

## **A REFLECTION ON THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN HARTFORD'S FIRST CHURCH**

When Shelly asked me to speak on the history of African- Americans in Hartford's First Church, I said, "Yes, but there is very little written down." Dr. Walker's 1883 History has only two notes listed in the index. They both referred to the wills of two early ministers. I have learned that when this happens, you look for information in other places that might refer to African-American history in Hartford or CT or biographies of persons who may have had a connection to Hartford. Plus, there is the internet with source material that I might not otherwise find accessible. So, instead of wondering if I would find enough material, I have so much that I've decided to focus on the earlier years today and hope we can continue this journey at another time.

You may be surprised at what I have learned. I grew up in Center Church, was educated in Manchester schools, graduated from CCSU to become a teacher and taught fifth grade for five years. It wasn't until about 10 years ago that I learned that several of our early ministers owned enslaved African-Americans and that they had attended worship in our meeting houses.

Yes, we can say it was a different time but I was shocked and naive and may even have felt a victim of history that had been sanitized. What I would like to do this morning is tell you what I have found about the early days of our church's and Hartford's history and our relationship to African-American enslaved persons who were brought here and purchased as property to be "servants" to the white Puritan colonists.

Center Church is 387 years old this year; both Native Americans and African- Americans were enslaved to serve the early settlers. This year, 2019, is the 400th anniversary of the first African-Americans who arrived in Virginia at Jamestown. These enslaved persons probably saved many white lives because they had experience with caring for animals and growing foodstuffs; something many of the Jamestown settlers didn't have.

In 1632 our church family's ancestors came from Essex, England to Boston and settled in Cambridge for 4 years before taking the long walk to settle Hartford in 1636. There is no mention of any African-Americans being part of the trek, but they and Native Americans, captured in the early wars between the Native Americans and the settlers, are mentioned in early records. By 1650 the CT colony had already legalized slavery. They felt justified in their action because of biblical law found in the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Enslaved servants in the North did live different lives than most enslaved persons in the South. They may have been taught to read. Many were house servants or farmed their owner's land, or had been taught a trade such as that of brick maker, blacksmith or barrel maker. The money earned by the enslaved servant went to his owner; although sometimes he may have been allowed to keep a small portion to save toward purchasing his freedom.

Freedom! CT was the last of the NE states to give enslaved persons their freedom in 1848, nearly 200 years later. One probable reason for this was economic for in 1702 a law was passed that if a freed person became destitute or disabled, his former owner would be responsible for his care. This would not have been a popular idea, but the town government didn't want to be responsible either. Some owners did free their enslaved servants when the owner died. Some who did so may have given the freed person some land and a bequest, but I got the impression that was not the norm. Others included their enslaved servants and their children in their wills to be passed on to other family members. At the time of the American Revolution nearly 5000 enslaved men enlisted to fight the British. Some were freed upon enlistment; some after the war was over. Others saved money from their pay toward buying their freedom.

Most enslaved persons in the North were owned by those who were educated and well-to-do. Ministers topped the list; one reason given was that many ministers received modest salaries and unless they had private funds, they needed to farm in order to feed their families. Enslaved servants could do the farming while their owner ministered to their churches. From what I can find, four of our 17th and 18th century ministers did own enslaved servants. They were: The Rev. Isaac Foster (1680-1682), The Rev. Timothy Woodbridge (1685-1732), The Rev. Daniel Wadsworth (1732-1747) and The Rev. Edward Dorr (1748-1772). Abigail Woodbridge, Timothy's 3rd wife, and her mother also owned enslaved persons.

I found information for the State of Connecticut from the first U. S. Census conducted in 1790. The 5 categories of information presented were: free white males over 16 yrs., free white males under 16 yrs., free white females, all other free persons, and slaves. The total population for Hartford in 1790 was 4090; 48 were slaves. I checked the free white male names listed in the census against our membership in 1807 but found few matches.

This brings us to Center Church in 1819. Joel Hawes became our minister the year before. African Americans were required to attend worship. At that time the interior of this meeting house was very different from what it is today. It was plain, had clear glass windows, no organ, had a very high pulpit, and had two kinds of pews: box pews in the center of the main floor,

with slip pews on the sides and in the gallery. The well-to-do and important personages were seated in the middle and toward the front; the poor and those of African heritage, whether free or enslaved, were seated either in the gallery or in back in the “negro” box pew. The sides were high enough so that when seated the congregation couldn’t see them. They became more and more frustrated with their treatment and finally asked Mr. Hawes if they could worship in a separate room in the building next door. Mr. Hawes agreed. Within a year this determined group had rented rooms on State Street and established their own church where you could sit anywhere you wanted to! In time they built the Talcott St. Church and in 1953/1954 merged with Mother Bethel Methodist Church, changed their name to Faith Congregational Church and moved to 2030 Main St.

Last Sunday Center Church and Immanuel Church joined Faith Church for worship to celebrate their 200th anniversary. It was a most joyful time.

This has only been an introduction to the history of African-Americans at Center Church. I am sorry that I haven’t been able to include any of their names. I am hoping we can continue looking back at their journey to help us all to go forward into the future.

Earlier in today’s service Stephen read words from scripture that can guide us. From Paul’s letter to the Galatians he read “... in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith....there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” From the Gospel of John we heard Jesus speaking “...Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And to this let us add the great commandment found in the Gospel of Matthew that “...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Finally, from Mr. Rogers, his simple, yet profound, question, “Will you be my neighbor?”

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