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Spring 2021

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Barrington Preservation Society Museum

Lower Level, Public Library

Hours

Wednesdays & Saturdays
1:00 – 4:00 or by appointment

Please check our website at
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JOHN WILLIAMS: “BORN A SLAVE IN VIRGINIA” “DIED A FREEMAN IN RHODE ISLAND”

RESEARCHING BARRINGTON’S PAST HISTORY OF SLAVERY: PART 2

By Stephen Venuti, *President BPS*



This past year brought a new-found awareness to the ‘Slave Monument’ at Barrington’s Prince’s Hill Cemetery dedicated to *“The Slaves and Their Descendants Who Faithfully Served Barrington Families”*. Although this large white stone monument is easily found, it bears no names, making research into the life-story of either the enslaved or the enslavers difficult.

There is, however, at least one name we do know. Harder to find and nearly impossible to read is a smaller grave marker at Prince’s Hill inscribed with these words: *“John Williams, Born a Slave in Virginia, Aug. 6, 1850, Died a Freeman in Rhode Island, Aug. 11, 1872”*. Knowing his name, we can ask *“who was John Williams and how did a former enslaved Black Man from Virginia come to be buried in Barrington, Rhode Island?”*

By the time Mr. Williams was interred as a ‘Freeman’, slavery (‘Jim Crow’ laws aside) had been legally abolished here in RI and throughout the US. But the road from ‘enslaved’ to ‘freeman’ was long, difficult, and not necessarily a straight line.

According to the 1774 Colonial Census, of the 601 people living in Barrington, 51 were listed as ‘Blacks’ or ‘Indians’ who were either enslaved or indentured by the ‘White’ families in whose homes they lived. Ten years later in 1784 the State of Rhode Island established *“An ACT authorizing the Manumission of Negroes, Mulattoes and others, and for the gradual Abolition of Slavery”*.

Both the ‘Manumission’ (i.e., voluntary freeing of the enslaved by their enslavers) and the ‘gradual Abolition of Slavery’ were indeed gradual. In fact, as late as the US Census of 1830—some 46 years after the gradual Abolition of Slavery became law—‘slaves’ were listed as living in the homes of ‘White’ families throughout Rhode Island, including one here in Barrington. By the 1840 US Census, however, no ‘slaves’ are listed in Barrington. And although the **1842 RI State Constitution**, newly enacted following the **Dorr Rebellion**, guaranteed that *“Slavery shall not be Permitted in this state”*—freedom from re-enslavement for men like John Williams was not guaranteed.

In **1850**—the year John Williams was “Born a Slave in Virginia”—the United States passed the *“Fugitive Slave Law”*. According to this law any enslaved person escaping from a state where slavery

Cont. on page 6

museum news

The Way We Were: Paul Darling Photographs 1949–2019

By Julia Califano

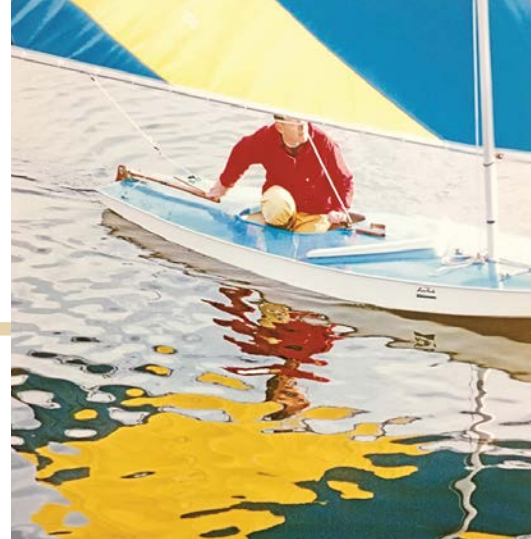


To celebrate the 90th birthday of Barrington native and photographer Paul Darling, the Barrington Preservation Society planned an exhibit of his photographs, entitled *The Way We Were: Paul Darling Photographs, 1949 – 2019* for February, 2020. The photographs in the exhibit included people and events as well as the aerial views Paul Darling took while flying over Barrington in 1959 and 1999 in a small, Piper Cub airplane piloted by

his friend and co-worker at WPRI Channel 12, Don Moeller.

Only a few weeks after the exhibit opened, COVID 19 shut the museum down, but BPS plans to reopen the museum in fall 2021 and will keep the exhibit in place for a few more weeks after the reopening.

Graduating with a BFA in Illustration from the Rhode Island School of Design, Paul Darling originally planned a career in conventional, commercial art until he took a summer job filming for WJAR television in 1956 and then earned a permanent position as photographer for WPRO television, later reidentified as WPRI Channel 12. For the next thirteen years, Darling covered the news, sports and local events for Channel 12, including the 1958 return of the America's Cup races to Newport after a 21-year, post-war hiatus. Darling photographed a total of 9 America's Cup Series Races until the American yacht *Liberty*, skippered by Dennis Connor, lost to the Australian challenger *Gretel* in 1983. Darling gave up his job at



L to R (clockwise)

1. Barrington native, photographer and chronicler of events Paul Darling.
2. Sunfish reflections
3. Cooling off on a hazy, summer Sunfish afternoon.
4. The start of a frostbiting race in March for a fleet of Barrington Sunfish.
5. Aerial view (1959) of Rumstick Point looking north with the crescent of Barrington Beach on the left.



5. A self portrait of Paul Darling overlooking the gravel pit that is now Tiffany Pond.
6. Fog enshrouds the boats in Barrington harbor.
7. Aerial view (1959) of County Road and the Town Government Center looking northeast to the Barrington River and Hampden Meadows.



cont.

WPRI in 1970 and launched a career in freelance photography, doing wedding photography and documenting regional events, including frostbite Sunfish races, the Bristol Fourth of July parade and the Herreshoff Museum's annual vintage yacht rendezvous.

Darling still carries a camera with him everywhere but has generously donated many of his Barrington photographs, including the aerial photographs from 1959 and 1999, to BPS, along with his Ciro-flex, twin lens reflex camera (ca.1950), providing a remarkable record of the way Barrington developed during those formative years. ♦



Docent Training Course

By **Barbara Hail** *Chair, Museum Committee*

In January of 2020 the Museum Staff invited members of the public to participate in a training course in order to become knowledgeable volunteers in the BPS Museum. The course included an introduction to the society's mission, and to the archives of historic Barrington, collection management procedures, tips on successfully guiding visitors in the gallery, and an explanation of the historic house plaquing program. Those completing the course include the following: Jane Sparfven, Lisa Marcello, Adele Carlsen, Kara Massie, Cathy Bledsoe, Prudy Bishop, Jamie Schiff, Henry Feuss, Luther Spoehr and Jane Scola. The last four individuals serve as members of the BPS Board, and all of the participants have since volunteered in various capacities, particularly as much needed exhibit interpreters. Unfortunately, the Museum had to close its doors in late Spring due to Covid, and will remain closed to the public until sometime in the Fall of 2021. We hope that our Docent Training Course graduates will be available to return to help us welcome visitors at that time.

Recent Acquisitions 2021

Rhode Island: An inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites. Gary Kulik & Julia Bonham. Historic American Engineering Record. Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation. U.S.D.I. 1978. Gift of Dr. Patrick Malone.

Painted Rooms of Rhode Island: Colonial and Federal. Spring Green Books, Warwick. 2012. Ann Eckert Brown. Gift of Nathaniel Taylor. (includes images of John Martin House, Barrington, 1707)

American Painted Floors Before 1890. Spring Green Books, Warwick. 2008. Ann Eckert Brown. Gift of Nathaniel Taylor.

Collection of Paul Darling photographs documenting Barrington life from the 1950s to the 1990s, and the camera he used to take them. Gift of Paul Darling.

plaque news

New and Replacement Plaques Awarded

By **Nathaniel Taylor**, *Chair, BPS Plaquing Committee*

BPS volunteers researched and granted several new and replacement plaques this Winter, all in private presentations following social distancing guidelines.

In December we presented three replacement plaques:

Henry & Lucy Anthony House, 1892

50 Walnut Rd. (Betsy Bowman).

Watson Ingraham House, c.1855

151 Mathewson Rd. (Julia & Nick Califano).

Thomas Morton House, 1869

45 Bluff Rd. (Susan & Peter McCalmont).

In each case a decades-old, faded or cracked plastic plaque was replaced with our current larger, painted and laquered wood plaque. Research had confirmed the earlier data, resulting in a straightforward replacement. Any member with an older plastic plaque can request a replacement plaque at the member cost of \$100. Replacements can take as little as a few weeks—longer if research suggests that the information needs to be corrected.

In February we awarded two new plaques for fine nineteenth-century houses, the culmination of research spread out over the past year due to pandemic access restrictions:

The Bowen–Cornell House, c.1858

46 Sowams Rd. (Gretchen Healey), is a charming Greek–Revival house on a generous square lot near the lower end of New Meadow Neck.

The Albert F. Smith House, 1880

276 Washington Rd. (Lori MacLea) is a handsome Victorian with a tastefully sited new wing adjacent to the bike path.

Finally, comprehensive new research has finally been concluded on Barrington's oldest house, the John Martin House, to be reported on in the next newsletter. ♦



BARRINGTON'S BRICKS: THE VERY EARLY YEARS

By Maria Bruce

Prior to the establishment of Barrington's nearly century long mechanized "Brickyard Industry," (1847 - early 1940's) two successful hand-made brickmaking operations existed.

Beginning in approximately 1673 brickmaker William Cohoon produced bricks on the west bank of the Palmer River in the Nockum Hill area. Allowing for easy transport to the Warren and Bristol markets, Mr. Cohoon's finished bricks travelled through a canal which led directly to the Palmer River. As outlined in the Original Swansea Records, Town Clerk, Swansea, at the meeting of the Townsmen, 12/24/1673, strict pricing regulations were established "...at a price not exceeding twenty shillings a thousand...". Additional production and quality standards called for "The demensions of his bricks shall be 8 inches, 4 in breadth and in thickness to be two inches and a quarter, to hold their demensions when they are burnt." Also, another agreement outlined that "...when his bricks are burnt he shall give the town publick warning thereof." Interestingly enough, this practice of public warning also occurred during the "Brickyard Industry" era which was to follow. As such, prior to the firing of brickyard kilns (which typically ran for 3 days) sirens sounded as a practical warning to local residents to remove their laundry from outdoor clothes lines. Also of note is the exceedingly close dimensional resemblance of Mr. Cohoon's bricks to our modern standard brick size of 8" x 3 5/8" x 2 1/4", currently regulated by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM). Although this Nockum Hill area manual brickmaking operation was thought to continue under various names, and at different times for about two centuries, it discontinued



Examples of Barrington "Brickyard Industry" bricks, showing a variety of shapes and sizes. Bricks from the Nicholas Gizzarelli Sr. Collection, photo courtesy of Caroline Tortolani.

manufacturing operations altogether in about 1860.

By 1720, a second successful hand-made brickmaking operation was established by Irish immigrant Matthew Watson. Arriving in Barrington by way of Boston at the age of 22, Mr. Watson soon began making bricks on the farm of Barrington resident Mr. John Read. Using clay harvested from the banks of the Mouscouchuck Creek, off of Nayatt Road, and lime obtained from burning shell fish shells, Mr. Watson's bricks were largely destined for Newport and New York. After marrying Bethia Read (Mr. Read's only daughter), and purchasing the Read family farm, Mr. Watson's hard work and diligence paid off in large sums of monetary wealth. As such, he achieved many notable "firsts" including building Barrington's first brick house and installing the town's first woolen carpet and first wall paper, among other lavish furnishings. However, even more notable than Mr. Watson's material accomplishments were his great energy, character and integrity. His brickmaking operations ceased upon his death in 1803, at the age of 107. ♦

Bricks thought to be from the Matthew Watson House, Barrington's first brick house. Built in 1745 with Watson's hand-made bricks, and located on Nayatt Road (in the vicinity of 268 Nayatt Road) this south facing "Lean-to" house crowned Watson's 2000-3000 acre farm, and housed generations of his descendants. After falling into disrepair, the house was demolished sometime after 1910. Bricks from the Nicholas Gizzarelli Sr. Collection, photo courtesy of Caroline Tortolani.

Cont. from page 1

was still legal—found in Rhode Island or any other state—must be returned to his or her enslaver. Anyone who knowingly harbored or otherwise aided a “fugitive” slave was “*subject to a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, and imprisonment not exceeding six months...*”

It is true that northern abolitionists were appalled by this law and many, not only vowed opposition, but actively harbored “runaway slaves”. But this opposition was not universally accepted or condoned even here in Rhode Island. The Fugitive Slave Act was signed into law on September 18th, 1850 by President Millard Fillmore—a member of the Whig Party. By early 1851 opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law led to rioting in the streets of Boston. In the February 21, 1851 edition of the Newport Daily News the Whig Party of Rhode Island issued the following pronouncement: “*We are glad to see that President Fillmore has been so prompt in...(condemning) the recent outrages and gross violation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Boston.*” “*A few rounds of shot from regular troops will soon cool down those hot-headed Boston Abolitionists and bring them to their senses...*”

Fifteen years following imposition of the Fugitive Slave Law, **John Williams** appears in Barrington listed on the 1865 Rhode Island State Census as a 15-year-old Negro “**Chore Boy**” from Virginia living in the Rumstick Road home of **Nathaniel C. Smith**. During that same intervening fifteen-year time span the Country would fight a Civil War over the issue of Slavery, President Lincoln would issue the Emancipation Proclamation, the Country would enter the era of Reconstruction, and “Jim Crow” laws would begin to take effect across much of the Country disenfranchising and severely limiting the rights of Blacks who had formerly been enslaved.

Since slavery remained in force in Virginia where John Williams was born into slavery until the end of the Civil War in 1865—one has to wonder—was John Williams a runaway who escaped to Barrington before being freed at the end of the Civil War? Or, did he come only after being freed?

Perhaps less of a mystery, however, is that John Williams should appear living in the home of Nathaniel C. Smith.

A stipulation of the 1784 RI law calling for the gradual abolition of slavery was that “*all Persons held in Servitude or Slavery, who shall be hereafter emancipated by those who claim them, shall be supported as other Paupers*” and that “*the respective Town-Councils may bind out (their) Children as Apprentices, or otherwise provide for their Support and Maintenance...*” So, it is no surprise that, even after being “freed” at least some of those formerly enslaved persons and their children continued to live as “free-colored” servants in the homes of their or their parent’s former enslavers.

As can be seen in the tables on page 7—prominent families including the Allin, Bicknell, Watson, and—most notably—the Smith family of Rumstick Point kept both enslaved Negroes and Indians and “Free-Colored” servants continually since Barrington’s colonial days and well into the mid-1800’s. In fact, the last person known to have been enslaved in Barrington was enslaved by a member of the Smith family, Asa Smith. And as late as 1840 at least four “colored persons” were kept as servants of Nathaniel, James, and Asa Smith. So, by the time John Williams appears listed in the 1865 RI State Census as a 15-year-old Negro “Chore Boy” in the home of Nathaniel C. Smith—he follows in a long line of Smith family servants.

Beyond this, we know very little of John Williams. He is listed again five years later in the 1870 US Census as a “**Farm Laborer**” in the home of Otis G. Harris at his farm near what is now Matthewson Road. The last we know of Mr. Williams is that he died “a Freeman” in 1872 at age 22 and is buried in a plot purchased several years before by Nathaniel C. Smith at Prince’s Hill Cemetery. I leave it to the reader to puzzle out what, if anything, this tells us about the relationship between Mr. Smith and Mr. Williams. ♦

TIMELINE

- 1774** RI Colonial Census, Total Barrington Population: 601. **Enslaved: 51**
- 1784** RI: An Act authorizing the Manumission of Negroes, Mulattoes and others, and for the **gradual Abolition of Slavery**
- 1790** First US Census, Total Barrington Population: 683. **Enslaved: 12**
- 1800** 2nd US Census, Total Barrington Population: 650. **Enslaved: 7**
- 1810** 3rd US Census, Total Barrington Population: 604. **Enslaved: 3**
- 1820** 4th US Census, Total Barrington Population: 634. **Enslaved: 1**
- 1830** 5th US Census, Total Barrington Population: 612. **Enslaved: 1**
- 1840** 6th US Census, Total Barrington Population: 549. **Enslaved: Zero**
- 1842 May** – Thomas Dorr, in opposition to the 1663 Royal Charter which limits suffrage to white landowners, leads a failed Rebellion
- November** – though the Rebellion failed many of the rights Dorr fought for are included in a new RI State Constitution
- 1843 May** – The 1842 RI Constitution becomes effective, including Article 1, Section 4, stating “Slavery shall not be permitted in this state.”
- 1850 August 6th: John Williams** (Negro), “Born a Slave” in Virginia
- September 18th:** US Congress Enacts “Fugitive Slave Act” requiring escaped slaves caught in free states be returned to their “owners.”
- 1851** Whig Party of RI endorses enforcement of the Fugitive Slave laws and calls for “hot-headed” “Abolitionists” to be brought “to their senses”
- 1861 April** – Civil War begins
- 1863 January 1:** Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation becomes effective
- 1865 May** – Civil War ends
- June** – RI State Census lists John Williams, age 15, as Black “Chore Boy” in the Rumstick Rd home of (White) Farmer Nathaniel C. Smith
- 1870** 9th US Census lists **John Williams**, age 21, as Black “Farm Laborer” in the home of (White) Farmer Otis G. Harris
- 1872 John Williams** dies at age 22 and is buried in Prince’s Hill Cemetery in a plot originally purchased by Nathaniel C. Smith

Number of Enslaved Persons In Homes with White Head of Household

Head of Household	1774		Census Year					
			1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840
Adams, Nudigate	1	1784 - An Act Authorizing the Manumission of Negroes, Mulattoes and others and for the gradual Abolition of Slavery						
Allen, Joseph (Jr)	1*							
Allen, Samuel			3	2				
Allin, Matthew	5							
Allin, Ruth (widow)	1							
Allin, Thomas	5							
Amariah, Lilley					1			
Bicknell, Asa	3							
Bicknell, James			1					
Bicknell, Joshua	3							
Bicknell, Rachael (widow)	4							
Bosworth, Edward	2		2	1				
Brown, James	8**							
Humphry, Elknah	1							
Kelley, Duncan			1	1	1			
Killey, John	1							
Low, Hooper	1							
Martin, John	1							
Smith, Asa						1		
Smith, Hannah			1					
Smith, Nathaniel			2	1	1	1		
Smith, Sarah (widow)	1							
Tiffany, Ebenezer			1	1				
Tiffany, Ester (widow)	1							
Tiffany, Hezekiah	5							
Toogood, Eunice	1*							
Tyler, Moses	1*							
Watson, Mathew	4		1	1				
Watson, Matthew (Jr)*	1							
Census Total	51		12	7	3	1	1	0

* Listed as Indians, ** Includes both Indians & Blacks

■ Names in both Census Tables

Number of Free Colored Persons In Homes with White Head of Household

Head of Household		Census Year					
		1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840
Allin, Mathew	2						
Allin, Thomas	1			6			1
Allin, William				4			
Amariah, Lilley		1					
Bean, Joseph					1		
Bicknell, Allin					1		
Bicknell, Asa	2						
Bicknell, Joseph					1		
Bicknell, Joshua	2					2	
Bowen, James							1
Brown, James		1	1	1			
King, Jenny						4	
Martin, John	2						
Martin, Sullivan						1	1
Mauran, Joseph			1				
Peck, Benjamin						1	
Read, David	1						
Remington, Enoch					1		
Richmond, Peleg		2	2				
Smith, Asa			1				1
Smith, James A							1
Smith, Joseph					1	1	
Smith, Nathaniel					1	1	2
Smith, Nathaniel 2nd					1		
Smith, Samuel					2		
Smith, Simon							1
Tiffany, Ebenezer	1	1				1	1
Townsend, Solomon Jr			2				
Watson, John			1				
Watson, Mathew, Jr	1	2					
Watson, Samuel			1				
Census Total	12	7	19	10	11	9	

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