

**Reconstructing Delaware's Free Black Communities,
1800-1870**

Prepared by

Rebecca J. Sheppard
Kimberly Toney

With

Rebecca Koch
Keonna' Greene
Allison Olsen
Rachel Selway
Rebecca Downes
Emily Bunce
Sarah Laurel
Elizabeth Protokowicz
Ted Triandos

Mapping by

Ann Fangman
Mili Joshi

Center for Historic Architecture and Design
University of Delaware

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I. Introduction

The Underground Railroad (UGRR) in Delaware and the broader topic of the experience of the black population (both enslaved and free) in Delaware have been the subject of intense study over the past decade, by a variety of scholars and organizations such as the Delaware State Historic Preservation Office (DESHPO), the Underground Railroad Coalition of Delaware (URCD), the City of Wilmington, the Historic Preservation Program at Delaware State University, and the Center for Historic Architecture and Design at the University of Delaware (CHAD). As a result, the state now has a historic context for the Underground Railroad in Delaware, a scenic and historic byway that follows one of the major routes of the UGRR in Delaware and links to routes in Maryland and Pennsylvania, and an ever-growing list of cultural resources that can be tied to the UGRR in Delaware.¹

On the other hand, this research has also uncovered a series of related research topics that demand further exploration. For example, during the preparation of the scenic and historic byway nomination, researchers realized that they had very little information with which to assess the role played by free black communities with the UGRR in Delaware. While it seemed a reasonable assumption that free blacks would have sought to aid their fellow blacks escape from slavery, too little was known about these communities to assess the role they actually played. The current study, conducted by CHAD and funded by the National Park Service through the URCD, initially began with two straight-forward research objectives: 1) to uncover the role of free black communities in the Underground Railroad in Delaware, and 2) to identify the use of water routes to escape from or through the state. As the project evolved, several more goals were added, reflecting some of the issues and complications encountered during the research. These objectives focused primarily on the research methodologies developed in conjunction with the initial goals: 3) to create a methodology for the study of free black communities

¹ Primary scholars involved with these efforts include William H. Williams, Patience Essah, Robin Krawitz, Debra Martin, Peter Dalleo, Kate Larsen, David Ames, and Rebecca Sheppard. See the bibliography at the end of this report for a full listing of published materials.

in Delaware; 4) to develop a strategy for mapping the known data about free black communities and UGRR routes through Delaware; and 5) to identify a list of further research needs.

This report is broken into several sections that reflect these objectives. First, the introduction includes a detailed explanation of the methodology developed to study free black communities, as well as identification of some of the common problems with the process and the biases of the records available. Second, the section on free black communities provides both an overview for the patterns seen across the state and a series of case studies that explore the particular circumstances of five different communities. Each of the case studies addresses the particular issues related to the methodology and sources for that location. The results of the mapping research are incorporated into the overview discussion of free black communities and into a separate section discussing potential routes for freedom-seekers. A final section addresses areas of future research needs.

Methodology

An initial step in the methodology for this project lies in our definition of the term “community,” particularly as it applies to free black communities in Delaware. At the most basic level, a community is a group of people who share a common attribute or a common interest. Thus, people of a particular ethnic heritage, such as Irish- or Italian-Americans, might consider themselves a community, as could a group of chicken farmers in Sussex County or the congregation of a church. Alternatively, a community can be defined geographically, such as the residents of a small town or a river valley. For the purposes of this study, we defined free black communities on the basis of race, geography, and social involvement. That is, a free black community in Delaware consisted of a group of free blacks that lived in close proximity to one another, shared a common racial heritage as African-Americans, and interacted with one another on a regular basis through kinship, social connections, employment, religious organizations, and neighborly exchanges of goods and services. While the five communities explored in this study vary somewhat from one another, all share these particular characteristics.

The research design for this project involved two distinct and separate efforts. The first focused on developing a methodology for the reconstruction of free black communities and carrying that process out with five case studies. The second concentrated on mapping as much data as possible about free black communities and UGRR escape routes into a GIS system. The two efforts occurred simultaneously but also changed directions on several occasions as a result of findings in the other area.

I. Reconstructing Communities. The case study communities selected for this project included: Polktown in Red Lion Hundred, New Castle County; St. Jones Neck in East Dover Hundred, Kent County; and Lewes and Belltown (both in Lewes and Rehoboth Hundred), and West Laurel (Little Creek Hundred) in Sussex County (Figure 1). The case study communities were chosen on the basis of two factors: 1) a survey of documentary resources indicated that a substantial amount of information survived that related to the community, and 2) the community was located in a place that might have supported water-based escapes. We began with a longer list of known communities and narrowed the list to five following a survey of existing data sources. It is our hope that the methodology developed in this project will be used by other scholars who wish to study additional communities, expanding our knowledge and understanding of the free black experience both in Delaware and in comparison to other areas of the country.

Once the case study communities had been identified, we began collecting raw data designed to reconstruct the populations and landscapes of the communities. The logical methodology for reconstructing a community started with an examination of manuscript population census returns and tax assessments in order to identify names and biographical information of inhabitants. However, this proved difficult for free black communities due to the fact that few of these communities were precisely (or even vaguely) identified within the census; thus, we developed new strategies for isolating the appropriate individuals within larger lists. Essentially, this involved a certain level of detective work and the particular strategies varied with each case study, often involving a two-pronged approach. In general, we found that it was easiest to begin with the 1870 manuscript census and work backward, and also that it was most effective to start with

the larger population of a hundred and then begin to narrow that population by constantly linking with other sources, especially tax assessments and historic maps.

For example, in exploring Polktown, we began by identifying all of the black households listed in the 1870 manuscript population census for Red Lion Hundred. Then we looked at Beers Atlas (1868), which included both a map of the hundred and a more detailed map of Delaware City and Polktown with the names of property owners noted next to specific locations. We then cross-referenced the two sources, looking for sequences of households in the census that matched those on the map. This resulted in the identification of twenty households that appeared to be located in Polktown, and another nine in Delaware City, four of which were just north of Polktown on Fifth Street. We also located another sixteen individual blacks who lived in the households of white employers in Delaware City.

Since our goal was to identify as many residents of these communities as possible, we were interested in more than just the names of heads of household and the number of residents in each home. We hoped to get a sense of the entire population, children and adults, male and female. Prior to 1820, we could only count the total number of people in free black or white households; between 1820 and 1840, the census provided rough age groups for each race and gender. Starting in 1850 the census identified each individual by name, occupation, age, race, and gender. We also looked for other ways to expand the list of known residents. Tax assessments proved helpful in this regard, because they listed anyone who paid taxes, regardless of whether they were a head-of-household. Not surprisingly, we discovered that many individuals appeared on the tax assessment but did not show up on the census; what we had not expected was the corresponding discovery that many individuals listed in the census did NOT appear on the assessment. This prompted us to begin systematically exploring both census manuscripts and tax assessments from the same period to develop a more comprehensive list of likely inhabitants.

Once we had this more comprehensive list of names for the community over time we began linking to other sources, such as probate records, manumissions, deeds, orphans court records, and in one case, an account book. This strategy of record linkage was

designed to make connections between multiple generations of black families, looking for their links to the larger world of employment and commerce, gaining more detailed information about family histories especially as related to dates of manumission, and determining how and when free blacks began to purchase land. Depending upon the sources available, use of record linkage varied significantly from one location to another. For example, certain areas proved to have a much higher incidence of probate records than others, allowing us to develop more detailed pictures of families and their material lives. Other areas contained higher incidences of land ownership, resulting in more evidence through deeds and orphans court records.

One promising source that proved difficult to access was church membership and meeting records. Given the prominent role played by churches in free black communities, we hoped to draw on these records to explore the connections between the formation of these communities and the establishment of congregations and church buildings. However, these sources were particularly difficult to locate. While we were unable to pursue them in detail for this project, they should remain a high priority for future research. Connections between the local congregations of AME and Methodist churches to their mother churches in Philadelphia may have provided a powerful and productive link for UGRR travelers, conductors, and stationmasters.

Many of the sources that we explored specifically for these five case studies should be examined more comprehensively to create a database of material documenting the lives of Delaware's free blacks. Items such as probate inventories, wills, birth/death/marriage records, manumissions, census records, tax assessments, and land transactions contain a wealth of information about family connections, employment, material life, quality of life, and the acquisition of real estate. When viewed in the aggregate, rather than just for a single family, this data will allow a far more comprehensive and detailed discussion of the material lives and social history of free blacks in Delaware. In addition, account books kept by local farmers and merchants document the myriad economic and social networks between free blacks and their white neighbors. These relationships were complex and many lasted a lifetime, describing tasks, purchases, and social/life events.

In order to manage the massive amounts of data collected, we constructed a series of spreadsheets. The design of the spreadsheets evolved over the course of the project (and is still evolving). One of the major challenges was to keep the census information consistent with the order in which it was recorded by the census-taker, because this provided significant detail about clusters of households. At the same time, we tried to integrate the tax assessment data into the existing census lists, but also wanted to be able to look at the assessment data for a single year as a whole so that we could talk about economic patterns. We began by using Excel spreadsheets, but also experimented with FileMakerPro in order to allow better coordination of data related to a single individual. A primary goal of this project is to make these data sets available to other researchers, both for the data they contain as well as to serve as models for future work on other free black communities.

Summary of Methodology Steps for Community Reconstruction

- Review population census manuscript returns for a particular hundred or town to identify free black households and free blacks living in the households of whites between 1800 and 1870, drawing on Beers Atlas to identify locations and concentrated populations
- Examine tax assessments for the locations involved, looking for blacks assessed for livestock, land, or simply their person
- Create a comprehensive list of names of community residents, organized chronologically
- Link the names on the comprehensive list to other sources, such as probate records, deeds, orphans court records, manumissions, and private papers
- Enter all information into spreadsheets for each community, recording as much specific data as possible

Once all of our data was entered into the spreadsheets we began looking for patterns, both within individual communities and across the state. We asked questions about population growth, the makeup of individual households, occupations, gender and age ratios, housing, and property ownership. In many respects, our findings simply generated more questions, prompting us to dig further into the data and the networks between individuals in the communities. The results of this work appear in this report in

two places—first, in the overview of free black communities in Delaware, and second, in the summaries of the individual case study communities.

II. Mapping. The second major effort in the research design focused on mapping as much data as possible about free black communities and UGRR escape routes into a GIS system. It was our hope that we would begin to see possible connections between UGRR activity and these communities once the information was viewed in a geographic context. As with the reconstruction of communities, however, this task proved challenging and produced unexpected results.

Our initial task was seemingly quite simple—to map the locations of black churches, schools, and known free black communities in order to gain a sense of their distribution and position on the landscape of the state. Drawing from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including the historic context on settlement patterns of black communities, a study of black schools, Beers’ Atlas, and a study of churches in Delaware, CHAD staff mapped GIS layers for each of these elements. It is important to note that the current maps are limited by the known/published data and will likely be expanded as new research uncovers more information. For example, the context on settlement addresses primarily Kent and southern New Castle counties, so there is little data available for Sussex County. However, the correlation between schools, churches, and communities offers a model for identifying additional communities in Sussex County on the basis of the layers for schools and churches, suggesting several locations for new research.

Questions regarding the UGRR and potential escape routes prompted the creation of two additional maps. First, we cross-referenced the 1860 U.S. Population Census Slave Schedules with the names of landowners on Beers Atlas (1868) and mapped all of their locations as potential points where slaves might begin their flight to freedom. By gearing the map to show the number of slaves in a given location, we were able to have a more precise visual appreciation for the concentration of slave populations in particular areas. This map also raised additional questions by demonstrating, for example, the close proximity of free black communities to slave owners, particularly in Sussex County. In

the future, it would be valuable to produce a similar map based on the 1850 Slave Schedule.

Second, we attempted to map the routes used by fugitives traveling through Delaware. This proved the most challenging of the mapping exercises, due in part to the nature of the sources. We scoured multiple primary and secondary sources for stories of runaways and their escape routes; these included runaway ads in newspapers, obituaries that described a former slave's escape, and William Still's collection of escape narratives. Although we collected many stories, this search is far from complete. Data from these narratives was then compiled into a spreadsheet and the known points from the escapes were mapped and linked to the spreadsheet. This sounds straight-forward, but in reality was extremely difficult. Many of the sources provided only very vague information about locations, sometimes only a county or hundred. The amount of detail in each story also varied greatly; while one account might describe only the point of origin for the escape along with a note of the fugitive's arrival in Philadelphia, another would provide information about the actual route, and still another would only mention the arrest of the fugitive and their escape from the jail in the Town of New Castle. In the end, we opted to map three major types of points: origins, destinations, and points along the way. Thus, we are able to look at the points connected with an individual to think about their route, or we can look at points in the aggregate to get a better sense of density on the landscape. As with the other datasets, this map will continue to expand as more data is made available.



Figure 1: Map of Delaware Hundreds.

II. Free Black Communities in Nineteenth-Century Delaware

Slave and free black communities existed in North America as early as the mid-seventeenth century, but the nature of those communities varied considerably from the northern colonies to those in the south. Differences in climate encouraged the formation of very different agricultural economies with a variety of labor needs. In the south, settlement focused on large amounts of acreage dedicated to cash crops such as tobacco, rice, and cotton. These crops were labor-intensive and required individual farmers to control significant acreage. Tobacco exhausted the soil in a few seasons and fields needed several years to lie fallow between uses; thus, farmers needed enough land to rotate the tobacco crop from one field to another. Rice farmers in the Deep South had to invest in complex irrigation systems, therefore making it most profitable to run large-scale operations. These crops also demanded detailed attention throughout the planting, cultivating, and harvesting cycle and farmers needed lots of hands to care for the plants. Thus, for plantation owners in the South, the cheapest way to produce large quantities of rice, tobacco, and cotton, and to make the largest market profit was to utilize unpaid labor in the form of African slaves and this created a voracious need for slaves in the South. The agricultural economy that developed in southern states grew increasingly dependent on slave labor and the slave-labor system was fully ingrained into the southern way of life by the mid-nineteenth century. Most southern slaves were field workers, but some were trained for household service (including cooking and sewing) or trades such as masonry, carpentry, and blacksmithing.²

In the South, slave communities developed as separate neighborhoods on plantation landscapes. These neighborhoods generally took the form of clusters or lines of dwellings that housed multiple families and individuals. The large number of slaves in the population encouraged formation of families, with marriages occurring between multiple plantations as well as within a single property. Masters often encouraged these unions, partly because they would own the children born to the marriage as future

² Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans, Volume One: From the Beginnings through Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc, Seventh Edition, 1994); Peter Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1989).

laborers, but also because they believed that individuals were less likely to seek freedom if they were leaving family members behind. In locations where large slave populations congregated, they were able to develop unique cultural characteristics of language, artisanry, and religion.³

Although their lives were dominated by the discipline of masters, slaves found opportunities to enhance their world through their own actions. In many quarters, small vegetable gardens tended by the slaves provided produce that supplemented their diet. On some plantations, owners permitted the slaves to sell any surplus they produced at local markets. Some slaves, particularly those trained in carpentry and blacksmithing, were able to market their skills to generate cash that might eventually be used to purchase their freedom.

The northern economy developed in an environment that was less conducive to single-crop farming. The cooler climate and the rocky soil that covered much of New England meant that most family farms were subsistence or self-sufficient operations rather than market-oriented. Some engaged in specific activities, such as fattening beef cattle for market, and those lucky enough to acquire fertile land in the river valleys grew wheat and corn in large amounts. The scale of production for most family farms, however, did not justify a significant investment in slave labor.⁴

In the North, slave holdings were typically much smaller than those in the South, with northern slave owners keeping, on average, two to four slaves in bondage. A substantial portion of the population made their living from manufacturing and commercial enterprises such as shipping, lumbering, textile milling, printing, baking, distilling, carpentry, and shoemaking. “Middling tradesmen and artisans engaged in virtually all facets of Boston’s urban economy and bought and sold slaves...alongside well-connected merchants, ship’s captains and the ‘better sort.’”⁵ Because many

³ Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

⁴ Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877*; Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*; Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians*.

⁵ Robert Desrosiers, “Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 59, No. 3, *Slavery in the Atlantic World* (July 2002), pp. 623-664.

northerners were not agriculturalists but craftsmen, they typically sought slaves who were skilled in various trades. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, all of the northern colonies had either abolished slavery outright or passed laws that aimed at its gradual abolition.⁶

The Mid-Atlantic region occupied ground between the slave states to the south and the free states to the north and felt the impact of both cultures. Delaware in particular, as a border state, found its population divided between the Quaker influence in the northern part of the state and the Chesapeake culture in the south that relied on slave labor. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, farmers throughout the state employed slave labor in conjunction with indentured servants, family, and hired day labor. Slaveholdings of individual farmers were typically less than those of Maryland and Virginia planters, generally ranging from 1 to 6 slaves.⁷

Housing for slaves in Delaware varied, largely depending upon the number of slaves on a particular farm. Unlike Maryland and Virginia, slave quarters were comparatively rare, generally occurring only on properties that housed ten or more slaves. Very few of these structures are known to survive to the present. The Ross Farm Quarter near Seaford was likely typical—built of log planks, two rooms on the ground floor and a half-story above. The majority of slaves in Delaware, however, lived in other sorts of housing, most often attic spaces above kitchens, dwellings, or even outbuildings, and often separated from the white family's sleeping space by solid walls.⁸

⁶ Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877*; Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*; Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians*.

⁷ David L. Ames, Robert D. Bethke, James Curtis, J. Ritchie Garrison, Bernard L. Herman, James Newton, Rebecca J. Siders, William H. Williams, "Ross Mansion Quarter, Seaford, Sussex County, Delaware Historic Structure Report" (Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware, 1992); Rebecca Sheppard, "Making the Farm Pay: Persistence and Adaptation in the Evolution of Delaware's Agricultural Landscapes," (Doctoral dissertation, University of Delaware, 2009); Patience Essah, *A House Divided: Slavery and Emancipation in Delaware, 1638-1865* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); William H. Williams, *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware 1639-1865* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996)

⁸ Housing discussion is based largely on data from the Delaware's Orphans Court Extracts Database (Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives) and field work by CHAD in the Mid-Atlantic region. See also Ames et al, "Ross Mansion Quarter." Lanier, Gabrielle M., and Bernard L. Herman, *Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic: Looking at Buildings and Landscapes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Sheppard, "Making the Farm Pay."

By the late eighteenth century, several factors began to contribute to a rising incidence of manumissions in the state, a trend that continued through the first half of the nineteenth century. First, political views related to the American Revolution, especially the philosophy of equality of men, encouraged manumission of slaves; in addition, these views contributed to the creation of laws that banned importation of new slaves by the early nineteenth century. At the same time, religious groups such as Quakers and Methodists strongly urged their members to cease the use of slave labor; in the case of the Quakers, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which governed most of the Mid-Atlantic, threatened in 1776 to shun any members who did not free their slaves. Finally, some of the trend towards manumission may have been economical. As farmers in the region shifted more emphatically from tobacco and corn to grain, they had less need for large numbers of slaves. The cost to support these slave families no longer made economic sense if the farmers could hire free blacks as wage labor when needed for periods of planting and harvest. It is no coincidence that the period of increasing manumissions dovetails closely with the rise of house and garden lease-labor agreements between white farmers and free blacks. Thus, by the early nineteenth century, the population of slaves in Delaware began to decline rapidly. In 1800, the state contained 8,887 slaves; by 1860, only 1,798 remained enslaved and two-thirds of them were located in the southernmost county (Table 1).⁹

Manumissions occurred in many ways, and under a variety of conditions. One popular strategy was to free slaves at the death of their owner. Thus, in 1806 John Hyatt of St. Georges Hundred freed five slaves in his will. Priscilla, Isaac, Jacob, and Charles were each to be free when they reached age 34. Sal was to serve out her term with Mrs. Aull and an additional six years beyond that to John's widow, Sarah; at that point, she would reach age 34 and be free like the others. All the children born to Priscilla and Sal were to be free at age 28. Other slave owners initiated the process of manumission prior to their death, but required a period of service before freedom was official. John Dickinson, for example, filed papers with the Kent County Court in 1777 to free all of his

⁹ Essah, *A House Divided*; Williams, *Slavery and Freedom*; Rebecca Siders and Anna V. Andrezejewski, "The House and Garden: Housing Agricultural Laborers in Central Delaware, 1780-1930," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 7 (1997): 149-166.; U.S. Federal Census of Population, 1800-1860.

slaves (roughly 40 in number), but required them to serve an additional 21 years, regardless of their present age. In fact, few slaves were freed immediately; most were required to serve an additional term, specified either in number of years or by age (typically between 25 and 34). Manumissions began to occur in the 1770s, primarily among Quakers, and escalated rapidly in the early nineteenth century as other slave owners followed their lead. The pattern in the appearance of manumissions, particularly a spike in the 1820s, coincides with a significant increase in the number of free black households in the same period.¹⁰

One result of such large manumission efforts was the presence of an increasing number of free blacks on the landscape, as many of the former slaves opted to remain in Delaware rather than fleeing further north. Many were still tied to the area by kin who were still enslaved; some found attractive agricultural lease-labor agreements with local farmers; still others discovered opportunities for non-agricultural employment in port towns. Former slaves moved quickly to establish nuclear family households, but necessity also encouraged them to pool resources with siblings and parents, while at the same time fostering community by providing a home and shelter to extended family, friends, and apprentices. Young couples often shared a household prior to having children, but households with a single resident were highly unusual. Practicality dictated that those who followed this strategy were more likely to achieve economic independence, but it also kept them in a common location and promoted development of a neighborhood. By the late 1820s, they began to form small communities that grew quickly through 1870, by which time there were at least 40 free black communities scattered across the state (Figure 2).

Formation of separate communities offered a variety of benefits to free blacks. First, they likely felt some safety in numbers—that is they probably believed they were less likely to be seized by slave traders in front of witnesses. Second, the networks of employment that tied them to local white farmers reinforced that sense of safety. Third, and most importantly, the formation of physical communities encouraged the

¹⁰ NCCPR, John Hyatt, 1806; Deed of Manumission filed by John Dickinson, 1777, DSM, Dickinson Papers. See also Essah, *A House Divided* and Williams, *Slavery and Freedom*.

development of social networks and religious institutions that increasingly bound the residents to one another.

Regardless of their legal status as free, many of these former slaves viewed themselves as “almost free.” In certain parts of the state, they lived in constant fear of being captured and sold south by unscrupulous traders such as Patty Cannon. While they were no longer “owned” by white masters, they still lived in a landscape rife with prejudice and discrimination whose roots lay within a society that viewed blacks as “less” than whites. This dichotomy can be seen to some extent in the laws passed to regulate black activities, controlling their ability to travel in and out of the state, to own guns, to vote, and to have rights in a court of law.¹¹

Freed from the chains of slavery, the new-found mobility of free blacks threatened to deplete an agricultural labor force desperately needed by white farmers, especially in southern Delaware. Laws passed in Delaware after 1806 not only prohibited free blacks from migrating into the state, but also banned free black residents in Delaware from re-entering after an absence of six months. By denying a free black’s ability to market his or her labor elsewhere and still maintain contact with family members left behind, these laws and regulations forced blacks to seek employment within their immediate locales. The conflict between these laws and restrictions and the local farmers’ need for labor created a situation in which both whites and free blacks possessed some level of power to negotiate the terms of their employment. Despite being disenfranchised politically, socially, and economically, free blacks that remained in the state earned wages, paid taxes, and thus owned a stake in their local economy.¹²

¹¹ *Laws of the State of Delaware On Slavery, Free Blacks and Mulattos Volumes 1-14, 1700-1874*, compiled by Robert C. Barnes and Judith M. Pfeiffer (Newark, DE: s.n, 2002) 79-80, 119-120; Berlin, 62-63. The rights of free blacks were limited by Delaware state laws imposed upon them throughout the nineteenth century. Some of these restrictive laws included fines for the possession of a firearm, penalties for blacks who were not residents of a town found within town limits on Election Day, and prohibitions against large assemblages of free blacks meeting together.

¹² Bradley Skelcher, *African American Settlement Patterns on the Upper Peninsula Zone of Delaware, 1730-1940 +/-: Historic Context* (Dover: Department of History and Political Science, Delaware State University, 1995), pp. 37-42.

Geographic patterns of free black communities

As can be seen in Figure 3, free black communities could be found throughout the state, occurring in the highest concentrations in Wilmington and in the central portion of the state. Sussex County contained fewer communities, likely due to the persistence of slave culture in this region. Although there has been no comprehensive attempt to identify the free black communities of Sussex County, as there has in Kent and New Castle counties, the overlay of known black churches and schools provides a model for predicting their location. In the two other counties, these institutions occur in great proximity to the homes of free blacks, often on land donated by either a member of the free black community or by a white employer. Assuming that this is the case in Sussex also, then the homes that make up those communities should be located within close range of the churches and schools.

The geographic nature of these free black neighborhoods varied depending upon the period of origin, association with a pre-existing town, employment opportunities, and the ease with which blacks could acquire land. This study has identified three primary configurations that occurred in Delaware: shadow towns near the edge of larger towns, multiple small clusters within port towns or cities, and linear groupings of agricultural laborers along rural roads. Both shadow towns and urban clusters initially developed as a result of two primary conditions. First, the possibility of employment, in many cases as more than just day labor, attracted free blacks to certain locations. Second, within the first generation of freedom, many families were able to amass the resources needed to purchase a home of their own.

“Shadow towns” were coherent neighborhoods of free blacks segregated on the outer edges of existing towns, literally in the shadow of these larger communities. Many were known by specific names, such as Polktown, even though they were located within the boundaries of the larger town. Typically, these neighborhoods included houses on small lots ranged along a road that stretched away from the town, and eventually supported one or more churches and a school. Many blacks owned their homes while others rented either from white landlords or from their black neighbors. In most cases, shadow towns appear to have occurred in areas that offered potential employment to free

blacks, although the source of employment varied from one location to another. In Laurel, for example, many of the men worked for the saw mills or shipbuilders, providing the manual labor needed for those enterprises. The land on which the communities grew tended to be located in close proximity to those businesses, but also on land that whites were willing to sell to free blacks.

Large urban places like Wilmington and Dover, as well as smaller ones like Lewes, Laurel, Delaware City, and Milton, provided a wide variety of possibilities of employment for black men, especially in the later part of the nineteenth century. Manufacturing operations, particularly tanneries, sawmills, shipyards, basket factories, and canneries all hired blacks, most often assigning them to the dirtiest, messiest, and most physically arduous tasks. A few managed to develop skills as artisans that led to independent employment. Cato Lewis, for example, learned the art of shipbuilding as a slave; once freed, he began building ships on his own in Lewes, later employing his sons and other former slaves. Mingo Tilghman worked as a house carpenter in St. Jones Neck in the early years of the century, contracting his framing skills to white farmers and employing free black Daniel Morrell as his assistant. Although we have no direct evidence, it is possible that Tilghman constructed some of the earliest free black dwellings in that community. Theodore Marsh, of West Laurel, worked his way up from seaman to ship captain. Other artisans in these communities included shoemakers, butchers, tanners, and blacksmiths, who served both the residents of the free black community and members of the white community as well.¹³

Many men and boys found work in the maritime industry, as sailors on boats that sailed the Atlantic Ocean or just the Delaware River. Others worked as fishermen, harvesting turtles, oysters, shad, and sturgeon from the river and bay, or as trappers, hunting muskrats in the marsh for their valuable pelts. This area of employment offered opportunities for some to assist fugitive slaves by helping them stowaway on a ship

¹³ Research file on Cato Lewis and his family, Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware. Mingo Tilghman's occupation and his relationships with local farmers and with Daniel Morrell can be seen in Joseph Barker's Negro Ledger Book, 1801-1811 in Delaware Public Archives Digital Archives, pp. 4, 6, 32, 35. U.S. Population Census, Little Creek Hundred, Sussex County, DE, 1850-1900; Sussex County Probate Records (hereafter SCPR), Theodore Marsh, 1872-1873.

bound for Philadelphia or New Jersey, or by loaning a small boat for crossing the Delaware River. Their time on the river and in the marsh gave them valuable knowledge of the maritime landscape, useful for guiding fugitives through an unfamiliar place. Joseph Finney, of Little Creek Landing in Kent County, coordinated a group of such watermen who provided their services to freedom seekers crossing the Delaware River to New Jersey. Peter Lewis, of Lewes, may be the ship captain referred to by William Still who carried fugitives from Lewes north to Philadelphia and Red Bank.¹⁴

In larger towns or cities that offered potential employment for recently freed slaves, free black families could initially be found renting small houses throughout the town, generally located within walking distance of their place of employment and often in proximity to others engaged in the same occupation (whether white or black). Over the course of the nineteenth century, urban neighborhoods segregated by race rather than occupation became the norm, paralleling a shift among free blacks from renting to owning their homes. Thus, the earliest households of free black residents in Milton could be found mixed in among white residents who also worked in the shipyards. By the mid-1870s, blacks began to establish a concentration of black-owned housing around Walnut, Coulter, and Atlantic streets on the southwestern side of the town. In Lewes, the same pattern could be seen, although the shift to creating their own neighborhood along Ship Carpenter and Fourth Street began by the 1820s and eventually included the construction of two churches, a school, and a Masonic lodge. The City of Wilmington was the largest urban area in the state and an early home to rapidly growing numbers of free blacks as a result of the strong presence of friendly Quakers and other abolitionists. As in Lewes and Milton, black families initially rented small homes throughout the city, seeking to locate in proximity to their employment in tanneries, shipyards, and other manufacturing enterprises along the Christiana River. By the mid-nineteenth century, the free black population was divided between communities focused around segregated neighborhoods

¹⁴ William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Chicago, Johnson Publishing Company, 1970).

such as the one around Orange and 7th streets and alley communities that backed up to the homes of whites.¹⁵

In rural areas, the patterns were somewhat different. For the most part, these clusters on small parcels along a rural road developed during the period after 1820, in response to the growing number of masters who freed their slaves but still needed a labor pool for seasonal agricultural tasks. Most of the state's economy in the nineteenth century focused on agriculture, and not surprisingly, most rural free blacks worked as farm laborers hired by the day or month, or rented farmland to work independently. They developed intricate networks of relationships with the farmers in their neighborhood, both white and black. They exchanged day labor for multiple employers towards their purchases from local merchants, as well as trading items grown in their gardens or harvested from the river. Account books contain ample evidence of blacks purchasing items that could not be produced at home, such as shoes, rum, and coffee.¹⁶

Many landowners followed the "house and garden" strategy, either gifting a small house and lot to their former slaves or renting such houses under lease agreements that promised the landlord first claim on the tenant's labor and provided the tenant with a house and enough ground for a cow, pig, some chickens, and a kitchen garden. In some cases, the neighborhoods were primarily made up of rentals, while in other locations, free blacks quickly came to own their homes. In comparison to the lots in Polktown, these rural lots were larger, possibly in order to support the small livestock holdings of these families. Lots typically ranged from about 4000 square feet to several acres. These types of houses were primarily owned by white employers until the later part of the nineteenth century when many blacks purchased the house and garden lots they occupied from the landlords.¹⁷

¹⁵ Kate Kerr, "Expansion from Within: Interior Block Development in Wilmington, Delaware, 1731-1900" (Master's thesis, University of Delaware, 2002); African Americans in Wilmington, Delaware, research materials (Newark, DE: Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware); Sheppard et al, *Cultural Resource Survey: Town of Milton, Sussex County, Delaware* (Newark: Center for Historic Architecture and Design, 2009).

¹⁶ See especially the account books of Daniel Corbit (Delaware Historical Society); John Alston (Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College); Richard Mansfield (Delaware Public Archives); and Joseph Barker (Delaware Public Archives).

¹⁷ See Siders and Andrzejewski, *The House and Garden*, for more detailed discussion of this practice.

Some clusters developed into long-term communities that still exist in the twenty-first century, while others eventually vanished from the landscape. Those that thrived were generally the ones where blacks were able to purchase their own land at an early date and where the population grew large enough to sustain a church and a school. Belltown, near Lewes, developed between 1830 and 1870 around the intersection of 5 roads; free blacks purchased lots of approximately 4000 square feet primarily along three of these roads, placing them in proximity to the large farms in the area. The continuing demand for farm labor supported the growth of Belltown, and the population expanded to a critical mass that could support at least two churches by 1865. Star Hill, near Camden, developed under similar circumstances in the same period and contained a church by 1868. Both communities constructed schools with aid from the Freedman's Bureau by 1867. When P.S. duPont began building new schools in the 1920s, both communities benefited from the campaign, indicating the continued presence of sufficient population to justify new schools. An additional key to the thriving nature of these two communities was the high incidence of black property ownership by 1850.¹⁸

As agriculture became more mechanized in the twentieth century and required fewer hands, the residents of many rural communities sought work elsewhere, often joining other family members in urban areas like Wilmington or Philadelphia. Many farmers demolished the small houses once rented to farm laborers, eliminating these as homes. Thus, Blanco, in western Kent County, disappeared by the early twentieth century, completely absorbed now by the agricultural landscape. Still other populations, such as the ones on Port Penn Road, White Oak Swamp Road, and New Discovery, all survived into the late twentieth century, but are less coherent and less visible on the landscape, due in part to the impact of development and to the absence of churches or schools.¹⁹

¹⁸ Bradley Skelcher, *African American Education in Delaware: A History through Photographs, 1865-1930* (Dover: Delaware Heritage Press, 2006); Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Education Division, Monthly School Reports, Maryland and Delaware, 1867-1868 (Delaware Public Archives).

¹⁹ Anna Andrzejewski, student paper on Blanco, Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware; National Register of Historic Places nominations of House and Gardens in Central Delaware, Robert Grose House (Port Penn) and Alston-Ridgely-Corbit House (White Oak Swamp);

In addition to the concentrated neighborhoods, there were also larger rural communities like the one that formed in St. Jones Neck and southern Little Creek Hundred, Kent County. This population was spread out over an area of about 12 to 15 square miles and included former slaves who worked as farm laborers, tenant farmers, and watermen. Their employment, commercial, and religious networks took them to locations such as Dover, Little Creek Landing, Barkers Landing, and Kitts Hummock.

Churches and schools were essential to the development and sustained growth of free black communities and their survival into the twentieth century, whether in urban places, shadow towns, or rural clusters (Figures 4 and 5). Institutions such as AME churches, black Masonic lodges, schools, and even a benevolent society, were common in more-developed black communities and likely fostered the personal and economic networks between individuals, families, and communities throughout the mid-Atlantic region, especially linking them to corresponding organizations in Philadelphia. West Laurel, Polktown, Belltown, Star Hill, and Ship Carpenter Street in Lewes all appeared between 1820 and 1870, and each supported one or more churches by 1860 and a school built with assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau by 1870. The presence of multiple churches within these communities was not uncommon; Polktown, West Laurel, Belltown, and Lewes each contained at least two churches, allowing individuals to choose whether to be part of a congregation that answered to the white-controlled Methodist organization or to join an independent black AME or UAME church. Unfortunately, the records for these groups are held by the individual entities, and it has proven difficult to access early materials that would enhance our understanding of their role within the communities and their contribution to Underground Railroad activities. This promising topic requires substantial research and should be considered a high priority for future study.

Family life and economics

Population demographics for free blacks in Delaware varied little between the case study communities, but provide a vivid picture of the development of this

population. Freed slaves who remained in Delaware moved quickly to establish nuclear family households, but necessity also encouraged them to pool resources with extended family members such as siblings and parents. The large numbers of both nuclear and extended family household types suggests that free blacks preferred to establish complete family units, at the same time fostering community through providing a home and shelter to extended family members, friends, and apprentices (Table 2). Households with a single resident were highly unusual throughout the nineteenth century. Age distributions also demonstrate the intense focus on creating and raising families (Table 3). Throughout the century, children under 10 and young adults between 10 and 24 represented an overwhelmingly majority in the population. Life expectancy beyond the age of 55 was slim, with less than 10 percent of the population falling in this age group.

The nuclear household structure (one or both parents plus children) was dominant in all of the communities studied, but extended families (multiple adults and children) were almost as common. For free blacks, “the ties of a shared experience and history seem to have provided a basis upon which to build a common household. By pooling their meager resources and sharing a common residence, these ex-slaves could realize as nearly as possible the experience of freedom and independence.” Another common pattern was for two young couples to share a household prior to having children.²⁰

Gender distributions were largely equal throughout the study, indicating a balance between men and women (Table 4). In some of the communities, such as West Laurel, women tended to have a slight edge over men in numbers. Some scholars argue that statistics such as this (characteristic of free black communities in the majority of large cities during the study period) are due to greater employment opportunities for women in urban areas as domestic servants. Further, in urban areas, including Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Wilmington, employment opportunities for free black men were limited.²¹ Yet, census records from 1850 through 1870 suggest that the majority of married black women listed no occupation other than “keeping house” for their families.

²⁰ Essah, *A House Divided*, p. 131-133.

²¹ W.E.B Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1899), p. 35; Essah, *A House Divided*, p. 135).

When black women shifted from serving white families to a new role as the domestic head of their own homes and families, they placed a high priority on working and caring for that home. Regardless of whether they lived in rural or urban locations, married black women primarily listed their employment as “keeping house.” If necessary, they tended to look for work that could be done at home, such as spinning yarn or taking in wash, so that they could care for their children and tend the livestock and kitchen garden. Evidence from account books indicates that they also worked in the fields during peak periods of planting and harvest. Young girls and unmarried women often worked as domestic servants, either living in the home of their employer or walking to work each day, but generally left these jobs once they married. Later in the century, black women found seasonal employment to supplement the family income by picking fruits and vegetables or working in the canneries.

Free blacks lived in both tenant houses as well as dwellings they built and owned themselves. In both urban and rural communities, they rented from white landowners as well as their fellow free blacks. In fact, providing housing seems to have been a common strategy for those who were achieving economic success. Before spending extra income on their own material conditions, many free blacks purchased lots and built additional houses that could be rented to others as a source of income.

Landownership rates varied widely throughout Delaware in the nineteenth century, for both whites and blacks. In most areas, less than half of the assessed population owned land. For most free blacks, the acquisition of taxable property occurred slowly after manumission. The overwhelming majority of the free black population owned little or no taxable property through 1840, and were taxed primarily for their person. However, a handful of individuals throughout the state acquired both land and livestock in these early years.

Steady employment allowed free blacks to begin saving money toward their ultimate goal of home ownership and over time, many families were able to achieve that goal. Property ownership rates for blacks increased substantially over the course of the nineteenth century, but the amount and type of land they owned fell within specific parameters. Most commonly, free blacks owned a “house and lot” or “house and

garden,” meaning a small frame or log house with an equally small amount of land, perhaps one to five acres. A small minority owned larger parcels, although rarely more than 50 acres and generally the value of their land per acre was among the lowest in the area. Landownership increased substantially in the 1840s and 1850s, but the reason for this increase is not entirely clear. Possibly it occurred simply because the first few generations of free blacks had accumulated sufficient resources to purchase land, but there may have been other factors at play.

A closer look at the shadow towns of Polktown and West Laurel illuminates the characteristics of land acquisition and the strategies employed by free blacks. Daniel Newbold laid out the plan for Delaware City in 1829, to serve as the gateway to the Delaware River entrance to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. He divided the land into a grid plan, with house lots of 20 by 100 feet as the standard. The lots closest to the river and the mouth of the canal sold quickly and a commercial district soon developed with the residential areas further west and north. The Polktown lots were part of the original plan but were the only area located south of the Canal to be developed as urban lots; they were far removed from the area of early development and were likely perceived as less desirable because of their proximity to the marsh and its humid, mosquito-laden air.

In the early 1830s, two white men, carpenter Ezekiel Shaw and real estate investor Robert Polk, purchased at least 16 lots in Polktown. Polk viewed his 11 lots strictly as an investment, and sold them within a decade to James B. Henry, a self-styled speculator and coal dealer. Two years later, in 1845, Henry sold 4 of the lots to free black preacher Shadrack Boyer and his two sons, Joseph and Shadrack, Jr., creating two house lots. The 8 lots at the north end of the Polktown strip probably served as rental housing until 1865, when Henry sold the entire section to Shadrack Boyer, shortly before moving to western Pennsylvania. It appears that the lots provided a small level of rental income for Henry while he lived in Delaware City, but were not worth the trouble of trying to manage them from a great distance.

Ezekiel Shaw behaved quite differently with his investment in Polktown. A house carpenter who moved his family from New Jersey to Delaware City in 1832, Shaw

likely hoped to capitalize on the massive building campaign in the town. He purchased 5 lots in Polktown and built a house on one for his family. He then constructed houses on several other lots and rented them to free blacks until the mid-1850s. Shaw then decided to retire to a small farm in Camden, and sold 4 of his lots to free black Perry Reynolds in 1853 and one to Betsy Green in 1856. Reynolds' purchase likely strained his financial resources; when he died in the mid-1860s, his land was sold at auction to James Henry's brother, who quickly resold the land to free black John Miller. At any rate, Shaw's motivation appears to have been somewhat more benevolent than Henry's, given that he lived within the black community and sold his lots to free black homeowners (rather than white investors) at comparatively low prices.

In short, ownership of land in Polktown was controlled by whites from 1830 through 1845, when free blacks began to purchase house lots in significant numbers. While some purchased single or double lots directly from whites, a few bought multiple lots and later broke them up among their children or other family and friends. In fact, cooperative strategies for acquiring housing seems to have been a strong value among this community, supported by those who were achieving economic success. Before spending extra income on their own material comforts, many free blacks focused on building houses that could be rented to those just getting started in their own households. These landlords could count on a small income from rent, while knowing they were helping others. Joshua Seiney owned at least two houses on 5th street, just north of Polktown. In 1870, he shared one with a young married couple, probably his daughter and her husband, and rented the second to another family. Other individuals, such as Shadrack Boyer, acquired multiple lots and quickly passed them on to others. Boyer appears to have been actively promoting home ownership; while most free blacks bought lots at a cost of less than \$250, Boyer spent ten times that amount on the eight northern lots purchase from Henry in 1865, the single largest purchase of land by a free black in Delaware City. Within just three years, Boyer transferred those lots to four members of his community, families as yet unable to amass the resources to achieve home ownership. Boyer and Seiney were just two of many free blacks throughout the state who gave their community a boost by providing much-needed and desired housing.

Thus, by 1870, Polktown contained at least 17 lots owned and occupied by free blacks, laid out along both sides of the road from Delaware City to Port Penn and a new road that ran along the canal (see Figure 11). A second group of five houses stood on 5th Street north of the Canal, focused around a node of white carpenters and the meeting place of the St Peters Methodist Church, a free black church. A few other blacks owned isolated parcels elsewhere in Delaware City, largely at the edge of the town away from the commercial district.

Landownership in West Laurel occurred in much the same way, in an area of marginal agricultural land located along the road to Portsville and bounded on the north by the cripple along the Broad Creek. Here too purchase of house lots was facilitated by certain members of the community who seem to have developed relationships with white landowners in the area. Blacksmith William Sipple purchased a piece of land between West 6th and Townsend streets and divided it into six smaller parcels, each of which soon contained another dwelling rented or sold to a fellow free black. Ship captain Theodore Marsh also acquired multiple parcels along West 6th Street, some of which passed to family members and others to un-related members of the community. Sipple and Marsh also collaborated with several neighbors to found the Union Temperance Benevolent Society, specifically to aid the community of West Laurel in moving toward independent land ownership.

In rural areas or small towns, housing was almost uniformly wooden (unless a tenant farmer leased a farm with a brick dwelling), small in size, and plain in finish (Figures 6-9). House plans were generally one or two rooms on the first floor, with either a half-story or full story above containing one or two rooms. The house and garden property fits this description well, with the inclusion of a one-story shed kitchen at the rear or side of the dwelling. In urban locations, such as Wilmington, housing varied from two-story frame or brick dwellings to multi-story tenements, in settings that ranged from alleyways to row houses that fronted a main street.

Free blacks who occupied their own household (whether rented or owned) generally owned a small amount of livestock—a cow and calf, one or two beef cattle, some pigs, some chickens, and possibly a yoke of oxen. This was the typical

configuration for those who lived in “house and garden” arrangements; the small amount of land they controlled could only support a few animals, but those few could provide milk and meat for the family’s table, and manure to fertilize the garden. Those few free blacks who tenanted or owned larger farms possessed proportionately larger herds of livestock, sometimes approaching the numbers held by their white neighbors.

Household goods were generally meager in the first half of the century, consisting of the basics required for a family. Probate inventories generally list straw beds, a table and a few chairs, a few pots and other cooking utensils, and simple hand tools for farming. Occasionally a finer piece of furniture, such as a “walnut table” is listed, but these items are almost always described as “old.” This likely reflects the acquisition of such items from a former master. In 1821, Sarah Hyatt left very specific bequests to several of her former slaves. To Jacob Durham, she gave “one good straw bed, one blanket, one good sheet, one coverlid, one cow, one hog, and fifteen dollars;” to each of her two black women, both named Rebecca, she gave “the beds and bedding they now have in use and my two worst feather beds, the old mesh chairs, one sheet, one blanket, one bed quilt, all the common crockeryware, old knives and forks, one walnut table, and tubs, churns, pots and pails, wheel and reel.”²² In combination, these items would have allowed the three former slaves to establish a minimally functioning household. Few free blacks amassed more than these basic necessities until after 1850. Those living in a house and garden situation clearly placed a priority on the purchase of livestock, as these holdings increased before other items in the dwelling.

After 1850, coinciding with the higher rate of home ownership, more black families began to acquire larger amounts of household property and items that could not be classified as essentials. This included finer tableware and more extensive cooking equipment, upholstered furniture, and window curtains, all designed to improved the quality of their material lives.

²² NCCPR, Sarah Hyatt, 1821-1827.

Conclusion

Clearly, the nineteenth century was a time in which the free black communities of Delaware took root and began to grow. Under the right conditions, many thrived well into the twentieth century, while others disappeared from the landscape entirely. Key to success were factors such as access to employment opportunities other than simple day labor, the ability to purchase land and build their own homes, and the creation of public institutions such as churches, schools, and fraternal organizations. These communities shared many characteristics, including their geographic orientation, the types of housing constructed, and the ways in which land was divided and parcels laid out. The case studies described in the next section provide more detailed pictures of these communities and the lives of their residents.

Table 1: Population of Delaware, by County and Race, 1790-1860

New Castle County

| Year | Free | Slave | White | Total |
|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1790 | 639 | 2562 | 16487 | 19688 |
| 1800 | 2754 | 1838 | 20769 | 25361 |
| 1810 | 3919 | 1047 | 19463 | 24429 |
| 1820 | 4344 | 1195 | 22360 | 27899 |
| 1830 | 5708 | 786 | 23226 | 29720 |
| 1840 | 6773 | 541 | 25806 | 33120 |
| 1850 | 7621 | 394 | 34765 | 42780 |
| 1860 | 8188 | 254 | 46355 | 54797 |

Kent County

| Year | Free | Slave | White | Total |
|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1790 | 2570 | 2300 | 14050 | 18920 |
| 1800 | 4246 | 1485 | 13823 | 19554 |
| 1810 | 5616 | 728 | 14151 | 20495 |
| 1820 | 5533 | 1070 | 14190 | 20793 |
| 1830 | 5671 | 588 | 13654 | 19913 |
| 1840 | 5827 | 427 | 13618 | 19872 |
| 1850 | 6385 | 347 | 16084 | 22816 |
| 1860 | 7271 | 203 | 20330 | 27804 |

Sussex County

| Year | Free | Slave | White | Total |
|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1790 | 690 | 4025 | 15773 | 20488 |
| 1800 | 1268 | 2830 | 15260 | 19358 |
| 1810 | 3601 | 2402 | 21747 | 27750 |
| 1820 | 3081 | 2244 | 18732 | 24057 |
| 1830 | 4476 | 1918 | 20721 | 27115 |
| 1840 | 4319 | 1637 | 19137 | 25093 |
| 1850 | 4067 | 1549 | 20320 | 25936 |
| 1860 | 4370 | 1341 | 23904 | 29615 |

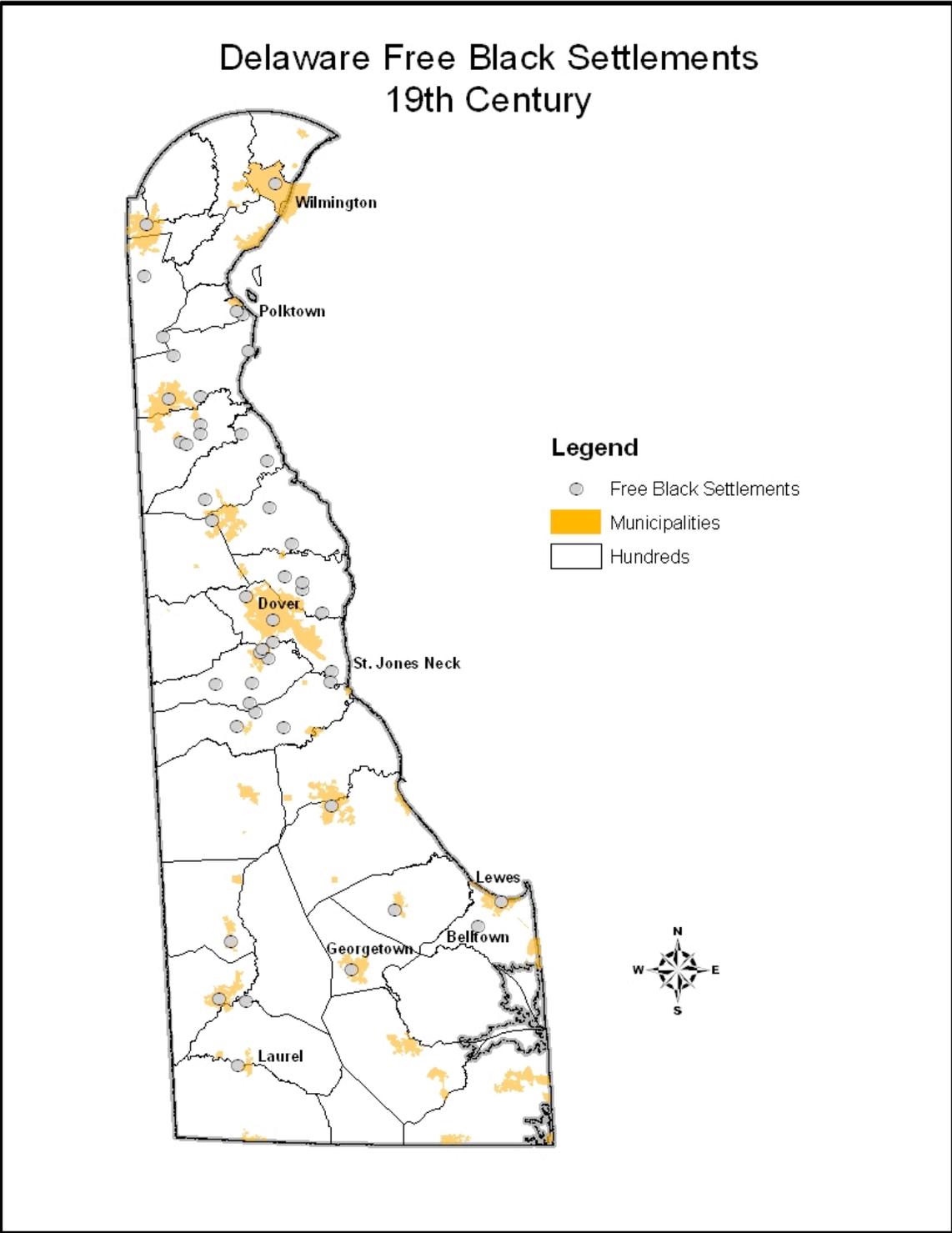


Figure 2: Map of Free Black Settlements in Delaware.

Delaware Black Schools, Churches, Settlements 19th Century

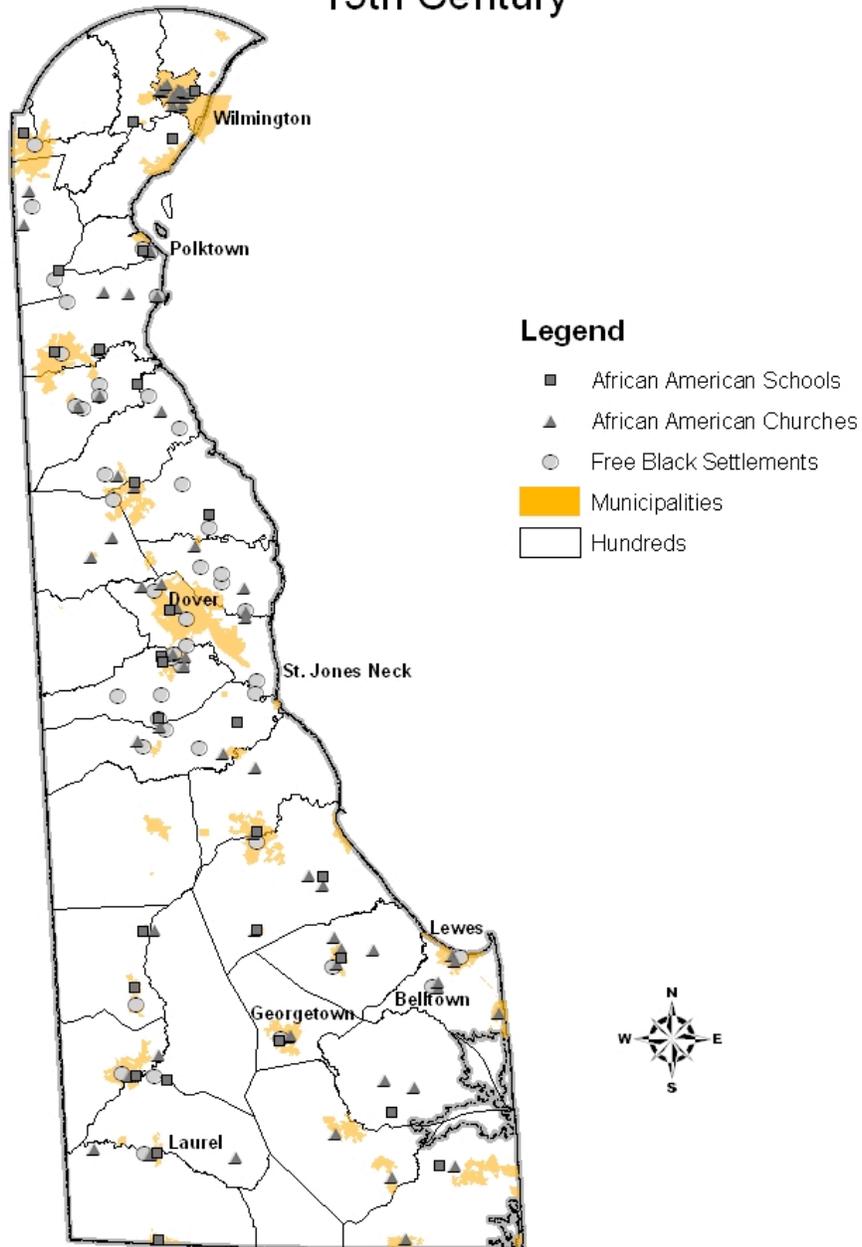


Figure 3: Map of Delaware showing Free Black Schools, Churches, and Settlements.

Delaware African American Schools 19th Century

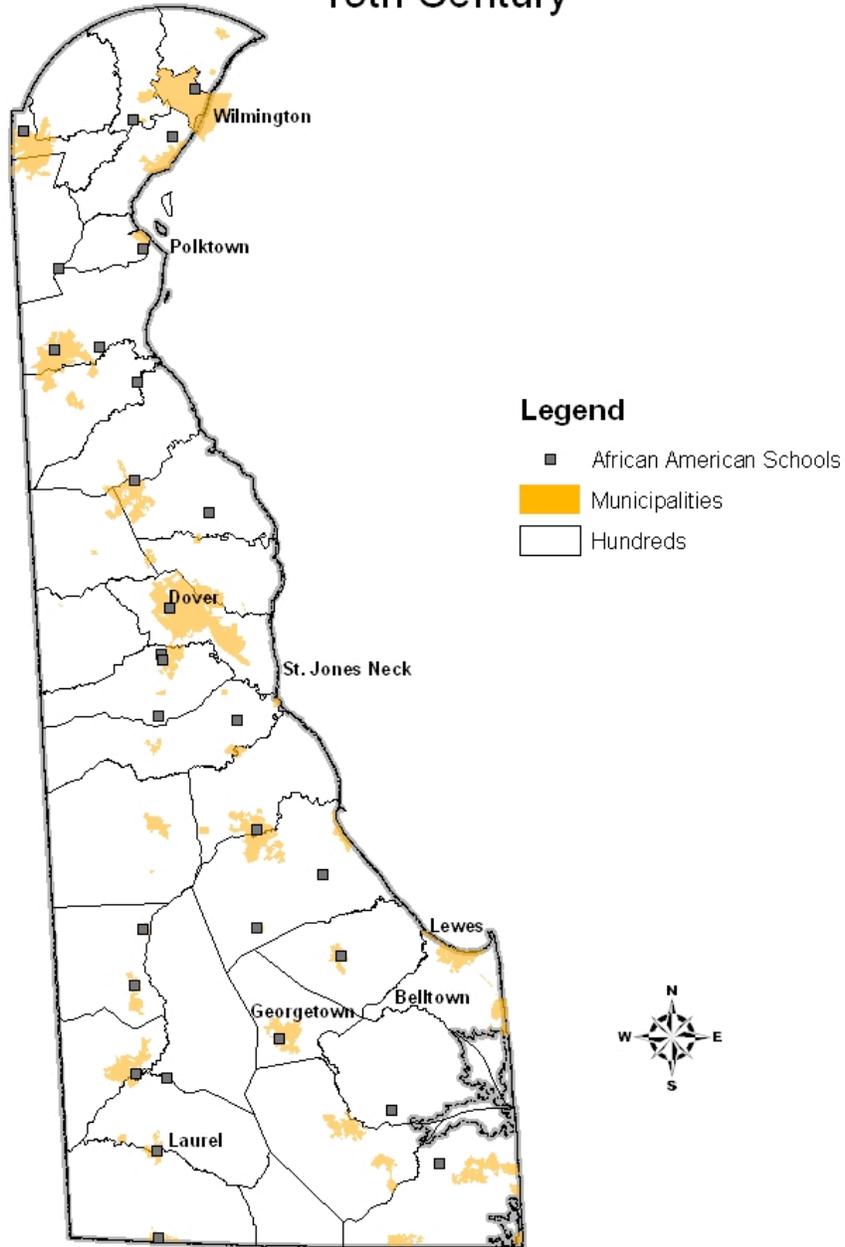


Figure 4: Map of Black Schools in Delaware.

Delaware African American Churches 19th Century

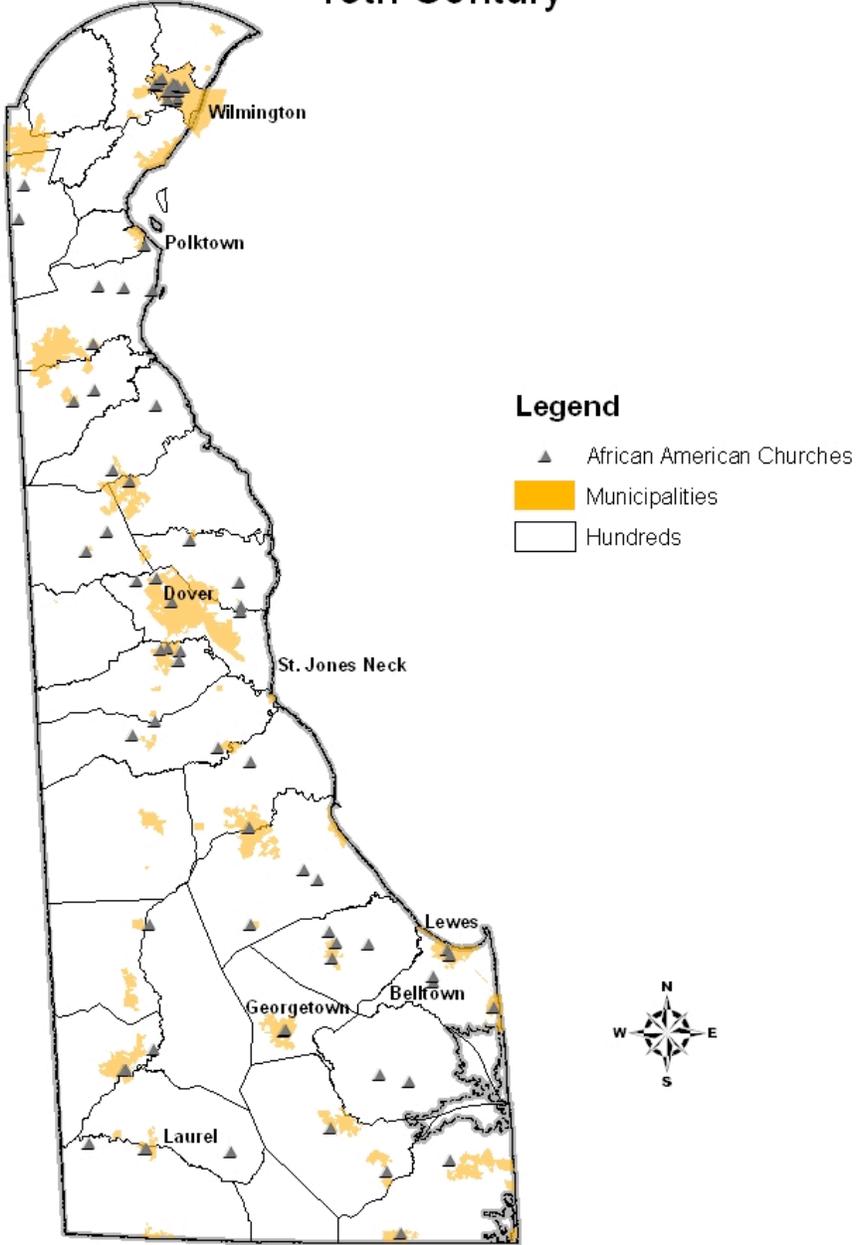


Figure 5: Map of Black Churches in Delaware.

Table 2: Distribution of Free Black Households in Case Study Communities*

| Census Year | 1820 | 1830 | 1840 | 1850 | 1860 | 1870 |
|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Nuclear Family (one or two adults with children) | 78/ 58% | 132/ 53% | 165/ 58% | 61/ 41% | 133/ 52% | 117/ 53% |
| Extended Family (Nuclear family plus additional adults) | 33/ 24% | 73/ 29% | 55/ 19% | 73/ 49% | 84/ 32% | 80/ 35% |
| Unclear (Nuclear or Extended) | 11/ 8% | 15/ 6% | 16/ 6% | 4/ 2% | 2/ 1% | 7/ 3% |
| Single Person or Married Couple | 13/ 10% | 29/ 12% | 50/ 17% | 12/ 8% | 39/ 15% | 21/ 9% |
| Total Households | 135 | 249 | 286 | 150 | 258 | 225 |

*Belltown, Lewes, St. Jones Neck (1820-1870); Red Lion Hundred (1820-1850); Laurel (1830-1840, 1860-1870); Delaware City/Polktown (1860-1870)

Table 3: Age Distribution of Free Blacks in Case Study Communities*

| Year | Age | | | | | Total |
|------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|-------|
| | 0-10 | 11-24 | 25-36 | 37-55 | 56-100 | |
| 1830 | 450/ 33% | 361/ 27% | 268/ 19% | 202/ 15% | 84/ 6% | 1365 |
| 1840 | 522/ 33% | 401/ 25% | 276/ 18% | 248/ 16% | 131/ 8% | 1578 |
| 1850 | 403/ 33% | 351/ 28% | 222/ 18% | 173/ 14% | 81/ 7% | 1230 |
| 1860 | 481/ 33% | 394/ 27% | 217/ 15% | 232/ 16% | 117/ 9% | 1441 |
| 1870 | 504/ 32% | 469/ 30% | 241/ 15% | 251/ 16% | 109/ 7% | 1574 |

* Belltown, Lewes, and St. Jones Neck (1830-1870); Delaware City/Polktown (1860-1870), Red Lion Hundred (1820-1850); Laurel (1830-1840, 1860-1870)

Table 4: Gender Distribution of Free Black Population in Case Study Communities*

| Year | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------|----------|----------|-------|
| 1830 | 863/ 51% | 843/ 49% | 1706 |
| 1840 | 821/ 52% | 765/ 48% | 1586 |
| 1850 | 617/ 50% | 612/ 50% | 1229 |
| 1860 | 664/ 46% | 775/ 54% | 1439 |
| 1870 | 724/ 46% | 837/ 54% | 1561 |

*Belltown, Lewes, and St. Jones Neck (1830-1870); Delaware City/Polktown (1860-1870), Red Lion Hundred (1820-1850); Laurel (1830-1840, 1860-1870)



Figure 6: House on West 6th Street, West Laurel.



Figure 7: House in Belltown.



Figure 8: House on Ship Carpenter Street, Lewes.



Figure 9: House and garden, Barkers Landing.

III. Case Studies

Polktown, Delaware City, Red Lion Hundred, New Castle County

St. Jones Neck, East Dover Hundred, Kent County

**Town of Lewes (Ship Carpenter Street and Pilottown Road), Lewes & Rehoboth
Hundred, Sussex County**

Belltown, Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred, Sussex County

West Laurel, Town of Laurel, Little Creek Hundred, Sussex County

Polktown, Delaware City, Red Lion Hundred, New Castle County

Methodology Introduction. Polktown was settled as a free black community just south of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, on the periphery of Delaware City, beginning in the 1830s after the founding of this canal town (Figures 10 and 11). Although the area was known as Polktown as early as the 1830s, evidenced by its use in property deeds, the name was never used in the manuscript census to designate a geographic area. Thus, the process of locating the individuals who lived in Polktown relied on a complex strategy of working backward from the 1870 census and Beers' *Atlas*. Names of property owners that appeared on Beers' *Atlas* were located in the census manuscript and allowed us to identify two clusters of households, one on Fifth Street (included in the Delaware City list) and the second in Polktown proper (included in the St. Georges Hundred list by accident). By tracking these names backward through the census years, we were able to identify free blacks that lived in Polktown, elsewhere in Delaware City (distinguished in the census in 1860 and 1870), and in Red Lion Hundred. Since Polktown was not laid out until after 1829, our search focused primarily on the years from 1830 to 1870, but we also included Red Lion Hundred for 1800 to 1820 to establish a pattern of the free black and slave populations.

Once a database was compiled of names of all free blacks living in Red Lion Hundred between 1800 and 1870, names were cross-referenced with other records for Red Lion Hundred, including tax assessments and probate files. Names of free blacks identified as living in the area of Polktown and owning real estate were investigated in the Recorder of Deeds office in Wilmington, Delaware, in an attempt to learn how and when they acquired land.

Probate records were also located for several free blacks in Red Lion Hundred, in order to assess occupational and economic status. However, the ratio of probate records to the known population of free blacks was very low, especially in comparison to some of the other case studies, limiting the interpretation and conclusions possible from this source.

The physical resources associated with Polktown's historic black community are very few. Several of the homes still standing are vacant and seriously deteriorated while others are no longer extant on the landscape, demolished in the face of construction work related to the Canal and the Reedy Point Bridge. A free black school and at least one commercial building also vanished in the wake of this construction.

Case Study Narrative. Polktown was a small neighborhood populated by free blacks, located in Red Lion Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware, on the southeast side of Delaware City (see Figures 10 and 11). Situated on the eastern coast of the hundred, Delaware City is bordered on two sides by water--to the east by the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, and to the north by the Delaware River. The majority of the town lies on the north bank of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, with the community of Polktown occupying an area on the south bank of the original canal, just off of Fifth Street. Although the bulk of Polktown was in this separate section outside Delaware City, the community seems to have extended north of the canal along on Fifth Street.

The land Delaware City rests on was originally named "Reeden's Point," an area owned by the Ward family until 1801 when they sold it to John Newbold of New Jersey. In 1824, work finally began on the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, a connector between the Chesapeake Bay and the Delaware River that would shorten the shipping time between major port cities including Baltimore and New York. Completed in 1829, the eastern end of the canal opened into the Delaware River at Reeden's Point, a logical location for a new port town. In 1826, Newbold drew up a grid plan for Delaware City and sold the land to Manuel Eyre in 1828, one year before the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal was completed. The town grew rapidly from its initial ten dwellings into an active commercial center and transportation node as a direct result of the construction of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal.²³

As a port town with ships regularly entering and exiting its docks for trade, Delaware City had connections with many east coast cities. Steamers from New York City followed a route through the Raritan Canal, passing through Trenton, New Jersey,

²³ Scharf, *History of Delaware*, p. 971.

and then down the Delaware River to Delaware City. From there, they traveled through the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, and down the Chesapeake Bay to Baltimore. Thus Delaware City residents had regular access to New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. In the early 1870s, the Delaware and Pennsylvania Railroad opened a line into Delaware City that linked the city to even more locations along the east coast.²⁴

While this economically friendly development attracted wealthy whites, Red Lion Hundred, and eventually Delaware City, proved an attractive place for free blacks as well. Over the course of the nineteenth century, free blacks appeared both in their own independent households as well as within white-owned residences (Table 5). Single free black men regularly worked for whites as agricultural laborers, some of whom likely received room and board as part of their pay. Once married, many free blacks preferred to live in homes of their own. In 1800, only 5 free black households comprising a total of 30 individuals were counted in the hundred, while another 56 free blacks lived in the homes of white employers. The number of free black households in Red Lion Hundred increased steadily over the first three decades of the century, reaching 38 dwellings by 1830, housing a total population of 193 people. An additional 145 free blacks lived in white households at this time. As a result, the total population of free blacks rose from 83 in 1800 to 338 in 1830, a more than 250 percent increase in the free black population in Red Lion Hundred in three decades (Table 6).²⁵

The development of Delaware City clearly had an impact on the free black population after 1830. In the next decade, the total number of free black households in Red Lion Hundred nearly doubled, increasing from 38 in 1820 to 70 in 1840. By 1850, Delaware City itself was home to 14 free black households (a total population of 70 free blacks) whose houses were primarily located along Fifth Street and in Polktown.²⁶ Another 163 free blacks lived in white households within Delaware City, many working

²⁴ Wingate, William O., *Reminiscences of a Town that Thought it would be a Metropolis: Delaware City, Delaware* (Wilmington: Delaware Heritage Press, 1993), 7; Scharf, *History of Delaware: 1609-1888*, 971-72; The City of Delaware City, "History," <http://www.delawarecity.info/history.htm>.

²⁵ U.S. Census of Population, Red Lion Hundred and Delaware City/Polktown, 1800-1870.

²⁶ 1850 is the first year in which the population of Delaware City is clearly separated from the rest of Red Lion Hundred.

as laborers and domestic help. Over the next two decades, the community thrived, and the number of free black households in the town doubled.²⁷

The nature and make-up of these free black households reveals the importance of family to this population. Gender distribution figures for Red Lion Hundred indicate that the free black population was well balanced between males and females by 1820 (Table 7). From 1820 to 1850 both the male and female population accounted for between 40 and 60 percent of the whole group. Such equity in numbers both allowed and encouraged the formation of families. Statistics on age distribution for the hundred demonstrate a corresponding increase in the proportion of children and young adults in the population, rising from 50 percent in 1830 and 1840 to 60 percent in 1850 and 1860 (Table 8). This pattern suggests that either individual families were having greater numbers of children or that there were simply more families with children. The distribution of types of free black households suggests that both patterns existed.

Throughout the period from 1820 to 1870, nuclear or extended family households made up the overwhelming majority of free black households; with the exception of 1840, this group represented between 87 and 100 percent of the households (see Table 5). A spike in the number of households comprised of a single adult or married couple in 1840 likely reflects the point at which the first generation of children born to this community reached adulthood and began to move into households of their own. It is also this generation that likely contributed to the dramatic rise in the number of free black households overall in both Red Lion Hundred and in Delaware City. Over time, the size of households also changed. Between 1800 and 1830, most households contained four or more individuals. From 1850 on, household sizes decreased, with the extended family household type becoming less common as families comprised of one or two adults with children increased.

Employment data also demonstrates the potential for free black families in the area around Delaware City to earn money to support their families (Table 9). Prior to 1850, data is very vague and suggests only that many of the men worked in agriculture or

²⁷ Delaware City/Polktown Census data, 1800-1870; New Castle County Tax Assessments, Red Lion Hundred, 1800-1870.

manufacturing. Between 1850 and 1870, when occupations were listed, most black men worked as laborers, likely marketing their time to local farmers and industries (including canning, tinmaking, and basketmaking), according to the seasonal demands of agriculture. They may also have worked for carpenters and brick masons busy constructing all of the new dwellings and commercial buildings in Delaware City, or even assisting with the construction of Fort Delaware on nearby Pea Patch Island.

By 1868, a “Tin Ware” factory stood on Clinton and Fifth Street, very close to Polktown. Jesse Alexander, “manufacturer of coaches and carriages,” and George Clark, “dealer in coal and lumber,” also potential employers, were both located in the center of Delaware City. Potential places of employment for free blacks could be found throughout, and beyond, Delaware City as well. The Reybold farm, about one mile north of Polktown, was a major producer of peaches between 1840 and 1880.²⁸ The Reybolds were slave owners prior to emancipation but may also have employed free blacks for the labor-intensive seasonal work of picking and packing peaches. T.J. Clark was another farmer who owned slaves yet could have also employed free blacks on his farm immediately outside the town or on one of his other more distant farms. All of these avenues provided opportunities for free blacks to acquire skills and to develop a network of contacts. By 1860 and 1870, some free blacks developed more specialized skills, and were involved in occupations such as cook or waiter in a hotel, butcher, carpenter, sailor, boat steward, shopkeeper, and preacher.

Men appear to have been the primary wage-earners in black families, perhaps in reaction to their new role as head of household. During the nineteenth century, married women almost exclusively listed their occupation as “keeping house,” clearly putting a priority on caring for their own families and homes. Although their work in the house probably varied little from the domestic labor they carried out as slaves, free black families were now the primary beneficiaries of their chores. A few took in washing to earn extra money, and many likely supplemented the household income by picking peaches during the peak of the harvest period. Unmarried women, including girls as

²⁸ The City of Delaware City, “History,” <http://www.delawarecity.info/history.htm>.

young as 10 and women of 40 or more, frequently found work as domestic servants in white households.

Throughout the nineteenth century, most free blacks in Red Lion Hundred owned little taxable property; free blacks assessed for more than a poll tax possessed small numbers of livestock (usually cows or sheep) and occasionally a small frame house and lot (Table 10). Regardless of what they owned, all fell within the poorest 40 percent of the population. In 1852, tax assessments reveal that free blacks were significantly less wealthy than their white counterparts. Free blacks' taxable property averaged \$255, whereas whites' averaged \$2,217, almost nine times as much. The wealth differential took several forms. First, whites owned larger numbers of livestock. Second, whites were more likely to own land, and to own more substantial amounts than the small lots assessed to blacks. Third, the material used for black housing was overwhelmingly wood (when specified it was described as "frame" but some of the unspecified cases may have been log). Wood housing was also the most popular housing for whites (160 of the white homes in 1852 were built of frame or log). However, whites also occupied 38 brick homes, and another 19 constructed of both brick and frame.

Home ownership appears to have been a high priority for free black families in Delaware City and housing primarily took the form of small frame dwellings, mostly along South Fifth Street and in Polktown. In 1850, Delaware City contained 14 free black households. Twelve of those households owned a total of 14 houses—10 families each owned one dwelling while 2 owned 2 houses each. Nine of these houses were described as "frame;" materials for the others were not specified.

It is difficult to determine exactly how many families tenanted homes that someone else owned. Tax records for Red Lion Hundred and Delaware City do not note tenants by name and census records for 1850 and 1860 give few clues about families occupying residences that are not their own. By 1870, there were 29 free black households in the town, most located in the Polktown area. Of those households, at least 16 owned their homes and most can be identified on Beers *Atlas*. Clearly, some families were still occupying rental homes. Some rentals may have been offered by free blacks such as Joshua Seiney, who owned two frame houses on Fifth Street; his second house

was occupied either by another family member or was rented to a fellow free black. White landowners and businessmen, such as J. B. Henry or A. Colbourn, likely provided other rental houses. J.B. Henry shipped coal from Delaware City and owned multiple properties in Delaware City, including 2 small dwellings on Fifth Street and another just east of Polktown. Colbourn owned a farm south of the Canal and likely employed free blacks as farm hands; he also owned at least one small house and garden in the vicinity of Polktown that he likely rented to one of those farm laborers under a lease-labor agreement.

By carefully linking tax assessments and census data with the 1868 Beers Atlas, it is possible to reconstruct the names and locations of most free black members of the Polktown community circa 1870 (see Figure 11).²⁹ One cluster of four to six households stood on Fifth Street, near the schoolhouse. In 1870, forty-year-old Mary Trusty rented a house that likely belonged to Arnold Brown, William Gibbs, or Joshua Seiney (all free blacks). She headed a home that included her two children, John (age 7) and Elizabeth (age 15), along with a young married couple, Eliza and Walker Harris. Walker likely provided the only cash income for the house by working as a laborer, while Mary and Eliza managed the house. Near the Trusty/Harris household lived Joshua Seiney, who owned two houses along Fifth Street. Sixty-two-year old Joshua was widowed and still worked as a laborer. A neighboring house was owned and occupied by 58-year-old free black laborer George Young and his wife, Martha. Seventeen-year-old Ann Smith worked with Martha to care for the home and the Youngs' three children—Charles (age 7) and four-year-old twins John and Rebecca. According to Beers *Atlas*, William Gibbs also owned a house in this cluster but the census order suggests that he and his wife, Genty, lived several houses further south on Fifth Street, possibly renting Joshua Seiney's second house. At the age of 64, Gibbs worked as a boat steward, possibly on one of the steam boats that traveled the route between New York and Baltimore.

On the south side of the Canal, a group of 20 households formed the community known as Polktown; the map shows at least 14 dwellings in the area. With only one exception, all of these households, which averaged 5 people each, included one or more

²⁹ See pp. 23-25 of this report for a detailed discussion of the acquisition of land in Polktown.

laborers who provided the income to support their families. The exception was free black Lebonsey Pernell, who served his community as their Methodist minister. Among these households were the homes of free black Shadrack Boyer and his sons, along with families who acquired their homes from the Boyers, or from white landowners Ezekiel Shaw and J.B. Henry. Other residents included widowed Betsey Green; laborers Alexander Draper, George Shorter, William Watson and their families; and widow Caroline Caulk and her young son, among others.

Religion played a role in Polktown from the earliest years of settlement. A cemetery on the north bank of the Canal, west of Fifth Street, originated in 1835 and known interments date from 1857 to 1868. In the years following the Civil War, the black community in Delaware City and Polktown built at least two churches. A group of trustees for St. Peters Methodist purchased a lot from James Henry on Fifth Street in 1872, quickly erecting their first meeting house. A second congregation formed (probably under Shadrack Boyer and Lebonsey Purnell) and built a church along the new road near the canal. Efforts were not restricted to religion; the community also sought funding from the Freedman's Bureau school in order to build a school that opened in 1867, located along the south bank of the canal near the church. Enrollment in the first few years averaged 15 to 20 children each year, representing more than half of the school-age children in the community.

The strong presence of free blacks in Polktown, Delaware City, and throughout Red Lion Hundred lends itself to conjecture about possible Underground Railroad activity in the area, although slave-ownership was limited to just a few individuals in the area by 1820. Evidence suggests that some freedom-seekers followed routes that took them through or past Delaware City. Between 1796 and 1842, eight runaway ads appeared in various newspapers for six slaves in the Red Lion Hundred or Delaware City area. One was expected to have fled to Wilmington, another to Philadelphia. One runaway was jailed near Delaware City. Although the method of escape for these runaways was not noted, at least seven runaways originated from Delaware City. Two of

the slaveowners who published these ads, John Reybold and Thomas Clark, lived in Delaware City or its immediate vicinity.³⁰

Conclusion

Clearly, both free and enslaved blacks operated within several spheres of life in this community, within Polktown and in the larger areas of Delaware City and Red Lion Hundred. Free blacks in Polktown were separated from Delaware City by the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, yet this did not limit their interactions with the city. While many of their enslaved brethren labored on farms or in domestic settings, free blacks worked both in the city and in the surrounding area as laborers, carpenters, butchers, sailors, cooks, etc. Generally, free blacks were less wealthy than their white counterparts yet still owned livestock and houses and they usually lived in nuclear family groups. Free blacks had connections to other northeastern cities through the canal and later through the railroad. They contributed to the labor base in Delaware City but also contributed to the growing black community in Polktown by establishing and obtaining property in the area, and using their income to stabilize and support the black community.

³⁰ In 1829, Thomas (T.J.) Clark placed an ad for Samuel Voreeca. John Reybold placed an ad in 1842 for a “negro boy.” Runaway database, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware.

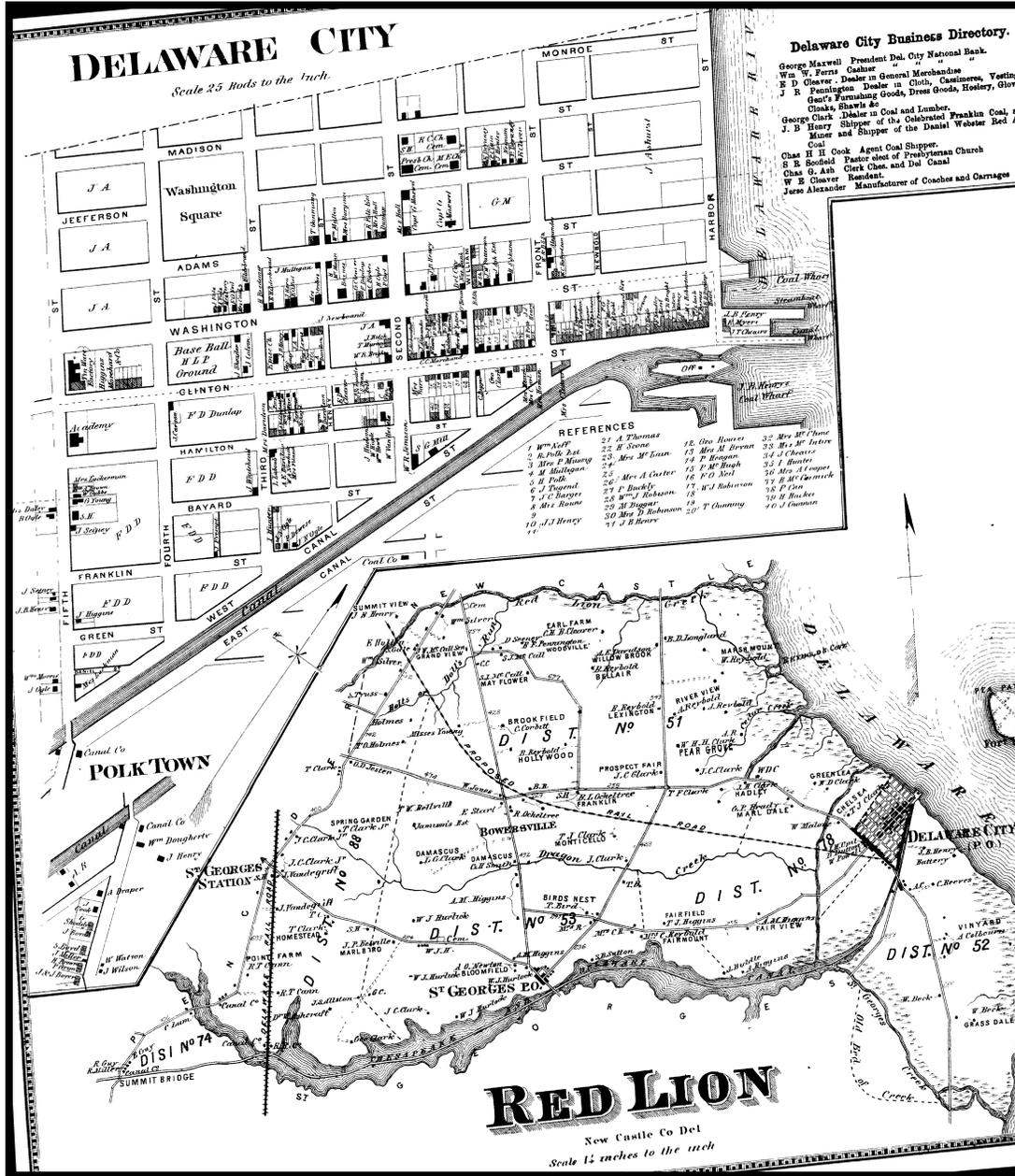


Figure 10: Map of Red Lion Hundred and Delaware City showing Polktown, Beers' *Atlas of Delaware*, 1868.

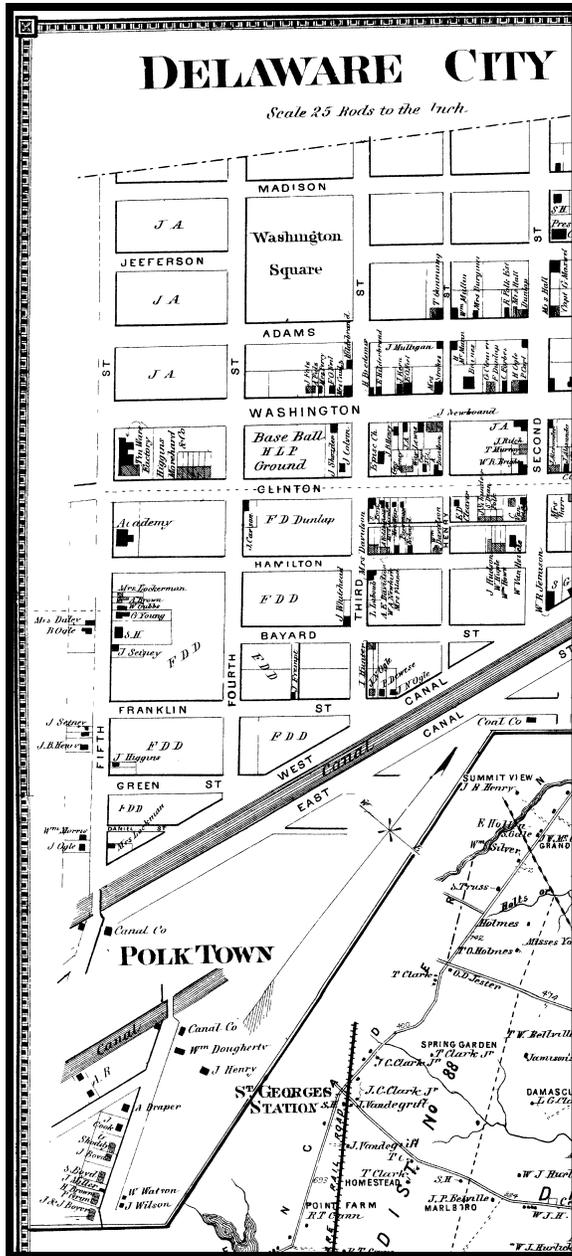


Figure 11: Detail of Beers' *Atlas* showing Polktown and Fifth Street.

Table 5: Types of Free Black Households in Red Lion Hundred (1820-1850) and Delaware City/Polktown (1850-1870)

| Census Year | Red Lion Hundred | | | Delaware City/ Polktown | | |
|---|------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | 1820 | 1830 | 1840 | 1850 | 1860 | 1870 |
| Nuclear Family (one or two adults with children) | 24 / 65% | 17 / 45% | 36 / 51% | 5/ 36% | 20 /59% | 16/ 55% |
| Extended Family (Nuclear family plus additional adults) | 8 / 22% | 16 / 42% | 14 / 20% | 9 /64% | 11 /32% | 10/ 35% |
| Unclear (Nuclear or Extended) | 2 / 5% | - | - | - | - | - |
| Single Person or Married Couple | 3 / 8% | 5 / 13% | 20 / 29% | - | 3 / 9% | 3 /10% |
| Total Households | 37 | 38 | 70 | 14 | 34 | 29 |

Table 6: Free Black Population in Red Lion Hundred (1800-1840) and Delaware City/Polktown (1850-1870)

| Census Year | 1800 | 1810 | 1820 | 1830 | 1840 | 1850 | 1860 | 1870 |
|--|-----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Individual Blacks living in White Households | 53 | 114 | - | 145 | 139 | 163 | 17 | 16 |
| Individual Blacks living in Black Households | 30 | 94 | 193 | 193 | 284 | 326 | 168 | 124 |
| Total Black Population | 83 | 208 | 193 | 338 | 423 | 489 | 185 | 140 |

**Table 7: Gender Distribution for Free Black Households in
Red Lion Hundred, 1820-1850**

| Year | Male | Female | Total |
|--------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1820* | 88/ 46% | 105/ 54% | 193 |
| 1830 | 207/ 61% | 131/ 39% | 338 |
| 1840 | 241/ 57% | 182/ 43% | 423 |
| 1850 | 260/ 53% | 229/ 47% | 489 |

*residents in Red Lion Hundred enumerated within St. Georges Hundred, Delaware Census returns for this year.

Table 8: Age Distribution of Free Black Population in Red Lion Hundred (1830-1850) and Delaware City (1860-1870)

| Year | 0-10 | 10-24 | 24-36 | 36-55 | 55-100 | Total |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1830 | 77/23% | 79/24% | 119/35% | 41/12% | 22/6% | 338 |
| 1840 | 129/31% | 126/30% | 83/20% | 61/14% | 24/5% | 423 |
| 1850 | 157/ 32% | 141/ 29% | 91/ 19% | 79/ 16% | 21/ 4% | 489 |
| 1860 | 73/ 40% | 38/ 21% | 24/ 13% | 35/ 19% | 14/ 8% | 184 |
| 1870 | 43/ 31% | 30/ 22% | 22/ 16% | 27/ 20% | 16/ 11% | 138 |

Table 9: Occupations Held by Free Blacks In Delaware City, 1850-1870

| Occupation | Year | | |
|------------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| | 1850 | 1860 | 1870 |
| Agriculture | 0 | 0 | 1 / 1% |
| Carpentry | 1/0.25% | 0 | 0 |
| Clergy | 2/ 0.5% | 0 | 1 / 1% |
| Cook/Waiter | 0 | 0 | 3 / 2% |
| Craftsman | | 0 | 0 |
| Day Labor | 134 / 27.5% | 34 / 18% | 30 / 22% |
| Domestic Service | 1 / 0.25% | 12/ 7% | 13 / 9% |
| Keeping House | 0 | 0 | 23 / 16% |
| Maritime | 1/0.25% | 1 / 1% | 1 / 1% |
| Tradesman | 0 | 1 / 1% | 0 |
| Washerwomen | 0 | 0 | 1 / 1% |
| Misc. | 1/0.25% | 1 / 1% | 2 / 1% |
| None Given | 349 / 71% | 136 / 72% | 65 / 46% |
| Total | 489 | 185 | 140 |

Table 10: Black Property Ownership In Red Lion Hundred, 1816-1867

| Year | Type of Property Owned | | | | Total |
|-------------|------------------------|-----------|------------------|----------|------------|
| | Real Estate | Livestock | Real & Livestock | None | |
| 1816 | 0 | 14/ 45% | 1/ 4% | 17/ 57% | 32 |
| 1823 | 1/ 2% | 4/ 8% | 1/ 2% | 44/ 88% | 50 |
| 1849 | 0 | 17/ 7% | 0 | 78/ 93% | 84 |
| 1852 | 20/20% | 0 | 1/ 1% | 78/79% | 100 |
| 1861 | 14/ 13% | 5/ 5% | 7/ 6% | 82/ 76% | 108 |
| 1867 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 27/ 100% | 27 |

St. Jones Neck, East Dover Hundred, Kent County

Methodology Introduction. St. Jones Neck, located in east-central Kent County, encompasses approximately 25 square miles bounded on three sides by water: the Little Creek to the north, the Delaware River to the east, and the St. Jones River to the south (Figure 12). The fertile soil and easy access to water for transportation quickly attracted settlers. Intense European settlement of the Neck began in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, drawing Quakers from Penn's colony as well as Maryland colonists from the west seeking more land.³⁰ By the late nineteenth century, wealthy landowners, tenant farmers, and those who made a living from extracting the rich resources of the river and marsh fully occupied the landscape. When they no longer needed the day labor provided by blacks, their tenant houses and small plots of land were absorbed into the agricultural landscape.

This history produced a situation in which, unlike other communities where many resources could be drawn from the surviving landscape or local residents, very little of the nineteenth-century free black community in the St. Jones Neck survives today. At present the area is mostly farm and marshland and very few of the original buildings still stand, making research into the exact location and material conditions of the community difficult. The historically high rate of tenancy among the free black population further contributed to problems using deed records to pinpoint residences of free blacks in St. Jones Neck.

Additional problems arose in researching census and tax assessment records because the St. Jones Neck was part of several different hundreds over the course of the nineteenth century. Through the 1820s, it was a section of a separate hundred—St. Jones Hundred—which included some land south of the St. Jones River. Circa 1830, St. Jones Hundred was split in half and combined with neighboring Dover and Murderkill hundreds. Most of the Neck area became part of Dover Hundred, which was eventually divided into East and West Dover hundreds. Our challenge lay with distinguishing those individuals and households actually located in the St. Jones Neck from the multiple census lists over the years.

³⁰ The origins of this community most likely lie with the slaves manumitted by John Dickinson in 1798. It is likely that more information is available about these individuals from the John Dickinson Plantation Museum, but due to the museum's busy schedule we were unable to obtain information from them during the course of this project.

As in Polktown, we began by comparing the 1860 and 1870 manuscript census for Dover and Murderkill hundreds to the 1868 Beers' *Atlas* of St. Jones Neck. Names that appeared on the Atlas were identified on the census, and those families shown to be living in proximity to these individuals were declared to be in the area of St Jones Neck. These names, plus the names from the 1800, 1810, and 1820 censuses for St Jones Neck, were cross-referenced with the 1830, 1840, and 1850 censuses to find those living in the original area of St Jones Neck. This process was particularly challenging due to the high rate of tenancy in the Neck and the shortage of owner-occupied properties that could be positively identified in the census.

After we identified a list of names from the census, we conducted a similar process using tax assessments. Once again, identification of names on the earlier lists was relatively simple, but after 1830, it was more challenging and had to be limited to those names that could be linked to the census. This eliminated one strategy used in other case studies to develop a more comprehensive list of names.

One highly valuable source of information about St Jones Neck was the Joseph Barker Negro Ledger Book. Barker operated a general store just south of the Neck; his Negro Ledger Book was a separate account of his sales to free blacks. This book describes what these individuals bought and how they paid, sometimes indicating the bartering of goods or labor instead of cash. Entries in the Ledger also provide information about family and business relationships, as well as occupations. The items purchased can also indicate an individual's access to and knowledge of waterways and ships, perhaps demonstrating their ability to aid slaves escaping by way of the St. Jones River or the Delaware River.

The net result of this research is that we have a fairly clear picture of the community as it existed in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, as one of the earliest free black communities in the state, but a much less detailed one for later in the century.

Case Study Narrative. The community of free blacks on the Neck began to form in the late eighteenth century as many local farmers freed their slaves in response to the pressures of religious organizations. For example, Quaker John Dickinson filed papers with the Kent County Recorder of Deeds in 1777 to manumit all of his slaves. He made this move in response to the resolution passed by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends in 1776 calling for the

manumission of all slaves owned by Quakers within the meeting. Dickinson owned almost 40 slaves at the time; regardless of their individual ages, he freed them all (including any children born to the women) once they completed another 21 years of service, that is, effective in 1798. Dickinson was only one of many farmers in the grain farming region who freed slaves in this period, partly for religious reasons but also for economic ones as the agricultural economy in the area focused more and more on wheat, a less labor-intensive crop than corn or tobacco. Regardless of their specific reasons for freeing their slaves, the result was a rapid influx of free blacks onto the landscape in the early years of the nineteenth century and by 1860, only one slaveholder owned land in the Neck. By 1800, St. Jones Hundred (roughly equivalent to the Neck) contained 93 households headed by free blacks, for a total population of 514. Some of this community relied primarily on seasonal agricultural and maritime labor to supplement the produce of their kitchen gardens, while others, like brothers Peter Patton and John Furbey, tenanted farms owned by white landlords such as John Dickinson.³¹

Household sizes decreased slightly in the period from 1800 to 1840. In 1800, the 93 free black households in St Jones Neck ranged in size from 2 to 15 people with an average of 6 inhabitants. By 1820, the number of households had decreased to 50 and household sizes ranged from 2 to 11 people, with an average of 5. Household sizes in 1840 ranged from 1 to 10 people yet the majority of families ranged between 2 and 6 occupants making the average household size 4 people.

Household types varied little over the century (Table 11). Throughout this time, nuclear and extended families accounted for 75 to 90 percent of all households. The least common household type was consistently the single person or married couple without children (either newly married or after all their children were grown), which rarely exceeded 15 percent of all households. During the first half of the century, nuclear families dominated, but in 1850 and 1860, the number of households that fell into the extended family category rose significantly,

³¹ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, John Dickinson owned approximately half of the Neck, an area totaling roughly 4000 acres. He divided the land into farms that he leased to tenants, both black and white. For example, during the first decade of the nineteenth century, free black brothers John Furbey Sr. and Peter Patton leased farms known as Luff's and Fisher's from Dickinson. After Dickinson's death in 1808, his daughter, Sally Norris Dickinson, inherited the land and continued to manage it as tenant farms until her death in 1845, when the land was carved up amongst her nephews. On Dickinson's landholdings, see Rebecca Siders and Pamela Edwards, *The Changing Landscape of the St. Jones Neck Under the Influence of the Dickinson Family, 1680-1850: An Exhibit Script* (Newark: Center for Historic Architecture and Design, 1992).

perhaps identifying the point at which the second generation of children born into freedom reached adulthood. By 1870, the numbers dropped back to the pattern seen earlier in the century.

Between 1830 and 1870, gender distribution remained relatively steady, with women consistently representing only a slightly higher proportion of the population than men (Table 12). The only variation to this pattern occurred in 1860 when women rose to 56 percent of the population. When combined with the rise in extended family households in the same year, the data suggests that a significant number of the men in the population were absent from the landscape, possibly because they were away fighting in the Civil War.

As in most of the case studies, age distribution between 1840 and 1870 indicates a population focused on reproduction and the creation of new families (Table 13). Children under 10 remained the dominant age group, representing 32 to 41 percent of the population. Teenagers and young adults (10 to 24 year olds and 24 to 36 year olds) each consistently accounted for between 15 and 25 percent of the population, while older adults (36 to 55 year olds) were also a stable proportion of about 16 percent. Life expectancy over the age of 55 was slim, with this group routinely containing less than 10 percent of the total population.

Throughout the nineteenth century, a small but growing number of free blacks owned taxable property, including land and livestock (Table 14). In 1810, 5 free blacks owned land; by 1822, 8 free blacks owned land and most of them lived in a house on that land. John Furbey's widow, Tamar, for example, occupied 19 acres with a log dwelling. A few rented better-quality land or larger amounts of acreage from someone like Dickinson and then leased their own land to another free black, sometimes a family member such as a son or a brother.

At least one-third to one-half of free black taxables owned livestock in St. Jones Neck, critical to their survival in this agricultural landscape. Free black livestock holdings averaged 1 to 3 animals and could include horses, cows, oxen, pigs, and sheep. For example, in 1810 Samuel Jenkins kept only one sow and some shoats, while John Furbey owned a horse, a mare, two oxen, four steers, six cows, four calves, eight young cattle, and two sows. Furbey, however, seems to have been doing especially well as he was one of only eight free black landowners in the Neck in 1822 and leased additional farmland from John Dickinson. Between 1800 and 1845, this degree of animal ownership remained consistent. These mostly modest, but life-sustaining

holdings suggest that most free blacks in St. Jones Neck lived off a combination of the food products drawn from their livestock (milk, beef, and pork), kitchen gardens (fruits, vegetables, and corn for grain), and the small amounts of cash generated by day labor for local farmers.

The ability of free blacks to own property increased dramatically between 1810 and 1860. The 1808 tax assessment of St Jones Hundred indicates that none of the 25 free blacks assessed owned property either in the form of real estate or livestock. By 1822, the majority (nearly 60 percent) still owned no property, but 36 percent owned livestock and 12 percent owned land. By 1856 more than half (53 percent) owned property in the form of real estate and/or livestock. This steady rise in property ownership indicates an increasing amount of income and opportunities for free blacks during the 1800s.

While land (and home) ownership among free blacks on the Neck rose six-fold between 1822 and 1857 (increasing from 8 individuals to 53), the majority of free black households continued to lease their homes from landlords who were primarily white. Free black homes were universally built with wood (either log or frame) in St. Jones Neck, however some tenants were able to upgrade their standard of living by renting a farm with a brick dwelling.

Comparing the assessments of free blacks with their white neighbors reveals that many whites fell into the same economic category—assessed only for a poll tax or a small number of livestock. Where whites differed was in the potential to own property assessed at more than \$500 and in the likelihood of owning substantial amounts of land. Whites owned most of the land in the Neck while free blacks generally owned small parcels of less than 20 acres, and many whites were assessed well into the thousands of dollars.

The decline in the number of free blacks who owned livestock in 1822 may be related to an economic downturn. Some evidence does point to this possibility, which we can observe through the holdings of a handful of individuals who appear on more than one tax assessment. The taxable property of some free blacks dropped significantly between 1810 and 1822. Peter Patton's property was assessed at \$784 in 1810 yet in 1822 was assessed at \$209. This could have something to do with the value of the dollar, but his actual holdings decreased significantly over this period as well. While John Furbey's estate had acquired land by 1822, it appears that the diverse livestock owned by John Furbey Sr. and John Furbey Jr. in 1810 had been lost by

1822, with the exception of the cows owned by the widow, Tamer. Almost \$800 assessed between Furbey Jr. and Sr. in 1810 fell to \$380 in 1822. Joseph Robinson was assessed at about \$300 in 1807 and by 1822 he was assessed with only a poll tax. These downward trends indicate an economic downturn and perhaps explain why fewer people owned livestock.

The tax assessment of 1845 points to an upward economic trend for free blacks in the Neck. The number of individuals assessed with only the personal tax dropped to 19, while the amount of tenants with livestock (52) remained relatively the same as in 1822. The number of free blacks who owned land increased to 13, and two of those households owned more than 100 acres. Many of the individuals assessed at more than \$250 did not appear on the 1840 census, just as many of this group on the 1822 tax assessment did not appear on the 1820 census. Again, this could mean these individuals were new to the area or recently freed. Most of these new, wealthier individuals in 1845 were landowners living in small log or wooden houses.

Sources of employment varied little on the St. Jones Neck in the nineteenth century (Table 15). Between 1850 and 1870, men overwhelmingly worked as day laborers, primarily for local farmers. A handful over the century found other employment as carpenters, cooks, waiters, and preachers. Women almost exclusively remained at home, keeping house and caring for their children, livestock, and vegetable gardens. A few took in laundry and occasionally a young girl or unmarried woman worked as a domestic servant. Employment of children was rare in the census, suggesting that free black families preferred to keep their children close to home, helping with chores related to livestock and crops needed to sustain the family. To some extent, however, the St. Jones Neck does not seem to have provided the economic opportunities for advancement that existed elsewhere in the state. In fact, those opportunities may have declined over the course of the century. A close look at a few case studies illuminates the material lives of residents in this community over time.

John Furbey, one of the earliest free black residents of the St. Jones Neck, may have been freed in the 1790s by Jacob Furbey, a white resident of Dover. By 1800 he married Tamar Frazier and headed his own household on the Neck which grew to include at least six children. From 1802 to 1812 he rented two farms (known as Luff's and Fisher's) totaling 250 acres from John Dickinson with his brother Peter Patten. By 1810 John, Peter and John Furby, Jr., worked the land together and owned in total 2 mules, 8 horses, 1 sheep, 3 oxen and 4 steers, 63 cattle

(both milk cows and beef cattle), 4 sows and 11 shoats. The Furbey and Patten families clearly were investing in livestock both as a means of production (they controlled at least 6 plow teams and cows that produced beef and butter at market levels) and subsistence (meat, milk, and wool for home consumption). In the 1810s, however, the families faced a series of blows. First, William Frazier (likely Tamar's brother) died in 1813, leaving three young sons. John purchased a few essentials at the sale of William's property, which he set aside for the boys who may have come to live with John and Tamar. Two years later, in February 1815, both John Furbey Sr. and his son, John Jr., died. John Sr. left a will naming Jacob Furbey as his executor and left his house and lot (20 acres) to Tamar; the remainder of his property was to be sold to pay any debts and then the proceeds divided between Tamar and their 6 children. While Furbey was a wealthy man in comparison to most of his free black neighbors, dividing his estate between so many people likely left them each with more typical holdings.³²

Mingo Tilghman was another early resident of St. Jones Neck. Head of his own household by 1800, Mingo Tilghman worked as a carpenter on St. Jones Neck in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Among other projects, he constructed the frames of two barns for white merchant and farmer Joseph Barker on tenant farms in the Neck, employing free black Daniel Morrell to help him. Although married to Sabrina, he had no children living at the time of his death in 1816; his estate was divided between his widow and two surviving sisters, Hannah and Dackey. He owned no land, likely renting a house and garden from James Barker or Martin Knight, so that his wife could maintain a home while his carpentry work took him to other locations. An inventory taken in 1816 reveals that the Tilghmans' standard of living was at subsistence level. The house contained 1 bed, an old pine table, 3 chairs, a cupboard with queensware, a desk, and a chest. Sabrina used a few simple pots and earthenware to prepare meals over a hearth. The family owned 7 sheep, some geese and other fowl, 2 steers (for beef), 4 cows and a calf, and a half-share of a beehive. Each of the livestock produced something the family needed—wool for clothing, feathers for bedding, meat and milk for the table, and honey for home or market—and Sabrina likely bore most of the responsibility of caring for the animals and the garden, possibly with assistance from one or both of her husband's sisters. The presence

³² Research files on John Furbey and Peter Patten, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware.

of carpenters tools and a seine marked two ways in which Mingo supported his family—working as an artisan and fishing. When her husband died, Sabrina asked the court to allow Mathias Day or Martin Knight to administer his estate, probably because she herself could neither read nor write.³³

Thirty years later, Charles Orrell died in 1844, leaving a far less substantial estate than those of Furbey or Tilghman. In 1840, Orrell was already over the age of 55 and his wife was approaching that age as well. Their household also included a young black woman between age 10 and 24, who may have been the only daughter not yet married, while sons James, Thomas, and John lived away from the Neck. Charles Orrell likely rented a small farm or a house and garden and he farmed on a very small scale. His inventory, taken in December 1844, listed a “crop of corn on the ground,” a plow and harrow, an axe, 3 hoes, and a horse as the extent of his agricultural assets. Furniture in the house emphasized their simple quality of life, listing only a bed, two chests, a spinning wheel and loom, a cupboard, a table, 4 chairs, and one luxury in the form of a looking glass. His total estate was valued at only \$41.³⁴

The key institutions that created and supported community, churches and schools, are not clearly visible in St Jones Neck and likely contribute to the disappearance of this community over time. In 1868, the nearest black church and school were located in Little Creek Landing, just across the Little Creek to the north. During the first half of the nineteenth century the women of the Little Creek Friends Meeting provided basic education to black children.

Joseph Barker, a general merchant whose store and home was located at Barker’s Landing, on the St. Jones River in Murderkill Hundred (just south of St. Jones Neck), kept a separate record of his business interactions with local free blacks.³⁵ Many residents of St. Jones Neck appear in both Barker’s “Negro Ledger,” and in tax assessments or census records between 1800 and 1810. They include William Frazier, John Furbey Sr., Peter Patton, Joseph Robinson, Thomas Smith, Samuel Jenkins, Thomas Jackson, Mingo Tilghman, Ezekiel Rodney, and D. Ceasar Rodney. Many paid their accounts with third-party notes from employers for work such as harvesting wheat and corn or cleaning flax.

³³ Research file on Mingo Tilghman, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware.

³⁴ Research file on Charles Orrell, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware.

³⁵ Joseph Barker’s Negro Ledger Book.

In combination these sources indicate that the free black community of St. Jones Neck drew on a wide range of contacts that stretched far beyond the geographic boundaries of the community. Underground Railroad escape narratives support this to some extent, indicating the close connections of free blacks to the local waterways and their link to the broader world of freedom. For example, free black Joseph Finney of Little Creek Landing organized a group of boatmen around the waterways to transport fleeing slaves to freedom by boat.³⁶ Other narratives document escapes from Kitts Hummock in St Jones Neck by boat, either with help from local free blacks or simply by stealing the needed watercraft.³⁷

Conclusion

Thus, the free black community of St. Jones Neck shared many characteristics with other case study communities, especially in the area of population demographics and household structure. Unlike other areas, however, economic opportunities for free blacks declined over the course of the nineteenth century and the community lost any sense of cohesion, demonstrated by the lack of institutions such as churches and schools. Eventually, all physical traces of the community were obliterated by the expansion of agricultural fields.

³⁶ Peter T. Dalleo, "The Growth of Delaware's Antebellum Free African American Community," in *A History of African Americans of Delaware & Maryland's Eastern Shore*, ed. Carole C. Marks (Wilmington: Delaware Heritage Commission, 1998), 4.

³⁷ William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Chicago, Johnson Publishing Company, 1970).

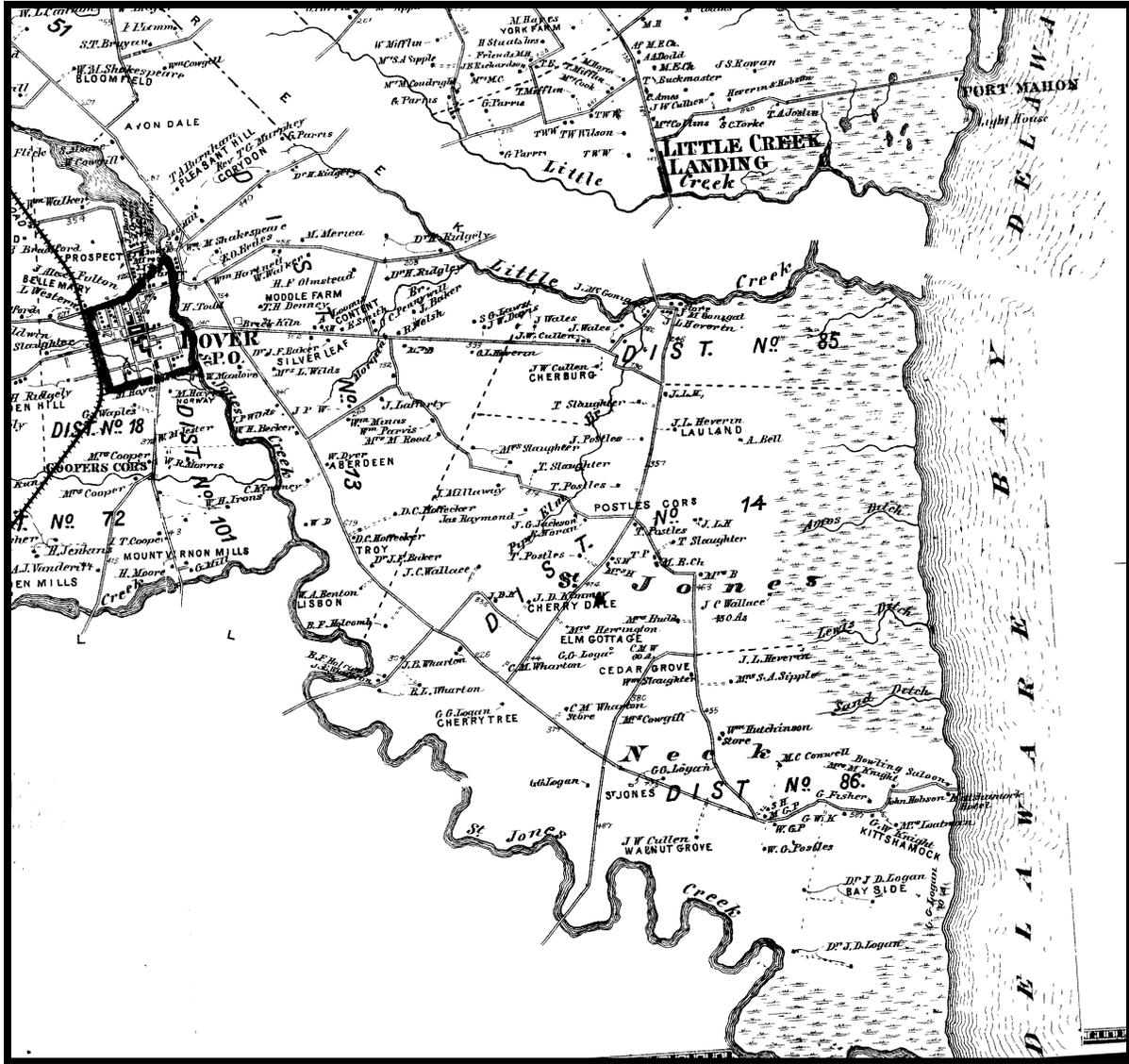


Figure 12: Map of St. Jones Neck, Beers' *Atlas of Delaware*, 1868.

Table 11: Types of Free Black Households in St. Jones Neck, 1820-1870

| YEAR | 1820 | 1830 | 1840 | 1850 | 1860 | 1870 |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Nuclear Family (two adults with children) | 31 / 62% | 67 / 53% | 48 / 68% | 18 / 43% | 13 / 28% | 34 / 63% |
| Extended Family (Nuclear family plus additional adults) | 12 / 24% | 32 / 25% | 13 / 18% | 19 / 45% | 27 / 57% | 16 / 30% |
| Single Person or Married Couple | 5 / 10% | 19 / 15% | 9 / 13% | 5 / 12% | 7 / 15% | 4 / 7% |
| Unknown | 2 / 4% | 9 / 7% | 1 / 1% | 0 / 0% | 0 / 0% | 0 / 0% |
| Total | 50 | 127 | 71 | 42 | 47 | 54 |

Table 12: Gender Distribution in the Free Black Population of St. Jones Neck, 1830-1870

| Year | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1830 | 280/48% | 301/52% | 581 |
| 1840 | 169/49% | 179/51% | 348 |
| 1850 | 90/49% | 95/51% | 185 |
| 1860 | 88/44% | 110/56% | 198 |
| 1870 | 144/48% | 155/52% | 299 |

Table 13: Age Distribution of the Free Black Population in St. Jones Neck, 1830-1870

| Year | 0-10 | 10-24 | 24-36 | 36-55 | 55-100 | Total |
|------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|-------|
| 1830 | 96/ 38% | 53/ 21% | 39/ 15% | 51/ 20% | 14/ 6% | 253 |
| 1840 | 142/41% | 56/16% | 52/15% | 66/19% | 27/8% | 343 |
| 1850 | 59/32% | 38/20% | 49/26% | 27/15% | 13/7% | 186 |
| 1860 | 64/32% | 40/20% | 47/24% | 28/14% | 21/11% | 200 |
| 1870 | 124/41% | 69/23% | 41/14% | 50/17% | 16/5% | 300 |

Table 14: Types of Property Owned by Free Blacks in St. Jones Neck, 1808-1857

| Tax Assessment: | 1808 (St Jones Hundred) | 1810 (St Jones Hundred) | 1822 (St Jones Hundred) | 1834 (Dover Hundred) | 1856/57 (Dover Hundred) |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Real Estate | 0 | 1 / 1% | 4 / 6% | 0 | 20 / 9% |
| Livestock | 0 | 49 / 68% | 21 / 30% | 58 / 43% | 70 / 30% |
| Both | 0 | 4 / 5% | 4 / 6% | 0 | 33 / 14% |
| None | 25 / 100% | 18 / 25% | 41 / 59% | 78 / 57% | 108 / 47% |
| Total | 25 | 72 | 70 | 136 | 231 |

Table 15: Occupations of Free Blacks in St. Jones Neck, 1850-1870

| Occupation | Year | | |
|------------------|------------|----------------|----------------|
| | 1850 | 1860 | 1870 |
| Agriculture | 2/2% | 0 | 66/46% |
| Carpentry | 2/2% | 0 | 1/less than 1% |
| Clergy | 0 | 1/less than 1% | 0 |
| Cook/ Waiter | 1/1% | 3/2% | 0 |
| Day Labor | 39/35% | 40/32% | 0 |
| Domestic Service | 0 | 2/2% | 0 |
| Trades | 1/1% | 3/2% | 0 |
| Washerwomen | 0 | 8/6% | 0 |
| Total | 111 | 124 | 145 |

Town of Lewes, Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred, Sussex County

Methodology Introduction. Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred is located on the eastern side of Sussex County, at the mouth of the Delaware Bay where it meets the Atlantic Ocean (Figure 13). This hundred contained some of the earliest settlement in the state, including the town of Lewes, which developed as a port of entry to the Delaware Bay. Although Lewes & Rehoboth was located in a county that sustained the practice of slavery all the way up to the start of the Civil War, many of the residents of this hundred abandoned the practice much earlier. In 1800, Lewes and Rehoboth Hundred contained 230 free blacks and 239 slaves. By 1820, the total number of blacks dropped from 469 to 415, but the balance shifted to 305 free blacks and only 111 slaves, suggesting a major wave of manumissions in this period. By 1850, there were only 68 slaves remaining in the hundred and by 1860, 37 of them were described as “fugitives” in the Slave Schedule, suggesting that they were no longer in the area although the owner still claimed them as property. Figure 14 shows the locations of slave owners in the hundred circa 1860. Overall, the total population of free blacks in the hundred increased by 250 percent from 1800 to 1840, and remained stable at about 560 individuals between 1850 and 1870 (Tables 16 and 17).³⁸

Variations in the method of recording the population census complicated our ability to identify residents of the town of Lewes in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. In each of these years, Lewes was simply included with the rest of the hundred. In addition, the 1800 census simply listed all free black households at the end of the manuscript, providing no context for neighborhoods. In 1810, several hundreds in Sussex County were lumped together in one list, making the situation even more murky. In that same year, 85 of the 305 free black households had no last name other than “negro”, suggesting the possibility that they were recently manumitted slaves who had yet to select a surname. Many of the surnames given in later years reflect names of white families who may have been slaveholders in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Maull, Burton, Cannon, Kollock, etc), also suggesting a pattern of early manumission. By 1840, the town of Lewes was separated out from the census list for the

³⁸ Lewes and Rehoboth Hundred U.S. Population Census data, 1800-1870.

hundred, making it considerably easier to identify town residents. Although we followed the same practice used in other case studies, working backward from the 1870 census and Beers' *Atlas*, identification of residents was less definitive in the early decades of the century.

Tax assessments offered the same set of problems for identifying town residents since the lists described the entire hundred. We collected all names of free blacks in the hundred and then worked to confirm whether they lived in the town. In some cases, real estate was identified as being "in the town of Lewes," which helped to confirm a location.

Other sources proved particularly valuable for exploring the free black community in Lewes. These included a series of articles published by the Lewes Historical Society that focused on the free blacks of Lewes, an 1899 map of the town that showed the location of free black housing along Pilottown Road, Sanborn Insurance Company Maps that showed the landscape in the late nineteenth century, and a research file on Cato Lewis developed by Russell McCabe of the Delaware Public Archives. We were able to locate probate records for several free blacks, which allowed a better understanding of the material lives and family networks within the community in Lewes.

Case Study Narrative. Lewes was one of the earliest towns established in Delaware, built as a port town at the tip of Cape Henlopen, which created a naturally safe harbor for ocean-going vessels, and the entrance to the Delaware Bay as early as 1631. Vessels traveling up the Delaware River to Wilmington and Philadelphia often stopped in Lewes to pick up cargo, passengers, and a pilot to guide them up the river. The town served as the county seat of government until 1792, and over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, became home to a population of sailors, ship carpenters, and merchants, as well as lawyers and hotel-keepers.

The town was laid out in a rough grid, with Front, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Streets running parallel to Lewes Creek and the bay waterfront beyond (Figure 15). Ship Carpenter, Mulberry, Market, and South Streets ran inland perpendicular to Front Street. Initial residential and commercial settlement focused in the areas closest to the pier and the

center of the grid, along Front, 2nd, Mulberry, and Market Streets. As in most eighteenth-century towns in North America, residents of all races sought housing in close proximity to their places of employment, with neighborhoods based more on occupation and income than race. For example, shipbuilders congregated along Ship Carpenter Street and pilots and mariners lived along Pilottown Road.

The free black population in Lewes originated in the late eighteenth century. One of the earliest free black families to appear in Lewes was that of Cato Lewis, a former slave and master ship carpenter who purchased his sons' freedom and settled his family in Lewes. By 1820, Cato owned a "new house" along with a yoke of oxen and four pigs. Over the first few decades of the century, increasing numbers of former slaves sought work as sailors, carpenters, and laborers in the shipyards. The number of free black households in Lewes more than doubled between 1840 and 1850, stabilizing at about 30 through 1870 (Table 18). The types of households found in Lewes reflect not only the overwhelming desire to start families, but also the economic constraints of an urban environment. In 1840, almost three-quarters of the households were nuclear, but by 1850 they were almost equally divided between nuclear and extended households. As in other case studies, single adults and married couples without children rarely lived alone.

Gender and age distributions in Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred closely resembled those of other case study communities between 1830 and 1870 (Tables 19 and 20). Women slightly outnumbered men in most years. Children and young adults also consistently represented more than 60 percent of the population, while the elderly (over 55) constituted a very small minority. As in the other communities examined in this study, these figures point to a population focused on creating and growing families.

Occupations in the town of Lewes, as shown on the census records in 1850 and 1870, suggest that roughly three-quarters of free black men worked as day laborers, most likely in agriculture or in the shipyards (Table 21). A few achieved designation as ship carpenters, while others made their living as sailors on river- or ocean-going vessels. As in other communities, married women placed a high priority on caring for their families and homes. Single women worked in significant numbers as domestic servants, a practice common in urban locations.

The free black population in Lewes was dispersed throughout the town, but clustered primarily in two areas. The first was along Pilottown Road, where blacks lived in company with white ship captains, sailors, and ship carpenters. The St. Georges A.M.E. Church built its first meetinghouse and cemetery on Pilottown Road, near a small cluster of free black homes (see Figure 15). The second area of housing was located on Ship Carpenter and Market streets, west of 3rd Street. The free black population grew rapidly in this second area, which became known as Camile, through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1920s, it boasted two churches, a Du Pont school, and a Masonic lodge, in addition to houses on Ship Carpenter and Mulberry Streets and an early subdivision.

There was a significant incidence of home ownership among this free black community during the antebellum period. In 1840, 5 of the 11 free black households in Lewes owned their homes and in 1850, 7 of 28 households lived in their own dwellings. Significantly, occupation as listed in the census does not necessarily correlate with owning real estate--the landowners included five laborers and two carpenters. Looking at surnames and family histories suggests that home ownership was more likely among certain families (such as the Lewis and Summers families), and among those who had been free for at least two decades. Once purchased or built, houses tended to stay within a family through several generations. No probate data survives to tell us about the Lewis houses, but inventories for another ship carpenter, Cato Summers, and laborer Noah Burton demonstrate the quality of life some free blacks enjoyed in Lewes by 1860.

Shipbuilder Thomas Summers acquired a house and lot, probably on Pilottown Road, circa 1836. By 1840, his household included his wife, four children under age 10, and three young people between 10 and 24 years old. When he died three years later, he still owned the house and lot. His inventory demonstrated his investment in his shipbuilding business--\$31 of his total \$77 inventory value represented carpentry tools, and another \$7 represented boats and equipment, for a total of 49 percent of his assets. Approximately \$7 went towards agricultural implements and crops and the remaining \$26 (33 percent) covered household goods and furniture. In order to settle the estate, his executors (son Cato and neighbor Noah Burton) held a sale of all the inventoried goods

on October 11th, 1843. Summers and Burton were the most frequent buyers on the sales list. As a second-generation shipbuilder, Cato Summers purchased primarily carpentry and agricultural tools, as well as one boat and one bateau; he also selected a few other items for family use including a cradle, a table, and a gig. Noah Burton bought one of Thomas Summers' boats, some sails, oars, and tools, but he also purchased most of the household furniture. It is possible he was married to one of Summers' daughters, which could explain his role as co-executor and his purchase of the household goods.³⁹

Circa 1833, probably a few years after his marriage, Cato Summers acquired a house and lot from someone named Rodney, valued at \$50. He and his wife Charlotte occupied the house, probably on Market Street, with their son and daughter. Summers' business prospered and the tax assessments suggest that he either built a new house or expanded his old one circa 1850 (the value of his house jumped from \$50 in 1844 to \$275 in 1852). By 1860, only Cato and Charlotte lived in the house, along with 50-year-old Hannah Seymore, possibly the widow of their former neighbor Cato Seymore. When Cato Summers died in 1861, his house was valued at \$300 and his inventory at only \$39. Predictably, he owned carpenter's tools and boats; the few luxuries in the dwelling included a clock, two Lo Ming glasses, and a feather bed. The furniture suggests a small dwelling, probably only two rooms: one cupboard, a stove and pipe, a pine table, a desk, a rocking chair, fifteen chairs, two beds, a bureau, and a settee. In two generations, the family moved from Pilottown Road to Market Street, marking a slight improvement in their quality of life.⁴⁰

Thomas Summers' neighbor Noah Burton first appears in Lewes in 1843, as one of Thomas' executors, and by 1844 he owned a house and lot on Pilottown Road. Described as a laborer in 1850, he and his wife Hannah shared their house with two sons, Lot (19) and George (14), a daughter Rachel (19), Matilda Frame (15), and three elderly women (Diana Kollock—73, Hester Gibbs—87, and Rosanna Burton—93). By 1852, Noah and Hannah owned two houses, the one on Pilottown Road and a new one on Ship

³⁹ Research file on Thomas Summers, Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware.

⁴⁰ Research file on Cato Summers, Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware.

Carpenter Street valued at \$300. Noah died in the fall of 1858 and his inventory reflects the contents of the house on Ship Carpenter. The house most likely contained three rooms on the first floor (dining room, sitting room, and kitchen) and two chambers on the second floor, a substantial improvement over the small one- or two-room plan houses of most free blacks in this period. In comparison to Cato Summers, who lived two blocks away on Market Street and whose inventory was valued at \$39, Noah's inventory totaled \$112, most of which represented household goods but also included some tools, a boat, a bateau, and a cow. Noah's son Lot inherited the house on Ship Carpenter and purchased the one on Pilottown Road at the vendue.⁴¹

By 1860, widowed Hannah Burton still lived on Ship Carpenter with her two sons (John L[ot?] and George), John's wife Charlotte, and 90-year-old Diana Kollock. Ten years later, both Hannah and Diana had died, while John and Charlotte had filled the house with four children, the eldest named for grandfather Noah. George, who worked as a farm laborer, shared a house with Thomas (a waterman) and Lydia Robinson and their baby, possibly the house and lot on Pilottown Road. When George died in 1879, the house was sold to George Rush.

Given its location as a prominent port town, with plenty of access to boats and knowledge of the water, Lewes seemed a likely destination for freedom-seekers, particularly given the absence of a strong slave-owning population. However, as in other case studies, specific evidence has proven difficult to identify beyond a few narratives in the Still collection. Yet, one individual deserves further exploration as a potential activist with the Underground Railroad. Peter Lewis, one of Cato's sons, was born into slavery and freed by purchase by 1820. Peter was a sailor, perhaps even a ship's captain, who traveled up and down the Delaware River and Bay regularly. In addition to this work, he also traveled as a Methodist circuit rider for the A.M.E. Church and is credited with initiating multiple new congregations in Sussex and southern Kent County. William Brinkley used Lewis as a reference in his first letter to William Still, indicating that Lewis' travels took him as far as Camden. He built a network of personal connections

⁴¹ Research file on Noah Burton, Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware.

throughout the Delmarva Peninsula, ranging from Philadelphia and Wilmington south to Lewes and Laurel that may have played a role in the Underground Railroad. Although no narratives have yet been found that credit Lewis by name, one of Thomas Garrett's accounts may refer to him:

The brig Alvena, of Lewistown, is in the Delaware opposite here, with four females on board. The colored man, who has them in charge, was employed by the husband of one of them to bring his wife up. When he arrived here, he found the man had left. As the vessel is bound to Red Bank, I have advised him to take them there in the Vessel, and tomorrow take them in the steamboat to the city, and to the Anti-slavery office.⁴²

Further research into Peter Lewis, particularly his connections within the A.M.E. Church, could prove fruitful in identifying escape narratives and possible associations with other local free blacks who may have participated in the Underground Railroad.⁴³

Conclusion

Thus, it is clear that for those free blacks fortunate to find skilled or semi-skilled labor in the town of Lewes, there was significant room for economic growth and the improvement of one's quality of life. Churches, schools, and even a black Masonic Lodge would further enhance the social life and networking of blacks in Lewes after the Civil War (Figures 16 and 17). At the same time, however, the community was increasingly segregated to one section of town, following the patterns seen in both West Laurel and Polktown.

⁴² Letter from Thomas Garrett to William Still, August 25, 1859; Still, *The Underground Railroad*, p. 641.

⁴³ Research file on Peter Lewis, Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware.

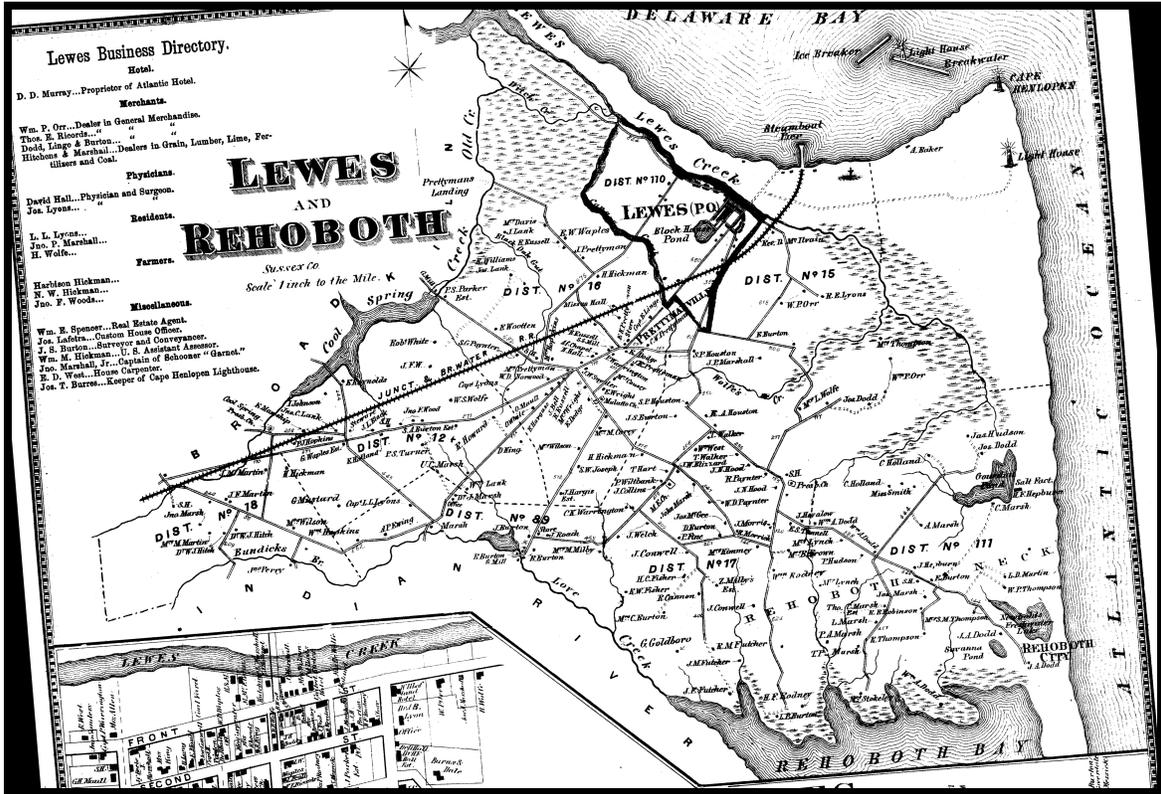


Figure 13: Map of Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred, Beers' *Atlas of Delaware*, 1868.

**Slave Owners in Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred
Sussex County, Delaware ca.1860**

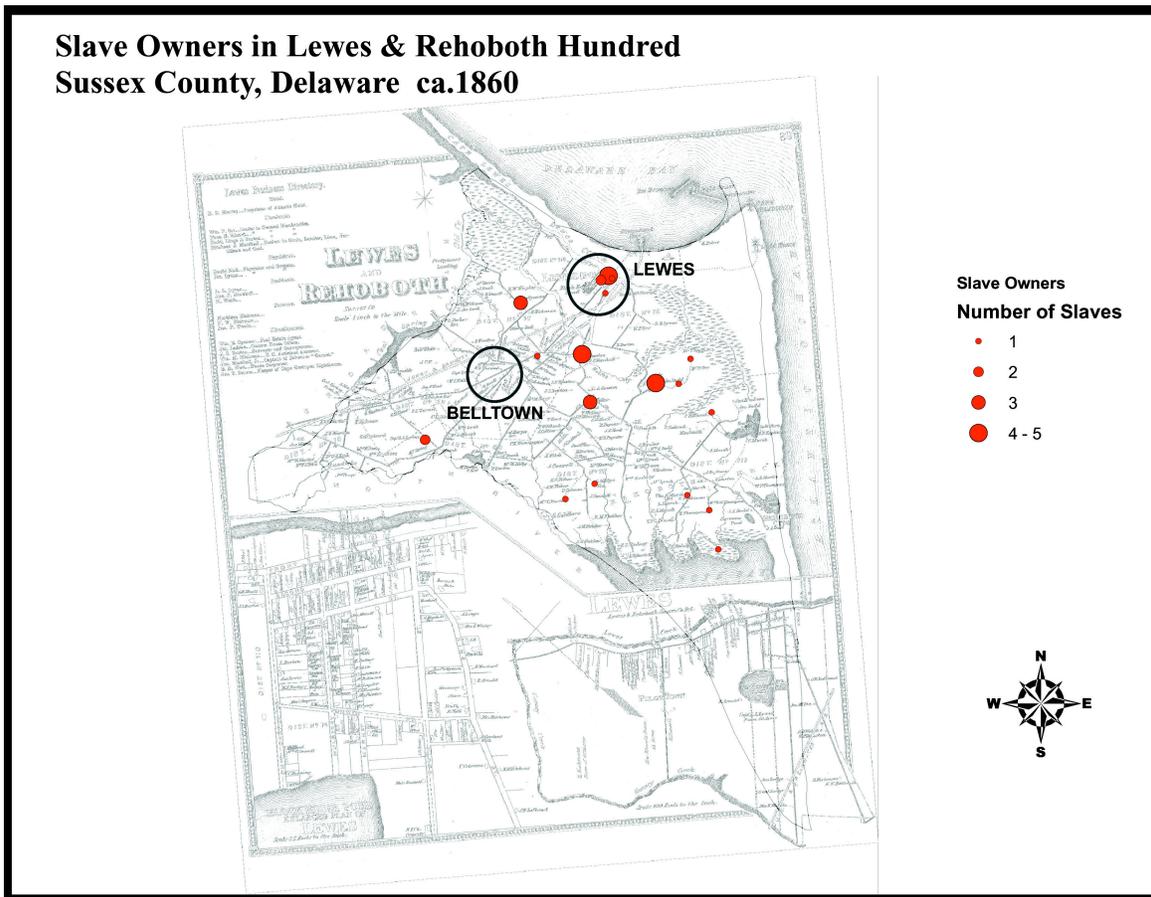


Figure 14: Slave Owners in Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred, 1860.

Table 16: Free Black Population in Lewes and Rehoboth Hundred, 1800-1870

| Year | 1800 | 1810 | 1820 | 1830 | 1840 | 1850 | 1860 | 1870 |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| In Free Black Households | 199 | N/A | 238 | 394 | 413 | 401 | 484 | 482 |
| In White Households | --- | --- | --- | 91 | 105 | 154 | 95 | 83 |
| Total | 199 | N/A | 238 | 485 | 518 | 555 | 586 | 565 |

Table 17: Types of Free Black Households in Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred, 1820-1870

| Year | 1820 | 1830 | 1840 | 1850 | 1860 | 1870 |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Nuclear Family | 23 / 48% | 38 / 55% | 45 / 51% | 29 / 39% | 49 / 55% | 43 / 45% |
| Extended Family | 13 / 27% | 22 / 32% | 16 / 18% | 39 / 53% | 29 / 32% | 37 / 39% |
| Unclear (Nuclear or Extended) | 7 / 15% | 6 / 8% | 15 / 17% | 4 / 5% | 2 / 2% | 7 / 7% |
| Single Person or Married Couple | 5 / 10% | 3 / 4% | 12 / 14% | 2 / 3% | 10 / 11% | 8 / 9% |
| Total | 48 | 69 | 88 | 74 | 90 | 95 |

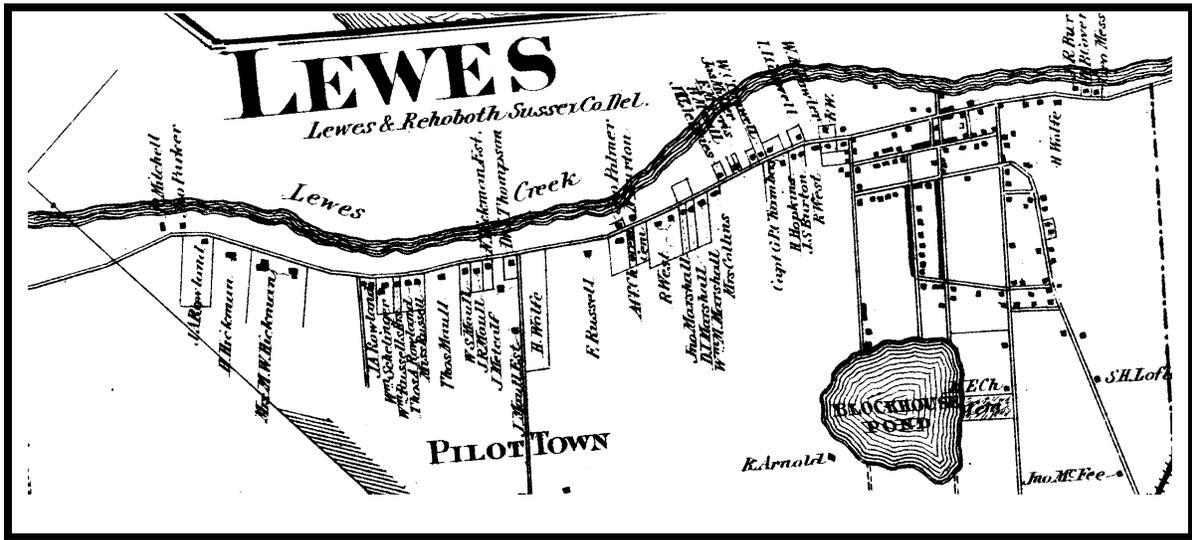


Figure 15: Map of the Town of Lewes and Pilottown, Beers' *Atlas of Delaware*, 1868.

Table 18: Types of Free Black Households in the Town of Lewes, 1840-1870

| Year | 1840 | 1850 | 1870 |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Nuclear Family | 8 / 73% | 11 / 39% | 13 / 42% |
| Extended Family | 1 / 9% | 15 / 54% | 12 / 39% |
| Single Person or Married Couple | 2 / 18% | 2 / 7% | 6 / 19% |
| Total | 11 | 28 | 31 |

Table 19: Gender Distribution of Free Black Population in Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred, 1830-1870

| Year | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1830 | 234/48% | 251/52% | 485 |
| 1840 | 267/52% | 251/48% | 518 |
| 1850 | 267/48% | 288/52% | 557 |
| 1860 | 274/47% | 312/53% | 586 |
| 1870 | 281/50% | 284/50% | 565 |

Table 20: Age Distribution of Free Black Population in Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred, 1830-1870

| Year | Ages | | | | | Total |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| | 0-10 | 10-24 | 24-36 | 36-55 | 55-100 | |
| 1830 | 189/39% | 132/27% | 76/16% | 63/13% | 24/5% | 485 |
| 1840 | 167/32% | 132/25% | 86/17% | 80/16% | 53/10% | 518 |
| 1850 | 187/34% | 172/31% | 82/15% | 67/12% | 47/8% | 555 |
| 1860 | 182/32% | 201/34% | 84/14% | 81/13% | 38/7% | 586 |
| 1870 | 174/31% | 181/32% | 88/16% | 82/14% | 40/7% | 565 |

Table 21: Distribution of Occupations Held by Free Blacks in the Town of Lewes, 1850-1870

| Occupation | Year | |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 1850 | 1870 |
| Agriculture | 1 / 4% | 6 / 9% |
| Carpentry | 2 / 8% | 0 |
| Day Labor | 19 / 72% | 44 / 68% |
| Maritime | 3 / 12% | 2 / 3% |
| Domestic service | 0 | 13 / 20% |
| Trades | 1 / 4% | 0 / 0% |
| Total | 26 | 65 |



Figure 16: St. Georges A.M.E. Church, Ship Carpenter Street, Lewes.

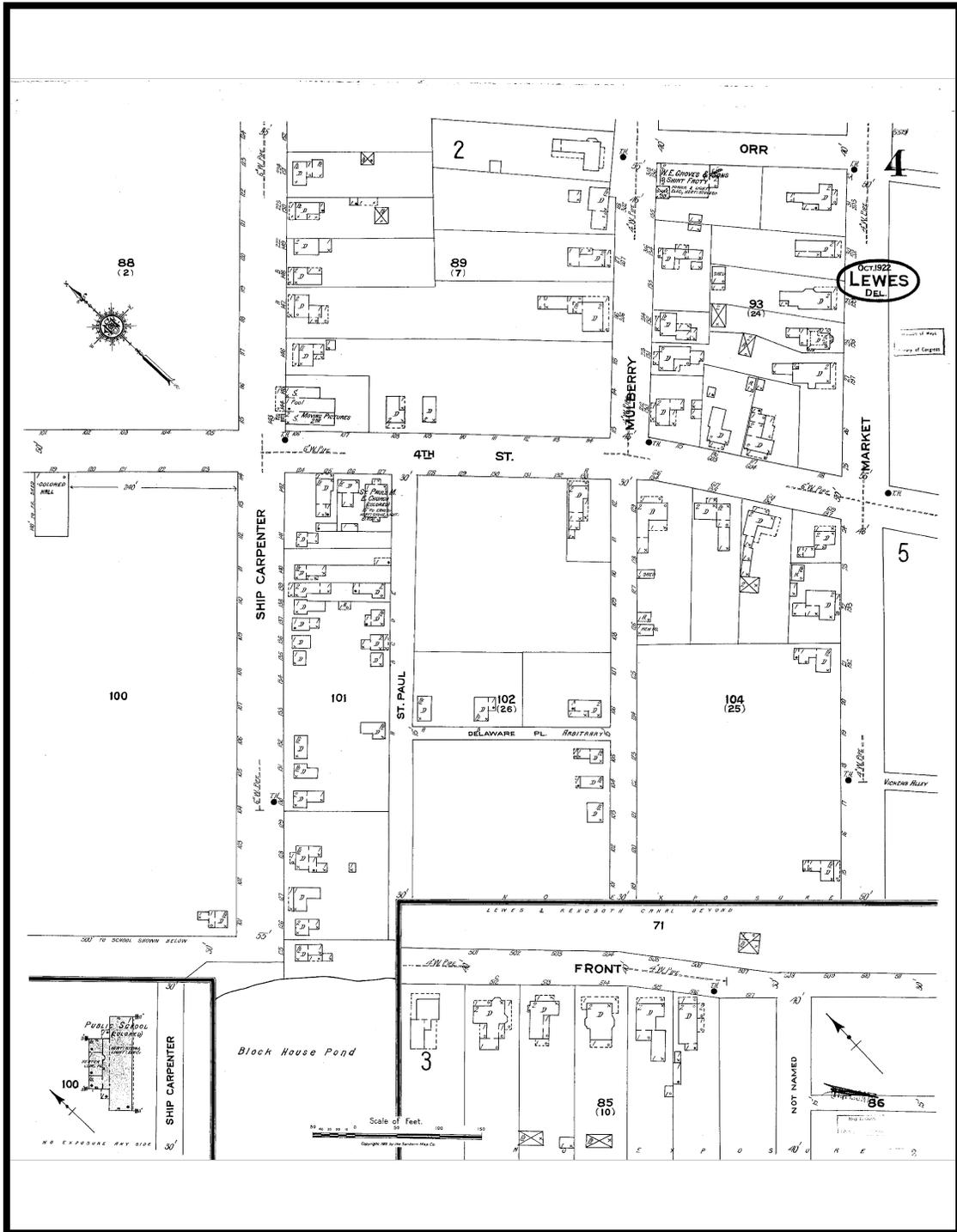


Figure 17: Sanborn Insurance Company Map of Lewes, 1922, showing concentration of African-American churches and meeting hall around Ship Carpenter Street and 4th Streets.

Belltown, Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred, Sussex County

Methodology Introduction. Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred is located on the eastern side of Sussex County, at the mouth of the Delaware Bay where it meets the Atlantic Ocean (see Figure 13). This hundred contained some of the earliest settlement in the state, including the town of Lewes, which developed as a port of entry to the Delaware Bay. Although Lewes & Rehoboth was located in a county that sustained the practice of slavery all the way up to the start of the Civil War, many of the residents of this hundred abandoned the practice much earlier. In 1800, Lewes and Rehoboth Hundred contained 230 free blacks and 239 slaves. By 1820, the total number of blacks dropped from 469 to 415, but the balance shifted to 305 free blacks and only 111 slaves, suggesting a major wave of manumissions in this period. By 1850, there were only 68 slaves remaining in the hundred and by 1860, 37 of them were described as fugitives.⁴⁴ Overall, the total population of free blacks in the hundred increased by 250 percent from 1800 to 1840, and remained stable at about 560 individuals between 1850 and 1870 (see Tables 16 and 17).

Belltown was a cluster of houses, churches, and a school located to the west of Lewes along several roads that meet near an intersection known in the nineteenth century as Prettymanville (Figures 18 and 19). Like many rural free black communities, this one spreads in a linear fashion along present day Lewes-Georgetown Highway, Beaver Dam Road, and Plantations Road. Loose geographic boundaries for this community were defined by the project team after examining Beers' *Atlas* and comparing it to the surviving landscape.

Variations in the method of recording the population census complicated our ability to identify residents of Belltown. Throughout the entire study period the area was simply included with the rest of Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred. In addition, the 1800 census simply listed all free black households at the end of the manuscript, providing no context for neighborhoods. In 1810, several hundreds in Sussex County were lumped together in one list, making the situation even more murky. In that same year, 85 of the

⁴⁴ Lewes and Rehoboth Hundred U.S. Population Census data, 1800-1870.

305 free black households had no last name other than “negro”, suggesting the possibility that they were recently manumitted slaves who had yet to select a surname. Many of the surnames given in later years reflect names of white families who may have been slaveholders in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Maull, Burton, Cannon, Kollock, etc), also suggesting a pattern of early manumission.

Once again we followed the same practice used in other case studies, working backward from the 1870 census and Beers’ *Atlas*, looking for clusters of free black households in the census whose names matched those on the map. Although some free blacks owned property early in Belltown’s history, most did not. Thus, we also looked for the households of white property owners that could be located in the vicinity of Belltown on the map and often found free black households nearby.

Tax assessments offered the same set of problems for identifying town residents since the lists described the entire hundred. We collected all names of free blacks in the hundred and then worked to confirm whether they lived in Belltown. Title traces in Belltown proved particularly problematic. Although we found documentary evidence that certain free blacks owned land, we were unable to find deeds showing how they acquired the land. This area warrants further research.

The end result is that although Belltown survives on the landscape today, piecing together the archival evidence for its history is far more difficult than in the other case studies. Because we have been unable to create anything that resembles a comprehensive list of residents for Belltown, it is impossible to conduct any detailed analysis of population demographics for this community. Much of the discussion that follows is anecdotal, based on the few individuals we were able to trace back from the 1870 census.

Case Study Narrative. Most residents of Belltown were likely former slaves, manumitted by their owners for religious reasons or freed by purchasing themselves from their masters. Between 1850 and 1870, slave owners who owned farms within a three-mile radius of Belltown included Captain Laban L. Lyons, Shepherd Houston, Robert Russell, Joel Prettyman, Joshua S. Burton, and Zadoc Milby. In 1860, all of them reported at least some of their former slaves as fugitives or manumitted; out of 68 slaves

on the schedule, 38 were listed as fugitives, and 27 as manumitted.⁴⁵ By 1870, Belltown consisted of at least 18 free black households, most of which were supported by a combination of day labor and/or farming.

Local legend claims that the community of Belltown began when a man named Jacob Bell bought land in the area around 1840 and sold it to his fellow free blacks.⁴⁶ However, this is difficult to confirm from the deed records or tax assessments. Born about 1790, Jacob Bell arrived in Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred by 1820, living near Cato and Peter Lewis, and also near several white households that contained both free blacks and slaves, possibly including some of Bell's family. He may be one of at least two Jacobs listed in the 1810 census with the surname "negro." The census for 1820 suggests that Bell was married to his wife, Nancy, and they had produced three sons under the age of fourteen. Ten years later, Bell and his wife managed a household that included son Jacob and three daughters and still lived in a location that included both white and free black households; the surnames of surrounding property owners suggest that the family was in the Belltown vicinity by this time. By 1840, Jacob Bell owned a house and lot in Belltown, and the community was clearly taking shape around him; at least ten of the sixteen households listed on either side of Bell were black, including those of Orange White, Cyrus Maull, and London Hall, surnames that would appear as property owners in Belltown over the next two decades. Yet, there is no record of Bell purchasing his house or selling the land he reputedly shared with his fellow free blacks; it is possible his house and lot was acquired as a gift from his former master. His holdings never amounted to anything more than the single house and lot and some livestock.⁴⁷

In 1850, Bell, age 60, gave his occupation as clergyman; his household included his wife, Nancy, and four of their children, Betsy (age 27), Mary (19), Jacob (20, working as a laborer), and Peter (2). Jacob died in the 1850s; his wife Nancy and son Jacob Jr.

⁴⁵ U.S. Federal Slave Schedules, 1850 and 1860, Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred.

⁴⁶ Peter Dalleo, "The Growth of Delaware's Antebellum Free African American Community," (in *A History of African Americans of Delaware & Maryland's Eastern Shore*, edited by Carole C. Marks, Wilmington: Delaware Heritage Commission, 1998), p.152; Williams, *Slavery and Freedom*, p. 211; Hilda Norwood, "Belltown: A Recollection," *Journal of the Lewes Historical Society*, Volume IV, November 2001, p. 21.

⁴⁷ Research file on Jacob Bell, Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware.

remained in the house in Belltown. Jacob Jr. married circa 1860; he and his son Caleb both worked as laborers in 1880 while wife Catherine kept house. A quick look at census records suggests that many of Jacob Bell Sr.'s children and grandchildren moved out of the Belltown area, to locations including Wilmington, Philadelphia, Maryland, and the Ohio River valley.

Most of the residents of Belltown worked in agriculture—either as farmers on their own small lots or as laborers for neighboring farms. Their lifestyle suggests a strong similarity to the house and garden property type seen in Central Delaware—their lots seem to have been large enough to support small herds of livestock, along with small orchards and kitchen gardens. Livestock included yokes of oxen, small numbers of milk cows and beef cattle, pigs, chicken, and sheep. Ownership of sheep and the presence of looms and spinning wheels in probate inventories suggests that the women in the families contributed through home manufacture of cloth. By later in the nineteenth century, women seemed to take a more active role in generating income for the family; a number were employed as domestic servants in 1860 and 1870. Perhaps the fact that the men were involved in agricultural tasks allowed the women to seek domestic employment in nearby Lewes. However, this contradicts the pattern seen elsewhere and warrants further exploration.⁴⁸

The Drain family lived in Belltown from circa 1820 through the 1890s and provides an excellent example of typical family strategies. Like Jacob Bell, Solomon Drain first appeared in Lewes and Rehoboth Hundred in 1820 with a household of nine people. He purchased ten acres of land from Elizabeth Paynter circa 1830-33. He built a small house on the property and amassed a small herd of livestock, including three yokes of oxen, two to four milk cows and beef cattle, six to fifteen sheep, a sow and her shoats, and some chickens. Solomon and his family spread their employment efforts across both agricultural and maritime pursuits, with two of the ten-person household working in agriculture in 1840 and three as sailors. The 1850 census suggests that Solomon may have built a second house on his farm, to accommodate his large family. Solomon, his wife Linah, and a woman named Elizabeth Draper lived in one household, while adult

⁴⁸ Norwood, “Belltown: A Recollection,” pp. 21-30.

sons Robert, Jacob, and James lived in the second with 11-year-old Emeline and 2-year-old Eva Draper.⁴⁹

Solomon died in 1851; in his will, he left one-third of his real and personal estate to his wife and the rest to three of his four sons (Robert, Jacob, and James) with instructions that they were to occupy the land jointly and pay small cash bequests to his older son Abraham and his three daughters, Hannah, Mary, and Eliza (Draper?). Debts owed by the estate forced Linah to sell the land to James and Charles King circa 1856, although the family seems to have continued to live on the property, possibly as renters for several more years.

In August 1851, two neighbors valued Solomon's possessions at a total of \$169. The contents of the inventory included a few luxuries, such as some pictures, a mantle clock, and carpeting, but the majority of the items focused on agriculture (livestock and basic implements described as old). He also owned carpenters tools and some coopering supplies, which he may have used to barter services with neighbors. He owned a share in "a growing crop of corn," suggesting that he cooperated with his neighbors to produce food for the livestock. The family diet likely consisted of pork and beef, with milk provided by a single cow. The presence of three spinning wheels, a loom with tackling, fifteen pounds of wool, and ten sheep indicates that Linah and her three daughters were engaged in the production of thread and cloth, either for home consumption or for market.

After the sale of the family land, the Drains struggled to survive economically. By 1860, the family had settled into two households: Jacob, his wife Maria, and their son Robert occupied one building, while James lived in the other with his wife Sarah, son Isaac, and mother Linah. Robert (a mariner) had moved to Philadelphia and lived with the family of Benton Horner, a carter. Shortly after the census was taken, both James and Jacob moved their families to Indian River Hundred, settling near their older brother Solomon and (uncle?) Daniel. Neither owned land but James apparently rented a farm and Jacob worked as a day laborer. Both families grew and by 1880, the two brothers

⁴⁹ Research file on Solomon Drain, Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware.

took different paths. James moved his family of seven, now including his widowed mother-in-law and two of his wife's siblings, to Philadelphia, where the men found work driving "furniture" cars. Jacob, on the other hand, returned with his family to Belltown, where he managed to purchase a small farm. When he died in 1891, the inventory of his estate revealed that his farming strategy differed slightly from that of his father earlier in the century. He owned a yoke of oxen, a few hogs and cows, and 40 chickens, but no sheep. He grew corn on 5 acres of his own land plus another 2 acres rented from Leven Lank. Like many farmers in the region, he also grew vegetables including "round" potatoes, sweet potatoes, lima beans, and cabbage. Some of these crops formed part of the family diet but they were also grown for sale to local canneries.

The house and garden property type carries through the actual housing as well. Several buildings survive from the mid-nineteenth century in Belltown (Figure 20, see also Figure 7). While not identical to one another, they share a number of basic characteristics—they are built of frame construction, 1 ½ or 2 stories high, usually one or two rooms on the ground floor. Some display the small second-floor frieze windows typical of central Delaware house and gardens.

The use of housing in Belltown during the mid-nineteenth century suggests a strong spirit of cooperation—the census lists several households that included multiple families, often poorer families who supported themselves primarily by day labor and could only afford to rent their houses. The community included homeowners as well as tenants—in 1870, at least 7 of the 18 households in the core of Belltown were owner-occupied. Sharing a house with another family reduced the cost of housing for both families. For example, in 1870, George and Hetty Hopkins shared a house with Moses and Mary Brereton. Both men worked as day laborers, while their wives kept house; neither of the young couples had children, which likely meant that each couple occupied a private bedroom. In other cases, shared living circumstances reflected extended families, with parents offering a home to married children and their families until they could amass the resources necessary to acquire a home of their own or elderly grandparents living with children and grandchildren. Jacob Bell Jr., for example, shared his home with his mother and his 8-year-old son Caleb; George and Elizabeth Short also

lived in the house along with their two sons (Thomas, age 21, and James H., age 16). It is likely that Elizabeth was Jacob's older sister; this strategy allowed the two families to pool their resources more effectively, although providing cramped quarters.

The story of Woolsey Foster presents a stark contrast to these patterns of family cooperation. Born circa 1779 and described as a mulatto, Woolsey was likely freed between 1800 and 1810, when he first appeared in the population census. Through 1830, he lived in Dagsboro Hundred, but after his marriage to Jane Hansor in 1830 he moved to Belltown. By 1840, Woolsey and Jane's household included 2 young sons, plus 3 others—1 male and 2 female—between the ages of 10 and 24. These may have been Jane's children from an earlier marriage, or other extended family members. Foster did not own any land so he likely rented a small property. Like Solomon Drain, he owned 2 yokes of oxen, 1 milk cow and her calf, 2 beef cattle and 6 young pigs, which provided a diet similar to that of the Drains. However, despite the presence of young women in the household, he did not invest in sheep for production of cloth. By 1850, Woolsey was the only Foster left in Lewes and Rehoboth Hundred. Either his entire family had died or they had relocated—the census shows several Fosters in other locations throughout the Delaware Valley. The fact that Woolsey did not move with his children as he aged suggests the possibility of tension in the family. In 1850, 71-year-old Woolsey lived with the family of Lamuel Lodge, a white farmer in the Belltown area, and worked as a laborer on Lodge's farm. When Woolsey died in 1858, the contents of his inventory (valued at only \$27) describe a simple life, possibly occupying a room in some one else's house. However, he demonstrated a capacity for saving: at the time of his death his bank account in Georgetown contained \$300 and he was owed another \$380 by twelve local men, including Lodge, John Corsey, Orange White, Stephen Norwood, and Isaac King, among others. These debts may have been for Woolsey's labor, or they may have been loans to members of his community.

Free black communities frequently built their own churches. Possibly encouraged by Jacob Bell and Peter Lewis, the little community of Belltown supported two churches by 1868, an African chapel and an A.M.E. Church (see Figure 19). By the early twentieth century, these developed as the John Wesley United Methodist Church and

Israel United Methodist Church, which still stand today (Figure 21). Land for the churches was donated by members of the free black community in Belltown, John Henry Bell and Israel Jackson.⁵⁰

By 1867, Belltown had its first black school, a one-room wooden school built with help from the Freedmen's Bureau. Fifty years later, P.S. DuPont identified this as one of the schools that needed to be upgraded. He funded construction of a new two-room wooden schoolhouse that remained in use until 1965 (Figure 22).⁵¹

Although the frequency of slaveownership declined rapidly in Lewes & Rehoboth Hundred by the mid-nineteenth century, the Belltown area was surrounded by several white property owners who owned slaves, suggesting that the community would not have been a safe haven for runaways. On the other hand, many of the slave owners whose slaves escaped lived near waterways that may have offered a ready escape route. At least one slave escaped from the Belltown area, from a master named Shepherd Houston. In company with three other men (two of whom were claimed by Dr. David H. Houston of Houston Landing in Broadkilm Hundred, the third by blacksmith Thomas Carper), William Thomas "borrowed" a skiff from the beach in Lewes and rowed for approximately 18 hours, finally reaching Cape May, New Jersey. After landing, they were spotted by an oyster boat captain, who offered to transport them up the river to Philadelphia, where they made contact with William Still.⁵²

Conclusion

Belltown's survival into the twentieth century can be largely attributed to the same factors that led to its beginning. Residents were able to find steady work as day laborers, combining subsistence farming at home with day labor for local farmers, orchards, and watermen's activities. The ability to acquire land and homes tied many families to the landscape, encouraging the expansion of kinship networks. The community grew large enough to sustain several churches and to build its own school,

⁵⁰ Norwood, "Belltown," pp. 21-25.

⁵¹ Norwood, "Belltown," p. 24; Skelcher, *African American Education in Delaware*, p. 73..

⁵² Still, *Underground Railroad*.

offering their children much-needed education. The community persists today, although heavily threatened by the pressures of development and road construction.



Figure 20: House in Belltown.



Figure 21: Israel United Methodist Church, Belltown.



Figure 22: Rabbit's Ferry School (1922), Belltown. Source: Delaware Public Archives, Digital Photo Archives.

West Laurel, Little Creek Hundred, Sussex County

Methodology Introduction. Laurel was initially selected for study because of its history as a major nineteenth century port town, located along a navigable waterway, the Broad Creek (Figure 23). Laurel was likely an employment center for free blacks, who worked on ships or in shipyards as ship carpenters and sailors. Free blacks living in or around Laurel may have not only had personal knowledge of the navigation of the Broad Creek but also access to boats. For these reasons, Laurel had potential as a site of free black involvement in Underground Railroad (UGRR) activity where fugitive slaves found their way to freedom by using the Broad Creek as a water escape route with assistance from local free blacks. Theoretically, fugitive slaves journeyed from Laurel down Broad Creek to the Nanticoke River, then north toward Seaford or Bridgeville.

While areas for research were being selected based on their proximity to potential water escape routes, simultaneous research was being done to identify whether or not large populations of free blacks were living in or around the town of Laurel, in Little Creek Hundred. An examination of census records dating from 1800 to 1870 showed that during this period, a population of free blacks was growing along the western periphery of the town in an area known as West Laurel. These conditions were indicative of the beginnings of a black community in the study area.

Because the census for Little Creek Hundred in 1800 lists free blacks at the end of the census (rather than accounting for them as they were encountered by the census taker during his enumeration process) it is not possible to determine whether these blacks are living in close proximity to each other. However, the census does reveal that there were at least 94 free blacks living in Little Creek Hundred at that time. By 1820, free black households were listed within the census as they occurred along the census taker's route, making it possible to locate free black households within the town and determine neighbor-relationships.

Census data was transcribed into a comprehensive database for all Delaware population census years between 1800 and 1870. When both Laurel and Little Creek Hundred had census records in the same year, each location's census information was

transcribed. Census record information for the town of Laurel alone was only available for the years 1810, 1830, 1870, and 1880. This inconsistency inhibited, to some extent, the long-range statistical analysis of data from Laurel specifically. Therefore, occupation, education, gender, and household statistical data for Laurel had to be aggregated as it pertained to the whole of Little Creek Hundred. Furthermore, the boundaries between Laurel and the settlement of West Laurel, not formally annexed as part of Laurel until the 1980s, remained blurry throughout the nineteenth century. Sometimes, individuals known to live in West Laurel were enumerated within the Laurel census, while at other times these same individuals were excluded from the Laurel census and enumerated as part of the Little Creek Hundred census. Once census transcription was completed, a clearer picture of the development of the free black community of West Laurel was visible. Clustering of the black population was apparent in West Laurel as early as 1820.

During the preliminary stages of research, research assistants at CHAD also began to map the locations of slave owners in Delaware as a way to pin-point potential free black settlements. Using slave schedules from 1860 in conjunction with Beers' Atlas, the team at CHAD was able to identify a large population of slave owners in Little Creek Hundred (Figure 24). The high concentration of slave owners in Little Creek Hundred supported the potential for a large number of free blacks to continue to live in the area upon emancipation, tied to family members still enslaved or to employment connections. These findings further reinforced the likelihood of free black involvement in Underground Railroad activity occurring in and around Laurel.

Concurrent field visits to the town also confirmed the existence of a free black population in West Laurel. Nineteenth-century architecture lined the main roads leading through the settlement and two historically black churches--New Zion United Methodist and Mt. Pisgah African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.)--with late nineteenth century date stones also occupied the main access roads. The community also incorporated an elementary school named for the famous late-nineteenth century black poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar. An examination of gravestones in both the New Zion and Mt. Pisgah A.M.E. churchyards shed even more light on early free black settlement in West Laurel.

Several head stones in the church yards belonged to black men and women who appeared in early nineteenth century census records from Little Creek Hundred. Several photographs were taken during this field visit—of dwellings, church buildings, and gravestones. Once the names of nineteenth-century free black residents of Little Creek Hundred were transcribed into a database, and cross-referenced with photographs and notes taken during the field visit, it became easier to identify members of the black community who resided in West Laurel.

In order to further investigate the depth and extent of free black settlement in West Laurel, tax assessment records were transcribed into the database, allowing for the discovery of the value of real and personal possessions belonging to free blacks living in West Laurel. Furthermore, an assessment of the relative wealth of free blacks during the period (1800 to 1870) allowed for a comparison of their wealth to that of whites living in Laurel. These records also allowed for the investigation of the lifeways of free blacks in West Laurel; for example, many of them owned a small number of livestock (usually a cow, some pigs and sometimes sheep or a horse) indicating a practice of providing for themselves and their families through subsistence farming. Free blacks with greater holdings of livestock or those who also owned land likely engaged in farming at a more extensive level, selling surplus crops for profit. These assertions were corroborated with occupational data provided in census records. Comparisons between tax assessment and population census records also helped to identify the property holdings and financial resources of free blacks that worked as sailors, ship carpenters, or fishermen with access to maritime facilities and accoutrements.

Manumission records of free blacks in Little Creek Hundred were obtained from Sussex County deed records found both at the Recorder of Deeds office in Georgetown and at the Delaware Public Archives. These records served to link specific slave owners with their soon-to-be-former slaves by name, and enabled the tracking of specific individuals, now known to be former slaves, through the Little Creek Hundred landscape. By identifying individuals who were likely some of the strongest opponents of slavery in the area, more conjectures could be made about the identity of free black individuals who may have been linked to Underground Railroad activity in West Laurel. However,

findings in West Laurel suggest that free blacks who were further removed from a first-hand experience of slavery were those rumored by local history to be involved in UGRR activity.

A final important note about the West Laurel case study is that it served as the topic of a masters' thesis by Kimberly Toney, one of the CHAD graduate research assistants on this project. For that reason, Ms Toney conducted more in-depth research on West Laurel than was carried out for the other communities. Most significantly, she interviewed several local residents regarding their memories of the neighborhood. Much of the following narrative is derived from Toney's masters' thesis, titled "In Consideration of Divers Good Causes": The Development and Persistence of a Free Black Community in Laurel, Delaware 1800-1900."⁵³

Case Study Narrative. Through the late eighteenth century, uncertainty about the boundaries between Delaware and Maryland limited durable settlement in western Sussex County. Once durable settlement began in force in western Sussex County by the 1780s, the structure of the economy there relied on agriculture for both subsistence and profit. Sussex County's proximity to the slave culture of the Chesapeake influenced the widespread development of a slave-labor system, where farmers depended upon blacks in bondage to raise crops such as corn and tobacco.⁵⁴

While men and women alike toiled in the large agricultural fields abundant throughout Little Creek Hundred, located in the southern corner of southwestern Sussex County, saw and grist mills could also be found in abundance throughout the area by the early nineteenth century. Processed lumber from mills and agricultural produce grown on the farms in the area was shipped down the Broad Creek from the large port town of Laurel. Goods shipped from Laurel down the Nanticoke River would make their way to urban markets in Baltimore or Norfolk. Textile production also played a part in the development of the local economy in Laurel, evidenced by the fact that 57 percent of all

⁵³ Kimberly M. Toney, "In Consideration of Divers Good Causes": The Development and Persistence of a Free Black Community in Laurel, Delaware 1800-1900" (Master's Thesis, University of Delaware, 2009).

⁵⁴ 2004 *Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan*, p. 34.

households in 1810 contained a loom and nearly 40 percent of all Little Creek Hundred residents owned sheep by 1820.

Laid out in 1802, Laurel, located in the Lower Peninsula/Cypress Swamp Zone of Delaware, developed as a port town dependent upon agriculture, forestry, and home industry. Named for the laurel bushes growing along the banks of the creek, Laurel was, and is, an integral part of the Nanticoke River Watershed, part of the Chesapeake Bay. By the mid-nineteenth century, Laurel was home to successful European and European-American settlers--many of whom owned slaves. By the end of the nineteenth century, Laurel was the largest town in Sussex County, and economic success in Laurel continued to influence a rise in the black population living on the town's western periphery.⁵⁵

By the 1820s, Laurel was one of the fastest growing towns in western Sussex County, its population expanding rapidly while the export of lumber and grain remained the most lucrative industries in town. As Little Creek Hundred's wealthiest white residents began to free slaves to save the costs of sustaining a year-round population of slave laborers, the numbers of free blacks living in Little Creek Hundred increased (Table 22). By 1800, 18 households (out of a total of 334) in Little Creek Hundred were headed by free blacks, comprising a total of 79 individuals. As the mid-nineteenth century approached, the free black population in Little Creek Hundred began to converge upon an area located just west of the town of Laurel, demonstrating the degree of success and opportunity available to free blacks (Figure 25).⁵⁶

The origins of the free black community in West Laurel lie in the early nineteenth century. Early black settlement by this time consisted of a few dwellings along the "county road leading from Laurel to Portsville."⁵⁷ Through the nineteenth century, the population of free blacks in West Laurel grew, and so too did the number of dwellings and the network of streets in the area. The proximity of West Laurel to the town of Laurel—whose lumber, vegetable, and later, fruit, exportation industries contributed to

⁵⁵ J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Delaware* (Philadelphia: L.J. Richards & Co., 1888), p. 1328; Judith Quinn and Bernard L. Herman, *National Register of Historic Places: Eligible Sites in Little Creek and Broad Creek Hundreds Sussex County, Delaware* (Newark: Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware, 1986), p. 3.

⁵⁶ Quinn and Herman, *Eligible Sites in Little Creek and Broad Creek Hundreds*, p. 5.

⁵⁷ SCRD: Book 49, pp. 454-455, Samuel Huffington from Nathaniel Hearn & Wife, 1840.

economic success in the area—enabled free blacks to work and foster professional and social relationships within Laurel, while they lived in a community of their peers just outside of town. Defined by the mid-nineteenth century as an area of all-black settlement, West Laurel was home to many who worked in specialized professions, likely serving a clientele of blacks and whites in Laurel and throughout Little Creek Hundred (Table 23).

One of the principal streets through the free black community was this “county road from Laurel to Portsville,” now called West Sixth Street. Today, the remnants of the historic black settlement are most visible along this short stretch of road. Private dwellings—mostly two-story frame—are inserted between and around West Sixth Street's New Zion United Methodist Church and the Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School. Townsend Street, intersecting with the western terminus of West Sixth Street, is one of the principal access roads into the community from the town of Laurel and is another important street serving to define the boundaries of the black community in West Laurel. On Townsend Street one finds Mt. Pisgah African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church and a similar range of historic dwellings as those along West Sixth Street.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the number of free black households in Little Creek Hundred stood at 18. By 1830, that number would grow to 58, an increase of more than 200 percent. These numbers continued to increase steadily throughout the nineteenth century. Of those 58 households in 1830, 16 were either in Laurel or West Laurel. By 1860, the number of free black households in Little Creek Hundred rose another 50 percent, to 87.⁵⁸

Throughout the nineteenth century, the majority of free black households in West Laurel were built around a nuclear family structure – that is, a family of two adults (mother and father) and one or more children. The strong desire to create a whole family unit is further emphasized by the fact that from the mid- to the late-nineteenth century, extended family households began to appear with more frequency throughout Little

⁵⁸ Census data, Little Creek Hundred, 1800-1870.

Creek Hundred (Table 24).⁵⁹ Although the nature of employment for some free blacks (as domestic servants or farm laborers) may have required that they reside in the households of their white employers, the pattern of residence in Little Creek Hundred shows that the majority of free blacks were living in all-black households. The fact that a growing number of free black households in Little Creek Hundred were able to maintain a nuclear family structure may be attributable to the fact that the ratio of free black males to free black females remained relatively stable throughout the nineteenth century. Female free blacks in Little Creek Hundred outnumbered their male counterparts by only a slight margin between 1800 and 1870 (Table 25).⁶⁰

By 1830, more than 80 percent of blacks in the Lower Peninsula/Cypress Swamp Zone of Delaware were free.⁶¹ By this time, several free blacks in the Laurel area, including Haste Miller, Abraham Spencer and Richard Parker, had begun to acquire personal property in the form of cows, pigs, and occasionally a yoke of oxen or a horse. Whites owned similar types of livestock, but generally in larger quantities. The small assortment and quantity of livestock owned by free blacks during this time suggests that their agricultural endeavors were limited to subsistence farming.⁶²

Economic disparities are also apparent between whites and free blacks in Little Creek Hundred in terms of the value of property owned by each group (Table 26). In 1832, one of the most affluent members of the white community in the area, Henry Bacon, owned property assessed at \$2,422. In comparison, Abraham Spencer, the wealthiest member of the free black community at this time, was assessed for \$592.⁶³ Inequalities in property ownership between whites and free blacks in Little Creek Hundred would persist throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. Moreover, the amount of property owned by free blacks would fluctuate during this time as well, with the mid-nineteenth century signifying the highest percentages of both real

⁵⁹ Census data from Little Creek Hundred for the years 1850 and 1860 suggests that West Laurel residents William and Robert Sipple (both blacksmiths) each had a young boy living with him, both boys likely working as blacksmith's apprentices.

⁶⁰ Census data, Little Creek Hundred, 1800-1870.

⁶¹ Quinn and Herman, *Eligible Sites in Little Creek and Broad Creek Hundreds*, p. 5.

⁶² Little Creek Hundred tax assessment data, 1816 and 1825.

⁶³ Little Creek Hundred tax assessment data, 1832.

and personal property ownership by free blacks. The continually high percentage of real property ownership throughout the period, however, suggests the high value placed on this type of property ownership amongst free blacks, as it was a way for them to physically assert their prosperity.⁶⁴

By 1859, the Delaware Railroad reached Laurel, serving to further influence economic growth in the town. By improving transportation networks, the railroad strengthened trade connections between Laurel and the towns of Wilmington and Philadelphia.⁶⁵ Soon, fruit packaging and canning would rival lumber exportation as the largest industries in Laurel. Greater prosperity in West Laurel at this time is evidenced by an increase in property ownership among free blacks in Little Creek Hundred, as well as the first solid evidence of a concerted effort by free blacks aimed at buying and selling property specifically in West Laurel.

In 1850, free mulatto sailor Samuel Huffington purchased a lot of ground “on the south side of the county road leading from the town of Laurel to William W. Dulaney’s Mill,” from several white land owners, for \$50. Free black railroad car loader James Cannon also purchased land in 1850. However, Cannon obtained his land for the price of \$25 from Henry Miller, who was not a white landowner, but a free mulatto. By 1860, free blacks owned more than fifteen lots of ground along this county road (later Townsend and West Sixth Streets). Some blacks purchased land outright from white landowners while others obtained it at low cost from fellow free blacks.⁶⁶

The speed with which lots were being purchased and sold in West Laurel during this time suggests that for many blacks, the drive to own land in this area was overwhelming. The majority of these lots were owned by two men, ship captain Theodore Marsh and blacksmith William Sipple, both prominent free blacks in Laurel. William Sipple purchased six lots of land (generally less than one acre each) between 1854 and 1873, each parcel located on West Sixth and/or Townsend Streets (Figures 26

⁶⁴ Little Creek Hundred tax assessment data, 1816-1872.

⁶⁵ Harold B. Hancock, *The History of Nineteenth Century Laurel* (Westerville, Ohio: Otterbein College Print Shop, 1983), p. 14.

⁶⁶ SCRD, Book 49, pp. 454-455, Samuel Huffington from Nathaniel Hearn & Wife, 1840; Book 57, p. 464, Henry Miller to James Cannon, 1850.

and 27). In 1852, Sipple also purchased land with Minus Dulaney and John Saunders, on West Sixth Street, as a trustee of the Union Temperance Benevolent Society. During roughly the same period, between 1849 and 1866, Theodore Marsh was also busy acquiring six different pieces of land. All of these small lots, like those purchased by William Sipple, were located along present-day Townsend and West Sixth Streets. By the time of his death in 1872, Theodore Marsh built six houses on the land, all of which were subsequently divided amongst his heirs. Certainly, Marsh was using the wealth he acquired as a ship captain to provide homes for his extended family. By purchasing several lots of land, and making them available for rent, Sipple, Marsh, and others were also working to promote a cohesive black community in West Laurel.

Several months after the project began, oral history interviews and conversations with local West Laurel residents revealed vague reminiscences about stories of Underground Railroad activity occurring at a specific location on Townsend Street in West Laurel. Fugitive slaves from Sussex County and points south would seek refuge at this house in West Laurel, then travel north to Seaford. From there, these freedom seekers would continue northward, into Maryland and then toward Philadelphia.⁶⁷ Record linkage between these community sources, tax assessment records, Delaware parcel maps for West Laurel, and census records, revealed that the house associated with this activity once belonged to William Sipple. Records pertaining to Sipple's life indicated that he worked as a blacksmith in Laurel for more than three decades, was one of the wealthiest free blacks in West Laurel, and that he had never experienced life in slavery. Sipple's ownership of land and his occupation as a blacksmith granted him a high level of autonomy from white control, likely the reason he felt relatively safe engaging in Underground Railroad activity in West Laurel. Here again, it is apparent that free blacks in West Laurel were devoted to achieving self-sufficiency, and freedom, for all blacks--even engaging in activity that put their success and livelihood at risk.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Hyland, Lynelle. Telephone Interview by Kimberly Toney, 23 October 2008.

⁶⁸ The discovery of the development and history of the black community in West Laurel, and its involvement in Underground Railroad activity was only possible through intensive record linkage between and among primary and secondary sources. In some cases, secondary sources written about Laurel and

By the late nineteenth century, the town of Laurel was Delaware's "center for the shipment of peaches, raspberries, blackberries, canteloupes [sic] and watermelons."⁶⁹ Joshua H. Marvil's Basket Manufactory and Fruit Packaging Company had become the most successful business in Laurel. Marvil's factory was located on the western edge of Laurel, on the corner of West and Townsend Streets, effectively lying on the boundary between Laurel and West Laurel. Historically, canning factories throughout Delaware and the rest of the nation often employed women and African Americans. Perhaps it was no accident that Joshua Marvil located his canning factory so near to the black community in West Laurel. William W. Dulaney's Big Mills was also located in close proximity to the free black community in West Laurel, at the western terminus of West Sixth Street. The land on which Dulaney's Big Mills was located later became the site of a tannery and a canning factory. Dulaney, like Marvil, may have been able to secure a labor force at his "Big Mills" by providing land in proximity to their respective businesses upon which free blacks could live. These two men were the primary grantors of land along West Sixth and Townsend Streets to free blacks William Sipple and Theodore Marsh.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Thus, proximity to places of employment, an ability to purchase land, and a desire to build community were all factors leading to the development of the free black community in West Laurel. The development of this community was largely undertaken by free blacks who acquired wealth and an ability to purchase land through their work as much-needed tradesmen and skilled laborers serving consumers in Laurel.⁷¹ Free blacks

Little Creek Hundred alluded to UGRR activity in West Laurel, specifically circuit rider Reverend Adam Wallace's memoirs about his experiences in Laurel between 1847 and 1865.

⁶⁹ Scharf, *History of Delaware*, p. 1328.

⁷⁰ Little Creek Hundred tax assessment, 1852, William Dulaney. Hancock, *Nineteenth Century Laurel*, pp. 165, 175. Sussex County Deed Records for Marsh and Sipple. On the canning industry in Delaware, see Ed Kee, *Saving Our Harvest: The Story of the Mid-Atlantic Region's Canning and Freezing Industry* (Baltimore: CTI Publications, 2006) and Dean Doerrfeld, David L. Ames, and Rebecca J. Siders, *The Canning Industry in Delaware, 1860 to 1940: A Historic Context* (Newark: Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware, 1993).

⁷¹ Many of the most visible proponents for the development of the free black community in West Laurel (William Sipple, Minus Dulaney, Theodore Marsh) worked as skilled professionals (as blacksmiths, ship carpenters, or ship captains), some consistently mentioned in Laurel service directories throughout the

William Sipple, Theodore Marsh, and Minus Dulaney, along with others, used their wealth and influence to buy property in a specific and strategic location that eventually served as a beacon of prosperity for many free blacks in search of economic, educational, and social opportunities. By 1867, several of these men, including Sipple, Henry Sharp, and William Cooper had organized a school committee, while Minus Dulaney, Theodore Marsh, Daniel Brown, George Cooper, and others became trustees of what would become New Zion United Methodist Episcopal Church (Figure 28).⁷² William Sipple donated land across the street from his home to the Mt. Pisgah African Methodist Episcopal Church. Furthermore, many of these same men established a benevolent society in West Laurel; the organization's mission certainly to extend a helping hand to their less fortunate free black counterparts. Later in the nineteenth century, a Prince Hall Masonic Lodge would be established in West Laurel as well.

Many members of the free black community were devoted to advancing the success of the individuals choosing to live in West Laurel, as well as the community as a whole. The establishment of several institutional organizations, along with West Laurel's location adjacent to the employment opportunities in Laurel, served to anchor West Laurel residents as well as to influence other free blacks to settle there.⁷³ Nineteenth-century free blacks living in West Laurel took advantage of their right to own property and used their occupational skills to develop a tight knit community where the well-being of one's black neighbor was of primary importance.

By 1900, the town of Laurel "was a thriving and prosperous town...and some citizens even claimed that it was the first – or second – most important town in the County, and the wealthiest."⁷⁴ Arguably, the free black community in West Laurel was also thriving and prospering at this time. More black families continued to move to West Laurel and many found work at the Marvil Packaging Company, or in various sawmills

nineteenth century. "Laurel Directories 1865-1895," transcribed in Hancock, *Nineteenth Century Laurel*, pp. 351-374.

⁷² Bradley Skelcher, *African American Education in Delaware*.

⁷³ The ancestors of Lorraine and Donald Hitchens moved to West Laurel at the turn of the twentieth century to pursue economic opportunity in Laurel. Lorraine Hitchens, interview by Kimberly Toney, December 18, 2008, Center for Historic Architecture and Design Archives, University of Delaware.

⁷⁴ Hancock, *Nineteenth Century Laurel*, 165.

or chicken feed houses. Today, the survival of nineteenth-century dwellings, two churches, and extant gravestones serve as physical reminders of the origins of the free black community in West Laurel.

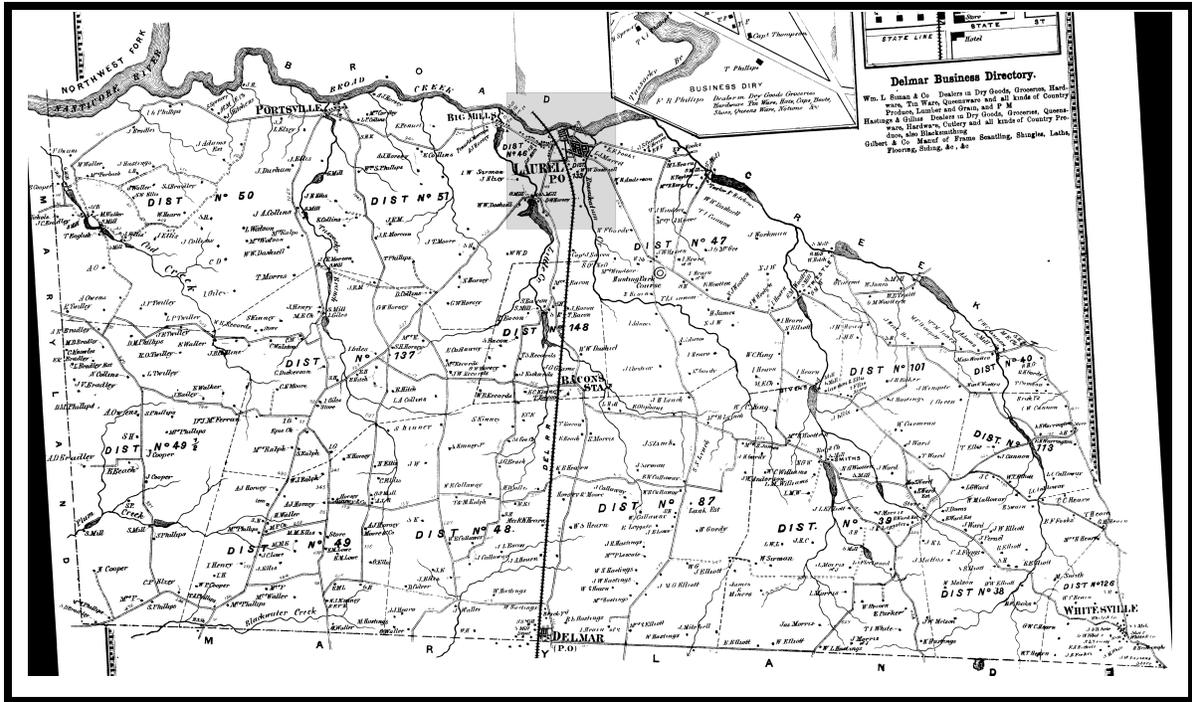


Figure 23: Map of Little Creek Hundred showing location of Laurel, Beers' *Atlas of Delaware*, 1868.

**Slave Owners in Little Creek Hundred
Sussex County, Delaware ca.1860**

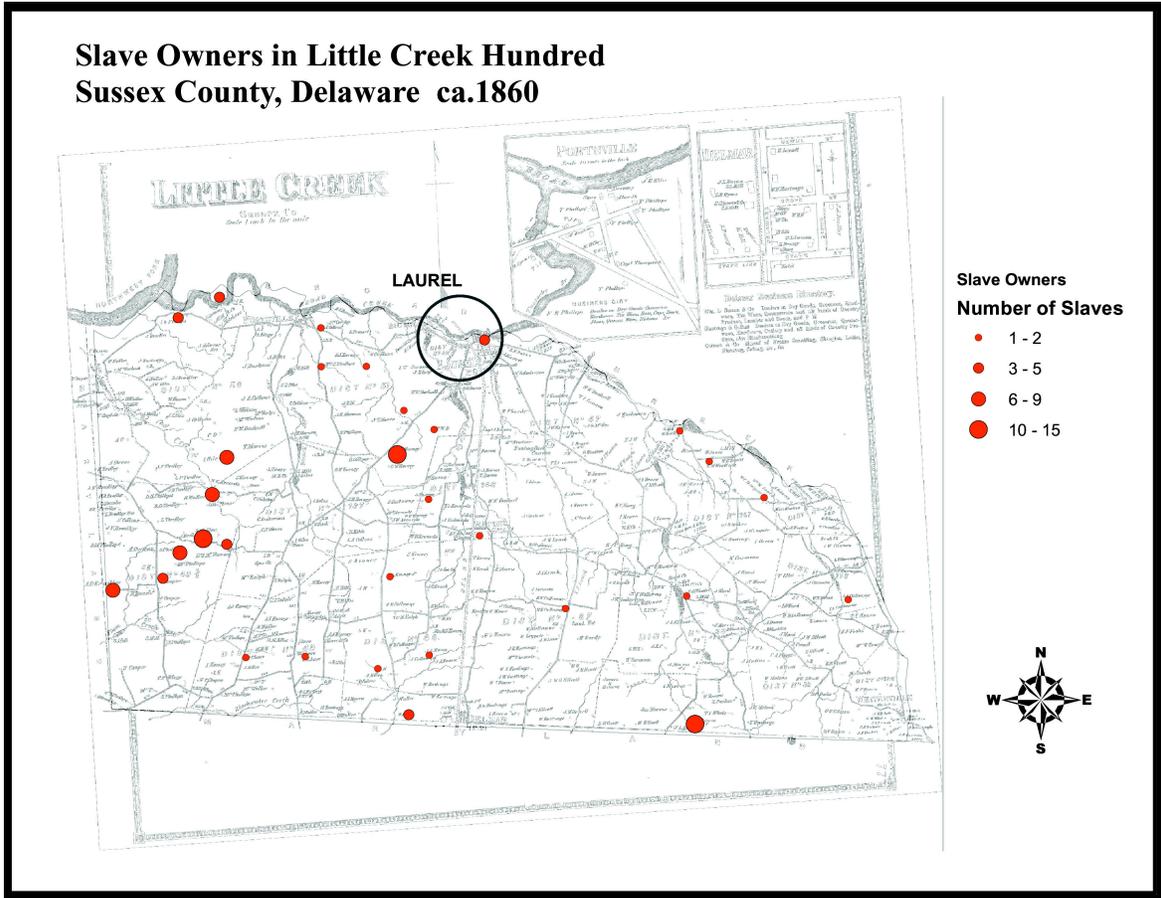


Figure 24: Slave Owners in Little Creek Hundred, 1860.

Table 22: Population of Slaves and Free Blacks in Little Creek Hundred, Sussex County, 1800-1860

| Year | Slave | Free | Total Black Population | Total Population (all races) |
|------|---------|---------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1800 | 255/12% | 94/4% | 349/16% | 2164 |
| 1820 | 396/14% | 185/7% | 604/22% | 2796 |
| 1840 | 318/11% | 294/10% | 611/20% | 2982 |
| 1860 | 210/6% | 471/15% | 681/21% | 3241 |

Table 23: Occupations of Free Blacks in Little Creek Hundred, 1840-1870

| Occupation | Year | | |
|------------------|---------|------------------|------------------|
| | 1840* | 1860 | 1870 |
| Agriculture | 30/51% | 38/14% | 29/15% |
| Carpentry | 0 | 4/1.5% | 3/2% |
| Clergy | 0 | 1/less than 0.5% | 0 |
| Cook/ Waiter | 0 | 0 | 16/8% |
| Craftsmen | 0 | 4/1.5% | 0 |
| Day Labor | 0 | 37/13% | 42/22% |
| Domestic Service | 0 | 30/11% | 26/13% |
| Keeping House | 0 | 0 | 53/27% |
| Maritime | 10/17% | 17/6% | 7/4% |
| Ship Carpentry | 0 | 3/1% | 0 |
| Trades | 8/13.5% | 0 | 0 |
| Washerwomen | 0 | 16/6% | 0 |
| Misc | 0 | 2/less than 1% | 1/less than 0.5% |
| None Given | 11/19% | 124/45% | 18/9% |
| Total | 59 | 275 | 195 |

*The 1840 census limits data to several broad categories (agriculture, maritime activities, and trade). The numbers given here are for the number of households reporting those activities.

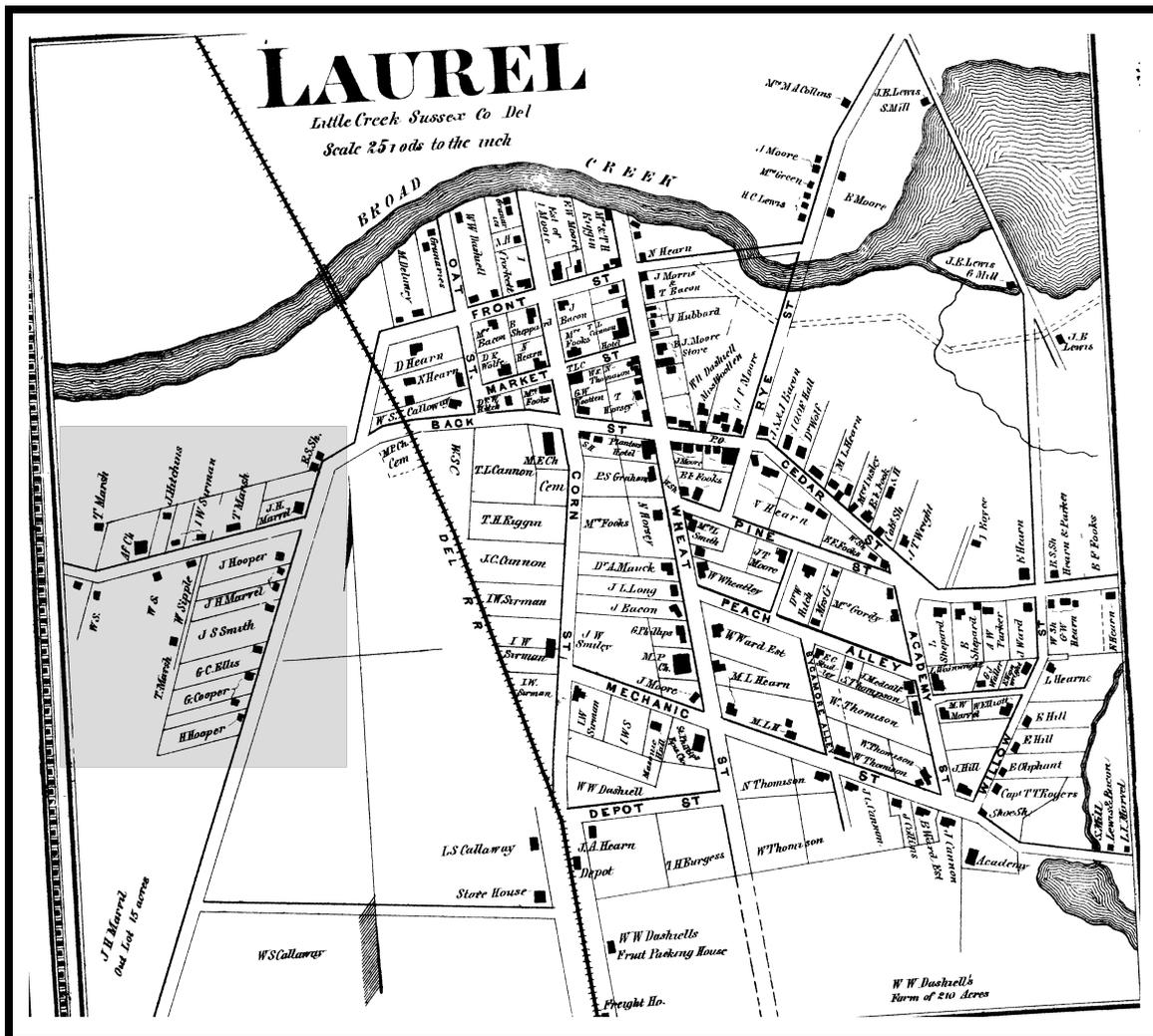


Figure 25: Map of Laurel, Beers' *Atlas of Delaware*, 1868. This map shows both the town of Laurel and a portion of the free black settlement referred to in this study as West Laurel. Located just west of the railroad tracks, West Laurel appears as a small settlement of houses along two roads.

TABLE 24: Types of Free Black Households in Little Creek Hundred[#] and Town of Laurel*, 1830-1870

| YEAR | 1830* | 1840 [#] | 1850* | 1860 [#] | 1870* |
|---|----------|-------------------|---------|-------------------|----------|
| Nuclear Family (two adults with children) | 10 / 67% | 36 / 63% | 9 / 45% | 51 / 59% | 24 / 51% |
| Extended Family (Nuclear family plus additional adults) | 3 / 20% | 12 / 21% | 6 / 30% | 17 / 20% | 17 / 36% |
| Single Person or Married Couple | 2 / 13% | 9 / 16% | 5 / 25% | 19 / 21% | 6 / 13% |
| Total | 15 | 57 | 20 | 87 | 47 |

Table 25: Gender Distribution of Free Blacks in Little Creek Hundred, 1830-1870

| Year | Male | Female | Total |
|-------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| 1830* | 142 / 47% | 160 / 53% | 302 |
| 1840 | 144 / 48% | 153 / 52% | 297 |
| 1860 | 219 / 46% | 252 / 54% | 471 |
| 1870* | 238 / 50% | 236 / 50% | 474 |

**Totals have been aggregated to include free blacks living in Laurel, even though census data was taken for the town separately in these years.*

Table 26: Free Black Property Ownership in Little Creek Hundred, 1816-1872

| Year | Type of Property Owned | | | | Total |
|------------|------------------------|----------|-----------------|--------|-------|
| | Real | Personal | Real & Personal | None | |
| c. 1816 | 3/7% | 17/41% | 3/7% | 18/44% | 41 |
| 1819 | 0 | 19/63% | 2/7% | 9/30% | 30 |
| 1825 | 5/11% | 21/47% | 1/2% | 18/40% | 45 |
| 1852 | 8/11% | 19/26% | 28/38% | 19/26% | 74 |
| 1860 | 21/32% | 6/9% | 13/20% | 25/38% | 65 |
| 1864 | 14/15% | 12/13% | 15/16% | 51/55% | 92 |
| 1868 | 24/22% | 9/8% | 9/8% | 65/61% | 107 |
| 1872 | 30/25% | 11/9% | 11/9% | 70/57% | 122 |

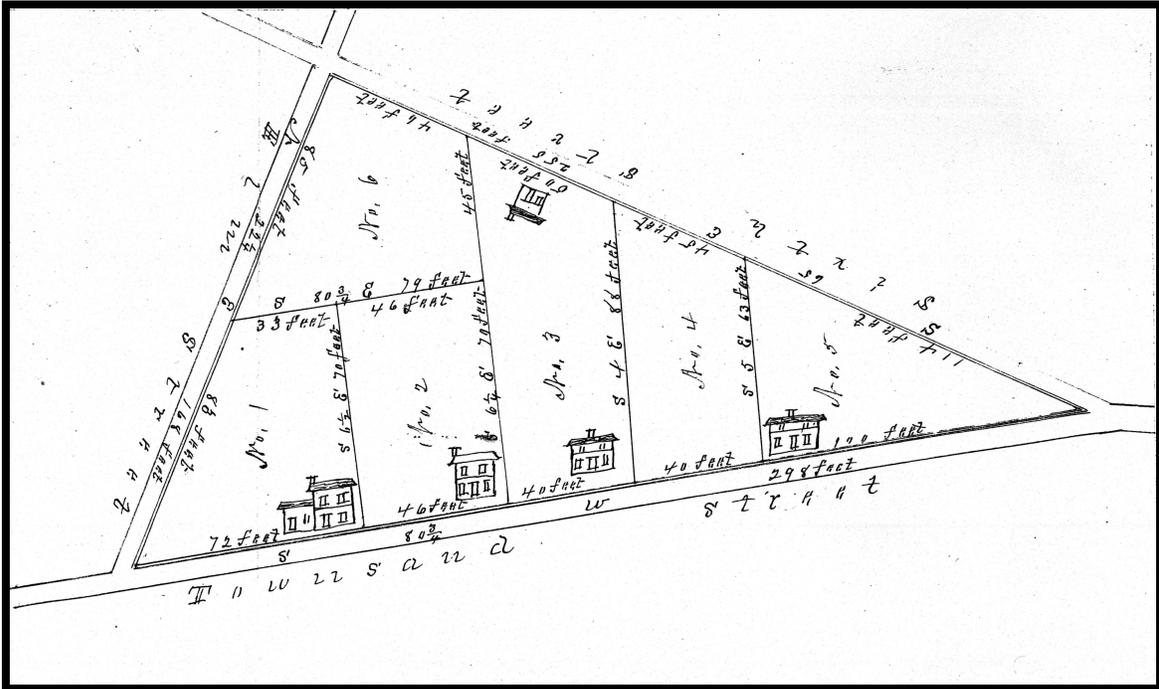


Figure 26: Sussex County Orphans Court Plot Map, William Sipple, 1909.



Figure 27: Dwelling on Sipple's land, West Sixth Street.



Figure 28: New Zion United Methodist Church, West Sixth Street.

IV. Mapping Slavery and Freedom in Delaware

One of the goals of this project was to develop a more comprehensive geographic view of the routes taken by freedom-seekers in Delaware. While this seems straightforward, it proved difficult in some respects. In an effort to understand where slaves began their escapes in Delaware, we mapped two sets of information. The first set addressed information primarily from two sources: 1) advertisements that described runaways, often including the owner's names and the location from which the slave escaped; 2) narratives from William Still's papers describing the circumstances under which freedom-seekers escaped, sometimes including details about the routes they took and the people who helped them along the way. We created a spreadsheet organized around these sources, listing the dates of the event, names of the freedom-seekers and their owners, plus any details about locations. This spreadsheet was then imported into a GIS system and each event was tagged as a point of origin, a point of interest (a location related to the escape journey), or a destination. Figure 29 shows the points of origin mapped to date; this remains a work in progress and will hopefully be expanded in the future to include additional source material.

The second set of information attempted to identify locations from which slaves *might* have escaped, specifically the locations of known slave owners within the state. This was a labor-intensive process that began with creating a spreadsheet from the 1860 Federal Census Slave Schedule, which gave the names of slave owners in each hundred and listed their slaves individually by age and gender. The second step of the process required matching the names of slave owners to names of property owners that appeared on Beers' *Atlas of Delaware*, 1868. This information was then used to map those locations onto a GIS map of Delaware with a background layer showing Beers' *Atlas* (see Figures 14 and 24). In cases where a property owner's name appeared more than once on the *Atlas*, we turned to other sources to try to identify the location most likely to be their "home place," to avoid duplication. Figure 30 shows the results of this mapping project. Ideally, this should also be expanded to include the data from the 1850 Slave Schedule,

perhaps matched to Rea & Price's *Atlas of New Castle County, 1849*, and Byles' *Atlas of Kent County, 1859*.

Analysis of the two maps, in conjunction with the mapping of free black schools, churches, and known settlements (see Figure 3), points to several conclusions and suggests the need for further research in this area. At a minimum, once additional data has been added to the runaway map, further analysis should be conducted to look at changes over time as well as the data for points along the routes and final destinations. If funding becomes available, it would be helpful to expand the study to include data from escapes that originated outside of the state of Delaware.

First, mapping of the runaway data indicates that the bulk of the escapes mapped to date originated in the two northern counties of New Castle and Kent, areas in which rates of slave ownership were actively declining in the early part of the nineteenth century. Incidences of escapes from southern Kent and Sussex County were far less common, even though the majority of the slave population in Delaware lived in that part of the state. To some extent, this seems counter-intuitive. It suggests that despite the favorable attitude towards abolition and a strong pattern of manumission in the northern portion of the state, many slaves still sought freedom on their own terms and timetable. It also suggests that slaves in Sussex County, surrounded by a landscape rife with prejudice, oppression, and discrimination, thought very seriously before attempting to escape from that region.

Second, mapping of slave owner data also produced some interesting results. Not unexpectedly, the maps demonstrate a heavy concentration of slave ownership in Sussex County that corresponds to the numbers from the population census. The runaway data for this County correlates strongly with the highest areas of slave ownership—the western side of the county near Bridgeville and Seaford, and the area around the Indian River and Assawoman Bay. The northern and central parts of the state, also predictably, show very little concentration of slave ownership, with one exception.

The most well-known route of the Underground Railroad in Delaware is shown on the slave owners map as a heavy black line criss-crossing the northern two-thirds of

the state. Surprisingly, that route runs directly through the only section of heavy slave ownership in the northern part of the state, the area just west of Middletown. This correlation suggests the need to look more closely at the reasons for choosing that route over others that might have avoided such a potentially dangerous region.

Comparison of the mapping of free black settlements, churches, and schools with slave ownership reveals two interesting patterns. In some cases, free black communities occurred just outside of areas with heavy concentrations of slave ownership. For example, several communities in Appoquinimink and St. Georges hundreds were mapped on the outskirts of the areas of slave ownership near Middletown. In Sussex County, communities were found in the areas of greatest slave ownership, near Bridgeville, Seaford, Laurel, and the Indian River. To some extent, this suggests a pattern of creating communities in proximity to family members still enslaved. On the other hand, communities also appeared in the central portion of the state, an area virtually devoid of slave owners by 1860. This suggests the continuation of communities established during slavery and continued under the house and garden practice to support the need for agricultural labor. Ultimately this mapping research has just begun and will continue to provide data for researchers to develop further in the future.

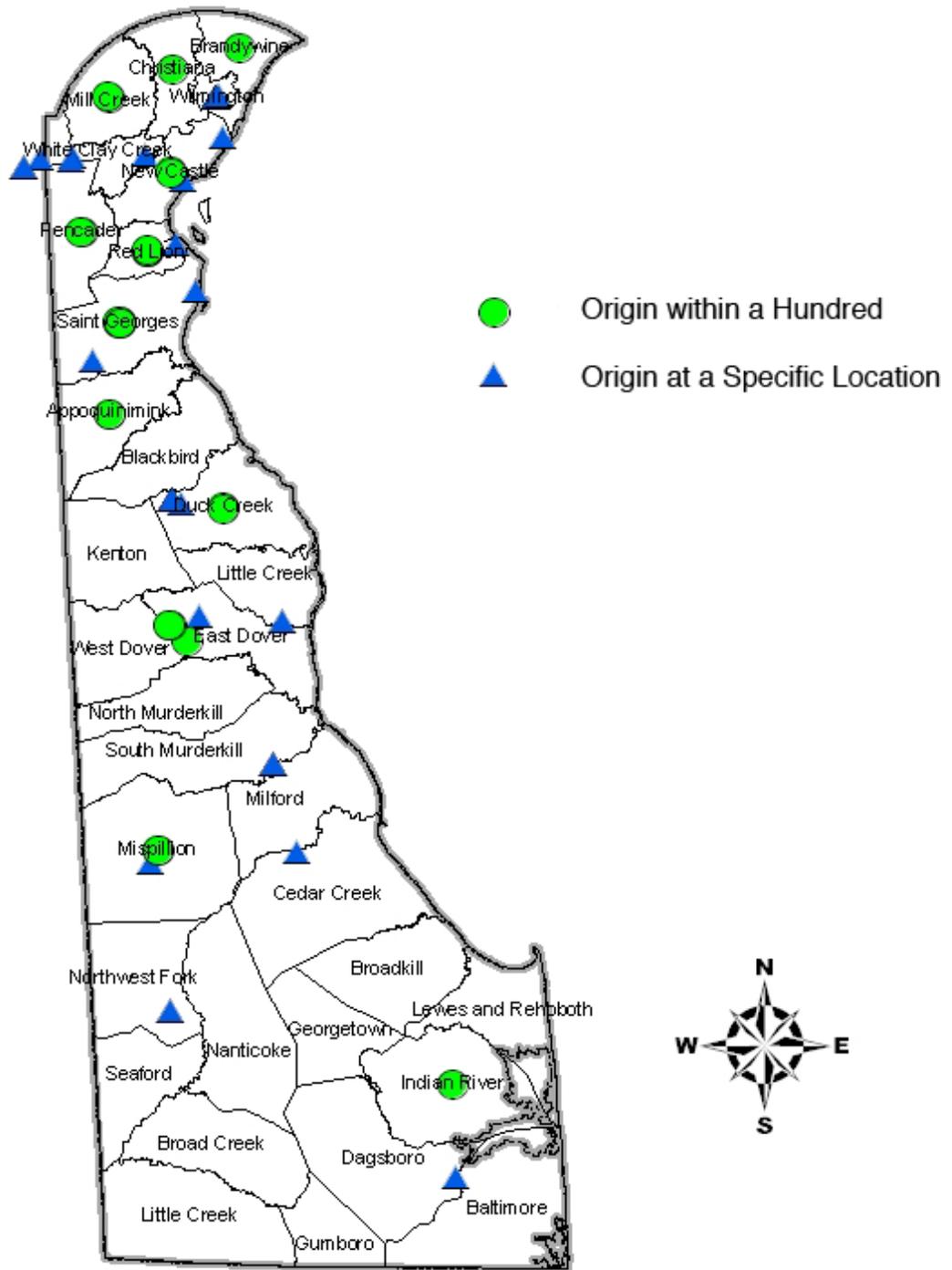


Figure 29: Origins of Slave Escapes in Delaware.

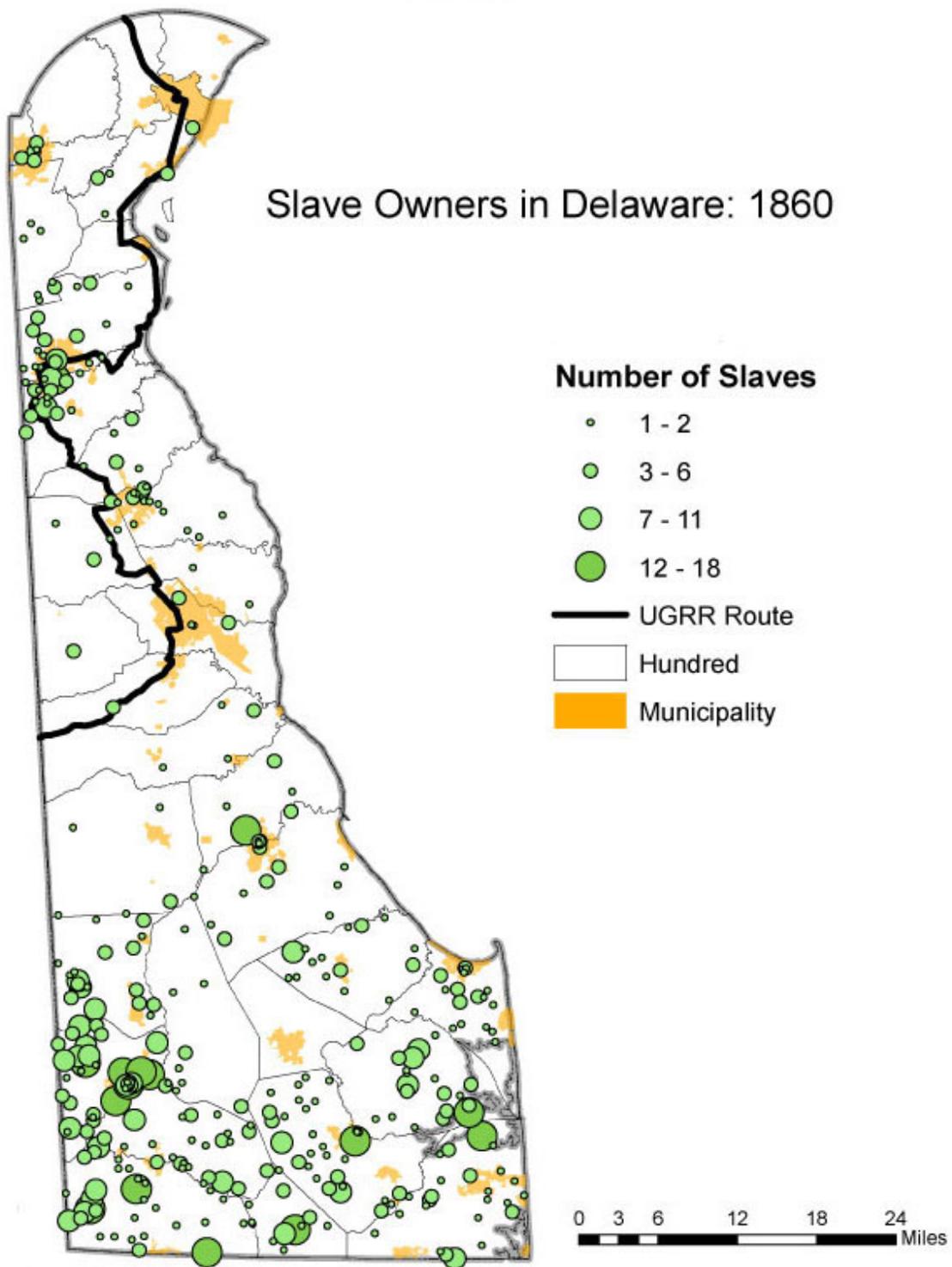


Figure 30: Slave Owners in Delaware, 1860.

V. Areas for Future Research

One of the most frustrating, and yet most exciting, aspects of this project, is that the deeper we delve into the data, the more questions we uncover. Thus, although we now know a great deal about the five communities in this report, we also know that a great deal of work remains to be done. Topics for future research include (but are not limited to) the following:

- A comprehensive review of account books and ledgers to learn about employment and economic networks
- Develop more detailed biographies of individuals and families to help identify networks and connections as well as a greater appreciation of quality of life
- Investigate black Masonic lodges and other fraternal organizations
- Locate records for churches and schools and develop a more detailed context for their role within the community
- Research benevolent societies such as the one in Laurel to determine the kinds of activities they engaged in and the services they provided to free blacks
- Conduct extensive deed research to learn about the process of land ownership and acquisition
- Study free black housing in the form of both surviving resources and documentary evidence
- Explore the role of Native Americans (Lenape and Nanticokes) as part of the free black population
- Continue mapping efforts by adding the information from the 1850 Slave Schedule to the Beers' Atlas overlay, cross-referencing it against the Rea & Price 1849 map for New Castle County and the Byles' 1859 map for Kent County
- Continue efforts to locate additional escape narratives and include them in the mapping initiative
- Pursue the research materials available from the John Dickinson Plantation Museum regarding the free black population of the St. Jones Neck

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