

Evil practice of 'slavery' once took place in East Haven

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Yes, we did have slaves in this town in the early days. Man has often in the past put men in bondage. Sometimes it was at the person's own choosing, such as when he bonded himself to learn or court ordered to clear a debt. Eventually he hoped to become free but this did not always happen and some died in bondage. Others called it "slavery." There is little difference; the master dictated the terms, good or bad.

In this town, as well as surrounding towns, the term "slave" was not used for black persons in bondage, who instead were called "servants." In most cases this is what they actually were, for they lived with the family and often were as close to the family as were the family members themselves, all doing what they had to do to make life livable.

Still, involuntary servitude is slavery, whatever the name. With it came conditions of confinement to a dictatorial life.

By the year following the war of independence, the practice of slavery in the north was rapidly dying out, both for religious reasons and the stigma of the practice, for we had just fought a war for independence, and people believed it should be applied and available to all.

For the following story, I have gone to the official record in East Haven. The wording is not copied verbatim, but the gist of the legal paperwork is offered for your edification.

In 1795, in volume 2 page 341 of the Town Clerk's record, there is recorded the names of eight people receiving money to the amount of 10 pounds lawful money, whereby they sold, made over, and confirmed unto Mr. Zebulon Farren a certain Negro girl named Sophia.

Zebulon Farren abhorred slavery. In the court record in volume 2, page 342, the next recording of the sale record, we find the following record by Zebulon Farren of his emancipation of Sophia:

"To all of whom these present shall come, Greeting. Know ye that I, Zebulon Farren of East Haven for divers good causes there unto me moving have this day Set at Liberty, Freed my servant girl by name of Sophia, which I have this day purchased as a slave for life, and I hereby



"Am I not a Man and a Brother."

declare that I have claim no further services, but wholly discharge the said Sophia from any claim, challenge or demand of service, either from me or my heirs, Witness my hand in East Haven this last day of April 1795."

Various histories and vital statistics of East Haven list three dozen or so bonded African-Americans, most by a single name and in some cases merely note that the deceased was a servant of someone when they died.

There is a story about a slave of a Rev. Street, who was forever asking when he would be freed, and always received the same answer: "Tom, you may be free whenever you sign my paper that states that I will no longer be responsible for your welfare when you are too old or ill to work." And with this the fellow would roll his eyes, grin and walk away whistling to himself. Tom died in 1791 at the age of 57.

That Rev. Street did not like slavery, and noted that we abhorred the oppression of England, at this time we still accepted it, but he counseled that we should examine our

own bosoms in regard to this subject. "Pink and her daughter Chloe, slaves of Isaac Forbes, were the last remnants of slavery in East Haven. Pink was a town charge, and died after 1850."

By the eighteenth century people became more concerned about the institution of slavery. Better education, and the rights to express themselves in public, at coffee houses, at their church or almost any meeting place, the subject was brought up more and more, and discussed freely. Legislation was soon on the agenda in some countries to solve the dilemma of serfdom, and soon laws would be enacted against this evil practice.

In 1787 the Wedgwood firm, headed by Josiah Wedgwood asked one of his artists and sculptor, William Hackwood, to design a medallion against slavery. Mr. Wedgwood had founded the "Society for the Suppression of the Slave Trade" and wanted a distinctive motif.

Mr. Hackwood designed a medallion appropriate to the abolitionists' cause (see picture). The medallion depicted a kneeling slave in chains in supplication, and the words around the rim asked, "Am I not a Man and a Brother." Thousands of these were sold and given away to anyone concerned with the issue. They were also set in rings, bracelets, pins and buckles. Small jewelry boxes and even hat pins became all the rage at the time.

On Feb. 28, 1788, Wedgwood sent some of these medallions to Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia, enclosing with them a letter that said, "This will be an epoch before unknown to the world, and while relief is given to so many of our fellow creatures, the subject of freedom itself will be more canvassed and better understood in the enlightened nations."

Wedgwood, however, did not follow his cardinal rule. "Mark anything that he produced with his name." He was a business man and he did not wish to estrange any customers, especially in the southern states where his wares, such as the blue and white Jasper Ware, were selling well to the southern planters.

These medallions are now a rare collectors' item and although they were reproduced since 1950, even they are very scarce, the originals are all in museums and private collections, and I have not seen even a reproduction in many years.