

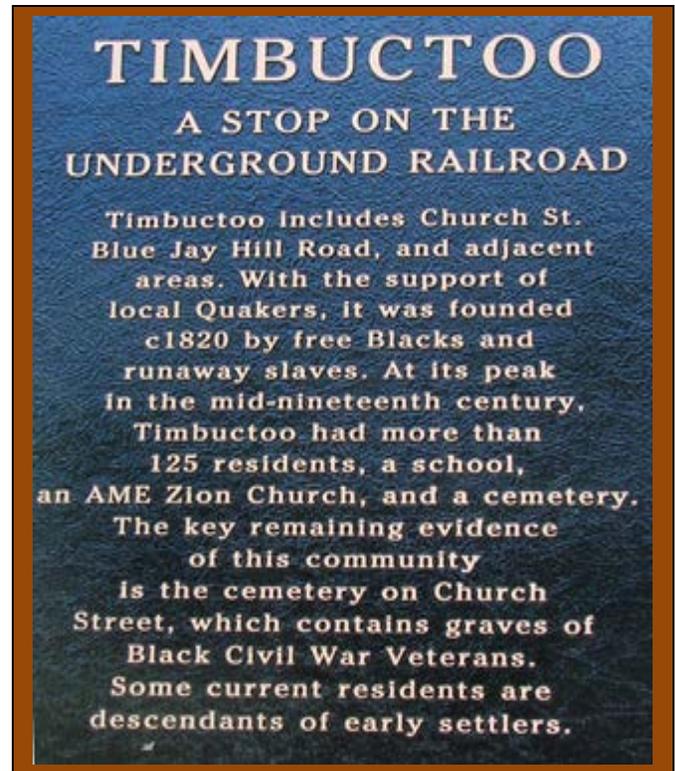
Timbuctoo

A Historically African American Settlement in Westampton Township,
Burlington County, NJ

Timbuctoo is an unincorporated community in Westampton Township, Burlington County, New Jersey, according to the US Geological Survey Geographic Names Information System. Deed records in the Burlington County Clerk's Office indicate the first land purchases by African Americans in the area now known as Timbuctoo occurred in 1826.

County documents also include Articles of Incorporation for churches and schools in and around Timbuctoo as early as 1826. Corporate registration of African American institutions in the County Clerk's office during this antebellum period is noteworthy, because it indicates recognition by the local government, as well as suggesting some level of appreciation for the notion that African Americans should create their own institutions to meet community needs. For example, the recital in an 1834 deed between one Peter Quire and three African American men associated with Timbuctoo (Edward Giles, Hezekiah Hall, and Major Mitchell) states "*whereas, in the Settlement of Tombuctoo...and in the vicinity thereof, there are many people of Colour (so called) who seem sensible of the advantages of a suitable school education and are destitute for a house for that purpose. And the said Peter Quire and Maria, his wife, in consideration of the premises and the affection they bear to the people of Colour, and the desire they have to promote their true and best interests, are minded to settle, give, grant and convey...said premises to the uses and intents hereinafter pointed out and described.*"

In short, during an era when it was typically illegal in southern states to teach African Americans to read, these men codified their opinion to the contrary in a land transaction. Similarly, an 1840 amendment to the Articles of Incorporation of Mount Moriah AME Church says: *Be it remembered that on this eighteenth day of July, AD 1840, the subscriber, one of the Justices of the Peace for said county. Robert Evans, Major Mitchell, Samuel Still, Thomas Harris, and John Bruer, who have been duly elected trustees of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Mount Moriah, located near Mount Holly...did each take the necessary qualifications of the statute; such case made and provided....To support the Constitution of the United States. To bear true faith and allegiance to the government of this State. And to faithfully discharge the duties incumbent on them as*



Trustees of said Church according to the best of their understanding and abilities." At least two of the Trustees (Major Mitchell and John Bruer) are Timbuctoo residents.

In this case, we have free African Americans appearing before the Justice of the Peace to take an oath, registering their names and identities and very publicly declaring their community leadership roles. Notwithstanding discrimination and inequality they would have faced in early nineteenth century America, their experience was certainly a stark contrast from southern states, where any aspiration of individual leadership or community organization could be punished by severe penalties that could include death by lynching.

That's not to say African American communities in Burlington County lived in total peace and tranquility. In "Path of Freedom: The Black Presence in New Jersey's Burlington County, 1659 to 1900", Ernest Lyght describes raids by slavecatchers who targeted Timbuctoo and vicinity because the community was known to harbor escaped slaves¹. In one instance, Lyght describes the "Battle of Pine Swamp," in which a well-known slave-catcher, George Alberti, sought to capture an escaped slave by the name of Perry Simmons. Reportedly,

Simmons had lived in the area for a decade or more and had a strong network of supporters among Timbuctoo residents. When news of the attempt to capture Simmons reached his Timbuctoo allies, a large group rushed to Simmons' aid yelling and screaming, and scared the smaller raiding party off. Alberti had also solicited the aid of a local US Marshall under the false pretense that Simmons had stolen chickens from Moorestown. Once the constable learned that the chicken stealing charge was just a ruse, he declined to make an arrest. Although Simmons prevailed in this case, others were not always so lucky.

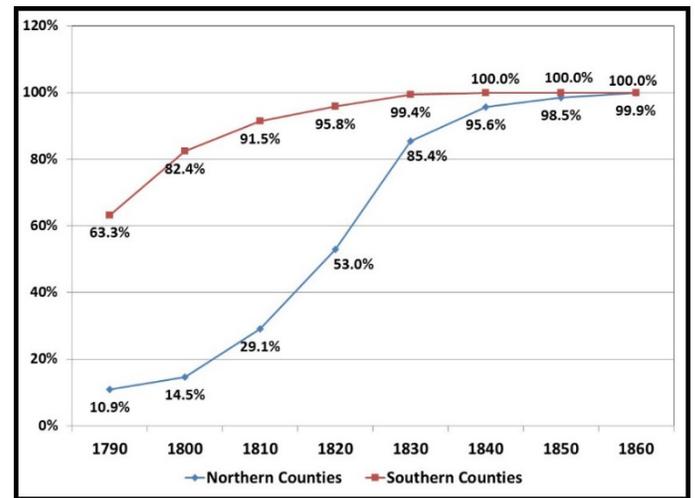
At its peak in the mid-nineteenth century, Timbuctoo had more than 125 residents, a school, a church and a cemetery.² The US Census identified the "Village of Timbuctoo" as a separate entity within Westampton Township for the first time in 1880, enumerating 108 residents and 29 households.³ Today the cemetery is the only remnant of Timbuctoo's historic past, but a handful of families in Westampton and surrounding areas are descendants of early settlers. Although Timbuctoo appears on local maps, many area residents have never heard of it or are familiar with its historical significance.

It is noteworthy that the development of Timbuctoo did not occur in a vacuum. Abolition of slavery in northern states began eighty-six years before the Emancipation Proclamation in Vermont in 1777.⁴ In many instances, Quakers were associated with the abolitionist movement, and New Jersey was no exception. John Woolman, arguably the most prominent Quaker abolitionist of the 18th century, was from nearby Mount Holly, NJ.⁵ Quakers led advocacy to end slavery in New Jersey, petitioning the legislature to enact laws to abolish slavery in 1785.⁶ These efforts eventually led to *An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery*, passed by the New Jersey legislature in 1804.⁷ This law provided that all children born to slaves after July 4, 1804, would become free after a period of "apprenticeship" to their mother's masters. Males would remain the servant of mother's owner until age 25 and females until age 21. By 1820, the number of free blacks in New Jersey (12,460) outnumbered those in bondage (7557).⁸

Regional variations in the progress of gradual manumission in New Jersey are telling. Using data from the US Census, which enumerated all free US households⁹ by name, beginning in 1790, Table 1¹⁰ compares the proportion of free African Americans each decade in the northern and southern regions of the state. As early as 1790, fourteen years before the New Jersey legislature passed the gradual manumission act, nearly

two-thirds (63.3%) of African Americans living in the southern counties of New Jersey were free. By comparison, just 11% of their counterparts in the northern counties were free.

Progress of Gradual Manumission of Slaves in NJ



The northern counties did not approximate the progress of northern counties until 1850. This regional difference in the progress of manumission can be attributed, in large part, to Quaker influence, which was strong in southern New Jersey counties, while virtually absent in the northern counties. Certainly, New Jersey's distinction as the last *northern state* to abolish slavery was a matter of regional debate within its boundaries.

¹ Lyght, Ernest *Path of Freedom: The Black Presence in New Jersey's Burlington County 1659-1900* (Cherry Hill. E & E Publishing House, 1978), 39

² *Ibid.*, 40

³ 1880 New Jersey Census, Burlington County, New Jersey, population schedule. P. 34, digital image. Ancestry.com (<http://www.ancestry.com>. Accessed May 24, 2014) citing National Archives microfilm publication T9. Roll 772

⁴ Rodriguez, Junius P. (ed.) *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia, Volume 1*. (Santa Barbara. ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2007) Vermont was a sovereign entity in 1777 and entered the union as a free state in 1791.

⁵ David Sox, *John Woolman: Quintessential Quaker, 1720-1772* (York: Sessions Book Trust, 1999)

⁶ Henry Scofield Cooley *A Study of Slavery in New Jersey* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1896) 17-19

⁷ Giles R. Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey: a short history*. (Trenton, NJ Historical Commission, 1989), 19

⁸ Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey: a short history*, 25

⁹ Before 1850, the US Census only identified heads of households by name, with numbers for other household occupants. Beginning in 1850, all occupants were identified by name.

¹⁰ US Census Bureau *US Census of Population and Housing*, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/overview/. Accessed on May 20, 2015