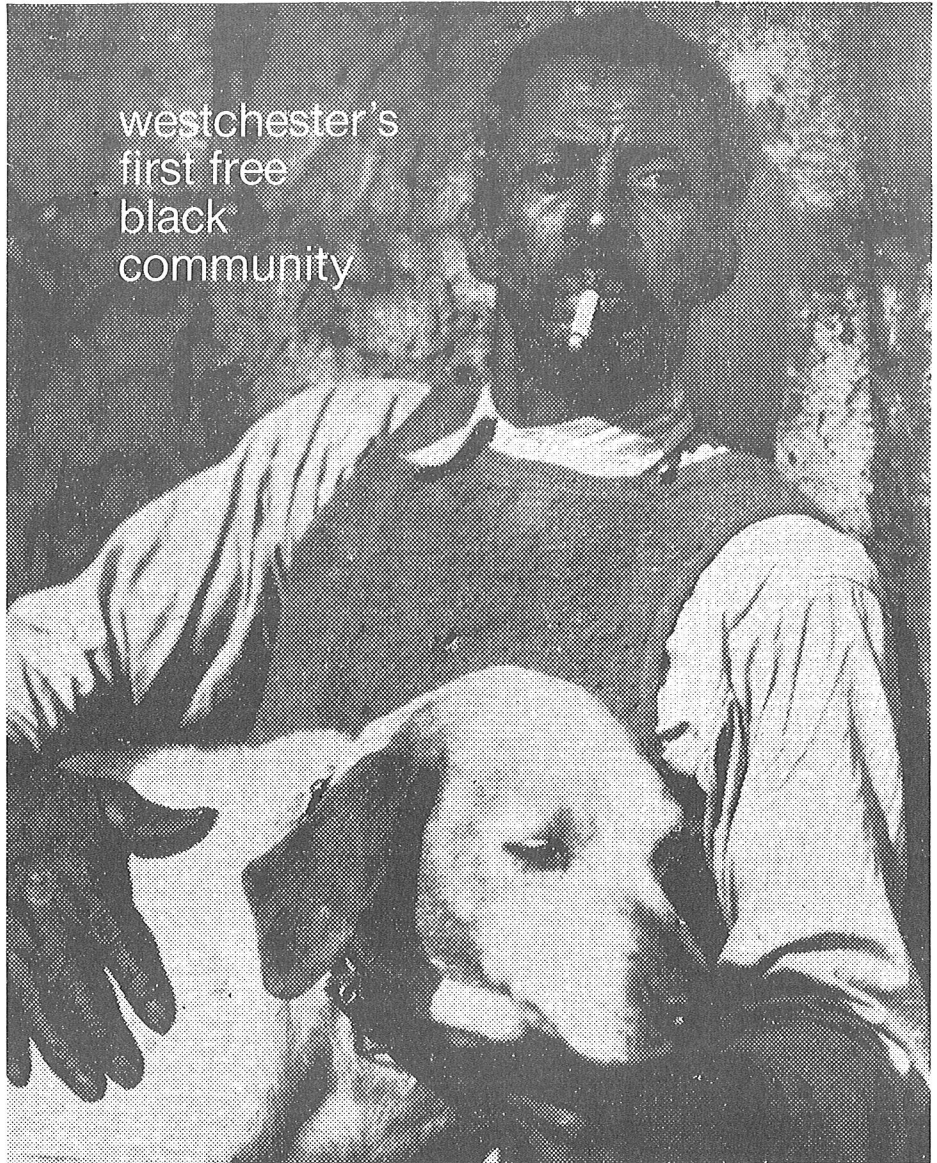


the · history · of stony · hill



Andrew P. O'Rourke, County Executive
Joseph M. Caverly, Commissioner
Dept. of Parks, Recreation & Conservation
618 Michaelian Office Building
White Plains, New York 10601

the · history · of · stony · hill

In the rocky, northern section of Silver Lake Park in Harrison lies a symbol of brotherhood and freedom. It is a monument to both black and Quaker history in New York State. And it is a story that is not yet fully written.

In 1695, John Harrison bought from an American Indian what is now Harrison and Purchase. One of his four partners was William Haight, a member of the Society of Friends, more commonly known as the Quakers. While the other four probably disposed of their shares by the early 1700s, Haight encouraged Friends from Flushing and other Long Island towns to join him as the first white settlers of Harrison. They began a farming community in the north of town that became known as Purchase, and in 1727 erected their first meeting house.

Like other settlers in the area, several Friends owned slaves. One Quaker family, the Burlings, may have brought slaves with them on their ship. Early Dutch settlers in Westchester County had obtained their first African slaves under a charter granted by the West India Company in 1629. In the inhumane terms characteristic of the time, the company promised the colony of New Netherlands that they would "supply the colonists with as many blacks as they conveniently" could. The British continued to support the slave trade after the renamed colony, New York, became a British possession.

The first census of New York in 1698 indicated that there were 917 whites in Westchester County, and 146 blacks. In this same year, blacks from the coast of Guinea were brought to Rye for Adolph Philipse, of Philipsburg Manor, attracting attention at the time because the Philipses were under suspicion of gaining huge profits by trading with pirates. By one account, as the County grew, the number of slaves in the Rye-Harrison area alone rose to 117 by 1755. Another account maintains that the traffic of slaves began to decline in 1718, and that there were only 73 in the County in 1755.

There appears to be no disagreement, however, that the Quakers were the first County residents to take action to free their slaves, an action which predates even the Revolutionary War. Themselves victims of persecution in England, and even by the Dutch in their settlement on Long Island, the Quakers believed that God dwelt within every person. Thus, they have maintained a group testimony against war, capital punishment, slavery, discrimination and segregation to this day. In his *Advices*, written in the 1600s, Quaker founder George Fox approved of mixed marriages between whites and blacks, and joint meetings for worship. This advice was largely unheeded, even much later. Suffragist Susan B. Anthony noted that in 1839, while visiting what was probably the Purchase Meeting House, she and

her three black guests were forced to sit in the balcony, an area reserved for servants and blacks.

Nonetheless, John Wollman, a minister from New Jersey with a strong anti-slavery message, noted that in 1760 he visited a Quaker meeting in "Rie Woods." Apparently he convinced many of his listeners to free their slaves, though slave-trading had already been prohibited among Quakers. In 1767, the Purchase Meeting sent notice to an annual statewide gathering called the New York Yearly Meeting, asking that "if it is not consistent with Christianity to buy and sell our fellowmen for slaves," how could it be consistent to actually possess slaves? The Yearly Meeting discussed the matter until 1775, when it judged that those Quakers who still held "negroes ought to restore them their natural rights as to liberty."

The Purchase Meeting responded by appointing in 1776 "a Committee to visit those that keep negroes as slaves — agreeably to directions of the Yearly Meeting." The Committee reported in 1777 that it had visited "nearly all those within the verge of this Monthly Meeting that hold slaves" and had found that "a considerable number have been declared free... since last year." In the following year, the Purchase Meeting resolved to disown Friends who continued to hold slaves. The last slave held by a Quaker in Purchase was probably freed in 1779. It was not until 1827 that all New York slaves were made free by a law passed in 1817.

Reportedly, Purchase Quakers also wanted to offer economic compensation to their former slaves, and were otherwise interested in their welfare. In 1781, they appointed another committee to visit former slave owners and the ex-slaves themselves, to "inspect into the circumstances" of the freed slaves, to "afford them advice," and to "endeavor to find what in justice may be due to such negroes as may have spent the prime of their days in the service of their masters." The committee was directed to determine the amount due for such compensation, where the ex-masters were willing to leave it to committee judgement.

This compensation probably came largely in the form of "the rough lands in the northwestern portion of the Town of Harrison," upon which the Purchase Friends settled their emancipated slaves. According to some accounts, the Quakers also built simple houses for each of the families, and provided them with land for a church. Thus, the community often known as Stony Hill was begun, part of which now exists in remnant form in the northern section of Silver Lake Park.

Slaves freed in the northern portion of the county collected into a smaller settlement near Bedford, and Friends of Mamaroneck and Scarsdale are said to have given land on Saxon Woods Road in Scarsdale for their emancipated slaves. But, some historians believe that Stony Hill was the first of these free black communities in Westchester, and perhaps also in the entire state. Further documentation is

necessary, but given the Purchase Meeting's leadership in bringing the issue of emancipation before the statewide Yearly Meeting, it is quite possible that the establishment of a community for their freed slaves also predated efforts by other Quaker Meetings.

Lying between Buckhout Road and Silver Lake, Stony Hill is so called for its rocky terrain. It has also been referred to on maps and in historic documents as Horton's Hill, Walnut Hill, Quarry Hills and Negro Hills. To the north of Buckhout Road, well beyond the boundaries of Silver Lake Park, was another related, and now abandoned community often called Brooksville, which may or may not have been part of the original lands given by the Quakers.

A central gathering ground in the Stony Hill community was doubtlessly the combined chapel and schoolhouse, remnants of which are still visible on the south side of Buckhout Road. Accounts vary as to when the church was established, with dates ranging from 1845 or possibly several years earlier, to "approximately 1866." Several of these accounts mention that the land was given by Frederick Stevens, a Quaker whose home still stands, across from the church. The small frame building was known as the Asbury Colored Peoples Church, and eventually burned down, probably prior to 1892. Another, unrelated Presbyterian church called Hope Chapel was situated until the mid-20s a few hundred yards to the west and on the

other side of the road. White residents who lived adjacent to Stony Hill attended services there.

According to an 1886 account, religious services were conducted at the Asbury chapel "by whites belonging to the Methodist Episcopal Church on Broadway in White Plains." A division among the congregation is said to have occurred, and a number of them, under the leadership of Richard O'Neil, withdrew. In 1874, after four or five years of worship in private homes, they erected a new church, the St. Luke's Methodist Episcopal Church, on Westchester Avenue. In 1919 this church was renamed the Mount Hope A.M.E. Zion Church, which today is situated close to the site of the original Asbury church, at 65 Lake Street in White Plains. Mount Hope still owns some of the original site on Stony Hill.

Adjacent to the Asbury church site is a graveyard, where civil war veterans are buried. The names of those buried there, and their number vary among different accounts, although there were at least five and perhaps as many as twenty. One, John Lea Brown, was the only Harrison man killed in the Civil War. Louis Burling, a black private who served in Colonel Samuel Pell's regiment in the Revolutionary War, is also buried there, according to one account. There is at least one other black graveyard in the Stony Hill area, and many of the graves are marked simply by small, upright rocks, rather than by inscribed tombstones.

The Asbury church, the Stony Hill community and the Purchase Meeting are believed to have played a combined role in the activities of the Underground Railroad, although there is no documentary evidence to confirm this. All three were close to the Connecticut Highway, now Old Lake Street, the customary route to Danbury and points north.

In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, the Stony Hill community extended along the road that still bears its name, comprised at one time of at least 26 simple homes and other structures. At its steepest point, the road was paved with cobblestones, ending in a foot path which joined up with Buckhout Road. Relatives and friends of those who lived along Stony Hill Road had homes along Buckhout Road and to its north, in Brooksville.

Whites and blacks played or worked together, and in at least one family, intermarried. Children could walk to the streetcar which ended in West Harrison, and ride it to White Plains for a nickel. Many went to the Lake Street Grammar School, at the corner of Lake and Park, with the children of Italian immigrants and other white families. Purdy's Store was even closer, which while now a home, was a shop full of harnesses, shoes, clothes and groceries.

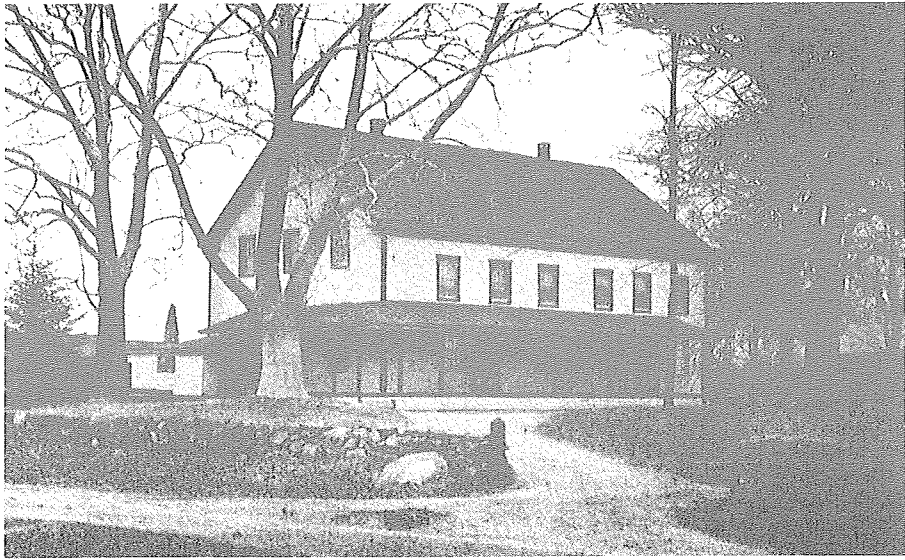
Charles Davis worked as a street cleaner in New York City, and Malvina Barker as a housekeeper. William R. Hobby was known for his horticultural skills, particularly in grafting fruit trees. Ben and Henry Hobby worked for the Dutterman Ice House, and eventually bought the business.

Several descendents of these and perhaps other residents are still alive today (1985). Some even lived at Stony Hill as children. But, gradually the families moved on and the wooden homes burned down, leaving only their stone foundations. Silver Lake Park was created in 1924 and 1925, and the last family left the area in 1941. Eva Hobby missed the area so much that she wrote a song of remembrance, called simply, "Silver Lake."

Now, thanks to the efforts of private citizens and the Westchester County Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation, the story of Stony Hill is being written piece by piece. Was it the first free black community in New York? Did it serve as a stop on the Underground Railroad? And what was life like there, in the time period between the emancipation of Quaker slaves and the last days of the trolley and Purdy's store?

The story may never be fully written, because everywhere black history has, until recently, been largely ignored. Thus, there are few accounts of Stony Hill among historical documents. If it can be told fully, the rest of the story must be written from fleeting memories and from archeological exploration of Stony Hill itself.

It is fortunate that the pieces of this story are still there. Many sites of archeological and historical significance in this county and beyond have been covered over by development. But within Silver Lake Park, a symbol of freedom and brotherhood, a true monument to black and Quaker history, has been preserved.



silver·lake

by Eva Hobby Colden 1909

*There's a lovely quiet place
I long to see.
In my lonely heart it will always be.
There the winds so softly
blowing.
There the waters gently flowing,
Mossey banks a lovely carpet
makes
At the quiet water sides of
Silver Lake.*

*Silver Lake, Silver Lake
When I think of you
It makes my sad heart ache.
It was there in the golden
summers
I plucked the flowers
from the shores at
Silver Lake.*