

Uncovering Island's Black History

By Je'Lesia M. Jones

The history of African-Americans on Martha's Vineyard is fragmented, partly because records were not kept and the records that were, in many instances, refer to African-Americans as "foreigners" or simply listed them with Native Americans as "Indians."

Early entries in the Dukes County Registry of Deeds, the Dukes County Intelligencer, and the United States Census also contain limited information. What can be surmised and substantiated by recorded fact is that African-Americans were present on Martha's Vineyard in or around 1638.

Massachusetts did not permit plantations or the like, nor was the state involved in the business of slavery: African-Americans were simply "employed" by families. However, according to the Massachusetts Slave Census of 1754, there were 2,307 slaves on record in Boston and slaves listed in all other counties throughout the state, including Dukes County.

In 1765, according to a book describing Dukes County from 1745-55, there were 46 African-Americans recorded as "living" on the Vineyard: 20 in Edgartown, 17 in Tisbury, and 9 in Chilmark. The Chilmark census, however, listed three males and four females as "Negro slaves" in their population. Nantucket listed slaves as "none," this largely because the population of that island was mostly Quaker.

In 1644, New England was involved in a triangular trade with Africa and the West Indies. West Africans were "bought" with goods, and often exchanged for sugar and tobacco in the West Indies. Many wealthy families on Martha's Vineyard sent husbands to the Caribbean and other islands to bring back "help." According to the late Mrs. Alice Anderson, who died last year at age 95, she was brought back from Panama by a Vineyard Haven family.

Edgartown whaling captains also went to Curacao, the Azores, and Cape Verde and exchanged goods to bring back men to work as crew on their boats. These crews remained on Martha's Vineyard and mainly married into the Native American community.

Although these families referred to the workers as "employees," "a part of the family," or, after the abolition of slavery in the United States, "indentured servants," there are records referring to them as "slaves." One record lists the sale of a "Negro woman" in 1769. In addition, despite conflicting reports, the sale of a young "Negro boy," age 8, is recorded in 1793 by John Saunders to Melatiah Pease of Edgartown. A different account states that John Saunders, a minister from Virginia



The Shearer Cottages are said to have been the first houses built and owned by African-Americans on the Island.

credited with bringing Methodism to the Island in 1787, "apprenticed" his son to Malatiah Pease of Edgartown in 1793. (Note: Each record offered a different spelling of Mr. Pease's first name.)

When the revised Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 went into effect in the United States, the effect was adverse for African-Americans living in Massachusetts. Daniel Webster, senator from Massachusetts, spoke in favor of the revised law. The law imposed stricter penalties on "... any person obstructing the arrest of a fugitive or attempting his or her rescue, or aiding him or her to escape or harboring and concealing a fugitive, knowing him to be such shall be subject to a fine not exceeding \$1,000 and be imprisoned not exceeding six months and shall also forfeit and pay the sum of \$1,000 for each fugitive so lost."



Despite this new law, many Massachusetts residents took an active role in the Abolitionist movement, including housing "fugitive" slaves and acting as an integral part of the Underground Railroad. Massachusetts also enacted laws to protect the African-American, including granting them the rights to sue, own land, and sell or transfer property. But some saw this as an opportunity to make money and kidnapped free African-Americans living in the state and sold them into slavery. Many families, therefore, sent their "employees" to England to escape retribution. Others sent them to New Bedford. New Bedford, which was forming a strong Cape Verdean community, was considered a haven for African-Americans. (Incidentally, Frederick Douglass escaped from Baltimore to New Bedford.)

In 1854, the Vineyard Gazette reported the escape of a Randall Burton from the Franklin ship in Vineyard Haven, then Holmes Hole, through the assistance of two African-American cooks. He was thought to be a "fugitive

slave." The women supplied Mr. Burton with women's clothing and drove him to Menemsha. There he boarded a boat that took him to New Bedford, then on to Canada.

Life went on for African-Americans on the Vineyard. Many integrated with the Native American communities and John Saunders preached and served as minister to both the Felix Neck and Chappaquiddick communities. He settled on Chappaquiddick in 1792 and lived there until his death in 1795.

There are varying reports on African-American involvement in the Wesleyan Camp Ground. Fr. John Furlight is said to have preached there in 1856, but actual African-American church membership was nonexistent. A Baptist church was built in the Highlands in Oak Bluffs in 1878 and is said to have serviced the African-American community. Others say the "original" camp ground was in the Highlands. There is no record of African-American land ownership, however, until 1900.

According to "Aspects of the African-American Experience in Massachusetts with Particular Reference to the Island of Martha's Vineyard," by Elaine Weintraub, "the first property built and owned by black people in the Highlands was the Shearer Cottages, which were built in 1900 and originally operated as a laundry." Mrs. Weintraub further states that many of the people she spoke with while researching her book said, "... the Camp Ground was a place where Black Americans were not welcomed ... It is a fact that a Mrs. Anthony Smith ... obtained a cottage for the use as the first guest house open to African-Americans, and was forced to move." Mrs. Weintraub says that this fact was substantiated by Dorothy West, a well-known writer and long-time resident of Martha's Vineyard.

According to a 1950 Transfer Certificate of Title, as recorded in the Dukes County Registry of Deeds, it is stated that the premises in the Campground are to be "... occupied or enjoyed only by persons of the white race who are of the Christian religion ..." Many believe that an unspoken "agreement" still exists today, and also

Continued on Page 20

Island's Black History

Continued from Page 16

an "agreement" to not sell property to African-Americans in Edgartown proper or allow them to join the Edgartown Yacht Club.

The first recorded African-American church on Martha's Vineyard was the church of the Rev. Oscar E. Denniston, who came to the Island from Jamaica in 1900. Some records state an Anglo-Saxon minister, whose church was the Bradley Memorial Church, went to Jamaica and brought Mr. Denniston back to work with him. Still other records state that the Rev. Denniston's church was originally named Oakland Mission and the name was later changed to Bradley Memorial Church in recognition of the minister and their missionary

work together.

The African-American community grew during the early 1900s. Many of its members bought property on the Island, some outright and some through intermediaries. Many established businesses. Arthur Wentworth is listed as the first African-American to graduate from the Oak Bluffs High School; however, Mr. Denniston's son, Dean, graduated from the Oak Bluffs High School in 1931.

The writer thanks West Tisbury resident Elaine Weintraub for use of her document "Aspects of the African-American Experience in Massachusetts with Particular Reference to the Island of Martha's Vineyard."