



Historically Speaking

With Town Historian
Richard Forliano

Freedom and 'free' blacks in the Town of Eastchester

Even in colonial days, freed slaves lived in Eastchester. The federal Census of 1790 reported 11 free persons of African descent in Eastchester along with 75 slaves. But the term 'free black' is a misnomer.

Free blacks were not really free, but held a status somewhere between a white person and a slave. Their place in society during that time was similar to that of an indentured servant. In some respects, their lives were more wretched than those of slaves. In contrast, the farmers who lived in Eastchester had the right to vote, hold political office, and, in addition to running a farm, also start a trade that turned a profit.

In a culture that did not value people of color but discriminated against them, the free black was burdened by demands slaves never had to endure. Daily, they faced the arduous task of feeding, sheltering, clothing and providing the rudiments of education to their families. How ironic that free blacks were often so unstable that the certainty of food and shelter from a benevolent master may have been more desirable than the hardship of being semi 'free.'

Why were their lives so much more difficult than the white inhabitants of the town? Eighteenth and 19th century records of the Town of Eastchester entitled "Overseers of the Poor" explain why. The number of free blacks in town during that time was smaller in proportion to the total number of white paupers. But it must not be forgotten that most free blacks did not have the capital to buy land. There was a prop-

erty qualification for voting and without the right to vote, free blacks were never considered full citizens.

Eastchester records known as "The Book of the Colored People" show how difficult it was for free blacks to survive. Both before and after slavery was abolished in New York, a large minority of free blacks were forced to take on the most menial of jobs. They endured a miserable and wretched existence in Eastchester during that time period, as it was difficult for them to rise above manual labor and domestic service occupations. They were relegated to the meanest vocations at wages so low that they weren't able to accumulate capital or qualify to vote under the Constitution of 1821. During the first five decades of the 19th century, black property ownership was limited. Most, but not all, of Eastchester's African population lived on the farms of the white.

But the small African population was an integral part of town life. Their children persevered in the schools. Up until the founding of Mount Vernon in 1853, free blacks lived in every section of Eastchester. In 1845, both first and family names of free blacks were entered in the interment records at St. Paul's Cemetery, the spot where Eastchester was founded two centuries before. African-Americans were buried together in the same graveyard as their white neighbors. When the living became destitute, as sometimes happened, town records show free blacks, like their white counterparts, had to lay



Andrew Johnson (born 1872) and his wife Anna Casten Johnson were born in the Town of Eastchester. These two pictures are the oldest known photographs of people of African descent in Eastchester. Photos courtesy/Tuckahoe Library

themselves at the mercy of the local overseer of the poor for food, shelter, medical care and even burial.

But some free blacks were able to triumph over what seemed to be insurmountable barriers. One of these people was Tom (Thomas) Pell. Pell was a married free man who, during the American Revolution, owned land in town. Town records show that Tom Pell had a business relationship with one of Eastchester's most influential citizens, Charles Guion. Guion was a descendant of a French Huguenot blacksmith who, in 1708, settled in Eastchester and later started a tavern where town meetings were held. Guion entered the tavern business in 1775, and there is a letter proving that George Washington stopped there on his way to take over the troops in Boston in 1775.

Another African-American success story was Benjamin Turner. He was a free man that had a family. His children attended school with white children, and he owned a prime piece of real estate in the heart of the Town of Eastchester. Some of the names – both first and last – of free blacks who lived in town were Abigail, Andrene, Ann, Joseph Benson, Betty, Byah, Charity, Phillip, Nathaniel and Thomas Ford, Israel, Plato Pugsley, and Benjamin Turner.

Still, there were many more opportunities for the white population of Eastchester in the first half of the 20th century. For the land-owning farmers, the skilled craftsmen, and the entrepreneurs and businessmen, Eastchester was the land of opportunity. At the end of this time period, Irish immigrants also arrived as the newly completed New York and Harlem River railroad came to town, and allowed for the swift transportation of goods, people and mail. But the wheels of government were controlled by whites who owned property. Irish and German immigrants were just beginning to arrive and many of them would soon become upwardly mobile.

This is the third in a series on the history of African-Americans in the town. The next article will be devoted to how the founding of the Village of Mount Vernon in 1853 and the American Civil War would create significant change for African-Americans in the Town of Eastchester. "Historically Speaking" runs biweekly.