

Free Black Communities were bulwarks of safety before Civil War

by Bill Jeffway

For persons of color, the 66 years between New York State's 1799 Gradual Emancipation Act (a promise of the abolition of slavery that was realized in 1827) and the 1865 national abolition of slavery, was a period of great peril.

Five years into New York being a "Free State," in 1832, a well-known Poughkeepsie stagecoach proprietor named Isaac Butler was heading to Virginia to sell horses. He asked a local Black man if he would allow the man's young son to come along to help. The father said yes. Butler returned to Poughkeepsie, but not with the boy, saying the boy had run away.

The young boy's astute petitioning for justice in Virginia, naming prominent men in Poughkeepsie that he knew of, had the good fortune to be heard by someone who knew Poughkeepsie's Judge James Emmo. The plot was exposed and reversed, and the boy returned to Poughkeepsie.

The need for security was obvious. One of the ways Blacks sought greater security in this period was by coalescing in small, rural communities. This afforded the potential to own property, even if the land was poor, and allowed a proximity that improved communications and safety.

The Black historian A. J. Williams Meyers writes, "Free Africans with their landholdings in rural areas ... carved out that 'social space' for themselves and family. They created caring, nurturing, and religious communities up and down the Hudson Valley ... many of them were mixed communities of African, European, and Native American descent. Because they were caring communities, free of racial strife, interracial couples were attracted to them. In the Hudson Valley [there were] such communities [as] Freemanville and Baxtertown east and west, respectively, in southern Dutchess County ... They were steadfast in weakening the molding of a materially dispossessed and dependent African by nurturing a materially affluent African."

In addition to Freemanville and Baxtertown mentioned by Dr. Williams-Meyers, we will also look at Lithgow, Hyde Park's New Guinea, and the less

traditional situation (more central to the village than rural or marginal), Rhinebeck's Oak Street.

Freemanville

Freemanville, sometimes called "Guinea," and was located in the Town of Beekman near the village of Poughquag, and was named for its free Black founder, Charles Freeman.

The Mid-Hudson Antislavery History Project reports, "By 1818 Freeman [then known as "Cesar Freeman"] had purchased three acres of land for \$312, and this became the nucleus for Freemanville." An illustration in the 1877 General History of Dutchess County by Philip Smith shows what is meant to be a typical Freemanville house. The house is two stories, has a traditional roofline, clapboard siding, and a high stone foundation suggesting it may have been built into the side of a wall.

Lithgow

In his 1958 book, "Blithe Dutchess," Henry Noble MacCracken writes that "Lithgow, near Amenia, became the home of freed Negroes, who found employment on the farms in the area. Others drifted in as seasonal laborers. The Central Baptist Church of Clinton welcomed them." We have not been able to find the kind of evidence we have found for other communities in census records and maps, but this is likely a factor of the impoverished, transient and seasonal nature of the population. More evidence is likely to be found with further research.

Baxtertown

About two miles northwest of the Village of Fishkill you will find Baxtertown Road. You will also find a 2015 historic roadside marker from the Pomeroy Foundation reading, "Site of Zion Pilgrim M.E. Church, Served Baxtertown Community 1848 to 1930s. Evidence suggests [it was a] station on [the] underground railroad." Beyond this, nothing visible remains of the Baxtertown community.

The lawyer and noted local historian Frank Hasbrouck wrote in 1909 that Baxtertown was a hamlet where Blacks, Indigenous Peoples, and multi-racial persons through their intermarriage made up



In a program on Feb. 9 at 7 p.m., DCHS Executive Director Bill Jeffway will look at the Hyde Park New Guinea Community that settled in and around the elbow in the Crum Elbow Creek. "Bright Spark in Freedom's Pursuit" will examine the unique Dutchess story of a Free Black community buffeted and supported by adjacent communities. To the west were wealthy estate owners (1838 river perspective), some of whom had very aggressive pro-slavery views. To the east, the Crum Elbow Meeting House (recent photo) was a source of national voices for the abolition of slavery. See more at DCHSNY.org/feb9.

a vibrant community. Like most of these free communities, the land was poor; it was rocky and swampy. Appearing to speak from direct, personal knowledge, and making the point that Native Peoples made up a good part of the hamlet, he describes one resident, Harry Catskill, as entirely Native in appearance, "a well-built, handsome man, with straight hair."

There are newspaper references to Baxtertown as a hamlet into the early 1900s. Baxtertown appears to be named for William Baxter (1805-1875), a White medical doctor who lived in the area.

New Guinea

The New Guinea Community, one to two miles east of the center of the village of Hyde Park, will be the subject of a DCHS program on Feb. 9 at 7 p.m. via Zoom (see end of article).

Census records suggest that the population of persons of color peaked across two specific decades when it grew from around 50 enslaved persons in 1820, to perhaps 100 free persons in 1830, and back to 50 free persons in 1840.

It was home to fugitive slaves as well as locals. Robert St. John was a freedom seeker from Brazil who was forced to work on ships bringing goods to New York City. He escaped during a port visit sometime in the 1840s. Solomon Garnett was a fugitive slave, perhaps from Virginia. Many were former slaves of the adjacent river families, the Bard family, and Judge Pendleton for example. Pendleton was Alexander Hamilton's chosen "second" in the duel with Aaron Burr that proved fatal.

Most importantly, here persons of color became landowners. Inside and around the u-shaped elbow turn that was the inspiration for the name, "Crum Elbow Creek," the land is very rocky and marshy but gave persons like ??Primus & Betty Martin, Richard & Nancy Jenkins, Frank & Sukey Peters, Jack & Dinah DeWitt and Dunbar & Amy Brown became landowners.

Oak Street

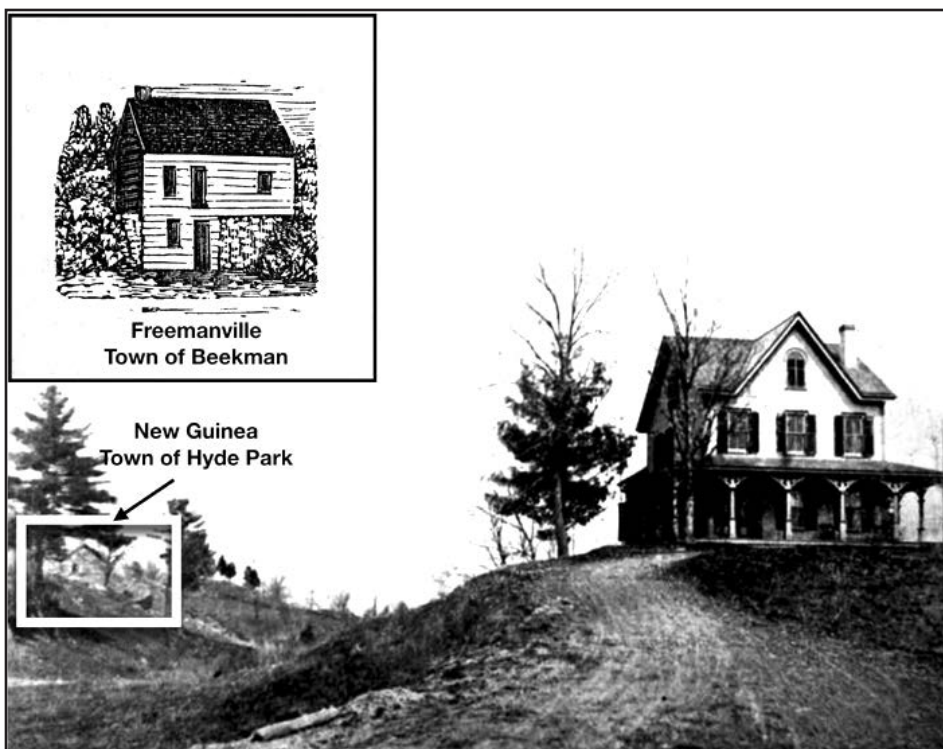
As mentioned earlier, Oak Street does not meet the criteria of the traditional Free Black community, as laid out by Williams-Meyers. It is not clear why Oak Street in Rhinebeck emerged as a neighborhood of persons of color. It may be related to the fact the land was owned by Mary Garrettsen, daughter of the famous Methodist agitator Freeborn Garrettsen. She herself had given land nearby for a cemetery dedicated to, in her words, "persons of color."

A good example of the nostalgia expressed for an earlier Black community that had receded is expressed in the writings of Howard Morse in his 1908 book, "Historic Old Rhinebeck." He writes, "The colored people of Rhinebeck, in the old times, cut something of a figure. Tune was a blacksmith. Chalk was the town fish peddler. Aunt Lyd and her daughters were washwomen. Jennie Pierce was the popular stewardess on the old barge Milan. Three or four were coachmen. Others were stablemen, drivers and choremen."

These rural communities would ultimately recede, however, in favor of communities in cities and large towns. In addition to the advantages that attracted Whites, like better paying and more reliable employment, the cities and large towns offered the chance for organizations to emerge, like the AME Zion Church, which allowed tighter-knit and more effective political, educational, religious and social advancement.

For information about the DCHS program on the New Guinea Community, visit dchsn.org/feb9.

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Inset top left: An 1877 illustration of the type of home that could be found in Beekman's hamlet of Freemanville, prior to the Civil War. The larger photo is of the Hackett House, now owned by the Town of Hyde Park as part of its public park. Historians speculate as to whether the small building barely visible to the left of the main house, might be one of the small houses that dotted New Guinea's Fredonia Lane in this undated photo.

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