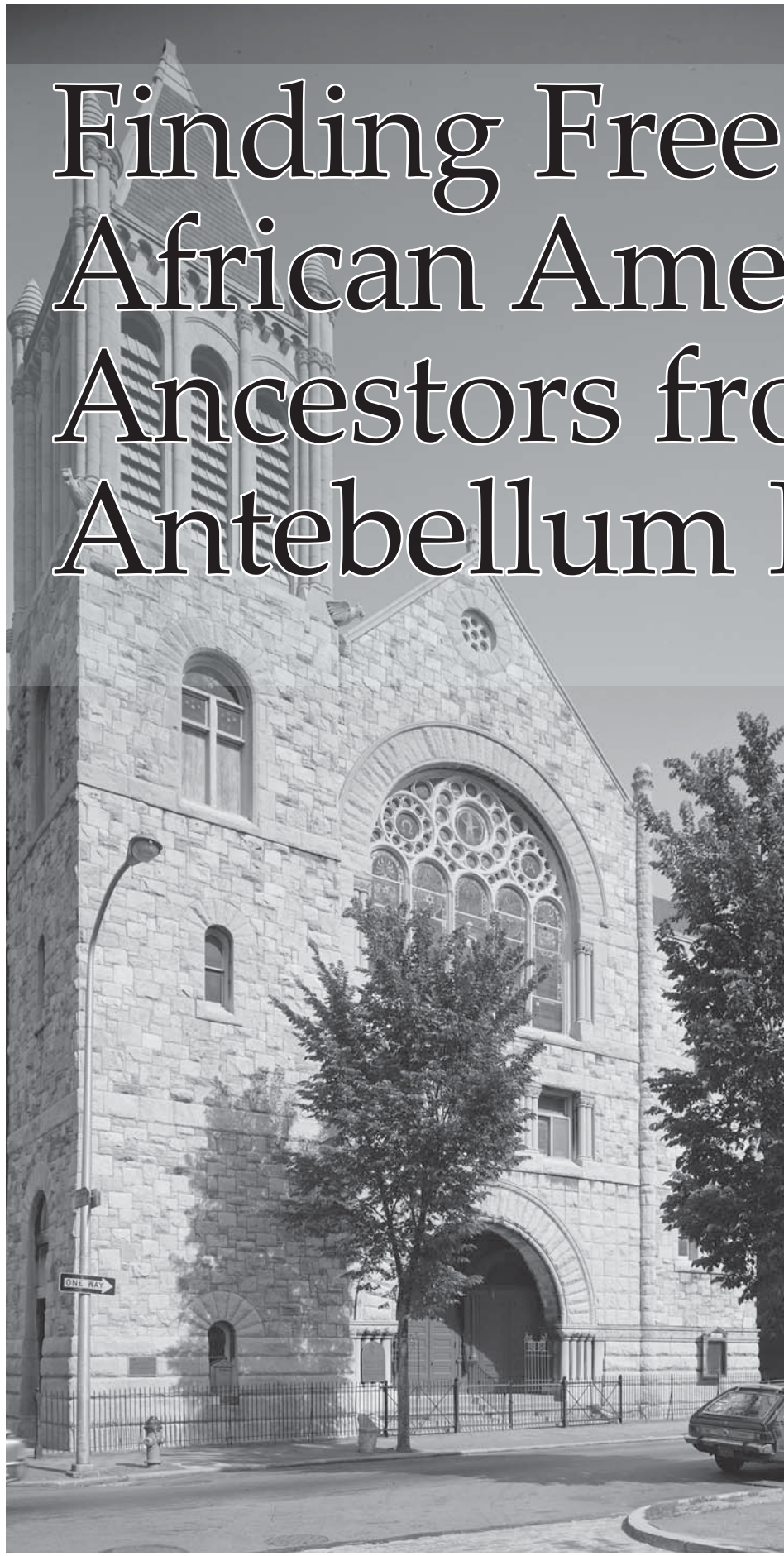


Finding Free African American Ancestors from the Antebellum Period

by Guy-Oreido Weston



*A 1973 image of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS photos.137872p
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Genealogy researchers may assume that public documentation of African American family histories prior to the 1870 census is limited to slave records, such as those found in deed books. United States history, as taught in my New Jersey high school, does not challenge that assumption. In describing the unique challenges African Americans face in genealogy research, Henry Louis Gates indicates: “The fact that the vast majority of our ancestors were slaves until 1865 means that no census prior to 1870 is going to contain their names. So black Americans who are trying to trace their families back past 1870 must try to find the name of their last enslaved ancestor’s owner prior to emancipation.”¹

While this may be a true statement for a majority of African Americans, it fails to acknowledge the very significant history of a substantial minority. Nearly 500,000 free African Americans were enumerated in the 1860 census.² Free African Americans had comprised between 11% and 14% of the total African American population since 1800.³ A number of African American communities existed during that period, such as those that founded Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Philadelphia in 1794, Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City in 1808, and Mount Moriah AME Church in Mount Holly, New Jersey, where my 4th great-grandfather, John Bruere, was a trustee in 1840. In 1829, John purchased a one acre parcel in a nearby community called Timbuctoo.⁴

Situated in Westampton Township, New Jersey, Timbuctoo was founded by free blacks and runaway slaves in the 1820s with the support of local Quakers.⁵ At its peak in the mid-1800s, Timbuctoo had more than 125 residents, a school, an AME Zion Church, and the church's

adjacent cemetery. It was also a stop on the Underground Railroad. Today, the cemetery, which includes gravestones of African American Civil War Veterans, is a visible remnant of Timbuctoo’s history.

Family artifacts can lead to remarkable discoveries

I first learned about Timbuctoo as a child, but I had no idea that my family’s presence there preceded the Civil War until my cousin Lillian transferred title of the property to my mother many years later. During a visit to Lillian’s house, she presented us with the following documents: the original 1829 deed from John Bruere where he bought his first parcel in Timbuctoo for \$30; a deed for an adjacent parcel purchased in 1831 for \$8.50; John Bruere’s will from 1842; mortgage documents from 1845; and various receipts for mortgage payments and taxes through the 1930s. Four generations of my family had lived there, but most of my ancestors had left the rural homestead by the 1930s to seek employment in nearby Philadelphia. Eventually, the house was lost in a fire, but various family members continued to pay taxes on vacant land for nearly 60 years. In spite of our long history of ownership, we faced a challenge when applying for title insurance to get a mortgage to build a house in 1991.

In 1930, Lydia, Lillian’s mother, had received the title from her father, Joseph, and it appears that Joseph was able to use the original 1829 and 1831 deeds with the corroboration of John Bruere’s 1842 will to obtain a deed to transfer ownership from him to Lydia. This resulted with no record of a deed in Joseph’s name.

Following the ownership of the property proved to be problematic. In John Bruere’s 1842 will, he devised the property to his wife,

Ann and daughter, Sarah.⁶ When Ann passed away in 1872, her only known heir was Sarah, who passed away in 1880.⁷ Sarah, the mother of Joseph (Lydia's father), died intestate. Since Joseph was one of six children, the property would have been devised among the six heirs and Joseph would have received 1/6. With the division of the estate not being accounted for, negotiating with any descendants of the other five siblings would have to be done.

At the time of her death in 1970, Lydia had two surviving children: Lillian and Theodore and Lydia left no will.⁸ When Theodore passed away in 1990, there was no written record of his concurrence with Lillian's desire to give the property to another family member. Therefore, an agreement had to be negotiated with his

heirs as well.

To secure a clear title, research was done and an attorney was hired. Establishing the chain of title between John Bruere was needed and identifying potential heirs of Joseph was sought. Names in these records provided by Lillian were researched and correlated with census from 1830 to 1920. Correspondence to living cousins was conducted and public notices in local newspapers notified potential heirs of the undivided interest.⁹

Certainly, the title issues were a cause of frustration for the construction project but they were also a blessing in disguise that required me to pursue intensive genealogy research over a short time period. The documents provided

Table 1.

Document	Genealogical Significance
Original deeds conveying the premises to John Bruere in 1829 and 1831.	Identifies 4 th great grandfather by name and his probable location at the 1830 Census.
John Bruere's will from 1842	Provides names for John's wife and daughter (my 4 th great grandmother and 3 rd great grandmother). Identifies their probable location at the 1840 census. Also provides documentation needed to obtain a copy of the inventory of John Bruere's estate from the County Surrogate's office, facilitating further insight into his life.
Indenture of Mortgage 1845	Provides name for 3 rd great grandfather, introducing a surname associated with our present day family. Provides another name to uses in searches of the 1840 and 1850 Censuses.
Mortgage payment receipts 1846 to 1896. (Annual payments are made into the 1860s, then sporadically until 1896)	Provides names for another generation of ancestors for searching census records during these decades, including 2 nd great grandfather. Receipt for 1875 and 1876 indicates payment of \$24 via 2000 bricks at \$12 per 1000. This provides insight into the ancestor's probable occupation.
Deed from 1930	Legal description identifies the premises as the same premises conveyed by the prior owner to John Bruere in 1829. Subsequent deeds for this parcel and adjacent unrelated parcels in the 1980s and 1990s continue to use these archaic references, which can identify family relationships.

States in New England and along the North Atlantic began gradually freeing slaves as early as 1783 and significant proportions of free persons among their African American populations by the early decades of the nineteenth century.

a plethora of names and dates in one package that many genealogists can only dream of. Table 1 summarizes selected land and probate records from my family and the insights they provided for my research.

Using original records and databases to identify ancestors

Land records can be of important assistance for identifying ancestors and during the antebellum period. Deeds frequently include the names of spouses, names associated with adjacent lots, and possibly prior owners. For example, the legal description of a 1999 deed for the parcel for our family ends with the sentence “being the same premises that Samuel Atkinson, and his wife Hannah conveyed to John Bruere in his lifetime in fee by deed....in 1829,” and refers to 1829 neighbors when defining the boundaries of the parcel.¹⁰ This is not unusual in contemporary deeds in the area, even for transactions with no heir involvement.¹¹ Of course, most transactions will not have references going back to the 1820s, but even references to mid-20th century owners can provide useful information for genealogists.

The advent of indexed, digitized records accessible on the Internet added a critical dimension to research and helped to resolve unanswered questions. Digitized and indexed census records, such as those available on *Ancestry*, facilitate searches for pre-1870 entries of African Americans but details vary from region to region. States in New England and along the North Atlantic began gradually freeing slaves as early as 1783 and had significant proportions of free persons among their African American populations by the early decades of the 19th

century.¹² Details of enslaved and free African American population numbers by geographic location, beginning in 1790 can be found on the Census Bureau’s Website.¹³ Researchers with ancestors in these regions during these time periods may find a wealth of information to further their family trees beyond 1870.

For instance, in the “New Jersey Births and Christenings Index, 1660-1931,” collection available on *Ancestry*, I was able to find births for several people beginning in 1850. Similarly, the “New Jersey Deaths and Burials Index, 1798 to 1971,” collection recorded the deaths of relatives from 1872 and forward. These collections along with the censuses were able to verify the place and year of birth of a 4th great grandmother.

These online records, corroborated with original records, can trace the histories of these family members, even before vital records were kept in some states. New Jersey has collections of newspapers online and digitized and African American obituaries are published within. An obituary from 1875 for my 3rd great grandfather in the *New Jersey Mirror* reported:

“Lambert Giles, a well-known colored man, long a resident of this vicinity, was found dead by the side of the road from Mount Holly to Rancocas, near the barn of the late Caleb A. Woodward, on Monday evening about 7 1/2 o’clock. He had been at work at his usual occupation, white-washing, in Mount Holly during the day and left here for his home at Bucto about 7 o’clock. Deceased was subject to attacks of an epileptic nature and doubtless died

in a fit of this kind. Coroner Laumaster viewed the body in company with Dr. R. E. Brown and no doubt being entertained of the cause of his death, an inquest was deemed unnecessary. Lambert was an industrious and worthy man, and noted for his courtesy of manner. He was about 60 years of age."¹⁴

"...The sudden demise of the old colored whitewasher, Lambert Giles, last week put a number of housekeepers on the wing to find somebody to fill his engagements. Lambert followed an humble calling, but was regarded as about perfect in his art, and will be more missed than would many of our more pretentious citizens. He was often engaged weeks in advance."¹⁵

Local Church histories and Quaker associations

With the cemetery still in existence, we are also blessed to know Lambert's resting place, as his gravestone in the cemetery of Mt. Moriah AME church remains to this day. An obituary for Lambert's son, Joseph in April of 1938 provided additional information on the family such as Joseph's "great aunt, Sarah Ash, was one of the founders of Richard Allen's Church, Sixth Street, below Pine, Philadelphia."¹⁶ Richard Allen's Church is also known as Mother Bethel AME Church and it was founded by free African Americans in 1794.¹⁷ Mother Bethel is among the first African American churches established in the United States and was among the most prominent African American institutions in that era. Mother Bethel has an extensive archive collection that includes documentation of its early membership.¹⁸

The influence of Quakers during that period of New Jersey's history should also be noted. John Woolman, the prominent 18th century Quaker abolitionist, was from nearby Mount Holly, New Jersey.¹⁹ Quakers

by the name Samuel and Hannah Atkinson sold land to John Bruere in 1829 and 1831.²⁰ Another Quaker by the name of Jonathan Hilyard granted a mortgage to the heirs of John Bruere in 1845.²¹

Quakers were also leaders of advocacy to end slavery in New Jersey, petitioning the legislature to enact laws to abolish slavery in 1785.²² These efforts eventually led to *An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery*, passed by the New Jersey legislature in 1804.²³ This law provided that all children born to slaves after July 4, 1804, would become free after a period of "apprenticeship" to their mother's masters. Males would remain a servant of the mother's owner until the age of 25 and females until the age of 21.²⁴ By 1820, the number of free blacks, 12,460, outnumbered those in bondage, 7,557.²⁵ The regional distribution of slaves in New Jersey in 1820 is telling: only 182 (4%) of 4,318 Blacks in the Southern counties were slaves, while 7,375 (47%) of 15,699 in the northern counties were slaves.²⁶ By 1840, there were only four slaves in the Southern counties; while by contrast, there were 672 in the Northern counties.²⁷ This regional difference in the progress of manumission can be attributed to Quaker influence, which was strong in Southern New Jersey counties, while virtually absent in the north. Certainly, New Jersey's distinction as the last northern state to abolish slavery was a matter of regional debate within its boundaries.

Conclusion

Beginning decades before the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of free African Americans were enumerated in each decennial census. Today, nearly one hundred and fifty years after the Civil War, descendants of these free persons must number in the millions. There is clearly a dearth of information about antebellum free African Americans in the literature of genealogy, and in some cases, a lack of acknowledgement. I am fortunate to have been afforded such substantial documentation to guide my initial journey into family history research in a state with a wealth of information.

I hope this can assist others in their endeavors. Newspapers and vital records are available online and physically assisted in verifying the chain of title that was passed through generations in my family. The advent of websites that connect us, searchable databases that facilitate information access, and DNA testing, among other advances, have vastly improved our ability to learn our history and ancestry, share it among ourselves, and connect with each other. These tools assisted in my family history and I hope that they can assist in yours too. 🌳

Notes

1. Henry Louis Gates, *In Search of Our Roots* (New York: Crown Publishing Company, 2009), 419-420.

2. Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," *U.S. Census Bureau*, September 2002 (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/twps0056.html>), Table 1.

3. Gibson and Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," Table 1.

4. National Park Service, transcription of "Trustees of the Methodist Episcopal African Church Mount Moriah, July 18, 1840," crediting Burlington County Clerk's Office, Book of Deeds Y:339, Mount Holly. The listing of trustees, which is included in a deed book with property records, identifies John Bruere and three others who "have been duly elected trustees" of the aforementioned church, as well as referencing their qualifications, commitment, and "oath to support the Constitution of the United States." This document is part of a massive collection census, land, probate and other records pertaining to Timbuctoo that was transcribed, catalogued, and bound by the National Park Service.

5. Dennis Rizzo, *Parallel Communities: The Underground Railroad in South Jersey* (New York:

History Press, 2008), 133-137. Ernest Lyght, *Path of Freedom: The Black Presence in New Jersey's Burlington County 1659-1900* (Cherry Hill. E & E Publishing House, 1978), 38.

6. Burlington County, New Jersey, Book of Wills, F;229, for John Bruere, 15 November 1842; Burlington County Surrogate's Office, Mount Holly.

7. "New Jersey Deaths and Burials Index, 1798-1971," database, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 15 May 2014), entry for Sarah Giles, 17 September 1880, and entry for Ann Hall, 25 March 1872.

8. Burlington County, New Jersey. "Order Entering Final Judgment by Default," Instrument No. 771593, Weston v. Giles, 1992; Superior Court Clerk's Office, Mount Holly. Order and supporting documents specify intestate death of Lydia Giles Fallon who had been the record owner of the property in question.

9. Burlington Co., NJ, "Order Entering Final Judgment by Default," Instrument No. 771593.

10. Burlington County, New Jersey, Deeds, 36:3926, Guy Weston to Mary Weston, 13 November 1998; Burlington County Clerk's Office, Mount Holly. The history of the land is documented within this.

11. Carolyn Chang, Westampton, New Jersey [(Email for Personal Use,)] to Guy Weston, email, 28 November 2014, Conveyance Language used in New Jersey deeds discussed and historical considerations for chain of title, Personal Correspondence Folder, Weston Research Files; privately held by Weston.

12. Paul Finkelman, *An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981). Randall M. Miller and John David Smith, "Gradual abolition", in *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery*, (Westport, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), 471.

Gibson and Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," Tables 15-65.

13. Gibson and Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to

1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," Tables 15-65.

14. "Found Dead," *The (Mount Holly) New Jersey Mirror*, 22 April 1875, p.3, col. 3; Indexed Transcription, *Burlington County Library System* (<http://www.bcls.lib.nj.us/newspapers/newjerseymirror/> : accessed 5 December 2014), Genealogy Guide.

15. "Local Briefs," *The (Mount Holly) New Jersey Mirror*, 13 May 1875, p.3, col. 1; Indexed Transcription, *Burlington County Library System* (<http://www.bcls.lib.nj.us/newspapers/newjerseymirror/> : accessed 5 December 2014), Genealogy Guide.

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21. Burlington County, New Jersey, Mortgages, Q:110, Jonathan Hilyard to Ann Bruere, Sarah Giles, and Lambert Giles, 22 October 1845; Burlington County Clerk's Office, Mount Holly.

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23. Giles R. Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey: a short history* (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1989), 19.

24. See Edgar McManus *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973) 177-181; *An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 43, 72, 103-105, and Harris, Leslie *African Americans in New York City 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 59-71. All of these sources discuss descriptions of "gradual manumissions," "indentured servitude" in place of apprenticeship.

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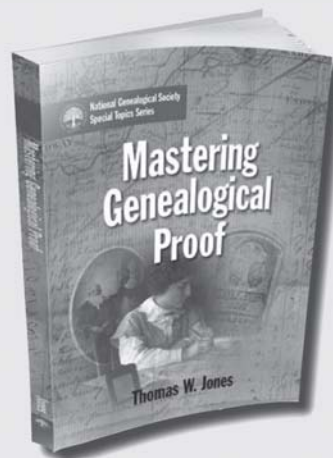
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Guy-Oreido Weston is a nonprofit executive and public health ethnographer that has managed HIV programs for two decades. A native of Philadelphia, his genealogy research traces his mother's family back to Philadelphia in the 1790s. An avid writer, this is his first publication in the field of genealogy. Current activities include further research into his 18th century roots in Philadelphia, as well as serving on the Timbuctoo Discovery Project, which advises the Westampton Township, New Jersey government on various archeological and historical projects pertaining to the community of Timbuctoo. He can be reached at guyoweston@gmail.com.

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