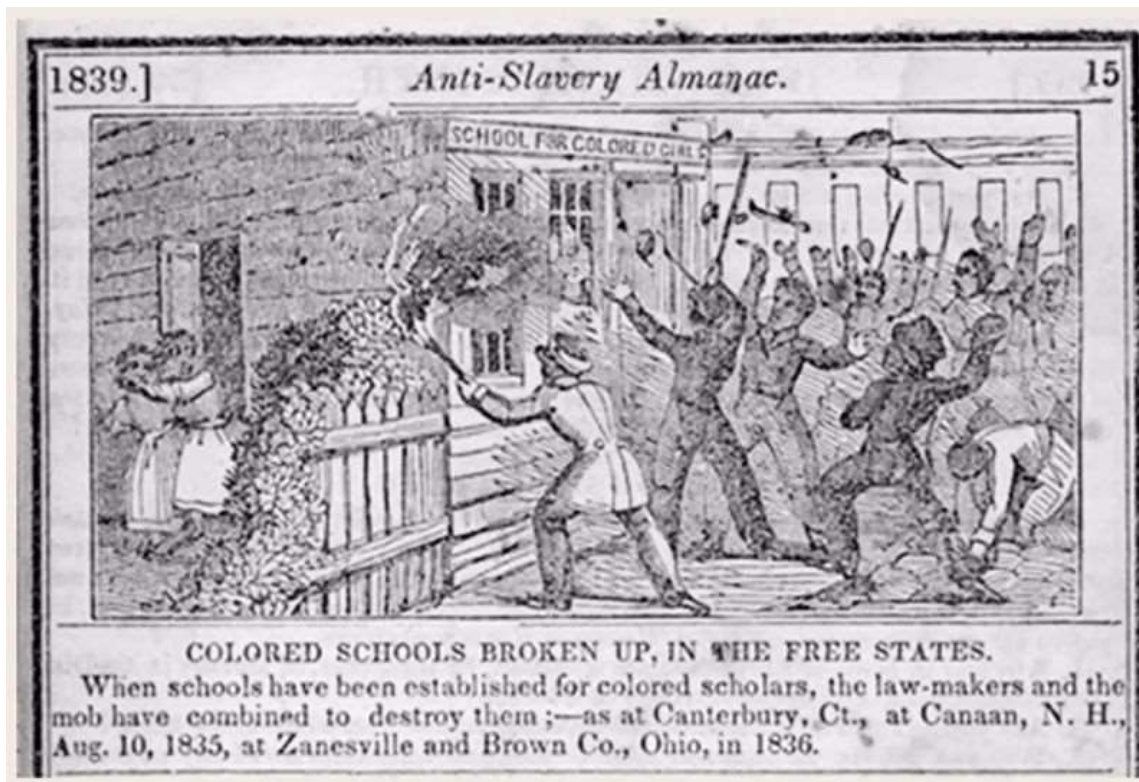


Historical Society presents talk on slavery in Glastonbury

By STEVE SMITH
HARTFORD COURANT |
MAR 05, 2021 AT 4:56 PM

Steve Smith has been covering Glastonbury, Ellington, Vernon and Tolland since 2007, and appreciates what each town has to offer in the way of history, culture, and most importantly, people. He also likes to incorporate a photojournalistic aspect into each of his stories.



Schools for colored girls, including one in Canterbury, started by Prudence Crandall, were attacked by mobs, as portrayed in the Anti-Slavery Almanac in 1839. Courtesy photo.

GLASTONBURY — The Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative held a community conversation called “Slavery and Abolition in Glastonbury, 1639-1865,” on Feb. 24, via the Zoom platform.

Diane Hoover and Julie Thompson, director of education for the Historical Society of Glastonbury and the HSG vice president, respectively, conducted the presentation after doing

years of research, which encountered the challenge that often few records were kept of slaves, as well as ex-slaves.

“There is very little written history on the lives, or even the existence of these people,” Hoover said, “and what is written is usually not in their words, but in those of the reporters at the time, white men.”

The two presented documents and historical records that showed the first enslaved people arrived in Connecticut in 1639, and slavery was legalized in the state in 1650. Hoover said that while it is logical to assume that wealthy businessmen from Wethersfield who first settled across the river in Glastonbury likely brought their property with them, including any slaves, the first records of slaves in Glastonbury weren't until 1712.

“The number of enslaved people in Glastonbury was consistently low,” Hoover said. “The townspeople were typical of New Englanders in that few owned slaves and they usually owned only one slave.”

Many slaves, upon being freed, took common last names and many unrelated people took the same last names, such as Freeman, Freebody, Black, Brown, or Beaman, further obfuscating accurate research.

“Researching the name ‘Freeman,’ for families in Glastonbury, there were actually several, unrelated families who chose the name, ‘Freeman,’ which made it difficult to identify individual members of a single family,” Thompson said, adding that names were often spelled differently, even by members of the same family.

The Connecticut Black Codes, which were in effect from 1690 to 1730, limited the rights of African Americans, as well as Native Americans, including those who were free. They were required to carry passes and could not travel beyond town borders, and were not allowed to hold office or serve on juries, but they still had to pay taxes if they owned land.

Other laws passed later prohibited slaves from drinking in taverns without permission from their owners, and in 1717, they forbade blacks and “molattos” from buying land or going into business.

Slaves were often freed by their owners when they were no longer productive. This led to a 1711 law being passed in Connecticut that said slaves could only be freed on the condition that if they became paupers, their former masters must support them.

In 1774, Glastonbury had a population of 74 African Americans, which was four percent of the population, and 64 of them were listed as slaves. Those numbers began to decline by 1790, when the first formal anti-slavery society was formed. In 1792, a state law was passed making

all healthy slaves under the age of 45 free, and between 1810 and 1820, slavery virtually disappeared in Connecticut. However, it was not abolished in the state until 1848.

Glastonbury's Smith sisters, and their mother, Hannah, were involved in abolition. Even though slavery was nearly gone before they became active in the 1840s, local apathy about slavery elsewhere prompted the Smiths to take up the cause. They held and attended abolitionist meetings, and helped distribute *The Liberator*, an anti-slave newspaper produced in Boston. They also sent many anti-slavery petitions to Congress.

There is no clear evidence that the Underground Railroad ran through Glastonbury. There were many routes that passed through Connecticut, but as crossing the river was more rare and more difficult, few routes lead through Connecticut - except those where slaves were hidden on ships that docked on the state's coast, east of the mouth of the river.

"If they disembarked in Old Lyme, New London, or Westerly [Rhode Island], they could have passed through Glastonbury," Thompson said.

Rev. John Rankin, one of the most famous conductors of the Underground Railroad, was based in Ohio. One of Rankin's sons, Samuel, later settled in Glastonbury. Samuel spoke frequently about his family's efforts, including having to defend their home against slave hunters.

The Hale-Rankin House, which still stands in Glastonbury, has often been rumored to be an Underground Railroad stop, and did have a hidden cellar beneath the kitchen, but recently, the site was examined by former State Archaeologist Nick Bellantoni, who determined the space was used as a cistern or well, and there was no evidence of it being part of the railroad.

Rumors of the Welles-Shipman-Ward House also persisted as late as the 1960s, but despite investigations, there was no evidence found there either.

"However, since the entire premise of the railroad was secrecy, it's entirely possible that there were houses or families who were stations in town," Thompson said. "There's just no proof, to date."

Hoover and Thompson said they plan to continue their research.

"We'd love to have a story about an African American who was a slave, in Glastonbury, became freed, and what happened in his or her life," Hoover said, adding that they are also busily researching Native American slaves in town.

"This is just as far as we've gotten so far," Thompson said. "We're just going to keep going."

For more information, visit www.glastonburymkci.org or www.hsgct.org.