

People of Color in Wilmington's History

Collated during Black History Month, February 2024 by Joseph Jackson

****Note**, this document is not expected to be exhaustive, but will be enhanced as new information has been uncovered. Context of early residents between 1730-1900.

Slave Laborers, Samuel Dummer

Levi Swanton Gould, "Ancient Middlesex"

<https://archive.org/details/cu31924028817950/page/n155/mode/2up?q=wilmington>

"In early life he appears to have lived in Jamaica. On his return he settled in Wilmington, where he cultivated with slave labor an extensive estate. He had a mania for purchasing farms and at one time had several hundred acres in that vicinity, which probably were not specially remunerative, as he became financially embarrassed and parted with most of them in 1731. In 1730 as "a Principal Inhabitant of Wilmington" he was ordered by the General Court to warn the inhabitants to meet in Town Meeting and elect Town Officers."

Two Carpenters, of Ebenezer Jones Farm

https://archive.org/details/Town_Crier_1990-12-26/page/n3/mode/2up

Supposedly the black folks from Dummer's estate transferred to the Jones Farm after Samuel Dummer died in 1738.

Aside: One member of the [Jones] family, Ebenezer by name, served in the Massachusetts forces at Ticonderoga, during a war with the French and Indians. His rank at Ticonderoga was, Captain, and he, together with about 20 men were killed by the Indians.

The reader, occasionally, may read a story of how 20 men from Wilmington were killed at that time. Only Lieutenant Jones was from Wilmington.

The Harnden Tavern was constructed about 1770. According to Alice Hathaway Dillaway a man named Ebenezer Jones built that tavern. He had two black slaves, probably carpenters.

Titus Colburn

<http://localhistory.wilmlibrary.org/.../files/1979-08-01.pdf>

Wilmington had not had very many documented people of color as residents through the early agricultural/industrial years. The 1790/1800 Census both include Titus Coburn, who was a free black man and a veteran of the Revolutionary War at Bunker Hill. His wife was named Susannah, and she was a widow by 1830 living at the poor house in Andover. It is possible that Titus had been freed by 1783 through the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Cases, but he

may have also been born free. I haven't been able to find documentation on Titus, but I'd like to learn more!

https://archive.org/details/Town_Crier_1990-12-26/page/n3/mode/2up

Much evidence for Titus Colburn, black soldier from Wilmington.

“The name appears as Titus Cober in the Wilmington records.

Presumably a black man, he served in a company in the Town of Shirley in 1775, Later his name appears three times as serving in the company of Captain Ephraim Corey, ‘part of the Middlesex Regiment commanded by Colonel William Prescott at Bunker Hill Colburn's name appears on lists dated May 6, 1775, October 7, 1775 and October 31, 1775. Those dates were before-and-after: the Battle of Bunker Hill.

There are further records. One shows that he marched on December 17, 1776, to reinforce General Washington "in the Jerseys," and returned on March 27, 1777. Another record shows he served from June 9, 1779 to November 24, 1779. According to the last entry he was from the Town of Wilmington.

To make the record more interesting Fleming, in his history of Bunker Hill uses the same name, for a man from Andover. Titus Colburn is shown as one of three black men who fought at Bunker Hill from Andover.

Fleming is the only person who, shows that Titus Colburn, at Bunker Hill, was a black man.”

What do the Wilmington records show?

There were, perhaps, eight or nine black persons living in Wilmington on the day of the march to Concord. There were also some in the neighboring town of Andover.

The 1790 census of Wilmington shows there were four persons in the family of Titus Cober, a black man. It also shows that there were three in the family of Peleg Gardner, also black, and three in the family of Caesar Russell, black. A fourth family was that of Phillis Summersett in which there were two persons.

Phillis Summersett was probably the girl who was admitted into the (Congregational) Church in 1767 Capt. Walker, of Shawsheen Avenue, was the commander of the Trained Band (militia) on Concord Day, and who marched, with many others, to repel the British. Phillis was a servant in his family.

Titus Cober, who lived on the Jones Farm, married Violet Noble, of Wilmington on August 28, 1785, Jennie, a daughter, was born to Titus and Violet on May 27, 1789.

Then there were four children to Titus and Phillis Tonia, (or Toney) who also lived on the farm of Ebenezer Jones. Peter was born Feb. 20, 1770; Peggy, a daughter on July 7, 1772, Jamson on March 5 1774, and John October 12, 1776.

Peggy Tony married Peleg Gardner on October 16, 1788.

Of interest was the day that the Town Meeting voted, unanimously, to free the black servants of Wilmington. It was, one could say, a second Declaration of Independence. The first, of course, was that of July 4, 1776. John Hancock was the presiding officer in Congress, and he signed his name in large letters so that the King could more easily read his signature.

March 3, 1777 was the 'Town Meeting date to elect officers and conduct other business. It was held in the meeting house (church)

The Rev. Isaac Morrill and others without doubt had a hand in the preparation of a document intended to free the slaves of Wilmington. That document received a favorable vote, unanimous, on March 3, 1777. (It is of interest that there was a black servant in the home of the Rev. Mr. Morrill, named Mary. She was not named as a slave, and she preferred to stay with Morrill and his family.)

Cadwallader Ford, Esq. was the moderator. It was his son who commanded the Minutemen on Concord Day. After the town meeting Cadwallader Ford would sign the necessary documents to show what had occurred in the town meeting.

There was no doubt as to what his actions meant. The message of that town meeting was clear.

In Wilmington it happened in less than nine months. Slaves after the date of March 3, 1777 had nothing to fear while they traveled The Andover Road, or any other road in Wilmington.

Things probably changed after the Dred Scott decision in the US Supreme Court. Congress, about 1850, passed a law which led to the recapture of slaves who had escaped from the states of the South. U.S. officials were named to capture those slaves.

That law was the Fugitive Slave Act. There is no record of having been captured in Wilmington because of the existence of that law, but, possibly, it might have happened...

From the Minutemen Book:

BORN: 1757

MARRIED: Violet Noble DATE: 28 August, 1785

CHILDREN: Jennie, 27 May, 1789

FAMILY INFORMATION:

Titus and Violet were servants of Ebenezer Jones in 1789. In 1779, Titus was 22 years of age, 5' 6" tall, Complexion: Black. Was also shown as "Colburn". Possibly came from Andover originally.

SERVICE INFORMATION:

Enlisted 24 November, 1779 into Continental Army for Town of Wilmington. Possibly could have been sent on 2nd Draft of July, 1776 to do turn of service by Captain Edward Hurcum. Delivered to Captain Baity on enlistment, 1779. Also served Lieutenant Col. Fernald's Company, Col. Michael Jackson's 8th Regiment. Enlisted 25 July, 1779. Discharged 25 April, 1780.

Enlistment: 9 months. Also Private serving Main Guard under Col. Loammi Baldwin, June, 1755. Shown as having fought at Bunker H

https://archive.org/details/Town_Crier_2015-10-14/page/n1/mode/2up

From https://archive.org/details/Town_Crier_1993-10-20/page/n3/mode/2up

"Wilmington town meetings were, in those days, always on the first Monday of the month, and the annual town meeting was always in March, It began at 1 p.m. Only voters were present.

The Meeting House in Wilmington was a place of worship on a Sunday It was a place for town business the rest of the week, town business being, generally, only on Monday and in the afternoon, Town Meetings were only for people with a right to vote, That meant to own a home, or to be a person who made at least 40 shillings a year.

Tutus Cober, black, the only Wilmington man who was a veteran of the Battle of Bunker Hill could not attend that meeting, at least as a voter, Possibly he could be a spectator, this writer does not know, Titus did not own the Jones farm on what is now Andover Road where he lived. He did not earn 40 shillings a year, the minimum to be a voter.

But Titus was not in Wilmington. He had marched on Dec. 17, 1776 to fight "in the Jerseys." Titus did not return until after March 27, 1777.

Capt Edward Hurcum(?)

Town Records, page 317

Capt Edward Hurcum & Wife and Family Came to Town in ye Spring of ye year AD 1774

Names of their family is as follows (viz)

Nathaniel Russel Sarah Russel and Titus Cober and Peggy Hurcum—

Stephen Buxton of Reading in the County of
Middlesex yeoman testifies and saith That some Time
in the Month of July Anno Domini 1768: Cesar
(a negro man) was taken by a Warrant for threatening
to hurt Capt Edward Hurcum of Reading aforesaid
who had sold him about four months before that Time
to Mr Samuel Taylor. That he said Cesar would hurt
him ^{the} Hurcum in his person or Estate, and the said
Negro man Cesar was carried before Mr Justice Nicholls
and upon Tryall was found guilty and Mr Samuel
Taylor aforesaid was charged with the Costs which
was about thirty pounds ^{old} ~~which~~ ^{which} Taylor ~~paid~~
engaged to pay, and also stood bound for his good
behaviour till the next Court and further saith
that the said Cesar promised to pay his said Master (Mr Taylor)
for all his Costs & Trouble or he would be willing
to be sold by him Stephen Buxton
Essex ss Nov 12: 1771
132190 Sworn to Before Peter Frye Justice of the Peace

<https://northshoreslavery.org/freedomcases/images.php?id=26>

Transcription: Stephen Buxton of Reading in the County of Middlesex yeoman testifies and saith that some Time in the Month of July Anno Domini 1768: Cesar (a negro man) was taken by a Warrant for threatening to hurt Capt Edward Hurcum of Reading aforesaid who had sold him about four months before that Time to Mr. Samuel Taylor. That he said Cesar would hurt him & the said Hurcum in his person or Estate, and the said Negro man Cesar was carried before Mr. Justice Nicholls and upon Tryall was found guilty and Mr. Samuel Tayler aforesaid was charged with the Costs which was about thirty pounds old Tener which said Taylor [crossed out] paid said [crossed out] engaged to pay, and also stood bound for his good behaviour till the next Court and further saith that the said Cesar promised to pay his said Master (Mr. Taylor) for all his Costs & Trouble or he would be willing to be sold by him Stephen Buxton Essex Ss Nov 12 1771 Sworn Before Peter Frye Justice of the Peace

Tony, or Titus Toney

<https://archive.org/details/wilmingtonminute00unse/page/n401/mode/2up?q=jones>

Servant of the Ebenezer Jones family

Toby (bill of sale between Nathaniel Flint and Ebenezer Jaquith)

To all people to whom this Bill of Sale shall come know ye that I Nathaniel Flint of Reading in the County of Middlesex and Province of ye Massachusetts Bay in New England Has bondman for in in Consideration of ye sum of two hundred and fifty pounds old tenour to me in hand before the Ensuing here well and truly paid by Ebenezer Jaquith, of Wilmington in ye County and Province aforesaid Yeoman. Have given, granted, bargained and sold and by these presents do give, grant, bargain, sell alienate convey and confirm, attesting the said Ebenezer Jaquith his heirs Executors administrators a Negro Man Servant Named Toby about Twenty Nine years of age to have and to hold the above said Negro During His Naturall Life to him, his heirs, Executors, and adminsr and I the said Nathaniel Flint for my self my heirs executors administrators do covenant grant to and with the said Jaquith that at and before the Ensealing hereof I am the true sole and lawful owner of the said Negro and have in myself good rights full power and lawful authority to sell him in maner of aforesaid. Date the fifth day of September one thousand seven hundred and forty eight and in ye Twenty first year of his Majesties Reign.

Signed sealed & Delivered

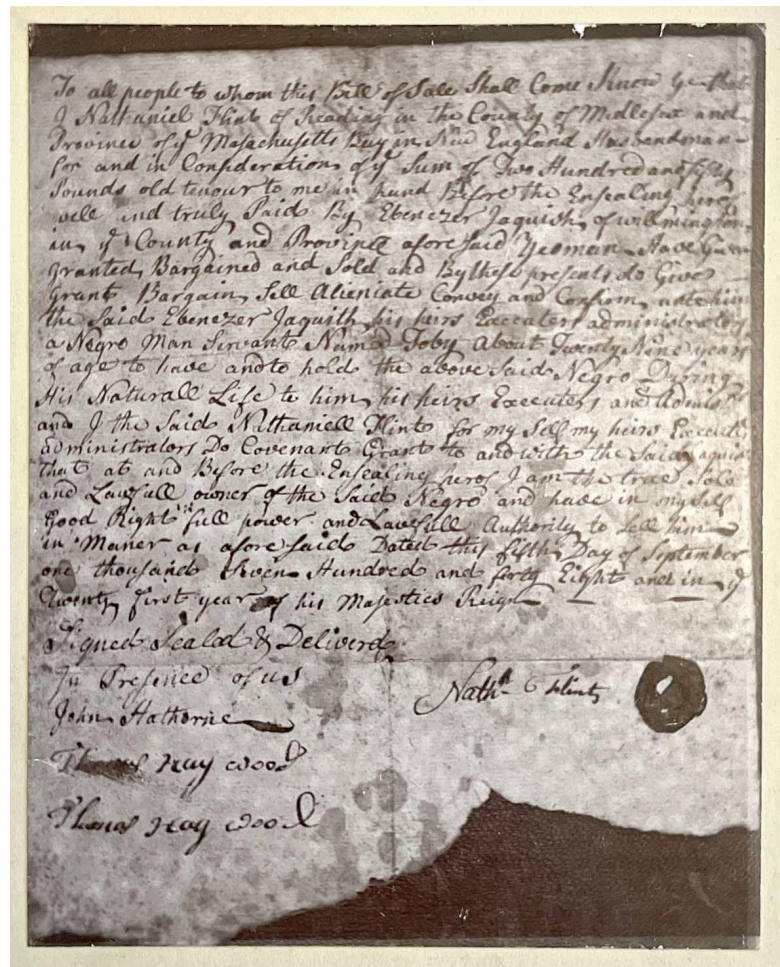
In Presence of us

John Hathorne

Thomas Haywood

Thomas Haywood

Nathaniel Flint



Dinah and Philis (Rev. Isaac Morrill)

https://archive.org/details/Town_Crier_2015-10-14/page/n1/mode/2up

http://homenewshere.com/wilmington_town_crier/news/article_60e246e4-7418-11e5-9b03-5fbc_b4035987.html

“...There was, for instance, a female slave in the home of Rev. Isaac Morrill of Wilmington. Rev. Morrill was very liberal in his thinking and an apostle of freedom. The thinking of the people was changing.”

“Morrill Kindred in America” archive.org

There is another vote recorded for March 3, 1777, which has a Strange sound to us— accepting all negro slaves , whom their owners choose to free, and agreeing to support them as the town’s poor, if unable to maintain themselves . Rev. Isaac owned two slaves , Dinah and Phillis . Dinah, he purchased for thirty dollars . When Dinah and Phillis were set free, they planted a row of trees near the house which flourished for many years . The family records state that Dinah died April 28, 1830, at the age of 105 years.

[Wilmington Town Records](#), page 316

“Wilmington March ye 10th 1777

To Mr. Cadwallader Ford Ju.r Town Cler for Wilmington
Sr—

As my Negro Woman Dinah has for Some time past had a desire for her freedom, and as this Town did at their Last meeting Vote that Such Negroes as were within one month freed by their Masters Should be Supported by the Town in Case of Necessity: This is to Inform you that in Consequence of said vote of This Town, and the Desire of ye. Said Dinah, I have given her her freedom, and She is at free Liberty to Leave my House and Service when She pleases-

Signed- Isaac Morrill

Wilmington March ye 10th 1777

A True Record Attest

Cadwallader Ford Junr TCK

https://archive.org/details/Town_Crier_1993-10-20/page/n3/mode/2up?q=morrill+slave

March 1877 Town Meeting commentary:

“The Rev. Isaac Morrill was Present in his capacity as a clergyman, and also because he and Mrs. Morrill (daughter of a Billerica minister) had a female slave, Dinah, who wanted her freedom.”

“...The discussion about freedom for Negroes centered on what should be done for free black persons who should not be able to support themselves,

It was voted that any Negroes belonging to the Town, whose masters were willing to give them freedom should have it, in one month.

It was also voted that if any of them were unable to support themselves the town would support them, as it did for the town poor. Surprisingly there were two arguments in the negative Cadwallader Ford and Cadwallader Ford Jr. Their arguments were not recorded, but it seems they centered 'on the phrase "as it did for the town poor."

The support of the poor, in any Massachusetts town in those days always a "touchy" subject Selectmen and others were always on the alert to prevent a further drain, for any reason, on town finances

The two men, father and son, were expressing the attitude of many

One week later there was a letter from the Rev. Isaac Morrill, about Dinah saying "I have given her her freedom and she is at free liberty to leave my house and service when she pleases."

Another mention in the 1990 article indicates that Morrill had another slave named Mary, who chose to stay with him after receiving her freedom. (This seems to overlap with the story of Dinah.)

Violet

Wilmington March ye 29, 1777

These may Certify That Mr. Benja. Tompson of Wilmington aforesaid appeared before me the Subscriber, & Declared that he had given his Negro Girl Named Violet, her Freedom, & Desired that I would Enter it upon Record.

Attest

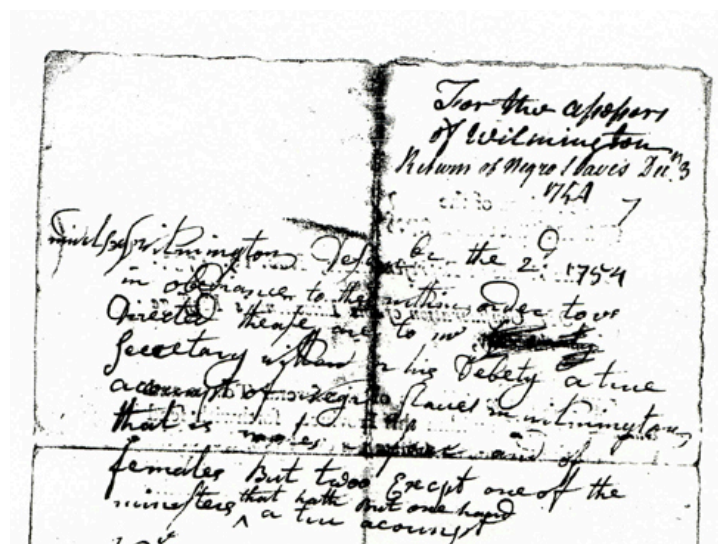
Cadwallader Ford Jun Town Clerk

1754 Slave Census

<https://primaryresearch.org/the-1754-slave-census/>

For the assessors
Of Wilmington
Return of Negro Slaves Dec^r 3
1754

midsx/Wilmington December the 2d
1754



In obedience to the authority order to us
Directed thease are to in
Secretary ** in his debety a true
Account of negro slaves in Wilmington,
That is males –five– and of
Females but two except one of the
ministers that hath but one hand
A true account.

Samuel Walker
Benjamin Harnden
Stephen Wesson
Thos Peirce {assessors

Peleg Gardner

There were at least three generations of the name Peleg Gardner in one family in [Swansea](#), no indication they are related or the same person.
Another Peleg Gardner in Nantucket b. 1746.

Phillis Somersett

Phillis could possibly be the same girl who was a servant in the family of Capt. Walker in 1767, and who was admitted into the Congregational Church that year. Maybe it was a different Phillis.

1790 Federal Census

The 1790 United States census shows four in the family of Titus Cober, a black man. It also lists three in the family of Peleg Gardner, also black, and three in the family of Caesar Russell, a third black man. A fourth family was that of Phillis Summersett, where there were two.
https://archive.org/details/Town_Crier_2015-10-14/page/n1/mode/2up

Artifact of the Month, Feb 2024

Deed of Sale of an Enslaved Person (see Toby, above)
Wilmington, September 5, 1748
2022.0707.199

As we enter Black History Month, we felt it was appropriate to do some research on our town's role in the horrors of slavery. Although this is only a picture of the real record, it is unfortunately unclear as to where it lies currently. This artifact was specifically chosen because it truly conveys the idea of "history is written by the victors." Unfortunately, belongings and records of previously enslaved people are few and far between.

This deed was for the sale of an Enslaved person, with the given name of "Toby" when he was roughly 29 years old. In the "twenty first year of his majesties reign [George II]", Nathaniel Flint of Reading sold this enslaved person to Ebenezer Jaquith of Wilmington on September 5, 1748 for 250 pounds.

It wasn't until March 3, 1777 when the town passed an ordinance respecting any enslaved person their freedom. It should be noted that respected revolutionaries Cadwallader Ford Esq. and Cadwallader Ford Jr. entered an official protest in the Town Records.[1] It was not until 1783 when the State Supreme Court applied judicial review to abolish slavery during a series of cases known as the "Quock Walker Case." [2]

Although Wilmington was one of the first towns in Massachusetts to "abolish" slavery, it raises a lot of questions. Why was it one of the first towns? Was it truly because of progressiveness? Did it not suit the current socioeconomic statuses of the Wilmington yeomen and farmers? What aspects of these histories are missing? Why?

Some historians believe it's important to acknowledge this difficult history in order to perhaps change our prior held beliefs in the present. Though we may not share the same beliefs as our ancestors, acknowledging the realities and hardships of our history on a broader level, is the first step towards comprehension, compassion, and cooperation.

1. Arthur T. Bond, "Exact Copy of the First Book of Wilmington, Mass. Town Records 1730-1762," (1900) 191.

2. James Turner, "Use of the Courts in the Movement to Abolish American Slavery," (Ohio St. LJ 31, 1970) 307 - 308.

Phyllis Wheatley (Debunked)

For Facebook

Previously, biographies of Phillis Wheatley reported that after her marriage to John Peters, the newlyweds relocated to Wilmington, Massachusetts for a few years before returning to Boston. No substantiation has been found for this claim, but it was nevertheless included in a hand-written manuscript by Miss Margaretta Matilda Odell, of Jamaica Plain, who had "derived [her memoir] from grand-neices of Phillis's Benefactress [Mrs. Susannah Wheatley had desired a domestic and an agreeable companion, though she was still acquired via slavery to John Wheatley, a tailor of Boston], who are still living," and "corroborated by a grand-daughter of that lady, now residing in Boston." These memoirs were published in 1834 as a result of efforts by Mr. B. B. Thatcher (editor) and a Mr Light (publisher). This memoir had included the mistaken

report of Phillis relocating to an unremarkable rural town (confusing Wilmington for Middleton), which had been repeated and propagated in subsequent biographies of Phillis Wheatley Peters.

However, in the last 3 years, the truth of Phillis Wheatley's "lost years" have been discovered as part of a search through litigation in Middleton, Essex County by Professor Cornelia H. Dayton of the University of Connecticut History Department.

John Peters had been previously enslaved by John and Naomi Wilkins, but after his own manumission (being "set free") and marriage to Phillis (who had also been manumitted in 1773 after her return from a trip to London), the couple relocated to Middleton to take care of the estate as part of the last will and testament of John Wilkins, who had recently passed away. John Peters had a mortgage agreement to care for the estate and the dependants— particularly his previous enslaver Naomi Wilkins and another negro woman named Dinah Cubber. He would be set to manage and inherit the farm as long as he took care of them for the rest of their lives.

Through a series of unfortunate events that likely resulted from John trying to protect Phillis from domestic work, John Peters had a falling out with Naomi and Dinah, and the women left the Wilkins home. Having failed to meet his obligation to care for the Wilkins dependents, the courts found that he defaulted on his part of the mortgage agreement, and thus he was stripped of his ownership claim to the Wilkins farm. Thus, John Peters and Phillis Wheatley Peters returned to Boston.

Phillis Wheatley Peters' most recent biographer, Prof. Vincent Albert Carretta had given a presentation at the Wilmington Memorial Library several years ago, and he also acknowledges that the information presented there is now counter-factual, and deserves to be updated. Thus, he is publishing an updated biography that does not indicate that Phillis Wheatley was a resident of Wilmington. For more information on what really happened, see this interview with Professor Dayton. <https://publicseminar.org/essays/phillis-wheatleys-lost-years/>

<https://wilmingtonapple.com/.../video-wilmington-library.../>

Prof. Vincent Albert Carretta, an expert biographer of hers (and who also talked at the Mass. Historical Society's presentation), was invited to share his research (which is now outdated) with the Wilmington Memorial Library. I know at least Terry attended so I wouldn't be surprised if you all remember this as well. The link to this video is here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm7_XPI9qt8

Phillis Wheatley in Middleton

<https://publicseminar.org/essays/phillis-wheatleys-lost-years/>

Mass Historical Society:

<https://www.masshist.org/events/lost-years-recovered-john-peters-and-phillis-wheatley-peters-middleton>

“Litigation in Essex County reveals where the African-born poet Phillis Wheatley Peters and her husband John Peters went when they left Boston for three years starting in spring 1780. Peters came into possession of a substantial farm where he had been enslaved as a child. But his tenuous legal position and the hostility of many townspeople led to his eventually losing the land and deciding to move the family back to Boston. Panelists will discuss the implications of these new findings, the future research pathways they suggest, and investigative methods that expand our awareness of Black lives in the late eighteenth-century northeast.”

<https://atlanticblackbox.com/2021/09/04/lost-years-recovered-john-peters-and-phillis-wheatley-peters-in-middleton/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpv56PHrCvE>

[Minutes 11-13 describe the error in the assumption that Phillis Wheatley lived in Wilmington]

Virtual Public Program: “Recovering the Lost Years of John Peters and Phillis Wheatley Peters”
– American Antiquarian Society

“The privacy that Wheatley, a public figure, seems to have insisted Upon, or that John Peters enforced to the great frustration of some of Phillis’s former patrons and friends, had a distinct logic. One of its results is that we know little of the last six and a half years of Wheatley’s life. She gave birth at least once, possibly three times. She moved, with her husband and probably one child, to Middleton in 1780, and back to Boston in 1783. There are suggestions that she worked, in and outside the home, but also hints in a court deposition, that her husband tried to shield her from kitchen work during their Middleton years, so much that it became a source of conflict with the other members of the household. She suffered illness, possibly related to the respiratory ailments she had written about to Obour earlier. She kept writing. She tried to make her marriage work. “

David Waldstreicher, “The Odyseey of Phillis Wheatley,” (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023) 329-330.

[Email 2/12/2024]

“Dear Matt,

Terry, Adele, Andrea, & Caroline found no record for me of Phillis Wheatley Peters's having been in Wilmington. And I'm unaware of any evidence of Whitefield's having preached there.

You might also want to look at the latest edition of my biography

<<https://ugapress.org/book/9780820363325/phillis-wheatley-peters/>>. Waldstreicher graciously

acknowledges that his biography is based on the first, 2011, edition of mine, which I significantly revised in 2014, and again in 2023.

Sorry I don't have more positive information about a Wilmington connection,”

Vincent Albert Carretta

Professor Emeritus

University of Maryland

References:

1. Odell, M. M. , and Thatcher, B. B., *Memoir of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave*, 1834. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/>, and <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/wheatley>
2. Shurtleff, N. B., *Letters of Phillis Wheatley, the Negro-slave poet of Boston*, 1864. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/>
3. Phillis Wheatley, Image of original poems and letters, Mass Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org>
4. Robinson, William Henry, *Black New England Letters: Phillis Wheatley*, 1977. <https://archive.org>
5. Lost Years Recovered: John Peters and Phillis Wheatley Peters in Middleton, 2021. <https://atlanticblackbox.com/>, <https://www.masshist.org/>
6. Dayton, Cornelia, *Phillis Wheatley's Lost Years*, 2022. <https://publicseminar.org/>
7. Summary: Malachi Project: Phillis Wheatley, <https://www.ihopkc.org/>
8. Summary: Phillis Wheatley, <https://www.encyclopedia.com>
9. Summary: Phillis Wheatley Slave and Poet, <https://www.craftymomssshare.com/>