

# The People and Lands of Christ Church Easton

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## Article 7: Connecticut, the “Georgia of New England” and Fairfield County, the “Georgia of Connecticut”

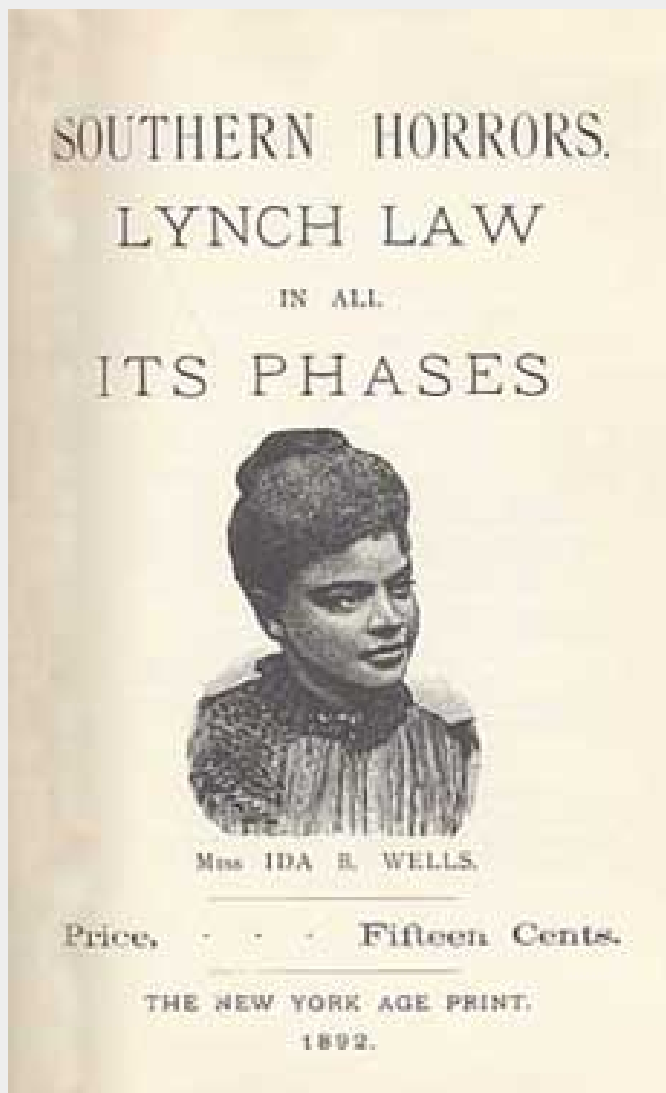
*(A note from the author: please forgive the delay in this series publication due to personal and professional demands. This will be the first of three articles to conclude the series.)*

The 19th century was a time of upheaval in nation and church. Even as anti-slavery activity spread in the northern states among a growing white minority, in Easton and Fairfield County their activity would be largely silenced by violent opposition. As enslavement gradually ended in Weston (Easton), a small but vibrant free Black community had emerged (See Article 6), but their white brethren did not share their commitment to the advancement of Black Americans and the abolition of enslavement. Rather, white Christians in Fairfield County sought to preserve white power, promoted white supremacist ideologies, and remained pro-enslavement even as gradual abolition occurred.

Though Blacks were enmeshed in rural life with their white counterparts in Weston, they

faced inequality in all aspects. Despite achieving their own advancement in education and land ownership, free Blacks continued to struggle economically, relegated to working their land when they owned it and contracting with white land and business owners as laborers and farmers. Politically, Blacks were excluded by their white counterparts. In 1818, a new state Constitution clarified racially restrictive voter eligibility by adding the word "white." In 1839, when the issue of suffrage was raised again, the Assembly held that because the "colored population is regarded as a distinct and inferior race, the proposition to admit them to a full participation of political power, can be regarded in no other light than... a scheme encourage the amalgamation of the two races." Such accusations of racial mixing played upon racist ideologies that asserted the superiority of the supposed white race and constructed a false yet powerful idea of racial purity that was used to justify continued enslavement and racial inequality. White supremacy had considerable staying power. The 1846 statewide referendum on removing the word "white" from the Constitution was voted down by a resounding 19,148 votes to 5, 353. So not to even make the suggestion of equality, in 1851, the General Assembly would pass a law exempting Black property owners from paying taxes (Nelson 2020; Main 1882; Warshauer 2011).

Violence underpinned these racist ideologies and structures. Free Blacks lived under the threat of kidnapping into enslavement that the Supreme Court's repeal of state laws requiring judicial process in such incidents and the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act made worse. Lynching and abuse occurred, too. As Ida B. Wells would describe in *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases* (1892), a racist mythology was constructed and utilized to help to defend white terror and abuse. Constructing a "plausible screen of defending the honor of its women," a racist myth emerged that painted black men as a threat to white women. Elevating the racial purity concerns illuminated above, this trope became the rallying cry and excuse for the killing and abuse of black individuals, more often than not targeted because of their expressions of freedom that transgressed white control.



Title Page (1892). Available from Gutenberg.org. For more on the continued and sickening hold of this brand of white supremacist ideology in contemporary acts of violence, please consult Jamelle Bouie's "The Deadly Story of 'They're Raping Our Women,' Racists have long used rape to defend their worst racist violence.

Yet rather than singularly a 'Southern Horror,' this practice was local one, too (Nelson 2020; Warshauer 2011; Bouie 2015).

Such racist ideology underpinned the threat of violence that terrorized Blacks in Fairfield county and Easton. In 1819, 15,000 individuals from surrounding towns like Weston gathered in Danbury to witness the execution-whether it was an extralegal lynching or state sanctioned capital punishment was not noted-of a Black man named Amos, killed supposedly for a rape of a white woman. Suggesting the mundane

acceptance of anti-Black violence, notice of this gathering was clipped from the paper, saved and pasted into a scrapbook for his adopted son by the then Newtown clerk, who one imagines attended like so many other ordinary white residents. In Easton, in 1846, for an alleged 'misdemeanor,' a white man named George Godfrey 'punished' an unnamed black woman; when an unnamed black man sought to defend her from her assault, Godfrey killed him. This gentleman's murder and gentlewoman's abuse, like so many, went unchecked; instead, the retaliatory murder was celebrated in the *Morning News of New London* ("An Interesting Scrapbook," 1891; Reeve et. al 2009).

Neither the members nor clergy of the Episcopal Society in Weston acted to oppose such ideologies or horrific practices. Instead, their concerns were focused on their own survival. Weathering suspicion of Anglican affiliation during the 1812 War with Britain and the advent of Methodism during the second great awakening, the church established its first endowment in 1814 in order to pay the taxes of the poor and support a clergyman. Unable to support a full-time position, Christ Church clergy held joint positions with nearby Episcopal churches. When the structure of the original Episcopal Society literally began to crumble, its members began raising funds for a new building. And, when the town split, the church did too. Members living in "Norfield" or the Weston lands resented the poor roads they were forced to travel into what was known as "North Fairfield" (what is now Easton) for civic and religious life. Under a contested vote within the Episcopal Society, much vitriol, and a series of legal proceedings, Emmanuel Church in Weston and Christ Church in Easton were founded in 1845, with the latter worshiping in member homes until a new church would be built at 348 Westport Rd. on the former Staple lands in 1873 (Article 4 of this Series; Hickox 1998).

If the perspective of their clergy was any indication, parish members made no objection to inequality and might even have promoted the continuation of enslavement. The Rev. David Belden, priest who served the Episcopal Society of Weston from 1813-1816 still enslaved 1 person in 1820 to no known objection of its parishioners. That he enslaved someone in 1820 when only 97 persons were still enslaved in the entire state (in Weston,

for example, enslavement had ended by 1810) suggests a moral interpretation of faith that not only failed to condemn enslavement but would and could argue for its positive good. Reminding us of the vast web of complicity, Belden's successor, Rev. Joseph Welton who served from 1816-1819 and as an occasional priest until 1835, resided in a house in Waterbury granted to he and his wife Eunice Tomlinson from her father, Victory, who had inherited his wealth in part from his sea-faring father Captain Beach Tomlinson. Captain Tomlinson had enslaved at least two persons. Likely reflecting the view of the clergy and at least some parishioners in 1839, the Connecticut General Assembly urged Congress *not* to put restrictions on slavery in new states joining the Union (US Census 1820; Woodward 2012/2013; Reeve et al. 2009; Nelson, 2020; The Vincent J. Rosivach Register of Slaves; Jacobus 1930; Warshauer 2011).

During the ensuing decades, abolitionism, the call for the immediate end to enslavement and advancement of racial equality long-advocated by Black New Englanders, took seed among a minority of white Christian New Englanders. These abolitionists differed in method but most commonly employed moral suasion, seeking to convince others that slavery was a mortal sin and racial inequality a threat to the republican enterprise. However, in Easton and its surrounds, violent opposition barred abolitionism from taking serious hold. Rather, for its rigid attachment to the perpetuation of enslavement and racial inequality, notable and local abolitionists alike deemed Connecticut the "Georgia of the North" and Fairfield County the "Georgia of Connecticut" (Main 1882).

The founding of the Georgetown Anti-Slavery Society reads, therefore, like a suspense film. In 1838, a Baptist from Boston, the Rev. Nathaniel Colver, joined a Litchfield county abolitionist, Dr. Erasmus Hudson. Together, they traveled around Fairfield county distributing anti-slavery literature, seeking to form Anti-Slavery auxiliaries. According to Hudson's diary, everywhere in their travels they were treated violently as "outlaws" due to the "tender regard" by "nearly all classes of society" for the institution of enslavement. In South Norwalk, the two were burned in effigy and "pelted with brick bats." In Georgetown (what is now the corner of Weston, Redding, and Wilton), their

horse was shaved and terrorized. In Easton (what was then Weston), they managed to hold three meetings at the Baptist Church (which our predecessors at Christ Church would utilize for worship in the middle of the 20th century as they awaited the construction of our current site 59 Church Road, just across the street).



Google Maps Image of 29 Church Road, the former Baptist Church of Easton

When the abolitionists tried to call an Anti-Slavery society forward in Georgetown, dozens put on masks or painted their faces black and harassed the abolitionists, throwing missiles at the building and disrupting their ability to meet. Undeterred, the abolitionists met the following day at the Baptist Church of Georgetown and founded their society, yet two days later, on Thanksgiving morning, anti-abolitionists marched to the church and lit a keg of gunpowder placed under the pulpit, destroying it. Some thought the act committed by members of that very congregation opposed to abolitionism. The *Norwalk Gazette* declared its objection to the act of “Judge Lynch” (a

reference to lynch law), yet at the same time repeatedly made its intent clear to equally, if not more vigorously, “denounce in the severest terms the exasperating conduct of the abolitionists” (Main 1882; Colley n.d.).

Despite such attacks, the Georgetown Anti-Slavery gathered in the crumbling church on December 13th 1838 to seek, as its constitution averred, the “entire abolition of slavery in the United States” as a “heinous sin in the sight of God” and to elevate the status of the “People of Color [to]...share an equality with the whites of civil and religious privileges.” Though fierce in their dedication, these few remained few, mostly Baptist and Methodist church members in Danbury, Bethel, Brookfield, Georgetown, Norwalk, Newtown, Wilton (including what would become Redding), Weston, and Stratford. They met monthly to sing and pray and threw support along third party initiatives like the Liberal one of 1840 that would ultimately contribute to the end to the Whig party and the birth of the Republican. But even as their small efforts continued, opposition prevailed, and eventually they were driven underground. As remembered by one among the abolitionists, in contrast, “Ministers, Magistrates, Lawyers, Doctors, Merchants and all tradesmen virtually encouraged the mob spirit which had unlimited sway, with only a few noble exceptions.” Despite repeated efforts to rebuild, by 1849, due to the continued pull of Methodism and, one would imagine, the sway of mob spirit the Baptist Church in Georgetown had been disbanded (Main 1882; Colley n.d.).

At least some members of the Baptist Church of Easton, though none of their Episcopal neighbors, attended those fateful meetings in 1838 and remained dedicated to the Anti-slavery cause. Their minister, the Rev. Alvah Gregory, was elected as Vice President of the Georgetown Anti-Slavery society. Further, their parishioner, Aaron Burkley/Buckley who died in 1864 in Easton, the great-great grandson of a Puritan dissenter from England, may have served as a station agent in the Underground Railroad, the network of anti-slavery activists that helped self-liberated individuals escape from enslavement to freedom mostly to northern cities. Though written records are missing, Buckley’s home was later uncovered to house an underground tunnel in which African-American artifacts

were found. This site is exceptional in Easton. Only a few other individuals in nearby Wilton and Georgetown were known as agents, as for most this area proved too hostile. That a station may have been operated by Buckley and possibly by nearby Black residents would have been done at great risk to themselves. Because of the legal and social penalties that threw violent epithets employing the racism of the day in order to defame-“Ni\*\*er worshipers, amalgamationists, Black abolitionists”- along with the threats of actual violence, what emerged in Fairfield county according to the remembrances of an active member, instead was an “Though Shalt Not Tell Epithet.” (Cruson 2007; Main 1882).

Abolitionism failed to take significant hold in Fairfield county and an ideology of white supremacy prevailed because, at least in part as previously discussed in this series, enslavement was at the heart of their economies, with sugar in the West Indies and cotton in the American South featuring centrally. As the nation acquired new lands first from the Louisiana Purchas and then in the 1840s and 50s from its invasions of Mexico (including now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and California) and those territories sought statehood, the question of slavery took center stage in national politics. A series of compromises emerged that accelerated and intensified divides. Though sectional divisions between North and South over the question of slavery would bring the nation to Civil War, the historical record of Easton and its surrounds described above demands that we appreciate the degree to which pro-slavery and anti-Black attitudes prevailed in northern states and towns and among their churchmen. As Connecticut churchmen rallied to the Northern cause, they did so not because their hearts had been convicted by the abolitionist plea nor because they objected to to the enslavement of persons, but rather because they feared the seaming unbridled “Slave Power” of the South (Warshauer 2011).

Prior to resigning as Senator, the Connecticut Whig Truman Smith made an impassioned speech, declaring, “slavery I consider rather the misfortunate than the crime of the South... It is only when you become aggressive that I feel bound to resist you.” The



concluding article of this series will consider the Civil War and the aftermath, revealing that, indeed, during and after the Civil War white supremacy prevailed in Fairfield county, setting the tone for the segregationist practices of the 20th century responsible for persisting racial inequalities today.

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*A word on citations: Our historical investigation draws widely from over eighty secondary and primary sources (see here for a full bibliography).*