

Peter Freeman and Whacket Freeman: Towards an Archaeology of 18th Century Black Homesteads

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INTRODUCTION

Many of you in the audience are probably thinking: Who is Peter? Who is Whacket? And what do they have to do with Venture Smith Day? Those are good questions.

Peter and Whacket have a lot to do with Venture Smith. Firstly, they were contemporaries of Venture. Their historical and archaeological stories give us a glimpse into the local black community, of which Venture was a part. Secondly, they provide insight into Venture's character and how he saw himself – his role – within East Haddam's black community.

And that is what my talk today will explore.

Our archaeological study of the Peter and Whacket home lots was part of a much larger survey of the Connecticut Yankee Atomic Power Company property (Lavin and Banks 2005, 2007). This is a 582 acre plus parcel at the southern end of the Haddam Neck peninsula – which belongs to the Town of Haddam. As most of you know, Connecticut Yankee recently completed decommissioning this plant. As part of that process CT Yankee was required to pay for a comprehensive archaeological survey of the entire property – to identify significant archaeology sites and assess their potential for eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places – and to develop management alternatives for these sites.

My firm, American Cultural Specialists, was chosen to perform the survey. We conducted a seven year study of the property. We identified 30 Native American, Euro-American, and African-American sites across the landscape. Fifteen of those sites are considered historically significant and eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The Venture Smith Homestead and the two other African-American sites, representing the homesteads of Whacket Freeman and Peter Freeman, are included in those 15 significant sites.

In 1778 Venture Smith sold a 12-acre strip of his farmland to two free black men from East Haddam, Peter Freeman and Whacket Freeman. Who were Peter and Whacket? Historical documentation for them is scanty. But our favorite town historian, Dr. Karl Stofko¹, ferreted out

¹ Karl Stofko is the town historian of East Haddam, and an expert on the history of its internationally famous African American citizen, Venture Smith, as well as on the town's African American history in general.

those records, and the following historical description of their lives is a result of Karl's research. Perhaps we should consider Karl my co-author on this paper.

THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Whacket Freeman

Whacket Freeman was born a slave around 1746. His owner was Daniel Brainerd Esquire, a wealthy East Haddamite who owned a wharf and warehouse on the Connecticut River, at the Upper Landing. After Brainerd's death in 1777, Whacket was given his freedom. Sometime after, Whacket purchases Base, the female slave of Brainerd's widow, and marries her at the First Church of Christ, Congregational in May 1778. Two months later, he and Peter purchase a 12 acre strip of land from Venture Smith for 66 pounds. The strip ran from Salmon River Cove northward into the wooded uplands, giving the men access to both riverine and woodland resources. Most of the rocky upland was on poor soils, suggesting it was important for its wood and stone resources rather than farmland. The Salmon Cove end of the strip was within an area traditionally known as "The Sand Bank", an important fishing shore. Peter signed the deed with an "X", and Whacket did the same on a 1780 deed, showing that both men were illiterate.

Little less than one year later, Whacket and Peter split the property, Whacket taking the south portion and Peter the northern part. They were apparently living on the property, as both are listed as Haddam residents in the deed. A later deed described "appurtenances", which indicates buildings. One year later, in March 1780, Whacket mortgaged his land to Amos White of East Haddam for a whopping 500 pounds. Amos White was a white entrepreneur who ran a tavern

and cooper's shop while managing Humphrey Lyon's mercantile store. He was a business associate of Venture Smith. They engaged in a number of land transactions in the 1780s and early 1790s. Whacket was unable to pay the mortgage, White foreclosed and in March 1788 White sold the parcel back to Venture Smith for 30 pounds. By 1790 Whacket and his wife were living in a small house on Amos White's property at the East Haddam Upper Landing. In 1792, Whacket died at 46 years of age, leaving a widow and no issue (Karl Stofko, unpublished research records dated September 2, 2004).

Peter Freeman

Peter was born a slave in 1756 and baptized at the First Church of Christ, Congregational in East Haddam. He was given his freedom sometime before 1778. In May of that year he married Peg, also a free black, at First Church. Soon after they moved to the 12 acre strip on Haddam Neck. Peg apparently died between 1780 and 1781, as Peter married a white woman named Sarah Archer in October of 1781 in East Haddam. In December 1782, Peter sold his Haddam Neck property back to Venture Smith for 20 pounds. He lived the remaining years of his life in East Haddam with his wife and 7 children, dying in 1805 at 48 years of age (Karl Stofko, unpublished research records dated September 2, 2004).

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

We believe that we located both Whacket and Peter's home lots, not far south of the original 10 acre strip of land purchased by Venture Smith in 1775. One home site was on an upland ridgeline near a small spring, just off the colonial wood road that connected the homes of all the residents

of the small community living on southern Haddam Neck. The site yielded only 143 historic artifacts. In comparison, Venture Smith's home site contained over 149,000 historic artifacts, 3 houses with stone-lined cellar holes, and 8 or 9 other outbuildings as well as at least one barn complex in the field above his compound.

At this site, there were no stone foundations or stone piers to mark the house and no evidence of an outbuilding, just a small concentration of 18th century nails and domestic debris, which included ceramic and window glass fragments. They suggest a small, windowed, ephemeral structure had once stood there, perhaps about 10 feet by 15 feet in size or smaller. The great majority of the ceramics were inexpensive redware. There was one kaolin pipe stem fragment – unlike Venture Smith, the owner smoked. The sparse artifacts and light domestic footprint correspond with a short occupation of the property.

The second home site was located to the south, or east, of the first house – depending on where the deed claims south to be. The house lot was near a spring on a small terrace overlooking Salmon River Cove. Below it was a small point of land that held the stone foundation of a small dock or wharf. The point is still a favorite fishing spot for 21st century fishermen. The home lot contained twice as many artifacts as the inland home lot, but they were similar in nature – 18th century iron nails, kaolin pipe fragments, and redware tableware. It also contained stacked stonework that suggested the foundation or pier of a house.

We originally identified the inland home lot as Whacket's property, and the home lot overlooking Salmon Cove as Peter's. This identification was based on the archival work of

historical archaeologist Robert Gradie, who was the historical consultant during our CT Yankee archaeological surveys (Gradie 2007). Gradie had reported that Peter remained nine years longer on the property than Whacket -- that Amos White sold Whacket's part of the strip to Venture Smith in 1780, and that Peter had remained until 1789, when he sold his portion back to Venture. However, Karl's research shows that Peter sold his property in 1782, not 1789. Karl also reported that the 1780 deed between Whacket and White was a mortgage, and that Whacket may have continued to live on the property until 1788 – 6 years longer than Peter, when Amos White foreclosed and sold the property back to Venture.

If this is the case, then the relatively sparse inland house lot could be Peter's and the more substantial house with footings on Salmon Cove could be Whacket's. That whopping \$500 mortgage makes more sense with this scenario. Whacket may have intended to try his hand at river trading, like his successful contemporary Venture Smith, with the \$500 going for boats, equipment, and an expansive wharf at the point. I speculate that Venture helped Whacket obtain the mortgage from Amos White, a white man he knew and who was a trusted business associate.

SUMMARY

At both sites, the houses were small and simple in construction. Compared to the house lots of Venture Smith and their white neighbors, Peter and Whacket's material goods were quite sparse. Virtually all of the artifacts were either nails or ceramic fragments, and the majority of the tableware was inexpensive, locally made ceramics. They suggest occupation by persons of lower

social and economic standing, which accords with Peter and Whacket's status as former slaves only recently freed.

The men were likely attempting to emulate the success of Venture Smith in lumbering and fishing. Their relatively brief use of the property shows that they were unable to do so. Both men died while still in their forties, which suggests that poor health was a major factor in their failure to achieve.

Peter and Whacket's home lots are significant archaeology sites because they are rare examples of 18th century black rural homesteads...two families representing that group of marginalized peoples in the lower Connecticut River Valley that are rarely mentioned in local town histories. Additionally, both men were contemporaries of Venture Smith. Comparisons of their small households with the size, numerous buildings, and many artifacts from Venture's family compound demonstrate a degree of social and economic diversity within the local 18th century black community. Future research on 18th and early 19th century black homesteads has the potential to provide additional information on this diversity, and on the archaeological identification of ethnicity.

On to Venture's part in this saga. He provided Peter and Whacket with land very much like his original 10 acre parcel in size and physical features. As we all know, Venture's success in exploiting the resources on that parcel allowed him to expand his holdings and eventually achieve a most respectable social and economic status in East Haddam society. He obviously assumed that Peter and Whacket would do the same. In other words, this is another example of

Venture trying to help members of the local black community raise themselves out of the poverty and low social status in which freed slaves often found themselves. Other examples are recorded in his autobiography, in which he refers to the black community as his “own countrymen” and to himself as an “African” (Smith 1797). All of which show that Venture continued to see himself as an African prince, obligated to helping his countrymen by distributing his wealth and expertise.

And that is why Peter and Whacket are important to Venture Smith Day.

REFERENCES

2007 Phase 1 and Phase 2 Archaeological Investigations of the Connecticut Yankee Atomic Power Company Property in Haddam Neck, CT, the 2005-2006 Field Seasons, with a Synopsis of the 2002-2004 Field Seasons and Overview of the Entire 7-year Archaeological Study. Volumes 1-3. Unpublished report to the CYAPCO August, 2007; on file at Special Collections, Dodd Center, University of Connecticut at Storrs.

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