

Historically Speaking

with Eastchester Town Historian
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The plight of African-American slaves in Eastchester (1664-1822)



African-American slaves were among the original settlers of Eastchester in 1664. From Eastchester's 17th century rural and pastoral beginnings, people of African descent were among the pioneering souls who laid roots to its soil. From Eastchester's very beginnings, African-American slaves, along with their English Puritan masters from Fairfield, Conn. were responsible for the founding of one of the oldest communities in America.

Working with two hands or with simple tools, slaves tilled the soil, built shelters, raised livestock, and grew, harvested and prepared



Slavery and the slave trade were part of the culture and economy of Eastchester. The pictures shown here were taken from Dr. Spruill's pioneering work, "A Time to Remember: A Portrait of African-American Life in Mount Vernon." Mount Vernon was part of the Town of Eastchester until 1892. Contributed photos

food. Without their forced labor, their masters could not have conquered the hardships of frontier life. White 18th century farmers used African workers to build and develop their nascent industries. Slaves must have mastered the same skills of the blacksmiths, millers, coopers and other skilled craftsman who dotted the landscape.

It should never be forgotten that African-Americans were the only group to arrive in America against their will. For the Irish who came to Eastchester fleeing the potato famine of the 1840s and the large number of Italians who followed them at the beginning of the 20th century, the town in the end proved to be a land of freedom, hope, and opportunity. As the two previous series in this paper have pointed out,

the Irish and Italians faced the obstacles of prejudice and discrimination. But the plights of other ethnic groups were nowhere near as horrendous as it was for African-American slaves.

Africans came in chains, and for over 150 years fought just to be free. With few allies and against hopeless odds, African men and women struggled to stay alive, to obtain their freedom, and to share in the American dream of human dignity and justice for all.

For people living today, the first English settlers of Eastchester and the French Huguenots from New Rochelle who they often married present a strange historic irony. Their ancestors came to this community looking for both religious and political freedom

and the opportunity to better themselves economically. They were very protective of their own rights, but denied those very same rights to people of color.

In 1710, Eastchester officials recorded 152 male and 136 female Christians, in addition to 17 male and eight female slaves. The buying and selling of African-American slaves was part of the Westchester County economy in the 18th century. In 1698, pirates were also active in the Long Island Sound. Africans brought from the Guinea coast to Rye for use at Phillippsborough Manor were suspected to have been purchased from pirates. Two 19th century historians cite that the inhabitants of the county were more concerned that pirates were doing business in the area than that slave dealers were among their ranks. In the early 18th century, slavery and the sale of slaves was considered a necessary and legitimate enterprise in Westchester County.

It is somewhat true that slavery in New York State was not as brutally harsh as in the South. However, slavery in colonial Eastchester was still an unspeakable horror for those who experienced it. In the Nov. 14, 1748 *New York Weekly Post-Boy*, one master in Eastchester advertised for a fugitive accompanied by his wife in an advanced state of pregnancy. The defenseless condition of the slave woman was a constant invitation to sexual exploitation.

Throughout the 18th century, Westchester's slave population continued to grow. At the dawn of the American Revolution in 1771, the county reached a peak of 3,340 slaves, about 15 percent of the population. However local Africans in Westchester – both free and enslaved – still fought on behalf of the patriots. After the American Revolution, the abolition of slavery in Westchester seemed inevitable. The federal Census of 1790 showed that within less than two decades, the population of slaves in Westchester County had declined by more than 50 percent. The pages of Eastchester's town records became filled with slave manumission certificates.

On July 16, 1822, the last slave manumitted and recorded by the town was a black women formerly owned by Joseph Pell. Her name was Lydia. Nearly all of Eastchester's slaves were set free by 1822. And thus, the long sad story of African-American slavery came to an end. If there were any other slaves in town, they had to wait until July 4, 1827 when slavery in New York State was abolished. Thirty-five years before the Civil War, Eastchester was free of slavery.

What individuals and groups were responsible for the end of slavery in the North? Founding fathers like John Adams, Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin were supporters of the abolition of slavery, but an overwhelming majority of the men who wrote the Constitution were either tolerant of slavery or defenders of the 'peculiar institution.' Still, the movement for the abolition of slavery in Westchester was led by the Society of Friends, who are better known as the Quakers. As early as 1778, the group began releasing slaves. Once the revolution was over, they pressured the state legislature for the complete abolition of slavery, not gradual emancipation. As always, the Quakers remained true to their conscience, no matter what the consequences.

"Historically Speaking" runs bi-weekly. This is the second in a series on the history of African-Americans in the town. In the next article, the story of free African-Americans in 19th century Eastchester will be told. A great deal of the information in this article was culled from a book written by Larry Spruill that was first printed in 1993 by Afro-American Workshop entitled "A Time to Remember: A Portrait of African-American Life in Mount Vernon."