

Preliminary Notes on
The Hempstead Family and African Americans in Early New London.

Mary E. Baker, The Hempsted Houses
The Antiquarian & Landmarks Society, Inc.

The story of the Hempstead family and the cause of African American freedom begins in the early 1700s. Joshua Hempstead had lost his wife after their ninth child, and Adam Jackson, slave, helped Joshua raise the children and keep the family going for the next forty-two years. Just how Adam came to the Hempsted family is unclear, but evidently Joshua helped extricate Adam from a legal wrangle within the Rogers family in which the Jacksons persisted in their claim to be free. Not satisfied with the court's findings, Adam repeatedly ran away from his supposed masters until coming to live with Joshua. Adam appears to have been allowed to earn and keep wages from outside work during these years with the Hempsteads. In 1758 Adam Jackson was officially freed according to provisions in Joshua's will. What happened to Adam after Joshua's death is not known.¹

In the 19th century, the Hempsteads and extended family were deeply involved in the anti-slavery movement and according to oral tradition, opened their home as a way station on the underground railway through New London. Though impossible now to prove, a letter exists in the Hempsted Museum archives that hints about participation in hiding runaway slaves. Three Hempsted sisters: Nancy, Mary and Martha, were Abolitionists along with Mary's husband, John Bolles, and Martha's husband, Christopher Prince. Mary and John's daughter Mary (Bolles) Branch was also involved in the anti-slavery movement. We have Mary (Hempstead) Bolles's letter of resignation from the Second Congregational Church because the church did not take a stand against slavery. We have Martha (Hempstead) Prince's and Christopher Prince's correspondence with anti-slavery leaders. The family subscribed to "The Liberator," and their correspondence makes it clear that they were personally acquainted with national leaders and were themselves local leaders in the anti-slavery movement. In the 1840s, Christopher and Martha were active in the effort to prevent

the entry of Texas into the Union as a slave state. Interestingly, Christopher Prince was descended from both the Hempstead family and the Jackson family, and though he denied the rumors, his grandmother was thought to have been a woman of color.

The Hempsteads attempted to buy a slave girl in order to return her to her mother, though we don't know if they were successful. In the 1840s, Christopher was instrumental in obtaining the commutation of the death sentence for a black man, George Jackson, who had been found guilty of murdering a Native American. (George's possible relation to Adam Jackson is unclear.) After the Civil War the Hempsteads remained involved, donating regularly to the Freedmen's Society.

The Hempsteads were personally involved in attempting to rectify the horror of slavery as an institution, but perhaps this is not surprising considering that many of their close neighbors--people who lived on what had been in the 17th century Hempstead land--were free African Americans. It MAY BE that the Hempstead Street neighborhood is one of the oldest INTEGRATED neighborhoods in the nation. Certainly, many free blacks lived in the neighborhood from the late 18th century. The neighborhood continues in this same tradition today.

In Connecticut, the largest community of African Americans lived in New London, and because of the concentration at this and other seaports, there developed an African American culture here in a society otherwise dominated by European immigrants.² After 1750, the majority of the African American population was native born, and by 1800 there were relatively few who had been born in African.

The black population continued to grow beyond mere natural increase because of New London's transportation network with New York City, where abolition was not passed until 1799. Indeed, in 1790 New York had more slaves than any city in the nation except Charleston, S.C. Thus, Connecticut's seaports were very important escape routes for slaves leaving New York.

For those African Americans trying to earn a living in New London, domestic service

and personal services, such as livery, tavern-keeping, and domestic work, were important, but many were occupied as mariners. A significant number were professionals, artisans, hucksters, carters, bakers, fruiterers, grocers. Among females, many were retailers, boardinghouse keepers, and washerwomen. Those having the most problem getting jobs were "Irish emigrants and French Negroes," according to a 1797 New London newspaper.

Black men were excluded from politics until after the Civil War (1870), but they had their own "elections" in the 18th century. A New London man named Hercules, who knew Adam Jackson, was one of the early black "governors." These mock elections made fun of a system from which African Americans were excluded. However, blacks were not officially disenfranchised until 1814 when a law was passed excluding all but "free white males" from being admitted to any town as "freemen."³ [I question whether this law had blacks in mind. A similar law passed in NJ was aimed at women, who had lined up to vote in the first post-Revolutionary elections!]

There has been very little published research on the topic of early New London and African Americans (though much has been written on the Armistad revolt). This much is certain: early black settlers in New London had a significant cultural impact on the community, though the dimensions of this impact remains to be delineated.

NOTES

1. The story of Adam Jackson (b. Circa 1713) is told in Tapestry by James M Rose and Barbara W. Brown, (New London County Historical Society, 1979).
2. William Parson, Black Yankees, (Amherst: Univeristy of Mass. Press, 1988), 18.
3. Tapestry, 38.