



Teaching Timbuctoo

RAISING THE PROFILE OF ANTEBELLUM FREE BLACK PEOPLE IN NEW JERSEY HISTORY

Cheryl Alspach, JoAnn Donnelly, Kevin Risley, Guy Weston

ABSTRACT

Teaching the history of African Americans before the Civil War typically focuses on enslavement in the South without acknowledgment of the free Blacks in the North who established institutions, were covered in “white” newspapers, and sometimes owned their homes. This article discusses a curriculum development project designed to expand teaching of African American history to include these perspectives. The project is ongoing and continues to add new elements to address issues that arise during engagement with local teachers. Portions of the discussion on population trends also appeared in the November/December 2021 issue of *AAHGS News* under the title “Free People of Color, North and South,” by Guy Weston.

KEYWORDS

Teaching African American history; antebellum African American history; free Black people

Our curriculum project was inspired by a bequest of family property to co-author Guy Weston’s mother. He recounts that the history around the land parcel his mother inherited seemed to contradict his understanding of US history as follows:

My fourth great-grandfather purchased an acre of land in 1829 in Burlington County, New Jersey. Four generations of my family lived there for about one hundred years, until the era of the Great Depression (1920s–1930s). My great grandmother, born in 1902, was part of the last generation to live there. In that era, most of her siblings moved to nearby Philadelphia, where employment opportunities were more plentiful than rural Burlington County. Our house burned down and was never rebuilt, but various family members continued to pay property taxes on the vacant land for some sixty years. One day in the 1980s, one of my grandmother’s cousins invited my mother and me to her house to give us “the papers”

associated with the property in anticipation of transferring the deed. We would learn that “the papers” were mostly original handwritten deeds from 1829 and 1831, as well as probate records, an indenture of mortgage, mortgage and tax receipts, and more. Needless to say, we were astonished. But something was wrong with that picture because my understanding had been that:

- ◆ Virtually all Black people were enslaved before the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War, and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment.
- ◆ Black people couldn’t own land “before slavery was abolished in 1865.”
- ◆ Black people could not be taught to read without serious repercussions during the antebellum period.
- ◆ Black people could not establish their own institutions during the antebellum period.

Our work with local teachers confirmed that Weston's understanding was not unique. Substantial numbers of teachers reported not knowing a majority of Black populations in southern New Jersey had been free as early as 1790, or that his ancestral homeland, which is called Timbuctoo, originated as a free Black settlement thirty-five years before the Civil War. Surprisingly, prior to our outreach efforts, teachers in nearby school districts were not more likely to know about Timbuctoo than teachers from elsewhere. Colleagues generally assumed that antebellum African American history began and ended with the horrors of enslavement.

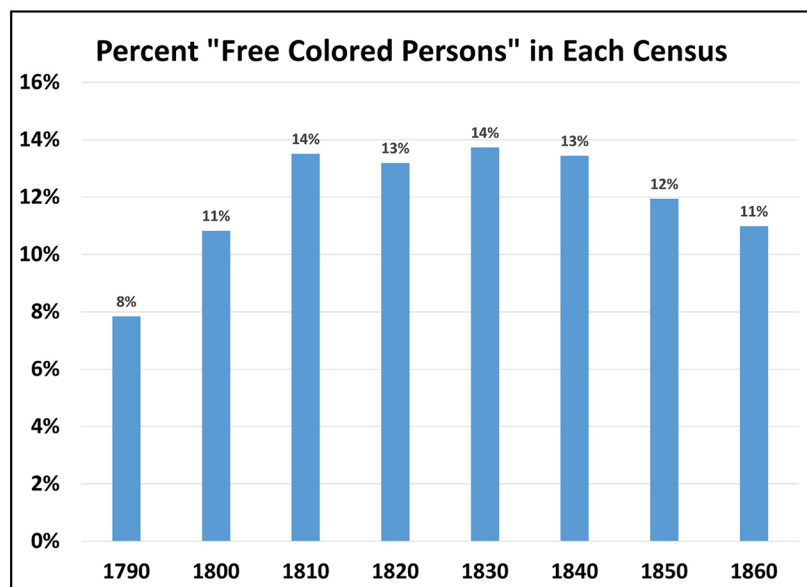
Certainly, a majority of the US Black population was enslaved during the antebellum period. However, nearly 500,000 free Black people were enumerated in the 1860 census, representing 12 percent of the US Black population. This was not a new phenomenon in 1860. The proportion of free Black people had ranged between 11 percent and 14 percent in each census since 1800. This trend is depicted in Figure 1.

On the eve of the Civil War, slightly more than half of free Black people lived in southern states¹ in

the shadows of enslavement, without opportunity to pursue any semblance of liberty, independence, or self-determination. Some southern states had passed legislation requiring manumitted Black people to leave the state to avoid “distracting” the enslaved majority. Others allowed free Black people to remain, but didn't allow them to own land, organize institutions, or educate their communities. In the South, free Black people comprised only 6 percent of more than four million Black people in this era.² Being the exception and not the rule, free Black people could “reasonably” be presumed be enslaved, and subject to abuse and harassment if they could not satisfactorily prove their freedom on demand.

Many free Black people in northern states had different prospects. By 1804, all the states in the North had had taken some action to end enslavement.³ The map (Figure 2) shows the US population in 1830, the proportion of free Black people in each state, and the year each northern state enacted its first manumission laws. The states with the darkest coloring had the highest proportion of free Black people. It is noteworthy that in all of the states except those not already admitted

to the Union,⁴ free Black people comprised 90 percent or more of the Black population. While we do not wish to suggest that “this freedom” was not subject to the ugliness of discrimination and violent attacks of racism, there are important distinctions between these Northern states and the South. For example, Black people did own land and establish institutions. As we will discuss later, in Timbuctoo, their lives were documented in vital records and newspaper accounts as early as the 1850s. Certainly, Timbuctoo is not the only place where Black communities had these experiences. Our understanding of antebellum African American history can be



Derived from:
US Census Bureau. Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970

Figure 1

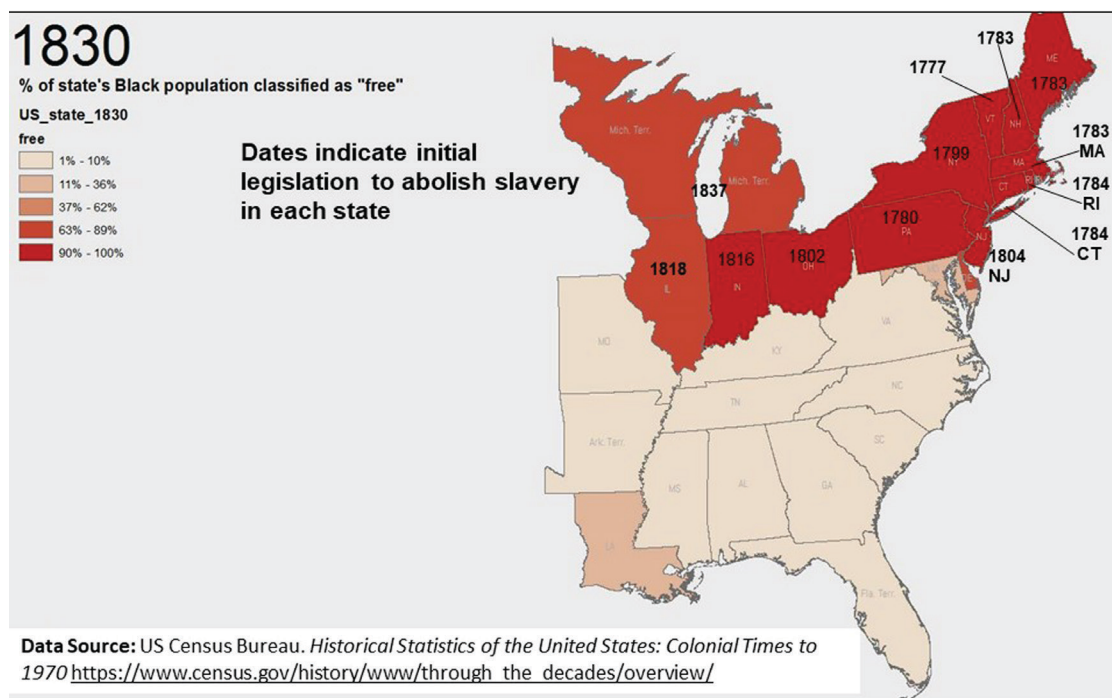


Figure 2 US population in 1830 showing the proportion of free Black people in each state, and the year each northern state enacted its first manumission laws.

enhanced by identifying these places and adding these perspectives to our lessons.

With the exception of Vermont in 1777 and Massachusetts in 1783, these were gradual manumission laws. *Gradual manumission* meant that Black people born after a certain date would be free after a period of indentured servitude to their mother's enslavers. To use New Jersey as an example, males born after July 4, 1804, were declared free after twenty-five years of indenture, while females were free after twenty-one years.⁵ A subsequent 1846 law purporting to end slavery completely left an indentured servitude measure in place.⁶ Other states that began the process with gradual manumission all passed laws to end legal enslavement long before the Civil War. The 1860 census enumerated only eighteen enslaved people in the northeast, all in New Jersey, while forty-six remained in Utah, Nebraska, and Kansas combined.⁷ On this basis, nearly 100 percent of Black people in these regions were *enumerated* as "Free Colored Persons" in 1860. As early as 1830, 97 percent were free.⁸

Within New Jersey, the Quaker dominant southern region of the state was more progressive in ending enslavement compared to New Jersey overall.⁹ Here, two-thirds of the Black population was classified as free as early as the 1790 federal census, and the proportion of free people reached 96 percent by 1820 and 99 percent by 1830. Multiple free Black settlements emerged in southern New Jersey during this period. Once such settlement is Timbuctoo, which is the topic of our curriculum project.

Timbuctoo is an antebellum free Black community first settled in September of 1826 when four formerly enslaved men from Maryland purchased parcels of land from a Quaker businessman. Ezekiel Parker, David Parker, Wardell Parker, and Hezekiah Hall purchased their parcels of land from William Hilyard, ranging in size from 0.5 to 1.5 acres. The prices ranged from \$8.33 to \$24.05 "paid in hand"—in other words, paid in cash. Documentation of Timbuctoo's founding and early development is substantial. These documents are discussed in detail in "Timbuctoo and the First



Figure 3 New Jersey place names in 1830 with current locations in parentheses.

Emancipation of the Nineteenth Century.”¹⁰ Readers are encouraged to access this article and its multiple hyperlinks for further information.

Integrating Timbuctoo into Public School Curricula

Ironically, descendants of these men and women living in the area today did not learn about their ancestors’ remarkable local history in public schools, in part because textbooks typically focused on national themes relevant to any stakeholder group. “It wouldn’t be cost effective to invest in developing content that’s only relevant to a small proportion,” explained one colleague. Local teachers frequently add information specific to the location of their schools because of this.

Substantial amounts of documentation about Timbuctoo are available to support teachers’ efforts in this regard and can be found at in the

Timbuctoo article referenced above, as well as at www.TimbuctooNJ.com.

We expected that New Jersey’s distinction as a leader in passing an Amistad bill, which requires teaching of African American history in public schools, would have resulted in additional information in materials available through the New Jersey Department of Education. However, we found this monumental legislation summarized important perspectives in African American history with statements such as these:¹¹

- ◆ All people should know of and remember the human carnage and dehumanizing atrocities committed during the period of the African slave trade and slavery in America and of the vestiges of slavery in this country; and it is in fact vital to educate our citizens on these events, the legacy of slavery, the sad history of racism in this country, and on the principles of human rights and dignity in a civilized society, and
- ◆ The history of the African slave trade, slavery in America, the depth of their impact in our society, and the triumphs of African Americans and their significant contributions to the development of this country is the proper concern of all people, particularly students enrolled in the schools of the state of New Jersey.

Here we see that even in “progressive” efforts to promote teaching African American history, history is reduced to the atrocities of enslavement without acknowledgement of the resilience and resolution of some free Black populations in the North who did own land, established institutions, and provided educational opportunities. It is important to note that within Northern states, free Black populations comprised a very substantial majority as early as 1830, but documentation of their existence and vitality is often lacking.

We sought to change that. In 2019, we obtained funding from the Burlington County Division of Parks Cultural and Heritage Affairs to develop

curricula and materials about antebellum free Black communities in general and Timbuctoo in particular. Although development of the project was delayed by the COVID pandemic, a second grant was requested and received for 2022. The Timbuctoo Historical Society convened social studies teachers from Westampton Middle School and Rancocas Valley High School to develop curricula in accordance with educational standards established by the New Jersey Department of Education. Through the collaborative efforts of many, the curriculum project was launched.

We utilized reports from archaeological excavations conducted in Timbuctoo between 2009–2011, nineteenth-century newspaper articles from as early as 1851, and various research articles developed and/or collected by the Timbuctoo Historical Society. We also conducted our own research to identify materials to inform the curricula developed, and selected themes from the materials. We settled on the topics below. The full curriculum can be accessed at <https://timbuctoonj.com/curriculum-development>.

Middle School Lessons

“What Is the story of Timbuctoo?” For the lessons developed for middle school students, we chose to use a “story motif.” Stories tell us about our own lives or the lives of people and events. Telling a story includes experiences that have made us “who we are.” Educators, especially those in the content area of social studies, tell stories about individuals, groups, societies, and civilizations.

We sequenced the lessons in the curriculum to provide the students with the “equipment” or framework to research various sources of information about the Timbuctoo settlement in Westampton, New Jersey. Upon conclusion of these lessons, students use the information they have gathered to answer the question: “What is the story of Timbuctoo?”

Though this curriculum was created for middle school students, it can be tailored to meet the

needs of younger or older age levels. There are four lessons that are research based and one final culminating lesson. The first lesson is “What and Where Is Timbuctoo.” Using online resources, students complete a web quest in which students note the similarities and differences between Timbuctoo, New Jersey, and Timbuctoo of ancient Mali. The second lesson is “Archeology and Timbuctoo.” Here, students become acquainted with the methods used by archeologists at a “dig” site such as the site at Timbuctoo, Westampton, New Jersey, conducted in 2010 and 2011 (Figure 4). In the third lesson, “Everyday Life in Timbuctoo,” Students examine images of artifacts found at the site and organize their responses on a graphic organizer. The fourth lesson is called “Defiance, Devotion, Dedication, and Duty in Timbuctoo.” The information researched in this lesson is divided into three areas of inquiry: (1) *Defiance*: Underground Railroad and Timbuctoo; (2) *Devotion*: the role of the AME Zion Church; (3) *Dedication and Duty*: US Colored Troops.

The final culminating activity is entitled, “What Is the story of Timbuctoo? Bringing the story motif full circle, students combine the information they have gathered from the research and activities of this unit of study and create a historical narrative, i.e., a story!



Figure 4 Artifacts uncovered at a “dig” site in Timbuctoo

High School Lessons

Every high school student in New Jersey is required to take United States History I. At times, it can be a difficult subject for students to get excited about, but when they uncover the rich histories connected with their local communities and perhaps even their ancestors, the story comes to life! This is what we sought to do in creating lessons that incorporate the history of Timbuctoo in the curriculum. In our first lesson, students learn about the Quakers and their connection to Timbuctoo and other Black communities. Their early adoption of abolitionist policies led to changes in the state of New Jersey and, eventually, the nation. Our second lesson explores what life was like for free Black people living in New Jersey, a rather unique state because of the counterbalancing of Quaker activism and the vestiges of plantation style settlements farther north in the state, essentially a microcosm of the conflict that would tear the nation apart. In our third lesson, students are asked to step into the shoes of a resident of Timbuctoo who was stalked by a notorious “slave hunter” under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (see

Figure 5). This simulation concludes with a heroic act of resistance by the entire community of Timbuctoo. Finally, our fourth lesson highlights the residents of Timbuctoo who served in the Civil War. As we examine their stories, students are asked to consider the meaning of military service for these men and their community (Figure 6).

They were not only fighting for the end of enslavement, but for a hope for a better future and recognition as full citizens of the United States. These lessons fit seamlessly with New Jersey State Standards (NJSL 6.1.12 and the Amistad Law) for the course and enrich students’ understanding of how the story of our nation hit home and impacted the people who once lived in their community.

How to Find Engaging Local History

We know students will be taught local history by their teachers, but as teachers where can we learn that information about local African American history? The quickest and easiest way is, of course, to do a search online to find information from in and around your area. Online resources such as historical newspaper databases offer great primary and

secondary sources for reading about local African American history, and there are many books and publications written that can be found. In our own research however, we have found that online resources have best served as stepping-stones to real people and real historical sites that we can interact with. One of the best ways to find these local historical sites is to find landmarks. Landmarks such as cemeteries, AME and AME Zion churches, and local museums can be found online. A couple examples in the southern New Jersey area include Jacob’s Chapel



Figure 5 Student artist’s depiction of the Battle of Pine Swamp



Figure 6 *Freedom to the Slave, Union army recruitment broadside from 1863, chromolithograph*

AME Church in Mount Laurel, the Underground Railroad Museum in Eastampton, and, of course, Timbuctoo in Westampton.

Almost all of these historical sites have websites and Facebook pages filled with information about their unique histories, but they also have addresses and contact information so that you can get in touch with the passionate people running them. So often these wonderful people have an emotional and personal connection to the history that they are trying to preserve, and it makes learning about it from them so much more engaging and interesting. These local historians are eager to share their stories especially with educators who are planning to share it again with generations of students. This could also open up many doors to direct interactions between students and the history as well. In addition to possible field trips and projects that could be centered around these local African American historical sites, they are almost

always hosting community outreach events to get people to come and learn.

Jacob's Chapel has historical reenactments of what it was like to be traveling on the Underground Railroad. Timbuctoo hosts a number of different roundtable discussions centered around engaging in local history as well as Juneteenth celebrations and other activities. Information about the times and dates of such events can typically be found online on Facebook pages and websites. To learn local, turn local.

Implementation Issues and Next Steps

The Timbuctoo Historical Society¹² was fortunate to identify and employ local teachers who were highly motivated to find and develop meaningful material to engage students in US history, a topic which is often regarded as boring and irrelevant to present day life. Not every district will identify teachers willing to do the extra legwork to develop materials from scratch, or be willing to deal with sensitive issues of racism and enslavement. One way we will deal with this aspect is to include a module on teaching difficult history in upcoming professional development workshops.

Some teachers expressed concern that their schools would not likely have adequate interest for a specialized course in African American history. The answer to this question is simple: this should not always be a specialized course, but rather rudimentary components on any purportedly comprehensive discussion of the antebellum period.

Some teachers raise questions about the dynamics of teaching these topics in predominantly African American school districts versus predominantly white districts versus districts that are multicultural. The simple answer to this question is that fully integrating African American history into the regular US history curriculum simplifies matters in this regard.

Some critics expressed concern that our curriculum project only involved one African American teacher besides the project director. Our answer

here simple: not every district will have African American social studies teachers. It is noteworthy that our county's only predominantly African American district did not have any African American teachers at the high school level, and none of those were available to participate in our curriculum development. However, we did present the curricula and materials at the 2022 New Jersey Education Association Convention in November 2022, and from that we were invited to present at

the Burlington County Education Association's conference in April 2023. One of the topics we present there will be "Implementation Issues and Next Steps," from which we will get input on professional development programs to address all these issues. Our curriculum is a work in progress that will continue development in response to needs that are identified as we interact with teachers and students throughout the state.

Appendix: New Jersey Learning Standards Addressed by Our Curriculum and Materials

Lesson	New Jersey Student Learning Standards Addressed
What and Where Is Timbuctoo? Everyday Life in Timbuctoo Defiance, Devotion, Dedication, and Duty in Timbuctoo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6.1.8.Civics HR.3.b: Evaluate the impact of the institution of slavery on the political and economic expansion of the United States. • 6.1.8.CivicsHR.3.c: Construct an argument to explain how the expansion of slavery violated human rights and contradicted American ideals • 6.1.8.CivicsHR.4.a: Examine sources from a variety of perspectives to describe efforts to reform education, women's rights, slavery, and other issues during the Antebellum period. • 6.1.8.EconNE.4.a: Explain how major technological developments revolutionized land and water transportation, as well as the economy, in New Jersey and the nation. • 6.1.8.EconNE.4.b: Analyze how technological innovations affected the status and social class of different groups of people and explain the outcomes that resulted. • 6.1.8.HistoryCC.4.b: Explain the growing resistance to slavery and New Jersey's role in the Underground Railroad. • 6.1.8.HistoryUP.5.b: Examine the roles of women, African Americans, and Native Americans in the Civil War. • 6.1.12.HistoryUP.2.b: Analyze the impact and contributions of African American leaders and institutions in the development and activities of black communities in the North and South before and after the Civil War
Archeology and Timbuctoo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6.2.8.History SE1.a: Explain how archeological discoveries are used to develop and enhance understanding of life prior to written records.
#1 Quakers, Free People, Abolition, and Timbuctoo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6.1.12.HistoryCA.2.a: Research multiple perspectives to explain the struggle to create an American identity. • 6.1.12.HistoryUP.2.b: Analyze the impact and contributions of African American leaders and institutions in the development and activities of black communities in the North and South before and after the Civil War. • 6.1.12.CivicsDP.3.c: Examine the origins of the antislavery movement and the impact of particular events, such as the Amistad decision, on the movement.

Lesson	New Jersey Student Learning Standards Addressed
#2 Antebellum North and South Jersey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 6.1.12.HistoryUP.2.b: Analyze the impact and contributions of African American leaders and institutions in the development and activities of black communities in the North and South before and after the Civil War. · 6.1.12.GeoPP.2.a: Analyze how the United States has attempted to account for regional differences while also striving to create an American identity. · 6.1.12.CivicsPI.3.a: Analyze primary and secondary sources to determine the extent to which local and state issues, publications, and the rise of interest group and party politics impacted the development of democratic institutions and practices. · 6.1.12.CivicsDP.3.c: Examine the origins of the antislavery movement and the impact of particular events, such as the Amistad decision, on the movement. · 6.1.12.CivicsDP.3.a: Compare and contrast the successes and failures of political and social reform movements in New Jersey and the nation during the Antebellum period (i.e., the 1844 State Constitution, abolition, women's rights, and temperance)
#3 The Battle of Pine Swamp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 6.1.12.HistoryUP.2.b: Analyze the impact and contributions of African American leaders and institutions in the development and activities of black communities in the North and South before and after the Civil War. · 6.1.12.HistoryUP.2.c: Explain why American ideals put forth in the Constitution have been denied to different groups of people throughout time (i.e., due process, rule of law and individual rights). · 6.1.12.CivicsDP.3.a: Compare and contrast the successes and failures of political and social reform movements in New Jersey and the nation during the Antebellum period (i.e., the 1844 State Constitution, abolition, women's rights, and temperance).
#4 Civil War Veterans of Timbuctoo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 6.1.12.HistoryUP.2.b: Analyze the impact and contributions of African American leaders and institutions in the development and activities of black communities in the North and South before and after the Civil War. · 6.1.12.HistoryCA.2.a: Research multiple perspectives to explain the struggle to create an American identity. · 6.1.12.CivicsDP.4.a: Compare and contrast historians' interpretations of the impact of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments on African American's ability to participate in influencing governmental policies. · 6.1.12.CivicsDP.4.b: Analyze how ideas found in key documents contributed to demanding equality for all (i.e., the Declaration of Independence, the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Gettysburg Address). · 6.1.12.HistoryCC.4.a: Analyze the extent of change in the relationship between the national and state governments as a result of the Civil War and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments during the 19th century.



Cheryl Alspach (left above) teaches history at Rancocas Valley High School. She earned her MA in American history from Pace University in conjunction with Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and a BA in history and social studies education from Messiah College in 2005. She has been actively engaged in public history as high school teacher and through her involvement with the Timbuctoo Curriculum Project.

JoAnn Donnelly (right above) taught middle school social studies for more than thirty-five years. She has been involved in a number of projects Timbuctoo projects, including an online student exchange program between Westampton Middle School and a school in Timbuktu, Mali, as well as multiple activities of Westampton's Timbuctoo advisory committee. She earned her bachelors degree from the University of Delaware, and her masters degree from the College of New Jersey.

Kevin Risley (not pictured) is a first-year teacher at Winslow Township High School. He learned about Timbuctoo through his student teaching assignment at Rancocas Valley High School, as well as through his senior capstone project, which focused on Jacob's Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, which is a historic congregation in Mount Laurel founded around 1824.

Guy Weston (center above) is a genealogist and cultural heritage specialist who currently serves as the managing director of the Timbuctoo Historical Society. His ancestors settled in Timbuktoo in 1829. He holds an MA in bicultural studies from LaSalle University. Guy is also the director of publications for the Afro American Historical and Genealogical Society.

ENDNOTES

- 1 US Census Bureau. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*. https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1975/compendia/hist_stats_colonial-1970.html accessed on September 3, 2022.
- 2 US Census Bureau. *Historical Statistics of the United States*.
- 3 Arthur Zilversmit. *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967)
- 4 Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan were admitted to the Union after 1804.
- 5 Guy Weston. 2022. "Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Nineteenth Century." *New Jersey Studies* 8 (1, Winter). <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i1.268>
- 6 Weston, "Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Nineteenth Century."
- 7 US Census Bureau. *Historical Statistics of the United States*.
- 8 US Census Bureau. *Historical Statistics of the United States*.
- 9 A majority of New Jersey's population (> 70 percent since at least 1800 through today) is concentrated in the northern counties. As a result, trends in this region obscure what's happening in the more sparsely populated southern region of the state. See Weston "Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Nineteenth Century."
- 10 Weston, "Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Nineteenth Century."
- 11 The Amistad Legislation Act of 2002. New Jersey Statutes Annotated: P.L.2002, c.75 (C.52:16A-86 et seq.).
- 12 The project was originally conceived with Westampton Township's Timbuctoo Historical Society and was transferred when the Timbuctoo Historical Society was established in 2020.

Timbuctoo Historical Society

Timbuctoo was settled by formerly enslaved and free Black people, beginning in 1826. Residents owned land and established institutions such as the African Union School in 1834 and an AME Zion Church and Cemetery c. 1840s. Timbuctoo was a stop on the Underground Railroad. There's a lot to find out about the persistence, resilience and achievements of free Black people in New Jersey through Timbuctoo history. Learn more at: www.TimbuctooNJ.com . Also visit the website to:

- Request a presentation for your group at your location, onsite at the Timbuctoo Cemetery, or via Zoom
- Find out about our curriculum development project with local schools
- Read stories about Timbuctoo and people who lived there from 1800s local newspapers
- See video presentations and PowerPoint slides about Timbuctoo history
- Read magazine articles and scholarly papers about Timbuctoo
- Provide feedback on how to make Timbuctoo engaging for visitors





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- Guy Weston and colleagues discuss development of curricula on antebellum free Black people in New Jersey
- Karen Sutton introduces Grace Wisher, an indentured servant to a seamstress who played an important role in sewing Baltimore's "Star Spangled Banner"
- Bob Davis discusses calculating numbers of Revolutionary War soldiers that are frequently unrecognized: Black soldiers
- Margaret Dorsey Jones reflects on the life of her grandmother, Julia Francis Courtney

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- *Black Homesteaders of The South*
by Bernice Alexander Bennett
- *The Archaeology of Race and Class at Timbuctoo: A Black Community in New Jersey*
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