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From Slavery To Diversity

Black History Spans Three Centuries in Windsor

By Melanie Winters
Editor

Much of the town's history can be found near the confluence of the Connecticut and Farmington rivers. It was there that English settlers built a trading post in the 1600s; it was there that slaves were traded during the early 1700s; and it was there that slaves traveling with the Underground Railroad of the 1800s stopped over for temporary sanctuary.

According to several references at the Historical Society, the first record of blacks in Windsor is a 1680 inventory of Henry Wolcott's estate. The inventory included the name of a slave named Cyrus, the first in Connecticut of which there is any record.

"If this was the first slave in Connecticut," writes Lloyd Wright Fowles in "The Fowles History of Windsor," "then Windsor can lay claim not only to the first but to the last slave in the state."

By the first federal census in 1790, slavery here was diminishing. Some, like Hezekiah Chaffee's slave Sarah, were given emancipation if they proved to be independent and in good health.

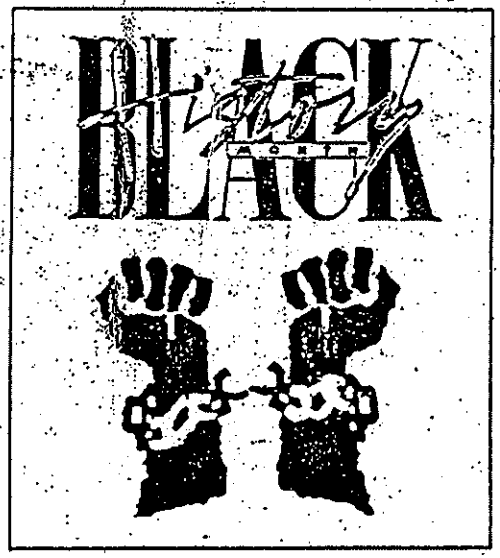
The Last Slave

Nancy Toney, known as "Old Nance," was also the property of the Chaffee/Loomis family during the mid-1800s, but was not eligible for emancipation because it was determined that she would not be able to care for herself. By 1810 Old Nance was only slave left in Windsor, and the only one in Connecticut by the time of her death in 1857.

Still other slaves were given emancipation for serving in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. According to research sources, there were nine blacks from town who served, of which only two returned to Windsor.

Oliver Mitchell was one. According to Henry R. Stiles' "The History of Ancient Windsor," he was the last "colored" survivor of the Revolution. Dr. Primus, former slave of Dr. Alexander Wolcott, also returned to the area.

As a slave, Dr. Primus had worked as Dr. Wolcott's medical assistant and was given full access to his library. After the war, Dr. Primus returned to what is now South Windsor to establish a medical practice. One of the meeting rooms at Town Hall is named after him.



Underground RR

Although there is no record of local involvement in the abolitionist movement of the mid-1800s, several homes around the Palisado Green area housed runaway slaves traveling with the Underground Railroad.

"It is speculated that they would arrive by boat and crawl through a tunnel to the Fyler House," according to a 1991 thesis written by Trinity College student Marcia Dort Hinckley.

Although rumors of such a tunnel have never been confirmed, there were four houses that sheltered runaway slaves, three of which are still standing. The Fyler House, the Chaffee House and the parsonage of First Church, now occupied by Rev. Gordon Van Parker, were part of the Underground Railroad. The Old Slave House, located behind where the Milo Peck Center now stands, also housed runaways.

Another home to consider when discussing Black History in Windsor is one that was once occupied by Joseph H. Rainey, the first black U.S. Congressman. A South Carolina representative from 1870 to 1879, Mr. Rainey made his summer home at 299 Palisado Ave. and was one of three featured speakers at the town's Centennial Celebration.

AME Church

In April 1887 a meeting was held at Town Hall to form the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Mission, to be located in the Hayden Station area. It was there, as well as in the Cook Hill Road area, that black families began to settle in the late 1800s.

Although the AME Zion Church was a central part of their community, William Best, a 68-year-old African-American native of Windsor, said not all black families attended. "I always belonged to First Church. The people were congenial. That's one thing that keeps me in that church; they accept you," he said.

According to Mr. Best, there were about 16 black families living in the Hayden Station area while he was growing up.

"The families up there, they had their own homes to live in. We made out the best we could with the money we had," Mr. Best said, noting that it was particularly tough during the Depression years.

"I had a pretty good childhood," he continued. "Everybody got along fine; everybody played together."

Interaction

Mr. Best received his education from the Hayden Station School, which is still standing today. He said the school was interracially mixed and that the students and families interacted often. However, it was in the social and employment areas that the differences were more pronounced.

"In the social life you sort of knew your place," he said.

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Town Evolved Into 'Unique,' Diverse Community

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Mr. Best recalled how blacks were excluded from the Hayden Station Social Club, as well as certain types of jobs during the 1920s and 1930s. He said it was understood that blacks could not work in the mills, and while they worked on area farms, they were not allowed to operate farm vehicles.

"They wanted blacks around to clean and do their domestic work. Other than that, people got along fine," he said.

Things changed in the 1940s when the war began and people went into the service, but not much. Mr. Best said that jobs started to open up for blacks at Pratt & Whitney, but only for such menial tasks as sweeping floors.

Separate but Equal?

Mr. Best went into the service in 1943. "I was one of the first blacks to go into the U.S. Marine Corps, and you know they didn't want blacks in the Marine Corps. They said it was suppose to be separate but equal — don't you believe it," Mr. Best said.

In 1951 Mr. Best became the first black police officer in Windsor, but not without some resistance. He took and passed the required exam three times before finally being accepted into the department. And yet, he still was not fully accepted.

"It was tough," he said.

He cited as an example a motor vehicle stop in which the driver, who Mr. Best said was from Georgia, insisted that a black police officer did not have the authority to issue him a ticket.

Mr. Best retired from the police department in 1968 as a result of an injury, and is now in business for himself as owner of Best Printing on Pierson Lane. Again, he said it was difficult at first.

"If I did get work it would be menial or something they knew I couldn't do. Now I have a lot of people coming in to do business and we get along fine," he said.

"I don't remember a really bad time with anybody in Windsor," he said.

However, he did question some of the treatment blacks received from the town itself. He cited as an example the extension of a roadway in the Hayden Station area. The town came in with bulldozers and went through people's property without notification, without a hearing and without compensation, he said.

Despite the ups and downs of the past 68 years, however, Mr. Best said, "I enjoy this town. I never wanted to live anywhere else."

Diversity

It wasn't until the last 20 years that the minority population in town saw a significant increase, particularly in the Wilson area. Mr. Best said there was a time when people refused to sell houses in certain areas to black families. "Now there are blacks all over Windsor," he said.

"Windsor is a unique town in the region as far as the diversity," said Stanley Cicero, president of the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association.

Founded in 1982, WAACA was set up to allow minorities to get to know each other and to become involved in town government, he said. The organization also began raising scholarship money for local high school students.

Since then, Mr. Cicero said that minorities are much more involved in town government than in the past, serving on various boards and commissions as well as community-based activities like the Shad Derby and Northwest Park.

"It's not as much as we'd like," he said. Like any other civic organization, "There's always room for more.

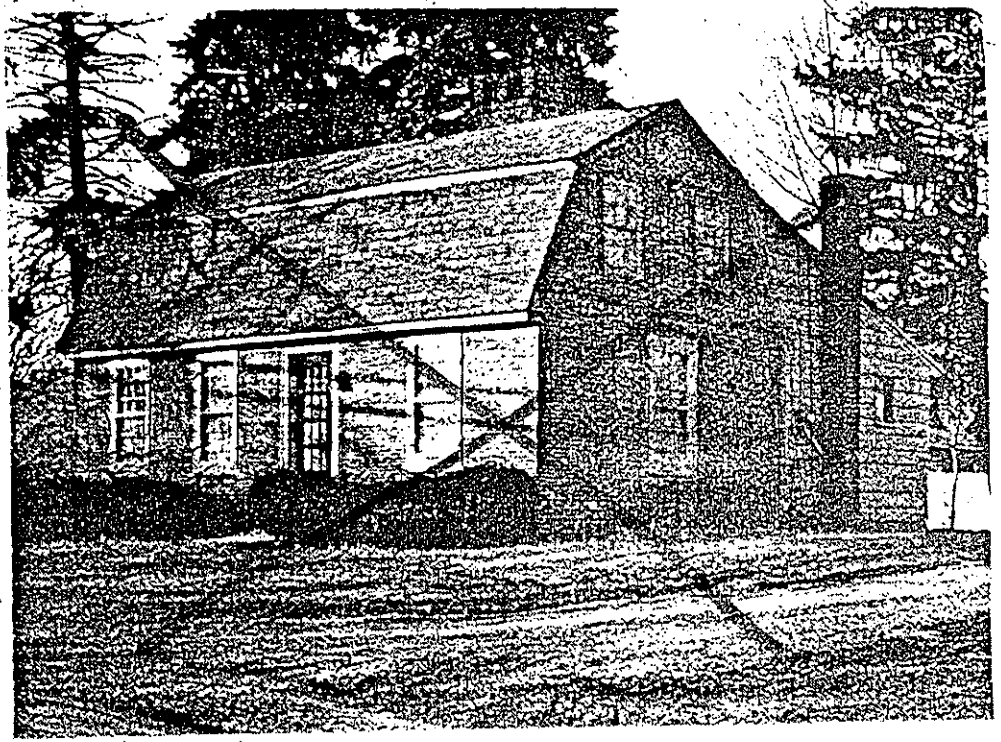
"I think there should be more involvement with each other," he said, noting disappointment at the turnout of last year's Town Pride Day.

For the future of WAACA, Mr. Cicero said he would like to see more members and more participation in the town. This includes working with the health department to promote awareness of breast cancer and increased participation in the Shad Derby.

"Anything we can do in town to make it better," he said. "That's what I really like about Windsor—the volunteerism."

The Hezekiah Chaffee house once sheltered runaway slaves traveling with the Underground Railroad. It is now being leased by the Windsor Historical Society.

Staff Photos by Melanie Winters



The former Hayden Station School is now used as a private residence.