



Subject Guide Project

Providing Access to Traditionally Excluded Voices

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Westport Historical Society Inc.
D/B/A Westport Museum for History & Culture
25 Avery Place, Westport, CT 06880

<http://westporthistory.org>

[Click here](#) for historical background related to Black, Indigenous, and people of color in Westport. Researchers also will find extensive material about the African American experience in Westport in the online exhibit [Remembered: The History of African Americans In Westport.](#)

Scope of Collection:

The Westport Museum for History and Culture's archival collection contains 300 linear feet of material dating as far back as the late 17th century. Most of this collection comprises paper but there is a significant photo collection as well as a small map, audio, and video collection. The material covers the geographic area of present-day Westport and parts of Fairfield, Norwalk and elsewhere in Connecticut.

[Finding aids](#) are available in the Connecticut's Archives Online database for most of the Museum's archival collections. Extensive family papers are among the most significant holdings in the archive. These include papers of families and individuals who were owners of enslaved persons as well as papers of African Americans. Several of the documents in the list below are from the Museum's Miscellaneous Personal Papers Collection, which contains smaller amounts of documentation for individuals and families associated with the town. The Adams Family Papers and Sherwood Family papers also include documents related to enslaved persons and free Blacks associated with the families. The Adair Family Papers and Venora Ellis Papers provide documentation of African American residents of Westport. The Museum also contains the archives of early churches in Westport (Green's Farms and Saugatuck Congregational Churches) that have membership records documenting people of color in Westport. The Museum's Town Records Collection contains marriage records that reference people of color. Other curated collections such as the Business and Commerce Collection and the Westport History, Events, and Topics Collection provide context and background related to the life of Black, Indigenous and people of color in Westport.

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Subject Guide

This Subject Guide presents information on resources in our Archives that document the experiences and representations of African American, Native Americans, and other people of color in Westport and in Connecticut at large from the colonial era to the present. These resources reveal the stories, experiences, and history of these traditionally excluded voices. Finding aids that contain these records can be found on our page on [Connecticut Archives Online](#).

List of Collections Containing BIPOC Records

1. **Westport Miscellaneous Personal Papers Collection**, 1700s to present, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT:
https://archives.library.wcsu.edu/caoSearch/catalog/ctwspwhs_misc

1.1 Joshua Jennings—Sale Deed for Enslaved Person, Jack, 1769

Citation: “Sale Deed for Enslaved Person, Jack, 1769”, Joshua Jennings Papers, Westport Miscellaneous Personal Papers Collection, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: The Jennings family was prominent in the Westport and Fairfield area and among the earliest Europeans to settle in the area after the 1648, when a land grant was given to five Englishmen for the “West Parish” of Fairfield, an area that is now Greens Farms in Westport. The Joshua Jennings papers within the Miscellaneous Papers collection likely refer to more than one person named Joshua Jennings. The collection exclusively relates to real property transactions and comprises eight deeds including the one for the enslaved person, Jack. African slavery was an engine of Westport’s agricultural economy.

1.2 John Hyde—Estate Distribution to widow Abigail of Enslaved Person Dorcas, 1763

Citation: “Estate Distribution to widow Abigail of Enslaved Person Dorcas, 1763”, John Hyde Papers, Westport Miscellaneous Personal Papers Collection, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: John Hyde (formerly Hide) was born August 17, 1755, in Fairfield, Fairfield, Connecticut, son of Joseph (Hyde) Hide and Elizabeth (Sherwood) Hide. He married Abigail (Jennings) Hide on April 7, 1776. Their children were Eunice (Hide) Coley, Abigail (Hide) Burr, and Betty (Hide) Couch. John Hyde died 14 January 14, 1836, in Westport. The John Hyde papers include deeds, correspondence, biographical documentation, financial records. 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.

1.3 John Hyde—Estate Distribution to Sarah Banks of “the negro girl” – ca. 1761-1763

Citation: “Estate Distribution to Sarah Banks of “the negro girl” ca. 1761-1763”, John Hyde Papers, Miscellaneous Personal Papers Collection, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: See annotation for previous item.

1.4 Hannah Osborn to Ebenezer Banks—Sale Deed for Enslaved Person, Caesar, 1761

Citation: “Hannah Osborn to Ebenezer Banks—Sale Deed for Enslaved Person, Caesar, 1761”, Hannah Osborn Personal Papers, Westport Miscellaneous Papers Collection, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: The Osborns were descended from Captain Richard Osborne, who was rewarded with an 80-acre land grant for his service in the Pequot War which began in 1637, when 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. Once the original people were forced to migrate from their land families like the Osborne’s could establish large, multi-generational strong holds. Hannah Couch married into the Osborn family of Fairfield and Greens Farms. The Couches and the Osborne’s bought and sold in Africans forcibly migrated here as victims of the slave trade. In 1761, Hanna sold 23-year-old Cesar to Ebenezer Banks, also of Westport. Cesar was also paid 2 pounds and 10 shillings for ringing the Greens Farms church bell.

1.5 Venora Ellis Papers

Citation: “Venora Ellis Papers”, Westport Miscellaneous Papers Collection, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: Born in Yazoo City, Missouri, Venora Witherspoon Ellis was a prominent Black Westporter who came to the town during the Great Migration in 1942. In 1952 she married Leroy Ellis who was also from Yazoo City. The Ellises became important members of the Westport community. They were both heavily involved in community service, particularly as it related to Civil Rights. 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. Her papers contain biographical documentation, family photos, clippings, recipes, postcard collection (scenic, humorous, floral, friendship, Valentine’s Day, Christmas – many addressed to Miss Irene Gooden of Mississippi).

2. Adams Family Papers, 1699-1968, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT

https://archives.library.wcsu.edu/caoSearch/catalog/ctwspwhs_adams

2.1 Bill of sale of “negro girl named Cate” from Jacob Cadwell – 1745

Citation: “Bill of sale of “negro girl named Cate” from Jacob Cadwell – 1745”, Adams Family Papers Collection, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT

Annotation: The Adams family settled in Fairfield in the 1650s and later moved to the Greens Farms and Westport area. They were landowners and farmers in the early days with later generations involved in education, commerce, and the church. Regular detailed letters between parents and children, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins show how this New England family stayed in close touch even as branches of the family moved to the Midwest or California. The Adamses were pillars of Westport area society, and the collection shows their interconnectedness with other area families, including the Davies, Jennings, Wakeman, and Hyde families. These intended disbursements were written by the senior Nathaniel Adams on behalf of his daughters with Ann Silliman Adams (1719-1748)

2.2 Nathaniel Adams Daybook listing intended disbursements to daughter Ann Wakeman of “1 negro girl” and to daughter Rebecca Wakeman “1 negro girl”

Citation: “Nathaniel Adams Daybook listing intended disbursements to daughter Ann Wakeman of “1 negro girl” and to daughter Rebecca Wakeman “1 negro girl”, Adams Family Papers, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: See description of Adams family above. This daybook book was used by both Nathaniel Adams, 1716-1784 and Nathaniel Adams, 1746-1801.

2.3 Estate dispersal document of unidentified individual includes dispersal of “negro girl” to Abigail Adams Bradley, undated.

Citation: “Estate dispersal document of unidentified individual includes dispersal of “negro girl” to Abigail Adams Bradley.” undated, Adams Family Papers, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: The Bradley family was one of a number of prominent Westport families who intermarried continually over many generations including the Hydes, Sherwoods, Wakemans and Bennetts. All were enslavers at various times in the colonial period and up to gradual abolition. While we don’t know the relationship of Abigail Adams Bradley to the testator, we can say that the young girl being left to her as property was likely not yet an adolescent—common parlance of the time referred to a young girl or woman who could bear children as “wench” as a signifier of her potential value in increasing an enslavers human property.

3. Sherwood Family Papers, 1768-2003, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT

https://archives.library.wcsu.edu/caoSearch/catalog/ctwspwhs_sherwood

3.1 William Bennitt Will, 1772 giving wife Abigail “use and improvement of my Negro man named Jack and the use of my Negro boy Tim”

Citation: “William Bennitt Will, 1772 giving wife Abigail “use and improvement of my Negro man named Jack and the use of my Negro boy Tim”, Sherwood Family Papers, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: The Sherwood family settled in the Westport area in the late 18th century. A large part of the documentation in the Sherwood Family Papers relates to the children of Daniel Sherwood (1761-1828) and Catherine Burr Sherwood (1766-1835). These children included seven sons who became prominent businessmen and sea captains. The Sherwood family originally settled in Fairfield County from Ipswich, England in 1634. Samuel Sherwood (born around 1660) was the first miller of Southport. The Sherwood family acquired the Mill Pond gristmill in 1790, which served local farmers. The mill burned down in 1895. Sherwoods farmed on what is now Sherwood Island in Westport through most of the 1800s. Crops such as onions and potatoes were shipping to New York and oysters were Harvested. The collection includes some early legal documents of the Bennitt/Bennett family, including the 1772 will of William Bennitt, which gives to his wife the “use and improvement” of two enslaved persons. The Bennitts were related to the Sherwoods by marriage.

3.2 Daniel Sherwood account book showing transactions for Caesar , a free Black, 1794-1799

Citation: “Daniel Sherwood account book showing transactions for Caesar, a free Black, 1794-1799”, Sherwood Family Papers Collection, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: Transactions include purchases of goose, fowl, pork, potatoes, flax, rye, mutton, butter, yards of cloth, and candles. We can piece together details of daily existence in Westport’s early free African American community through the account ledgers of local merchants as well as records of local churches, banking information, census documents, wills, deeds, and probates. 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.

4. Adair Family Papers, 1850-1956, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT
https://archives.library.wcsu.edu/caoSearch/catalog/ctwspwhs_adair

Citation: “Adair Family Papers, 1850-1956”, Westport Museum for History & Culture, Westport, CT.

Annotation: The Adair Family Papers document the descendants of Benjamin Adair, who was one of the few prominent Black landowners in Westport during the 19th century. The Adair Family Papers date from 1850 to 1956 and include documentation primarily related to the women of the family – Ursula (Adair), Laura (Adair), Emily (Adair Vincent), Alice Viola (Vincent Burbridge), and Marguerite (Burbridge, known professionally as Mika Mingo). The collection includes correspondence, legal and financial documents, biographical documentation, and numerous photographs. Material related to activities of Mika Mingo includes documentation of the Cranberry Harvest Festival and Native American food and crafts.