



Why Did They Call It “Timbuctoo”?

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ABSTRACT

Timbuctoo is an antebellum free Black settlement in southern New Jersey, established in 1826. The name “Timbuctoo” is an anglicization of “Tombouctou,” a renowned African kingdom-city located in present day Mali, founded in the early eleventh century. It became a center for the trans-Saharan gold, salt, and ivory trade, as well as a center of Islamic scholarship and culture. While the history of the African Tombouctou is well documented, extensive research of New Jersey’s Timbuctoo is recent, revealing a compelling narrative of a fledgling Black population bound and determined to establish their own community on their own terms. One outstanding question is why early nineteenth-century Black New Jerseyans chose this name for their community. This paper explores possible origins of the name.

In September 1826, four Black men embarked upon a challenging and significant mission—the founding of a free Black settlement in New Jersey, a remarkable achievement in the antebellum era. In time, this community established schools, a church, and a cemetery, and became a safe haven in the North to “many weary wanderers who had escaped the yoke of slavery.”¹ Likely motivated by a shared vision, Hezekiah Hall, a formerly enslaved man living in New Jersey, joined forces with fellow Mount Holly residents Ezekiel Parker and Wardell Parker, as well as David Parker from nearby Evesham, purchasing lots in the area that would later adopt the name Timbuctoo.² They hoped to establish a community where they could live freely, obtain economic independence, and control their own destiny. The 1834 deed to Timbuctoo’s African Union School³ exemplifies their focus on self-determination, and suggests more than a modicum of success in achieving it. After the requisite description of the buyers, seller, legal description, and price, this deed says:

Whereas, in the Settlement of Tombuctoo . . . and in the vicinity thereof, there are many People of Colour (so called), who seem sensible of the advantages of a suitable school education and are destitute for a house for that purpose. And the said Peter Quire, and Maria, his wife in consideration of the premises, and the affection they bear to the people of Colour, and the desire they have, to promote their true and best interests, are minded to settle, give, grant and convey . . . said premises to the uses and intents hereinafter pointed out and described.

Perhaps more than any other extant documentation on Timbuctoo, this deed declares “agency” in the sense that these early settlers had the autonomy to establish their own priorities and develop a plan to achieve them. They also had the means to achieve their plans. “Peter Quire and his wife Maria,” were Black Timbuctoo residents⁴ who donated the land. Most notably, the school’s organizers, who included initial settler Hezekiah Hall,

stipulated that future trustees must be “people of colour who live within ten miles of the premises,” plainly indicating their intent to be in charge of the education of their community. This concept of “agency” is important to point out in a discussion about naming the community, as some researchers question whether fledgling Black community members in this era would have the authority to determine the community’s name. Certainly, if the community’s organizers could file a document in the county clerk’s office that restricted school leadership to Black people, it is likely they could determine the name of their community. Like other early references, “Tombuctoo,” uses a variation of the French spelling, suggesting some French language influence in the adoption of this name. This phenomenon is discussed later on page 26.

The four settlers purchased four parcels of land, ranging from 0.5 to 1.5 acres, from Quaker William Hilyard in Northampton Township.⁵ (It

is not clear whether the Parkers were previously enslaved or free men of color.) On December 15, 1829, there was a fifth recorded sale to a Black person, when John Bruer of Northampton Township purchased a nearby lot from Quaker Samuel Atkinson for thirty dollars.⁶ On February 3, 1830, Major Mitchell, a “coloured man” also of Northampton Township, purchased half an acre of land for fifteen dollars from Quaker Samuel Atkinson.⁷ According to the deed, this parcel of land was adjacent to the lot sold by Atkinson to John Bruer in 1829, who was referred to as “John Bruer in Tombuctoo.” This transaction marked a significant event—the first recorded mention of “Tombuctoo” as the official name for this Black settlement in Northampton.

When John Bruer purchased a second property on February 25, 1831,⁸ the deed explicitly identified him as John Bruer of Tombuctoo whose newly purchased lot was situated in Tombuctoo. Use of the name in this context suggests it was



Timbuctoo appeared on area maps as early as 1849. Source: Historical Maps of New Jersey, Rutgers University.



Reportedly Major Mitchell, who settled in Timbuctoo in 1830

not a pejorative one, particularly considering the reference to “Tom-buctoo” in the African Union School deed in 1834. The sequence of deeds and designation of Tombuctoo indicates the name may have been adopted in early 1830 specifically. It was not used in John Bruer’s deed of December 15, 1829, but was used in Major Mitchell’s deed dated February 3,

1830. These dates become important as we consider how and where the name may have come to the attention of these New Jersey Black settlers.

Where Did the Name Timbuctoo Come From?

New Jersey’s Timbuctoo bears the title of the famous African kingdom-city Tombouctou, now located in the Republic of Mali.⁹ “Timbuctoo” is an anglicization of “Tombouctou.” “Timbuktu” is another anglicization used in reference to the African kingdom-city. This paper uses Timbuctoo to refer to US settlements. Timbuktu or Tombouctou is used to refer to the African city. However, early nineteenth century newspaper references and maps are not consistent in using one spelling or the other, and also include Tombuctoo, as spelled in early deeds for the New Jersey community.

The original Timbuktu was founded around the start of the eleventh century by nomadic Tuareg herdsmen, who established it as a tented settlement. Over time it became a permanent thriving city with structures made of mud-brick wall construction.¹⁰ This ancient metropolis “flourished as a commercial trans-Saharan trade and intellectual center (Sankore University) between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries as part of the great medieval empires of Mali and Songhay.”¹¹ It became a center for the trans-Sahara gold, salt, ivory, and slave trades, as well as a center Islamic scholarship and culture.¹²

There are various etymologies and stories which define the origin of the African name Timbuktu. One popular oral tradition reveals that the word, derived from the Tuareg language, is made up of “tin” which means either “place” or “well” and “Buktu,” which was the name of an old Malian woman who once lived in the region. She was trusted by travelers who left belongings behind



West Africa c. 1830

with her to be retrieved on a return visit. If a traveler was asked where his belongings had been left behind, he would answer that he left them at Tin Buktu meaning the “Place [or Well] of Buktu.”¹³

Some traditions say that her name means “an old slave woman” or is a translation meaning “woman with a large navel.” Buktu was described as a Black slave woman with a big navel who was entrusted with the camp and who became the keeper of a large well.

Another more elaborate tale has Buktu being “the first person to live in the city” before the Tuareg. “A slightly more macabre version of this tale has Buktu being captured and enslaved by the Tuareg, and finally killed by her enslaver, . . . her body becoming, quite literally, the salt of the earth, and herself the navel of the city—a somewhat grisly allegory preserved by the Bella [a caste of enslaved Black people] to illustrate their dependence on, and helplessness at the hands of, their overlords.”¹⁴ This story also illustrates the importance of the sacrifice of an enslaved person who became the foundation of the African city. In contrast, the New Jersey Timbuctoo was founded by freedom seekers who, in many cases, left behind their family and friends and made sacrifices for themselves to become free and independent.

Other Places Named Timbuctoo

There are at least four known places named Timbuctoo in the United States. Why were they named Timbuctoo and who named them?

Besides the New Jersey Timbuctoo, a second settlement was a California gold-rush town which, populated with Black people, was founded and named Timbuctoo in about 1855. By 1860, when the town was at its peak, the Rose Bar/Timbuctoo federal census listed only forty Black or Mulatto residents out of 1,243 people.¹⁵ The origin of how it got its name is unknown. The most popular and least probable story, according to Lane Parker, author of *Smartsville and Timbuctoo*, is that about 1855 “[t]he first white miners in the area found an

African already at work ‘with pick and pan’ and [because he discovered gold] decided to name the place Timbuctoo.” The African city of Timbuktu, known as the city of gold, was an important center “for its trade in copper, salt, and gold.” The Black prospector and the miners decided to name the place after the celebrated gold-rich town.¹⁶ The nearby Yuba River bend, named the Timbuctoo Bend, is north of the gold-bearing sand bars.¹⁷ It is reminiscent of the Niger River’s Niger Bend in Africa, which was just south of the ancient city of Timbuktu. Another story suggests that William Marple, a local storekeeper and part-time gold miner, began “making more from his claim than from his full-time business, after which point he became known as the ‘Sultan of Timbuktu.’” Another possibility, according to Lane, is that miners, aware of other Timbuctoo communities in New York and New Jersey, also named this boomtown Timbuctoo.¹⁸ By the late 1800s, the population had declined, and in 1964 there was a Ghost Town Restoration Festival.¹⁹ Today fewer than five hundred residents call the area home.

A third settlement is almost lost to history. In 1846, prominent abolitionist and wealthy philanthropist Gerrit Smith donated 120,000 acres or 3,000 Adirondack gift lots in North Elba, New York, to free, poor, nondrinking Black men who lived in New York State. According to state law, these men could now vote in New York because they owned taxable real estate with homesteads worth \$250.²⁰ Many of the grantees never even visited their lots, and of those who travelled to claim them, many soon migrated elsewhere. By 1857, “probably less than fifty [had] taken and [continued] to hold possession of their grants.”²¹ These inexperienced farmers became disillusioned because of their remote and unworkable gift lots, harsh winters, and no available resources to help develop their real estate.²² Established as an African American settlement in an unfamiliar remote wilderness, perhaps as a common Timbuctoo metaphorical meaning²³ suggests, it was “a place that

was very far away.” Living there would have been difficult and lonely since residents would have been far away from their social support system of family and friends. In contrast, the New Jersey Timbuctoo settlers had to purchase their affordably priced lots. These homesteaders often remained and purchased other lots within the same community. The New Jersey settlement was situated in a friendlier environment that was closer to cities, friends, and family and exists to this day.

Why Gerrit Smith’s land received the name of Timbuctoo is unknown. Amy Godine, in her thoroughly researched *The Black Woods: Pursuing Racial Justice on the Adirondack Frontier* and in Godine’s interview with Susan Apel offers suggestions. Black or white Americans could have named it to mean a forsaken and out-of-reach outpost. White North Elbans, unsympathetic to Gerrit Smith’s “ideas or his beneficiaries,” could have been “the ones to gift the settlement with a name they deemed a slur” and Black settlers then made it their own.²⁴ Acknowledging the speculative nature of her observations, Godine posits that militant white abolitionist John Brown or another settler could have been responsible for the name or “one of Smith’s Black allies who helped him promote his land giveaway could have come up with the name.”²⁵ Godine theorizes that “Timbuctoo (or the African Timbuktu) in the early Black press stood for Black economic independence, culture, and self-governance.”

A fourth Timbuctoo (nicknamed Bucktoe), existed as the community surrounding Pennsylvania African Union Church of New Garden congregation, incorporated in 1851, located in Chester County, Pennsylvania. A lot was purchased on September 4, 1824, by the African American trustees of the congregation for the establishment of a meeting house and burial ground. Today, only the cemetery remains at the original site. It is unknown when this church community was named Bucktoe.²⁶

Timbuctoo as Known in Western Culture

Timbuktu had intrigued Western Europeans for centuries because of its legends that romanticized an exotic culture with riches of gold and great wealth. “General awareness of the city [Timbuktu] and its role in trade had been published for centuries and so the name, at least, and its history as an “African Kingdom led by a black sultan,” would have been familiar.²⁷ In 1826, Scottish explorer Gordon Laing is acknowledged as the first European to reach Timbuktu. He survived a vicious attack by Tuareg nomads on his journey from Tripoli to Timbuktu and two days after leaving the city, he was murdered. In 1828, Rene-Auguste Caillie, the first European who lived to tell his tale, reached Timbuktu and remained there for two weeks. He returned to Morocco and then traveled home to France where he published a two-volume travelogue in 1830 that described his travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo.²⁸ Several newspapers printed excerpts of his travels with a focus on Timbuctoo. On May 29, 1830, page one of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* featured a narrative from Caillie’s travels about the king of Timbuctoo, the king’s hunting practices, and the game he hunted.²⁹

Learning about African Timbuktu in the 1800s

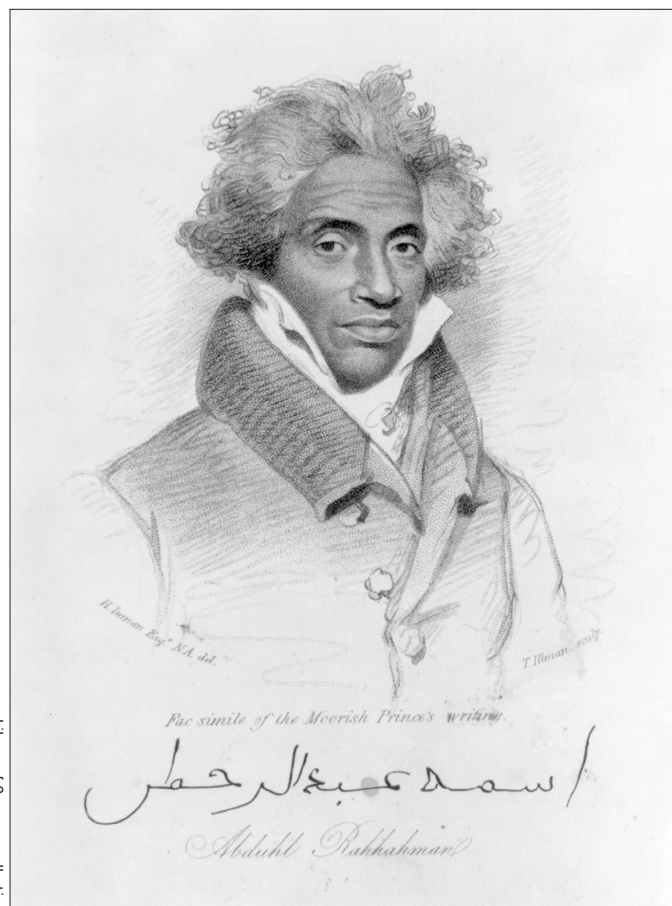
Black activists were reading about African Timbuktu early on and “in 1827 alone, *Freedom’s Journal*, the nation’s first Black newspaper, published nine articles on African exploration, culture, and geography.” In 1828, *Freedom’s Journal* tracked the French explorer Rene Caillie who, as noted above, was the first European to reach Timbuktu and return alive to tell his story. In the same year the journal also introduced and “ran thirteen features” about an enslaved Muslim prince named Abdul Rahman,³⁰ who was reportedly from Timbuktu.

On March 21, 1828, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* republished an article about the plight of this enslaved Muslim prince, described as “The Unfortunate Moor.” This account was first published in Natchez, Mississippi, on December 13, 1827.³¹ The story focused on Prince Abdul Rahman, with reference to the African kingdoms of the ancient city called Tombouctou, and a city called Teembo [Timbo], in Footah Jallo. Footah Jallo was located in the highlands of present-day Guinea, which shares a border with Mali. Abdul Rahman, who stood six feet tall, was an African natural-born leader, who had been captured in his homeland and was eventually sold into enslavement in Natchez, where he remained for forty years. In Natchez, Rahman was characterized as honest, “extremely modest, polite, intelligent,” and for the white population, compliant.³² Prince Rahman was highly educated, according to the article. He

had attended school at Timbo and then at Jenne and Timbuktu, thriving cities of Muslim culture, where as a Muslim he learned to read and write the Koran in Arabic.³³ The article gave a short historical background for Rahman as follows:

Rahman was reportedly born in 1762, at Tombuctoo, where his uncle . . . was at that time king. The father of Prince was sent out, as Governor, to Footah Jallo, which was, at that time, a colony of, or in some manner tributary to, Tombuctoo. Prince, after completing his education, entered the army. He soon rose to distinction, and at the age of twenty-six, was appointed to the command of an army of about two thousand men, to be employed against the Hebohs, “a tribe of negroes at the north of Footah Jallo.” He marched into their country, laid waste their towns, and sent them into flight. Believing he had won, he and his army were ambushed at a narrow mountain pass, captured, “sold to the Mandingoes, and by them put onboard a slave ship then upon the coast.” He was shipped to the Caribbean Island of Dominica and then to New Orleans and sold in Natchez, Mississippi in 1788.³⁴ Soon after Prince’s capture, his father died, and a brother became king. Prince believed that he was the rightful heir to the throne [Timbo].

After nearly twenty years of enslavement in 1807, Prince Rahman had a chance meeting in a marketplace close to Natchez. John Cox, a distinguished physician in the area recognized Rahman, who had known him intimately in Teembo in 1781, where, when afflicted with an illness, Rahman’s family treated him with kindness until he recovered.³⁵ This African encounter along with Rahman’s tale, helped to make him a local celebrity, especially with the confirmation that he was of royal blood.³⁶ The publicity around this encounter ultimately led to a series of events that led to Prince’s freedom. In brief, Dr. Cox sought



Drawing of Abdul Rahman. The Arabic inscription reads, “His name is Abd al-Rahman.”

to purchase Rahman, but was not successful. After Cox's death in 1816, his son William Rousseau Cox sought to purchase Rahman and free him, but was not successful.³⁷ Eventually, local newspaper publisher Andrew Marschalk, who had influential contacts in the federal government, took an interest in Rahman's case. Marschalk was able to get the attention of Secretary of State Henry Clay and President John Quincy Adams, who arranged to have Rahman freed on the condition that Americans held unlawfully in Morocco be released.³⁸

On May 24, 1828, the *New Jersey Mirror* republished the contents of a lengthy letter from a gentleman of Natchez to a lady in Cincinnati that relayed the unfortunate story of the enslaved Rahman and updated his circumstances.³⁹ Under the title "The Captive African Restored to Liberty," it was first printed in Natchez on April 7, 1828. The letter described how Prince Rahman and his wife Isabella left Mississippi on a speaking tour to raise funds to purchase their children's freedom, making an important first stop in Cincinnati, Ohio. Since the *Mirror* was published in Mount Holly, New Jersey, a town about two miles from New Jersey's Timbuctoo, residents would have access to information about his plight.

The letter detailed the events that led up to the liberation of Prince Rahman and his wife, Isabella. Rahman, who was enslaved in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1788 on the plantation of Thomas Foster, was liberated by Foster "without any compensation" on the condition "that he should not enjoy his liberty in this country," intending that he be returned to his own country. It was believed that when Rahman returned to his African "country called Timboo [Timbo]," he would "no doubt" become "a lawful king." Isabella was purchased for \$200 through the generosity of several people. His children and grandchildren, however, sadly remained enslaved on the Foster plantation. Prince Rahman would obtain his freedom if he and his wife agreed to emigrate to the colony of Liberia

in Africa with the aid of the American Colonization Society,⁴⁰ an organization dedicated to sending emancipated enslaved and free-born African Americans back to Africa. This society obtained money through subscriptions and contributions.

To raise funds for the purchase of his children (nearly \$10,000), Prince Rahman made appearances in eight cities on a ten-month speaking tour appealing for donations. To attract attention and charitable offerings, he wore a Moorish dress fabricated especially for him. This letter in the *New Jersey Mirror* was published in May 1828, before Rahman made his appearance in Philadelphia, where dressed in his "Moorish costume," he paraded the city streets and appealed to charity. While touring, he told his story, pleaded his plight, and reminisced about the African Timbuctoo and "the world he left behind."

Rahman arrived in Philadelphia in mid-June 1828. It was believed that he would collect a substantial amount of donation money when he was introduced to wealthy and influential people. However, contributions were disappointing and his coverage by the newspapers was limited, even though they ran stories about African explorers seeking Timbuktu.

It is noteworthy that Philadelphia had the largest free Black population in the United States throughout the antebellum period and had been a nexus of abolitionist activity during this time. As early as 1790, the US Census Bureau reported a Black population of 1,630 in Philadelphia, of whom 87 percent were free and 13 percent enslaved.⁴¹ A number of Black institutions were established during this period, such as the free African Society in 1787 and the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1794.⁴²

Although information about specific Burlington County Black community social connections to Philadelphia is limited, one place where such connections are clearly documented is in the churches. Both Mount Moriah African Methodist Episcopal Church⁴³ (founded nearby in North-

ampton Township, in 1826), and Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church⁴⁴ (established within Timbuctoo in the 1840s) were congregations with hierarchical governance connecting them to church conferences in Philadelphia. This would mean attendance at annual meetings in Philadelphia, and/or eventually hosting Philadelphia regional meetings in Northampton, as well as “oversight,” by church officials based in Philadelphia. In some cases, southern New Jersey churches were established based on missionary efforts from Philadelphia-based administrative offices.⁴⁵ Rev. Joseph Sinclair, who was the pastor of the Zion Wesleyan Church in 1854, was a Philadelphia resident in 1850.⁴⁶ There were also family connections. Early settler John Bruer’s wife Ann as well as Ann’s daughter were born in Philadelphia,⁴⁷ and Ann maintained a relationship with her sister Sarah Ash, who became a noted undertaker in Philadelphia.⁴⁸ Sarah’s husband, Joseph Ash was the executor of John Bruer’s 1842 will.⁴⁹ Timbuctoo resident Charles Butler, who came to Timbuctoo from Medford in the 1850s, was born in Philadelphia in 1833.⁵⁰ David Parker’s third wife, Clarissa Cole, was born in Philadelphia circa 1835.⁵¹ Certainly, news from Philadelphia could have reached Timbuctoo directly, and Timbuctoo residents may have attended Philadelphia activities.

Philadelphia always had an important connection to Mount Holly, New Jersey. Both early settlements were established by Quakers.⁵² One of the major early roads out of Mount Holly was called “The Great Road” in a circa 1745 map and was known for many years as the “great road leading to Philadelphia.”⁵³ In 1830 and earlier, when the stagecoach from Philadelphia would arrive with passengers and mail at the marketplace in Mount Holly, “the people would gather around, and the stage-driver would call out the names of persons for whom he had newspapers. Two persons then often joined in taking one paper—one of the subscribers would

read it on the evening and pass it over to his neighbor on the next morning . . .” and likely through the grapevine the news reached many more people.⁵⁴ Since Mount Holly was situated on the north branch of Rancocas Creek, it “offered the advantage of an open waterway to the Delaware River. This made possible [transportation and] the exchange of commodities with the port of Philadelphia.”⁵⁵

Prince Continues His Tour of Northern Cities

Prince Rahman departed Philadelphia in late July 1828 enroute to Boston, leaving his wife, Isabella, behind. Having remained in Philadelphia for five months until his return,⁵⁶ it is likely she continued to share her husband’s stories and through his fame, would have been an honorary guest in Black circles. Her stay brought more attention to the name Timbuctoo. In Boston, unlike Philadelphia, “appreciation of Ibrahima [Prince Rahman] was not confined to whites. Prominent Blacks had learned straightaway of his arrival . . . and lost no time in offering him their help.” A public dinner was organized in his honor and a Tribute of Respect was delivered and reported in the press.⁵⁷ On August 29, 1828, *The United States Gazette* in Philadelphia (copied from the *Boston Centinel*)⁵⁸ reported the Tribute of Respect rostrum of events and printed the most moving toasts presented as well, as a song written and sung on behalf of the “Chief from Old Africa.” As in Boston, Prince Rahman was well received by local Blacks in New York.⁵⁹ He and his African kingdom of Timbuktu continued to intrigue and make headlines in numerous newspapers throughout 1828.

On November 6, 1828, *The Litchfield County Post* in Connecticut reported:

The interior of Africa along the Niger [River], and between the Niger and the desert is still unexplored. But we have now among us a native Prince of Timbuctoo, one who received his education in that mysterious city, and is of

course able to give us more authentic accounts of that place than have ever been published. He describes it as a large walled city, probably as large as N. York, and a place of great business. Of this, we have before had evidence perhaps, as it has long been known that the enormous caravans crossing Africa in various directions are most of them destined for, or returning from a city called Timbuctoo. According to the account given by Abduhl Rahaman, Timbuctoo is also the seat of a powerful king, who holds a great number of cities and territories tributary to his government. This we are told by the grandson of the King himself, and we are further told how these cities and territories are governed, and what branches of the king's family are placed over each.⁶⁰

Rahman returned to Philadelphia in late December 1828 and reunited with his wife, Isabella. He continued to give interviews, making himself more prominent in the city. This time he was well received, unlike his first visit.⁶¹

Rahman joined the Black people of Philadelphia on January 1, 1829, in their New Year's Day parade that began at Lombard Street between 8th and 9th Street and eventually ended at Wesley Church.⁶² Notably, this church belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination that had established a congregation in Timbuctoo by the 1840s.⁶³ Rahman marched along through the heart of the city, an honored guest. Later, he sat prominently in the church, where the program of the day was presented. Newspapers in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston mentioned his appearance.⁶⁴ Whether he was designated Prince or King during this march is unknown. Certainly, the procession knew about his royal title. On February 9, 1829, Rahman and Isabella took passage in the ship *Harriet* which embarked from Norfolk, Virginia, and arrived in Monrovia, Liberia, in the middle of March.⁶⁵ In November 1829, the brig

Liberia arriving in Philadelphia from the coast of Africa delivered news of the death of Prince Abdul Rahman and about thirty of the colonists in Liberia due to fever.⁶⁶ He died in Liberia on July 6, 1829, never returning to his home in Timbo.

Conclusion

While we stop short of drawing firm conclusions, it is certainly plausible that activist leaders in Burlington County, New Jersey's Timbuctoo had awareness of *Freedom's Journal*, the nation's first Black newspaper, which published nine articles on African exploration, culture, and geography in the early years of Timbuctoo's founding, as well as tracking explorer Rene Caillie who was the first European to reach Timbuktu and return alive to tell his story. This paper introduced and "ran thirteen features on Abdul Rahman in 1828." Also, early Timbuctoo residents would have access to the *New Jersey Mirror*, the local paper that published a letter about the prince and his plight on May 28th of that year.

The 1829 New Year's Day parade featuring the prince ended at an AME Zion Church, part of a network of churches that eventually established a congregation in Timbuctoo. Moreover, the spelling in early documents New Jersey documents suggests some French influence in the adaptation of the name.

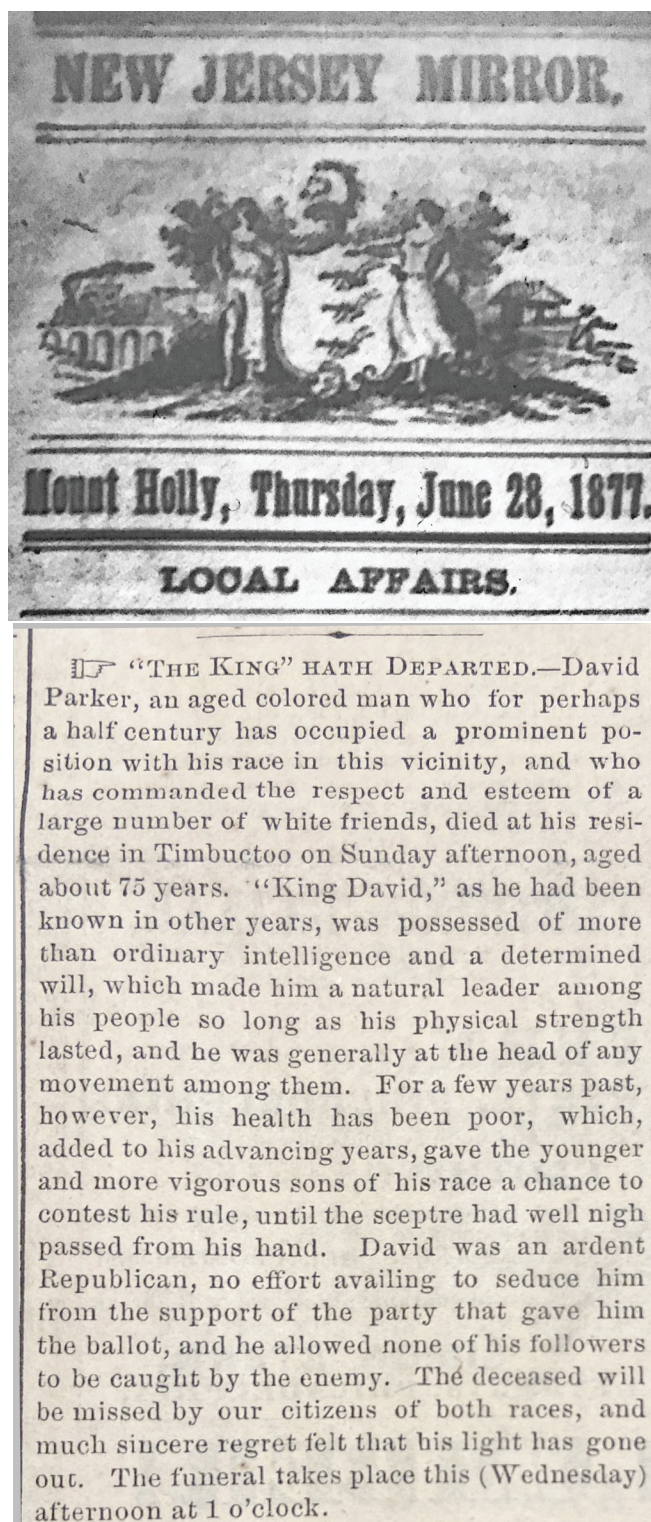
Some researchers have suggested that Timbuctoo settlers were illiterate and lacked political sophistication to "negotiate" a name for their community, sometimes citing a number of settlers who are described as unable to read in census records, albeit inconsistently. The African Union School deed offers an opposing perspective. These organizers had the audacity to declare their African school to be "by us, for us," in an 1834 legal filing, as well as describing the importance of education for their community. It should be noted that recording legal documents in the county clerk's office meant an official hand-wrote a second copy

for the county's record and therefore every detail of the document was observed when it was entered into the county record.

Given the foregoing, it is clear that early Timbuctoo settlers had both motive and opportunity to choose a name that represented their own desire for self-determination and cultural pride. For Black people, the name may have resonated deeply, echoing Abdul Rahman's personal history as an enslaved prince whose dignity and story became a powerful voice against enslavement. His experience of family separation and resilience could have mirrored their struggles, inspiring a sense of kinship. Historian W. Caleb McDaniel suggests that another perspective is that naming the New Jersey town "Timbuctoo" served as a subtle political statement amid the colonization debates of the 1820s, asserting that "home was here"—in the United States, not Africa.⁶⁷ Alternatively, the name may have simply reflected a vision of Timbuktu as an aspirational place, embodying independence, prestige, and strength.

A final question regarding the influence of Abdul Rahman in New Jersey's Timbuctoo is regarding use of the title "King" for its leader. David Parker is referred to as King David in multiple newspaper reports, very casually without explanation or question of the unusual nature of the title. For example, in 1855, when the *New Jersey Mirror* featured and described the local African American village of "Timbuctoo" they reported, "David Parker, is the King of the place, and ever since the imperial crown was placed upon his woolly head, his word has been considered Law and Gospel, by the whole tribe."⁶⁸ An 1886 article in the *Courier Post* said Timbuctoo "for many years enjoyed the distinction of having a different form of government than any other settlement within the borders of the state," indicating the sole ruler of the place was David Parker, known far and wide

as King David."⁶⁹ This article goes on to describe Parker's leadership and some dynamics of his governance. On June 28, 1877, the *Mirror* printed an obituary that eulogized as follows:⁷⁰



David Parker had several public roles in Timbuctoo. As a founder and “figurative” mayor, he was their spokesperson, political activist, a founder and trustee of the Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church of Timbuctoo.⁷¹ He also was a school board trustee and district clerk of the Timbuctoo school.⁷² He was also a founder and president of an organization called the Beneficial Society of the United Sons and Daughters of Timbuctoo and Vicinity.⁷³ He led Timbuctoo “warriors” in the Battle of Pine Swamp,⁷⁴ an infamous confrontation in which captors seeking to kidnap a self-emancipated Timbuctoo resident were beat down and chased away. Was Parker’s “King” title inspired by “King” Abdul Rahman? This remains an open question. The narrative of King Abdul Roman represents a unique account in Black history as it provides compelling details of an enslaved African’s prestigious life, intellect, military leadership in his home country, resilience through forty years of enslavement, and dedication to his family. This is certainly an unusual, but compelling contribution to Black history. David Parker is similarly compelling, albeit with some differences. He also a multifaceted leader, which included leading his followers to victory in battle. Relatively speaking, David Parker was wealthy, and he was involved in multiple initiatives to advance the interests of his people. “King” would be an unusual title for a Black community in America, and it was one that may have been foreign to Black people reading about their homeland. We may never know if Black New Jersey residents read about

Abdul Rahman in *Freedom’s Journal*, *The New Jersey Mirror*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and were inspired to use his story to name their community and their leader. But we have learned about two great leaders in Black history while investigating this question, and we know that King Abdul Rahman represents a role model that Parker and his contemporaries would have held in high esteem.



The Republican.

SPRINGFIELD, OCTOBER 8, 1828.

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Abdoul Rahman, the Moorish Prince who has been forty years a slave in Natchez, Mississippi, arrived in this town on Saturday from Hartford. He was attended by Rev. Mr. Gaulladet, Principal of the Deaf and Dumb Asylum, and S. Terry, Esq. At the recommendation of the American government, through whose agency he has been liberated from slavery, he is visiting the principal cities and towns of the Union, to obtain money sufficient to ransom his children, that they may accompany him to Africa. His aged wife is ransomed and is at Philadelphia. To his moral worth the highest testimony is borne, not only by the family to which he belonged, but also by gentlemen of the first respectability in Natchez. A brief history of his life, written by himself, will be found in our paper of July 16th. It is stated that he writes Arabic with ease and correctness. On Sunday evening, Mr. Gaulladet delivered a discourse in his behalf at the Rev. Mr. Peabody’s Meeting-house, and notwithstanding the rain, a respectable audience was collected, and between 80 and 90 dollars contributed. The next morning the amount was increased to the sum of \$114 59. For an hour the speaker fastened the attention of the audience, by his usual clear, lucid and interesting manner; and presented a history of the Prince, which were it not supported by the highest testimonials and well authenticated facts, would appear like a tale of romance.

Springfield Weekly Republican
Springfield, Massachusetts
Wednesday, October 08, 1828

The next morning the amount was increased to the sum of \$114 59. For an hour the speaker fastened the attention of the audience, by his usual clear, lucid and interesting manner; and presented a history of the Prince, which were it not supported by the highest testimonials and well authenticated facts, would appear like a tale of romance.

Much good it is believed will result from the return of Abdoul and his family to Africa, as his kindred there possess extensive power and influence.— His nephew is the present king of Foota Jello, a populous and extensive territory, less than three hundred miles from the colony at Liberia; and one of his relatives is the present king of Timbuctoo, where Abdoul was born and educated in the best manner which his country afforded. At time he was captured and made a slave, his father was the king of Foota Jello, and he was the rightful heir to the kingdom. He is now 66 years of age, was formerly a Mahometan, but has been a professor of the Christian religion ten years, and returns to his native country with no ambitious projects. With the introduction of the Bible among his countrymen, he will bear testimony to the superior excellence of the Christian religion over their Mahometan faith, and may prove of great benefit to this country in a political and commercial point of view. One of his sons is a preacher of the Gospel at Natchez.

Gail Astle is a retired research microbiologist. Her interest in African American history began with research into the life of UGRR operative Rev. Thomas C. Oliver, which resulted in the discovery of his previously unknown final pastorate and burial place in Windsor, Ontario. She also demonstrated that the Little Rocky Hill Mount Zion African American Methodist Church was affiliated with the Underground Railroad, and was instrumental in including it as part of the 2002 Harriet Tubman and William Still Underground Railroad Walk Across New Jersey. Researching the history of the pre-Civil War UGRR Black community of Timbuctoo, New Jersey, Gail organized the first Memorial Day event in Timbuctoo Cemetery to honor the lives of the soldiers buried there and contributed to their memorial signage.



Guy Weston's current work encompasses research and public history initiatives to raise the profile of Timbuctoo, New Jersey, where his 4th-great-grandfather purchased land in 1829. These have included interpretive signage in Timbuctoo, coordination of a curriculum development project in collaboration with local teachers, and preservation efforts for the Timbuctoo cemetery, where the oldest gravestone is dated 1847. He currently serves as managing director of the Timbuctoo Historical Society, is the editor of *Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS) Journal*, and is a visiting scholar at Rutgers University. He has contributed articles about his research to *AAHGS Journal*, *AAHGS News*, *National Genealogical Society Magazine*, and *New Jersey Studies*. He maintains a website at www.timbuctoonj.com.



ENDNOTES

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- 2 Guy Weston, "Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Early Nineteenth Century," *New Jersey Studies* Vol. 8 No. 1 (2022): Winter 2022, 224–258.
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- 7 Weston, "Timbuctoo," 224–258.
- 8 Weston, "Timbuctoo," 224–258.
- 9 Amy Godine, *The Black Woods: Pursuing Racial Justice on the Adirondack Frontier* (Ithaca: Three Hills, 2023), 158.
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- 17 Parker, *Smartsville and Timbuctoo*, 2 (map with Yuba River Timbuctoo Bend).
- 18 Parker, *Smartsville and Timbuctoo*, 23; <https://www.timbuctoocalifornia.com/>.
- 19 Parker, *Smartsville and Timbuctoo*, 35, 55; <https://www.timbuctoocalifornia.com/>.
- 20 Godine, *The Black Woods*, 16–19.
- 21 Godine, *The Black Woods*, xii, 29, 146–147.
- 22 Godine, *The Black Woods*, 18, 90–95, 120–122, 138–141, 143.
- 23 As described later, “Timbuctoo,” in popular culture, often refers to a remote and isolated place.
- 24 Godine, *The Black Woods*, 160. Caleb McDaniel, Timbuctoo only small conclave with two farms.
- 25 Susan B. Apel interview with Amy Godine. “What You Should Know about Timbuctoo: Amy Godine’s ‘Black Woods,’” 8 February 2024. <https://artful.substack.com/p/what-you-should-know-about-timbuctoo> (accessed June 27, 2024).
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- 28 Rene Caillie, *Travels Through Central Africa to Timbuctoo V2*, and *Across the Great Desert to Morocco, 1824–1828* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830); “Major Laing” (Narrative of a Moor coming from Timbuctoo Sep. 1828, Renne Caillie’s Travels), *Freedom’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin, Ireland) 25 Mar 1830, p. 3, Newspapers.com; Matt Rosenberg, “Timbuktu.” ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/where-is-timbuktu-1433600> (accessed July 13, 2024).
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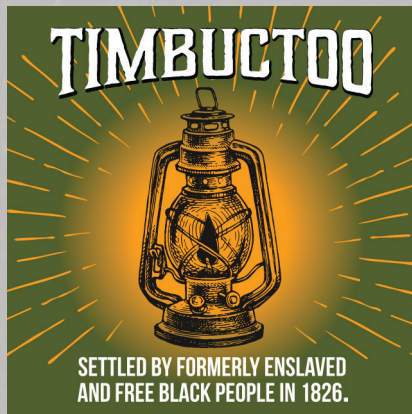
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TIMBUCTOO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving, Protecting and Promoting Our Community

***Listed on the New Jersey Black Heritage Trail and the
Underground Railroad Network to Freedom in 2024***



Education and Community Awareness in 2024

- ♦ Presented at NJEA teachers conference in Atlantic City
- ♦ Featured in a CBS News segment
- ♦ Presented to 25 groups reaching 1004 people
- ♦ Collaborated with Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society on two authors' forums to disseminate research findings

Archaeology in 2024

- ♦ Collaborated with Richard Grubb and Associates to identify subsurface features of interest in the cemetery area and a private residence, using GPR (ground penetrating radar)

Research in 2024

- ♦ Published three scholarly papers in AAHGS Journal

Interpretive Planning in 2024

- ♦ Conducted surveys to elicit community feedback on making Timbuctoo more engaging for visitors
- ♦ Developed additional signage to honor early 20th century pioneers in response to community feedback

Plans for 2025:

- ♦ Completion of children's book about Timbuctoo in collaboration with Advanced Placement (AP) African American history students and art students from Rancocas Valley Regional High School and Holly Hills School.
- ♦ Collaboration with Temple University on an archaeological exhibit featuring Timbuctoo artifacts
- ♦ Various cemetery preservation projects
- ♦ Ongoing educational workshops and publication of research papers

*Funded by the New Jersey Historical Commission, Burlington County
Parks Department, and private donations
www.TimbuctooNJ.com*