

The HIGHLANDS Current

SPECIAL REPORT

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PART 1

Always Present, Never Seen

A Black history of the Highlands

By Chip Rowe

History is a prism that can be viewed from many angles. The white wealthy men who forged the nation took one view, and Blacks, Native Americans, women and the impoverished took others. Sometimes the colors produced by the prism cross and blend. But any honest view of history must turn the prism now and again.

The 1619 Project, which won a Pulitzer Prize for *The New York Times*, turned the prism, and the reaction was swift, with accusations that looking at our shared history in ways other than as it was written by white men in the 19th century was teaching white children to bear the guilt of past crimes.

Yet even before *The 1619 Project*, many Hudson Valley institutions had begun to reexamine the contributions of Black people, most of whom were enslaved during the 200 years before the institution was abolished in New York in 1827. In February, the John Jay Homestead in Katonah hosted a program highlighting the fact that the future chief justice enslaved people for more than 40 years after he first called for New York to ban it. In 2020, Boscobel began a project to examine the people enslaved by States Dyckman, who built the early 19th-century home that was relocated in 1956 from Montrose to Garrison.

In 2019, Historic Hudson Valley, based in Westchester County, produced a documentary, *People Not Property*, that acknowledged the earliest Black residents of the Hudson Valley and named their enslavers, including the owners of Van Cortlandt Manor in Croton and Philipsburg Manor in Sleepy Hollow.

"Slavery was the brutal foundation upon which the entire United States, north and south, was built," it stated.

Philipsburg Manor, which Historic Hudson Valley has preserved, was constructed by Africans enslaved by a Dutch merchant, Frederick Philipse (1626-1702), whose property covered about a quarter of modern-day Westchester. He and his son would become

major slave traders; the family is honored today by the name Philipstown. According to Columbia University, before a Philipse descendant donated three boxes of family papers to the university in 1930, she removed nearly every document related to its human trafficking.

A.J. Williams-Myers, a longtime professor at SUNY New Paltz who died in July, noted that Black people are almost nonexistent in standard local histories such as the *General History of Dutchess County*, published in 1877, or *The History of Putnam County* (1886), "other than to appear as a statistic when counting material possessions."

There are many examples of this oversight. The late Robert Murphy, who for

38 years edited the Beacon Historical Society newsletter, said that the best single source he found for Black history from the 19th century was the *Fishkill Standard*, although "a careful reading of the paper leaves only the briefest of sketches of what life was like for the Black men and women of that time."

The exclusion is reflected in recent artwork by Jean-Marc Superville Sovak, who has a studio in Beacon. In a series of prints, *a-Historical Landscape*, he took idyllic 19th-century landscape engravings typical of the Hudson River School and inserted images from anti-slavery almanacs and abolitionist tracts of the same period. "What makes these works so American, I think, is not what is

depicted but also what's missing," he says.

The relative lack of archival resources is a loss, says Michael Groth, author of *Slavery and Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley*, because "there's nothing more fascinating in our history than the central paradox of slavery and freedom — how can a nation so committed to the ideals of democracy and equality also become the largest slaveholding society in the Americas? And the freedom struggle is as dramatic and powerful a story as any that can be told."

This five-part series is designed to be an introduction to the Black history of the Highlands. Its title is borrowed from social historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar, who was referring to Black people during the time of the Revolutionary War, when Americans fought for white freedom: "They were always present, but never seen."

Arrival

The first Black people brought to the Hudson Valley came against their will, enslaved by the Dutch, who had arrived in 1624 to establish what is now New York City. Investors organized as the Dutch West India Company faced an immediate labor shortage because few whites were desperate enough to emigrate to work in isolation on rented land. If anything, they aspired to be merchants.

The company's initial shipment of humans to New Netherland, in 1625 or 1626, included about a dozen men and their wives; the men built public works projects, cut timber and burned lime, while the women were assigned to various company officials as domestic servants. Slavery would flourish in New York for another two centuries. It was never as integral to the economy as in the American South or West Indies, but many historians believe that, without African labor, the white aristocracy here could not have existed. The enslaved enabled the wealth of families whose names today are memorialized on maps and street signs in Philipstown and Beacon.

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"Hudson Highlands (From Bull Hill)/B is for Bloodhounds," from a series by Jean-Marc Superville Sovak, a Beacon-based artist who superimposed images from 19th-century anti-slavery publications onto idyllic landscapes from the same period

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The vast majority of African slaves kidnapped and sold to New York owners were Kongo, Coromantin, Paw Paw and Malagasy, typically brought in small shipments and often offered as payment for debts. They usually were first taken to the West Indies for “seasoning” on sugar plantations; owners in New York complained that Black people shipped directly from Africa too often rebelled against their loss of freedom and the brutal conditions.

When white settlers were convicted of crimes, they were sometimes sentenced to “work with the Negroes,” a suggestion of the hard labor that Africans were compelled to do, observes historian Andrea Mosterman. Enslaved people were given the dirtiest work, such as clearing the streets of animal carcasses and flogging and executing criminals. One of the earliest slaves in Hudson Valley records — from 1646 — was the hangman at the Dutch settlement that is now Albany.

Even after 1640, when more white immigrants were available for hire, the Dutch preferred slaves. One historian estimated that the break-even for buying an enslaved person versus hiring a freeman was about a year. At the same time, many farmers found it more economical to rent, rather than own, enslaved people because they didn’t have to feed or house them during the winter.

The Philipse family

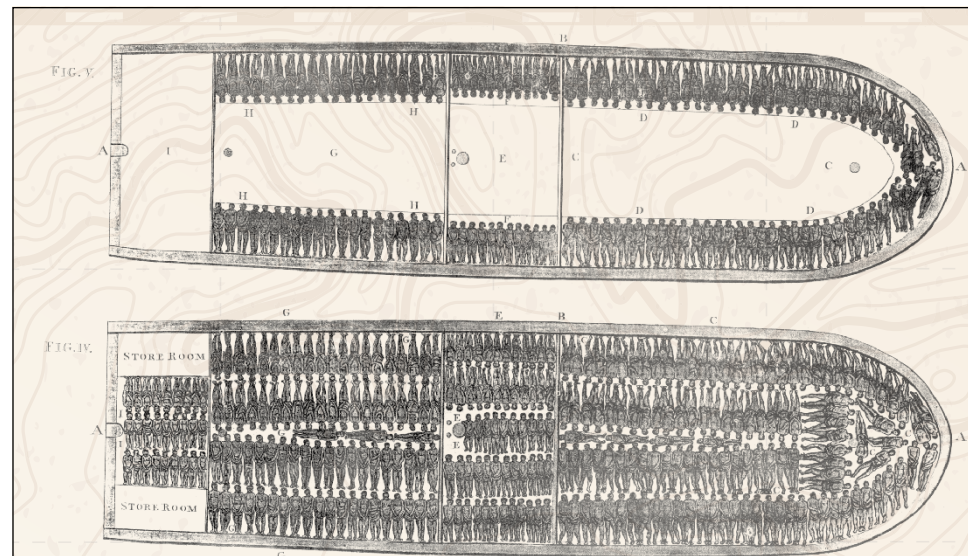
Members of the Philipse family were among the most active slave traders in the Hudson Valley. Their DNA is so much a part of the region that property deeds executed in Philipstown still grant mineral rights to their descendants.

The patriarch, Frederick Philipse, born in 1626, came to the colonies as a young man to work as a carpenter for the Dutch West India Company. Within about 20 years, he was one of the richest men in New Netherland — and that was *before* he became a slave trader. (In 1977, a hagiography in *The New York Times* portrayed his life as the classic “rags-to-riches” tale of “the immigrant son of a roofer.”)

In 1664, the British took over New Netherland from the Dutch. The Philipse family stayed in the good graces of the new regime, becoming friendly with the governor, who granted Frederick wide swaths of land that would become Westchester County. In 1666, Frederick married a widow who had been left a fortune in merchant ships and Manhattan property. He began trading with suppliers in the West Indies, England, Holland and Portugal and experimented with the slave trade by providing “servants” to other wealthy New Yorkers.

The food that made the manorial system in the Hudson Valley work was grain. Europe and the West Indies needed flour, and traders built sawmills and gristmills and claimed monopolies over access to the rivers and streams. The Philipse family built two mills: one near Tarrytown (Upper Mills) and the other where City Hall now stands in Yonkers (Lower Mills).

In 1685, Frederick sent one of the family ships, the *Charles*, to Soyo, a city on the west coast of Africa in what was then the kingdom of Kongo (present-day Angola and Republic of the Congo). There, the crew



Crossing the Atlantic

Michael Lord is the director of content for Historic Hudson Valley. These comments were taken from the documentary People Not Property.

In 1685, a Phillipse-owned ship named the *Charles* sailed from New York City. It sailed along the coast of West Africa, picking up grain and fresh water and eventually settling at the port of M’Pinda Soyo, which is on the mouth of the Congo River. The Congo kingdom was in the midst of a centuries-long civil war, and the losers of battles ended up being the ones sold as African captives onto these ships.

The captain of the *Charles* was able to negotiate for the purchase of 146 Congo men, women and children. The *Charles* was a type of ship known as a pink. It was about 100 feet long and would have had two cargo holds, one for food and water, and one for human cargo. The cargo hold on a ship the size of the *Charles* was not much more than 20 feet by 20 feet, a little larger than a living room. These men would be stripped naked, they would have been shackled together at the arms and at the ankles. They would have been laid down on their backs on the floor of this cargo hold.

If that floor cannot fit 100 people, they would have built a second half-deck two-and-a-half feet off the floor. They would have laid another group of men. The journey across the Atlantic Ocean in 1685 could take as long as 12 weeks. Those men in that cargo hold would spend weeks below deck. They would need to remain down there until they were out of sight of land because the threat of these individuals who see land jumping ship and trying to

swim back was too great.

In bad weather, individuals remain below deck. There’s no ventilation. You’re in equatorial heat. There are no facilities. People died every night and were tossed overboard; there was a line of sharks behind these boats. The women remained above deck. They were at the discretion of this all-male crew.

Of the 146 men, women and children who started on this voyage, 105 survived. They pulled into Barbados, where they were quickly purchased to work on sugar cane plantations. The remainder — too ill, too weak to be of any value to the sugar cane planter — those 23 men, women and children set sail from Barbados to New York City. It was a relatively easy journey. Fourteen more died.

By the time they disembarked in Rye, there were nine that survived. One was a small boy with one eye. He was led to Manhattan. The other eight were taken by Frederick Phillipse’s son, Adolph, and marched across Westchester, where they were set to work on building what is now called Phillipsburg Manor. These eight Congo survivors, some of the first Africans in Westchester County, built a manor house, a mill, the barn and the old Dutch church in what is now called Sleepy Hollow.

It’s unimaginable to try to comprehend the size and the scope of this transatlantic trade without breaking it down to these individual voyages and understanding the nightmare that took place on each and every one of them.

loaded 146 captured men, women and children for a journey to Barbados for seasoning. When the *Charles* arrived, however, only 105 had survived.

The 23 sickest were deemed unfit for sale and shipped to New York City as “refuse cargo.” By the time they arrived at Wall

Street, only nine were alive. Frederick’s son, Adolph, then 19, sent eight to the Upper Mills and the ninth, a boy with one eye, to the Philipse mansion in Manhattan.

These enslaved workers came from an agricultural society in Kongo, where residents grew manioc, yams, taro, groundnuts,

maize and palm and fruit trees using hoes, writes Dennis Maika, a historian with the New Netherland Institute, based in Pleasantville. Men cleared the fields, tended the trees, fished and hunted, and the women did the daily field work. The Kongoleses had experience with other cultures because of their proximity to the Kongo River, which drew traders and navigators. They spoke the Bantu language, as did many ethnic groups.

When it came to Black labor, Frederick Philipse was on the hunt for bargains. The slave market on the African mainland was controlled by the Royal African Co., which had a license from the British government, so he shifted his sights to Madagascar, using agents and pirates to work around the royal monopoly.

In 1691, Frederick heard from an Englishman who lived on the island and offered him slaves for 30 shillings each. Frederick dispatched a ship loaded with shoes, stockings, shirts, hats, tools, rum, Madeira wine, cannon powder and books to trade. But instead of 200 slaves, representing £4,000 in profit (about \$1.2 million today), as he expected, the ship returned with 34 slaves, 15 head of cattle and 57 bars of iron.

Frederick was unhappy. “Negroes in these times will fetch £30 and upward the head, unless they be children or superannuated,” he complained. “It is by Negroes that I find my chiefest profit.” He noted that of the 34 slaves, 15 were children and three still suckling. Frederick also had lost one of his enslaved workers who went on the voyage as his representative but decided not to return.

Frederick continued dispatching the family ships but they returned with only a few slaves. For one trip, made by the *Margaret* in 1698, he tried incentives: The captain, Samuel Burgess, was promised a commission for each enslaved worker he brought back; the first mate and physician were each allowed to transport one slave free; and the doctor earned 12 pence for each captive who arrived alive.

After reaching Madagascar, the *Margaret*’s crew filled the hold with 114 captured African men and departed for New York. The ship and slaves never arrived, however, as the ship was seized by British authorities on allegations the crew had worked with pirates. Burgess was forced to sell the enslaved men at the Cape of Good Hope; he was sent to England and imprisoned.

The following August, Adolph Philipse sailed to London to recover the ship and its cargo — minus the humans. He managed to free Burgess. But while he was overseas, his father died in New York.

Most of Frederick Philipse’s land, livestock and enslaved workers went to Adolph and to Frederick II, the son of Frederick’s late brother. In the years that followed, Adolph assigned an overseer to the Upper Mills. By the 1720s, he had slave quarters built about 90 feet from the main house; at that point, the mills were likely being operated entirely by enslaved workers, Maika writes.

By 1741, Frederick II was a respected merchant in New York City, where 20 percent of the population was enslaved. That year, about 150 enslaved and free Blacks and whites were accused of insurrection; Frederick II was one of the two

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judges assigned to hear the case.

The plot had been discovered, according to testimony, when conspirators were overheard discussing it at the Philipse mansion in Manhattan. Thirteen Blacks were burned at the stake, 16 Blacks and four whites were hanged and 70 Blacks and seven whites were banished.

Among those burned alive was Cuffee, a slave owned by Adolph. Cuffee lived in one of the family's Manhattan homes; was bilingual in English and Spanish; and had liberty to travel around the city. He allegedly confessed to setting fire to a warehouse owned by Frederick II, who — in the role of both victim and judge — found him guilty and ranted about the “monstrous ingratitude of this Black tribe.”

(The only member of the Philipse family who freed enslaved workers was the second wife and widow of the patriarch Frederick, and it was an empty gesture because she made no provision in her will for a £200 security that was required for each freed slave.)

When Adolph Philipse died in 1750, an inventory of his estate listed 23 enslaved workers at the Upper Mills, including eight children. Their names suggest families that included several generations, Maika says.

Frederick II inherited his uncle's property. Within months, he began selling the enslaved workers, through newspaper ads, in part. By the time of his own death the following year at age 53, he had dispatched 21 men, women and children, almost certainly breaking up families in the process.

His son, Frederick III, continued the sale, except for a boy named Charles, whom he gifted to his widowed mother. Frederick III likely finally destroyed a Kongolese culture that had arrived at the mills in the 1680s and been preserved there, says Maika.

The British arrive

The British forced the Dutch out of New Netherland in 1664 and took over and expanded its slave system.

The Dutch had an “institutional ambiguity” toward slavery, says Maika. Enslaved people could hire themselves out, raise their own food, own moveable property, sue and be sued and marry and raise children. At the same time, historian Jeroen Dewulf cautions against the impression that Dutch slavery was benign. He cites the response of a slave who was told he was probably happier than a poor person because his master fed him well: “That may be true, sir, but put bird in cage, give him plenty to eat, still he fly away.”

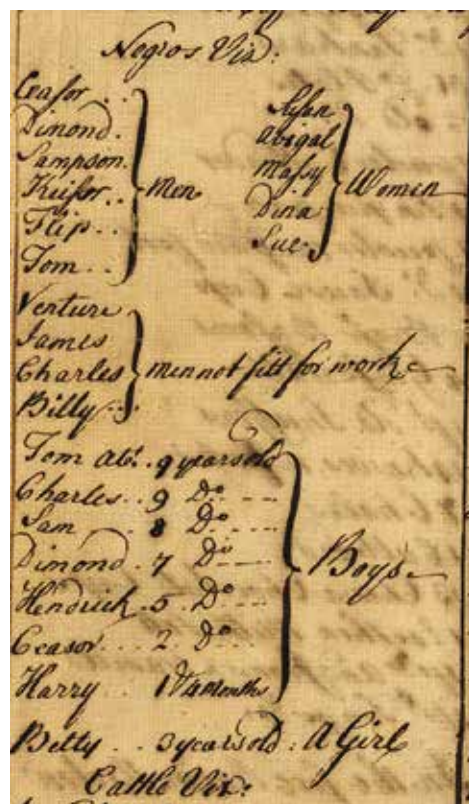
The British transformed New York from a “society with slaves” to a “slave society,” notes historian Ira Berlin. They passed progressively restrictive laws, such as prohibiting any gathering of three or more slaves under punishment of 40 lashes. (Each town was instructed to appoint a whipper.) The slave code was more severe than in other northern colonies but not as severe as laws in the South. Owners could not harm or kill an enslaved person (although, legally, a slave could not be raped by a white person), were required to provide “adequate” food and clothing and were fiscally responsible for the infirm and elderly.

At the same time, historian David Korbin



The majority of slaves kidnapped and sold to New York owners were Kongo, Coromantin, Paw Paw and Malagasy from the western coast of Africa. This French map shows the European understanding of Africa in the mid-17th century. The island of Madagascar, which was a source of labor for the Philipse family, is at right.

David Rumsey Historical Map Collection

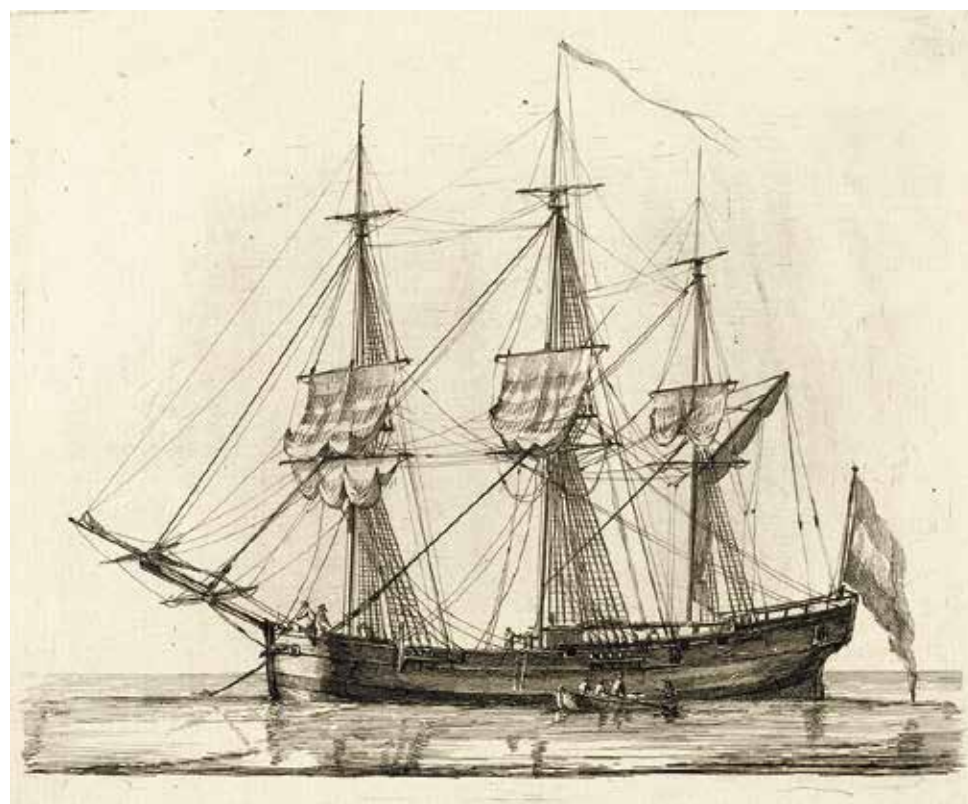


An inventory made in 1749 of the people enslaved by Adolph Philipse, followed by an accounting of his cattle, oxen and cows

New York Public Library

writes, “since the Negro was considered to be property, if the slave was executed the owner would usually be compensated by a levy charged to all the slaveholders of the county involved.” When large numbers of slaves were executed, such as after a 1712 insurrection, a special assessment was made.

In 1717, the New York Legislature allowed owners to free their slaves, but only if they paid a £200 deposit plus £20 annually for maintenance. The goal, wrote Williams-Myers, was to dangle the idea of freedom



The Charles, owned by the Philipse family, was a “pink” such as this ship, shown in a drawing from 1789.

Collection Rijks Museum, Amsterdam

to maintain a “hearty, obedient, docile but dependable labor force.”

To purchase humans, Hudson Valley landowners typically hired agents to bid at Wall Street auctions. In 1721, for example, Cadwallader Colden wrote from his estate in Newburgh to place an order for two males of about 18 years old and a girl of about 13 years that his wife requested “to keep the children and to sow.”

It is not clear when the first Black people arrived in what is now Beacon, but they

were almost certainly enslaved, and they may have been among the four slaves listed in the 1714 census of Fishkill Landing. (Beacon was created in 1913 from Fishkill Landing and Matteawan.) Three were owned by Roger and Catherine Brett, a daughter of Francis Rombout, who 30 years earlier had “purchased” 85,000 acres from the Wappinger tribe.

In 1709, the couple had built a mill. After her husband drowned in 1718, Catherine

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continued to oversee it. Before her own death in 1764, Madam Brett — whose home is on Van Nydeck Avenue — left her “Negro wench” Molly to her eldest son, ordered that Old Negro Sam be cared for and allowed a slave named Coban to choose her own master.

In 1790 — nearly a decade after the American Revolution — Henry Schenk, who married a Brett granddaughter, owned eight people. Other area slaveholders included Isaac Adriance, who was a partner in a storehouse at the mouth of Fishkill Creek; the Brinckerhoffs, who owned 30 slaves; and Philip Verplanck, whose 12 slaves tended to his mill, store, storehouse and farm.

The early Dutch settlers had planned to entice white immigrants to clear and farm Dutchess County — and pay rent. But whites who had fled aristocratic Europe preferred to own their own property. The first two settlers and their families had been alone for 25 years after their arrival in the 1680s, although a sloop came up the river occasionally. By 1714, when Dutchess was deemed to have enough people to govern itself (rather than being subservient to Ulster), it had a population of 447, including 29 enslaved workers. Nearly everyone lived in one of three settlements along the river — Fishkill, Poughkeepsie or Rhinebeck — each separated by a day’s ride.

After 1714, the population of Dutchess doubled each decade until 1750, after which it had doubled again by 1771 and again by 1790. The 418 white residents grew to 42,980 and the enslaved to 1,856, including 600 in Fishkill.

Dutchess farmers enslaved relatively few workers — the average in 1790 was 2.8 per household — so their slaves had to be, by necessity, skilled in many trades. The phrase “understands all kinds of farm work” was common in advertisements. The skills might include plowing, planting, harvesting, felling trees, clearing fields, tending livestock, building barns, repairing fences, fixing tools, carting produce to market, tending orchards and processing grain, notes Groth, a history professor at Wells College in the Finger Lakes.

The most enduring testament to the work of enslaved people in the Hudson Valley may be “the agricultural contours of the counties” marked by cleared fields and stone walls, says Peter Buntin, chair of the Mid-Hudson Antislavery History Project.

A 19th-century historian, Mary Humphreys, described how, “for every department of the household, there was a slave allotted. They hoed, drilled, shod horses, made cider, raised hemp and tobacco, looked after the horses and the garden, made and mended the shoes, spun, wove, made nets, canoes, attended to fishing, carpentering, each household sufficient unto itself.” Enslaved women worked mostly as domestics but might have learned skills such as dairying, milking and butter and cheese making. John Dumont of Ulster County, who enslaved Isabella (later known as Sojourner Truth) boasted that she could “do a good family’s washing in the night, and be ready in the morning to go into the field.”

In wealthier homes, slaves might be charged to start fires in fireplaces at stated hours. The men were waiters, butlers, craftsmen and coachmen, such as those who handled the

reins when Madam Brett made the rounds of Fishkill Landing. When Benjamin Franklin was leaving the Schuyler mansion in Albany in May 1776, headed for New York City, Mrs. Schuyler insisted that her slave Lewis drive him. Once he arrived, Franklin wrote Philip Schuyler to thank him because “part of the Road [Old Albany Post Road] being very stony and much gullied, where I should probably have overset and broken my own Bones; all the Skill and Dexterity of Lewis being no more than sufficient.”

Slaves and indentured servants took care of collective white obligations to maintain that road, also known as the King’s Highway. And during the second half of the 18th century, an enslaved man named Quam captained a rowboat and a pirogue (a two-masted vessel without a jib) that served as a ferry connection between Fishkill Landing and Newburgh.

At the manors owned by the Philipse family, enslaved workers likely created gardens and perhaps found the sweet potatoes similar to the manioc and yams of their homeland, says Maika. They used their knowledge of herbalism for medicines. Enslaved people built the mills, the dams and the mansions.

‘Happy’ slaves

Before historians began in the past few decades to take a second look at the lives of enslaved Black people in the Hudson Valley, their predecessors generally adopted one of two approaches: They ignored Black people except for noting the names of slaves mentioned in wills, or they reported that, despite the trauma of being held captive, slaves were happy-go-lucky and better off than they would have been in Africa.

As an example of this revisionism, Helen Wilkinson Reynolds, a longtime and respected member of the Dutchess County Historical Society, in 1941 attempted a history of Black people enslaved in the county.

First, she noted that because most farmers could afford only one or two slaves, their property typically lived in the cellar or attic. That was certainly uncomfortable, but “there was probably no intention of cruelty,” Reynolds mused, “for the knowledge of hygiene and sanitation was limited.”

As for runaways, Reynolds wrote, “while in some cases it may have been prompted by harsh treatment of the slave by the white owners, in others it was presumably due to wanderlust, a desire to get abroad and see something new, to have amusement and to do as he or she pleased.”

She then turned to “happier parts of the story,” such as the Hudson Valley family who loved their enslaved humans so much they recorded their births in their Bible. Others set aside land to bury their enslaved.

Not surprisingly, slave owners emphasized the “happy.” In the 1760s, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a Frenchman who lived near Newburgh, noted that “the few Negroes we have are at best but our friends and companions.” They were expensive to purchase and to cloth, and they might run away, he wrote, but “the simple Negro fiddle” was much respected.

He wrote that his enslaved humans sometimes appeared “as happy and merry” as if they were free. “The sight of their happiness always increases mine, provided it does not



Did Every White Person Own Slaves?

When Thomas Davenport, who in 1730 was the first settler of what is today Cold Spring, made his will in 1746, he left “my Negro Jack” to his widow. He instructed that if she remarried, or at her death, Jack was to be sold with the other goods and chattel and the proceeds divided among his children.

His son, Thomas Davenport, who lived in a log cabin near Indian Brook, owned four slaves in 1790, according to the federal census, more than any other Philipstown resident. In his 1797 will, Thomas freed an enslaved worker named Dob but made no mention of others. In the 1800 census, his son William had two slaves.

That even the pioneers of what would become a tiny village enslaved people might make you wonder who didn’t. When three activists, for a grassroots campaign they call Slavers of NY, in 2020 began placing stickers on street and subway signs and in neighborhoods in New York City named for prominent men who were slaveholders, someone asked that question in an addendum (above).

In response, the activists acknowledged that, while many New Yorkers did not enslave people,

“they also did not necessarily work toward abolition.” While prominent men such as Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe expressed abolitionist views or personal moral conflicts with slavery, they did not feel compelled to free anyone they had enslaved.

Michael Groth, a history professor at Wells College and author of *Slavery and Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley*, says that many of his students are surprised to learn that, at the time of the Civil War, three-quarters of white Southern households did *not* include enslaved people. Of those that did, most held fewer than 10 — far from the vast plantations that *Gone with the Wind* placed in the popular imagination. This was also true in the North, where in 1790 the average owner enslaved three people. The exceptions were a few family manors.

Whatever the numbers, more important is that New York state, like the South, became what historian Andrea Mosterman, author of *Spaces of Enslavement*, describes as a “full-fledged slave society.” Over two centuries, the institution infiltrated all aspects of daily life, and every white resident benefited from an economy boosted by enslaved workers.

degenerate into licentiousness, and this is sometimes the case, although we have laws to prevent it.”

“In the main, the relation between the races was amicable and often it was one of devotion and attachment,” Reynolds wrote, although she conceded that “occasionally there were instances unpleasant to tell of, as they reveal each race at its worst — the Negro in underdevelopment; the white in brutality.”

The problem with these sanitized accounts, says Groth, is that while mentions of scars and injuries in newspaper ads hint at the brutality, “explicit details of such traumatic encounters will likely remain hidden forever.”

Some whites and the people they enslaved may have expressed affection; it’s unlikely that all slaveholders were physically abusive, if only to avoid damaging valuable goods. Groth cites a study of black rural life in Virginia where historians found evidence that whites perceived slaves in general in harsher terms

than those they had personally enslaved.

There is historical evidence that “white and Black residents of Dutchess worked, lived, ate, drank, played, sang and danced together,” notes Groth; some slaves used that familiarity to win concessions.

Yet even if slaves were not physically abused, they lived with the constant possibility of being sold and separated from loved ones. In 1717, Cadwallader Colden, near Newburgh, expressed no remorse shipping one of his slaves to Barbados. In a letter to a friend, he wrote: “I send by this vessel ... a Negro woman and child. She is a good house Negro. Were it not for her allusive tongue, her sullenness, I would not have parted with her. ... I have several of her children I value and I know if she would stay in this country she would spoil them.”

Sojourner Truth, who saw her nine siblings sold off in Ulster County, would later describe what she saw in older slaves as “the misery.” ■

PART 2



A view of the Hudson River looking south from Croton Point. A British warship, the HMS Vulture, was anchored nearby when spotted by a Black patriot, Jack Peterson.

Photo by Erik Weiselberg

By Chip Rowe

Most schoolchildren have heard the story of John Andre, Benedict Arnold and George Washington, three men whose actions during the Revolutionary War changed the course of history. Far fewer know of Jack Peterson, a 34-year-old Black patriot who changed the course of Andre.

A British major who conspired with Arnold to seize West Point from colonialist control, Andre received a map of the fort in September 1780 from the American general, then its commander. He planned to deliver it and other documents to his superiors in New York City. Had he succeeded, and the British taken West Point, they would have controlled the Hudson River, and the war may well have been lost.

Andre met Arnold in Haverstraw, on the western shore. He had been brought to the spot by a skiff from the 14-gun British sloop HMS Vulture — the same ship that would later rescue the traitorous Arnold from his headquarters in Garrison — and planned to return the same way. Instead, Andre found himself walking in disguise through Westchester, with the incriminating documents in his boot. He was captured by three militiamen near Tarrytown on Sept. 23.

After dropping Andre at Haverstraw, where he and Arnold stayed overnight, the Vulture retreated south to the relative safety of Croton's Point. As it waited, about 20 British soldiers rowed in a skiff toward the east bank, accompanied by a small boat with a cannon at its bow.

By one account of what happened next, according to Erik Weiselberg, the principal historian of Revolutionary Westchester 250, Jack Peterson deserves credit for a small act of defiance that led to American democracy — for others. He was one of the many Blacks, free and enslaved, who aided the patriot cause in the Hudson Valley even though the freedom they fought and some-

times died for would not be their own.

The journey to shore of the soldiers on the skiff was interrupted by small arms fire from Peterson, a sharpshooter whose nickname was "Rifle Jack." This is according to an 1848 history that said Peterson and a 19-year-old white soldier named Moses Sherwood had been making cider when they spotted the Vulture. (The captain of the Vulture later alleged the Americans lured them to shore under a false flag of truce. "Surely the British were up to no good, but the claim does make the simple heroic narrative of brave shoreline defenders minding their own business a bit more complex," Weiselberg notes.)

Peterson, who grew up in the family of Job Sherwood in modern-day Sleepy Hollow, was described in his obituary as "mulatto," but it is unclear whether he had been enslaved. When Sherwood's son, Isaac, joined the Continental Army at Peekskill, Peterson joined with him and helped defend the city against a British raid in March 1777, the first of several battles he fought in over the next three years.

He left the army in 1780 but remained a member of the militia. On the morning of Sept. 20, he and Moses (a cousin to Isaac) spotted the Vulture. According to the 1848 account, the men hid behind rocks to fire. One shot from Peterson caused a Redcoat to drop his oar; the skiff turned back while the gunboat lingered to provide cover.

Peterson and Sherwood traveled 5 miles north to Fort Lafayette at what is

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Testimony: Black Patriots

Benjamin Latimore

Benjamin Latimore enlisted in the Continental Army in September 1776 and by April was at Fort Montgomery on the Hudson River under the command of Gen. George Clinton.

"In the early part of [October 1777], some vessels belonging to the enemy came in sight and when within five miles of the fort, the wind having slackened, they disembarked at the place called Dunkerbarach [Dunderberg] or Thunder Hill and marched from thence to the fort," Latimore recalled in his pension application.

The British commander met with Clinton outside the fort. After the usual salutations, the British officer, Col. Mungo Campbell, was asked by Clinton the nature of his business, and he replied that he "came to demand a surrender of the fort, which if done within an hour and our troops grounded their arms they would be permitted to go as it was not wished to make them prisoners because they (the enemy) had more men with them than could be accommodated in the fort."

Latimore said that Clinton told Campbell that Fort Montgomery would not be surrendered "as long as he had a man able to fire a gun." Campbell replied that Clinton "would sleep in the fort that night, or in hell."

The fort held until 6 or 7 p.m., Latimore said. Campbell was killed during the attack, and Clinton escaped. But Latimore and others were held in the fort until October, when it was destroyed and the British soldiers and their prisoners sailed to New York City.

Latimore was forced to become a servant to a British officer until he was liberated by American forces and taken before Major Gen. Israel Putnam, who ordered him to rejoin the 5th Regiment at New Windsor.

Thomas Rosekrans

Thomas Rosekrans enlisted in the fall of 1778 at Continental Village in Philipstown. He was a substitute for Thomas Johnson and was assigned to serve as a waiter to his owner's son, Maj. James Rosekrans.

"At the time I enlisted I recollect that an officer took hold of my hand and made me write my name that I would serve during the war, that I would be true to my country and that when I had enlisted the said Thomas Johnson, whose substitute I was, was then discharged," Rosekrans recalled in his pension application. "I was then called Joseph Johnson on account (as I suppose) of my having Thomas Johnson's place."

Mary Dewitt, the sister of James Rosekrans, testified in support of the former slave's pension application. She remembered he "left Fishkill on



Detail from a 1781 watercolor by a French officer, Jean Baptiste Antoine de Verger, depicting members of the Continental Army, including, at left, a member of the First Rhode Island Regiment. The all-Black force was formed in 1778.

Sunday morning to join the army and that I furnished him with some food to put in his knapsack to eat by the way."

Like Rosekrans, other enslaved men who fought expressed uncertainty about what name had been assigned to them during their service. Marlin Brown, when applying for a pension in 1834, noted he was known as Marlin Roorback after his owner in Wallkill, who gave him permission to enlist, but that he was now known as Brown after a later owner, or more generally just as Marlin.

Charles Stourman

Charles Stourman enlisted in the spring of 1776 to serve under Col. Hugh Hughes, the commissary of the military stores at Fishkill.

"I entered immediately in the hospital service situated about three-fourths of a mile from Fishkill, acting as a waiter or assistant to Dr. McKnight, who was a surgeon at the hospital," he recalled. "During the summer and fall I attended on the sick. The hospital and barracks were full of sick and dying."

"I continued there during the winter, cutting and preparing wood for the hospital and sometime in the next summer [1777] I went to Fort Montgomery and was there at the taking of the fort. I took a team and baggage wagon and drove it up the river and saved it from the British. I went back to Fishkill and stayed there that winter and attended to the same duties I had formerly, to wit tending the hospital. The next spring [1778] I was sent by Col. Hughes with a team to get provisions and forage and followed that business during that summer and fall."

After serving for three years and receiving a discharge, Stourman fought for another eight months in Virginia.



Gen. Washington and Billy Lee

Many years after the fact, John Trumbull painted this portrait of George Washington from memory. It depicts the general in 1780 on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River with his slave, Billy Lee, on horseback.

Lee, purchased by Washington in 1768, was the general's valet during the Revolutionary War and the only slave he freed outright in his will. After the war, Lee broke both of his kneecaps in accidents, which ended his work as a valet (he took up shoemaking instead). He is buried at Mount Vernon.

Lee is probably the "domestic" involved in the court-martial of Joshua Hett Smith, who was accused of complicity in the betrayal by Gen. Benedict Arnold. Maj. Gen. Marquis de Lafayette attempted to interrogate Smith on Sept. 26, 1780, at the Robinson House, which stood on Route 9D in Garrison, but Smith was an experienced lawyer and

apparently embarrassed the Frenchman, who was teased by his fellow officers.

Smith, who was being kept in solitary confinement, learned of Lafayette's discomfort from one of Washington's enslaved workers, "who daily brought me provisions." That person — certainly Billy Lee — said that Lafayette, when Smith's name was mentioned, would bristle.

Smith's account suggests Billy Lee was a part of Washington's inner circle, notes historian William Ferraro. "He was trusted enough by Washington to spend time alone with an important prisoner." In addition, the episode demonstrates "that Lee felt comfortable discussing a touchy subject with a highly educated professional."

The portrait is now owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Black History (from Page 5)

now Cortlandt to report the encounter. A colonel sent several cannons to Croton Point, where, at first light on Sept. 22, they bombarded the Vulture for two hours, forcing it to retreat downriver.

Without the Vulture, Maj. Andre was forced to walk. Following his capture, he was hanged on Oct. 2 as a spy.

Jack Peterson was later taken prisoner by the British and held in a ship in New York harbor, according to his pension papers, but escaped by crawling down an anchor chain. He lived in Cortlandt and Peekskill, and in 1818, at age 63, received a pension but never owned the minimum amount of property required of Black men to participate in civic life. Despite his pinpoint shot that may have preserved a nation, Rifle Jack could not vote.

The white revolution

At the time of the Revolution, Fishkill was the largest village in Dutchess County, with two churches, a schoolhouse, a hotel and a printing press.

When the war began in the spring of 1775, anxious landowners organized a committee to monitor the "affairs of the Negroes." In Newburgh, the council imposed a sundown curfew for the enslaved on punishment of 35 lashes. Provincial lawmakers authorized the shooting of any slave found more than a mile from home.

Communities on both sides of the Hudson River became armed encampments. Fishkill was a major supply depot, hospital, prison and burial ground.

About a third of Dutchess residents refused to swear allegiance to the American cause, and the Continental Army was plagued by enlistees who came and went. Although nearly 400,000 men were recruited to fight, there were never more than 35,000 in the field. The British forces never exceeded 42,000, so the Americans could easily have overwhelmed them at even quarter strength, historians note.

"African Americans participated in the American Revolution from its first day," notes historian Thomas Fleming, writing in the *Journal of the American Revolution*. "That

is why it is shameful that for a long time, they received no credit for their courage and enthusiasm for liberty. The minutemen who fought at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, included at least nine Black soldiers."

That was not Washington's choice. Only days after he took command in June 1775, he decreed that no Black man could join the ranks. As a Virginian, he was reacting to a Southern fear that arming slaves would not be prudent. Many Black men contributed in other roles: as drivers, orderlies, waiters, cooks, bakers (especially at Tarrytown, Continental Village and Fishkill, which had bread ovens), craftsmen and laborers. They were also engaged at New Windsor at the iron works where workers forged the chain that was stretched across the river as a defense against British ships.

After Washington told his Black troops their service would expire on Dec. 31, a group appeared at his headquarters outside Boston to protest. As a compromise — and because in November the British began offering freedom to slaves who joined his Majesty's troops — Black soldiers were allowed to re-enlist. By 1777, there was such a manpower shortage that Washington required men to enlist for at least three years and each town was given a quota. New York had earlier authorized owners to send an enslaved worker to serve for them in the militia; in 1781, the Legislature promised to free slaves who enlisted for the minimum tour or until they were honorably discharged. Their owners received land grants as compensation.

Along with Peterson, there were many other Black heroes of the Revolution, such as Pompey Lamb. The capture of Stony Point in Rockland County in 1779 by Gen. "Mad" Anthony Wayne was the result of Pompey's ability to move between his owner's home and the fort to sell fruits and vegetables to the British. He eventually acquired the password from the guards: "The fort is ours"; Pompey was among those who overpowered the sentries and allowed Wayne's 1,350 continentals (including many free Blacks) to take the fort on July 16.

Among the Black men with George Washington at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-78 were Philip Field of Dutchess County, the son of a slave, and Henry Crandle, who was compelled to fight by his owner, John Crandle of Fishkill.

The Black people of the Hudson Valley during the Revolution had a choice to make. The historian Benjamin Quarles notes that the enslaved worker was most likely "to join the side that made him the quickest and best offer in terms of those 'inalienable rights' of which Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson had spoken."

Male slaves who responded to the 1775 promise from the British that they would be freed for their service were assigned to what became known as the Ethiopian Regiment; they wore sashes with the words "Liberty to Slaves." In 1779, British Gen. Henry Clinton created the Black Pioneers, while also noting any Black man caught fighting for the Americans would be sold.

To gather support for their cause, America's first leaders cited the prospect of hordes of free, angry and armed Black people should the British prevail. During the war, Congress



The gravesite of Jack Peterson at Bethel Cemetery in Croton-on-Hudson

Photo by Erik Weiselberg

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Escape!

"I prayed [for freedom] for 20 years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs."

~Frederick Douglass

The enslaved fleeing from their enslavers was a problem for white New Yorkers from the beginning. As early as 1705, the colonial legislature forbade slaves from traveling alone more than 40 miles north of Albany (i.e., toward Canada); in 1755, it added the death penalty. As late as 1775, in Newburgh, slaves found without a pass were to be whipped 35 times.

The descriptions in newspaper ads offering rewards for the return of escapees provide testament to the brutality inflicted on Black people, noting limps and scars. Most escaped slaves were described as highly intelligent or "cunning," since doing otherwise would not reflect well on the owner who let them get away.

In a collection of about 600 advertisements published between 1735 and 1831 for escaped Hudson Valley slaves and collected by Susan Stessin-Cohn and Ashley Hurlburt-Biagini for their book, *In Defiance*, about two dozen were placed by residents of Fishkill. The earliest was from 1747 (Robert Shere seeking 40-year-old Harry), and the latest from the early 1820s, including one by Medad Raymond of Peekskill, who was looking for Sam, 17, who had been allowed to visit his enslaved parents in Fishkill but never returned.

There were no fixed routes but runaways tended to flee along the Hudson River or through the communities of Quakers (who opposed slavery) in the center of Dutchess County or near the Connecticut border. Enslaved people fleeing the South likely found refuge among the large Black population of Fishkill Landing (Beacon), which also had a Black church, St. James AME Zion, founded in 1844. Joe Collin or Collis, a Black fish peddler, is thought to have transported fugitives across the river to Newburgh, supposedly communicating with horn blasts and lamps.

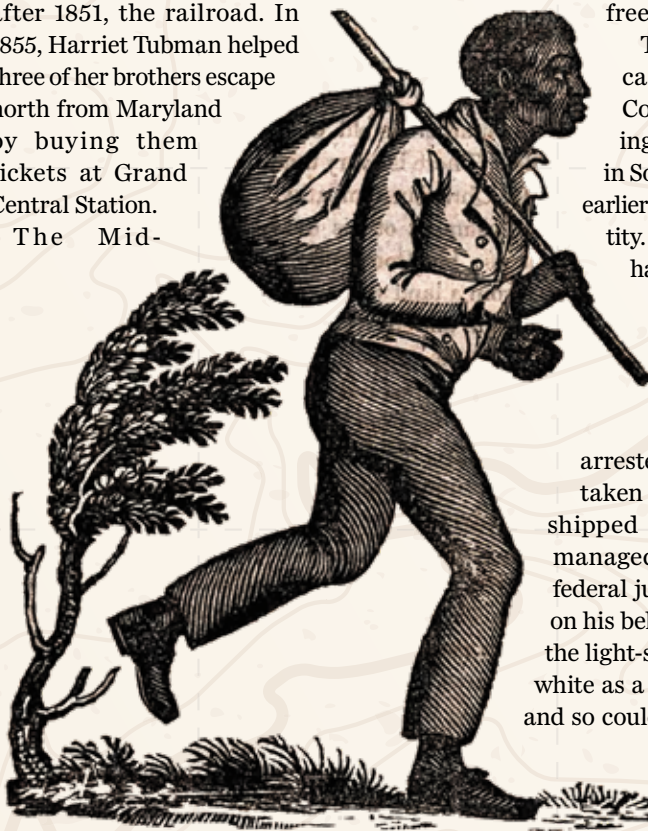
At its second annual meeting in 1840, members of the Dutchess County Anti-Slavery Society adopted a resolution vowing they "collectively and severally will do all in our power to assist those brethren, coming through this county, who may have thus far escaped the iron grasp of tyranny, by

giving them meat, money and clothes, to enable them to prosecute their journey to a land of liberty."

This was a reference to the Underground Railroad, although as historian Albert Bushell Hart noted, it was "not a route, but a network; not an organization but a conspiracy." It was so underground, noted historian A.J. Williams-Myer, that many fugitives may not have been aware it existed.

The Quakers had stops on the railroad from the 1830s in Millbrook and Pawling. Many fugitives were also sent up the Hudson on barges and, after 1851, the railroad. In 1855, Harriet Tubman helped three of her brothers escape north from Maryland by buying them tickets at Grand Central Station.

The Mid-



From *The Anti-Slavery Record*, 1837: "This picture of a poor fugitive is from one of the stereotype cuts manufactured for the Southern market, and used on handbills offering rewards for runaway slaves."

Library Company of Philadelphia

Hudson Antislavery History Project notes that "it is important to keep the Underground Railroad in context. Its 'conductors' freed only a tiny fraction of enslaved people. The majority of white Northerners did not support the road, and it seldom ran 'underground.' Most tunnels or secret hideaways found in historical properties probably had other uses" than hiding runaways.

Nevertheless, the Hudson River was a natural path to Canada, where escaped slaves would be outside the jurisdiction of an 1850 Fugitive Slave Act that required enslaved workers be returned to their owners, even from the free north.

This led to an unusual case in 1851 in Dutchess County, where John Bolding had fled from bondage in South Carolina a few years earlier and assumed a new identity. A Southern woman who had been staying in Poughkeepsie recognized him and notified his former owner, who obtained a warrant.

Bolding was arrested by federal agents and taken to New York City to be shipped south, but supporters managed to get him in front a federal judge. Two lawyers hired on his behalf argued that, in fact, the light-skinned Bolding was "as white as a great many white men" and so could not have been a slave.

The judge ruled against them, but Dutchess abolitionists raised

\$2,000 to buy Bolding's freedom and he returned to Poughkeepsie, where he lived for the next 25 years until his death in 1876.

Black people in Dutchess County were in a precarious position during the 1850s as the country split apart, notes Michael Groth, author of *Slavery and Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley*. Merritt Green of Fishkill was so fearful of being kidnapped by slavecatchers that he attempted suicide, vowing that "he had rather die than be enslaved." Black people, even in the North, had few allies. White immigrants from Europe were arriving in larger numbers, competing with Black residents for even meager housing and jobs. *The Poughkeepsie Telegraph* in 1851 told its readers that preserving the Union was more important than the "rescue of a few slaves from their bondage."

Fishkill, August 26, 1763

RUN away from his Master, the Rev. Mr. Chauncy Graham of the Fishkill, in the County of Dutchess, and Province of New-York, a Negro Man named Trace, aged 25 Years [] spry well-built Fellow; bred in New-England; looks very brazen, prompt and likely; talks flippent; has a flat Forehead and the lower part of his Face something prominent; his Hair [] on the Top, with a Tupee Foretop; plays on the Violin: He took with him an old blue Great-Coat, a Pair Leather Breeches, ditto Trowsers, a white Shirt, ditto Check, ditto Ozenbrigs, a [] under Jacket, a new Castor Hat, a Pair blue and white Stockings. Whoever takes up and secures said Negro, so that his [] Master may have him again, shall have Forty Shilings Reward and all reasonable Charges paid by CHAUNCY GRAHAM. N. B. All persons are hereby forbid to conceal, harbour, or carry off said Negro, as they shall answer it at their Peril.

From *The New-York Gazette* (Sept. 6, 1763)

assigned Benjamin Franklin to write a children's book about the evils of British rule; in it, he claimed the British would pay slaves to kill their masters and kidnap white women and children. While imagining the engravings for the book, Franklin envisioned a scene of armed Black plunderers that he thought could be engraved on the first U.S. coins.

"The matter of choosing sides ultimately proved to be an agonizing experience" for enslaved people in New York, says historian Michael Groth, author of *Slavery and Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley*. "Practical considerations weighed heavily." Most who escaped to New York City were young men, he notes; the majority of enslaved workers in the Hudson Valley seemed to adopt a

wait-and-see attitude.

Some white people, such as Abigail Adams, the future First Lady, recognized the hypocrisy of fighting for freedom from British rule, but not for Black people. "It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have," she wrote to her husband John in September 1774.

In fact, many American leaders during the Revolution voiced support for emancipation, but only in principle. As early as 1771 the delegates at the New York Constitutional Convention had voted 31-5 to abolish slavery, but no action was taken.

After the war, in 1785, the state Assem-

bly considered a bill that would gradually emancipate the enslaved. However, the proposal awarded Blacks only second-class citizenship, denying them the right to vote, hold public office, marry white people or give testimony in court against white people. That didn't fly in the more liberal Senate, and the bill died.

The Assembly, historian Edgar McManus observed, "feared Negro suffrage more than it desired emancipation." In the end, the Legislature managed only to pass a law banning the importation of slaves.

The New York Manumission Society was formed in 1785, and by the 1790s, freeing the enslaved had become a common cause, with the editors of *The Poughkeepsie*

Journal and other papers questioning the morals of slave owners. The economics of forced labor had changed because of an influx of white immigrants. Enslaved workers required capital investment and maintenance costs; not so the hired hand. With jobs harder to find, the working poor grew to resent slaves and former slaves. Even free Blacks were brutalized and excluded from skilled positions.

Fighting for freedom

After Lord Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown in Oct. 19, 1781, the defeated British evacuated New York City. On Oct. 25, Gen. Washington issued an order that any "Negroes

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Testimony: Nanna

In 1874, Henry Bailey recalled in a memoir the former enslaved woman he knew as a child, Nanna, who had been purchased in 1805 by his grandfather for £40. His grandfather was a newlywed and needed someone to keep house.

Nanna shared recollections with young Henry of the Revolutionary War, such as when the British fleet came up the Hudson River and everyone in the Van Voorhis family of Fishkill Landing [Beacon], which had enslaved her since birth, fled to Great Nine Partners [near Millbrook] except for the father. He said he would never leave his house, and Nanna said she could not leave him.

When the British ships arrived in Newburgh Bay, they began firing cannonballs at the Van Voorhis house. She and her owner went to the cellar kitchen until the fleet passed.

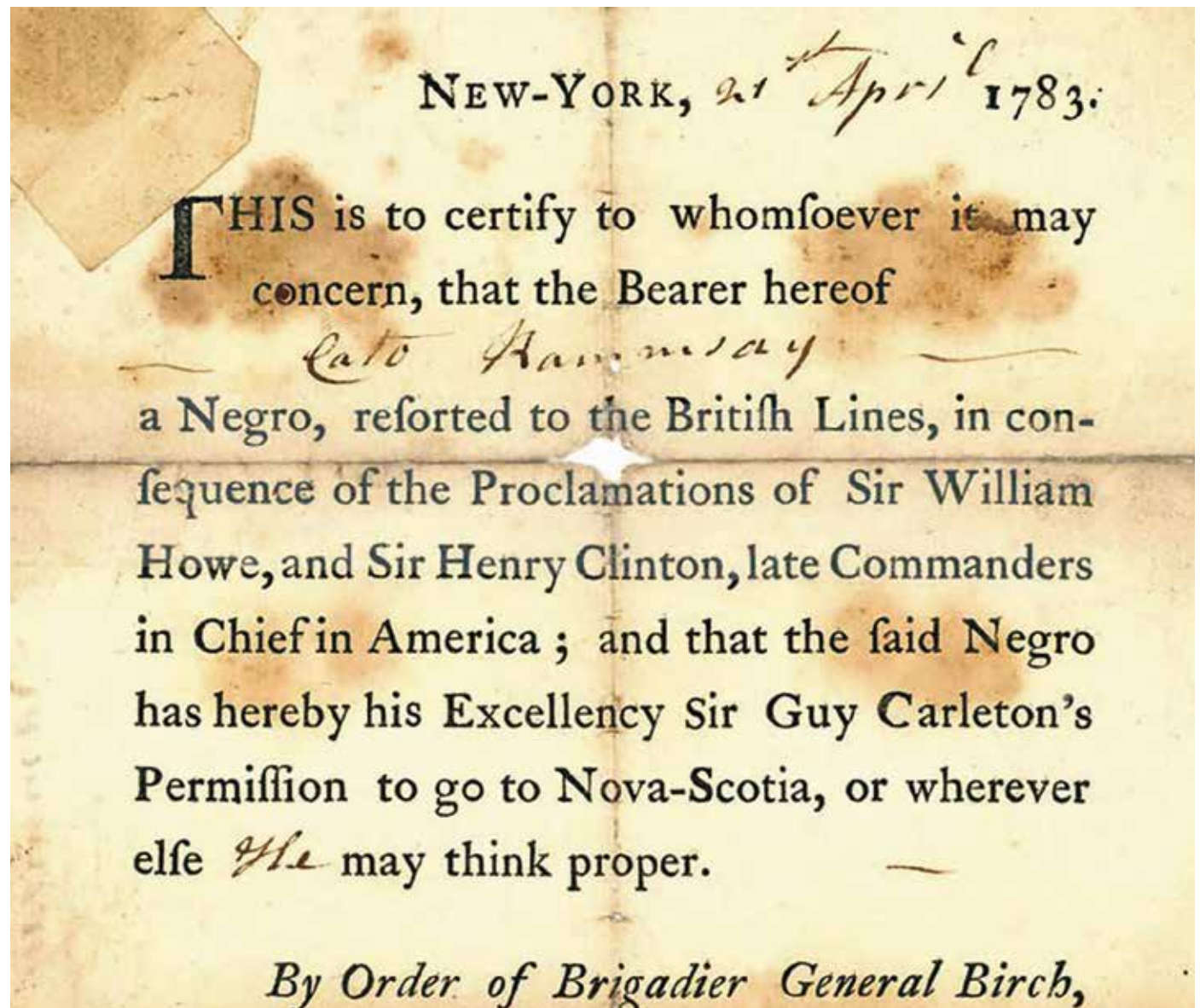
Nanna said she remembered Gen. Israel Putnam arriving at Fishkill Landing on horseback. She also saw Gens. Washington and Lafayette, and the American army camped on the flats north of the Highlands.

On one occasion, she helped prepare the home of Robert Brett [the Van Wyck Homestead on Route 9] for Washington, who was quartered there. She helped light the candles, she said.

Nanna, who could speak Dutch and English, was freed in 1827 when slavery was abolished in New York state. “Her son and daughter came to our house to take her home with them,” Bailey recalled. “My parents tried to persuade her to remain with them [with] what little time was allotted to her on earth, but the boon of freedom was too great for her. When she left the house, we all wept.” She did not know her age but was probably about 70, he said.

“Nanna found freedom far different than she expected,” Bailey wrote. “The colored people were poor, and there was no fuel in the country but wood,” which was expensive, “and she found that the fire of freedom did not suffice. She did not find wood and provisions as plenty there as she had in the days of slavery, and she wished herself back again in the old kitchen, a slave under her old master.”

He said the family sent for her but were told she had recently died in a little house near where the Dutchess Hat Works was later built [now Madam Brett Park].



A passport issued in New York City by the British in 1783 to an escaped slave for his trip to Canada

Black History (from Page 7)

or Molattoes” be rounded up and put under guard so they could be returned to their owners. One condition of the 1783 Treaty of Paris that officially ended the war was that the British would not “carry away any Negroes or other Property of the American inhabitants.”

The peace agreement allowed that any enslaved person who had reached British lines before Nov. 30, 1782, would be freed, but only with restitution to his or her owner.

To determine which Black people were eligible, a group of American and British officials met each Wednesday for six months at a Black-owned tavern on Broad Street in New York City to compile what became known as the “book of Negroes.” It contained the name, age and date of escape of every runaway slave who had reached the city during the war, including at least four who had escaped from enslavement in Dutchess County:

- ★ Ceaser Nicolls, 22, described as a “stout Blk Man,” had reached the British lines 3½ years earlier [in 1780] after fleeing from the Van Wyck family in Fishkill. He planned to travel aboard the Ann with his certificate of freedom issued by the British for a settlement in Nova Scotia called Port Roseway.
- ★ Bristol Storm, 40, a “stout fellow,” had escaped three years earlier [in 1780] from Garret Storm of Fishkill. He was destined for Annapolis/St. John, Nova Scotia, aboard the Clinton. Unlike Nicolls, he did

not have a certificate of freedom.

- ★ Massey Asten, 31, a “stout wench,” had escaped six years earlier [1777] from her Dutchess County owner, Joseph Jenkins. She was headed to Annapolis, Nova Scotia, aboard the sloop Cato.
- ★ John Simonsbury, 43, “healthy,” from Fredericksburg [now Patterson in Putnam County], had fled from his owner, Charles Collins, four years earlier [1779]. He was headed to Port Roseway on the London Frigate.

In 1783, about 3,000 Black men, women and children with certificates were allowed to leave for Canada; another 400 sailed for London; and 1,200 journeyed to Africa to create a community in Sierra Leone. In addition, about 1,500 enslaved people are believed to have been taken to Canada by their Loyalist masters.

By one estimate, 5,000 to 9,000 Black men fought with the Continental Army. But another 20,000 fled to the British in a bid for freedom that wasn’t being offered by the men who produced the Declaration of Independence.

“Our revered founders — intent on rallying mass support for a revolt intended to replace one set of colonial elites with another — indulged in egalitarian rhetoric that most of them did not believe,” observed historian Gregory Urwin in the *Journal of the American Revolution*. “What redeemed the Revolution is the fact that so many common Americans took that rhetoric literally.” ■

Reparations

Beverley Robinson, the son-in-law of Frederick Philipse, a large landowner and early slave trader whose family is the namesake of Philipstown, was an active Loyalist during the Revolutionary War. (His home in Garrison was seized by the Continental Army for use by Gen. Benedict Arnold.) After fleeing to London at war’s end, Robinson was one of 50 men from Dutchess County who made claims to be reimbursed by the crown.

He estimated his losses at £68,784, which included 60,000 acres, two mills and eight enslaved workers he left behind: Harry, 19 (valued at £80); Rose, 20 (£60); Coobaugh, 20 (£60); Belinda, 18 (£60); Sarah, 18 (£60); Phillis, 15 (£50); Candis, 15 (£50); and Clarinda, 13 (£50).

By comparison, Robinson valued a pair of oxen at £18 and a bushel of wheat at £7. He was awarded £23,287, or about a third of his claim.

PART 3



A home near Albany, photographed in 1936, with its former slave quarters, at left

Library of Congress

By Chip Rowe

Enslaved workers were brought by the Dutch to New York beginning in 1625 or 1626, but it wasn't until 1799 that state legislators ended the practice — sort of. Ever practical, lawmakers decided it was best to take it slow.

According to the 1799 law, children born to enslaved mothers on or after July 4 of that year would not be slaves but instead be “bound in service” to their mother's owner until age 25 (for girls) or 28 (for boys) — provided the owner taught them to read the Holy Scriptures.

In 1817, the Legislature fiddled with Black freedom again. It decreed that every slave born in New York would be free as of July 4, 1827. But it also said that children born to enslaved mothers from March 31, 1817, to July 3, 1827, would be bound in service to their mother's owner until age 21.

These children were New York's last generation of enslaved workers, and while owners might be willing to voluntarily free older slaves, they weren't so eager to give up the kids. This was reflected, noted historian Vivienne Kruger, in the number of Black children who lived in white households in the 1820 census. Because of high childhood mortality rates, many did not live long enough to be free, she wrote.

The 1799 law does appear to have prompted many white patriarchs to free their slaves, with various degrees of compassion. Zacharias Van Voorhis of Rombout Precinct [Fishkill] instructed his executors “to order my Negros into that apartment in my house where I died, and there in the most solemn manner proclaim to them their freedom.” Adolph Myers of Fishkill freed two of his slaves, Harry and Jane, but gave three others to his children and directed the sale of a fourth to create an endowment for his grandchildren.

In most wills, freedom was promised — later. John Ackerman of Fishkill bequeathed Adam and Isaac to his sons with instructions to free the men on their

36th birthdays. John Lancaster of Beekman said that because it was “wrong and wicked to hold any people in a state of slavery,” he would release a 3-year-old girl he had purchased — when she turned 18. Egbert Bogardus of Fishkill told his executors that they could free Pegg as long as his estate would have no continuing financial liability. (If not, they were to sell her.)

A few slaves who were allowed to hire themselves out saved enough to buy their freedom, notes Michael Groth, author of *Slavery and Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley*. But the costs could be prohibitive. Caty Stevenson of Poughkeepsie made an agreement with her owner to receive her freedom after six years for \$30. But after hiring herself out for four years, she had saved only \$5. The enslaved also had to trust their owner's word, since they could not enter into contracts. Anthony Murphy of Poughkeepsie agreed to buy his wife's freedom for \$10 but, when the time came, the price had increased to \$20.

It took 30 years, and two centuries, but the legal ownership of humans in New York eventually came to an end. By 1820, more than 80 percent of Blacks in Suffolk, Queens and Westchester counties were free, along with more than 95 percent in New York City, notes historian David Gellman.

Ten years later, after the 1827 emancipation, there were fewer than about 50 enslaved people in the state, according to an analysis of census records by historian Michael Douma of Georgetown University, including four in Putnam County but none in Dutchess. Most were likely children of enslaved mothers who were legally indentured servants, he says. Three of the four people recorded as

(Continued on Page 10)

A Northerner Defends Slavery

James Kirke Paulding (1779-1860), a member of the first board of directors of the West Point Foundry, which was formed in Cold Spring in 1818, had a wide range of interests. He is credited with the tongue-twister “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers” and also served as secretary of the Navy. Two of his sons are buried in Philipstown, and Paulding Avenue is named for the family.



One of his interests was slavery. In his 1817 book, *Letters from the South*, he noted that the institution was at odds with the preamble of the Constitution. But he argued that its evils were exaggerated — that slave traders, not owners, were responsible for any brutality, and that enslaved Black workers seemed to be the happiest people on earth. He condemned any owner who “adds one feather to the weight they are destined to bear.”

In 1835 Paulding reissued the book, and a year later published *Slavery in the United States*, in which he noted that Jesus is never cited in the Bible saying slavery is wrong. He warned that freeing the enslaved would destroy the country because Blacks would demand political power despite their “natural and incurable inferiority.”

The next year, in 1836, Paulding wrote *The Book of St. Nicholas*, which helped popularize the Dutch Santa Claus tradition in America.



A poster from the Civil War designed to recruit Black soldiers

A Shift in Feeling

For the Verplanck family, who owned Mount Gulian in what is now Beacon, the Civil War marked the end of a generational change in perspective toward slavery.

Historian Myra Young Armstead documented the progression of thought from Samuel Verplanck, a Revolutionary War-era slave owner who endorsed only a gradual end to the institution, to his great-great-grandson, Robert Verplanck, who graduated from Harvard in 1863 and immediately took command of a company in the U.S. Colored Troops.

Fifty-two of Robert's letters home during the Civil War were preserved. In December 1863, he wrote from Yorktown, Virginia:

“About three in the morning the cavalry came in with their prisoners, having captured the whole gang [of rebels], not one escaping, and immediately there was a detail of 20 men made from our regiment to guard them. I can tell you it made them savage to have the black soldiers put over them but they had to grin & bear it as Colonel West who had command believes in black troops & don't believe in catering to the tastes of rebels.”

For more excerpts related to his Black troops, see highlandscurrent.org/verplanck.

Black History (from Page 9)

enslaved in Putnam lived in the household of Daniel Travis in Philipstown.

In 1840, census takers tallied four enslaved people in New York state, including an older woman in Putnam; in 1850 there was one: an older man in Putnam. But Douma suspects these were errors and those marked as slaves were actually free Black people who continued to live with their former owners.

Pursuing the vote

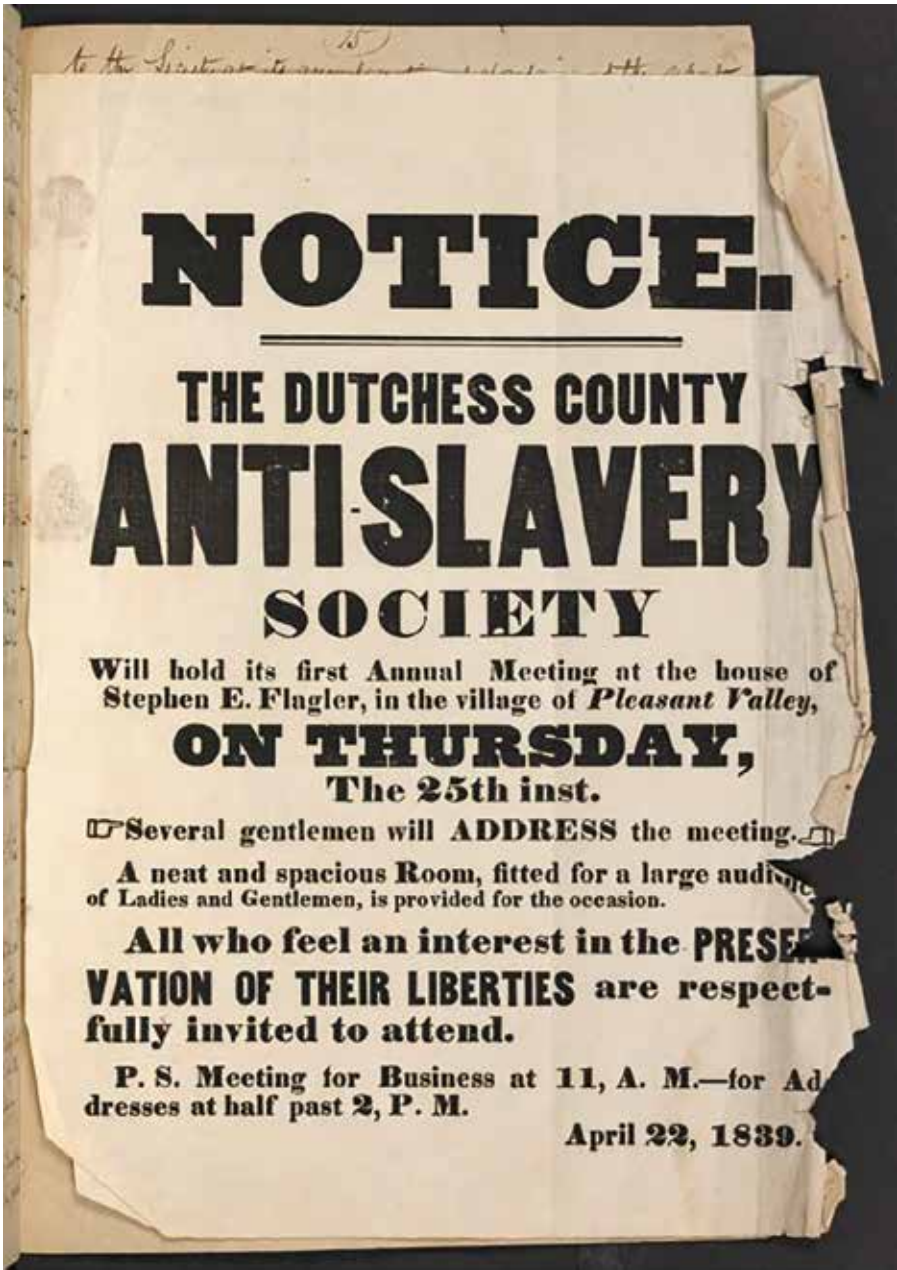
In 1821, New York lawmakers changed the state constitution to allow all white men age 21 and older to vote. They also allowed free Black men to vote if they had lived in New York for three years and owned more than \$250 in property. Fourteen years later, in 1835, there were seven qualified Black voters in Albany and four in Buffalo. (The earliest record that the Beacon Historical Society has of a Black person owning property is a deed for a home purchased by Isaac Atkins in 1819.)

In the 1830s, free Black people began to organize conventions to strategize about how to expand their role in civic life. The voices split between those such as Frederick Douglass, who preached restraint and working within the system, and those, such as the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, who were more militant and less willing to work with white abolitionists. Eventually, Douglass’ approach won out.

“Radical” abolitionists who called for immediate emancipation faced a tough audience in Dutchess County. By 1837, there were 19 antislavery societies in upstate counties, but none in the Hudson Valley. After an open call in Poughkeepsie in 1838 to create the Dutchess County Antislavery Society, a mob disrupted the proceedings. The group was formed, but when it asked pastors in Poughkeepsie to announce its prayer meetings, four of the five refused. The minutes of the society end abruptly in May 1840.

Abolitionist candidates did terribly in Dutchess County; of the 10,000 votes cast for governor in 1840, Gerrit Smith received 13. The Free Party candidate for the state Assembly tallied 29 votes in 1839, four in 1841 and 22 in 1842. An anti-slavery newspaper founded in Dutchess County in 1839, *Bow of Promise*, topped out at 131 subscribers, with 17 paid.

Most residents of the Hudson Valley were not sympathetic to abolitionists in part because of the region’s economic ties to New York City, and New York City’s economic ties to the South. “Most places on the Hudson River,” said abolitionist Sam Ringgold Ward,



A poster for an 1839 meeting of the Dutchess County Antislavery Society
New York Public Library

who escaped slavery to become a newspaper editor and labor leader, were “thoroughly and hopelessly pro-slavery.”

At a state constitutional convention in 1846, delegates argued over whether to open the vote to all Black men, not just property owners. Two of the three representatives from Dutchess voted “no,” but it was decided to hold a referendum. The question was defeated by a nearly 3-to-1 margin; in Dutchess County, it lost by an 8-to-1 margin. In Putnam County, it fell 42-to-1.

By 1850, according to the federal census, there were 60 Black people and 12 “mulattoes” in what is now Beacon, and five Black families who owned their homes: Robert DeWitt, Cornelius Schofield, James F. Brown,

Samuel Lampons and Susan Washington. There were two boatmen, a gardener (Brown) and several laborers. All the homes appear to have been on the same street, which may have been what is today Rombout Avenue.

Most Blacks in Dutchess County — about 75 percent — lived in river towns such as Fishkill Landing (Beacon). A few Black men found modest economic success, but the vast majority in the 1850 census were identified as tenants, sharecroppers or hired hands. Only 15 of the more than 500 Black men in Dutchess whose occupations were recorded owned their own farms.

Barbering was one of the few trades dominated by Blacks, writes Groth. They catered to a largely white clientele but had to put up with racism with self-effacing banter. Frederick Douglass called on parents to make their sons “mechanics and farmers — not waiters, porters and barbers.” In 1853, his *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* ran a series called “Learn Trades or Starve.”

Black churches

In the absence of social support, Black people formed churches and mutual aid societies, “pooling their meager resources to provide for their own sick, widows and orphans, and decent burials,” wrote Lawrence Mamiya, a historian who taught religion and Africana studies at Vassar College.

In 1804 in New York City, the African

The People vs. Alvin, a Black Man

In 1816, Alvin, a Black man enslaved in Putnam County, was charged with grand larceny. He was alleged to have stolen a \$20 bank note from the home of Stephen Frost. The court found him guilty and sentenced him to three years of hard labor. That didn’t sit well with Joseph Crane of Southeast, who owned Alvin and his hard labor. Although it was illegal under New York law to sell an enslaved person out of state, the court granted Crane a 14-day exemption so he could recoup his loss.

Return Visit

“After the Emancipation Proclamation by Lincoln, he concluded it was safe enough to visit his old master’s home. So in 1867 he started for Maryland. An absence of over 40 years had very much changed the appearance of the place, and his old master had departed this life, but others had not forgotten him. He was made happy by meeting those who had once known him when working on the plantation. His brother and sister, who are still living at an advanced age, gave him a hearty welcome.”

~ From the 1879 obituary of Joseph Thomas, 75, who had escaped to Poughkeepsie at age 20. He married a freed slave and they moved to Glenham, where he bought property. “He made many friends, and was much respected,” the obituary said. “He was always fond of joking and had a pleasant word for those who addressed him.”

Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) church was created under the guidance of the Methodists. In 1827, the Rev. George Matthews established a congregation in Newburgh, as well as a “station” in Fishkill Landing that by 1834 had 23 members.

James Brown, an escaped slave from Maryland who became a gardener at the Verplanck estate in Fishkill Landing, noted in a May 1844 entry in his journal the presentation of a parcel of land to build an AMEZ church; when it was dedicated in September, he underlined the entry. The St. James AMEZ church on Academy Street is the oldest church building in Beacon; its original site was across South Avenue. The church moved to its current location sometime after the Dutchess Tool Co. bought the property in 1890.

With the end of slavery, many Black communities began to emphasize self-improvement. The AMEZ church directed

Free Blacks and Slaves

	1790		1800		1810		1820	
	All	Enslaved	All	Enslaved	All	Enslaved	All	Enslaved
Dutchess Co.	2,296	81%	2,541	63%	2,390	52%	2,468	31%
Carmel est. 1795	–	–	20	80%	27	22%	31	55%
Fishkill	642	94%	643	82%	609	66%	691	39%
Pawling	133	32%	113	30%	33	18%	77	5%
Philipstown	27	93%	36	28%	39	21%	55	24%
Poughkeepsie	247	81%	317	56%	329	40%	353	15%
Rhinebeck	487	86%	491	74%	418	75%	142	52%

its pastors to stress the importance of education; its Sunday schools taught reading, writing and moral truths. New York State allowed districts to create separate public schools for Black children but there were often not enough to do so in rural Dutchess communities. As a result, children of all races attended together. And as might be expected, Black students suffered daily harassment and “petty annoyances,” notes historian Dennis Maika. In 1846, the state superintendent estimated that only 25 percent of Black children attended school.

Carleton Mabee, a historian who, until his death in 2014, wrote extensively about Black education in New York, concluded that the first public school for Black children and adolescents in Fishkill Landing probably opened in 1859. By 1863, it had 10 to 15 students. Few Blacks attended high school or college. As late as 1900, Vassar refused to admit Blacks; Beacon High School did not have its first Black graduate, William Howes, until 1925.

There were multiple attempts in Dutchess County to create Black colleges, including in 1870, when a group that included Samuel Jones, a laborer from Fishkill Landing, began an unsuccessful campaign to raise \$300,000 for a 15-acre campus in Poughkeepsie named for Toussaint L’Overture, the Haitian revolutionary. But many Black people did not want Black colleges. Delegates to the New York Colored Citizens Convention in Troy in 1872 argued that they should instead advocate opening more white institutions to African Americans.

In 1883, the Black school in Fishkill Landing was added as a “department” to the white school; in 1890 the Black students were meeting in the “colored annex” when the school board decided segregating the five or six Black students wasn’t worth the expense and sent them to the white elementary school. While Black public schools continued to exist elsewhere in New York into the 1940s, the Fishkill Landing school was the last in Dutchess County, Mabee wrote.

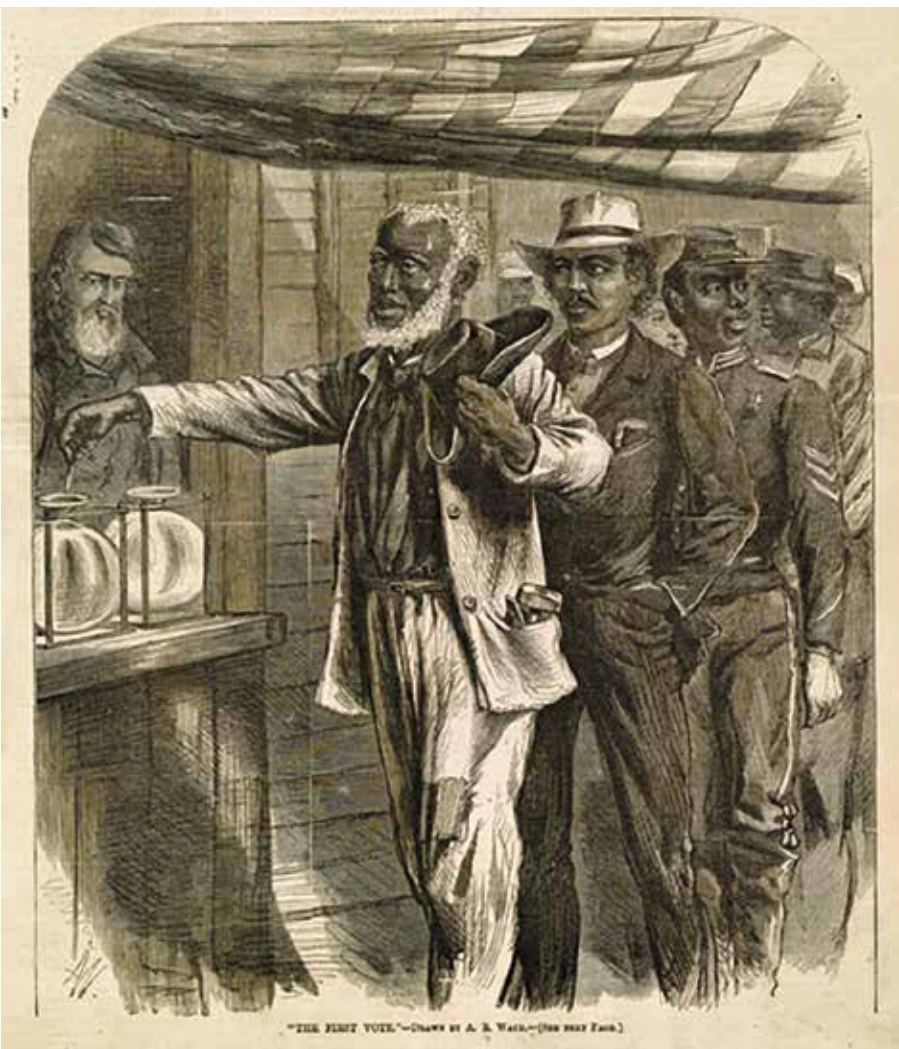
Getting the vote

On Aug. 11, 1870, Frederick Douglass visited Newburgh, where he spoke at the Opera House (now the site of the Newburgh Free Library) to 4,000 people gathered to celebrate the ratification six months earlier of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, which gave all African American men the right to vote.

On the stage with him were 29 young Black women, representing each of the 29 states that ratified the amendment. The Newburgh City Band played an overture and an all-Black choir sang, “Now the Glorious Day Has Come.”

Douglass, then 52, told the crowd that he had been a fugitive slave (posing as a sailor, he escaped from Maryland by train in 1838), and then an advocate for slaves. But now he appeared before them as an American citizen, “one of the greatest privileges of which a human being can boast.”

“The colored people now had equality at the three boxes — the jury box, the ballot box and the cartridge box,” he said, according to an account in the *Newburgh Daily Journal*. “The lesson of the hour was to get the knowledge box.” The 15th Amend-



An illustration from a November 1867 issue of *Harper's Weekly* shows Black men lining up to vote.

ment, he said, meant that “hereafter the colored man was to be thrown upon his own resources. It meant fair play, and if he could live by that, he could live.”

But Douglass also noted that, without vocations, Black people would face fierce competition from white immigrants. One advantage the European newcomers had was “intergenerational mobility” — fathers passed their jobs to their sons. The least-skilled Black workers tended to wander in search of work. In 1860, most Black women were domestic servants, but they lost their jobs to Irish women and were pushed into doing laundry.

James F. Brown

For 37 years, from 1829 to 1866, a Black gardener who lived in Fishkill Landing kept a diary that eventually filled 10 volumes. It was “a remarkable act for most Americans of his day and a virtually unheard of undertaking for an African American man,” says his biographer, Myra Young Armstead, a history professor at Bard College.

James F. Brown may have been the first Black man to own property in what is now Beacon, and to vote.

He was born a slave in 1793. At age 29, he was owned by a widow in Maryland, Susan Williams, who, over the next five years, rented him out, first to her brother-in-law and then to a businessman named Jeremiah Hoffman. In 1827, Hoffman allowed Brown to visit Delaware.

Brown did not return. Instead, he sent Hoffman an apologetic letter.

“I know that you will be astonished and surprised when you become acquainted with the unexpected course that I am now about to take, a step that I never had the most distant idea of taking,” he wrote. “But what can a man do who has his hands bound and his feet fettered? He will certainly try to get them loosened by fair and honorable means and, if not, so he will certainly get them loosened in any way that he may think the most advisable.”

Brown made his way to New York City and

found work as a waiter at the home of lawyer and banker Daniel Verplanck. According to family lore, a Southern visitor to the Verplanck home recognized Brown and alerted Williams. She contacted Verplanck, who, Armstead believes, negotiated a \$300 installment plan for Brown to buy his freedom and that of his new wife, Julia, who remained in Baltimore, for another \$100. Armstead says there is a cryptic reference in the diary to Brown writing Susan Williams about three years later, which she speculates was his last annual payment.

By 1828, Brown had relocated to the Verplanck country home in what is now Beacon. (It has been preserved as Mount Gulian.) He worked chiefly as a coachman before taking over as gardener in 1836. The Verplancks shared an interest in horticulture with Henry Winthrop Sargent, who had a sprawling estate nearby.

By then, Brown had saved enough to buy a house — the exact location is not known — and pay property taxes. That qualified him to vote, which he did on Nov. 8, 1837.

“The election at Fishkill took place this day at which place James F. Brown voted for the first time,” he wrote in his journal. At the time, the Democratic party was working to keep Blacks away from the polls, so many gravitated to the Whigs, a party formed in 1834.

Brown was an activist for Black homeownership, Armstead writes. Several of his friends began negotiating with whites to buy homes. James diligently paid his annual tax bill and made sure his neighbors’ were paid as well, even if they were employed elsewhere in the Hudson Valley or Manhattan or New Jersey.

Brown also worked to establish a cemetery for Black residents; in late 1851 he and four other trustees bought a parcel from John DeWindt for \$125 and created the Colored Peoples Union Burying Ground. The first burial was John Henry Roose on Oct. 31. There had been a Black burial ground in Fishkill since at least 1832, but it may have been too small — only nine grave-stones have been found there.

The burying ground, which measured 50-by-130 feet, is in the southern section of the Methodist Cemetery on North Walnut Street. In 1939 the Beacon City Council considered extending Oak Street to connect North Walnut and North Brett, but the city surveyor discovered the property was still owned by the descendants of the five original trustees.

“Today the cemetery’s most recognizable tombstones belong to a handful of black Civil War veterans,” noted Robert Murphy of the Beacon Historical Society in 2019. “A thorough history of Beacon’s black community has not been written, but when undertaken, it must begin in a cemetery.”

James died in 1868 at age 75. (He is buried in St. Luke’s Cemetery.) When Julia died in 1890, his journal passed to the Verplanck family, who donated it in 1942 to the New-York Historical Society.

James made his last entry in 1866: “The lowest tide that has been for many years in the Hudson River was this day — the flats was bare from the Long Dock down to Denning’s Point — so that persons could walk down to get eels and fish with one hand.” ■

Support for Black Suffrage

Percentage of voters who supported allowing all Black men to vote

	1846	1860	1869
State	27.6	36.4	46.9
Dutchess	11.6	21.9	50.4
Putnam	2.3	7.0	32.9
NYC	14.6	13.9	29.6
Westchester	4.1	11.3	42.7

Source: *The Politics of Race in New York*, by Phyllis Field

PART 4



The first of a series of 60 paintings by Jacob Lawrence created in 1941, when he was 23, as part of his landmark *Migration Series*. "During the World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes." The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

By Leonard Sparks

On April 29, 1995, inside Springfield Baptist Church, Johnnie Mae Sampson mined her past as a gift to the future.

Then a 61-year-old employee of the Dutchess County Community Action Agency, Sampson was one of 14 Black residents of Beacon being interviewed by members of the Dutchess County Historical Society's Black History Project Committee.

She had come to New York 45 years earlier, in 1950, from segregated Asheville, North Carolina, when her father's job as a nurse's assistant was transferred to the Castle Point VA Medical Center in Wappingers Falls.

His odyssey would be his family's, including that of his teenage daughter. Before leaving, Johnnie Mae read about the Hudson River. "When I rode across the river on a ferryboat, I dropped a nickel in it," said Sampson, who died in 2012, during her interview. "I said, 'I'm finally getting to see the Hudson River.'"

The ripple she created was part of a larger wave.

Sampson's family joined an unprecedented exodus of an estimated 6 million Blacks from the segregated South — where they faced racial violence and limited economic, educational and social opportunities — to cities in the North, Midwest and West between the 1910s and the 1970s.

About 1.5 million came to New York state. In Beacon, the city's Black population more than doubled between 1940 and 1950, and rose another 50 percent by 1960. Men, women and families from North and South Carolina, Virginia and other Southern states squeezed into Beacon's West End, a section of Ward 2 between Bank Square and the city's waterfront industries.

For Connie Perdreau, whose parents left South Carolina and eventually bought a house on Beekman Street with a view of the Hudson River from its balcony, the West End was a nurturing place.

"Even at a young age, I thought to

myself, 'We're looking at the same riverscape as the Roosevelts and the Vanderbilts,'" she said in an interview. "We have the most valuable property in Beacon."

Searching

Black people left the South because, despite its own problems with discrimination, New York and other Northern states promised better-paying jobs and better housing, and opportunities to attend better schools, live with fewer social restrictions and vote without barriers or threats — especially for a generation born decades after the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction.

Young Blacks in the first wave, from roughly 1910 to 1940, "could see the contradictions in their world," noted Isabel Wilkerson in her chronicle of the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which won a Pulitzer Prize. "Sixty, 70, 80 years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, they still had to step off the sidewalk when a white person approached, were banished to jobs nobody else wanted no matter their skills or ambition, couldn't vote, but could be hanged on suspicion of the pettiest infraction."

It was not just farm and factory laborers who left. Also making the journey from cities such as New Orleans, Montgomery, Birmingham, Savannah and Charleston were skilled Black mechanics and other trained workers, businessmen, ministers and physicians, according to a U.S. Department of Labor report on migration during 1916-17.

The movement alarmed the South. A leader of the Arkansas Republican Party complained in 1923 that Blacks were leaving the cotton fields half-cultivated, "selling what few goods they can and heading

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A Glimpse of Black Life in Beacon, 1941

In April 1941, Manet Helen Fowler (1916-2004) — later to become the first Black woman in the U.S. to earn a doctorate in cultural anthropology — visited Beacon and other Dutchess County communities to speak to African American residents about their views of the national defense (the Japanese would bomb Pearl Harbor in December, drawing the U.S. into World War II), race relations, migration and education, among other topics.

It's unclear who commissioned the typed reports, or if they have ever been published, but in 2020 the Fowler family put them up for auction with Swann Galleries in New York City. Bill Jeffway, president of the Dutchess County Historical Society, paid \$3,640 and donated the documents to the society. Below are excerpts from Fowler's report from Beacon.

• • •

Three or four blocks from the [Baptist] church we met the first Negro we had then seen in town — Mr. F., the handyman, who was dressed in a fisherman's hat, leather jacket and high boots, and who, after the "ground" was broken, talked willingly — on the street, in the rain — for more than half an hour. He is a tenant of Mr. and Mrs. A., living in a small shack in their backyard on Hudson Avenue, and he suggested that I contact them....

Mr. G. of the *Beacon News* was interviewed in his office. He was cordial, gracious and, though busy, typed out a list of "Negro" names who might be found helpful.

The first of these was that of Mr. and Mrs. W, of the Beacon Inn, described as a "restaurant," where we might be able to have dinner and to gain other contacts. At this Inn (referred to by Beacon Negroes as a "saloon" or a "beer garden," but never once as a restaurant!),

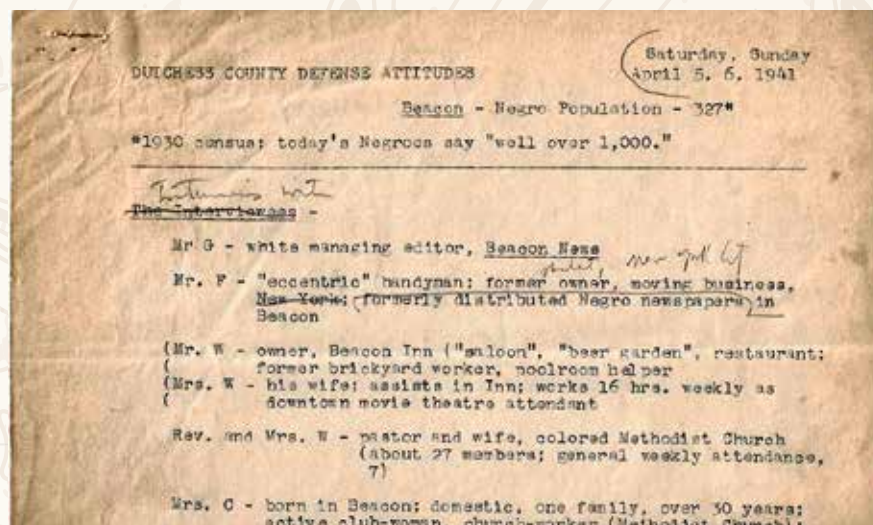
we were finally served dinner, cooked to order, having interviews meanwhile with Mr. and Mrs. W., the former brickyard workers, the aqueduct worker and the itinerant Philadelphia mechanic-carpenter.

The Inn is on lower Beekman Street, the "Negro" street up from the Hudson River where a large number of colored people live and conduct their limited businesses. Rev. and Mrs. W. and Mrs. C. live on this street, diagonally across from the Inn, and they were interviewed in their homes. Mr. and Mrs. J., who maintain well-appointed rooms for transients, gave their answers in their home, where we stayed overnight....

Mr. B., on leave from Fort Dix, [was interviewed] in the Congo Inn, the town's other colored "saloon" "beer garden" "restaurant," which, as one interviewee put it, "appeals to the younger crowd," while the Beacon Inn is frequented by the older working class. Mr. and Mrs. T. do not live on Beekman Street (those people who do have a complex about it, and feel that "the minute you say you live on Beekman Street in this town, you're disgraced!") but on Ferry Street, nearby; they were interviewed at home, after Mrs. C. had invited us to Sunday morning breakfast.

In all cases, opinions were freely given, completely without reticence. Here there seemed little need to "feel the way" in view of being an "outsider."... Perhaps it was because, of the interviewees, only Mrs. C. (and a few of the younger people of high school age) had been born in Beacon — gaining thereby the true in-group attitude. The others were immigrants, mostly from the South, who had been in the town a long time or short, but had, nevertheless, an objectivity which was colored in large part by a sense of affiliation "at home," wherever

(Continued on Page 13)



Manet Fowler's typewritten report, with her corrections, is part of the collection at the Dutchess County Historical Society.

(Continued from Page 12)

that might be, but of transition-residence in Beacon. No matter. Even though most of the opinions drifted in the same direction, the people — all of them — talked... .

Superficially, race relations offer no problem (this, in fact, was the opinion of Mr. G. of *The News*, in regard to Beacon: "Everybody got along fine; relief authorities made joblessness impossible — Negroes, everybody, always worked"); Negro and white boys and girls attend school together — but after school, with or without graduation, the future for the Negro boys and girls is limited. They are not accepted for work in downtown factories except at Gloversville, a non-union furniture factory out from town, which employs about 40% Negro men. (Miss H., a very light Negro girl with hazel eyes, a high school student now, and intelligent, made application at the National Biscuit Co. but has never been called, and was never allowed to speak with anyone in greater authority than a secretary-receptionist.)

The difficult thing with this non-acceptance, Beacon Negroes think, is that it is so rarely explicit, but subtle. Applications are accepted for jobs, but no one is ever called, nor is the applicant told that no disposition of his case will be made because he is colored. Miss H. felt that much could be gained in at least an understanding on both sides, if the Negroes could sometimes gain an audience with a personnel manager, instead of a receptionist, who, she felt, will often block the way. Two other Negro women have worked in downtown factories, however, but the other Negroes discount this as an achievement for the group proper — since, they say, "They were both so 'pink' nobody could tell the difference."

As in Poughkeepsie, also, the housing situation is bad in Beacon, although recently there has been a sudden spurt of Negro homebuyers, mostly among Castle Point employees. Even so, on all streets — even Beekman — some whites live side by side with Negroes and, in some cases (varying, of course, with individual personalities), limited social relations are indulged. But among the Negroes themselves there is the old problem of disunity — stratification into brickyard and hospital worker classes; between church people and saloon people; between young people and old... .

As for the young people and the saloon, there are fewer other places for them to go. The Baptist Church has no Young People's Forum, no clubs, little but a Young People's Choir to sing hymns. Mr. and Mrs. A., from their meager funds, charter a bus each Sunday to gather young people for the Methodist Church Sunday School... .

In the town of Negroes, there are, therefore, the two churches, the two saloons, two barber-shop-beauty-parlor combinations, and one business headquarters, for a man who sells life insurance and exhibits colored educational films, for a New York company. At the moment, the young people are very anxious to have something in the nature of a Community Center, or clubhouse, or whatever — where they might meet and have meetings and programs of a progressive, civic nature... .

Economically, the Castle Point Hospital employees are the "upper class." These live in nicer homes in town, if they do not occupy the attractive quarters furnished on the hospital grounds and many are now buying. One of the reasons for the inadequate Negro census figures for Beacon may lie in the fact that numbers of Negroes live "on their jobs," as in the case of the Castle Point workers — numbering, according to vague estimates, almost "as many as 327 themselves."



Manet Helen Fowler, in a 1951 painting by her mother

Yale University Art Gallery

The now-unemployed brickyard workers are the Beacon Inn nucleus — working men who pick up what they can, and their wives or sweethearts, who work as domestics. In all cases the idea proposed by Mr. G. that "there was no Negro (or any!) unemployment in Beacon — in fact, "too much work" was greeted with much cynical levity from interviewees. "Jobs," they answer, "but what kind of jobs?" Relief authorities encourage work, it is true, they say, but "you must take what you can get — and, for the Negro, that is always next to nothing!"

The case of Miss H. — who "cleans a large, 8-room house each Saturday for a white housewife at a \$1 salary — excused because she is 'a schoolgirl'" is in point. Mrs. W., who works as the theatre attendant part-time now, was extremely bitter about the housework situation, and has resolved that "working for Jews at the theatre is better; they don't pay much, but at least they treat you right."

At the time of the interviewing, some men were employed on the New York State aqueduct project, which was a union job requiring much standing in deep water and mud. Invariably, in regard to unions, there was much bitterness from the men, they are never called except for the dirtiest work, they are not allowed to join unions calling for skill: "Unions are controlled by Communists anyhow, Communists are white — no white man will give a Negro a job when he can give one to his own." Although admitting that the best jobs open in Beacon to Negroes were the Castle Point Hospital jobs, the attitude of these laborers was that it was only because Castle Point is a tuberculosis hospital that Negroes form such a large percentage of the employees; orderlies and maids are Negroes and doctors and nurses white... .

[The uneven distribution of jobs] is continually resented. It should not be a surprise that this resentment is reflected in some quarters in a complete isolationist stand: "We got nothing from the last war — why fight in this one?" On the other hand, Mr. T., veteran of the last war, and now economically well-fixed, felt that "regardless of how we are treated in America, we are still citizens, and as citizens of this country, I think we should help if the rest do."

The itinerant mechanic-carpenter from Philadelphia had traveled, after the last world war, in Europe, and had developed affection for the German people as a group. This man insisted that the greatest contribution the Negro in America could make to his own welfare was to stay out of this war, since he believed strongly that Negroes were being made victims of "propaganda" in regard to Germans. "Wherever an American or English white man had set foot in Europe, and I went there," this man said, "I was discriminated against. But when I went to Germany, the Germans treated me just like any other man. Personally, I hope Hitler wins the war!"

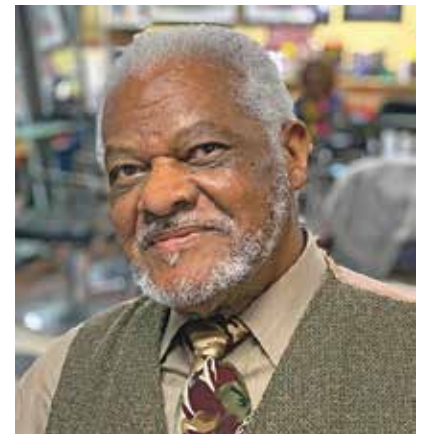
This man, who served in the last war, felt that if Negroes did wish to participate in the defense industry, their only chance for equality would be if the government took over.

Another speaker believed that all anti-alien, anti-Red and anti-union drives would prove beneficial to Negro workers. "Whenever they throw out the foreigners, the Reds and the unions, there can't help but be room for Negroes, for we are Americans, and so few of us are either Communist, or allowed in the good unions. CIO [the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a union open to Blacks] is helping some, but [Henry] Ford has been better to Negroes than most unions, regardless of what they say about him and Hitler."

north." He suggested the Coolidge administration appoint a commission of five respected Black men to convince people to stay in the South, "the natural home of the colored man and his family."

Their pleas would have been wasted. The Department of Labor noted that those who heard the message from religious or political leaders to stay put "were likely to suspect that such men are in the employ of white people."

The second great wave, during the 20 years following the end of World War II, drew 3 million Black people from the South. Alvin Bell, the longtime owner of a barber-shop on Main Street in Beacon, was one of them, arriving in 1959 from Virginia, where he had toiled on a tobacco farm.



Alvin Bell

Photo by Nancy LeVine

He didn't work "from sunup to sundown," he noted. That was a misnomer. "Before the sun comes up, you're in the field, and when the sun goes down, you're in the field."

New York was attractive because it was the country's leading manufacturing state between 1840 and 1960, notes Jennifer Lemak, chief curator of history at the New York State Museum. At the beginning of the Great Migration, African Americans could earn between \$2 and \$5 a day; as sharecroppers, they could expect 50 cents to \$2 a day, she said.

Most of the Black people who came to the state settled in New York City, but Albany, Buffalo and Rochester also drew their share.

Dorothy Medley, then 18, left Asheville, North Carolina, on Aug. 1, 1956, to stay with an aunt who lived in New York City so she could attend Apex Beauty School. Overwhelmed by the city's size, she returned to Asheville, but that only convinced her to leave again.



Dorothy Medley

Photo by Nancy LeVine

So, she called a friend from Asheville who had moved to Beacon to live with a sister and

(Continued on Page 14)

Beacon's Black Pioneers

1879 JURY

In December, the first all-Black jury was seated in Fishkill Landing to hear the case of a Black man accused of disturbing the peace while intoxicated. The courtroom was filled with spectators expecting a raucous scene, according to the *Fishkill Standard*. "They were disappointed, however, for the jury was very sober and sedate, evidently feeling the responsibility of their position." The defendant was found guilty and sentenced to pay \$5 or spend 10 days in jail.

1925 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE

In June, **William Howes** became the first Black graduate of Beacon High School, one of a class of 36. According to a newspaper account, "none in that audience could fail to be impressed by this beautiful exemplification of the ideal upon which the American nation was founded."



William Howes (back row, third from left) was the first Black BHS grad.

1939 SCOUTMASTER

Ryland Myrick, a former Black amateur boxer, founded a Boy Scout troop for Black boys, the first of its kind in Dutchess County.

1944 WAR CASUALTY

On Feb. 25, Pvt. 1st Class **Roscoe Lee Vaughn Jr.** of 86 North Ave., died in Italy of wounds suffered during a battle in North Africa. He had entered the service on Sept. 24, 1942, and had been overseas for about a year. Born in Brockway, he attended grammar school there and Beacon High School. An American Legion chapter, No. 1440 in Beacon, was named for him and in 1955 was the only all-Black post in the nation.



Vaughn Jr.

1953 POLICE OFFICER AND 1979 CHIEF

Robert Epps was sworn in on Feb. 21 as the city's first Black police officer. In May 1979, Epps, by then a lieutenant, became the first Black chief when he was named on an interim basis to succeed Raymond Stewart, who retired. However, a white officer, Lt. William Ashburn, was the only candidate who passed the civil service exam for chiefs, and he took over in January 1982. (Epps died in 1996.)

The second Black officer was **William Penn**, who was hired in 1959. In 1975 he told the *Evening News*: "I was fortunate to have lived and grown up here. It has given me an outlook on life that probably influences the way I think today. In my early years in the city, I saw Italian youth in my neighborhood ostracized just because they were Italians. I can equate this to my being Black." In 1972, Penn and Ashburn received Life Saving Award citations after they rescued the occupants in a house fire on North Avenue. Penn died in 2019.

Black History (from Page 13)

brother-in-law who were working at Castle Point. Medley disembarked from a train in Beacon and began walking up the hill.

"When I hit Ferry Street, I saw houses, I saw kids playing, I saw people sitting in their yards," she said. "I was so impressed."

A transformation

By the time Medley arrived in Beacon, Blacks had replaced many of the European immigrants who once lived in the West End and owned businesses there.

As early as 1930, census records show a smattering of Blacks born in the South living in Ward 2, whose remaining houses were owned or rented by a large contingent of people from Italy, mixed with Germans, Irish and Russian Jews.

For example, on Beekman Street, Evelyn and Angelo Puccini, the Italian owner of a shoe store, lived next door to Anna and John Rayston, a Black laborer from West Virginia. On River Street, Ela and James Shelton, a Black railroad laborer from Virginia, lived on the same stretch of homes as Jenny and Michael Litano, a railroad laborer from Italy.

Twenty years later, many of the single-family homes, apartment buildings and rooming houses that had been occupied by whites in 1930 had Black owners and tenants.

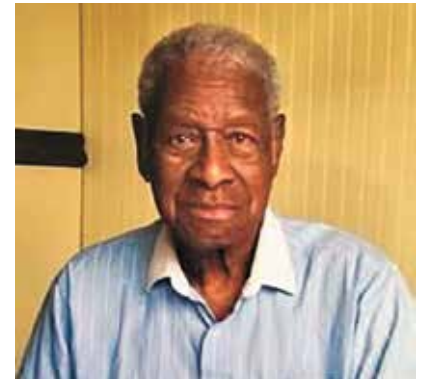
The house at 12 River St. in Beacon was no longer rented, as in 1930, by Louis Gerentine, a brickyard laborer from Italy, and his wife, Lucy. By 1950, it was owned by the Mississippi-born Miles Oliver and his wife, the Alabama-born Catherine Oliver.

In 1959, the Olivers' daughter, Gussie Mae, and son-in-law, Arthur Elmore, moved into the home after being forced to leave Bishop, West Virginia, when the mine there closed. The Elmores arrived with their children, including an adolescent named Sharlene. "They had a gazebo on the property, they had all kinds of fruit trees and a big barn," recalls Sharlene Stout, now 73.

Blacks also lived in Brockway, a community about 2 miles north of Beacon that was named for the family-owned brickyard that employed many of its residents.

Henry Noble MacCracken, in his 1958 history of Dutchess County, noted that many of the Black laborers working at Brockway and Dutchess Junction's brickyards had been

brought from the South to replace striking white brickyard workers; by 1932, the yards were bankrupt. Paul Williamson's father found work in the brickyards there when the family moved from Clarksville, Virginia, in 1921. The family raised their own food, including chickens, said Williamson, who was one of the Black residents of Beacon interviewed in 1995 for the oral history project.



Paul Williamson

"I helped my father with the gardens and we'd have to cut wood in the fall of the year to survive in the wintertime," said Williamson, who died in 2016.

Anthony Lassiter also grew up in Brockway, where his grandparents moved after leaving Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His mother, Vera Lassiter, was born there.



Anthony Lassiter Photo by Nancy LeVine

Lassiter, 75, remembers a small community of two-story row houses that also housed Castle Point employees and their families. Like other children in the community, he attended a one-room school where the students in the same grade occupied the same row of desks. The community also

(Continued on Page 15)



Sharlene Stout

Photo by Nancy LeVine

Beacon's Black Population

	Total	Black	%
1920	10,996	187	2
1940	12,572	520	4
1960	13,922	1,800	13
1980	12,937	1,908	15
2000	14,810	2,713	18
2020	13,769	1,933	14

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

had a church, Beulah Baptist.

Daily life was a “little tough,” said Lassiter. Houses did not have indoor plumbing and families had to get potable water from a community pump, he says. But the community was close-knit, said Lassiter, who was 13 when his family moved to 9 Academy St. — with indoor plumbing. “When we got into our new house, I took a shower — it had to be an hour,” he recalls.

From the brickyards to IBM

With her hands, Vera Lassiter earned that house with a shower.

Decades before her parents arrived in Brockway, brickyards along the Hudson River, mills powered by Fishkill Creek and manufacturers of household and commercial goods had been creating a demand for labor — first in Matteawan and Fishkill Landing, and then in Beacon, the city created in 1913 when the two villages merged.

The brickyards, which began operating in the 1830s, were one of the first industries to integrate, said Lemak at the New York State Museum. In addition, quotas that limited immigration from Europe opened up northern manufacturing jobs for Black Americans in the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s, she noted.

Vera Lassiter began working at the New York Rubber Co., whose products ranged from rubber balls to belting. During World War II, the company had contracts to make life vests, pontoons and life rafts for the federal government.

Sharlene Stout’s father worked at Chemprene, which manufactured coated fabrics and rubber belts. Her mother was employed by Tuck Tape. Dorothy Medley’s career included making electric blankets at Bobrich before holding jobs at the Dorel Hat Factory and Best Made Garments in Beacon, and Sonotone in Cold Spring.

Castle Point opened in 1924, and it drew Johnnie Mae Sampson’s father and other Blacks from the South. Many of the families who arrived to work at the hospital lived on-site. Paul Williamson’s father was eventually hired as a nurse’s aide, and Connie Perdreau’s father, Henry Whitener, landed a job there as a cook when he arrived from South Carolina.

The hospital’s employees were considered to be the “upper class,” according to Manet Fowler, an anthropologist who visited Beacon in April 1941 to interview Black residents about racial attitudes and their



WORKING UP NORTH — A group of migrant workers from Florida were photographed roadside in 1940 while heading to New Jersey to pick potatoes. Levi Horton, who grew up in Beacon in the 1930s and 1940s, recalled trucks filled with Black workers who traveled each summer from Florida to Fishkill to work in the bean fields. “That was an established way of life here in the Hudson Valley,” he told the *Poughkeepsie Journal* in 1997. “They were treated as second-class citizens. We, as young Blacks, figured that was a way of life and so be it. I wish I had the strength to do some of the protesting that came along with Martin Luther King.” Horton died in 2009. Photo by Jack Delano/Library of Congress



Connie Whitener (later Perdreau) in 1957, with her cousins Coyed Herndon (left) and Jerry Covin (right) and a neighborhood friend, Woody Douglas. Perdreau’s parents left South Carolina and eventually bought a house on Beekman Street. Photo provided

views on the growing conflict in Europe (see Page 12). The employees “live in nicer houses in town, if they do not occupy the attractive quarters furnished on the hospital grounds, and many are now buying.”

Other opportunities came from IBM. In 1953, its president, Thomas Watson Jr., told managers that they were to hire based on “personality, talent and background” regardless of the applicant’s “race, color or creed.”

Williamson became one of the first

Blacks at IBM when he was hired at \$60 a week in quality control. He spent 28 years with the company, he said in his 1995 interview, which, like the others cited here, was recorded on cassette tapes that were digitized and transcribed last year by the Dutchess County Historical Society.

Vera Lassiter retired from the company, as did Anthony Lassiter. He joined IBM two months after returning, in 1969, from a tour of duty in Vietnam. Stout’s mother also

moved to the company, in the mid-1960s. “Just about everybody ended up working at IBM,” she says.

Others worked for themselves. Perdreau’s parents, Arthur and Mazzie Whitener, operated a restaurant called Little Manhattan for a short time, she said. Medley, who dreamed of being a beautician, returned to Apex when her husband suggested she use their tax refund for tuition. After graduating in 1968, she owned her own shop before retiring in 1997.

Other Blacks, such as Alvin Bell, opened barber shops, bars and convenience stores, or took advantage of their talents. Lillian Goodlette, who lived on Ferry Street, listed her occupation as music teacher on the 1950 census.

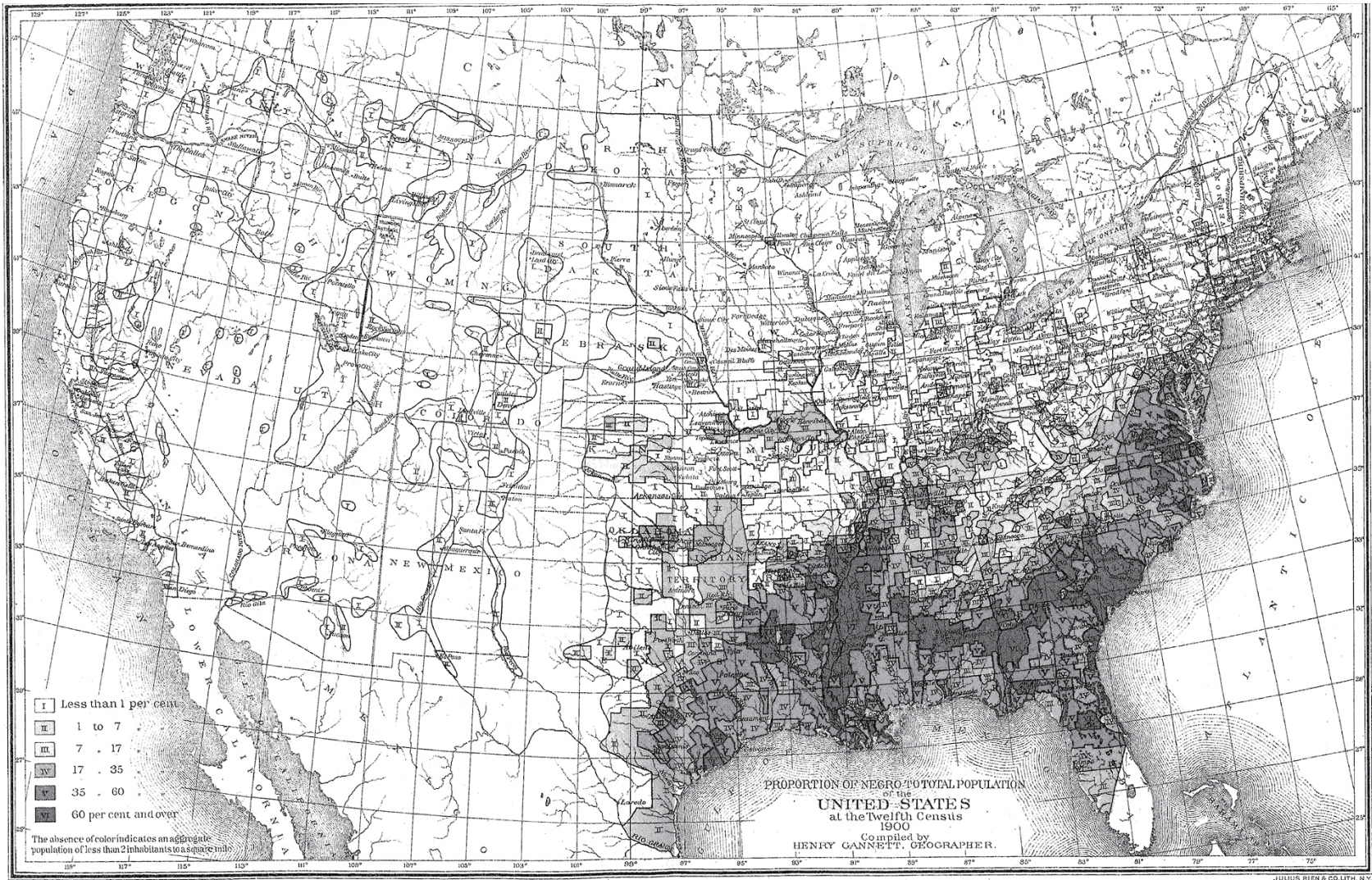
Integration

Along with better pay, Blacks migrating from the South found freedom in Beacon from legal segregation. Medley, newly arrived in Beacon, says she boarded a bus and walked by habit to the back, and was confused when she could not find the segregated seating on her first trip to see a movie at the Beacon Theatre.

“I could not find the stairs to go to the balcony, so I eased into a back seat just waiting for the usher to tell me I had to move,” she said. “Nothing ever happened.”

Blacks also attended integrated schools. Racial and economic diversity defined South Avenue School in the early 1960s, said

(Continued on Page 16)



Before the Great Migration: The Black population of the U.S. in 1900, according to census data

Black History *(from Page 15)*

Perdreau, with the children of blue-collar workers sharing classrooms with students whose parents were white-collar professionals.

Lassiter said he experienced culture shock when Brockway’s one-room schoolhouse closed and he and the community’s other students were transferred to the much larger schools in Beacon.

Before graduating from Beacon High School in 1966, he played baseball and football and wrestled.

One year, he was named the football team’s quarterback, a position he believes one other Black had played before him at the school. In the mid-1960s, a Black quarterback was still unusual at an integrated school.

“We played Poughkeepsie High School in Poughkeepsie and I could hear the folks on the sidelines yelling, ‘Hey, Beacon’s got a Black quarterback!’” he recalled.

Away from school, Blacks “laughed and played games together on the playground” with whites and visited their homes, said Geraldine Flood, a Beacon native whose parents came from South Carolina, during her interview for the oral history project.

But Flood, who was born in 1938 and died in 2019, also could not remember any Black teachers in the district.

Despite the absence of Jim Crow, New York state and the Highlands were not without prejudice — the Ku Klux Klan had a presence in Beacon and Philipstown that peaked in the 1920s — and segregation took other forms.

European immigrants tended to establish themselves in a particular area, such as Beacon’s West End, and then use higher-

paying jobs and bank loans to move out, said Lemak. But Blacks who couldn’t advance or get the same loans had limited mobility. “They were stuck, hemmed in, usually in the oldest sections of town,” she said.

In Beacon, well into the 1960s, Blacks were largely kept out of the East End, according to Sandy Moneymaker. Her husband, the Rev. Thomas Moneymaker, became priest-in-charge at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in 1965, not long after it integrated and a year before a cross was burned in the parking lot. “If you were Black, you could not buy a house east of Route 9D,” she said.

Many jobs were off-limits to Black residents, said Lemak, particularly those requiring interaction with the public, such as working in banks or department store clothing sales.

Manet Fowler, while interviewing people in Beacon in 1941 for her research, said Blacks complained that employers reserved the most menial jobs for them, and that the labor unions also discriminated.

Blacks hired as laborers for the construc-

tion of New York City’s Delaware Aqueduct from 1939 to 1945 said that “though it was raining constantly, and the work itself was ‘damp,’ the Negro workers were not given rubber boots and rain clothing, as the white workers” were, according to Fowler.

Paul Williamson, who enlisted in the U.S. Air Force during World War II, said he encountered racism days before shipping out, when he stopped in a bar in Beacon to have drinks with two white friends.

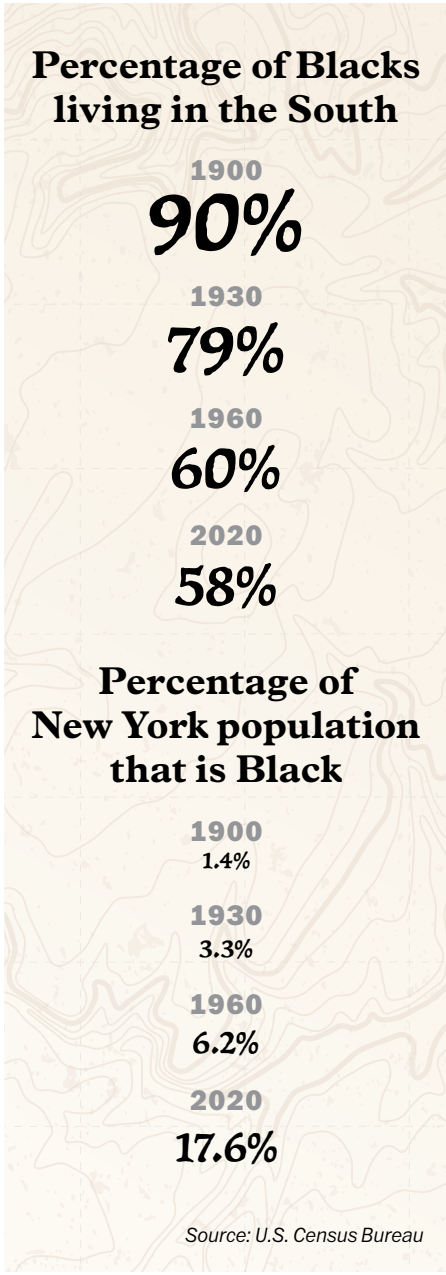
The bartender said: “We don’t want your kind in here,” said Williamson. The police were called when he complained; he was issued a ticket that was thrown out by a judge the next day.

Casual racism was such in Beacon and in the country that, over decades, even local churches organized minstrel shows as fundraisers, in which performers wore blackface.

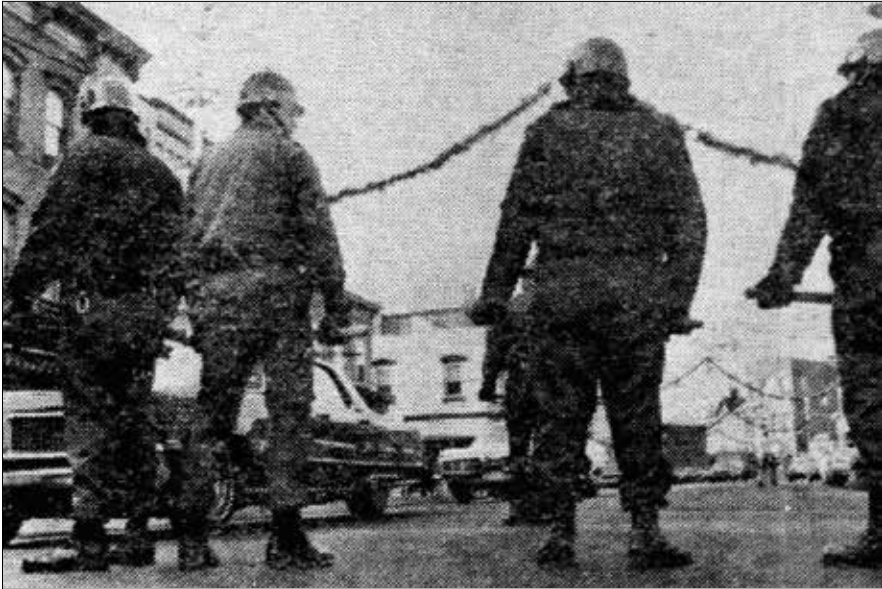
The First Presbyterian Church hosted one in 1948 and the city’s firefighters organized another in 1957 at Beacon High School. The Elks Club in Beacon held them, as did the Knights of Columbus in Cold Spring; the *Cold Spring Recorder* declared a 1921 performance to be the “blackest, funniest, most gorgeous of the brotherhood of burnt cork.”

By the early 1960s, according to the late Beacon historian Robert Murphy, the advent of the Civil Rights Movement had made minstrel shows unacceptable.

That movement, fomented in the South, reverberated in Beacon, where Blacks began demanding access to jobs previously denied them, launched campaigns for the City Council and school board and demanded fair treatment as urban renewal began removing the Black neighborhood in the West End. ■



PART 5



Members of the Dutchess County Sheriff's Department tactical squad patrol Main Street in Beacon in Nov. 19, 1974, following racial unrest.

Photo by James Deckner/Poughkeepsie Journal

By Leonard Sparks

In November 1974, with urban renewal having erased many of its West End buildings and Main Street decades away from a renaissance, Beacon community leaders faced another problem.

For several days, beginning with a football game between Beacon and Kingston, Black and white teens and young men had been clashing with their fists and with blackjacks, clubs and other weapons.

The conflict peaked on Nov. 19, when police arrested more than two dozen people on charges that included weapons possession, disorderly conduct and public drunkenness. Windows on Main Street were smashed and some of the combatants were injured seriously enough to require trips to Highland Hospital.

Mayor Robert Cahill ordered a curfew from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m., for anyone 18 and younger not accompanied by a parent. Two hastily organized community meetings took place and schools closed for a day. When they reopened, parents and clergy patrolled the hallways of Beacon High School.

Police Chief Robert Epps — who had been the city's first Black officer when he was hired in 1953 — said “no one seems to know” the reason for the conflicts. “We’ve asked the kids involved and they don’t even seem to know,” he said.

“Interracial dating between white girls and Black boys is part of it,” said Cahill. “But maybe the more serious problem is that nobody, the Blacks or whites involved, is listening. Where can you go if you can’t talk?”

The conflict capped a years-long period during which race had been a topic of conversation — when Blacks who left Southern states for Beacon to work in the city’s factories and at the Castle Point V.A. hospital in the 1940s and ’50s began demanding, in the 1960s and ’70s, representation in civic life and on city and county workforces.

But the unrest also became a catalyst for unity, spurring a multiracial coalition of community leaders to organize in 1977

the inaugural Spirit of Beacon Day, now in its 45th year. Dorothy Medley, a native of Asheville, North Carolina, who moved to Beacon in 1957, said that Nan Whittingham, then director of Beacon’s Neighborhood Service Organization, asked her and others to help organize a parade.

The event allowed residents to “see that we could live together and it was enough room for us all,” said Medley. “It wasn’t all about the Blacks; it wasn’t all about the whites; it wasn’t all about the Puerto Ricans. Beacon was big enough that we all could come together as a community and strive together.”

Campaigns for change

In 1933, the Rev. Francis Storey, pastor of the Star of Bethlehem Church in Beacon, announced a campaign to raise \$250 — about \$5,600 today — to aid the defense of the Scottsboro boys, nine Black teenagers and young men charged with raping two white women in Alabama. Eight had been convicted and sentenced to death, outraging both Blacks and whites and spurring a campaign to free them.

Two decades later, clergy and members from Beacon churches such as Star of Bethlehem, Springfield Baptist, St. James AME Zion and St. Andrew’s took the lead in demanding equal rights for Black residents. Men and women from their congregations also founded civic groups, such as Les Soeurs Amiables and the Southern Dutchess Coalition.

Pastors would attend City Council meetings and report to their congregations, said Medley, who joined Star of Bethlehem when she moved to Beacon. She later started attending council meetings herself.

“We were able to voice our opinion,

(Continued on Page 18)

Living in Putnam

There has never been a large population of Black people in Putnam County — the most recent census counted 3,820 African Americans (3.9 percent of the population), including 255 in Philipstown (2.6 percent).

In 1995 — when there were about 900 Black people in the county, or 1 percent of the population — a reporter for the *Journal News* interviewed three residents about their experiences. Meyrl Southlea was a retired teacher who had lived in Mahopac for 33 years; Harold Gary was the county commissioner of highways and facilities who had lived in Mahopac for 45 years; and James Nixon, an architect, had lived in Brewster for 15 years. Below are some of their observations. Southlea died in 2004 and Gary in 2020. Nixon continues his practice and is president of the Southeast Museum.

Buying a home

GARY: “Back in the 1950s, when I first came to Putnam County, one of the favorite sayings of real estate agents — and they could say it with authority, they didn’t need to be looking over their shoulders — was, ‘I don’t think you’ll be happy here.’ And I’ve heard that so many times. So that’s the reason the population of Blacks never increased in Putnam County. I don’t think a real estate agent would dare say to you today, ‘I don’t think you’ll be happy here.’ The laws have changed more than the people have changed.”

SOUTHLEA: “In the early 1960s, when I arrived, if you were Black, no real estate agent would show you anything that wasn’t swamp or rock. At that time, we had no Human Rights Commission and there were no restraints at all.”

Racism

GARY: “When you’re Black as long as I have been Black, [a racial epithet or cross burning, such as one that took place in Mahopac in 1994] doesn’t bother you. Because you know it’s there. You know it’s always out there. We’re not going to change it in our time. Does it disturb you? Of course it does. Every incident that reflects upon race irritates me. How you deal with it is a different thing.”

SOUTHLEA: “What you want — you want the law observed. At our first meeting [of the Mahopac Anti-Bias Coalition], one of our candidates stood up and said: ‘I don’t know how you change the hearts of people.’ I’m not interested in their hearts being changed. I want them to obey the law. No one has ever said anything [racist] to me. But I know that when I applied to teach here, it took them a long time to make up their minds.”

GARY: “[The racial climate] has changed [since he moved to Putnam]. The attitudes have become



Harold Gary

more acceptable. There has not been a total reversal. But you have to understand something else: It’s what people want to make of it when they come here. Regardless of whether you’re Black or white, your attitude and the way you become a citizen of the community determines how you’re going to be treated, although it may be more harsh if your attitude is negative if you’re Black.”

SOUTHLEA: “I was accepted. I never really ran into anything, except when I went out on a sabbatical in 1969. When I came back, there had been a building boom — I mean, development all over. That year I would say out of 27 children [in her class], 24 had not been in kindergarten in this county. And when those parents brought their children into school, they would walk right past my classroom, look in and keep going. Then they could come back and look in and keep going. Because they had been told there were no Black people in Putnam County. So, it was quite obvious that it was a surprise [to them]. But it was nothing overt, really.”

NIXON: “I never felt any real lack of acceptance when I came here in 1980. I feel generally accepted. I have clients in Putnam. I have more clients in Westchester, but that’s because Westchester is bigger. The one thing I am still aware of is that, to some people at least, James Nixon and Harold Gary are the ‘exceptions,’ so to speak. They may not be thinking that consciously, in exactly those words. But they are. That’s when they say, ‘Well, you’re different.’ ”

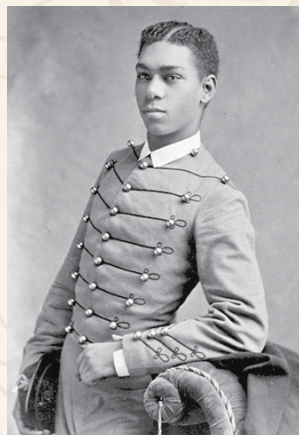
Black Pioneers

1870 West Point Cadet

In a story with the headline "Colorphobia," *The Cold Spring Recorder* in May 1870 noted that **James Webster Smith**, the first Black soldier to pass the entrance exam at West Point, had been refused a room at Roe's Hotel (which was owned by the government and located on Trophy Point) to await the start of classes and had to find housing in Highland Falls.

Following several years of verbal and physical abuse from white cadets — detailed in letters he wrote to the *New National Era and Citizen*, a Black newspaper in Washington, D.C. — Smith was dismissed after allegedly failing a philosophy class. He died of tuberculosis in 1876. In 1997, the academy posthumously awarded him a commission.

The first Black cadet to graduate from West Point, in 1877, was a former slave from Georgia, **Henry Ossian Flipper**, who in 1889 wrote a memoir of his experiences that paid tribute to Smith.



Henry Ossian Flipper

1939 Female Judge

Jane Bolin, a 1924 Poughkeepsie High School graduate (at age 15), was the first Black woman to earn a degree from Yale Law School and the first Black female judge in the U.S. when she was sworn in to the Family Court at age 31 by New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. She would serve three, 10-year terms. In 1944, in an address in Poughkeepsie at its annual American Brotherhood dinner, she noted the city had no Black judges, firefighters, police officers, doctors, nurses, skilled factory workers or teachers and suggested that textbooks be revised to include the contributions of minorities. Bolin died in 2007.



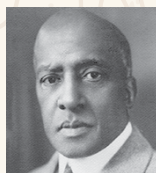
Jane Bolin

1940 Nurse

The first Black nurse employed by the Dutchess County Health Department was **Hannah Johnson**. The first Black nurse hired at Vassar Brothers Hospital was **Dorothy Edwards**, in 1946.

1945 Bar President

Gaius Bolin Sr. (1845-1946), Jane Bolin's father, was elected president of the Dutchess County Bar Association. He was also the first Black graduate of Williams College in Massachusetts.



Gaius Bolin Sr.

1987 Agency Head

Folami Gray, 33, of Poughkeepsie, became the first Black head of a Dutchess County agency when she was named director of the Youth Bureau.

1989 Mayor

The first Black mayor in Dutchess County is believed to be **George Carter**, who was elected in Fishkill. He died in 2001.

Black History (from Page 17)

but at that time, we didn't have any representation," she said.

Mazie Whitener, who had come to Beacon from South Carolina in 1936 with her husband, Henry, also became active. She joined a bus trip organized by St. James AME Zion to the 1963 March on Washington and she was among a group of residents that lobbied the Beacon and Newburgh school districts to hire their first Black teachers.

Blacks also fought for political representation, launching drives to register voters, especially in Ward 2, where most of them lived. Patricia Lewis, a future school board candidate then representing an organization called the Beacon Central Committee, told the Poughkeepsie Voters' League in October 1963 that Beacon had more Blacks registered in Ward 2 than there had been three years earlier in the entire city.

Seeking jobs

When Mazie Whitener arrived in Beacon in 1936, she expected to find a job as a teacher. A college graduate, she had taught at one of the more than 450 schools built in South Carolina for Black students



Mazie Whitener in 1936

between the late 19th century through the early 1930s. The schools were named for Julius Rosenwald, the Sears, Roebuck & Co. president who helped fund their construction.

In Beacon, Whitener found the schools were integrated but had no Black teachers or administrators. She instead found work as a domestic for families and at the Holland Hotel.

Whitener had encountered one of the ironies of the Jim Crow South: Segregation created jobs for Black educators.

Thomas White was hired as a Beacon teacher in 1954, the year the U.S. Supreme Court struck down racial segregation laws. Lois Hughes was hired to teach at South Avenue Elementary in 1962. By 1985, Les Soeurs Amiables was honoring Hughes, White and 12 other Blacks who taught in the district.

In 1951, five Dutchess County residents passed the civil service examination given to police officer applicants. One was Robert Epps, a resident of Beekman Street in Beacon's West End. He would go on to become the city's first Black officer and, in 1979, its acting police chief.

Blacks interested in becoming firefighters in Beacon also faced barriers. Candidates had to submit a handwritten application with signatures from three current members of the department. At a hearing in 1966 before the state's advisory committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Beacon officials testified that the Public Works Department did have one Black employee.

In 1963, Beacon's City Council approved the creation of a Human Relations Commission. It named Stafford Hanna, a purchasing agent for IBM, as chair. Other members included William Strolis, manager of the state employment office in Beacon; Dr. Leonard Supple; the Rev. Thomas Fenlon from St. John's Church; and the Rev. Henry Hobby of St. James AME Zion Church.

"By this action, we know that you are



The Day They Turned Away Jackie Robinson

Jackie Robinson, who in 1947 became the first Black player in Major League Baseball, was a serious golfer. In 1966, a decade after he retired, he and a Black banker expressed interest in buying the Putnam Country Club in Mahopac for \$1.4 million.

When the owners immediately took the club off the market, the NAACP filed a complaint with the state's Commission for Human Rights. It dismissed the action, as well as an appeal, citing a "lack of jurisdiction."

Back on the market, the course sold for \$1.1 million to Ed Levrey, who owned the Harrison Country Club, and Lou Lubitz of Umberto's Restaurant in New York City. It went through other owners — and nearly became a housing development — before being purchased by Putnam County in 2004.

interested in equal rights for the Negro," said Patricia Lewis, president of the West End Council, a neighborhood organization.

A 'house divided'

Although a 1961 state law barred racial discrimination in apartment houses with at least three units and new homes in developments of at least 10 units, to the residents of Beacon's West End, housing on the East End remained off-limits.

"A lot of my customers would talk about it — that they had a hard time trying to move over on the East side," said Medley, who owned a beauty salon.

In 1967, Mayor Charles Wolf agreed to study an anti-discrimination law proposed by Hildrom Fisher, president of the Beacon-Fishkill chapter of the NAACP, and supported by two prominent pastors: the Rev. Garfield Farley of Star of Bethlehem and the Rev. Henry King of St. James AME Zion. The law was intended to make it illegal for real-estate agents and brokers in Beacon to refuse to show property listings to potential buyers or renters. Violators could have been fined up to \$1,000 or jailed for up to one year.

(Continued on Page 19)



Genealogist Olivia Dorsey

Photo by Nitashia Johnson

Beacon Roots

Olivia Dorsey, who lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, started researching her family tree early — at age 11. She discovered that her great-great-grandmother, Annie Lewis, came to Beacon from Georgia; Annie's daughter, Susie Mae Warren (1915-1998), followed in 1931. Dorsey's great-grandfather, Steave Green (1900-1959), had arrived in Beacon from Florida two years earlier, found work at the Dennings Point and later Brockway brickyards and joined the Springfield Baptist Church. He met Susie after he moved to a boarding house where she lived with her mother.

Now 30, Dorsey an admitted “tech nerd,” in 2019 created a website called Digital Black History (digitalblackhistory.com) to assist genealogists and historians. She has a sticker on her laptop that reads: “I am my ancestors’ wildest dreams.”

“There is a perseverance and resilience from my ancestors to say that slavery doesn’t define us and what we do,” she told *The New York Times* in March. “All these terrible things have happened, but we’re still going to persevere, we’re still going to succeed, even though we’re starting further back than other people.”

Genealogy for Black Americans has its particular challenges, such as a lack of documentation for enslaved ancestors. At the same time, some white genealogists are disappointed to discover detailed records that establish they are descended from slave owners. That has inspired groups such as Coming to the Table (comingtothetable.org), which was founded in 2006 and has a New York City chapter, in which descendants of enslavers and the enslaved come together for “truth-telling, building relationships, healing” and to fight modern inequities.

After the City Council rejected the ordinance, Fisher walked out of the chambers. The city attorney, Anthony Pagones, said a state law already prohibited housing discrimination.

No law prevented urban renewal, which became a form of housing discrimination in the name of reducing “blight.” The federally funded initiative erased much of Beacon’s West End, where most Black residents lived, and, by 1966, had turned the city into a “house divided,” Wolf said at the time.

That division reached a climax in March of that year when Wolf announced that he was bringing Beacon’s nascent urban renewal plans “to a grinding halt” until they could be “re-evaluated.”

The plan’s first phase had called for demolishing a swath of the West End that had been resettled by Blacks migrating from the South, and relocating residents to new housing, including a yet-to-be-built 175-unit development that would be named Forrestal Heights. The relocation director for the Beacon Urban Renewal Agency said at a hearing in April 1966 that 188 of 252 structures in the Phase One area were occupied by residents who were not white, and

that 178 of those were to be demolished.

“There will be no acquisition of land, no demolition of properties, no awarding of contracts, nor any other executory acts for several months,” said Wolf.

The Rev. Thomas Moneymaker, who was white, had moved to Beacon a year earlier when he was named priest-in-charge at St. Andrew’s, a progressive Episcopal church considered the first in Beacon to integrate. Moneymaker, who died in 1998, “spent a lot of time at City Hall trying to get urban renewal to be reasonable,” said Sandy Moneymaker, his widow.

He protested a proposal to build a sunken four-lane highway and relocate St. Andrew’s from Wolcott Avenue to the ground floor of an apartment building at Bank Square, she said.

“Beacon would not be where it is today if urban renewal had their wishes,” said Sandy Moneymaker.

On March 2, 1966, the Rev. Mattie Cooper, the founder of Springfield Baptist, brought urban renewal officials and residents together for a meeting at the church. The meeting came months before the city’s Urban Renewal Agency was to

Beacon’s Black Pioneers

1963 School Board Member

William Curry won a one-year term on the school board and ran unopposed for a full term in 1964. (He died in 2004.) In 1964, on Bill of Rights Day, he was a member of a panel organized for teachers: “What Do Minority Groups Wish in Beacon?”

Leon Cochrane, who in 1968 was the second Black person elected to the school board, later became its president. A Beacon High School graduate, he was the fifth Black engineer hired at IBM. (His older brother, Harry Cochrane, was the first.) He died in 2019.



Cochrane

1972 Principal

Arthur “Ted” Brown became the first Black principal in the school district when he took over at Rombout Middle School. After his first year, he was demoted to his former job as assistant principal of Beacon High School, prompting protests. The board president said “no racism was involved” but that the move was based solely on a professional evaluation.

1979 Firefighter

Wilbur Oliver, 45, a school bus driver, was the first Black person to join the Beacon fire department. The department said it had never had a Black member because none had applied. But the Rev. Thomas Moneymaker criticized the application procedure, saying it discouraged minorities because it required the signatures of three current firefighters.

2001 City Council

Eleanor Thompson, 55, was elected as the first Black member of the City Council in November, to represent Ward 2. It was standing-room only at her swearing-in in January 2002, and the other officials sworn in that day, including Council Member-at-Large (and current mayor) Lee Kyriacou, all used the Thompson family bible. **Oteria Goggins** was the first Black woman to run for City Council, in 1989. She was defeated in the Democratic primary, 485-431, by incumbent Edith Krawiec, who in 1985 had been the first woman elected to the council.

2005 County Legislator

The first Black person elected to the Dutchess Legislature from Beacon was **Ronald Ray**, a Democrat. The first Black person elected to the Legislature was **Sherwood Thompson**, who represented part of Poughkeepsie, in 1982. (Clarence McGill, the founder of Dutchess County Community Against Racism, called Thompson “the best thing that has happened to Blacks in Dutchess County in 300 years.”) The first Black person to serve on the Legislature was **Robert Vaughn**, a retired fire captain from Poughkeepsie who was appointed in 1977 to fill a vacancy. He lost in the general election.

begin construction on Forrestal Heights.

At the meeting, someone described the complex as a “ghetto project for the city’s Negroes” and Thomas Moneymaker said Beacon was “easily the most bigoted city I’ve lived in. It easily could become another Selma, Alabama.”

Weeks later, on March 22, a sexton for St. Andrew’s discovered a burned cross and a note threatening Moneymaker in the church’s parking lot. The note was addressed to “Rev. Money-trouble-maker” and read:



Mattie Cooper

“Church will burn next. Then you. We influence White Plains Diocese in New York City.”

“The FBI came in and asked questions; they went away and nothing happened,” recalled Sandy Moneymaker.

The City Council voted to move forward in 1966 with urban renewal, absent the sunken highway, and the battles over the program shifted to demanding that Blacks be given a share of the jobs it created and that the homeowners and renters whose properties were demolished receive fair subsidies to buy homes or rent apartments.

A complaint filed with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

(Continued on Page 20)

Black History *(from Page 19)*

in 1973 alleged that 100 families being relocated because of urban renewal were owed \$400,000 in benefits, including 85 who had never been told they were eligible for rental assistance. Beacon's Urban Renewal Agency denied the charges and blamed changes by the federal government for a delay in issuing payments.

One person who benefitted was Sharlene Stout. She never thought she would live on Beacon's East End, but urban renewal "scattered the Black folk all over the place," she recalled in an interview.

She and her husband were renting, for \$95 a month, a five-room apartment inside a house on Ferry Street designated for demolition. They were offered \$100 for each room as compensation to be used for a new apartment, or \$4,000 in matching funds to buy a house, she said.

There were rumors that a local white real estate agent was trying to steer dislocated Blacks away from the East End, but a Black

agent suggested the couple buy a house now "because you ain't going to be able to afford it years later," said Stout. So, she and her husband borrowed \$2,000 that, along with the matching funds, allowed them to buy a home on Rector Street for \$26,600.

"He was absolutely right," Stout said of the advice.

A new spirit

There were other small victories.

In 1975, the Dutchess County Legislature approved an affirmative-action plan that called for hiring in proportion to the county's gender and racial makeup. Just two of the 33 legislators voted against the plan, including Glenn Warren, a Republican from Fishkill who argued that the county already had a "a high percentage" of women and minority employees and that "maybe the white male should be opposed to this." On the other side of the debate, Patricia Lewis, a Beacon activist, suggested the plan be set aside because it lacked a process for enforcement.

In 2001, Eleanor Thompson became the first Black to win a seat on Beacon's City Council. Flora Jones, who came to Beacon from Alabama in 1937 as a child, said Thompson's win was also a victory for the city's Democrats, after a "long battle to include people of color" on the council. (Jones died in February 2022 on her 85th birthday.)

Nearly three decades have passed since the 1974 clashes between Black and white young people in Beacon. Three years after that turmoil, in October 1977, a parade traveled east on Main Street from Cross to Eliza. It was the centerpiece of that first Spirit of Beacon Day, which included badminton, a concert, kite-flying, a skateboarding contest and tennis.

A multiracial coalition of Beacon residents believed in the event's potential to unify the city, and the turnout vindicated that belief. It showed that "if we all come together, we'll be together and we all can work together," said Dorothy Medley.

"That was just the best thing that could have happened to Beacon," she said. ■

A Black History of the Highlands

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