

Black History Month: The life of Hector Fuller

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By Nicole Carter

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PARIS — Narratives of the Black experience during the early days of Maine's settlement and statehood have only been slowly uncovered over time. One of Paris' early settlers was a Black man named Hector Fuller, who is recorded in Silas Maxim's *History of Paris, Maine, from its settlement to 1880* to have come to Paris with Gilbert Shaw. Shaw was a Massachusetts native who had relocated to western Maine with his family in the 1790s.

No birthdate or possible birthplace for Fuller exists in the record. It is highly unlikely that any African came to America outside of bondage and Fuller told Maxim that he had been kidnapped from his home on the African coast by Portuguese sailors. The details of his life between being seized and his arrival in Paris, remain a mystery.

Hector Fuller come to Paris
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Abner gave him part of
the Elvick Spaulff Lot -
Fuller come from Africa
when a little boy - He used
to play near the sea shore
and some of the crew of a
vessel being near - went
ashore in a boat and took
him - He said the last time
he saw his mother she was a
Oryeny on the beach - (som)
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Notes for Hector Fuller, a Black man who came to Paris during the 18th century. *Courtesy Paris Cape Historical Society*

Fuller had two distinctive characteristics: the first being that he had a double hair-lip. The second was his extremely dark skin that inspired the local saying “black as heck” when people described very dark shades, playing off his nickname “Old Heck.”

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What is particularly curious about Johnson is that he brought with him to Paris the means to buy land. He helped pay for the farm where the Shaw family established their homestead and received acreage in return.

On March 8, 1801 he sold what seems to be that real estate, the easterly half of Lot 5 in the Eighth Range, to Abner Rawson. This parcel was located in the area where Route 117 is, near Stony Brook and the present day King Hill Bed & Breakfast.

He owned land in another part of town, as the *History of Paris* indicates that “Fuller, ‘negro man,’ sold the northerly end of Lot 18 in the Third Range to Salvanus Robbins on Aug. 2, 1799,” which would have been property west of the Little Androscoggin River in the neighborhood around Hungry Hollow Country Store and Cooper Farms.

According to Paris Historical Society Curator Ben Conant, Fuller was a sporadic customer of Paris’ businesses. His name is found in receipt logs for various transactions, from corn, biscuits and fish to textiles to “drink.”

“He bought quite a few biscuits, at only \$0.03,” Conant said of an 1802 entry. “He bought a pound of fish, and [after that there is an entry for] Abner Rawson bought some spoons.

“You find all these different little references in this account book.”

From 1802 on, Fuller appears less frequently. Occasionally he would come in to pay on his store account.

After those transactions Fuller married a Black woman from Leeds, Lucretia Collins, which appears in Leeds’ town records. For several years the Fullers’ whereabouts have not been verified. They may have resided in Leeds or elsewhere, but by 1807 they were back in Paris.

The *History of Paris* notes that Fuller is among a group of residents “new to town” that had part of their 1806 taxes abated. But no property deeds for Fuller exist in Maine after 1801 so his residential status is unclear.

The Fullers were recorded as being a family of four in the town of Leeds in Maine's 1810 census, according to records at Maine Historical Society's Research Library. Their daughters Silvia and Charlotte were born on Jan. 19, 1807 and Feb. 22, 1809, respectively, as noted in the *History of Paris*. They would have two more children: Minerva was born Mar. 14, 1811 and son Nathan was born on Nov. 2, 1817.

A passage in the *History of Paris* shows that "The overseers of the poor were instructed to put out Hector Fuller's children, 'if they do not support themselves.'" This unsettling entry about the Fullers' plight is not detailed but points to a number of possibilities.

During that period towns were not required by law to support any poor who could not claim residency in them. Correspondence to and from the Overseers of the Poor in neighboring Oxford demonstrates how towns attempted to bill other communities and deflected charges from them to cover expenses for people unable to support themselves, especially if they had no permanent address.

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As a land owner at the turn of the century Fuller would have met that requirement. But when he appears in the town's history in 1807 as being new to Paris, the entry implies that Fuller had not lived there for several years (perhaps he and Lucretia lived in Leeds) but was again considered to be a resident.

Being recorded as Leeds residents in 1810 gives proof that the Fullers had left Paris for at least the second time after 1807. The family was not included in the Leeds or Paris 1820 censuses.

Might that threatening 1825 notation mean that Hector and Lucretia were not able to support their family and that the whole family was to be banished from town as non-residents? Or that they would be auctioned off?

Poor laws in the first part of the 19th century allowed town officials to auction off the care of its poor to the lowest bidder during annual town meeting. Poor families could be split up and put to work however their "bidders" saw fit. The oldest Fuller child was about 18 but the youngest only eight, certainly too young to be expected to work by today's standards.

Being auctioned off was a sentence to a year of forced servitude. The practice continued until the late 1840s when the anti-slavery movement came to prominence. Abolitionists loudly pointed out that auctioning off poor community members equaled slavery.

Paris' town history after 1825 makes no more mention of Fuller's family but Maine census records from 1830 place the couple and their five children as residents there, again.

The record of Fuller's whereabouts is also verified in a wild story, retold by Alden Chase of Bryant Pond in his monthly periodical the *Standard Storyteller*. In 1829 Chase, as a child, had fallen very ill with scarlet fever. His doctor sent for the local Dr. Christopher Bryant, a spinner of marvelous tales that were part of his bedside manner.

While looking after Chase, Bryant told him of a time when a fortune teller led him to believe that if he took a boat out to Jewell's Island in Casco Bay he would be shown to the spot where the infamous pirate Captain Kidd had buried his treasure.

As Bryant explained it, his friend Old Heck insisted on accompanying him on his adventure, which ended as all Captain Kidd treasure hunts did, with a haunting, bedlam and no treasure.

After 1830, Fuller and his family fade from local and state archival records. In the *History of Paris* it is written that Fuller's son Nathan eventually left the area and for a time was enslaved in Virginia before he was able to prove himself a free man.

The interview of Fuller by Paris' historian Silas Maxim, while not included in the *History of Paris*, is among the archives at the Paris Cape Historical Society. It is not dated. Whether by coincidence or not, it foreshadows or reflects the story of a later Paris black resident, Pedro Tovookan Parris, who died at Paris Hill in 1860.

Maxim's notes read:

"Hector Fuller came to Paris with Abner Shaw – Abner did not have money and Fuller put in money for one third of the Abner Shaw home. Abner gave him part of the Alvin Shurtleff lot. Fuller came from Africa when a little boy. He used to play near the sea shore and some of the crew of a vessel being near went ashore in a boat and took him. He said the last time he saw his mother she was a crying on the beach."

One final reference to Hector Fuller, independent of Maine's historical archives, is found in the online archive of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. In 1845 a Dr. W.W. Comstock wrote a letter to the editor about meeting Fuller in Paris:

"Sir, I notice in your last No. an extract from the Western Lancet, in which the inquiry is made, 'is the negro subject to hare-lip?' with a statement from the editor of that Journal, that, as far as his observation extends, although the deformity forces itself upon us very frequently, it is exclusively confined to the whites,' and asks if there is a philosophical reason for the difference.

"The question of philosophy can be answered by the fact that the difference does not exist. The African race is not exempt from that unfortunate deformity. I have myself witnessed more than one instance of its existence in the black, and recollect of having seen, a few years since, in the town of Paris, Oxford County, Me., a negro by the name of Hector Fuller, who had the misfortune of double hare-lip...."

HARE-LIP IN THE NEGRO.

To the Editor of the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal.

SIR,—I notice in your last No. an extract from the Western Lancet, in which the inquiry is made, “Is the negro subject to hare-lip?” with a statement from the editor of that Journal, that, as far as his observation extends, although the deformity forces itself upon us very frequently, it is exclusively confined to the whites,” and asks if there is a philosophical reason for the difference.

The question of philosophy can be answered by the fact that the difference does not exist. The African race is not exempt from that unfortunate deformity. I have myself witnessed more than one instance of its existence in the black, and recollect of having seen, a few years since, in the town of Paris, Oxford County, Me., a negro by the name of Hector Fuller, who had the misfortune of double hare-lip. I have the impression that instances of this kind are not very rare.—Since writing the above, a member of my family informs me, that when passing from Boston to Portland, six or eight years ago, she met, on the deck of the steamer, a black man very badly deformed by double hare-lip, who, to use her own expression, was the most horrid-looking creature she had ever seen.

Wrentham, July 5, 1845.

I am, Sir, your ob't serv't,
W. W. COMSTOCK.

Paris resident Hector Fuller was referenced in an 1845 medical journal in a letter regarding race and physical characteristics.

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