

Mr. Fortune's Final Resting Place

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11 January 2025

Fortune was an 18th century enslaved man in Waterbury, CT. The first documented reference we have of Fortune's existence begins in the 1790's. A 1788 Connecticut law required enslavers to record the birth of every child of their enslaved; the intent was to guarantee their freedom during the period of gradual emancipation. Due to that requirement, Fortune's enslaver, Dr. Preserved Porter, registered the birth dates of Fortune's 4 children, Africa, Jacob, Mira and Roxa.

There are historical references of Fortune and his family within the Waterbury community. His son, Africa, is documented as being responsible for ringing the town's school bell for three months in 1790. Also, Fortune's baptism was recorded by St. John's Episcopal church on December 20th, 1797.

In 1798, Fortune's death was notated in the personal records of Waterbury resident, Benjamin Upson. Many years later, a skeleton would be referenced in volume 2 of Joseph Anderson's 1896 book, referred to as "Larry." According to Anderson, Larry was an enslaved man belonging to Dr. Preserved Porter, who slipped from a rock at the river and drowned. As the story was told, Dr. Porter prepared and preserved the skeleton, doing the work at the place where the accident occurred. Dr. Porter would then open a school of anatomy, using the skeleton as a training tool. We now know that skeleton was actually Fortune.

Upon Dr. Porter's death in 1803, Fortune's wife Dinah is one of only 2 remaining enslaved by Dr. Porter. Dinah is listed in Dr. Porter's probate inventory as having a value of \$10. Fortune's skeleton is listed with a value of \$15. There is no indication of what became of Fortune's 4 children, and by 1810, there is no record of Dinah. Fortune, however, would begin a post-mortem journey of continuous possession that would span the next two centuries.

Fortune's bones were willed to Dr. Porter's son, Jesse, who was also a Waterbury doctor. They were then passed down to Jesse Porter's grandson, Dr. Homer Law, who later used the bones to teach anatomy to his daughter, Dr. Sally McGlannan. Sally would later refer to the bones as *"almost her first play thing as a child"*, keeping the bones with her all of her life. Dr. McGlannan would eventually attend Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore, where she would marry and remain.

In 1932, Dr. Sally McGlannan donated the bones to the Mattatuck Museum, agreeing to pay for the display. The skeleton would remain on display, persisting for the nearly 40 years, and also displayed on a popular postcard sold by the museum. In 1970, out of respect for the remains and sensibility of the community, the skeleton was removed from public display and placed in storage, where it would remain for nearly 20 years. In the early 1990s, realizing there was little documented of Waterbury's African American history, Ms. Maxine Watts of the Waterbury chapter of the NAACP asked the Mattatuck Museum to lead a project to locate and record the lives of the city's eldest African Americans. Known as the African American Oral History Project, committee members recorded the stories of over 40 residents 80 years of age and above.

As the committee finished their work, a local resident reminded them of a much older African American in the city, providing an old postcard from the museum depicting a skeleton referred to as "Larry." After nearly 20 years, the bones were pulled from storage for study. The committee sought the assistance of anthropologists, archeologists, other scientists and historians to determine who Larry was and how he lived. By 1996, their research had determined that the skeleton was actually Fortune. Researchers learned that in life, Fortune stood around 5 foot 6 inches tall and was in his mid 50's or older when he died. Based on the density of his bones, they knew he was a very strong man. Informed by the wear in areas where muscle once attached, and by the many fractures that had healed prior to death, they knew he was worked hard, and likely experienced pain in life.

In 2012, after nearly 20 years of research and examination, the committee made the decision to lay Fortune to rest. On September 12th, 2013, Fortune laid in state at the Connecticut State Capital in Hartford before being escorted by state police to St. John's Episcopal Church in Waterbury, the very parish where he was baptized in 1797. Fortune took his final rest at Riverside Cemetery in Waterbury, CT, amongst 18th and 19th century elite of Waterbury society, including some who held his bones.

Fortune's gravesite was placed on the CT Freedom Trail on September 13th, 2023.