

LINDEN PLACE

MANSION SCULPTURE GARDENS BALLROOM



As Linden Place re-examines its history as part of our preparation for the installation of a Rhode Island Slave History Medallion we will be sharing the stories we have uncovered about the house, its inhabitants, and most importantly the enslaved and free black people connected with Linden Place and our community. Here is our fourth installment. Some stories are straight forward and anecdotal, and some are nuanced and painful. As part of the medallion project, one goal is to create a safe space at Linden Place to discuss a difficult topic. We welcome your comments and insights as they will help us in our journey to that goal.

A Revolution is Brewing



Between 1620 and 1640 twenty thousand English colonists came to the New England Region. As children we learned how Squanto, or Tisquantum, taught the Pilgrims to plant corn, fish and hunt. We may not have been told that Squanto could communicate with the Pilgrims because in 1614 he had been captured, enslaved, brought to Spain and England and eventually made it back to North America and his tribe, fluent in English. His enslavement helped him escape the smallpox pandemic that killed so many of his people. 1614 is not a year we generally equate with slavery.

In 1638 the ship “Desire” took captive Native Americans to the West Indies for sale as slaves. By 1641 The Massachusetts Bay Colony gave legal recognition to the institution of slavery. Its “Bodies of Liberties” permitted the enslavement of “lawful captives taken in just warres, or such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us.”¹ By 1652 Rhode Island attempted to ban slavery, but acknowledged it was unlikely to happen. The order was to ban perpetual slavery; upon 10 years of service, or on your

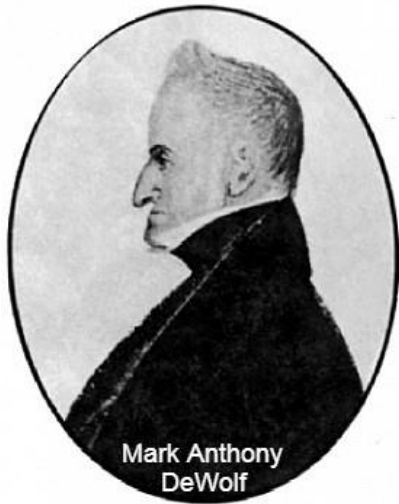
24th birthday, your enslavement was to end. The law was largely ignored.

Slavery was a business, a cruel and profitable one. Between 1705 and 1807, 934 slave voyages from Rhode Island transported over 100,000 enslaved Africans to the West Indies and North America. 672 of those voyages were from Newport; 167 from Bristol, 71 from Providence.

Simeon Potter was one of those legendary salty sea captains, privateers, marauders, slave traders, sailing on voyages out of Bristol. In his book published in 1917 Wilfred Harold Munro wrote:

“Simeon Potter was born in Bristol in the year 1720. His father was not a man of fortune and the boy's education was almost entirely neglected. His letters, even in advanced age, are those of an illiterate man who, apparently, had never attempted to remedy the deficiencies of his youth. Perhaps this is not to be wondered at. He went forth from Bristol a humble sailor lad whose only possessions were a sound body and an imperious will. After a comparatively few years spent upon the ocean he returned to his native town with a purse overflowing with riches, a man to be looked up to for

¹ *Complicity*, by Farrow, Lang and Frank, 2005



the rest of his life.”² Munro also made sure to write that Potter was a teller of tall tales – and as Potter aged, his wisdom, courage, strength, and physical size grew more expansive each year.

In 1744 Simeon Potter met Mark Anthony DeWolf in Guadeloupe. Mark Anthony, who had received his education in a French school and spoke several languages, made up for Potter’s inability to read or write or cipher, and became Captain Potter’s Secretary, in which capacity he sailed with him on a number of voyages. When they returned to Bristol, Mark Anthony, at age 18, was also smart enough to marry Simeon’s sister Abigail. Thus began the DeWolf dynasty, eventually funded by the Triangle Trade.

In 1764 James DeWolf was born to Mark and Abigail, one of 15 children. All eight of their sons went into the family business of capturing, transporting and selling human beings. James would go on to rival the more famous John Brown of Providence as a major figure in the slave trade business.



Just about the time that James was born, a young girl born around 1753 was kidnaped in West Africa and brought to Boston on an enslaved person ship. John Wheatley purchased the young girl as a servant for his wife Susanna. As Mrs. Wheatley was teaching her own children to read and write, the young slave girl learned alongside of them. At age 13, she wrote a poem about two men who nearly drowned at sea. It was published in the *Newport Mercury*. In 1773 Phillis Wheatley published a full book of poems, and the preface was signed by seventeen Boston men, including John Hancock, assuring the reader that Ms. Wheatley herself had written the poems in the volume. She was the first African-American published poet. She was a strong supporter of American Independence, and sent a poem to George Washington himself. The Continental Army Commander invited Ms. Wheatley to visit his headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts in March of 1776.

It would be interesting to research if Ms. Wheatley ever met Washington’s aide-de-camp, Simeon Simons, the great-great-grandson of PoMetacom (the son of

Massasoit) of the Pokanoket tribe, whom we know was with General Washington as he crossed the Delaware River Christmas night 1776.

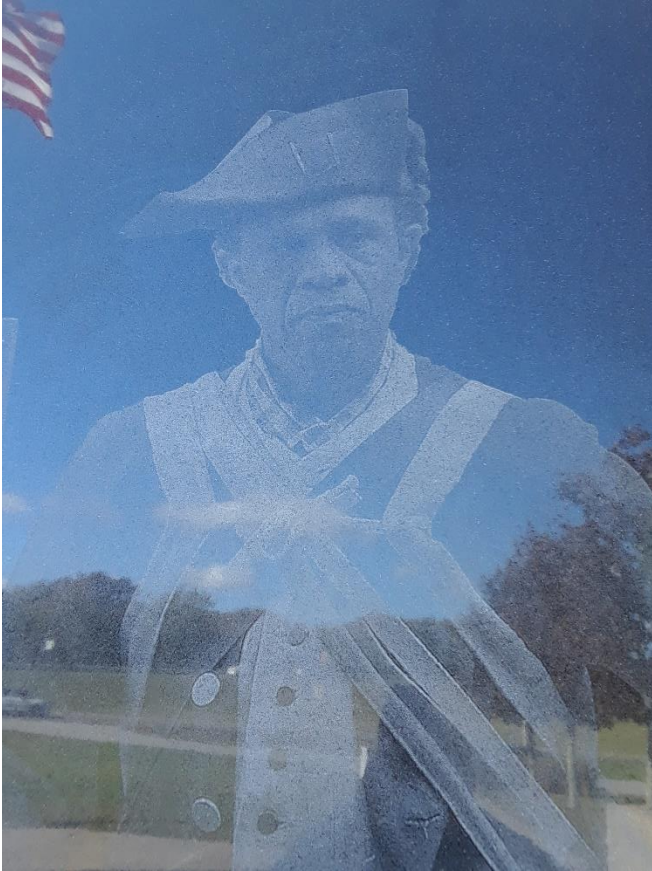
During that war, Bristol was bombarded by the British Army and many homes were burned. Elderly Reverend John Burt of the Congregational Church was found dead shortly after. His ‘servant’ (slave), Scipio Burt, served that Bristol church for many years, and was best known around town as an undertaker, arranging local funerals. Born in 1760, he married Sukey DeWolf, “servant” (slave) of Captain Mark Anthony DeWolf, on March 21, 1782. Sadly, there is a single marker in the East Burial Ground listing seven of their children who died between 1792 and 1805, ages 7 days to three years. After Reverend Burt’s death, Scipio became the possession of his widow Anna Burt. In the diary of Reverend Henry Wight of the Congregational Church there are notations of Scipio helping with various tasks and garden chores.

Very often the stories of people of color in Bristol are not told in any detail; in a pamphlet written about the 200th Anniversary of the Settlement of Bristol we do find this short description:

“Bristol, at an early period, was engaged in the slave trade. I recollect seeing on the wharf long rows of hogsheads of New England rum, to be sent to Africa for the purchase of slaves. My father took me with him to see the last slave ship fitted out. It was owned by Philadelphians, and in derision of scruples which were beginning to be felt, was called the “*Merry Quaker*”. There were handcuffs hanging in the blacksmith’s shop. There were in town a number of Africans

² *Tales of an Old Sea Port* by Wilfred Harold Munro, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1917

regarded as belonging to particular families. These had special seats provided for them in the upper gallery of the Congregational Church. They were headed by Scipio Burt, the servant of the former minister. Scipio was generally esteemed for his good nature and honesty, and was several years sexton of the church.³



In 1771 Isaac Hopper was born in New Jersey. He would become a famous Philadelphian, a “Merry Quaker”, and in our next installment we will tell how his story intersects with the DeWolfs. We will share the tale of how Prince Ingraham and Juba Smith of Bristol become soldiers in the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, which became known as the “Black Regiment”. Their names, with those of their compatriots, are etched on the granite wall in Patriot’s Park in Portsmouth, site of a Rhode Island Slave History Medallion. Detailed information is available on the RISHM website.⁴



Installation of the Slave History Medallion at Patriot’s Park in Portsmouth, RI, from rishm.org

Lynn Smith, Member of the Board of Directors of the Friends of Linden Place, is the author of this article. The information is considered to be accurate and reliable. Your comments, corrections, and input are all welcome.

³ Celebration of the 200th Anniversary of the Founding of Bristol, William J. Miller, 1880

⁴ <https://rishm.org/newport-county/portsmouth/patriots-park/>