

The Public Historian at Home
Episode 5: African American Historic Sites

Written and Produced by Nicole Belolan, PhD, Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, Rutgers University Camden
nicole.belolan@rutgers.edu | <https://march.rutgers.edu/> | <https://preservation.rutgers.edu/>

Transcript

[Description of opening: The opening depicts a fast-motion video of the view of someone driving through suburbia. The words “THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN AT HOME” appear at bottom in all caps in a black sans serif typeface. The video transitions to the Rutgers University-Camden logo onto the screen. The opening is accompanied by upbeat music.]

Hi, I'm Nicole Belolan, and I'm the Public Historian in Residence at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities at Rutgers-Camden. And welcome to The Public Historian at Home.

[Viewers see a photograph of the front of a brick house with wood trim. There is a small subcompact car parked at left. There are large cedar trees surrounding the house. The movie effect makes the house look like it's in an old silent movie. There are birds signing in the background.]

Welcome to the Public Historian at Home. Today we're going to be going on a road trip to Black historic sites in the area. It's an important and exciting time to be learning more about Black history. So, to do that, I'm going to get started by visiting three sites in the area associated with Black history. Timbuctoo, New Jersey, which was occupied by and lived in by lots of African-

Americans from about the 1820s to the 1850s; the James Still historic site, where Dr. James Still, a medical doctor, had an office; and then, finally, we're going to visit Lawnside, New Jersey, which has been predominantly African American since the 18th century.

[The transition depicts a fast-motion video of the view of someone driving through suburbia. Upbeat music is playing.]

We found it! We found Timbuctoo. It's at the intersection of Rancocas Road and Church Street - that's where the historical sign is, anyway. And the sign explains that at its height, this community had about 125 people in it--from between about the 1820s to the 1850s. These individuals had previously been enslaved. And there's also a cemetery down the road that has a couple burials for African Americans who had fought in the Civil War. So, we thought we'd take a drive down the road and try to find those burials.

As you can see, we did, in fact find the burying ground. There's a sign here: "The Timbuctoo Civil War Memorial Cemetery/in honor of these brave African-American men who fought with the Union Army against slavery during the Civil War. Timbuctoo in Westhampton, New Jersey, was a well-known stopping place for the Underground Railroad." Now, if you come here and visit yourself, you'll see there's a burying ground here. According to some of the interpretive signs, there was an archaeological excavation done in this area. Some of that involved what's called ground penetrating radar-that's sort of an x-ray you can take of the ground. And when they did that, they discovered that there were at least 70 burials in the land that you can see here. But, of course, there are only a few remaining stones- many of those are associated with African Americans who did, in fact, fight in the Civil War. Let's take a look at one of the grave markers to learn a

little bit more about the history here. So, this one is for William H. Davis. It says he was in company D of the 22nd Colored Infantry. “Colored” is a period term. Today we might use the word “Black,” or “African American.” But in this context, it tells you that the army was segregated and that William was black. He died April—looks like 4th—1914, and he was 77 years old at that time. It's accompanied by a very fresh American flag that's in a Grand Army of the Republic medallion. It doesn't necessarily mean William was part of this organization, but it does mean that there are people in the area who are taking good care of this burying ground. Other signs of that are the fact that it's mowed, very well landscaped, and there are several tokens of remembrance that have been left at many of these stones—pennies, shells so, this is a very important place for some people. If you are interested in getting more involved with a history organization or cause where you live, burying grounds like this one are often a great place to start because they are, in fact, all over the place.

[The transition depicts a fast-motion video of the view of someone driving through suburbia. Upbeat music is playing.]

Next, we visited the James Still historic site. You're looking at the office he built in the 1850s. His house used to be next door. The site, which is in Medford, New Jersey, is owned by the State of New Jersey and is managed in part by a friends group. James Still was born in 1812 to two formerly enslaved individuals. He was a doctor, and he manufactured medicine here, serving his community throughout his life. Many descendants of Dr. Still are involved in the preservation of the site today. If you want to get more involved by preserving James Still's story, you can visit the group at www.drjamesstillcenter.org.

[The transition depicts a fast-motion video of the view of someone driving through suburbia. Upbeat music is playing.]

We made it to Lawnside, New Jersey, a historically African American community in New Jersey. Behind me is the Peter Mott house. It's owned and run by a non-profit, the Lawnside Historical Society. Mott was African American. He lived here with his wife. They were farmers. And this house served as a stop on the underground railroad.

[The transition depicts a fast-motion video of the view of someone driving through suburbia. Upbeat music is playing.]

If you're still hunkering down due to the COVID-19 crisis like we are, visiting black historic sites from the outside like we did is a great way to familiarize yourself with local black history. If you're not sure where to go, visit your state historic preservation office's website or that of your local historical society. If they don't list any black history resources, send them an email or give them a call, and ask them for some recommendations about places to visit.

And thanks for coming along with us today on this episode of The Public Historian at Home.

[Description of conclusion: The opening depicts a fast-motion video of the view of someone driving through suburbia. The words "THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN AT HOME" appear at bottom in all caps in a black sans serif typeface. The video transitions to the Rutgers University-Camden logo onto the screen. The closing is accompanied by upbeat music.]

Resources

Places to Visit

Sarah Biehl and Kimberly D. Boice, “What Jack Wore: Incorporating the history of enslaved people at a Pennsylvania farmstead,” *History@Work*, June 4, 2019, <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/what-jack-wore/>.

Jason Romisher, “Lawnside, New Jersey,” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, Accessed August 18, 2020, <http://petermotthouse.org>.

The Dinah Memorial Project, Stenton, Accessed August 18, 2020, <https://www.stenton.org/dinah>.

Dr. James Still Office and Education Center, Accessed August 18, 2020, <http://www.drjamesstillcenter.org>.

Lawnside Historical Society, August 18, 2020, <http://petermotthouse.org>.

Professional Organizations

Association of African American Museums, Accessed August 18, <https://blackmuseums.org>.

Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Accessed August 18, 2020, <https://asalh.org>.

Offices and Resources to Consult

African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Accessed August 18, 2020, <https://savingplaces.org/african-american-cultural-heritage#.Xzvby2ZOgg>.

State Historic Preservation Offices, National Park Service, Accessed August 18, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/state-historic-preservation-offices.htm>.

Franklin Vagnone, “Systemic Bias & Racism of Preservation,” *Twisted Preservation*, June 2, 2020, <https://twistedpreservation.com/2020/06/02/systemic-racism-of-preservation/>

Other Readings and Contemporary Connections

John R. Legg, “A romantic union? Thoughts on plantation weddings from a photographer/historian,” *History@Work*, February 24, 2020, <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/plantation-weddings/>.

Tiya Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (2012), <https://uncpress.org/book/9780807872673/the-house-on-diamond-hill/>.

National Council on Public History, “National Council on Public History Statement on The Killing of George Floyd,” which includes resources for preserving current events such as Documenting Now and reading suggestions such as the #CharlestonSyllabus, Accessed August 18, 2020, <https://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NCPH-Statement-on-the-Killing-of-George-Floyd.pdf>.