

Slavery in Southeastern Connecticut: A View from Lyme

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When we in New England hear about slavery we immediately think about south of the Mason Dixon line, the Civil War, and envision images from Gone with the Wind and Scarlet O'Hara. It is likely that we as residents of Connecticut reflect upon our own Harriet Beecher Stowe and her book of the early 1850's Uncle Tom's Cabin. These two works have in many ways served to direct attention towards the South and characterize the North as representing the abolitionist view and anti-slavery.

This view is not adjusted when we consider more recent literature and film such as Amistad or review various documentary materials circulated by the Connecticut Department of Education and the Connecticut Historical Commission regarding the Freedom Trail. These more recent approaches to African American history tend to whitewash or sanitize the Northern component to slavery.

The fact is that Northern slavery started at the beginning moments of Puritan settlement here in New England. It focused upon the Native population first, as had been done in the Caribbean under Spanish settlement, and then realigned itself towards trade and importation of African slaves. Throughout the 17th and 18th century slavery was a legitimate way of life for white Christians in our region. While there was a continuous and ongoing debate throughout the North, as well as the South, regarding the morality of slavery, in the final analysis it persisted here in the North until it was no longer economically profitable. The termination of Northern slavery can be seen to occur in the beginning decades of the 19th century, and only 50 years prior to Lincoln's emancipation proclamation.

Here in Lyme, (if one is unaware of the aforementioned material) you would be startled to learn of local Northern slavery through an epitaph on a gravestone off of Ely's Ferry Road. In the Ely family graveyard is the headstone of William Ely. The epitaph reveals the tip of a hidden fact.

This is Lyme's involvement in *slavery*.

The gravestone epitaph reads: (note: the stone is worn and lichen covered.)

**Here Lyeth the
Body of William Ely
b. 1698 Died in the 60th
year of his Life 4 mar 1758**
.....

**He was the first amongst us to
Free his slaves**

The suggestion within this epitaph was that slavery was a part of Lyme's past during the later part of the 18th century. There are many primary documents that indicate that slavery was an important social and economic activity throughout the town (It is interesting to note that while I was able to find documentation for slaves of William Ely, I was unable to validate his having emancipated his slaves as suggested by the epitaph.)

William Ely's son, Samuel born to Ely's first wife in 1729, shows up in the Lyme Land records (LLR 16: 322) as freeing his slave Peter in 1781. It is unclear how Samuel acquires Peter. There are no property or probate references indicating transfer. In such a situation, it is reasonable to infer that this is a slave that was the offspring of other Ely slaves and therefore never purchased and not necessitating a record.

Samuell Ely Esq. – Ingagement to manumit his serbant *Peter*

.....I the subscriber Samuel Ely do hereby ingage and promise my Negro man, that upon his paying me thirty pounds in silver money, and thirty pounds in paper equibalent to silver - to manumit him - said Peter - set him free next Fall without fraud or deceit.

Lyme 13th February 1781.

Samuel Ely

A second document of 1784 testifies that Peter Freeman has the liberty to work for himself.

Recorded the 12th day of June 1784: by John Lay 2nd Registrar

Peter Freeman, the bearer hereof has liberty to hire himself out to any Body, He has paid the biggest part toward purchase of his freedom and has now a Right to hiring himself out to get the remainder: Lyme 14th December 1782

Samuel Ely his Olde Master

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After the death of his first wife, Hannah in 1733, William Ely received at least some of his slaves through marriage to John Noyes' widow Mary in the same year. Mary's property became that of her new husband. The slaves Caesar and Warwick are documented within the land and probate records of Lyme. While the epitaph reads that William Ely freed his slaves, Caesar and Warwick were not freed. Upon William's death in 1758 they reverted back to Mary.

From Lyme – New London Probate Records

Warwick: Negro youth Warwick in inventory of John Noyes of Lyme 1733. Noyes' widow Mary married William Ely of Lyme. Capt. William Ely left slave Warwick to wife Mary in his will of 1759. Widow Ely freed Warrick in her will of 1769. Warrick resided in the household of Mrs. Ely's son Elisha Ely after his emancipation and died in Lyme - February 3, 1793 -aged 70.

Caesar, servant child of Mary, widow of John Noyes
Negro Child baptized in Old Lyme Church June 15, 1735
Caesar listed in inventory of William Ely 1758 and distributed to Ely's 2nd wife Mrs. Mary (Noyes) Ely.

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Since William Ely was “the first amongst us” to give freedom to his slaves. It can be assumed that there were other families that maintained slaves at the same time as that of the carving of the epitaph. The US census records for Lyme give us a clue to the identity of local slaveholding families some thirty years later.

In 1800, ten years after the first census and clearly when slavery was on the wane, Lyme had an overall population of 4380. There were 108 enumerated recently freed “blacks”. There were also 23 slaves still maintained by local owners: Robert Douglas 1, David Ely 1, Roger Griswold 1, Elisha Lay 1, Lee lay 1, Enoch Lord Jr. 1, John Lord 2, Joseph Lord 1, Reynold Lord 1, William Mack 1, Samuel Mather Jr. 2, Joseph Noyes 2, William Noyes 3, William Noyes 2nd 1, Marshfield Parsons 3, and Jasper Peck 1.

The 1810 census shows 4261 people in Lyme and 108 free “blacks”. However, there was a drop in slaves to 9. Slave owners were Elizabeth Caulkins 1, Marsh Ely 1, Enoch Lord Jr 1, Eunice Noyes 3, John Noyes 2, and William Noyes 1.

These documents reveal the overall tail end of the practice; however, there was a clear 150 or more years prior, when Northern slavery flourished.

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The idea of slavery as a normal social phenomenon within New England is clearly projected in the very first Puritan documents where the idea of slavery was considered a necessity. The following are examples of Puritan opinions regarding slavery and this author's interpretation of the statements.

1630 John Winthrop Mass. Bay Colony

“God Almightye in his most wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condicion of Mankind, as in all times some must be riche some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others means and in subieccion.”

Discussion: This Puritan social theory concerning humankind in general, supported the idea of races and their station. The condition was established by no other than God. The lesser races were placed on Earth specifically for the use of the upper race – white Christians - Puritans. It is worthy to note that John Winthrop's son was the governor of the Pequot colony or New London. Both father and son were in constant communication with other area Puritans as George Fenwick of the Saybrook colony of which we in Lyme were clearly part.

1637 Roger Williams Providence, Rhode Island

“It having again pleased the most High to put into your hands another miserable drove of Adam’s degenerate seeds, ...they ought not be set free.”

Discussion: This commentary by Roger Williams, a very close friend and frequent guest of Fenwick to the Saybrook Colony shows his attitude towards the Pequots. In the Pequot War English and allied Native forces destroyed the Pequot fort and killed over 500. Remaining Men, women, and children were immediately put into slavery by *Right of Conquest*. Following this war and policy of enslavement the English termed many groups as far as western coastal Connecticut “Pequots”. In doing so these groups were immediately considered already a beaten group and *rightfully*, under English law, enslaved.

1645 EMANUEL DOWNING Rhode Island

“ A war with the Narragannsett is verie considerable to this plantation ... if upon a Juste Warr the Lord shall deliver them into our hands, we might easily have men, women, children enough to exchange for Floores ... for I doe not see how wee can thrive until wee gett into a flock of slaves sufficient to doe all our business.”

Discussion : Here we see a very pragmatic discussion regarding the issue of the necessity of slaves for New England. Downing is plotting war. The war will provide Native captives that Puritans can trade away in the Caribbean Islands for African slaves coming in on slave ships and sold at the

various slave auctions. By this time Puritans have decided that Native slaves are just too comfortable with the region of southern New England and have too great an advantage over their masters. As a result Native slaves easily slipped away and just as elusively reappeared. This demonstrated to the English their inability to control native slaves and thus led to their desire to attain slaves who knew the region no better than themselves. In 1650 the Connecticut Codes were passed that allowed for the trade or exchange of Native slaves for African slaves.

1706 Cotton Mather

“It cannot be otherwise! The state of your Negroes in this world must be lowe, and mean, and abject. A state of servitude. Something then, let there be done, towards their welfare in the worlde to come.”

Discussion: Cotton Mather weighs in on the ongoing debate relating to the ethics of slavery employed by Puritans and colonists. However, his position is that if a mistake is being made by colonial authorities regarding African and Native peoples in servitude, God will make the adjustment for those individuals when they go to heaven. Unfortunately, for many slaves this quieted some of the debate for the next 50 years and made them endure continued hardship.

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The example of an area family whose colorful past most certainly included the policy of slavery is that of the Mumfords. This family was integral to slavery in the Lyme area and in conjunction with other entrepreneurial families controlled the lives of many slaves.

Their story can be traced back from a very innocuous document, a Salem Valley Farms Ice Cream container (Chocolate – Chocolate Chip, 5/16/02).

About Salem Valley Farms:

“In 1769, John Mumford built his home in the beautiful Salem Valley and cleared the fields now used for dairy farming.”

As descendants of John Mumford, dedicated to preserving farmland, we proudly bring you this extraordinary premium farm product, made on the premises at Salem Valley Farms Ice Cream Barn, Using only the highest quality ingredients and our own delicious recipes.”

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It appears that this advertisement and product information has potentially left out a significant part of the story. John Mumford did not actually clear the land himself, but rather, had a little help. According to the Perkins Chronicles:

“John Mumford maintained a gang of 350 slaves that he rented out to area farmers to clear land.”

Today his land abounds with fieldstone marked burial yards of probable slaves that toiled on his and other area farmers’ land. *Ongoing archaeological and physical anthropological research is currently oriented towards this aspect of history.*

From documentary evidence it is clear that John Mumford maintained and had problems with some of his slaves. An advertisement in the Connecticut Gazette October 19, 1764 seeks information regarding a: **“Spanish mulatto slave Pharoah who ran away from John Mumford of Lyme in 1764”**. Six years later another runaway is posted in the Connecticut Gazette April 27, 1770: the advertisement reads: **“Sambo Negro man of**

John Mumford of Lyme has run away". In 1772 Sambo is again advertised in the Hartford Courant September 22, 1772: **"Sambo, formerly slave of Samuel Browne residing with John Mumford has run away."** In 1774 Sambo runs away again. He had been resold to Samuel Browne Jr. in 1772, however, at the time of purchase was renamed **Pomp.**

The final runaway advertisement regarding John Mumford's slaves appears in 1784 in the Connecticut Gazette April 23, 1784. This advertisement seeks information and the whereabouts of one: **"Ponto runaway - Negro Alan aged 38 of John Mumford of Lyme."**

Other documents attest to John Mumford's slave holding from Watrous Account Book (Connecticut Historical Society) comes a debt recorded to: **"Providence slave of John Mumford 1799."**

From Perkins Chronicles is an entry regarding: **"Aaron, Indian married Taphena Tatsen in Lyme, September 4 1800. Aaron died of the bursting of a gun in 1823. Taphena spent the remainder of her life as a servant of John Mumford Jr. of Lyme / Salem."**

The Mumford family had close connections to the slave trade of the early to mid 18th century.

From the Narrative of Venture Smith 1798 (Bontemps):

"I was born at Dukandarra, in Guinea about the year 1729. My father was the Prince of the tribe. His name Saungm Furro. I was named by him Broteer.....I and other prisoners were put on board a canoe and rowed away to a vessel belonging to Rhode Island, commanded by a Captain Collingwood, and the Mate

Thomas Mumford. While we were going to that vessel we were told to appear to the best possible advantage for sale. I was bought on board by Robinson Mumford, steward, on said vessel for four gallons of rum and a piece of calico and called Venture on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture.”

Note: Venture spent much of his life in southeastern Connecticut. He lived with his wife and grown children whom he all bought out of slavery. His homestead was adjacent the Connecticut Yankee power plant in East Haddam. Within his narrative are various stories of area families from Stonington, Fishers Island, Saybrook, and Lyme. He is buried at the cemetery in East Haddam.

In conclusion, it is clear that slavery existed in the region of southeastern Connecticut and specifically Lyme. From the earliest colonial times, while there was an ongoing debate regarding slavery, the prevailing opinion was that it was necessary and in accordance with the way God had arranged the world. Lyme slavery is clearly represented in various local documents such as land, probate, census, and cemetery records. While the policy of human enslavement is documented from the first encounters with Native populations there appears a redirection of concentration towards African slaves from 1650 onward. The policy of slavery slowly diminishes around the time of the Revolutionary War, however, does not finally come to an end until the mid teens of the 19th century. In the final analysis it may not have been the humanitarian or ethical aspects that caused its abandonment. Rather, it may well have been that slavery was no longer cost effective. Maintaining slaves within a region where there were decreasing agricultural profits no longer made sense. With the onset of industrialism, a different kind of worker was needed. The flood of manumissions and emancipations seen in the land records illustrate a sharp decline in slavery during the Revolution. US census records clearly show the end of slavery towards the end of the first decade of the 1800's. The economic environment and the rising complaints waged by loyalists who pointed out that Americans wanted and subsequently fought for their own freedom while they denied

such rights to their slaves, became too much for Northern slavery. The last document relating to a slave in Lyme is that of Pomp. In 1816 he is recorded as having run away.

Connecticut Gazette 12/25/1816

Pomp aged 40 has run away from Joseph Noyes of Lyme. Pomp is blind in one eye .

No record of manumission for Pomp from Joseph Noyes is on file.

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