

Slavery in Wilton, A Hidden Legacy

Prepared for the Wilton Historical Society

Meaghan Downey, Eve Mandel, Nina Mellin,
Kyle Nash, Ian Sanders

June 16, 2017

Haggar, Tonquin, Cato Green, Black Betty, **Onesmus** Brown: these are just some of the names of the more than fifty people who were enslaved in the quaint town of Wilton, Connecticut over the course of a century. There are no monuments, no tombstones, and few traces of these men and women who contributed meaningfully to the development of the town. Similar to many other locales in the surrounding area, Wilton has a long, but mostly unrecognized relationship with slavery. From the first slaves who arrived in the parish in the mid-18th century, to the final captive freed by 1840, the heritage of slavery runs surprisingly deep in Wilton. Many of the most well-known Wilton families — Comstock, Lambert, Keeler, and Middlebrook — possessed slaves. These unpaid and under-appreciated Wilton residents lived in the shadows, providing domestic housework, forced labor, and an effective workforce. Though certainly treated better than their counterparts in the South, Wilton's slaves faced difficult lives and, with some exceptions, a profound lack of recognition. Even as the rest of the North became the center of the abolitionist movement, Fairfield County and Wilton remained surprisingly reluctant to provide acceptance of the African-Americans within the town. Change came only through the action of brave souls in both Wilton and the rest of America.

Slavery, though often thought a phenomenon mostly found in the Southern United States, was also common in the North, especially prior to 1800. The parish of Wilton, which before the year 1802 was part of Norwalk, had numerous slaves. Enslaved people were brought to the ports of Norwalk and Fairfield, and sold to the upper and middle class farmers and traders in the area. Slaves in the North were mostly intended to act as house servants if female, and unpaid day laborers if male. Most of the families that

owned slaves in the town of Wilton were wealthy families that owned multiple slaves or even a whole family. Because slaves in the North lived and worked alongside their masters, they were often treated better than their Southern counterparts. One slave, named Cato, was admitted to the Wilton Church in 1816 and served in the local militia. Another slave, **Onesimus** Brown, was so loyal to the Comstock family that he listed himself as a “voluntary slave” in the census of 1850. Despite the generally humane treatment of slaves in Wilton and the rest of the North, public sentiment began to swing towards abolition. After peaking around the turn of the 19th century, the population of slaves in Connecticut began to decrease significantly. In Wilton, there were sixteen slaves in the year 1810, and by 1820 only seven remained. By the time the 1850 census was taken, slavery had been legally outlawed by the Connecticut Legislature, and this brief but shameful part of Wilton’s heritage faded away.

A Brief History of Slavery in Connecticut and Fairfield County

Slavery in Connecticut dates back to the 1600s, when the colony was first settled. Early colonists attempted to enslave Native Americans, who proved to be too violent and disobedient to remain under their control. According to David Van Hoosear, a 19th-century Wilton historian, Native Americans “were not docile and ran away repeatedly. A desire to keep the uncontrollable savages out of the colony led Connecticut in 1715 to forbid the bringing in of Indian slaves”. Much like the rest of New England, there were very few black slaves in Connecticut until the 18th-century. Sending food, lumber, and livestock to the West Indies provided enough money to develop the colony, but with few white hands to do the work, many Connecticut businessmen, ministers, and farmers took

advantage of the slave trade. On the eve of the Revolution, there were 6,464 slaves in Connecticut, more than in any other New England colony. Ownership of slaves was highest in cities and towns like Fairfield, New London, New Haven, and Hartford because there were more wealthy families who used their slaves as laborers, domestic servants, or even artisans. Within Fairfield County, the town of Fairfield had the highest percentage of slaves, with one in every seven households. Usually, these slaveholders owned a single slave or a married couple. Slave owning Fairfield families were typically the most prestigious: half of all ministers, lawyers, and public officials owned slaves and a third of all doctors owned slaves. Some notable slave owners in Fairfield were Caleb Brewster, Thaddeus Burr, and Gold Selleck Silliman. Silliman's home at 506 Jennings Road still has slave quarters today.

The town of Wilton, Connecticut had a small but prominent slave presence and has detailed records of families and their slaves in the 18th-and 19th- centuries. According to Van Hoosear, Wilton was not a wealthy enough community to have a large slave presence, and there were probably no more than ten families who owned slaves. The Keelers were one such family. Captain Samuel Keeler gave his son, Matthew Keeler, a slave called "Hone" in 1744. Another Wilton man, Blackleach Jessup, a wealthy landowner on Harris Ridge, also owned slaves. Jessup came from Fairfield in 1757 to build the "Sturgis Mansion" and most likely brought his slaves with him. Church records show that one of his female slaves married Deacon Andrews' slave "Amos" in July 1777. In 1781, Richard, son of Jessup's slave Tom, was baptized in the same church. Matthew Marvin of Stratford moved back to his mother's home in Wilton and purchased two young slaves, "Dick" and "Phyllis", who helped in the store and tavern he opened in

Wilton. Other Marvin slaves were “Cato Green” and “Black Harry”, who married one of Colonel William Belden’s slaves.

After the Revolution, the practice of keeping slaves became more widespread. The Belden family owned a Native American slave named Bill Tonquin. He married a black slave named Haggar Tonquin who was owned by Samuel Belden II, born in 1770, and the last slave in Wilton. Bill and Haggar Tonquin lived in the Belden store at the corner of Ridgefield Road and Danbury Pike and had three children, “Prince”, “Nancy”, and “Black Jack”. “Prince”, born in 1795, married a slave from Long Island who lived with Captain Belden’s son, Colonel William Belden. “Nancy” married the previously mentioned “Black Harry”. “Black Jack” married three times and was notable figure in Wilton, known and liked by all. According to his obituary, by the time of his death, he was “nearly blind” and had been “supported by the town for several years”.

The Life of a Wilton Slave

While the life of a slave may not have been a desirable one, slave life in the North was much more preferable to that in the South. The daily labor of a female slave in the North commonly consisted of domestic chores such as cooking, washing and ironing, while male slaves did manual labor, working the rich lands and fertile soils that distinguished Fairfield County as a grain producer. The slavery practiced in Connecticut, especially in Wilton, was known as “family slavery”, meaning that slaves were often left in charge of running a household or a farm, while the white slave masters went about their own personal duties. Family slavery was practiced in the North as opposed to the more brutal and degrading plantation slavery practiced in the Southern states. The treatment of slaves in Wilton was often better than is popularly believed, illustrated by

the Keeler family who emancipated their slave in 1747, leaving him with a house and garden. The fondness masters in Wilton held for their slaves is further represented in the relationship between Charles O.H. Middlebrook, who in 1832 started to leave \$100 per year to his slave, "Pompey Caesar." The regard Wilton slave-owners held for their slaves was often reciprocated, illustrated by "Cesar", a slave owned by the Comstock family, who was educated and greatly admired his master. His will left behind personal belongings — twenty books, animal traps, silver spoons, knee buckles, and sleeve buttons — to the members of his master's family.

While the respect and generosity slaves received and reciprocated may be viewed more as special circumstances reserved for specific Wilton families, this behavior was not uncommon in Wilton. According to town records, "Wilton slaves are recorded as being baptized as members of the Congregational Church – the center of government and socialization at the time." Slaves were integrated into society, not viewed as outsiders but as individuals who garnered respect and generosity by the white people of Wilton. Slaves were welcomed into churches where they were assigned to sit with their master's family or their own families, in pews reserved for slaves. Slave owners taught their slaves how to read because of the belief that it was important for the slaves, as baptized Christians, to read and understand the Bible. Slaves were also encouraged to take part in the sacrament of marriage in the Congregational Church, as marriage promoted the idea of inclusion of slaves in the church. The treatment of slaves in Wilton reflected a positive relationship between the black minority and the white majority in Wilton before any amendments were passed calling for an end to slavery. The mid-nineteenth century was a time during

which blacks were making both social and economic advancements, it was also the time that a Wilton abolitionist movement was in the works.

Wilton's Shift to Abolitionism

The first abolitionist movement in Wilton began in November 1838 when Reverend Nathaniel Colver arrived in Georgetown to give a sermon about slavery and abolitionism at the Baptist Society of Georgetown. Colver himself was an organizer for the Connecticut Anti-Slavery Society, and he aimed to establish a smaller group in Fairfield County. Some sections of the town responded favorably to his sermons and he was invited to stay several days longer to deliver more speeches. On the second and third days, he was again favorably received and intended to give a fourth sermon. However, early in the morning on the fourth day, pro-slavery radicals snuck into the church and blew it up with gunpowder. Colver immediately left Wilton, thoroughly disliking his experience. He later referred to Fairfield County as “Georgia of Connecticut, the dark part of the state, full of intemperance and the spirit of slavery.” (*Wilton, Connecticut by Robert Russell, 193*) Nonetheless, the first abolitionist society in Wilton persisted in their efforts, and continued to hold meetings in spite of the recent violence. In December 1838, only a month later, the windows of their meeting house were again blown out with gunpowder, putting an end to their efforts.

Many individuals in Wilton were active abolitionists, taking a personal role in the fight against slavery. In Wilton there were two stops on the Underground Railroad for some slaves escaping from the South. Two families, the Chichesters and the Wakemans, are confirmed to have hosted stops upon the Underground Railroad. William Wakeman was an important abolitionist, who hosted meetings for the Georgetown abolitionist

movement after their first meeting house was blown up. He was a driving force in the Underground Railroad in Wilton, acting as both a station keeper and a conductor, bringing escaped slaves between destinations as well as sheltering them in his home on Seeley Road. Wakeman would send coded messages to the next destinations, informing them of parties of escaping slaves, which could number as many as six to a group. He would make long and dangerous trips to carry escaping slaves to safety, going to stops up to fifty miles away.

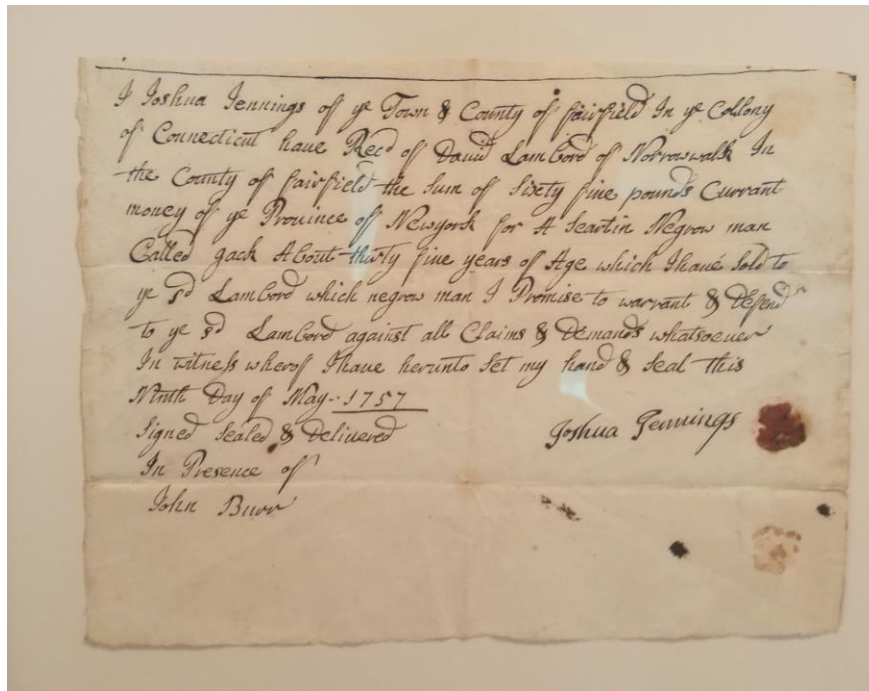
Like the shift in attitude regarding slavery, the laws that ended slavery in Wilton were also gradual. In 1783, Connecticut passed a law that slaves born after 1784 would become emancipated at the age of twenty one, with the stipulations that they be in good physical health and under the age of forty six (so that the state would not have to provide for many disabled or elderly former slaves). By 1820, there were only seven slaves remaining in the town of Wilton. In 1848, Connecticut passed legislation to formally end slavery throughout the entire state, but all slaves had been freed in Wilton by that point. After a little more than a hundred years, slavery was finally gone from Wilton.

Remembering Wilton's Checkered Relationship with Slavery

Wilton was never a large part of the slave trade, and slavery was not an enormous presence in this small town. Wilton's brief period of slavery is preserved in a number of different ways. One example is in the Wilton Historical Society where a deed from the sale of a slave is prominently hung in the front foyer. This slave, who remains unnamed in the deed, was sold by Joseph Monrow, a man from Norwalk, to David Lambert, a wealthy man from Wilton, for forty two pounds and ten shillings. This deed is just one of the remnants of slavery left in Wilton.

There are also opportunities to learn about Wilton's history with slavery. The main example of this is the Ambler Farm Field Trip that all fifth graders in the Wilton Public School systems attend. They get a glimpse of what it was like to be a slave on the Underground Railroad. The field trip presents the sobering reality of the lives of slaves through a simulation of a slave auction where the students are the slaves being auctioned off. Later, the students are told about a house on Seeley Road close to the Cannondale train station that was a stop on the Underground Railroad. The Ambler Farm field trip acknowledges that the barbaric practice of slavery permeated all aspects of societies, even the quiet New England town of Wilton.

Like many other towns in the area, the history of slavery in Wilton is not preserved enough to present a complete and adequate picture of slavery to the members of the community. With the passage of time, records are lost and artifacts disappear. Although there is no certainty, people likely tried to conceal their family records of slaves when the abolitionist movement became popular in Wilton. There are records that indicate that a slave cemetery -- "Spruce Bank" -- existed by the Norwalk River, but it has most likely been washed away by repeated floods and by the expansion of the river. People have searched repeatedly for the slave cemetery, but its precise location remains a mystery.

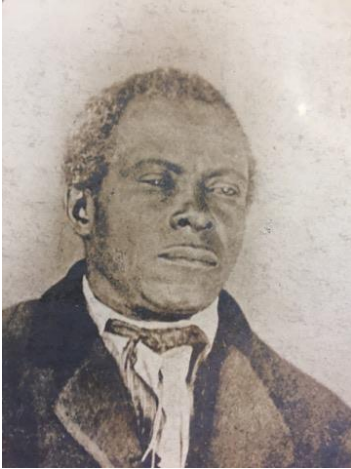


Deed for the sale of "Jack" from Joshua Jennings to David Lambert, May 9, 1757.

Permanent Collection, Wilton Historical Society



Black Jack Tonquin (1812 -1893), a slave in Wilton who was owned by the Belden family. Permanent Collection, Wilton Historical Society.



An Unnamed Wilton Slave. ND, Permanent Collection, Wilton Historical Society



The tunnel at The Ovals, the house originally owned by the Wakeman family, which was used for the transportation of slaves through the Underground Railroad. 2000, Connecticut Commission on Tourism and Culture



Harriet Tubman, played by Adrienne Reedy, looks out for runaway slaves in a reenactment during the Ambler Farm field trip. Photo by Jeannette Ross. The Wilton Bulletin, April 28, 2017.



Lambert House, built in 1724 and owned by David Lambert, an early slave owner in Wilton, was home to many slaves. Owned by the Wilton Historical Society

Bibliography

- "The Hour." *Google News Archive Search*. Google, n.d. Web. 16 June 2017.
- Ross, Jeannette. "Students Walk in a Slave's Steps." *Wilton Bulletin*. 27 Apr. 2017.
- Russell, Robert H. *Wilton Connecticut*. Wilton, Connecticut: Wilton Historical Society, 2004. Print.
- Hinks, Peter. "Enslaved Africans in the Colony of Connecticut." *Citizen ALL African-Americans in Connecticut*. N.p., n.d. Web.
- Hayes, D.H. "Slaves Fled to Freedom through Wilton." *Google News Archive Search*. Google, n.d. Web. 14 June 2017.
- "Slavery and Abolition." *Connecticut History*. Connecticut Humanities, n.d. Web. 14 June 2017.
- "Slavery in Connecticut." *Slavery in the North*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 June 2017.
- Van Hoosear, David Herman. "Families of Freedmen, Former Slaves." *Fulton History*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 June 2017.