

Historical background for Westport Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Subject Guide

Indigenous history in Westport

The story of Black, Indigenous and other communities of color in Westport mirrors that of the state of Connecticut and of New England at large. Native people lost their land and communities to European Colonization which ushered in disease, loss of native hunting and fishing ground, and war. Local indigenous tribes first encountered European colonizers in the early 17th century, who sought to acquire land and to trade animal skins as part of the mercantile business of the Plymouth Company of London that sent pilgrims to settle in Massachusetts in 1620. Men from that settlement separated from Plymouth and entered the Connecticut Colony in 1637 where they encountered local tribal people. Eleven years later, in 1648, a land grant for the “West Parish” of Fairfield, was granted to three Englishmen and became known as Green’s Farms, the first settlement of what is now Westport.

The indigenous people of the area comprised five tribes unified under the Paugussett Nation and included the Paugussett Proper, Paugussett minor, Pequannock, Pootatuck and Weantinock. Their territory ended at the Saugatuck River at modern-day Westport. The Norwalk side of the river was the northern reach of the Munsee speaking Siwanoy from modern day New York. These communities moved from protected inland areas in the winter to inlets and waterways along the tidal or salt marshes of the Long Island sound during the summer. Here they found abundant fishing, waterfowl, and mollusks. The proximity of fresh water to these marsh areas also made them desirable encampments.

In Westport and the colony at large, indigenous interaction with Europeans was one of trade as well as conflict over land ownership. While the tribal people believed they were granting or sharing usage rights with the Europeans, the latter considered these contracts as an agreement to cede ownership over the land to them. These regional conflicts took a more sweeping turn in Massachusetts in 1636 when English colonizers from the Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay and Saybrook (Connecticut) Colonies and their Narragansett and Mohegan native allies declared war on the Pequot tribe of the area.

In 1637, the Pequot were driven down the coast of the Long Island Sound where, in the marshland between Westport and Southport a final massacre was waged. The local Paugussett tribe aided the Pequot during the conflict in which the English prevailed. Those men who survived battle were sold into slavery in the Caribbean while captured Paugussett women and children were enslaved within the North American colonies including locally in Westport.

African American history

Counter to the myth that slavery didn’t exist in New England as it did in the American South, enslaved indigenous people and enslaved African people were an engine of Westport’s agricultural economy. Texts from Hartford and New Haven in 1639 and 1644, respectively, refer to enslaved African people in Bristol. By the 18th century, Newport, Rhode Island and New London, Connecticut surpassed Boston as major slave trading ports.

Slave trading was a key facet of the Triangular Trade between Africa, the Caribbean, and New England. Just before the American Revolution, most of New England's trade was with sister colonies in the British West Indies (the Caribbean). Provisioning farms in Westport sent wood, livestock, and food to sugar plantations in the Caribbean that focused on sugar production over other diverse crops. In return, American colonies received sugar, rum, molasses, and enslaved people who originally hailed from Africa. Manufactured goods were also sent directly to Africa from New England to barter for enslaved people. The entire Atlantic or Triangular trade-based economy depended on the work of enslaved Africans. The Caribbean was so dependent on North American exports that famine swept the islands during the American Revolution when British blockades prevented the arrival of American trading ships. At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, it is estimated roughly 6,500 enslaved people lived in Connecticut—more than any other New England state.

While there were few large plantations in states like Connecticut as there were in the south, there were at least one multi-thousand-acre plantations in New London which required a huge number of enslaved people to work them. For the most part, however, enslaved people in New England provided a wider variety of skilled labor for their owners from medicine and soap making to weaving and dyeing, milling, coopering, iron-smithing, and more—along with the usual household and farm work. Unlike in the South, enslaved people most often lived in their owners' households versus in separate quarters on the property. In Connecticut, the largest number of enslavers were judges, doctors, and ministers. In Westport, it was not uncommon for middle class families to enslave one or two people but wealthy slaveholders could enslave as much as five to ten. In the 1790 census, Ebenezer Coley, Thomas Nash, and Ebenezer Jesup with five enslaved people in each of their households while John Hide and Sarah Banks had six and four, respectively.

Just as in the South, Connecticut enacted harsh laws to both regulate the movement and actions of Black people—enslaved and free—through a series of laws called “Black Codes” that included punishment for going out at night, drinking alcohol without permission, disturbing the peace, threatening a White person, attempting to become educated or attempting to flee slavery. Runaways were pursued with vigor and punished cruelly if apprehended. Connecticut cooperated with the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850 which mandated that escaped enslaved people must be returned to their owners even if apprehended in a free state.

Slavery began its slow death in Connecticut beginning in 1774 when a nonimportation act was passed that “prohibited the importation of Indian, negro or Molatto [sic] Slaves” into the colony by “sea or land” from “any place whatsoever” in order to be “disposed of, left or sold within this Colony”¹ and carried a £100 fine for those who flouted the law. In 1784, Connecticut passed an act for Gradual Abolition of slavery. The act did not free any persons currently bound in the state but provided a pathway to emancipation for those born into slavery between 1784 and 1848. The act noted that children born after March 1, 1784, would be eligible for manumission once they turned 25 years of age. The wholesale abolition of slavery would not occur for all until 1848 but still maintained that those born before March 1, 1784, would remain enslaved.

During the period of slavery in Connecticut, from the mid 18th to the mid 19th century some enslaved communities elected a “Black Governor” who acted as a de facto social leader of the

community but had no formal power with respect to White society or legal structures. In Westport, oral histories indicate Ebenezer Jesup's enslaved man Tom acted as a Black Governor and oversaw Christmas celebrations in the Black Community.

Historically, African American life in Westport—and neighboring towns—represented a wide diversity of experience. Free people in Westport included Henry Munro whose wife Lysette Hyde Munro had been enslaved by John Hyde. Munro was a prominent landowner who amassed fourteen acres of Westport farmland by his death on March 10, 1821.

Another notable example of a prominent African American family in Westport is the Adair family, descended from patriarch Benjamin Adair who was likely enslaved in South Carolina before coming to New York City in 1850 and moving to Westport in 1852. Through a series of wise real estate investments Adair grew prosperous and his family remained in town for almost 100 years before being driven out by unfair real estate taxation.

We can piece together details of daily existence in Westport's Black community through the records of local churches, banking information, census documents, wills, deeds, and probates as well as the account ledgers of local stores. The earliest free people—and enslaved people as well—were given purchasing credit for goods paid for by cash, barter, or labor. In some cases, the labor of enslaved people was used to pay the accounts of their owners.

The Saugatuck River was lined with merchants and docks in the 18th and 19th centuries. Both white, enslaved, and free black Westporters worked loading local farm goods onto ships heading up the coast to New Haven or Boston, or south to New York. From New York the goods went on to the British West Indies and the American South to provide food, linens, and other supplies for the enslaved people who worked large plantations. In the mid 19th century, black sailors found work on whaling vessels. Well into the 20th century, African Americans remained employed in maritime professions, particularly in the oystering trade. On land, African Americans shucked oysters for canning at large firms like Tallmadge Brothers Oyster Company, the largest commercial oystering operation of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Wartime presented potential opportunities for African Americans. During the Revolutionary War Black men served the patriot cause even in the time when they were not free. Jack Rowland of Fairfield earned his emancipation in return for his service in Colonel Bradley's Connecticut regiment, serving at the battles of Ridgefield and Germantown. Cato Treadwell also of Fairfield joined as a free man in New York. Both soldiers petitioned Congress to receive their pension for time served in the War for Independence. Their counterparts Ishmael Coley, enslaved by Ebenezer Coley of Westport and Tom Hide, enslaved by John Hide of Westport both escaped to enlist with British forces, departing with them at the war's end. The Emancipation Proclamation, signed in January 1863, freed enslaved people in the rebelling Southern states and allowed for the enlistment of African American soldiers into the Union military. The Bureau of Colored Troops was established and by November of the same year, a bill was put before Connecticut Governor William A. Buckingham to organize regiments of "colored" infantry. Connecticut Democrats, including

Westport's representative John Wheeler, denounced the bill. They argued that it would unleash "a horde of African barbarians" onto the South. They believed that the North would lose if Black soldiers were allowed to fight, alleging that Black soldiers were cowardly and disgraceful. Nonetheless, Governor Buckingham authorized the bill, calling volunteers to make up the 29th Regiment Colored Volunteers. The response from the community of color in Connecticut was immediate and enthusiastic. In 1860, according to the census, less than 1.2% of Westport's population was Black. While Black men eligible to serve made up .4% of the Westport population—only 14 individuals—13 enlisted.

The 29th Regiment was present and took part in the last attacks against the Confederate capital city of Richmond in April 1865 and were among the first to triumphantly march through Richmond's streets. The 29th Regiment continued to fight after the war was "over" and reported for duty in Texas alongside their Connecticut brethren in the 31st. They aided in the efforts to enforce the emancipation of enslaved people in Galveston and oversee the peaceful transition of power, heading to Texas June 10th and remaining until they were ordered to muster out of service on October 14th, 1865.

Enlistment records demonstrate several Black men from Westport serving in World War I and World War II.

Following the First World War, Black Americans from the South came to Westport during the Great Migration of the 1930s to find work in the local farms, and as domestic servants in lavish estates like Hockanum and the Laurence Estate (Longshore). Many people lived in the downtown area on Bay Street, Wright Street, State Street (the Post Road), and East Main Street.

In 1950, a suspicious fire razed 22 1/2 Main Street, a boarding house exclusively catering to African American Westporters. Townspeople speculated that the fire was caused by a firebombing specifically designed to drive Black residents away. Just a few months earlier in December of 1949, a town meeting hearing about low-cost housing in Hales Court drew interest because of the attendance of "a delegation of Negro residents."

The front-page photo in *The Westport Town Crier* ran with the spurious caption "For the first time in Westport history, a Negro attended one of this community's town meetings." African American Westporters had come to the meeting to ask if they were eligible for town housing, describing their home at 22 1/2 Main Street as "slum quarters". The Westport Housing Authority Chairman said they were eligible "after veterans with proven needs and any others whose needs proved more pressing than theirs." The fire at 22 1/2 Main Street coupled with discriminatory real estate practices effectively heralded the end of an established African American community in Westport.

Born in Yazoo City, Missouri, Venora Witherspoon Ellis was a prominent Black Westporter who came to the town during the Great Migration. Mrs. Ellis found success working for herself as a seamstress and house couturier—designing draperies and custom upholstery for homes- for 42 years. While she enjoyed the freedom her job provided, she still struggled with the racism from some clients.

The Civil Rights era came to Westport in May 1964, when Temple Israel's congregation hosted the Baptist minister and civil rights leader, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King came to Westport on the invitation of Rabbi Byron T. Rubenstein and spoke to an audience of over 600 people noting that "It is possible to stand up to an unjust system without hate." Under Rabbi Rubenstein's leadership during the 1960s, Temple Israel hosted other activists including writer James Baldwin, becoming a forum for aggressive social progress. That June, Dr. King went to St. Augustine, Florida in response to citywide violence following an attempt by student protestors to integrate the Woolworth's lunch counter there. At the request of Dr. King, Westport's Rabbi B.T. Rubenstein came to support the civil rights movement in the company of other rabbis.

While legal segregation did not exist in Connecticut as it did in the South, Westport's town agencies continually took action to limit opportunities for its Black residents, from formal reports of the Health Department deeming boarding houses that catered to Black residents to be health hazards to restrictive deed covenants, vigorous protest against Project Concern, a school busing scheme in the 1970s and more.

In 2005, the Town of Westport formed TEAM Westport a committee dedicated to diversity. TEAM stands for Together Effectively Achieving Multiculturalism. The committee runs an annual Diversity Essay Contest for high school students in Westport and has partnered with the town and Westport Museum for historical markers that demonstrate an inclusive view of Town history.

Asian American history

Today, Westport's Asian and Asian American population comprises only 7% of the town. Among the earliest and most prominent of Westport's Asian residents was Gene Takahashi who, along with his family, were sent to a Japanese internment camp during World War II. He enlisted in the Army at 17 years-old and served against during the Korean War as a Lieutenant in the Army, commanding a "colored" platoon of Black soldiers. He was awarded the Bronze Star, Purple Heart and the Combat Infantry Badge.