

RHS: Spring 2012

Friday, February 24, 7:30 pm at the Starr Library, Local History Room

Have you ever wondered who lived in your house before you did? David Miller will tell you how to find out, using his search for the previous inhabitants of his house as an example.

President's Message Spring 2012

On behalf of the RHS board I would like to wish you and your families a very happy, healthy, and prosperous New Year. We are working on a great line up of programs and events for you. In addition to the programs listed on the back of the newsletter we will be having a tour of the Rhinebeck Cemetery in May, a joint picnic with the Red Hook Historical Society, celebrating the 200th anniversary of the separation of Red Hook from Rhinebeck, in June, a joint Progressive Dinner with the Museum of Rhinebeck History in July and our Sunset Supper in September. Stay tuned for more information.

As many of you may know there was a tragic fire at Southlands last fall. Most of the archives were destroyed. We are working with Southlands to house, in our archives, the material that survived. We also received a transfer of some wonderful items from the Chancellor Livingston Chapter of the DAR which will also be stored in our archives. To that end we are working on rearranging the archive room and purchasing more storage shelves.

I want to thank the Frost Foundation for approving the RHS' grant proposal for \$2,000 to purchase new computer hardware and software for the archives.

Lastly, I spent the past 6 months researching the history of my house. I learned many techniques for researching the history of a house and had collected a lot more material, photographs and stories during my research than I had room for in the last newsletter. Please come to my talk on February 24th where I will share that material with you. I think that the lecture will teach you about the history of some interesting people who lived in our town and assist you in researching the history of your own house.

David Miller, President

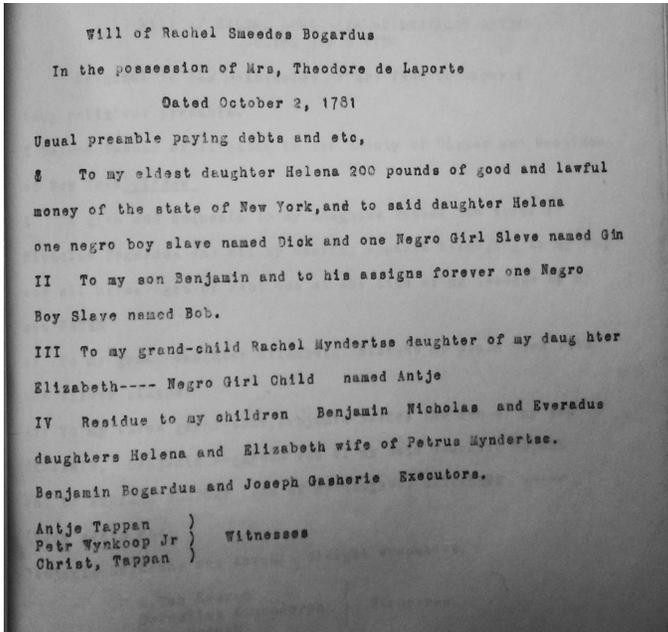
The History of Slavery in Rhinebeck By David Miller

When I first moved to Rhinebeck I was used to the very diverse population of the New York City. Rhinebeck appeared to be a typical, mostly white, upstate town. Indeed, the 2010 census data shows that our population is 9123 with 282 black residents. I assumed that this was always true. As I began delving into local history I discovered that this was not the case. Indeed, there was a time, over 200 years ago, when 25% of Rhinebeck was of African descent. I began researching our 'colorful' past and found out a lot about the African American, both slave and free, history of our town.

From the beginning of colonial America slaves were imported to support the growing economy of our expanding country. Most of them came from African countries. Slavery was heavily debated from the time that our constitution was drafted until the end of the Civil War. One of the first acts of our new government in 1787 was to leave it up to individual states to determine if slavery would be permitted. One way to look at the magnitude of the issue is to realize that, as of 1815, more people had come to America as African slaves than had come from Europe. The debate over slavery continued for the next 50 years. During that period the country expanded all the way to California, but as each state was admitted to the union there was an argument as to whether it would be a free or slave state. The pot finally boiled over in 1861 when the Civil War began.

When you think of slavery you think of southern states but slavery did exist in Rhinebeck. The first slaves were brought to New York by the Dutch West India Company in the early 1600's. Labor was in short supply and the slaves were used on farms, homes and businesses. The heaviest concentration of slaves in our area was on the estates of Livingston Manor and Clermont, just north of Rhinebeck. New York even passed a 'slave code' that

restricted personal autonomy, forbade trading with slaves, selling them liquor, or allowing them to congregate in groups of three or more. Slaves were the property of their owners. They could be bought or sold at any time and could even be willed to heirs as you can see below in this extract from the DAR archives.



Will of Rachel Bogardus, 1781, DAR Archives

The number of slaves grew as the population as a whole grew. A Dutchess County census of 1714 determined that 29 of a total of 445 inhabitants of Rhinebeck were slaves. By 1755 the number had grown to 52 slave holders with a total of 116 slaves. By the time the first official federal census was taken in 1790 it showed the amazing number of 21,000 slaves in New York State with 421 in Rhinebeck which was 25% of the population at that time. Keep in mind that this was before the 1812 separation of Red Hook from Rhinebeck so this number included both towns. Most Rhinebeck families who did have slaves owned just one slave, but wealthier families tended to own larger numbers. The Livingston's were the biggest slave holders. They imported them to Livingston Manor using their own fleet of ships. Slaves were used to clear the forests and plow on the resulting farm land. Female slaves were used for domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. As difficult as living conditions were for the early settlers, surviving the cold northern winters in small houses with poor insulation, their slaves fared much worse. They had to live in attics, cellars or unheated out buildings.

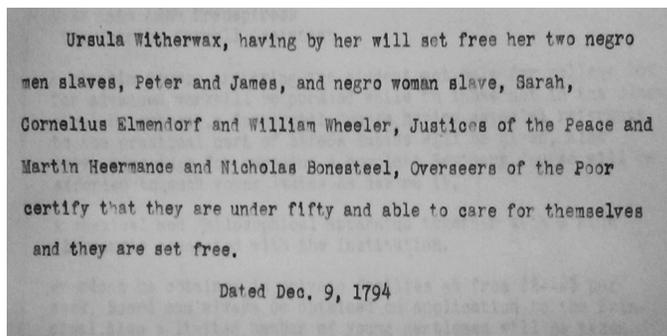
Slave owners were held responsible for any problems caused by their slaves and could be fined by the authorities for allowing their slaves to break the law. Nancy Kelly sent me the following accounts of two incidents involving sanctions placed on the owners of slaves: **Oct of 1762**- “Joseph Rykert, constable of Rhinebeck, was indicted when he allowed Isaac, the slave of Peter deWitt, to escape rather than take him to the whipping post at Rhinebeck for punishment.” **May of 1769** – “Court of General Sessions indicted Johannes Radcliff of 'Rynebeck' Precinct. They charged that on Monday the 15 of May, late in the night, Johannes entertained and harbored in his dwelling house in Rhinebeck twenty Negro slaves belonging to his neighbors and permitted and encouraged the said Negro slaves in drinking to excess, causing the Negroes to steal and commit many enormous crimes to the great damage of the owners.”

The punishment of the slaves for breaking the law was much worse than that of their owners. Slaves could be publicly whipped for minor infractions or executed, sometimes in barbaric fashion, for capital crimes. As an example, in Red Hook in the 1740's a slave was convicted of arson and burned at the stake. This harsh treatment led to many runaways. Henry B. Livingston of Rhinebeck put an ad in the January 5, 1802 Poughkeepsie Journal stating that a 17 year old slave named Solomon had run away. He describes his build, a scar on his face and the clothing that he was wearing and states that he supposes that Solomon “will apply for a passage to some foreign country as his inclination tents that way.”

This movement of runaway slaves, both local and out of state, led to the establishment of the Underground Railroad. Slave owners had the right to pursue their ‘property’ and reclaim it even from slave-free states after Congress passed the first Fugitive Slave Law in 1793. A \$500 fine could be imposed on anyone who hindered the arrest of a runaway. The only way to totally avoid capture was to flee to Canada. The railroad ran through Rhinebeck which was a critical stopover in the trip from New York City north to the Canadian border. At the peak of its activity, the years 1827 through the end of the Civil War in 1865, the Underground Railroad helped nearly 2000 slaves per year. The ‘railroad’ was not actually a railroad. It was a series of paths, tunnels and homes or shelters that the runaways could use on their journey. The homes were called ‘Stations,’ the sympathizers called ‘Conductors,’ and the fugitives

were called 'Freight.' Many of the churches and homes in Rhinebeck were used to hide the runaways. An article in the 1979 Poughkeepsie Journal tells about houses with tunnels in their basements on Livingston Street. My neighbor on Market Street showed me a tunnel in her root cellar heading towards my house. People who were in some of these houses in the mid 1900's tell of seeing slave shackles in the basement walls. There does not appear to be a comprehensive map showing how all of these tunnels are connected.

After the Revolutionary War, anti-slavery movements began in Dutchess County. The Quakers were a major force in the area starting in the late 1700's. Pressure was put on slave holders to free their slaves. In 1788 a law was passed in Poughkeepsie that stipulated that slaves under 50 years of age could be freed. They had to obtain certificates from overseers of the poor and from Dutchess County Justices of the Peace who would vouch for the slaves' ability to support themselves. As time went on slaves were freed as a result of long service to their owner or the owners freed them as a legacy in their wills.



DAR Archives

In 1788, the slave trade in New York was banned outright, and the special courts which had held power of life and death over slaves for 80 years were abolished. The loosening of restrictions filtered down to the municipal level, and Albany abolished the custom of flogging slaves for curfew violations. New York declared that, as of July 4, 1799 all slaves born from then on would be freed when the males reached age 28 and the females age 25. This gave slaveholders time to recoup some of their investment before freeing the slaves. In 1807 the federal government banned all transatlantic slave importing. And, finally, in 1817 New York passed a law that said in ten years, on July 4, 1827, all slaves would be freed without compensation to their former owners. Slowly, through the early to mid-1800's the balance of slaves to freemen in Dutchess County

swung around dramatically as slavery came to an end in New York.

There is another aspect of the African American history of Rhinebeck that I have not talked about which is the free and/or former slave population which was considerable in the 18th and 19th centuries. They were craftsmen, farmers and even Revolutionary and Civil War soldiers. In 1853 Mary Garrettson, daughter of Reverend Freeborn Garrettson, gave some land in the Rhinebeck cemetery as an African American burial ground. Some of the grave stones are still intact but most are missing. Over the past few years Vassar College professors and their students have been studying the area in an attempt to determine where and how many graves are located there. Please come to the Starr Library Local History Room on Friday March 30 at 7:30 p.m. to hear a talk "Graveyards, Geophysics and the Vibrant African American History of Rhinebeck" by Assoc. Professor of Earth Sciences Brian McAdoo, and Asst. Professor of History Quincy Mills.

Resources:

Crane, Susan J., "Ante-Bellum Dutchess County's Struggle against Slavery," 1980, Dutchess County Historical Society Yearbook.

de Laporte, Helen R (collection), "The Rhinebeck Record, Sketches of the Rhinebeck Precinct," Chancellor Livingston Chapter, Rhinebeck, New York, Daughters of the American Revolution.

Howe, Daniel Walker, "What Hath God Wrought, The Transformation of America, 1815-1848," 2007.

Mac Cracken, Henry Noble, "Old Dutchess Forever," 1956.

Mc Dermott, William P., "A Quality not generally annexed to the Character of a Negro: Slavery in Rhinebeck, New York, 1714-1800," The Hudson Valley Regional Review, September 1996, Volume 13, Number 2.

Morse, Howard H., "Historic Rhinebeck, Echoes of Two Centuries," 1908.

Reynolds, Helen Wilkinson, "The Negro in Dutchess County in the Eighteenth Century," 1941, Dutchess County Historical Society Yearbook.

Singer, Roberta, "Slaveholding on Livingston Manor and Clermont, 1686-1800," 1984, Dutchess County Historical Society Yearbook.

Upton, Dell T., "Dutchess County Quakers and Slavery, 1750-1830," 1970, Dutchess County Historical Society Yearbook.

Ver Nooy, Amy Pearce, "The Anti-Slavery Movement in Dutchess County, 1835-1850," 1943, Dutchess County Historical Society Yearbook.