



Slavery in Delaware

This report is the sum of the efforts of the members of the Committee on Slavery of the Diocese of Delaware.

Beginnings

Human chattel slavery was introduced into Delaware by European Christians. The first enslaved people to serve European Christians were indigenous. However, the native population was unable to supply slaves in sufficient numbers to meet the rising needs of the growing European population. In 1639 Anthony, the first known enslaved African, was imported into Delaware. He served Johan Printz, Governor of New Sweden. With the transfer of sovereignty to the Dutch in 1655 the number of enslaved Africans increased. English control of the area beginning in 1668 saw growth in both the European and enslaved populations. Labor intensive tobacco cultivation in Kent and Sussex counties utilized large numbers of enslaved people. On the eve of the Revolution some one quarter of the colony's population was enslaved.

Religious Underpinnings:

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts

The arrival of the English meant the introduction of English religion. The three counties of the lower Delaware were acquired by William Penn in 1682 and annexed to his proprietary colony, Pennsylvania. The three counties were allowed a significant measure of local autonomy with their own legislature meeting in New Castle. Unlike the New England and southern colonies religious tolerance was the rule in Pennsylvania. The Church of England, established by law in all of the colonies south of Delaware, could not depend on support from taxation in Delaware. The large number of Church of England members in Delaware and the colonies to the north, without adequate pastoral provision, led to the founding in 1701 of the London based Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. The Society's first venture in providing English clergy for the colonies was Delaware.

The SPG initially sought to minister to white Church of England members and to evangelize among the indigenous people of English America and transported African slaves. The Society had very modest success with the latter two. The retreating indigenous population was not easily evangelized and enslaved Africans did not convert to their oppressor's religion in any significant numbers. The Society was early on confronted with the dichotomy of freedom in Christ and the enslavement of the African workforce. The Society reconciled the dichotomy by speaking of spiritual freedom while supporting chattel slavery. The 1710 acquisition by bequest of Codrington Plantation in Barbados cemented the Society's support for slavery. Codrington Plantation was the largest sugar plantation in the West Indies, worked by approximately 275 enslaved men, women and children. Codrington had an unusually high turnover rate, even for the time and place, with a quarter of its workforce dying each year. This necessitated a constant program of importation to maintain profits. Discipline was draconian. Escape attempts were punishable by death while the murder of a slave by a European carried a more modest fine of £15 (approximately \$200.00). Codrington was a principal source of funding for the Society, so much so that the Society opposed all attempts to limit slavery and continued to utilize slaves at the plantation until the 1833 abolition of slavery in the British Empire.

Not only did the Society's clergy in Delaware receive their stipends from the profits at Codrington but evidence exists of Society clergy and Society congregations in Delaware owning enslaved Africans. The Rev. Mr. Phillip Reading, Rector of St. Anne's Middletown from 1746 until his death in 1778 bequeathed in his will a considerable estate. Amid the lists of household

silver, furnishings and farm implements he left to his wife “three certain slaves named Patrick (the elder), Menib and Moll, for her sole use and as her entire property. And with regard to the remainder of such slaves as shall be possessed and owned by me at the time of my decease, I give and bequeath them unto my son Phillip Reading and my daughter Catherine Anne Reading, to be divided according to age, sex, and other qualities, equally betwixt them.” The division of families, husbands from wives and children from parents, was not one of the criterion for division of the assets. The Rev. Mr. William Becket, SPG missionary and rector of St. Peter’s Lewes, left nothing to his son-in-law and daughter in a 1743 will because of previous generosity including “goods and chattels by building him a house and giving him a negro”. He did leave his “negros Jenny and Oxford ...to my two daughters”. A review of other probated wills from the period show widespread slave ownership among Church members. Most farm owners before 1785 in Sussex and Kent were C of E members and typically owned slaves. Records show that domestic slaves were common in the towns of New Castle County. An 18th century Vestry of Old Swedes, Wilmington provided an enslaved woman, Peggy, to care for the Rectory

Manumission

After 1790 the numbers of enslaved people in Delaware dramatically declined. Economics and a changing religious climate were chiefly responsible. The farming of tobacco and corn in the lower two counties gave way to wheat production which required less labor. Quakers and Methodists became public opponents of slavery in the Federal period. Although Methodism’s position shifted to support of slavery and racial separation after 1810, the Quakers continued to be vocal opponents of the institution until its abolition in 1865. The increase in the numbers of free people of African descent alarmed many in the European population. The "Delawarean" newspaper on Sept. 6, 1862, referred to the prospect of a completely emancipated black population as "the first step; if it shall succeed, others will follow tending to elevate the Negro to an equality with the white man or rather to degrade the white man by obliterating the distinction between races." During the course of the 19th century a series of laws or “Black Codes” limiting the suffrage, mobility, employment, marriage, and property ownership of African Americans replaced slavery as defining the relationship between European and African Americans. These laws perpetuated the social and economic relationships of slavery without the economic liability to slave owners.

By 1840, Delaware had the largest free black population, by percentage of population, in the Union. It was a circumscribed freedom. In 1776, and again in 1787, the franchise was specifically limited to qualified white male voters. In 1807 intermarriage between European and African Americans was prohibited and the franchise was once again limited to whites. An 1825 law forbid African Americans from being within a half mile of polling places on election day. In 1832 the right to bear arms was removed from African Americans. That same year the right of assembly was denied. In 1849 a pass law was introduced for African Americans. Beginning in 1807 African Americans were prohibited from reentering the state after a two year absence. As the century progressed that was lowered to six months, then six weeks, and finally to five days in 1863. In that year, in the midst of the great national struggle for the Union, the franchise was again denied to African Americans.

The Church’s Response

The Episcopal Church’s response to these changes may be understood by the number of clergy who left Delaware in 1860 to fight for the slavery cause. Eight priests, more than half the total at the time, declared for the Confederacy. That said, Alfred Lee, our first Diocesan (1841 – 1887)

was a staunch Union man. Bishop Lee was deeply involved in evangelization. In his first decade and a half in Delaware he founded fifteen congregations and organized the first “colored” Sunday school. In his first year as Bishop he ordained Alexander Crummel, one of the great African American theologians and missionaries of the 19th century, to the priesthood. Later, he was a consecrator of Theodore Holly, the first African American Bishop and missionary to Haiti. Both of these men were strongly abolitionist and among the founders of what in time came to be known as the Union of Black Episcopalians. Both of the ordinations were “extra-jurisdictional” and irregular. Crummel was not a member of Lee’s diocese and he ordained him in Pennsylvania after Crummel had rejected the Bishop of Pennsylvania’s degrading conditions for ordination. In the case of Holly, Lee and two other Bishops ordained him without a diocesan election to be the head of an indigenous Haitian Church not yet in Communion with the Episcopal Church. These were courageous actions. What he seems not to have done, was to promote an integrated ministry of African and European Americans. While this can be attributed to the times in which he lived it never-the-less condemned African Americans to a separate and inherently unequal status in the church and accepted the hideous consequences of the “Black Codes” in society.

In the decades following the Civil War and the constitutional prohibition of slavery the denial of basic human rights for African Americans continued in Delaware. Restrictions on the franchise, education, property ownership, and employment limited the freedom of African Americans. The poll tax and literacy tests meant that virtually all African Americans could not vote. Schools were for whites only. Restrictive covenants limited where African Americans could purchase property. Vagrancy laws and compulsory labor contracts were used to reintroduce servitude. This judicial servitude extended to the children of African American families who were removed from homes and forced into compulsory labor contracts with white employers as early as age 12. As far as we can tell, the church was silent in the face of these outrages.

In Delaware, of thirty-nine congregations in 2008, twenty-four were organized before 1860. Of these, eight predate the Revolution. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), founded in London in 1701 to evangelize the Empire, was heavily involved in establishing churches in colonial Delaware. The SPG’s dual commitment to the propagation of slavery and its direct involvement in the economics of slavery certainly contributed to the colonial Church’s easy acceptance of the institution. Clergy held slaves. Members of congregations held slaves. The SPG, which supplied many of the clergy, was partially funded by the profits from the largest slave worked sugar plantation in the West Indies. The dire consequences, both social and economic, continued well after the decline and abolition of slavery in Delaware. To all appearances, until the modern era, the Episcopal Church (and its predecessor the Church of England) accepted with equanimity, first the enslavement of Africans and later a very unequal segregation of Delawareans based on the color of their skin.

Addendum on the post Civil War era: The Black Codes

Unpaid labor was common in England and other European countries hence, this type of labor which included both indenture and slavery was a carry over into the colonies. Over time, however, the unpaid labor – slavery, became racial in nature, making it different. Slaves were black and masters were white. While colonists felt justified enslaving Africans because they were seen as “heathens and uncivilized” in addition to their color, both white indentured servitude and black slavery needed no real justification – it just was.

During the Age of Enlightenment, the American Revolution, Quakers and Methodists began to speak out against the institution of slavery. Many in Delaware began to reassess their own position on slavery. There were those who justified slavery because they believed that Africans were suited to be “hewers of wood and drawers of water” that they were happy when doing said chores. Africans were considered happiest when doing “constructive work”. By the end of the American Revolution, most indentured servitude had ended leaving only Africans enslaved. It is this period that slavery ceased to be about “class or ethnic affiliation and totally about race (Williams, 70).

It was during this period that the seeds of racism were sown. Slavery apologists really believed that it was necessary to keep Africans under control for the protection of the white population although whites generally believed “blacks were naturally lazy, prone to steal, violent and sexually promiscuous” (Williams, 70). At the same time, there was a large influx of Africans into Delaware which obviously increase the visibility of black people thereby raising the fear of whites to all time highs. It is important to note that whites were keenly aware of the various slave rebellions that had happened in the South as well as the rebellion in Haiti and Jamaica. There was always the fear that this type of slave rebellion could happen in Delaware.

A Delawarean wrote that manumission of slaves would do harm to their neighbors because it is “well known that Negroes have a rooted aversion to work and therefore must steal and rob in order to get a subsistence (Williams, 70). This statement justified the passage of a series of very harsh laws designed to control the movement of Africans. By 1740 and again in 1767, bills were passed that said, “It is found by experience that free Negroes mulattoes are idle and sloughful... and are an evil example to slaves” (Williams, 72).

To be enslaved meant that life was totally controlled and basic human rights were denied. Some of the laws instituted for control were: Africans were not permitted to testify in court against whites, they could be denied a jury trial and were never any blacks seated on a jury. Blacks were not permitted to congregate in large groups or travel without a pass. Delaware joined with other southern states in the denying of slave marriages.

It is interesting to note that over time, there was a steady decline in the number of enslaved Africans in Delaware. In 1664, the number of enslaved Africans was 95% and dropped to a low 8% by 1860. There were many Africans who were manumitted although this process was not written into law. One can see that at the dawn of the Civil War most of the Africans in Delaware were nominally free.

There were several things that caused the number of the enslaved to decrease so drastically. Before 1787, Africans had comparable value as those from the other surrounding Chesapeake area states. The average price for a field hand in 1800 was \$350.00 and rose to \$1300 in 1865. Unfortunately for planters, the Delaware General Assembly of 1787 banned the exportation of slaves to the Carolinas, Georgia and West Indies. By 1789, Maryland and Virginia were added to the list (Williams, 88). These laws forbade the sale outside of the state. If they were sold outside of Delaware, they automatically declared free. After 1789 only intrastate sales were legal. In the Deep South the price of Africans continued to rise due to the increased number of cotton and tobacco plantations while in Delaware the price of a “prime field hand dropped by 28% of the value of a comparable slave in Virginia.

When more and more Africans became free, whites felt it necessary to control this free population. A legally manumitted person had to have a security bond provided by the former

owner (Williams, 150). Since most owners did not want to provide this bond, many Africans were manumitted without a legal filing. This left the freed person vulnerable to be re-enslaved because they were unable to prove they were free. Due to the precarious nature of illegal manumission, many African migrated to Pennsylvania and other northern states.

Farmers, needing the help from free blacks, asked the state Legislature to do something to make free blacks stay in the state. The first piece of legislation stated that free blacks who left the state for more than two years would be fined more than \$30.00 upon their return. In the event, these fines were not paid, the blacks would be sold into servitude for up to seven years. The Legislature of 1811 reduced the time period out of state down to six months; in 1849 down to sixty days and in 1863 down to five days. Only sailors and other watermen were exempt from these laws. It was hoped that free blacks would think twice before leaving Delaware because it would be a very costly proposition to return.

At this point, planters needed to enter into wage based contracts with free blacks. When free blacks chose not to enter into these agreements, farmers complained that they did not have enough labor for planting and harvesting. According to white planters, there were throngs of “idle and undependable” black labor. The General Assembly of 1849 made it “illegal for free blacks to be unemployed while also being poor”. Since most black laborers were very poor indeed, this legislation made idleness by blacks a criminal act”(Williams, 197).

Listed below, are a few of the many proscriptive laws against enslaved and free blacks:

1820-1826:

Negroes and mulattoes traveling without a pass may be taken up as a runaway

1830-1835:

Negroes and mulattoes are prohibited from owning firearms and warlike instruments.

Meeting of more than twelve are prohibited after 10 p.m.

Slaves may be exported or brought into the state with a license granted by a judge

Free blacks are not permitted to attend political meetings

1845 - 1852:

Free Negroes and Mulattoes – Non-resident people are prohibited from coming into the state and a warrant will be issued for their arrest issued by the Justice of the Peace. A penalty will be levied. If the person is unable to pay the fine, they will be sent to jail and sold into servitude by the sheriff.

1861-1865:

Free Negroes and Mulattoes- No free Negro religious meeting can be held after 9 p.m., nor after sunset unless three whites are present.

Slaves were not permitted be out after 9 p.m.

The stringent laws and the widely held notions of racial inferiority of blacks laid the ground work for the insidious nature of racism that has become permeated into the psyche of many to this day.

Addendum Bibliography

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