

IN THE SOURLANDS

The Best Kept Secret in the Sourlands

by Caroline Katmann

*“Remember me as you pass by
As you are now, so once was I
As I am now so you must be
Prepare for death and follow me.”*

- From the tombstone of Mary Terhune, Stoutsburg Cemetery, Province Line Rd., Hopewell, NJ

In the Sourlands, there is a mostly unknown history of an entire group of people. A thriving African American community – a diverse group of people, most of whom were forced into labor - shaped the economy of this region. Many African Americans who lived here were free but there were many who were enslaved. All were laborers in practically every aspect of this area’s industry. They worked the farms, worked in factories that produced pottery and Belgium Block, were blacksmiths, caretakers of homes, nannies for children, basket makers, cooks, shoemakers, laundry workers, makers of moonshine and more!

We don’t usually think of New Jersey, a northern state, as a “slave state.” However slavery was present in New Jersey since the colony’s beginning in the 17th century. In its earliest constitution, New Jersey specified slaves as “possible members of the settler’s family” and offered concessions to colonists who owned slaves as enticements to settle in the colony:

- To every colonist that should go out with the first governor, 75 acres of land for every slave.
- To every settler before January 1, 1665, 60 acres for every slave.
- To every settler in the year following, 45 acres for every slave.
- To every settler in the third year, 30 acres for every slave.

Abolition came gradually to New Jersey and by 1804 the Legislature passed an “Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,” which essentially freed children who were born after July 4th of that year at the age of 21 for females and 25 for males. In subsequent years, NJ continued passing legislation toward the gradual decline of slavery until 1846 when it was permanently abolished in the state - though leaving the remaining slaves as “apprentices for life.” It was not until the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865, by the federal government, that all residents were finally declared free.

There is a dedicated group of individuals working to raise awareness of African American History in the Sourlands and to preserve whatever memories, stories, structures and artifacts remain of the black communities that thrived here. They are the members of the Stoutsburg Cemetery Association.

From the Stoutsburg Cemetery website (www.stoutsburgcemetery.com): “The Stoutsburg Cemetery, also known as Moore's Farm Burial Ground, has been the final resting place of area African Americans for close to three hundred years. It is also the burial ground for numerous Black veterans who served in wars dating back to the American Revolution. Some of our oldest grave sites unfortunately have sunk below the surface.” Two of those men are Private William Stives (1760-1839) who fought in the American Revolution and his descendant, Jonathan Stives, who fought in the Civil War. Though these men have been cited, they are merely a couple of examples of extraordinarily accomplished African Americans who are resting on this idyllic hill.

The Sourland Conservancy and the Stoutsburg Cemetery are working together to bring to life two connected aspects of African American History in the Sourlands: The creation of an African-American History Museum at the AME Church on Hollow Road and a reenactment of a traditional Camp Meeting. Camp Meetings were held across from the Bessie Grover Park (named after a prominent black woman from Skillman) and around the corner from the African Methodist Episcopal Church which was relocated to Hollow Road. These church “meetings” were huge revivals attended by both blacks and whites on the last two Sundays in July and the first two Sundays of August during the early 1900's. These revivals were known for great sermons and sometimes up to three preachers would come to speak before a huge crowd of people from different ethnic backgrounds. People would come in their Sunday best and eat wonderful homemade country food. For more information about these two projects and how you can help, please contact director@sourland.org.

Back by very popular demand, Elaine Buck and Beverly Mills of the Stoutsburg Cemetery Association, will present at the Sourland Conservancy's Train Station Series again this year. Their talk on “African American History in the Sourlands and Hopewell Valley” will contain new information and artifacts based on The Stoutsburg Cemetery Association's continuing research. Join us on Thursday, October 8th, 7 pm, at the Hopewell Train Station, One Railroad Place, Hopewell, NJ. Advance registration is not required; doors open at 6:40 pm; \$5 suggested donation.

Caroline Katmann is the Executive Director of the Sourland Conservancy. The Conservancy's mission is to protect the ecological integrity, historic resources and special character of the Sourland Mountain region. For more information about Sourland Conservancy's educational programs and advocacy work, visit www.sourland.org.