



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

Jim Greenfield Town Historian 283-6384

SLAVERY IN GREENBUSH

It may be disagreeable to think about, but at one time, there were many African-American slaves in our town. Slavery began during the time the Dutch controlled what is now New York. As early as 1626, records show slaves being brought into "New Amsterdam" as laborers for the Dutch settlers.

Nothing really changed when the English wrestled control of New York from the Dutch in 1664. In fact it wasn't until the end of the American Revolution that the movement for emancipation began. In the late 1780's politicians led by Aaron Burr tried but failed to pass emancipation laws in the State Legislature. The Quakers stoked public pressure to ban slavery. However it was demographics and economics that finally tipped the scales. A booming birth rate and the rush of white laborers from other states, who were willing to work for low wages, made slavery economically obsolete.

In 1799, the State passed an act for gradual abolition of slavery. Note the word gradual. Every child born after 1799 to a slave living in the state would be free, but would remain with their masters until they were 28 (males) or 25 (female). Blacks born before 1799 were slaves for life (although they were reclassified as "indentured servants.") It wasn't until 1827 that this latter group was freed.

I've done some research in the Census records which give a better picture of the number of slaves in this area. North Greenbush, East Greenbush and Rensselaer are counted together in these early records.

In 1790 there were 570 slaves living in 171 families; in 1800 there were 195 slaves in 66 families; in 1810 the numbers were down to 152 slaves in 56 families; in 1820 there were 61 slaves in 30 families. By 1830 the slaves were free.

As a rule, it was the families with Dutch and German pedigrees not the settlers migrating from New England who owned slaves. Sad to say, but prominent families including the Defreests, Witbecks, Van Alens and Van Rensselaers all had slaves.

In his 1793 will, John E. Van Alen, our first congressman and a local surveyor, left his "negro girl named Dinah" to his widow and "my negro man named Gus, and my Negro woman named Mol" to his nephew, with the provision that they be "manumitted" (freed) after his wife's death. Some of these former slaves may be buried in the Defreestville area.

The 1855 State census for North Greenbush lists only a few African-Americans. However, this area was active in the Underground Railroad at that time. Some slaves who made their way North went from Troy out through Sand Lake into Massachusetts (and some eventually to Canada.) I suspect some runaway slaves may have come through Rensselaer and then east on Route 43 to Sand Lake and beyond. That would mean there were stops on the Underground Railroad near Geiser and Peck Roads. Does anyone have any information that would confirm my theory?

Thanks for the response to my story on milk peddlers. One correction: I mentioned Charles Sliter-it should have been Arthur Sliter. Did I miss any milk dealers? Let me know at 283-6384.