

Rocky Hill Historical Society

From the Archives: Rediscovering Our History

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Slavery in Rocky Hill



There were no “gone with the Wind” style slavery based plantations in Rocky Hill, no slave markets on the landing or the Duke of Cumberland Inn, no slaves being driven through the meadows in chains. Several Courant articles in the 1980s made these claims but they seem to have been written to stir people’s blood and enlist support in opposing the construction of condominiums in the quarry by creating a false history of the area. The ploy worked. The condos weren’t built (thank goodness!) but the real history of slavery in Rocky Hill has been obscured by these stories. That is not to say there wasn’t slavery in Rocky Hill, there was, and it was a wrong as the southern model.

Some context is needed to understand the history slavery in Rocky Hill. *The Negro in Colonial New England*, by Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *Slavery in Connecticut*, a study done by Yale University, and *Slavery in Connecticut* from Princeton University all studied this issue and all came to the same conclusions.

The two main reasons why slavery never became as widespread in New England as it did in the south were weather and religion. The growing season is very short in New England. A way had to be found to feed, shelter, and cloth an enslaved work force in the winter. Some enslaved people were taught skills like carpentry or blacksmithing but the white tradesmen and their guilds resisted this. Some African-Americans went to sea as sailors, many performed unskilled labor, and many could be found working on the docks. African American slaves

were often referred to as servants and owning a so called “servant” seems to have been more a status symbol than a profit making venture.

The Congregational Church was the official state church of Connecticut until 1818. It accepted slavery as it was defined and sanctioned by the Torah in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Slaves were called “servants.” This seems to have come from the Bible. Servants were considered co-equal as God’s creatures and they had legal rights. For example, they could own property, sue, and testify in court. There was once a slave galley in the Rocky Hill Congregational Church which accommodated about 20 people. Slaves were considered improvable people with souls at this time; improvable meaning capable of adopting the cultural, education, and religious beliefs of white people. Given that church attendance was compulsory for everyone at the time, attendance at church by these people was probably also compulsory.



Duke of Cumberland Inn

In 1730 there were about 16 slaves in Rocky Hill out of a population of approximately 800 people. All of the slaves discovered to date were owned by wealthy people in the maritime trades. For example, William Griswold had four of his slaves aboard his ship when he returned from the south. Esquire John Robbins, who owned the Duke of Cumberland Inn on Old Main street, owned as many as seven slaves. Dr. Constantine Zariphes, who owns the Duke of Cumberland Inn today, tells of finding a set of shackles embedded in the floor of the inn. He had them removed to avoid upsetting his grandchildren.

Maritime New England including Rocky Hill, profited from the slave trade either directly by involvement in the Triangle Slave Trade or indirectly by conducting the trade necessary to support slavery in southern colonies and the Caribbean. There were slave markets in Boston and the Rhode Island ports, in fact, Brown University in Providence was endowed by proceeds from the slave trade. Attempts were made to establish slave-based plantations in Rhode Island and Eastern Connecticut. Middletown, which was the fourth largest port in New England at one time, had people who owned large numbers of slaves.

Two attempts were made to import slaves and establish a slave market although this seems to have failed. Aside from these few slave markets, slaves were bought and sold through newspaper ads, hand bills, and word of mouth.

Men were masters of their households in colonial times, with the right to beat their wives, children and slaves. There is an impression that slaves were always well treated, often like members of the family, in Rocky Hill. While this may have been true in some cases, it was clearly not always true. There are several accounts of slaves committing suicide. The legislature had to pass a law requiring slave owners to be responsible for slaves for their entire lives because it was not uncommon for a slave holder to free a slave when he or she was too old to work, disabled, or in some other way not productive. This, in effect, put helpless people out on the street to fend for themselves.

Over time, the responsibilities of slave ownership began to outweigh any benefits. The General Assembly passed a bill in 1774 outlawing importation of slaves into Connecticut. This meant that the future population of slaves would have to draw from the children of existing slaves. In 1784 the General Assembly passed the first Gradual Emancipation Act which provided that anyone born a slave after that time would be freed on their 25th birthday. A second Gradual Emancipation Act was passed in 1797 lowered the emancipation age to 21. This meant that slaveholders were responsible for raising these children to adulthood at which time the slave became free. Slavery was outlawed altogether in Connecticut in 1848, although by that time there were only six slaves left in the entire state.

Before we pat ourselves on the back for recognizing the evils of slavery and abolishing it, we should face the aftermath. Racism continued in Connecticut and opportunities remained limited for African-Americans, They were relegated to menial tasks or they moved to urban ghettos (these did exist in the 19th Century).

This passage can be found in *History of Ancient Wethersfield (written in 1904)*. p. 945.

*Narragansett Bay was the home of many vessels surreptitiously engaged in transporting blacks from Africa. Whether or not the same sort of trade was carried on the from the wharves of Rocky Hill cannot be known: the probabilities are that some of it was done, for the people here were **not less enterprising** than other New Englanders, and quite as **ready to make an honest dollar**.*

Enterprising? An Honest dollar? Racism was clearly alive and well when this was written in 1904. This same words were repeated, verbatim, on p. 90 of *Wethersfield and Her Daughters* in 1934. No reliable evidence has been

uncovered that any Rocky Hill ship ever served as a slaver. It's disturbing that some of our earlier historians supported this unproven claim with such pride. We can only hope our views are becoming more enlightened by 2020.