

African-Americans in Constantia Prior to 1890

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The Dark-Skinned People By Peg Peck October, 2014

The dark-skinned people had come from Africa. They came not as immigrants in search of opportunity and wealth, but as merchandise shackled in the holds of ships. Those who survived the voyage were sold at auction.

They were seen as livestock like horses and oxen, living machines that were bred and worked and traded. They were thought to be sub-human because they were not Christian and therefore had no souls. Still, they were taught the ways of Christian worship, but when they embraced the new god, they did not become fully human; they were not brought to Christ to save their souls, but to make them docile, submitting to subjugation tamely in hope of reward in a segregated heaven.

The dark-skinned children who were born in the Americas joined calves and colts as property, part of someone else's wealth. At any time sons and daughters, mothers and fathers could be torn from their families and sold, never to be seen again.

New York laws gradually changed, and by 1827 all slaves held in New York were emancipated — they were free men and women. However, federal Fugitive Slave Acts allowed bounty hunters and federal marshals to seek and capture escaped slaves in free states such as New York. Those who aided and abetted fugitive slaves were subject to fines and imprisonment. The dark-skinned men and women taken by the bounty hunters and federal marshals were not always fugitive slaves, though. Many were free men and women who, like their African ancestors, were captured and sold into slavery.

“The Inspection of a Slave,” reproduction of a wood engraving was originally published in *Captain Canot; or, Twenty Years of an African Slaver* by Brantz Mayer. It depicts an African man being inspected by a white man while another man talks with slave traders; circa 1854. The image is in the public domain because the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or less.



Were There Slaves in Constantia?

The answer is much more complex than a simple ‘yes,’ though the answer is, indeed, yes.

Although the state of New York was once a colony, held first by the Netherlands and then by England, the area that became Constantia was not part of the colony. Instead, Constantia was part of the government-recognized Indian Territory; the land belonged to the Oneida Nation. There were military and trading posts at both ends of Oneida Lake, but no settlement in Constantia other than temporary Oneida hunting and fishing camps.

After the Revolution, the State of New York acquired much of the former Indian territory and sold large tracts of land through contracts called Letters Patent. Constantia is part of the tract purchased by a consortium headed by George Scriba, so the patent bears his name. Early settlers came gradually. The only suggestion that slaves might have come with them is a statement in a history of Francis Adrian Van der Kemp that a number of black slaves worked on his property in what would become Bernhards Bay. Van der Kemp’s autobiography describes using slave labor to travel to the north shore of Oneida Lake, and after he left Constantia he reported owning slaves in the U.S. Census.

While settlement was growing on the north shore of Oneida Lake, New York was gradually abolishing slavery. The stories of early settlers told here, though, confirm that the institution of slavery did have its influence on the people of Constantia.

Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, 1754-1829, an autobiography, together with extracts from his correspondence; by Van der Kemp, Francis Adrian, 1752-1829; Fairchild, Helen Lincklaen. <https://archive.org/details/cu31924028859515>

Sold into Slavery

The recent film, *Twelve Years a Slave*, is a true story of Solomon Northrup, a free black man in New York who was kidnapped and sold as a slave in Louisiana. Unlike many in this plight, he was able to get word to his family and ultimately was released and returned. Solomon’s brother, Joseph, lived in Cleveland or just over the county line in Camden. Though Joseph never married, he was well-known and liked in the community. An item of local interest appeared in the Oswego Palladium: “CLEVELAND - Uncle Joseph Northrup, brother of Solomon Northrup of slavery fame, lies very sick about two miles north of this place.”

Peter Feeler had a son, Peter, who became a sailor. He was said to have been kidnapped “somewhere in the southern waters” and sold into slavery. His family never heard from him again.



“Am I not a man and a brother”; This image is in the public domain in the United States because its first publication was prior to January 1, 1923.

Emancipated Slaves

Peter and Jane Feeler were among Constantia's early settlers. They bought land a few miles north of Cleveland in 1834. With their children - Elizabeth, Jane Ann, Robert Henry, and Leander — they cleared and farmed the fields. They raised cattle, sheep, and pigs; they grew grain to feed livestock and family; they sold wool and butter. They were devout members of the Episcopal Church, donating nearly \$1,300 to the Diocese of Western New York.

Peter was born in Dutchess County, the slave of Jacob Schermerhorn. Jane Knapp was born in Columbia County, the slave of Andrew Whitbeck. When he became an adult, Peter was freed as the law required. Jane's father paid Whitbeck \$100 to free her. Constantia farm land was cheap in the 1830's. Like other settlers, Peter and Jane came to buy their own land and to send their children to school. Like some others, they may also have come to this less populated area to reduce the danger of being claimed or reclaimed as slaves.

Adin and Hagar Wilson settled in Amboy before 1830, and by 1840 their son George had moved to Constantia. George's son Edward, a shoemaker, married Elizabeth Feeler.

Moses Slater and his wife Debby Ann were in Volney in 1830, and had moved with their children and grandchildren to the Gayville part of Constantia by 1850. Moses said he was born in Nova Scotia, which may have been true, or it may have meant he was an escaped slave creating a fictitious background. The family was unusual for the time, as Deborah Ann Brown was said to be a white woman.

—Peter P. Keeler, a colored citizen, and one of the pioneers of that part of the town, of Constantia, Oswego county, died at his home on the Reed tract on the 3d inst., aged seventy-seven years. He was born in Dutchess county in this state, and was a slave to Jacob Schermerhorn until near his majority, when his freedom was given him.

Evening Courier & Republic, September 23, 1874, page 2.



Left: Headstone of Edward Wilson, Co. B. Mass. Colored Vol., Died Mar. 11, 1869, Aged 39 Years. Feeler Family Cemetery, Cleveland, New York. The cemetery is located on private property about 200 feet into the woods off the west side of Center Road. Photographs by Jim Peck.

Charles B. Wheelock	22		Livingston	S. Cotton	1		27 th Oct	
Edward B. Wilson	36	B	Wheeler	Mr. Sherman	1		5 th Mass Colored Jan 1863	
John Cook	25		Dulaney	S. Gardner	1		27 th Oct	Oct 2/61
Albert Phillips	20		Wheeler	S. "				

Above: From the Registers of Officers and Enlisted Men
Mustered into Federal Service, 1861-1865

Fugitive Slaves

A story written by former town historian Lawrence Cottet told of runaway slaves who found safety and community in Bernhards Bay. The story had been handed down in the Cottet family: in about 1850 Farmer Morse found a black man hiding in his barn. The man was terrified that Morse was going to turn him in to the federal marshals because he was a runaway slave. Even though harboring a fugitive slave was illegal, Morse assured him that he was safe because everyone on the North Shore was Anti-Slavery. The man worked on the Morse farm as a hired hand for a few months, then vanished without a word. A few months later he returned, but he was not alone. He had risked recapture to go back to South Carolina to rescue the woman he loved. The two were married and a house was built for them on the Shacksbush Road. “Aunt Charlotte” was a nurse and midwife in the community. No one betrayed them.

Historic records confirm the story. The man was Calvin A. Smith; his wife was Charlotte. Many former slaves bore the names of their “masters,” but the name Smith may have been chosen to honor abolitionist Garrett Smith, who had land and community connections in Constantia. Beginning in 1855 the Smiths appear in the census, and they must have felt great pride in reporting themselves to be free black. Charlotte could read and write, which was rare for a South Carolina slave, as it was forbidden to teach slaves to read. Calvin and Charlotte remained close friends with Albert and Sarah Morse. When they retired from farming, both couples moved to the Village of Cleveland and the families lived side by side.

RECORD OF SOLDIERS AND OFFICERS (Town Clerk's Register of Men Who Served in the Civil War, ca. 1861-1865)

52.2821									
Name:	Smith Calvin Alonzo	Private	31 st	Co	E. Dec 15, 1863	3	14	Cleveland	Co
Residence:	Bernhards Bay N Y		U.S.C.		In April 29, 1864				
Time and Place of Birth:	June 1820		Troops		Private				

			Lewis Cook	16	M	..	!	0				1	..
158	Plants	178	Calvin A Smith	42	M	B		Chataugua	1	1			Farmer
	Frank	150	Charlotte Smith	38	F	B	Wife	Morris	1	1			
159	Frank	170	John Keilkin	50	M	B		Germany	1	1			Farmer
			Wm. M. Smith	42	F	W	Wife	Germany	2	1	1		

Snapshot of New York State Census, 1865 containing the names of Calvin A. Smith and his wife, Charlotte Smith.

SLAVE DOCUMENTS FOUND IN CONSTANTIA

There is no telling what you will find in the old-time trunks and chests put away in garrets, and this was demonstrated last week when E. M. Hilton of Constantia, looking through an old trunk, found two documents—"notes of hand," for the services of slaves.

One was for the hire of a slave, named Tice, dated March 20, 1849, and the other for the hire of Jack, dated Jan. 2, 1852. The agreement to pay the first slave owners for Tice was \$50 and the one for Jack was for \$97.50; the time being in each case was for the balance of the year in which they were engaged. Where this slavery was in force is unknown, but it was not in this state, as the laws of 1817 made it impossible to hire slaves in this state.

The agreement for the hire of the slave Tice was as follows:

"On or before the 1st day of January, 1850, we promise and oblige ourselves, our heirs, executors and administrators to pay the sum of \$50 for the hire of a negro man Tice for the balance of the present year, the said negro to be returned at the end of the year with a suit of double wool yarn cloth, two Oznaburg shirts, one pair socks, a pair of double sole shoes, a hat and blanket. Witness our hands and seals this 20th day of March, 1849.

"(Signed) Martha A. Sale."

The Fulton Patriot, April 2, 1919, page 11.

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One was for the hire of a slave, named Tice, dated March 20, 1849, and the other for the hire of Jack, dated Jan. 2, 1852. The agreement to pay the first slave owners for Nice was \$50 and the one for Jack was for \$97.50; the time being in each case was for the balance of the year in which they were engaged. Where this slavery was in force is unknown, but it was not in this state, as the laws of 1817 made it impossible to hire slaves in this state.

The agreement for the hire of the slave Nice was as follows:

"On or before the 1st day of January, 1850, we promise and oblige ourselves, our heirs, executors and administrators to pay the sum of \$50 for the hire of a negro man Nice for the balance of the present year, the said negro to be returned at the end of the year with a suit of double wool yarn cloth, two Oznaburg shirts, one pair of socks, a pair of double sole shoes, a hat and blanket. Witness our hands and seals this 20th day of March, 1849.

"(Signed) Martha A. Sale."

Civil War Colored Regiments

After the Emancipation Proclamation it became possible for New York's men of color to enlist in the Union Army. So far four black citizens of Constantia have been found to have served, plus one with family ties to Constantia. All are recorded in the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Calvin Alonzo Smith mustered into Company A, 31st Regiment U.S. Colored Troops in 1863. This unit guarded Union trains and assisted the sieges of Petersburg and Richmond, participating in the pursuit of Lee to Appomattox and being present at Lee's surrender. Smith survived the war, and is buried in Cleveland Village Cemetery under a Civil War soldier's stone honored with an American flag. Presumably Charlotte is buried with him, although there is no marker for her.

Moses Slater, grandson of Moses and son of John Slater, enlisted in Company K of the 96th Regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry. This unit was deployed in Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama. After the war Moses Slater and most of his family emigrated to Michigan.

Alonzo D. Northrup, son of Solomon, enlisted in Company F, 26th Regiment U.S. Colored Infantry. This unit was sent to Beaufort, South Carolina and was involved in combat operations. Northrup is buried in Cayuga County under a soldier's stone with an American flag.

Robert Henry Feeler, usually known as Henry, enlisted in Company I, 29th Regiment Connecticut Volunteers (Colored). He was discharged two years later with disabilities. Before he was injured he served in the Ambulance Corps in or near New Orleans. Feeler is buried in the Feeler Family Cemetery under a soldier's stone with an American Flag.

Edward Wilson enlisted in Company B 5th Regiment Massachusetts Colored Cavalry. He had just been promoted to sergeant at Camp Meigs, Readville, Massachusetts when he contracted pleuropneumonia while in the line of his duty. He was discharged with total disability and was recorded as a casualty. He never regained his health and died a few years after the war. As Peter Feeler's son-in-law, Wilson is buried in the Feeler Family Cemetery under a soldier's stone and an American flag. Presumably his wife Elizabeth is buried near him under one of the unmarked fieldstone marking graves in the family burial ground.



African-American Civil War Memorial
Washington, D.C.

N. | 26 | U.S.C.T.

Alonzo S. Northrup

Co. F, 26 Reg't U. S. Col'd Inf.

Appears on

Company Descriptive Book

of the organization named above.

DESCRIPTION.

Age 27 years; height 5 feet 8 inches.

Complexion Dark

Eyes Black; hair Black

Where born Warren Co. New York

Occupation Boatman

ENLISTMENT.

When Feb. 14, 1864.

Where Glen Falls, N. Y.

By whom Capt. Butta; term 3 y'rs.

Remarks: Was in action of July 7. 64 at Bloody Bridge John's Island, S.C.

(383p) N. H. White. Copyist.

N. | 26 | U.S.C.T.

Alonzo Northrup

Appears with rank of Pvt. on

Muster and Descriptive Roll

of a detachment of U.S. Colored

Recruits from order for 1 Col'd

Reg't U.S.C.T.

Roll dated

Schenectady, N.Y. Feb. 17, 1864.

Where born Sandy Hill, N.Y.

Age 27 years; occupation Laborer

When enlisted Feb. 15, 1864.

Where enlisted Queensbury

For what period enlisted 3 years.

Eyes Blk.; hair Blk.

Complexion Blk.; height 5 ft. 8 in.

When mustered in Feb. 16, 1864.

Where mustered in Schenectady

Bounty paid \$ 100; due \$ 100

Clothing account:

Last settled , 186 ; drawn since \$ 24.25

Date of first muster , 186 .

Company to which assigned

Remarks: 16 Aug. Dist. 33

Book mark:

(355m) Alonzo Northrup Copyist.

N. | 26 | U.S.C.T.

Alonzo S. Northrup

Pvt., Co. F, 26 Reg't U. S. Col'd Infantry.

Appears on

Company Muster Roll

for Mch & Apr , 1864

Present or absent present

Stoppage, \$ 100 for

Due Gov't, \$ 100 for

Remarks: Recruit from Depot joined Feb. 18/64. Due U.S. for ordnance lost \$15.64.

Book mark:

(358) Saxon Copyist.

Alonzo Northrup Service Records (in part)

By virtue of an execution issued out of the Supreme Court of Judicature of the state of New York, against Henry L. Van Dyck and John L. Sharp, I shall expose to sale at public vendue to the highest bidder for cash, on Saturday the 19th day of January next, at ten o'clock in the forenoon of that day, at the house of Peter I. Lewis, inn-keeper, in the town of Kinderhook, all the right, interest and title of the said John L. Sharp, of, in and to the following lands and tenements situate, lying and being in the town of Stuyvesant and bounded as follows, to wit: — Easterly by the Farmer's turnpike and by the Vly of Nicholas Van Loon and Andrew Witbeck, southerly by the said Vly and the Hudson river, northerly by land of Jonas White, Jr. and Peter Feeler respectively, from which it is separated by the Hudson river, and westerly by the said river, extending into the same to the channel: so as the same was conveyed to him by Andrew Witbeck, Andrew A. Witbeck and Isaac A. Witbeck, by deed of indenture dated the 7th day of January, one thousand eight hundred and fifteen, and so as the same is now in the occupation and possession of the said John L. Sharp; together with all the right and title of the said John L. Sharp to the ferry from the premises above described to the Cocksackie Landing. Also all the right, title and interest of the said Henry L. Van Dyck, of, in, and to the following lands and tenements situate, lying being in the town of Stuyvesant aforesaid, and bounded as follows, to wit: one lot of land bounded westerly by the road leading from the village of Kinderhook to the house of Isaac Van Alstyne, northerly by land of the widow Maria Van Alstyne, easterly by land of John G. Philip, and southerly by land in possession of William Reynolds, containing about two acres of land be the same more or less. Also one wood lot, situate, lying and being in the town of Stuyvesant aforesaid, and bounded as follows, to wit: Easterly by land of Henry Van Vleck and Arent Van Vleck, westerly by land of Abraham I. Van Alstyne and by land of Arent Vosburgh, southerly by land of Peter I. Hoes, and northerly by land of John S. Vosburgh, containing ten acres of land, be the same more or less. Also the following described lot of land with the buildings thereon, situate lying and being in the town of Kinderhook, and bounded as follows, to wit: southerly by the road leading from the village of Kinderhook to Stuyvesant Landing, westerly by land of Cornelius S. Van Alen, northerly by land of Peter I. Hoes, and easterly by land of John I. Pruyn, containing three acres of land, be the same more or less. Together with all and singular the privileges and appurtenances to the above severally described premises belonging or in any wise appertaining. Dated Kinderhook, 5th December 1827.

BY virtue of an execution issued out of the Supreme Court of Judicature of the state of New-York, against Henry L. Van Dyck and John L. Sharp, I shall expose to sale at public vendue to the highest bidder, for cash, on Saturday the 19th day of January next, at ten o'clock in the forenoon of that day, at the house of Peter I. Lewis, inn-keeper, in the town of Kinderhook, all the right, interest and title of the said John L. Sharp, of, in and to the following lands and tenements situate, lying and being in the town of Stuyvesant and bounded as follows, to wit: — Easterly by the Farmer's turnpike and by the Vly of Nicholas Van Loon and Andrew Witbeck, southerly by the said Vly and the Hudson river, northerly by land of Jonas White, Jr. and Peter Feeler respectively, from which it is separated by the Hudson river, and westerly by the said river, extending into the same to the channel: so as the same was conveyed to him by Andrew Witbeck, Andrew A. Witbeck and Isaac A. Witbeck, by deed of indenture dated the 7th day of January, one thousand eight hundred and fifteen, and so as the same is now in the occupation and possession of the said John L. Sharp; together with all the right and title of the said John L. Sharp to the ferry from the premises above described to the Cocksackie Landing. Also all the right, title and interest of the said Henry L. Van Dyck, of, in and to the following lands and tenements situate, lying being in the town of Stuyvesant aforesaid, and bounded as follows, to wit: one lot of land bounded westerly by the road leading from the village of Kinderhook to the house of Isaac Van Alstyne, northerly by land of the widow Maria Van Alstyne, easterly by land of John G. Philip, and southerly by land in possession of William Reynolds, containing about two acres of land be the same more or less. Also one wood lot, situate, lying and being in the town of Stuyvesant aforesaid, and bounded as follows, to wit: Easterly by land of Henry Van Vleck and Arent Van Vleck, westerly by land of Abraham I. Van Alstyne and by land of Arent Vosburgh, southerly by land of Peter I. Hoes, and northerly by land of John S. Vosburgh, containing ten acres of land, be the same more or less. Also the following described lot of land with the buildings thereon, situate lying and being in the town of Kinderhook, and bounded as follows, to wit: southerly by the road leading from the village of Kinderhook to Stuyvesant Landing, westerly by land of Cornelius S. Van Alen, northerly by land of Peter I. Hoes, and easterly by land of John I. Pruyn, containing three acres of land, be the same more or less. Together with all and singular the privileges and appurtenances to the above severally described premises belonging or in any wise appertaining. Dated Kinderhook, 5th December 1827.

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E. O. HOLLEY, Sheriff,,
B. HILTON, U. Sheriff.

Questions for further research and discussion:

1. Continue to research the development of Constantia. Who were the other early settlers of Constantia? What were their backgrounds?
2. What other evidence of anyone mentioned in the article can you locate? What can those documents reveal?
3. Who was Peter Feeler? Who was his wife and who was her slaveholder? Is the Peter Feeler mentioned in the Peck article the same Peter Feeler mentioned in the very last document by E.O. Holley, Sheriff? Explain how you would attempt to verify or discredit the connection.
4. Joseph Northrup, who lived in Cleveland, was the brother of Solomon Northrup (*Twelve Years a Slave*). What other documents or articles about Joseph Northrup can you locate? What can you learn from those documents?