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Antebellum African-American Settlements in Southern New Jersey

By Christopher P. Barton*

“It takes a village to raise a child” -- West African Proverb

African American archaeology has been largely overlooked in New Jersey (Veit 2002). The study presented in this article hopefully provides a valuable contribution of historical archaeology of African Americans in a region that has yet to see a strong focus on their heritage. One of the few archaeological studies that focused specifically on African Americans in New Jersey concerned the history of Skunk Hollow (Geismar 1982), a free African American community located in the Palisades area of the state. Yet, the study of Skunk Hollow remains an isolated case, and greater commitment is needed to conduct such studies with strong collaborative engagement of the local and descendant communities of African American heritage. This article attempts to apply the practical and theoretical frameworks used to study other free communities in the United States to a project focusing on the region of New Jersey, which offers great opportunities for further exploring and understanding African American experiences and histories.

The presence of people of African descent in Southern New Jersey dates to the 17th century (Wright 1988). To discuss the existence of African Americans in Southern New Jersey one must understand the history of Quakers settlements in the region. Quakers, among the first dissenters from the Anglican Church, have been in Southern New Jersey since John Fenwick’s arrival in the 1680s. Early Quakers in the region included slaveholders; it was not until the mid-1700s, under the leadership of John Woolman of Mount Holly, that Quaker communities opposed slavery and preached of the immorality of human bondage.

Through the work of Woolman and the Quakers, New Jersey came to be on the forefront of the abolitionist movement. However, the local formation of local abolitionist societies was difficult in a region where slavery continued to persist well into the 19th century. Samuel

Mickle (1812) recorded in his chronicle that at the first meeting of the Gloucester County Abolitionist Society only he, Joseph Clement, Franklin Davenport, Jacob Wood, Thomas Carpenter, Joseph Sloan, Joshua Howell, and Job Kimsey were in attendance. The limited number of concerned Anglo-Americans in Gloucester County is worth noting. The abolition of slavery in New Jersey was introduced gradually. By legislation implemented in 1804, all children born of enslaved persons after July 4, 1804 (note the date) were to be freed after serving as apprentices to their mothers' masters --females at 21 years of age, and males after 25 years of age. By 1820 the abolition law of 1804 had for the first time enabled free African Americans in New Jersey (12,460) to outnumber those in bondage (7,557). By 1860, the total number of enslaved African Americans in the state was limited to 18 persons. However, it was not until 1865 with the national ratification of the 13th amendment (which New Jersey did not vote to ratify) that slavery was finally abolished in the state.

The resistance to the elimination of bondage in the state led to New Jersey being characterized in 1823 by a Connecticut traveler as “the land of slavery” (Wright 1988). The Quakers, whose settlements mainly concentrated in the southern portion of the state, only represented a minority within New Jersey’s total population. The actions of a minority of Quakers as “conductors” of the escape routes referred to as the “Underground Railroad,” creating safe houses and destinations within New Jersey, allowed for the establishment of free black communities. There existed more free African American communities in New Jersey than in any other northern state before the Civil War (Wright 1988). For example, at Timbuctoo, New Jersey, local Quakers from Mount Holly sold land to African American residents at below average prices. This land was purchased by Timbuctoo residents and created clear boundaries for the community (Figure 1). In researching the locations of free African American communities that existed in South Jersey prior to the abolition of slavery, one finds that all were located in close proximity to Quaker strongholds.

Early African American communities were located near Quakers dominated towns. Timbuctoo in Burlington County was located three miles from Mount Holly (Figure 1). Small Gloucester and Cootstown were located outside of Swedesboro in Gloucester County. GuineaTown of Salem County was located outside Salem. Gouldtown and Springtown were



**Figure 1. 1849 Map of Timbuctoo and Mount Holly
(Courtesy of the Burlington County Historical Society)**

located a few miles away from Greenwich in Cumberland County. Saddlertown and Snowhill (later called Free Haven and in 1887 Lawnside) were established near Haddonfield in Camden County. All of these communities existed during the early 19th century. All of these communities were part of the noted “Greenwich Line” of the Underground Railroad (Figure 2). Harriet Tubman, the most famous of all conductors, used the Greenwich line to secure many people’s freedom in the North. Escaping individuals would enter New Jersey via the Delaware Bay at Springtown or Gouldtown and then make their way north to other safe houses, either staying or continuing on to other regions. Gouldtown, the earliest settlement, was established

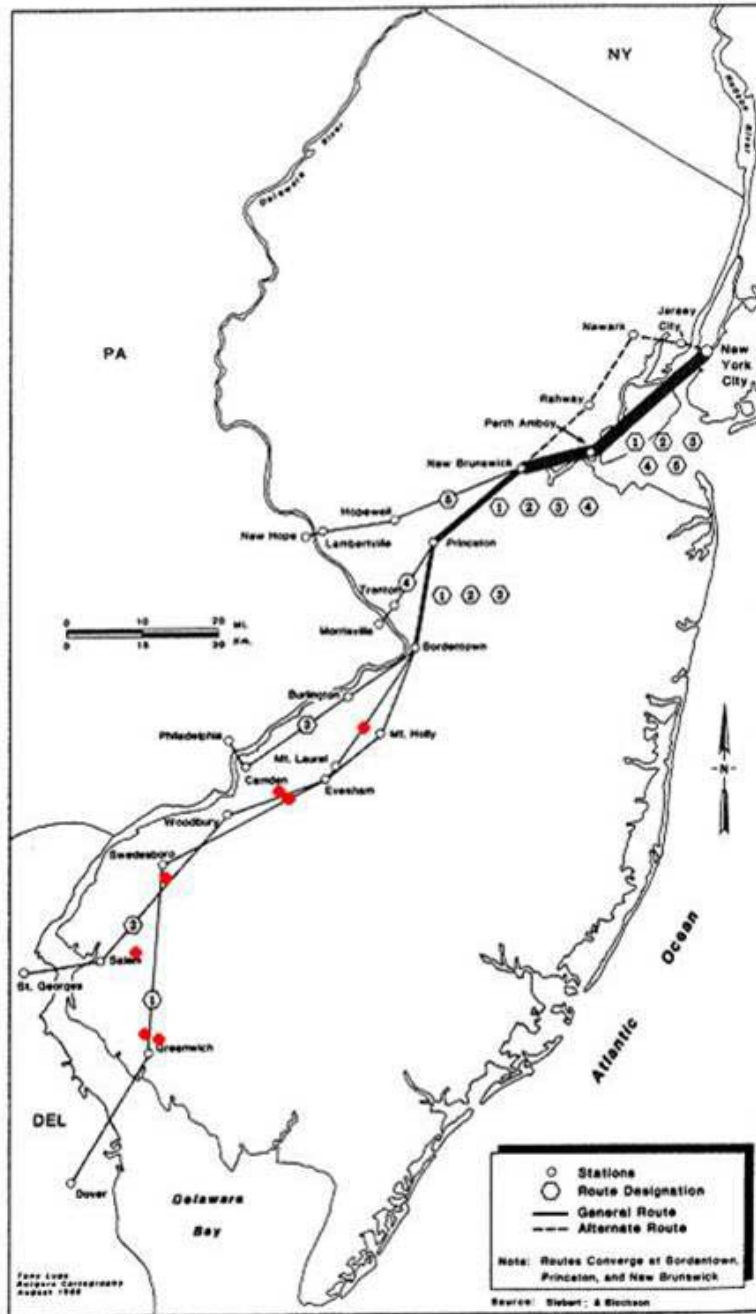


Figure 2. Map of underground railroad routes in New Jersey, 1860 (Wright 1988). Red dots roughly indicate free African American communities along the “Greenwich line” of the underground railroad that are discussed in this article.

in the 18th century by an interracial family. Local history accounts indicate that Anna, the daughter of John Fennwick, a noted Quaker colonist in the region, married an African American named Gould, which in turn provided the source for the town’s name. This settlement was

located in the forbidding landscape of the Pine Barrens in southern New Jersey and was isolated from the more populated areas of the state.

Most of the proclaimed dates of establishment of these communities (e.g., Timbuctoo in 1825) coincided with what would have been the first generations of slaves to be freed via the act of 1804. Perhaps after their emancipation and with the help of local Quakers formerly enslaved African Americans began to create these free communities. From these communities, and with the assistance of local Quakers, African Americans were able to then create new destinations along the escape routes of the Underground Railroad. In Timbuctoo the land was infertile for farming and African Americans instead often worked at Quaker-owned brickyards or other forms of businesses; in return, they received social and legal protection from the impacts of slavery. An example of the legal protection offered to African Americans by Quakers can be seen in accounts of Timbuctoo in 1862:

The Mount Holly Slave Cases -- An obliging correspondent has sent a clip from the Burlington Gazzette containing the subjoined brief account of the trial and its incidents at Mount Holly on Wednesday, involving the rights of three negroes claimed by Mr. John Roth, a slaveholder from Cecil County, MD., as fugitive slaves. These persons -- Perry Simmons, Noah Hewson, and Rachel Pine -- have lived near Mount Holly for several years with good repute, and two of them married there have families. On Thursday of last week they were enticed from their houses on a pretended claim of taxes, and were unexpectedly arrested on reaching Mt. Holly. A trial was of course demanded, and on Wednesday of this week it was brought on before a magistrate of the county. The course and result of the trial are thus reported. Today being the time appointed to try the claim of the person who alleged that the three negroes arrested here last week belonged to him, the town at an early hour was filled with those who felt an interest in the matter, among whom were a great many colored persons, many of whom had come a considerable distance. Upon the ringing of the bell, the court house was filled. The Judge directed that one half the room should be assigned to the colored persons, which was at once filled to overflowing. The Claimant (Roth), and the claimed (Simmons, Hewson, Pine) appeared at the bar of the Court, the one to substantiate, and the others to defend the claim, and with the latter came as their champion, David Paul Brown, Esq. so well known for his brilliant efforts in the cause of abolition (Burlington Gazette).

This example highlights the relationship between local Quakers and African Americans. As noted, the trial brought considerable attention in support of Simmons (actually his second time dealing with slave catchers), Hewson, and Pine. This attention was not limited to the African American community, but also a focus of local European Americans, since the judge had to order for the segregation of the courtroom. This division of the audience may have indicated that while Quakers disagreed with slavery, some did not view African Americans as their equals. In turn, the defendants were being represented by David Paul Brown, a famed activist for the abolitionist movement, whose involvement indicates that a community of both African Americans and European Americans coordinated their efforts to support these allegedly fugitive slaves.

Most of the African American communities discussed above were not only located near Quaker towns, but also within rural areas and some in the Pine Barren region of the state. Both the rural setting and close proximity of the antebellum African American communities to Quaker strongholds allowed for their establishment. Through natural reproduction and also being deeply interconnected with the movement of escapees on the Underground Railroad, such African American communities were able to grow dramatically in size. In Woolwich, the township that enclosed Small Gloucester and Cootstown, according to the 1850 census there were over 177 residents listed as being black. At Timbuctoo, the small village with its center roughly three acres in size, had over 125 African American inhabitants.

These locations of antebellum African American communities in New Jersey provided them with elements of support and protection. Similarly, the settlement patterns utilized by the residents manifested the need for protection and communal identity (Figure 3). Deetz (1996) discusses the history and settlement layout of the small community of Parting Ways, Massachusetts, in which African Americans appeared to have placed their dwellings clustered in the center of ninety-four acres of land. While it may be that African Americans formed closed communities simply for mutual reassurance, it is equally likely that the placement of the houses reflects a more corporate spirit. The usual Anglo-American house placement in the mid-Atlantic regions (including New Jersey) was that of scattered homes centered within farmsteads, each family being positioned on their own land. Although at Parting Ways the town clerk's map designates discrete portions of the 94 acres as having been cleared by each of the families, the residents still placed their houses close to one another. Similarly, at Saddlertown and Timbuctoo,

both historical documentation and geophysical survey data depict communities that, though having individual land ownership, still positioned their homes closer to one another (Figures 3 and 4).

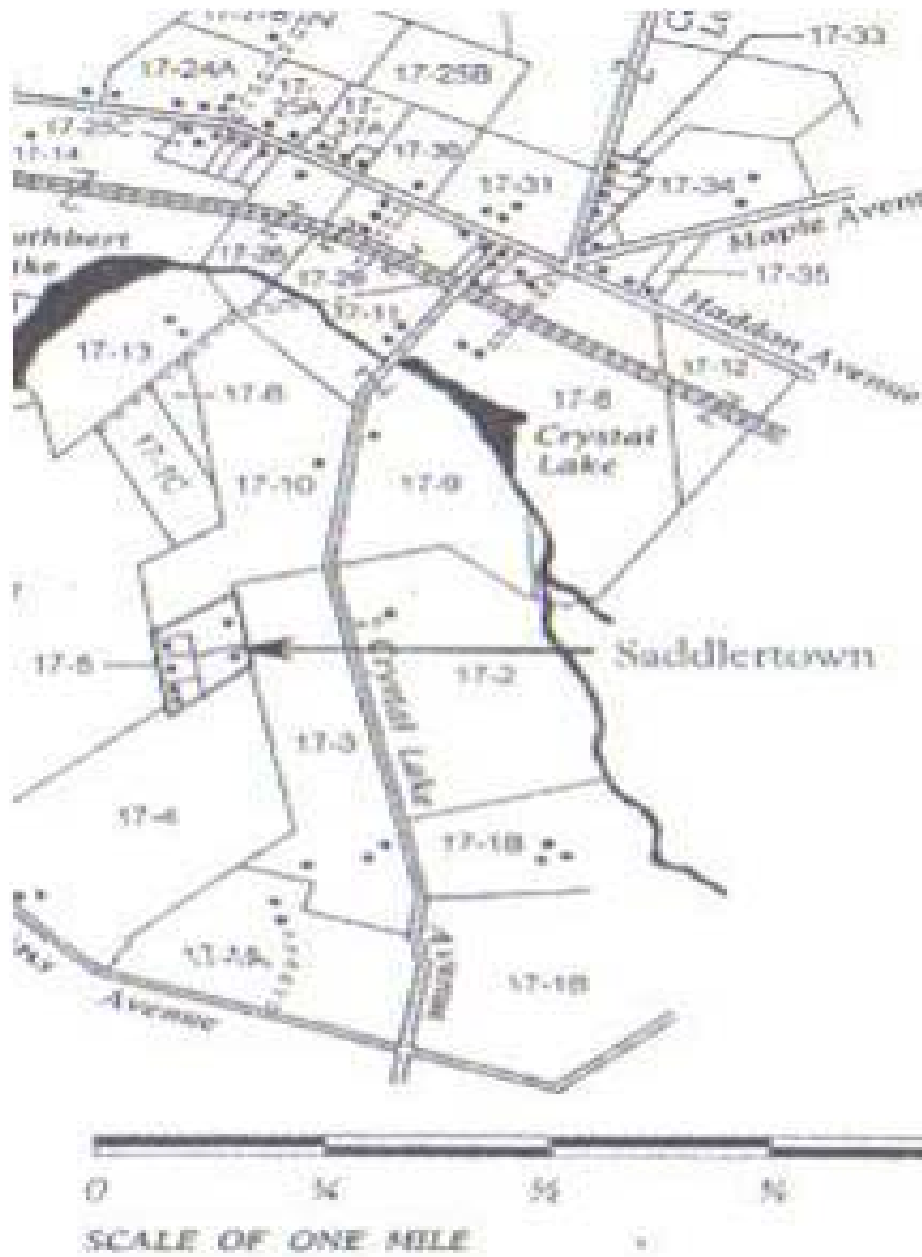


Figure 3. The African American community of Saddlertown, near Haddon Township, New Jersey (Rizzo 2008). Note the positioning of the structures as indicated on this map.

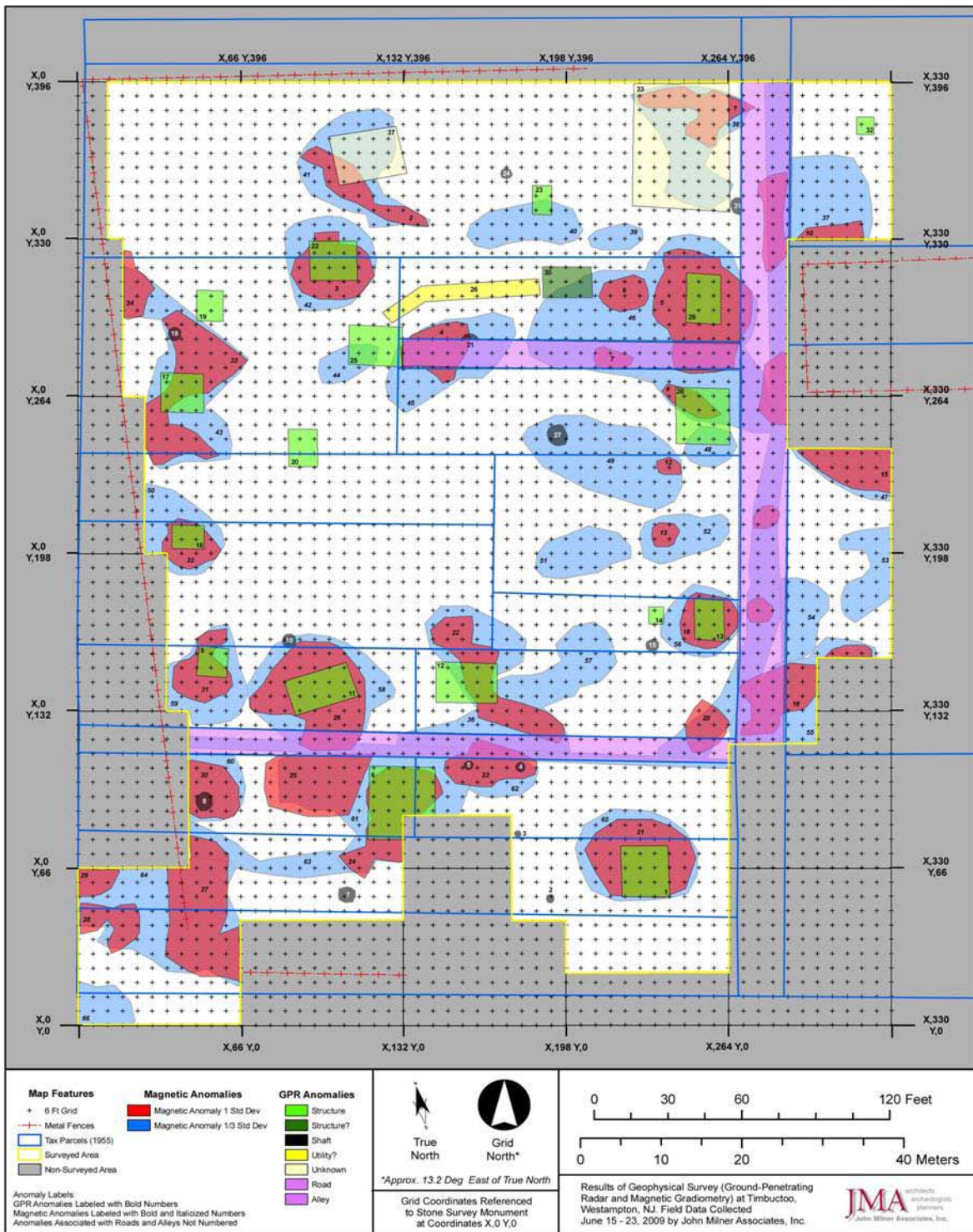


Figure 4. Map of Geophysical Data and 1955 Tax Parcels of Timbuctoo (Chadwick and Leach 2009). Green squares designate possible remains of structures as indicated by geophysical surveys.

Although at Timbuctoo the residents were listed as laborers, rather than working as farmers as at Parting Ways, their settlement choices signify a communal identity. The clustered positioning of the dwellings (as seen in Figure 4) very likely offered not only a corporate spirit, but also protection from external and adverse forces. Timbuctoo existed during slavery in New Jersey, during the Fugitive Slave Act of 1853 which allowed slave-hunters into Northern states to look for escaped slaves, and endured the Jim Crow years following emancipation -- hence, the communities' residents needed protection. In such a densely located area, any potential problems for the residents with slave catchers could be thwarted through a communal effort. For example, in 1860, Perry Simmons, a Timbuctoo resident for over ten years and fugitive slave, was being apprehended by slave-catchers. In response, the community of Timbuctoo arose and armed themselves to protect Simmons who had hid himself in his attic. The conflict that ensued is known locally as the "Battle of Pine Swamp" (a name referring to Timbuctoo) from which the slave-catchers fled and Simmons remained free thanks to his neighbors (New Jersey Mirror) (Figure 5).

Another example of a southern New Jersey African American community arming themselves to protect one of their own was referred to by Samuel Mickle's chronicle on June 2, 1812:

"A consultation between some members of the abolition society (of Gloucester County), on the measures necessary to be taken with some slave hunters in our county, one of their assistants, Henry Wright, being killed on the night of the 2nd inst. At Guineatown! (Mickle 1812: 430).

The success of the above mentioned examples of the protection of fugitive slaves through community violence was aided by the settlement patterns selected by those African Americans residents. For example at Timbuctoo, where the core of the village was situated on roughly three acres, the homes of the residents were easily within shouting distance of one another (see Figure 4). Furthermore, if the 19th-century landscape generally resembled that of the current-day topography (and all evidence suggests such) then possible threats of incoming violence could have been readily observed and countered.

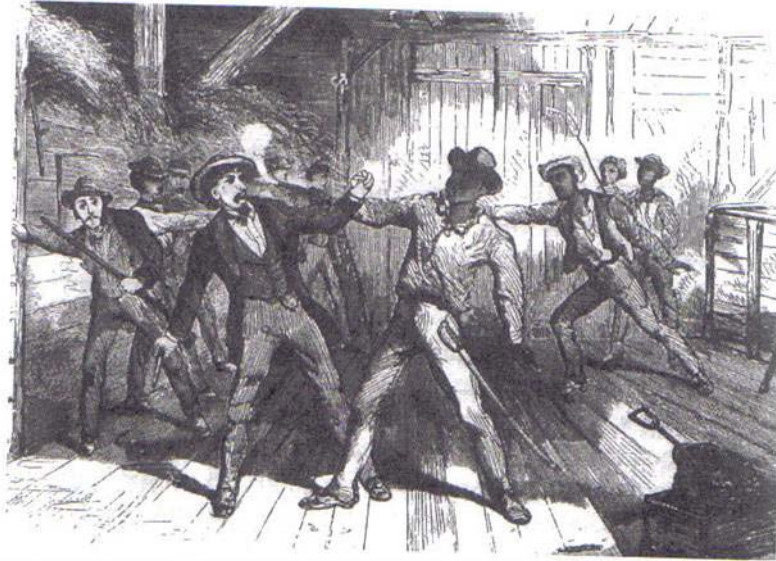


Figure 5. Battle of Pine Swamp (Rizzo 2008).

The settlement patterns of these antebellum African American communities fostered the ability for the group to maintain cultural continuity both from violent slave catchers and from the external pressures of acculturation. In the settlements examined for this article, each of those communities established both an all black school and church within its boundaries (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Springtown, founded 1816, built 1841 (White 2002)

The presence of both institutions greatly aided those African American residents in the maintenance and preservation of their cultural identities and sense of heritage.

The church (most being African Methodist Episcopal, AME) helped to uphold groups' ideas on values and distinguish itself in title from other local churches. If you were of African descent you very likely attended these local AME congregations. Thus, the church helped to enable ideologies of local solidarity that were necessary for communities that were bombarded by attempts at acculturation by the Anglo-American society that surrounded them. Written documentation attests to the presence of religious practices within free African American communities in Southern New Jersey. Religious revivals and "African camp meetings" were chronicled in the diary of John Cawman Eastlack of Gloucester County, throughout the 1820s and well into the 1850s. In communities such as Snowhill and Timbuctoo there exists direct written documentation referencing the religious revivals. The centrally located, open area circled by dwellings at Timbuctoo (see Figure 5) was most likely used as a communal space to host religious meetings. In the summer of 2010, phase II archaeological investigations will take place in this area to determine its past usage. Much like the formal church, these religious events and associated open spaces were very likely used to promote sociocultural identity within the community.

In all the communities studied for this article, all black churches were accompanied by segregated schools. Schools much like churches were used to instill and preserve communal values for subsequent generations. Through the work of such schools in African American communities in southern New Jersey, the rate of illiteracy became almost nonexistent (White 2002). Institutions such as AME churches and community schools instilled into the free African Americans of antebellum southern New Jersey communal identity as well as the values and morals deemed important by the group. They built churches and organizations that served as a center of spiritual comfort and moral guidance. They started fraternal orders that fostered socialization and civic work. Preserving the centrality of music in the African American community, they founded myriad forms of vernacular expression that shaped both African American and European American cultural forms (Alexander-Price, quoted in White 2002) (for examples of local architectural forms, see Figures 7 and 8).

Springtown



Robinson House, Springtown. This house was photographed by Maria Boynton in the late 1980s. It is a prime example of the early homes of the residents in this crossroads town. It also bears strong resemblance in style and size with many of the homes in the small towns we are discussing (see Murray home, Gouldtown and the next illustration). The Robinson House no longer stands. *Photo by Maria Boynton.*

Figure 7. Robinson House in Springtown (Rizzo 2008).



A Springtown house. The consistency of this housing style is uncanny in South Jersey. There is also reference to this style in small black communities in Georgia. It is not a "shotgun" house, but it appears to be a variation on old slave quarters and log cabins. *Author's photo.*

Figure 8. Example of house designs in Springtown (Rizzo 2008).

In this article, I have discussed the role in which both internal and external spheres of influence, settlement patterns, and communal institutions were utilized in the formation of free African American communities in antebellum southern New Jersey. Although this study is of

one specific region, the insights on sociocultural development and identity can be applied to different locations and groups. With the help of Quakers, newly free and fugitive African Americans were able to purchase inexpensive land in rural areas where they could find social and legal protection and work in nearby Quaker towns. The African American residents formed tightly bounded areas that fostered ideologies of community. The choice of positioning dwellings close to one another aided these developing senses of community and also offered protection for the group from slave catchers and acculturating pressures. The open areas created by the enclosed settlement patterns were most likely employed as communal areas that often hosted religious revivals. Institutions such as the church (more specifically, the AME) and segregated schools furthered the inculcation of residents into shared beliefs, values, and mores. Such adaptations were necessary for a group's identity and development in a time and environment that was oppressive to African Americans. Although local Quakers did offer African Americans cheap land and legal protection, they were placed as in the case of Timbuctoo, on infertile soil, thus, being forced to work in Quaker run businesses. Much of the Anglo-American population in New Jersey during the early to mid 19th century disagreed with slavery, but that is not to say that they viewed African Americans as equals. New Jersey continued to practice formal racial segregation in its public schools until 1947 (Wright 1988).

Many of the problems that still exist within New Jersey, especially in the inner cities, can be attributed to racial discrimination and classism. These comments are not meant to be a negative portrayal of New Jersey, but to show how even contemporary African American communities (and other oppressed groups) have been able to maintain social identity and perseverance despite the adverse effects of discrimination and classism. Through studying the free African American communities of antebellum southern New Jersey and the ways that they used the cultural landscape and sociocultural institutions, we are able to appreciate and better understand the accomplishments of African American culture and attempt to make changes to the present day. This article offers others studying African American culture and communities one model of how oppressed groups used the landscape and cultural institutions to resist and persevere.

Note

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