



Enslavement in Somerset County, New Jersey

compiled by Beth Rauen Sciaino



Origins of enslavement in New Jersey

- Northern NJ was part of the New Netherland colony begun by the Dutch West India Company in 1621. In NJ, Dutch farmers enslaved people from Africa at the highest rate in Bergen County, but also in Somerset County.
- When NJ became an English colony in 1665, the English appeased the Dutch farmers by maintaining slavery and expanding this system of oppression and its related economic benefits.
- The English encouraged settler colonists to come from Barbados to NJ with the promise of 150 acres for each household head and another 150 acres for each manservant, which included enslaved men.

The Black Freedom Struggle in Northern New Jersey, 1613-1860: A Review of the Literature by Christopher Matthews, Montclair State University. Prepared for the Passaic County Department of Cultural & Historic Affairs. Available online:

<https://www.montclair.edu/anthropology/research/slavery-in-nj/> . Full PDF also available:

<https://www.montclair.edu/anthropology/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2020/04/Slavery-in-New-Jersey-Literature-Review-2-2020.pdf>

Early White wealth in Somerset County

The origin myth of industrious Dutch settler colonists is well known in Franklin Township and other Somerset County towns. In advocating for a truthful origin story for the Franklin, Mark Grieco writes, “In reality, many early white settlers of Franklin were slave owners who benefited financially and politically from that enslavement.”

Citing *Franklin Township, Somerset County, NJ: A History* by William Brahms, he writes, “Brahms, once a Franklin Township librarian, states quite plainly that in **colonial Franklin many white farmers who owned farms of 100 acres or more – at least 75 percent of the farms were that size – owned slaves, to clear the land of forest and to farm it. Both Black and Native-American slaves were used.**”

In a 1988 presentation to the Franklin Township Historical Society, Dr. Peter Wacker is quoted in the *Franklin News-Record* as stating, ‘**The Dutch settling the area were using slave labor to work very large farms with very good soils. It was an affluent area.**’ He further stated, ‘The large amount of slavery in Somerset County, was directly connected with the large Dutch population and huge estates.’ ”

Opinion piece: **Franklin Needs To Face Its Slave-Holding History** in the *Franklin Reporter* by Mark Grieco. 8/24/2020.

<http://franklinreporter.com/in-your-opinion-franklin-needs-to-face-its-slave-holding-history/>

During the Revolutionary War:

- In 1775, VA's royal governor, Lord Dunmore promised freedom to enslaved men who fought for the crown. From 1775-1782, newspaper ads for 106 slave and 139 indentured runaways in NJ. <https://www.montclair.edu/anthropology/research/slavery-in-nj/part-3/>
- White colonists could “purchase” an enslaved person to serve in the colonial militia in their place. May promise freedom after the war, often didn't fulfill.
 - ◆ **Samuel Sutphen**, born in 1747, a private in the First Regiment Somerset County Militia, 1776-8; NY militia, 1779. *6 tours, shot w/ musket ball in ankle.*
 - ◆ “Purchased” by Caspar Berger of Readington for militia duty (prior “owner” was a Dutch farmer on the Raritan).

After the War ended applied and demanded my freedom of Berger. He sold me to Peter Ten Eyck⁵⁶ for £110, a slave for life. Ten Eyck sold me to Rev. John Duryea⁵⁷ for £92.10. I lived with him 2-1/2 years, and [he] sold me to Peter Sutphen for the same money. Lived with him and his for two years as slave. Then lived with my mistress for one year. I agreed to pay him from the proceeds of my labor £92.10. I paid it and bought my freedom after the additional servitude of 20 years under different masters.

Ten Eyck owned a farm at North Branch (in Bridgewater) and Duryea was pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church at Raritan (now Somerville).

- ◆ Rare oral history from this era recorded in 1834 by Dr. Lewis Condict, physician and politician from Somerset County.
- ◆ Oliver Cromwell served from 1777-1781 in place of his “master,” was freed after the War and received a federal pension. (*in part 3, see link above*)

- About 75% of people enslaved in NJ lived in Bergen, Essex, Middlesex, Hunterdon, **Somerset**, and Monmouth Counties. “More economically developed areas and to have labor scarcities. They also had more Dutch, German, and non-Quaker settlers. Perth Amboy was the principal slave entry port.”
- **Resistance through alternative culture:** African Americans celebrated and then made their own the Dutch church and folk festival of Pinkster (Pentecost), an annual spring celebration when they had off and were allowed to gather in large groups, celebrate, and drink alcohol. *



Recreation of Pinkster celebration at Philipsburg Manor's Djembes and Dance Event in Sleepy Hollow, NY.

<https://hudsonvalley.org/article/what-is-pinkster/>

- Pinkster celebrates “the ‘holy wind that resurrected Christ, Pinkster promoted an ecstatic release of energy and faith, including moments when either master or slave could become ‘the mouthpiece of God.’ Pinkster is interpreted as a promoting a sacred social equality of humanity.”

* <http://commonplace.online/article/vol-17-no-4-mosterman/>

^ <https://www.montclair.edu/anthropology/research/slavery-in-nj/part-3/>

“In 1734 a **slave revolt was foiled in Somerset County** when a slave informed a man named Reynolds that ‘Englishmen were generally a pack of Villians and Kept the Negroes as Slaves, Contrary to a Positive Order from King George, sent the G----- of New York, to set them, Free, which they said the G----- intended to do but was prevented by his C----- and A-----.’ Reynolds reported the slave who was arrested along with two others, one of whom was hanged. Further investigation discovered that as many as 30 slaves were part of the conspiracy, most of whom were either maimed or whipped. It was also discovered that these 30 slaves vowed to each ‘rise at midnight, cut the throat of their Masters and Sons, but not meddle with the women who they intended to ravish and plunder the next day, and then set all the houses and barns on fire, kill all the draught horses and secure the best Saddle Horses for their flight towards the Indians in the French interest’ (in Hodges 1999:89-90).”

<https://www.montclair.edu/anthropology/research/slavery-in-nj/part-3/>

New Jersey slaves frequently resisted their bondage. Some ran away. Others worked slowly, destroyed tools, animals, crops and other property, and sometimes physically harmed their masters. Individual acts of vengeance, as well as slave plots both real and imagined, contributed to a widespread white fear that was expressed in severe forms of punishment designed to crush slave resistance. As early as 1695 two blacks were hanged and another was burned alive for conspiracy and the murder of a prominent Monmouth County slaveholder. The discovery of a slave plot near Somerville in 1734 led to the arrest of several hundred bondsmen. Two were hanged, another had an ear cut off, and many others were flogged. And in the wake of the hysteria triggered by the New York slave conspiracy of 1741, three New Jersey blacks were burned alive after being convicted of setting fire to seven barns in Hackensack.

Giles R. Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey: A Short History*, NJ Historical Commission, Department of State, 1988, pp. 21-22.
<https://nj.gov/state/historical/assets/pdf/topical/afro-americans-in-nj-short-history.pdf>

1739: **2nd revolt in Somerset County.** “A slave in Rocky Hill was ordered by the overseer’s wife to fetch wood and make a fire. ‘He replied in a surly tone that he would make fire enough and pursued her with an axe.’ The slave killed the overseer’s son and then set fire to the barn burning more than a thousand bushels of grain. He was captured and burned at the stake.”

- 1752: “An unnamed slave was condemned to burn at the stake for murdering his master, Jacob Van Neste, at the fork of two rivers near Raritan. Hodges (1999:134-135) recounts the story: ‘Van Neste had angered the slave, described as ‘large and athletic,’ by taking some tobacco without his permission. When Van Neste returned home one evening, the slave struck the master with an ax as he dismounted at the stable door, nearly decapitating him. The next day, the local farmers proved the bondsman’s guilt by forcing him to touch the slain master’s head, causing, according to eyewitness reports, blood to run from the corpse’s nose and ears. The execution took place the following morning at dawn. Sheriff Abraham Van Doren of Somerset County orchestrated the killing with drawn sword held high above his head while riding on his horse. Van Doren represented implacable authority to the audience of local farmers and their slaves, for whom the immolation was intended to be a horrific lesson of the futility of resistance. Onlookers reported that the slave ‘stood the fire with great intrepidity.’ Newspaper accounts related that as the flames covered his body he shouted to the assembled blacks, ‘they have taken the root, but left the branches.’ ”
- **“For enslaved Africans, these resistance acts, taken in case from Raritan all the way to the funeral pyre, reflected an African tradition in which young men were taught to have ‘a profound disdain for pain,’ which understood as a sign of their self-mastery. Thus, Harry and the others who fought back were likely highly respected, if not regarded as heroes.”**

- **Maintaining African worldview:** “A clear example is found in the autobiography of James Albert Ukasaw Gronniosaw, an African born man who ended up in Somerset County, NJ as the slave of Reverend Theodore Frelinghuysen (Fuentes and White 2016). Gronniosaw was instructed by Frelinghuysen in Christianity, though he rejected many of the lessons, even attempting to kill himself because of his confusion and despair. He eventually found God while sitting under a tree outdoors. Hodges (1999:123-124) concludes: ‘Gronniosaw got his revelation in the open air near a tree, a symbol of the presence of divinity in African culture. His private conversion enabled him to live as a slave in white-dominated culture. At the same time, his inner light stemmed from an African conception of salvation.’ ”
- 1800: 12,422 people enslaved in NJ (highest historic figure)
- “ ‘Nearly a third of 1,232 self-emancipated people of color enumerated [for NY and NJ]... took flight between 1796 and 1800.’ This rash of **self-emancipations** certainly played a role in the passing of state-wide manumission legislation in both states at the time.”

Lord Stirling Manor (now **Lord Stirling Park**, a Somerset County park in Basking Ridge)

- William Alexander (1726-1783), **wealthy merchant, landowner, Surveyor General of NJ** (built and improved roads in Basking Ridge and Raritan River areas). He was heir to the Scottish title of Earl of Stirling, he sought it after 1756. Granted by a Scottish court in 1759, but overruled by the House of Lords in 1762. His goal was money and land connected to the title. He still called himself Lord Stirling. ^
- Raised on Broad St. in Lower Manhattan, he later moved to Basking Ridge and built Stirling Manor starting in 1761. This was a Georgian Palladian style estate called “The Buildings” by locals, on 700 acres inherited from his father who was also surveyor-general of NJ.
- He **“invested heavily in the slave trade. He invested in at least two voyages in 1748, and proceeded to buy 2 of his own slave ships, which brought 100 slaves to NYC.”** *
- He was a major donor fundraiser for the founding of King’s College (now Columbia Univ.), and was a College governor until 1776. His father, James, bequeathed \$100 in his 1745 will to establish a college in NY.” “William Alexander married the daughter of Philip Livingston, another active slave trader involved with the founding of King’s College.” *
- Alexander served as a Brigadier General under George Washington in the Revolution. As a colonel, he supported his unit, the 1st NJ Regiment at his own expense due to his wealth.

* www.columbiaandslavery.columbia.edu/content/merchant-families ; ^ <https://www.mrlocalhistory.org/lordstirling/>

- Rev. Robert Finley, pastor of Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church for 22 years, educator, founded Brick Academy
- 1816: A founder of the **American Colonization Society** and its state branch, NJ Colonization Society in 1817.
- Wanted to settle free Black people as “civilizing agents” in Africa.
- Support from prominent White New Jerseyans including abolitionists. One supporter was the grandson of Lord Stirling, William Alexander Duer. Also Robert F. Stockton, Theodore Frelinghuysen, Gen. John Frelinghuysen, Samuel Bayard.
- Main St. in Basking Ridge is named Finley Avenue in his honor.

The earliest evidence we have of Mr. Finley's views upon the subject of colonization, is contained in a letter which he addressed to a citizen of New York, about the commencement of the year 1815.

‘The longer I live,’ says the writer, ‘to see the wretchedness of men, the more I admire the virtue of those who devise, and with patience labor to execute, plans for the relief of the wretched. On this subject, the state of the *free blacks* has very much occupied my mind. Their number increases greatly, and their wretchedness too, as appears to me. Every thing connected with their condition, including their color, is against them; nor is there much prospect that their state can ever be greatly ameliorated, while they shall continue among us. *Could not the rich and benevolent devise means to form a Colony on some part of the Coast of Africa, similar to the one at Sierra Leone, which might gradually induce many free blacks to go and settle, devising for them the means of getting there, and of protection and support till they were established?*’

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25102965.pdf>

<https://nj.gov/state/historical/assets/pdf/topical/afro-americans-in-nj-short-history.pdf>

- **Significant anti-colonialist response from free and enslaved Black people** in NJ and Philadelphia. “In condemning [ACS], New Jersey blacks affirmed their own commitment to a permanent residence in this country and to an identity as African Americans. If they went to Africa, they argued, they would be abandoning their kith and kin who were locked in bondage. For them the Colonization Society’s efforts actually masked a scheme to rid the nation of free black opponents of slavery and to deprive the race of much of its articulate and concerned leadership.” (p. 35)
- Rev. Samuel E. Cornish (1795-1858), abolitionist, journalist, pastor of First Presbyterian Church on Plane Street in Newark. **Major opponent of ACS.** Beginning in 1830s, Cornish advocated for term “colored” rather than “African” because he thought “African” “encouraged white colonizationists to believe black people desired to return to Africa.” (p. 31)
- Only 24 people left NJ between 1820-1853. By 1872, less than 100 free people had left NJ. *
- Over 12,000 free Black people went to Liberia from the U.S. Faced high mortality rate from tropical diseases. 1852-1859: NJ Legislature funds transportation to Africa (cost \$1,000/year).

<https://nj.gov/state/historical/assets/pdf/topical/afro-americans-in-nj-short-history.pdf>

* <https://www.montclair.edu/anthropology/research/slavery-in-nj/part-5/>

There are seven Black cemeteries in Somerset County

- On July 22, 1801, 3 men (Robert Aaron, a free Black local beekeeper and Robert and Yaff, two enslaved men) purchased 0.1 acre for \$3 from one of their “owners,” Aaron Melick, on Hillside Ave., Bedminster, to establish a burying ground for Black people in the neighborhood. Church records from the Dutch Reformed Church provide names for 8 people buried between 1840-1850, as many as 50 could be buried.
- The Lamington Black Cemetery (also known as the Cowperthwaite African American Cemetery) is in Bedminster, where there was a Black community historically. This cemetery was rediscovered in the 1990s and rededicated in 2001. It is on the National Register of Historic Places as a 19th century burial ground. It includes 97 identified graves, 36 with names, 61 unknown, five of whom were Civil War veterans. They were both free Black people and enslaved people who were members of the Lamington Presbyterian Church.
- Liberty Corner Presbyterian Church (Basking Ridge) has a Black Cemetery marker for people buried in unmarked graves in a section of the church’s cemetery. These burials occurred from 1837-1865.

www.mrlocalhistory.org/bedminsterslavecemetery/

www.mrlocalhistory.org/honoring-black-history-month-in-the-somerset-hills/

African Burying

Ground:

Betty Bullion, died on 5/24/1841 of old age.

Ellen Wortman, died on 8/17/1842 of scarlet fever at age 12.

Margaret Sloan, died on 6/17/1842 at age 27 from a brain infection.

Harry (no last name listed), died on 9/20/1849 from dysentery.

Sarah Cox died on 1/22/1844 as an infant from consumption.

Jack Suydan, died on 1/8/1850 at 79 of old age.

Margaret Stuphen, died of discharge on 3/27/1845 at age 8.

Loney Sloan, died on 4/19/1848 at age 76 of a diseased leg.

- The **KKK was active in the 1920s** in the Somerset Hills, primarily targeting increased Roman Catholic immigration (yet building on the soil of systemic racism).
- **Robert Terry, Sr. (1913-1958), pilot** and flight instructor at Somerset Hills Airport, Basking Ridge. Graduate of Bernards HS in Bernardsville. Received his commercial pilot's license on 12/7/1939, and instructor's license on 3/13/1940. Could not rent a plane because he was Black, "facility staff and friends... cosigned on his behalf." Recruited to train Tuskegee Airmen during WWII serving from 1941-1945. Systemic racism prevented him from achieving his goal of working for a commercial airline. Fellow Tuskegee instructors had same experience. Including Perry Young, who became the first commercial Black pilot after a decade of fighting for employment.
www.mrlocalhistory.org/tuskegee-airmen-robert-terry/
- In 2020, South Bound Brook received a grant from the county to "improve ADA accessibility to the West Kitchen and Slave Quarters of the Abraham Staats House through a video that will relay the history of African American slaves at the house." When Staats died in 1821, 5 enslaved people were listed among his "possessions." Including, Jack who was in ill health and deemed worthless.
- <https://www.staatshouse.org/house/history/the-old-kitchen-at-the-abraham-staats-house-a-window-into-slavery-in-new-jersey/>

Resources:

> *Afro-Americans in New Jersey: A Short History* by Giles R. Wright for NJ Historical Commission, 1988.

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> Quotation from Rev. Robert Finley, a founder of the ACS: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25102965.pdf>

> Opinion piece: **Franklin Needs To Face Its Slave-Holding History** in the *Franklin Reporter* by Mark Grieco. 8/24/2020.

<http://franklinreporter.com/in-your-opinion-franklin-needs-to-face-its-slave-holding-history/>

Involvement in slavery of Lord Stirling: www.columbiaandslavery.columbia.edu/content/merchant-families

> Samuel Sutphen, Wartime Experience of a New Jersey Slave (NJ State Library):

https://www.njstatelib.org/wp-content/uploads/slic_files/imported/NJ_Information/Digital_Collections/NJInTheAmericanRevolution1763-1783/10.16.pdf

> Information about Pinkster: <http://commonplace.online/article/vol-17-no-4-mosterman/> ;

<https://hudsonvalley.org/article/what-is-pinkster/> and part 3 of *The Black Freedom Struggle* above.

> Brooks Betz, now local historian for Bernards Township, online Local History resources:

www.mrlocalhistory.org/bedminsterslavecemetery/ ; www.mrlocalhistory.org/tuskegee-airmen-robert-terry/ ;

www.mrlocalhistory.org/honoring-black-history-month-in-the-somerset-hills/

> The Staats House, video on 18th century enslaved life:

<https://www.staatshouse.org/house/history/the-old-kitchen-at-the-abraham-staats-house-a-window-into-slavery-in-new-jersey/>