"Their Own Guardians and Protectors":
African American Community in
Middletown, Connecticut, 1822-1860

by

Jesse Nasta
Class of 2007

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in History

Middletown, Connecticut

April, 2007
Acknowledgements

In piecing together the story of this community, I have been constantly supported by my own overlapping Wesleyan and Middletown communities. At Wesleyan, I am particularly indebted to my thesis advisor, Professor Romano, who has alternately served as academic mentor, coach, and therapist. She consistently does the job of three people. And she does it very well. I am also very grateful to Professor Schatz, my earliest mentor at Wesleyan, for his constant faith in and vital support of my academic growth. Many thanks also to Professor Schwarz for her encouragement and enthusiasm as I first undertook my thesis research, to Professor Swinehart for sharing his expertise on material culture, and to Professor Teter for always generously offering her insight and support. To the staff at Olin Library’s Special Collections and Archives, especially Suzy Taraba and Cheryl Hagner, I owe a debt of gratitude. Thanks also to the staff of Olin’s Interlibrary Loan Office, especially Kate Wolfe, for diligently and often thanklessly tracking down just about any book in the world. Interlibrary loan, not money, makes the world go round.

I owe a special debt to the Davenport Study Grant Committee for offering me this award. Without their generous financial support, my summer research, an extremely rewarding experience in itself, would not have been possible. I am also very grateful for the opportunity to be a student fellow at Wesleyan’s Center for the Humanities this semester. The academic community I found there has been extremely supportive and helpful. Special thanks to Shirley Wajda for always patiently sharing her vast knowledge of material culture.
I am also indebted to Bruce Stark, Assistant State Archivist, for both his
guidance as I began my summer research at the Connecticut State Archives as well as
for inviting me to present my thesis research at the Association for the Study of
Connecticut History's fall 2006 meeting.

As for those from my Middletown community, I would like to thank Dione
Longley, former director of the Middlesex County Historical Society, and Liz
Warner, the godmothers of local history, for their years of encouragement and
support. For the more than two decades they have each spent preserving and sharing
Middletown's history, I, along with many in Middletown, thank them and are
indebted to them for inspiring our local history research.

Thanks also to Donna Baron, current director of the Middlesex County
Historical Society, for her constant support of my research. I am also indebted to
Reverend Harvill, pastor of the Cross Street AME Zion Church, for speaking with me
early on in my research and offering me his encouragement and cooperation. Thanks
also to Frank Warmsley and Brian Warmsley, members of the only African American
family that has continuously lived in Middletown since the antebellum period. Both
have been very supportive of my research and generously willing to tell me all they
know about their family's past.

On a more personal note, thanks, of course, to my housemates for tolerating
me for the past few weeks- even when I could no longer tolerate myself. And, finally,
my earliest debt of gratitude: thanks to my parents and brother for being my home,
my greatest support, and, last but not least, my occasional proofreaders.
Contents

Introduction
"All We Ask For is Justice"  1

Chapter One
“She Had Thought of Going to the Poor House, But She Had Rather Take Care of her Grandchildren In Her Old Hut”:
Families, Households, and Community Formation  8

Chapter Two
“That Zion Here May Prosper”:
The Community and the Church  36

Chapter Three
“A Decent Independence”:
Black Property Ownership, The Bemans, and Moral Reform  59

Postscript  76

Appendices  80

Bibliography  89
Introduction

“All We Ask For is Justice”

On April 30, 1839, nine African Americans from Middletown, Connecticut met to assert their right to vote as citizens, and, as they saw it, as men. Since 1814, state law had barred all African Americans from voting while simultaneously granting universal manhood suffrage to whites. In 1834, many of these Middletown men had petitioned the Connecticut General Assembly “...[on] behalf of our Colored brethren in the State of Connecticut” to enfranchise blacks. “All we ask for is justice and we trust it will be granted,” they wrote.\(^1\) Now, on this April day five years later, these nine men gathered to repeat their plea to the General Assembly. One of them, possibly Leverett Beman, a trustee of Middletown’s African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church and a son of Rev. Jehiel Beman, the nationally known abolitionist who served as this church’s pastor from 1830 until 1838, scrawled the two page petition to this assembly. Then, on the third page, each signed his name: Henry Freeman, John C. Moody, George Garrison, John Randol, George W. Jeffrey, Leverett C. Beman, Matthew Strong, Samuel Condol, and Ebenezer Deforest.\(^2\)

In 1995, more than a century and a half after denying these and dozens of other petitions for black suffrage, the Connecticut General Assembly created the Connecticut Freedom Trail in order to recognize historical sites throughout the state “associated with the heritage and movement towards freedom of its African American

---

\(^1\) Rejected Bills, African Americans and Native Americans, RG 002, Box 2, Folder 7, Connecticut State Archives. Hereafter cited as CSA.

\(^2\) Ibid., Box 2, Folder 10, CSA.
One of them, designated the Leverett Beman Historic District, is the four-acre triangle of land in Middletown bordered by Cross Street, Park Street (today Vine Street), and Swamp Street (today Knowles Avenue) where three of the eight men who signed this 1839 black suffrage petition owned property. By the Civil War, African Americans owned all ten houses on this piece of land, five of which still stand and are the property of Wesleyan University.

After several years of researching Middletown’s history, it was these five houses, the most visible remnants of this city’s nineteenth century black community, which finally prompted me to write this thesis. Having moved to Middletown when I was eleven years old, I practically lived within sight of these houses during my junior high school years. Already fascinated by history, after school I would walk to the West Burying Ground on Vine Street, another site on the Connecticut Freedom Trail, to write down the gravestone inscriptions, intent on saving them before they were obliterated by time and acid rain.

Several years later, I came across the Milo Wilcox Collection while an intern at the Middlesex County Historical Society. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Wilcox, a local history buff, spent countless hours at Middletown’s historical society, the Connecticut State Archives, the Connecticut Historical Society, and other archives uncovering and photocopying hundreds of documents pertaining to Middletown’s

---

3 See www.ctfreedomtrail.com.
5 The five antebellum African American houses still standing in this neighborhood are: 170 Cross Street (built c. 1861), 9 Vine Street (built c. 1833), 11 Vine Street (built c. 1848), 21 Vine Street (built c. 1850), and 10 Knowles Avenue (built c. 1865). I determined approximate dates of construction based on Middletown Land Records and Cunningham and Warner, Experiment in Community.
eighteenth and nineteenth century African Americans. Browsing through this cache of
documents at the historical society, I recognized some of the names I had transcribed
from the gravestones on Vine Street as an eleven-year-old, and, for the first time,
realized that the cluster of nineteenth century headstones relegated to the corner and
rear of this cemetery belong to African Americans.

In 2002, the Connecticut Historical Commission contracted Janice
Cunningham and Elizabeth Warner to research the antebellum black homes now part
of the Leverett Beman Historic District. Their research report, the basis for this
neighborhood’s enrollment on the Connecticut Freedom Trail, painstakingly records
every African American who owned property here both before and after the Civil
War. After reading this report, I finally recognized that the five simple wooden
houses on the triangle of land between Cross Street, Vine Street, and Knowles
Avenue that I had walked by hundreds of times, the gravestones in the nearby
cemetery on Vine Street, and the AME Zion Church which, although now in its fourth
building, has held services on Cross Street every Sunday since 1828, are all remnants
of Middletown’s pre-Civil War black history.  

---

*Middletown’s AME Zion congregation, formed in 1822, began meeting at George Jeffrey’s home,
corner of Cross and Swamps streets, in 1828. See J.B. Beers, History of Middlesex County,
Connecticut, With Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men (New York: J.B. Beers & Company,
1884), 143. The congregation’s first church building, dedicated on Cross Street in 1830, was razed in
1867. See Ibid., 144, which states that “In 1867, by the removal of the edifice, an additional
indebtedness of $900 was incurred...” by this congregation. In 1919 or 1920, Wesleyan University
razed the AME Zion Church’s second building, having bought the church’s property in order to expand
the university’s campus. See “Who Will Control Fund Paid By Wesleyan to Middletown Zion
Church?,” The Hartford Courant, 8 March 1919, 2, and “Middletown Zion Church Has Scrap,” The
Hartford Courant, 9 May 1919, 8, for details concerning both Wesleyan’s purchase of the church’s
property as well as the congregation’s dispute with the AME Zion Conference over the money
received from Wesleyan. The church’s third building, built at the congregation’s present site, 160
Cross Street, was dedicated circa 1920 and razed in 1984. The present church building, the
congregation’s fourth, has recently been purchased by Wesleyan University. The congregation will
soon move to their new site. See Elizabeth A. Warner, A Pictorial History of Middletown (Norfolk,
VA: The Donning Company, 1990), 59.
Excited by this realization, I set out to uncover what the antebellum black settlement on this triangle of land can teach us about early nineteenth century African American life in Middletown. The ten homes that African Americans owned on this triangle, I soon discovered, were only part of Middletown’s antebellum black enclave centered on Cross Street. Although African Americans lived in other parts of Middletown, this neighborhood was home to the majority of the city’s blacks, the site of their church, and the location of greatest black property ownership. If African Americans had a name for this nucleus of their social, cultural, and spiritual life in Middletown from about the 1820s until about the 1920s, it has not been recorded. We only know that, to many of the city’s whites, it was “Nigger Hill.”

To the extent that often scant local records allow, this thesis recreates black life in Middletown, Connecticut from 1822, the year this city’s African Americans established the second African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church in Connecticut, until the Civil War. Aside from Cunningham and Warner’s valuable inventory of the Leverett Beman Historic District’s early residents, no study of Middletown’s antebellum blacks has been attempted. Being the first to systematically analyze the census, probate, and various other records which offer a glimpse of the community these African American created, however frustratingly incomplete that glimpse may be, has been an intensely touching, occasionally bewildering, but always rewarding process.

Middletown’s antebellum African American community serves as a unique window onto several central yet insufficiently studied aspects of black life in the early nineteenth century North. Despite the proliferation of studies on antebellum northern

---

7 See chapter 1 for a more in depth discussion of this neighborhood and its formation.
African Americans during the past three decades, this scholarship still lags far behind
that on southern blacks. Several vital issues in nineteenth century black life, although
thoroughly examined by historians of southern African Americans, have yet to be
examined in a northern context.

Chief among them is the role of extended African American family networks.
While historians have stressed the importance of kin networks among slaves and
former slaves in the South, almost no studies of extended black family in the
antebellum North exist. Due to the small size of Middletown’s early nineteenth
century black community, I was able to trace the genealogies of many of its
individual members. The extensive family connections I found between these African
Americans suggest that, as in the South, kin networks were central to the formation
and maintenance of antebellum northern black communities. In chapter one, I
examine the role extended black family played in both African American chain
migration to Middletown as well as the organization of this city’s black community.

The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church remains another vital
aspect of black life in the antebellum North which has received too little scholarly
attention. Several recent studies of the AME Zion Church’s rival denomination, the
AME Church, have provided valuable insight into the connections between the AME
Church in the United States and South Africa, the role of women within this church.

---

and this church’s missionary efforts among emancipated southern slaves following
the Civil War. Yet no major study of the AME Zion Church has been written. As the
denomination’s second church in Connecticut and only ninth or tenth in the nation,
Middletown’s AME Zion Church, founded in 1822, is key to understanding the black
church’s central role within northern African American society. Chapter two
examines the various ways this church, as a center of African American activism,
community organization, and class formation, shaped Middletown’s antebellum black
society.

Finally, with a significant number of black homeowners, many of whom
based their claims to civil rights on their status as property owners, Middletown’s
African American community illustrates the personal and political meaning property
ownership held for antebellum northern blacks. Though several historians have
studied property ownership among nineteenth century southern blacks, black property
ownership in the antebellum north has received only cursory treatment by
historians. Chapter three examines the significance of property ownership to

---

9 See James T. Campbell, Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Though Campbell’s study largely focuses on the AME Church in South Africa, the first third of his book provides the best account of the nineteenth century growth and development of the AME Church in the United States that I have found. Julayme E. Dodson’s recent study explores the central role women played in the AME Church. See Julayme E. Dodson, Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); Clarence E. Walker’s study of the AME Zion Church, though the most complete account of this church during the Civil War and Reconstruction, focuses primarily on the South. See Clarence E. Walker, A Rock in A Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction (Baton Rouge, LA; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

10 Two major studies focus on nineteenth century southern black property ownership: Dylan C. Penningroth, The Claims of Kinfolk and Loren Schweninger, Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990). In contrast, I have found no study which discusses the central role of property ownership in antebellum black protest. The following works either provide a cursory mention of antebellum black property ownership or discuss the topic in solely economic rather than political terms: Robert J. Cottol, The Afro-Yankees; Leonard P. Curry, The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream (Chicago; London: The University of
Middletown’s blacks as well as African American property ownership’s largely unexplored political importance in the black movement to regain suffrage in Connecticut.

There are, of course, many other facets of Middletown’s antebellum African American community worthy of study. Having peered into the fascinating lives of hundreds of Middletown’s nineteenth century African Americans, my greatest frustration is that I cannot look at just one more source, uncover just one more detail, or ponder just a bit longer the web of interconnected families, friends, and enemies that forged this community. I consider this thesis only the beginning of my research on both this city and this state’s African Americans. Just as I have drawn upon the valuable work of Elizabeth Warner, Janice Cunningham, and Milo Wilcox, I hope others will join me in uncovering the many additional stories this community can tell us.

Chapter 1

“...She had thought of going to the poor house, but she had rather take care of her grandchildren in her old hut”: Families, Households, and Community Formation

In February 1824, Phillis Freeman housed six relatives in her “old hut” on the rural outskirts of Middletown. Four of her grandchildren had lived there since their mother, Freeman’s daughter, Peggy, had died a year earlier; Freeman’s other daughter, Nancy, who had not heard from her husband in months, also lived there with her baby.

Freeman was in no position to support them. She was “lame and unwell,” and her husband, Peter Freeman, a former Middletown slave born in Africa, had died three years earlier at the age of “eighty or ninety.”¹ In the middle of winter, Elisha Coe, a prominent white resident, found Freeman and her family “nearly destitute of wood & provision.” Her daughter, Nancy, had just spent her “last cent of money...for potatoes” and Phillis “said she should likely freeze to death...” Yet she wanted to “…take care of her grand children in her old hut.”² Decades earlier, probably a recently freed slave then, Freeman had bound out her daughter to a local white

¹ Thomas Atkins, History of Middlefield and Long Hill (Hartford, CT: Press of the Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company), 103, photocopy in Wilcox Collection, Middlesex County Historical Society. Hereafter cited as MCHS.
² Elisha Coe to the Selectmen of Middletown, 24 February 1824, Middletown Selectmen’s Records, Letters to the Selectmen, 1824 Folder, Box 1 of 1, MCHS.
family, where she was raised as an indentured servant.\(^3\) This time, she was
determined to keep her family together.

The Freemans’ decades long struggle to achieve both legal freedom and
family autonomy mirrors that of countless African Americans, both in Middletown
and throughout the antebellum North. As historians have recently stressed, the
North’s emancipation laws did not provide slaves with automatic legal or social
freedom. Instead, the laws dismantled slavery over the course of decades.

Even after achieving legal freedom, moreover, African Americans struggled
to achieve social independence. Only after initially working in whites’ homes as
indentured servants, or, for those more fortunate, hired domestic servants, did many
freedpeople gradually forge independent households. Many African Americans, like
the Freemans, relied on their extended families to both establish and maintain their
own households. As Middletown’s antebellum community makes clear, family
networks were the foundation of this city’s predominantly African American
neighborhood and its black church, and, therefore, provided the basis for further
community formation.

\textbf{Half Free: Gradual Emancipation and Indentured Servitude,}

\textit{1784-1820}

Due to both the gradual nature of emancipation, and, more important, whites’
desire to control blacks even after they were freed, Middletown’s African Americans
struggled for decades to forge an independent, property owning community. As

\(^3\) \textit{Ibid.}
historians have recently emphasized, emancipation in the North was a process rather than an event. Between 1780 and 1804, the state legislatures of Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island adopted gradual emancipation laws which, rather than freeing slaves outright, dismantled slavery over the course of more than half a century.\textsuperscript{4} Connecticut's Gradual Abolition Act of 1784 merely provided that the children born to slaves after March 1, 1784 could not be held "in servitude" beyond the age of twenty-five. This law, therefore, only freed future born slaves after they reached the age of twenty-five while those born prior to March 2, 1784 remained enslaved for life.\textsuperscript{5} In 1790, when the first federal census takers made their rounds in Middletown, 110 of Middletown's 167 African-Americans, just under two-thirds, remained enslaved.\textsuperscript{6} Not until 1848 did Connecticut's legislature free the state's last handful of slaves.\textsuperscript{7}

Many Connecticut slaveholders, however, spurred by the ideals of the American Revolution, and, more significant, the declining economic importance of slavery in the state, voluntarily manumitted their slaves. Between 1790 and 1800, the state's slave population dropped from 2,764 to 951. By 1820, there were fewer than 100 slaves in Connecticut.\textsuperscript{8} Slavery's decline was equally pronounced in Middletown. By 1820, all but three of the city's 211 blacks were free.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{7} Menschel, "Abolition Without Deliverance," 191.
\textsuperscript{8} Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce & Labor, Heads of Families at The First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790, Connecticut 8 (1908) as quoted in ibid., 190-191.
\textsuperscript{9} 1820 Ms. Census. This figure includes both the city and town of Middletown.
Yet, as historian Joanne Pope Melish emphasizes, the gradual emancipation process did not create a free society but rather transferred whites’ assumptions of slaves onto freed African Americans. By the time gradual emancipation laws took effect, a century and a half of slavery in New England had led whites to view all people of African descent as a naturally enslaved class. Whites were collectively incapable, therefore, of modifying their view of blacks to accommodate their newly free status. Instead, they continued to treat them as dependent and available for service, traits associated with slaves.10

During the gradual abolition period, whites’ methods of binding out free African Americans as indentured servants reflected this unwillingness to acknowledge their independence. White children, of course, also served as indentured servants. Following the tradition of English Poor Law, New England communities had bound out children, most of them white, since the colonial period both to reduce the cost of poor relief and instill in them the habits of industry and morality which the poor were thought to often lack.11 But, due to the widespread belief in black inferiority, black children were disproportionately singled out for indentured servitude. In 1800 Providence, Rhode Island’s Town Council, for instance, sought to identify “all transient white people in poor circumstances, as also of the blacks of all descriptions.” While only poor, transient whites were seen as potential public charges,

all blacks were designated as dependent, and, therefore, potentially available for service.\textsuperscript{12}

Although only fragmentary indentureship contracts for Middletown survive, available records suggest that this city’s whites likewise transferred their assumptions about slaves’ dependency and availability for service onto free African Americans. The Middlesex County, Connecticut Historical Society’s files contain seventy-four indentureship contracts from 1790-1829.\textsuperscript{13} Five of these contracts are for children identified as “negro” or “black.” We can estimate, assuming that this is a representative sample of Middletown’s African American indentured servants, that blacks were approximately twice as likely to be bound out for service as whites, since African Americans comprised between three and four percent of Middletown’s general population during this period but represent 6.76 percent of the seventy-four indentured servants for which records survive.\textsuperscript{14}

Aside from the probability that African Americans were indentured more frequently than whites, the terms of their service differed in another important way. Of these five African American children, three were girls, and, like almost all girls white and black, were indentured to learn housewifery. Yet the two boys’ indentureships differ from those of almost all their white counterparts. Ten year old

\textsuperscript{12} Pope Melish, \textit{Disowning Slavery}, 86.

\textsuperscript{13} These files include an additional forty indentureship contracts from before and after this period. Since none are for African Americans, I have limited my analysis to 1790-1829, the period in which African Americans appear in these records.

\textsuperscript{14} 1790-1830 Census; Apprenticeship Records, Box 1 of 1, MCHS. Those identified as “negro” or “black” in these records are: Samuel a.k.a. Prince Negro, Mary Powers, Charlotte Storms, Thamar Storms, and Thomas Warrin. Although the indentureship contract of Chloe Ishmael does not specify her race, she was almost certainly the daughter of Ishmael and Jane Freeman, both African American. Also, the indentureship contract of James Davis, an African American, although filed with these records, was not included in my analysis since he was indentured in Philadelphia prior to moving to Middletown.
Thomas Warrin was indentured in 1803 to learn the “Art or Mystery of Husbandry.” In 1808, fourteen year old “Samuel or Prince Negro” was indentured to learn the “art or mystery of a man servant.” Most white boys, in contrast, were indentured to learn a skilled trade. Only several learned husbandry or farming, and, most significant, none during this period were indentured to learn to become servants. Indentureship practices in Middletown, therefore, support Melish’s finding that many whites hired African Americans specifically for heavy, unskilled agricultural and domestic labor, the jobs slaves had frequently performed, because they viewed them as inherently “available” for this “Negro work.” Yet, due to their supposedly dependent nature, they were thought to be unwilling to work unless coerced through indentured servitude.

This view of all African Americans as dependent and available to work for whites, regardless of their legal freedom, undermined the autonomy of free black families in Middletown well into the nineteenth century. The circumstances surrounding Mary Powers’ indentureship illustrate that, confronted with the much greater social power of white elites, African Americans were sometimes powerless to maintain their families intact. In 1825, Ann McDonough wrote Henry Carrington, a Middletown selectman, “As soon as convenient, I should like to have Mary [Powers] bound to me.” Although Mary’s grandmother was “in town,” McDonough argued that she “…has no right to interfere, as she has done nothing for the child.”

15 Thomas Warrin Indenture Contract, Apprenticeship Records, Box 1 of 1, Folder 1800-1810, MCHS. It was standard practice to bind out children until they reached their majority—eighteen for girls and twenty-one for boys. See Nash, Forging Freedom, 77. Nash found that, in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Philadelphia, authorities usually indentured African American children longer than whites, but I did not find this in Middletown’s fragmentary indentureship records.
16 Apprenticeship Records, Box 1 of 1, Folder 1800-1810, MCHS.
17 Pope Melish, Disowning Slavery, 109.
Despite Mary’s grandmother’s objections, evident in her attempts to “interfere” with her granddaughter’s binding out, Ann placed her desire for Mary’s labor above the wishes of the girl’s family. Just six years earlier, she and her husband, Commodore Thomas McDonough, the War of 1812 hero recently awarded a Congressional medal for his naval victory at the Battle of Lake Champlain, had built their genteel home on Middletown’s Main Street. Indentured until the age of eighteen to learn the “Art or Mystery of House keeping,” Mary, then only seven years old, would provide the McDonoughs virtually free domestic service for the next eleven years. Likely sharing the predominant view of blacks as a naturally dependent and available class, Ann McDonough probably felt entitled to Mary’s labor. Her insistence that Carrington grant her Mary’s service, not completely unlike the selling of slaves, was a private agreement between elite whites which forced an African American into servitude. Evidence like this, although fragmentary, suggests that the indentured servitude of blacks frequently replicated the practices of slavery.

Additional sources suggest that indentured servitude divided free African American families in Middletown decades into the gradual abolition process. Aaron Freeman, whose father, Philemon Freeman, was probably among the several hundred Connecticut slaves who gained freedom through Revolutionary War service, “lived with Ichabod Miller” until he turned twenty-one in 1814, the age at which boys

---

18 Apprenticeship Records, Box 1 of 1, Folder 1820-1830, MCHS; See J.B. Beers, *History of Middlesex County, Connecticut, With Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men* (New York: J.B. Beers & Co., 1884), 155 for a biographical sketch of Commodore Thomas McDonough; see Elizabeth A. Wamer, *A Pictorial History of Middletown* (Norfolk, VA: The Donning Company, 1990), 92 for a photograph and description of the McDonough house; Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 85-86. I say Mary Power’s labor was “virtually unpaid” rather than unpaid because indentured servants were promised “Clothing, Meat, Drink, Washington, Lodging, and Physic” as well as rudimentary reading and arithmetical lessons under the terms of their indentureship contracts.
reached their majority, and, therefore, customarily ended their indentures.\(^{19}\) Nancy Freeman, who, as we have seen, lived with her mother, infant child, and four nephews and nieces in an "old hut" on the outskirts of Middletown in 1824, was "brought up at Esq. Isaac Millers" as an indentured servant.\(^{20}\)

As late as 1820, seventy-seven of Middletown’s 211 African Americans, or more than a third, still lived in white households.\(^{21}\) Although it is likely that by this point most lived in these white homes as hired servants rather than indentured servants, whites continued to view these free workers in terms of slave-like dependence.\(^{22}\) In his 1819 *Statistical Account* of Middlesex County, Connecticut, which included Middletown as the largest community, local minister David Field asserted that the county’s blacks "...have little skill in setting themselves to work and

\(^{19}\) Revolutionary War Pension Records, no. S.36523, Philemon Freeman, Records of the Veterans’ Administration, Records Group #15, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C., accessed via HeritageQuest database, January 10, 2007, at Russell Library, Middletown, CT. Philemon Freeman’s pension application states that he enlisted as a private in 1779 and was discharged at the end of the war; Letter from the selectmen of Woodbury, Connecticut to the selectmen of Middletown, Connecticut, 20 January 1848, Letters to the Selectmen of Middletown, 1848 Folder, Box 1 of 1, Middlesex County Historical Society, states that Aaron Freeman was Philemon’s son; the *Barbour Collection of Connecticut Town Vital Records* contains the following Middletown birth record: Aaron Freeman, son of Philemon and Rachel, born October 7, 1793. I determined the date of Aaron’s indentureship based on this record. See Lorraine Cook White, ed., *Barbour Collection of Connecticut Town Vital Records* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 2000).

\(^{20}\) Letter from Elisha Coe to the Selectmen of Middletown, 24 February 1824, Middletown’s Selectmen’s Records, Letters to the Selectmen of Middletown, Box 1 of 1, 1824 Folder, MCHS.

\(^{21}\) 1820 Ms. Census. I calculated this figure, which includes the city and town of Middletown, from the manuscript census schedules for Middletown.

\(^{22}\) 1820 Ms. Census. Instead of specifying residents’ occupations, the 1820 federal census merely indicates those "engaged in agriculture," those "engaged in commerce," and those "engaged in manufactures." Since domestic servitude, the occupation of the vast majority of African Americans during this period, falls under none of these categories, the census does not specify their occupations, and, therefore, does not allow us to distinguish between hired domestic servants and indentured servants. Of Middletown's twenty-eight African American household heads listed in the 1820 census, only two, William Boardman [Boardman?] and Harry Huntington, were recorded as "engaged in commerce." The occupations of the African American heads of households are not specified, meaning that, if the census taker's reports are accurate, they were not engaged in commerce, agriculture, or manufacturing, and, therefore, were probably servants. In his study of African Americans in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Philadelphia, Gary Nash estimates that a quarter of the blacks living in this city's white households in 1790 were indentured servants while the rest hired out their labor as domestics servants. See Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 78. Hired black domestic servants probably likewise outnumbered black indentured servants in Middletown.
in husbanding their earnings,” and, therefore, could only be “...laborious and faithful, when employed by others.” Yet, even as he wrote this, many of Middletown’s African Americans were “husbanding their earnings,” striving to forge independent households and buy property. In enabling many of these African Americans to maintain these households and acquire property, kin networks would prove vital to the formation of Middletown’s stable neighborhood of black homeowners.

**Family and Community Formation, 1820-1840**

For African Americans in Middletown, like those throughout the North, the 1820s and 1830s were decades of renewed hope and activism. During this period, this city’s blacks simultaneously founded the state’s second African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church and forged a largely black enclave nearby. Centered on Cross Street, Swamp Street (today Knowles Avenue), and Park Street (today Vine Street), this neighborhood was home to the majority of Middletown’s African Americans by 1840.

The height of Cross Street, where the AME Zion Church was built in 1830 and just west of where Wesleyan University was founded in 1831, was known as “the hill” before significant numbers of African Americans moved there in the 1830s. The 1829 deed for the lot where the AME Zion Church would soon be built describes it as

---


24 For more on the founding of Middletown’s AME Zion Church, see chapter two.
a “piece of land lying on the Hill.” Two years later, the Elder of the city’s First Methodist Episcopal Church warned his congregants, probably abolitionists, who were “fond of visiting the colored church” that “if you continue to go on the hill, we shall next see the blacks elbowing our daughters about the streets.” By the 1860s, Middletown’s whites apparently perceived this neighborhood around the African American church as solidly black. In his account book of poor residents who applied for city “aid” between 1861 and 1867, a Middletown selectman alternately described black applicants as living on “the Hill,” on “Negro Hill,” and on “Nigger Hill.”

Despite whites’ perception of this neighborhood, Middletown, like cities throughout the antebellum North, was never totally segregated. The 1840 federal census shows that the two dozen black families in the Third Ward, where the “Negro

---

28 James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton found that even in Boston, the nation’s most segregated city by 1860, blacks and poor white immigrants shared neighborhoods. See James Oliver Horton and Horton and Lois E. Horton, Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North (New York; London: Holmes & Meier, 1999), 5.
Hill” neighborhood and AME Zion Church were located, lived interspersed with whites.\textsuperscript{29} Yet, as in many cities, segregation increased in Middletown during the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{30} While available sources do not reveal exactly where early nineteenth century Middletown residents lived, broad residential patterns illustrate the pull of the “Negro Hill” neighborhood on African Americans from other parts of Middletown and more rural surrounding towns.\textsuperscript{31} The 1840 federal census reveals that, even though twenty-three African Americans lived in the city’s Second Ward and sixty-eight lived in the First Ward, nearly half of Middletown’s 230 African Americans, 111 in all, were concentrated in the Third Ward. African American settlement was most prevalent in the section of this ward nearest the AME Zion Church.\textsuperscript{32}

This was not only the largest but also the most independent African American neighborhood in Middletown. In 1840, census records indicate, a greater proportion of the Third Ward’s blacks lived in African American headed households than those in other parts of the city. That year, twelve of the Second Ward’s twenty-three African Americans lived in white headed households, presumably as servants, and seventeen of the First Ward’s sixty-eight African Americans lived in the homes of whites. Only nine of the Third Ward’s 111 African Americans, in contrast, lived in

\textsuperscript{29} 1840 Ms. Census.

\textsuperscript{30} For an account of the increase in Boston’s black residential concentration during the antebellum period, for instance, see Horton and Horton, \textit{Black Bostonians}, 4, 8.

\textsuperscript{31} No city directories, which alphabetically list that city’s residents along with their exact addresses, are known to have been published for Middletown before 1868. Moreover, early federal census records for Middletown do not specify the street, or, except for the 1840 census, even the ward in which residents lived. Only by painstakingly cross-referencing census records, fragmentary tax lists, land records, and maps, therefore, could a future researcher determine the precise residential distribution of Middletown’s early nineteenth century African Americans.

\textsuperscript{32} 1840 Ms. Census. I calculated these figures from the 1840 manuscript census schedules for Middletown.
white headed households. By this year, African Americans had established twenty-four independent households in this ward, nearly two thirds of the thirty-eight black headed households in all of Middletown.\(^{33}\)

By 1860, African American settlement in this neighborhood near the AME Zion Church had become even more prevalent. That year, the federal census counted thirty-three black headed households in Middletown.\(^{34}\) Though this census does not specify the wards in which Middletown’s residents lived, an 1865 fire warden’s report lists sixteen “colored” families, just less than half the city’s black headed families, as living in the ward where the AME Zion Church was located.\(^{35}\) Population figures by ward are the most detailed statistics available, but they do not fully illustrate the concentration of African American settlement immediately surrounding the AME Zion Church. By the 1860s, African Americans owned all ten properties on the triangle of land bordered by Cross Street, Swamp Street (today Knowles Avenue), and Park Street (today Vine Street), practically within sight of the AME Zion Church.\(^{36}\)

\(^{33}\) 1840 Ms. Census. I calculated these figures from the manuscript census schedules for Middletown. Middletown’s total African American population in 1840 was 230. While 202 lived in “Middletown City,” an additional twenty-eight African Americans lived in the “Town of Middletown,” which includes the present towns of Cromwell and Middlefield. While 63.3 percent of Middletown’s African Americans lived in independent households in 1820, that figure had risen to seventy-one percent in 1830 and seventy-nine percent in 1840.

\(^{34}\) 1860 Ms. Census. I calculated this figure from the manuscript census schedules for Middletown.

\(^{35}\) Annual Report of Fire Wardens for Fourth Ward, December 25, 1865, Common Council Packets, Unsorted, Middletown Town Clerk’s Office, Municipal Building, Middletown, CT. These early Common Council records may soon be transferred to Middletown’s Russell Library, which acquired most Middletown Common Council records in 2002. Due to the redrawing of ward boundaries, the AME Zion Church was now located in the fourth rather than third ward.

\(^{36}\) This neighborhood, recently named the Leverett Beman Historic District, has been enrolled as a site on the Connecticut Freedom Trail. See Janice P. Cunningham and Elizabeth A. Warner, Experiment in Community: An African American Neighborhood, Middletown Connecticut, 1847-1930 (Hartford, CT: Connecticut Historical Commission, 2002); For a map of this community, see Frederick W. Beers, County Atlas of Middlesex County, Connecticut: From Actual Surveys By and Under the Direction of F.W. Beers (New York: F.W. Beers & Company, 1874) as reprinted in Cunningham and Warner, Experiment in Community, 10.
During this period, African Americans in numerous northern cities likewise formed enclaves around their independent churches. In his study of African Americans in fifteen antebellum cities, Leonard Curry found that black churches were usually located in areas of most concentrated African American settlement. By the mid-nineteenth century, eight of New York’s ten black churches south of Fourteenth Street were located in or immediately bordered the fifth and eighth wards, the city’s areas of greatest black residential concentration, while all of Boston’s black churches were in the lower Beacon Hill area, home to almost two-thirds of the city’s blacks by 1860. This area of Boston, though not entirely segregated, was thought of as solidly black because of its high African American concentration, and, like Middletown’s predominantly black neighborhood, was commonly called “Nigger Hill” by whites.  

Unlike the frequently studied urban black communities in antebellum Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, the small size of Middletown’s African American population, which never exceeded 230 during the pre-Civil War period, allows us to trace the vital yet often overlooked kin networks that united nineteenth century African Americans. More than twenty years ago, anthropologist Shepard Krech III pointed to a discrepancy between historians’ and anthropologists’ recent findings on black families. Historians had concluded that nuclear families predominated among nineteenth century African Americans while anthropologists, in contrast, found that

38 In 1860, the nation’s largest African American populations were in Philadelphia, New York City, Brooklyn, and Cincinnati. The African American population of Philadelphia was 22,185, 3.9 percent of the total population; 12,472 in New York City, 1.5% of the total population; 4,313 in Brooklyn, 1.6 percent of the total population, and 3,737 in Cincinnati, 2.3% of the total population. See Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 2-3. Although these cities had black populations much larger than Middletown’s, the percentage of blacks in their total population is roughly comparable to the percentage in Middletown. In 1860, Middletown’s 173 African Americans were 2.01 percent of the city’s total population, 8,620.
extended kin networks and extended family organization prevailed among mid-twentieth century African Americans.

Despite historians’ recent findings, Krech asserted, several early twentieth century studies suggest that extended family had been equally important to nineteenth and early twentieth century African Americans. In his 1909 study *The Negro American Family*, W.E.B. DuBois referred to the existence in Georgia of “many small communities composed entirely of Negroes, which form clans of blood relatives.” T.J. Wootter, Jr. observed extended kinship ties among St. Helena (Sea Island) blacks in the 1920s. Complicated family relationships bound the several families who comprised each plantation while grandparents often took care of their grandchildren.\(^{39}\)

This discrepancy between historians’ and anthropologists’ findings, Krech pointed out, was due to historians’ primary reliance on nineteenth century federal census manuscript schedules, which reveal household composition but tell nothing about family relationships between those living in different households. To uncover nineteenth and early twentieth century African American kinship patterns, Krech stressed, historians must also turn to family and oral history. Applying these techniques to his study of a late nineteenth century rural black community in Talbot County, Maryland, where abolitionist Frederick Douglass had been a slave, Krech found that the African Americans who lived there formed a “kin community” in

---

which residents were linked to each other in complex ways through ties of blood and marriage.\footnote{Ibid., 442.}

In the two decades since Krech’s study, numerous historians have likewise traced the complex kin networks among slaves and former slaves in the nineteenth century rural South.\footnote{Among the most important works on kin networks among southern slaves is Dylan C. Penningroth’s \textit{The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth Century South} (Chapel Hill; London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).} Due to their primary focus on major urban centers, historians of African Americans in the antebellum North, however, have yet to determine the extent of kin networks in northern black communities. James and Lois Horton speculate based on federal census data that, following the typical chain migration pattern, blacks went to cities where relatives had already settled. Cincinnati’s 1850 and 1860 federal census records, the Hortons point out, reveal that migrants often boarded with hosts who shared their state of origin, suggesting that they were relatives or friends from home.\footnote{James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, \textit{In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks} (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 97. If any studies have explored kin networks among African American in the antebellum north in greater depth, I am not aware of them.} Yet, due to the large scale of the black community in Cincinnati and other urban centers, historians have not attempted to trace family relationships among these cities’ African Americans. While family relationships among residents of smaller northern African American communities would be easier to trace, the few works on these smaller towns have as yet failed to explore kin networks in any detail.\footnote{The only two major works on African Americans in non-urban areas in the antebellum North that I have found are Kathryn Grover’s \textit{Make A Way Somehow: African-American Life in a Northern Community, 1790-1965} (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), a comprehensive study of Geneva, New York’s African American community, and Graham Russell Hodge’s \textit{Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1865} (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1997). James and Lois Horton provide a general discussion of the}
The extended family networks visible among Middletown’s antebellum blacks, central to African American neighborhood and church formation in this city, therefore shed new light on this two decade long debate over the nature of nineteenth century African American families. Family history reveals that Middletown’s antebellum blacks, like their counterparts in nineteenth century rural Maryland, formed a “kin community” in which many community members were linked by ties of blood and marriage. These extended families’ sequence of migration to Middletown, moreover, confirms the Hortons’ speculation that antebellum northern blacks followed chain migration patterns, with migrants moving to cities where their relatives had already settled.

The chain migration of extended African American families to Middletown, as far as available evidence indicates, began in 1828. George W. Jeffrey, one of the first African Americans to own property in Middletown’s “Negro Hill” neighborhood, bought a house and quarter acre on Swamp Street, today Knowles Avenue, that year from Israel Bailey, a local white man who mortgaged property in this area to both whites and blacks.44 Four months later, George’s father, Asa Jeffrey, bought a house on an adjacent quarter acre at the corner of Swamp and Cross Streets.45 Originally from Lyme, Connecticut, a town twenty-eight miles down the

---

44 Middletown Land Records, Volume 56, Page 374.
45 Middletown Land Records, Volume 56, Page 519. In tracing the extended family networks among Middletown’s African Americans, I have relied heavily on the extensive research of Barbara W. Brown, James M. Rose, and Vicki S. Welch, all of whom have compiled genealogical data on hundreds of early nineteenth century Connecticut African Americans. For their genealogies of the Jeffrey family, see Vicki S. Welch, And They Were Related, Too: A Study of Eleven Generations of One American Family! (Xlibris Corporation, 2006); Barbara W. Brown and James M. Rose, Black Roots in Southeastern Connecticut, 1650-1900 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Company, 1980).
Connecticut River from Middletown, Asa moved to this city from the nearby town of East Haddam.\textsuperscript{46}

Dozens of African Americans likewise moved to Middletown from the Connecticut Valley’s agricultural villages and tiny port towns, especially East Haddam, Lyme, Colchester, Haddam, and Hebron, during the first decades of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{47} These migrants were part of a larger population movement within the state. Although Connecticut’s population remained predominately rural until the Civil War, the majority living in towns with less than three thousand inhabitants, a slow but steady stream of both whites and blacks migrated to the state’s cities during the early nineteenth century. While only eight percent of Connecticut’s population lived in cities in 1820, this figure had risen to approximately twelve percent by 1850.\textsuperscript{48} As one of only three Connecticut cities in 1820 with a population exceeding 5,000, Middletown was the busiest commercial center of the Connecticut Valley and the destination of hundreds of migrants.\textsuperscript{49} While there is no way to determine the exact number who migrated here, the federal census indicates that Middletown’s population increased from 6,479 in 1820 to 7,210 in 1840.\textsuperscript{50}

Although Middletown attracted both whites and blacks, the city must have been particularly appealing to African Americans. Middletown’s black population, which reached 211 in 1830, was the state’s fifth largest, exceeded only by that of

---

\textsuperscript{46} Brown and Rose, *Black Roots*, 208.

\textsuperscript{47} See Cunningham and Warner, *Experiment in Community*, 40-49 for the birthplaces of dozens of Middletown African Americans, many of them migrants from these towns.


\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}, 20.

\textsuperscript{50} 1820-1840 Census.
New Haven, Hartford, Stonington, and Greenwich. Moving to cities, where free blacks were concentrated, provided African Americans some security against racial hostility.

Middletown also offered African Americans employment aboard coastal and transatlantic vessels. One of the largest port towns in Connecticut, Middletown remained a significant shipping center throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. An 1819 gazetteer described the city as “delightfully situated on the west bank” of the Connecticut River with a “safe and commodious harbor” which offered “...advantages for maritime commerce, much greater than any other place upon the river.” Through the early nineteenth century, coasting vessels regularly shipped live stock, corn meal, and lumber from Middletown to New York and southern ports. As late as 1836, Middletown’s “coasting trade” with New York and other domestic ports was “still very great.”

As historian W. Jeffrey Bolster points out in his groundbreaking study of antebellum black seamen, maritime work, especially aboard coasting vessels, was central to the formation and maintenance of early nineteenth century black communities. One of the few occupations open to African American men, seafaring

52 Nash, Forging Freedom, 73.
53 Niles and Pease, A Gazetteer of the States of Connecticut and Rhode Island, 273-274
54 See David D. Field, A Statistical Account of the County of Middlesex; 9, 19, 44, 145, 147 for a contemporary description of shipping in Middletown; 1830 Census.
provided blacks with pay equal to that of whites in the same position as well as the relative security of steady employment for several months at a time. With these wages, both in Middletown and throughout the antebellum North, African American men maintained households, and, in some cases, managed to buy property.  

Attracted by the presence of relatives, a sizable black community, and, in many cases, maritime work, the Jeffreys’ extended family soon followed them to Middletown. In 1830, Fanny (Condol) Beman moved to Middletown from the nearby town of Colchester with her husband, Rev. Jehiel Beman, who had been appointed pastor of the city’s recently established AME Zion Church. The Bemans were distantly related to the Jeffreys, their daughter, Sarah, having married Asa Jeffrey’s nephew, Rev. Roswell Jeffrey, three years earlier. Like the Jeffreys, Fanny was originally from Lyme, Connecticut.

Several relatives of Asa Jeffrey and Fanny (Condol) Beman, all originally from Lyme, soon sold each other adjoining properties near Middletown’s AME Zion Church, thus laying the foundation for the “Negro Hill” neighborhood’s stable community of black homeowners. On May 15, 1833, Asa Jeffrey, a seaman, sold a portion of his property to Eunice Brooks. Eunice’s husband, Cornelius Brooks, was a relative of Asa’s brother-in-law, Herod Brooks, from Lyme. Eunice lived here until

---

58 Middletown Land Records, Volume 62, Page 141. The relationship between Asa Jeffrey and Eunice Brooks is unclear. Asa, however, was almost certainly related to Eunice’s husband, Cornelius Brooks, through Asa’s brother-in-law, Herod Brooks, of Lyme. Herod later moved to Vine Street in Middletown, very near the Jeffreys. The fact that Asa sold this property to Eunice instead of to both Eunice and her husband suggests, however, that he was also related to her. See Welch, *And They Were Related Too*, 28 for more on Herod Brooks.
her death in 1867 and bequeathed her house, which still stands at 9 Vine Street, to her children and grandchildren.59

Seamen’s protection certificates, issued sailors under a congressional act of 1796 to protect them from impressment, reveal that Herod Brooks, who also soon moved to Middletown’s “Negro Hill” neighborhood from Lyme, was a seaman.60 The day after Asa sold property to Eunice Brooks, he sold an adjoining piece of property to another distantly related seafaring family. Elizabeth (Condol) Henry, sister of Fanny (Condol) Beman and wife of Abiather Henry, a seaman, bought this property in 1833 and remained here until the 1860s.61 Since Asa Jeffrey, Abiather Henry, and Herod Brooks, three of the first black settlers of Middletown’s “Negro Hill” neighborhood, were all seamen, it is possible that these distant relatives worked together aboard ships. If this was the case, seafaring could have forged contact between these distant relatives and laid the groundwork for their chain migration to Middletown.

This chain migration of Asa Jeffrey’s and Fanny (Condol) Beman’s extended families continued throughout the 1830s. During this decade, four of Fanny (Condol) Beman’s other siblings bought property in Middletown’s “Negro Hill” neighborhood. In 1831, her brother, Nathan Condol, mortgaged “a small Dwelling House or

59 Eunice (Brooks) Cambridge Estate File, Connecticut State Library, 1864. At the time of Eunice’s death, what is today 9 Vine Street was 5 Park Street. See Eunice Cambridge’s will.
61 By 1833, then, Asa Jeffrey, George Jeffrey, Eunice Brooks, and Elizabeth (Condol) Henry owned four properties on the triangle of land bordered by Cross Street, Park Street (today Vine Street), and Swamp Street (today Knowles Avenue), recently designated the Leverett Beman Historic District. Middletown Land Records, Volume 63, Page 355; Middletown Land Records, Volume 64, Page 151. See Welch, And They Were Related Too, for the genealogy of the Condol family; Middletown Land Records, Volume 96, Page 129: On October 24, 1864, Elizabeth Henry and her son-in-law, Menominee L. Miami, received a mortgage on this property from Middletown’s Farmers and Mechanics Savings Bank.
tenement” only “about eighty rods” from the recently built “African Church.” In August 1834, shortly before leaving Middletown, he transferred this property’s mortgage to his twenty-four-year old nephew, his sister Fanny (Condo) Beman’s son Leverett Beman. Less than five years later, on April 12, 1836, George Garrison, husband of Fanny (Condo) Beman’s sister, Abigail, bought an acre of land “nearly opposite the African Church” from Israel Bailey, who had sold nearby property to George W. Jeffrey eight years earlier. The same day, Garrison sold half his new property to his wife’s brother, Daniel Condo. Finally, in 1834, Samuel Condo, the sixth Condo sibling to own property in Middletown, sold a house to Garrison, his sister Abigail’s husband.

The Condols’ father, Cuff Condo, had bought his freedom in Lyme, Connecticut in 1790, about three years before his daughter, Fanny (Condo) Beman, was born. Within four years of his emancipation, he had bought property in Lyme from Daniel Wright, a Native American possibly related to Cuff. In 1949, Joseph Caples, Cuff’s then seventy-five year old great-grandson, wrote in his family memoir that Cuff “acquired quite a bit of property” with the “support of his family.” As Caples recognized, African Americans’ family networks were crucial to their acquiring property, and, as the case of Middletown “Negro Hill” neighborhood demonstrates, establishing stable communities.

63 Middletown Land Records, Volume 65, Page 421.
64 Middletown Land Records, Volume 60, Page 392, as transcribed in Milo Wilcox Collection, MCHS.
65 Middletown Land Records, Volume 64, Page 394, as transcribed in Milo Wilcox Collection, MCHS.
66 Middletown Land Records, Volume 62, Page 563, as transcribed in Wilcox Collection, MCHS.
67 Welch, And They Were Related Too, 1-2.
In addition to underpinning this city's African American community, extended black family networks were also central to the formation and maintenance of Middletown's AME Zion Church. Historian James Horton observed that, in Boston's antebellum black community, families were often involved in civil rights, anti-slavery, or general social reform for generations. He points to numerous fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, and siblings who were leaders of this city's black community. Middletown's antebellum African American community illustrates that, while this is true, multiple family members were not merely involved in social reform. Instead, both nuclear and extended family networks were the very foundation for community organization.

As we have seen, Rev. Jehiel Beman, an African American Methodist preacher, moved to Middletown in 1830 with his wife, Fanny (Condol) Beman, and their children from the nearby town of Colchester to serve as pastor of the city's newly established AME Zion Church. Pastor of this church until 1838, Beman then moved on to head Boston's AME Zion Church. While his achievements as a community leader and abolitionist on the local, state, and national level have been discussed by several historians, we should not overlook the kin networks which fostered Beman's rise to leadership. As we have seen, Jehiel and Fanny's daughter, Sarah, was married to Rev. Roswell Jeffrey, nephew of Asa Jeffrey, who, along with

---

70 For a more detailed discussion of this congregation's establishment and Rev. Beman's ordination as Deacon and Elder of the AME Zion Church, see chapter two.
his son, George W. Jeffrey, bought property in Middletown in 1828.\textsuperscript{72} Middletown's AME Zion congregation, which was organized in 1822 but did not build its church until 1830, began to meet in George's home that year.\textsuperscript{73} Based on the Jeffreys' family ties to Beman and their early involvement in the AME Zion Church, it is likely that this distant family connection both attracted Beman to Middletown and facilitated his leadership in its African American church.

Beman was not the only community leader, however, whose family ties united him with this church. Joseph Gilbert, freed from slavery in Middletown in 1818, joined the city's AME Zion congregation in 1824, within two years of its organization.\textsuperscript{74} Two years later, on January 1, 1826, he married Beulah DeForest, from Saybrook, Connecticut, in Middletown's white Methodist church.\textsuperscript{75} By 1829, Beulah's brother, Ebenezer DeForest, had moved to Middletown from Saybrook, and, with Joseph, his brother-in-law, became a founding trustee of Middletown's AME Zion Church.\textsuperscript{76} Two of the church's other original trustees, Asa Jeffrey and George Jeffrey, were father and son. Of the fifteen men identified in land records as trustees of this church during the antebellum period, ten are known to be related to at least one other trustee by blood or marriage.\textsuperscript{77} Similarly, seven of the ten founding officers of

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{72} Welch, \textit{And They Were Related, Too}, 25-28; Brown and Rose, \textit{Black Roots}, 211.
\textsuperscript{73} Beers, \textit{History of Middlesex County, Connecticut}, 143.
\textsuperscript{74} See "Died," \textit{Liberator}, 22 October 1836 for Joseph Gilbert's obituary.
\textsuperscript{75} See Lorraine Cook White, ed., \textit{The Barbour Collection of Connecticut Town Vital Records}, (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2000) for Joseph Gilbert and Beulah DeForest's marriage records. Her name is misspelled "Beulah Forrice." Beulah married Hercules White, also a trustee of Middletown's AME Zion Church, after Joseph Gilbert's death. Beulah White, Estate File, Connecticut State Library, confirmed that she was Ebenezer DeForest's sister.
\textsuperscript{76} Middletown Land Records, Volume 57, Page 214-215.
\textsuperscript{77} See Middletown Land Records and the appendix of this thesis for a list of trustees; see Cook, ed, \textit{Barbour Collection}; Welch, \textit{And They Were Related, Too}; and Brown and Rose, \textit{Black Roots}, for family histories of these trustees. I determined from these sources that the following ten trustees were related by blood or marriage: Leverett C. Beman, Nathan Condol (Nathan's sister, Fanny, was Leverett's mother), Samuel Condol (Nathan Condol's brother), Robert Huntington (Robert married
\end{footnotes}
the Middletown Home Temperance Society, the city’s only African American social reform organization for which we have a complete list of officers, were related to at least one other officer by blood or marriage.  

**Sustaining Community: Families and Households**

While extended family networks were vital to African American community and church formation in Middletown, they were even more central to the maintenance of this city’s independent black households. This is not to deny that antebellum blacks aspired to create single, middle class family households. In his 1841 commentary on Philadelphia’s African American elite, Joseph Wilson, a black southerner, defined the relatively elite as those blacks whose income “enables them to maintain the position of householders, and their families in comparative ease and comfort.” Most single family black households, however, did not live in “ease and comfort” but instead depended on all adult family members to earn wages. Financial strains, moreover, forced many African Americans to form composite households with extended family members and sometimes unrelated boarders.

Although working class whites likewise took in relatives and boarders, forming composite households was an especially crucial survival strategy for African

---

Asa Jeffrey’s daughter, Beulah Jeffrey), Asa Jeffrey, George Jeffrey (Asa and George were father and son), Joseph Gilbert, Ebenezer DeForest (Joseph married Ebenezer’s sister, Beulah), Ebenezer DeForest’s niece, Mary Ann DeForest, married John Snipes, a relative of trustee George Snipes, Hercules White (Hercules was the second husband of Ebenezer’s sister, Beulah).

78 “Temperance Society,” *Liberator*, 11 May 1833. The following seven were related by blood or marriage: Rev. Jehiel Beman, Asa Jeffrey, Matthew M. Strong, Leverett C. Beman, Samuel Condol, George W. Jeffrey, Amos G. Beman. See *ibid* for genealogy of these families.


Americans. Faced with harsh job discrimination, African Americans were more likely to be poor than whites and were especially susceptible to the diseases which swept the working class sections of antebellum cities. During the 1820s, black mortality rates in New York and Philadelphia were almost double that of whites.\textsuperscript{82} From 1820 to 1860, historian Robert Warner calculated from vital records, the death rate for blacks in New Haven, Connecticut was likewise approximately double that of the white population.\textsuperscript{83} While no mortality statistics for Middletown’s antebellum African Americans have been compiled, it is reasonable to assume that the city’s black mortality rate at least somewhat exceeded that of whites.\textsuperscript{84}

Faced with poverty and disproportionately high death rates, federal census records reveal, many of Middletown’s African Americans took in extended family members and boarders as a much needed source of additional income. The 1850 census identifies 149 African Americans living in Middletown.\textsuperscript{85} Twenty-three of them lived in white headed households, where most worked as servants or laborers. Two additional African Americans, John Mortimer, age 68, and Peter Wilson, age 25, were among the inmates at the city’s poorhouse. Middletown’s remaining 124 African Americans, the census reveals, lived among twenty-nine black headed households.\textsuperscript{86} Nine of these twenty-nine households, or just over thirty-one percent,

\textsuperscript{82} Horton and Horton, \textit{In Hope of Liberty}, 91.
\textsuperscript{84} Although extant, antebellum Middletown death records do not always record the decedent’s race. Determining this city’s black mortality rate, therefore, would require extensive cross-checking of census and other documents that do indicate race.
\textsuperscript{85} 1850 Ms. Census. I calculated this figure from the manuscript census schedules for Middletown. This figure, like all Middletown census data in this thesis, includes “Middletown City” and “Middletown Town.”
\textsuperscript{86} The 1850 census enumerated individuals by “dwelling” and, within these dwellings, by “family.” By saying there were twenty-nine black headed households in Middletown in 1850 I mean that there were
included boarders. Composite African American households were not unique to Middletown. The 1850 census reveals that, in Boston, about one-third of black households likewise included boarders. Some of these boarders were actually relatives of the head of the household, but, since the 1850 and 1860 censuses do not specify the relationships between those living in each household, it is often impossible to distinguish relatives from non-relatives.

Yet we know that, in numerous cases, African Americans in Middletown lived with extended family members for mutual support. The 1850 census indicates that Charles Young, a thirty-two-year old waiter, his wife, Jane (Daniels) Young, and their one-year-old daughter, Charlotte, lived with Jane’s mother, Phebe, and two other relatives, probably Jane’s brother and sister. Within what historian Patrick Rael calls the “compressed social structure of the black North,” Young was relatively affluent.

At a time when only nine of Middletown’s African Americans were identified as real

twenty-nine black headed “families.” In all instances, except that of the Charles Rue family, the race of the household head and that of their family correspond. Charles Rue, a 39-year-old black sailor born in Connecticut, was listed as having a white wife. Although the birth record of one of their children likewise records her race as white, no additional information on this couple has been found. Racial classifications, however, both those recorded by census takers and those individuals chose for themselves, were often based on numerous and complex social factors. The preface to William Grimes’s autobiography, first published in Litchfield, Connecticut in 1824, states that “he is married to a black woman, and passes for a negro, though three parts white....” See William Grimes, Life of William Grimes, The Runaway Slave in Five Black Lives. New Haven, CT: Published by the Author, 1855. Reprint, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 61.

87 1850 Ms. Census. I calculated this figure from the manuscript census schedules for Middletown. In defining boarders, I have adopted the following methodology of James and Lois Horton and Horton: “Since the censuses of 1850 and 1860 do not designate the relationship of household members to the head of the household, those adults with different family names from the household head have been considered boarders. In some cases these boarders may have actually been relatives of the household head or of the spouse of the household head. Speculation on relationships to the household head beyond the immediate family has not generally been attempted because of...low reliability. Boarders, then, include both unrelated individuals and families and adult members of the extended family. Adults with the same family name, other than the spouse of the household head, were also considered boarders.” See Black Bostonians, 149-150. The following individuals, their names re-arranged in alphabetical order, headed the nine African American Middletown households which included boarders: J.C. Benham [Beman], John Canberly [Cambridge], Henry Daniels, Eve Hamilton, Emily Jackson, Mary A. Jeffrey, Roger Megor, Rachel Stanton, Charles Young.

88 Horton and Horton, Black Bostonians, 16.
89 Rael, Black Identity and Black Protest, 23.
estate owners, he owned two pieces of property, including a house, barn, and a total of eleven acres.  

After Young died in December 1850, leaving his wife, Jane, with their one-year-old daughter and expecting a second child in April, she depended on her mother to survive. Twelve years after her husband's death, she and her mother, now seventy years old, continued to live together. Even with their combined wages for "tak[ing] in washing and ironing" and the financial help of three boarders, possibly relatives, Jane and her mother needed to ask the city for "a little coal" to heat their house through the winter of 1862-1863.

Housing trends following the depression of 1857, historians James Horton and Lois Horton emphasize in their study of blacks in antebellum Boston, are particularly illustrative of the economic support that extended African American families provided. Between 1850 and 1860, the Hortons found, the percentage of blacks in Boston who boarded with relatives more than tripled. Census records suggest that Middletown's African Americans similarly turned to their relatives to cope with worsening economic conditions following the depression of 1857. Between 1850 and 1860, the percentage of African American households in Middletown which included boarders rose from thirty-one percent to just over forty-eight percent, with sixteen of Middletown's thirty-three African American headed households including boarders.

---

90 1850 Ms. Census; Charles Young Estate File, Connecticut State Library; Cook, ed., Barbour Collection.
91 1860 Ms. Census. The three boarders were Augustus Carter, age 32, Charles Carter, age 12, and Henry Carter, age 9, all listed in this census as black and born in Connecticut, Middletown Selectmen's Records, Selectman's Account Book, 1861-1867, page 47, MCHS.
92 Horton and Horton, Black Bostonians, 17.
93 Horton and Horton, Black Bostonians, 16.
94 1860 Ms. Census.
While the 1850 census recorded no married couples living together in the household of one of their parents, this census showed two such families. Rather than starting their own households, possibly because of economic hardship, Fanny Sullivan, her husband, Henry Sullivan, and their two infant children lived with Fanny’s parents, Joseph and Almira Daniels. Similarly, Mary Ann Snipes and her husband, John Snipes, lived with her parents, Asahel and Abigail DeForest.95

As we have seen, extended family networks both drove African American chain migration to Middletown and laid the groundwork for this city’s autonomous black neighborhood and church. In uncovering these networks through family history research, this case study sheds new light on the role of extended black families in the antebellum North. No comparable studies have been done on other antebellum northern black communities, making it is impossible to determine whether black kinship networks played an equally significant role elsewhere.

Applying the family history techniques used in this study to other communities, therefore, may provide a new understanding of nineteenth century northern black life. It is possible that in other communities extended black family networks, although often invisible to historians, were equally central to African Americans’ struggle to create independent neighborhoods and churches. As we will see in chapter two, the church forged by Middletown’s network of largely interrelated African American families remained the center of black community building and activism in Middletown throughout the antebellum period.

95 1860 Ms. Census.
Chapter 2

"...That Zion Here May Prosper": The Community and the Church

While traveling through Connecticut in September 1841, W.P. Johnson visited Middletown to recruit subscribers to the Colored American, the black New York newspaper for which he was an agent. "My expectations were not fully realized," he complained in a letter to the newspaper's editor. Although Middletown's African American population had reached 230 by 1840, its highest point until the Great Migration of the 1920s and 1930s brought a new wave of migrants from the South, Johnson found "few...men and women" working for the "improvement" of their race. Instead, "four or five of them have to do most all the work in both Church and State, whilst others do comparatively nothing, yet participate equally in the benefits."1

As Johnson correctly observed, the same small group of men and women who led Middletown's AME Zion Church also tirelessly organized for civil rights on the local and state level. This is not surprising considering that, in Middletown and throughout the antebellum North, independent black churches were foundations for African American activism and community leadership. Yet, in dismissing the work of other African Americans from Middletown as "comparatively nothing," Johnson overlooked the crucial support they provided these leaders. Their efforts, combined with the vital leadership of a handful of Middletown's African Americans, sustained

1 Colored American, 20 November 1841; 1840 United States Federal Census. Middletown's African American population consistently decreased from 1840 until 1930, when the census shows an African American population of 227, nearly four times higher than Middletown's 1920 African American population of 57.
this city’s AME Zion Church as a basis for black activism. As the city’s only African American institution, moreover, this church simultaneously played a perhaps equally important role as the center of cross-class black community building in antebellum Middletown.

**African Americans and Methodism**

In his 1881 autobiography, abolitionist Frederick Douglass vividly recalled his conversion to Methodism fifty years earlier. Then an enslaved thirteen year old in Maryland, longing “in my loneliness and destitution for some one to whom I could go, as to a father and protector,” a white Methodist minister showed Douglass that “in God I had such a friend.”² As the Second Great Awakening swept the nation, thousands of African Americans, enslaved and free, likewise converted. Proselytizing through informal camp meetings and revivals, Methodists and Baptists were extremely successful at converting African Americans. The number of black Methodists, less than 2,000 in 1787, had grown to over 40,000 by 1815, by which time there were an equal number of Baptists. While these Evangelical sects also appealed widely to whites, with Methodists becoming the largest religious body in the United States by 1844, blacks were especially drawn to their doctrinal beliefs.³ In

---

1784, American Methodists denounced slave trading and slave holding in their
discipline and polity, reasserting their founder John Wesley's anti-slavery views. Moreover, in emphasizing the individual's capacity for direct contact with God rather
than church hierarchy and doctrine, Methodist and Baptist preachers stressed that
blacks could be chosen by God to preach the gospel of freedom and justice.5

Despite their doctrine of equality before God, Methodist and other white
churches were as racist as secular institutions. Segregated seating, increasingly
prevalent since the late eighteenth century, was virtually universal even in Methodist
churches by the 1830s.6 Partially spurred by their confinement to "negro pews,"
African Americans began to establish independent churches throughout the North. In
1794, Absalom Jones split with a white Methodist church to found the first
independent black church in the United States, St. Thomas Protestant Episcopal
Church of Philadelphia.7 African Americans in that city dedicated Bethel Church, the
nation's first black Methodist church, just days later.8

During the next two decades, blacks' establishment of independent Methodist
churches became so widespread that, by 1816, a dozen black churchmen could meet
in Philadelphia to formally incorporate themselves as the African Methodist
Episcopal (AME) Church, the first independent black denomination in the United

---

7 Horton and Horton, In Hope of Liberty, 139.
8 Ibid., 139.
States.9 With Richard Allen, the former slave who had founded Bethel Church, as their first bishop, the AME Church immediately dispatched emissaries across the northern states, absorbing congregations in New York, New Jersey, eastern and central Pennsylvania, and Maryland within five years.10

In July 1820, after voting to formally separate from the white Methodist Episcopal Church, New York’s Zion Church refused to join Allen’s already well established AME denomination, “being dissatisfied with their general manner of proceedings.”11 Publishing its own Discipline three months later, Zion Church instead established itself as the head of a new denomination, later named the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church.12 Though antebellum African Americans joined various denominations, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church held unrivaled popularity. In the northern states before 1860, blacks established 238 Methodist churches, including 192 African Methodist Episcopal churches and forty-six African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches, compared with about seventy-five black Baptist churches. Other

---

9 Ibid., 141.
denominations trailed far behind, with only twenty-one black Presbyterian churches and a mere two known black Episcopal churches.13

African American Methodism:

A Foundation for Activism in Middletown

Having established themselves in 1820 as head of the independent AME Zion denomination, Zion Church immediately dispatched preachers to invite existing black Methodist congregations to join this denomination.14 By their first yearly conference, which opened on June 21, 1821, the denomination included six congregations.15 The black Methodist society in New Haven, Connecticut, the smallest of these six, had joined in 1820.16

Middletown’s AME Zion congregation, which still worships on Cross Street in this city, was formed two years later as this denomination’s ninth or tenth congregation.17 On September 5, 1822, the Middlesex Gazette, Middletown’s first newspaper, announced that “an African Methodist Minister” was “appointed to preach at the North School House in this city” the following Sunday.18 It is likely that this unnamed minister was New Haven’s AME Zion preacher, Rev. James Anderson,

13 Horton and Horton, in Hope of Liberty, 144.
14 Ibid., A Short Account of the Rise and Progress of the African M.E. Church in America, 48.
15 Ibid., 69-71.
16 Ibid., 49.
17 Several sources state that Middletown’s AME Zion Church was the denomination’s third. This isn’t true. At the First Yearly Conference, held June 21, 1821, there were six churches: Zion Church in New York, Asbury Church in New York, New Haven, Long Island, Wesleyan Church in Philadelphia, and Easton, Pennsylvania. See Walls, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 122; by the Second Annual Conference, held July 18, 1822, there were two more: Newark and Harlem (founded 1822), see Walls, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 123-124; by the Third Annual Conference, held May 21, 1823, Providence’s AME Zion Church (established during the 1822-1823 year) and Middletown’s AME Zion Church, established during the same year, had joined the connection. See Walls, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 125.
18 Middlesex Gazette, (Middletown) 5 September 1822.
and that he helped found Middletown’s AME Zion congregation during this visit to Middletown.\textsuperscript{19} Eight months later, at the AME Zion Church’s third yearly conference, Anderson reported that a “small society of twenty-one members at Middletown” was “joined together within the last year.”\textsuperscript{20}

Like other independent black churches, Middletown’s AME Zion Church was established partially in response to racism. Consistent with almost universal practice, Middletown’s white Methodist church relegated African Americans to segregated, inferior seating. In 1829, its trustees reserved pews in their new church, dedicated the following year, for “colored people.”\textsuperscript{21} Yet, like black churches throughout the nation, Middletown’s AME Zion Church was more than just a racially separate version of its white counterpart.\textsuperscript{22} Beginning with the first independent black congregations in the 1790s and continuing well into the twentieth century, African American churches countered racism with what historian Elizabeth Rauh Bethel calls a “theology of liberation.” While appropriating the doctrines of Evangelical Christianity, antebellum African American church leaders applied the Gospel to the daily social and political needs of their oppressed parishioners.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{19} David Field states that “This church was organized by Rev. James Anderson, a colored clergyman of New Haven in 1828” in David D. Field, D.D., Centennial Address by David D. Field, D.D. with Historical Sketches of Cromwell, Portland, Chatham, Middle-Haddam, Middletown and its Parishes (Middletown, CT: Wm. B. Casey, 1853), 183. The same account that “In 1828, Rev. James Anderson, a Methodist minister, from New Haven, organized the church...” is also found in J.D. Beers, History of Middlesex County, Connecticut, With Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men (New York: J.D. Beers & Co., 1884), 143.

\textsuperscript{20} Rush, A Short Account of the Rise and Progress of the African M.E. Church in America, 79-80.

\textsuperscript{21} Records of the Trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1829-1840, Archives of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church, Middletown, CT. I am indebted to Mary Jane Dapkus for providing me this citation from her dissertation research notes.

\textsuperscript{22} Horton and Horton, In Hope of Liberty, 149-150.

\textsuperscript{23} Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, The Roots of African-American Identity: Memory and History in Free Antebellum Communities (New York: St. Martin’s Press), 53, 68.
From its inception, the leaders of Middletown’s AME Zion Church likewise challenged slavery and racism through this empowering interpretation of the Bible. While no official sermons by this church’s pastors are known to survive, Rev. Jehiel Beman, the pastor from its dedication in 1830 until 1838, and his second wife, Nancy (Scott) Beman, submitted informal sermons to the *Liberator* in 1831. Upon reading this abolitionist newspaper’s “painful account” of a Brazilian slave ship, where 562 African captives were “branded, like sheep...under their breasts, or on their arms” with a “red-hot iron” and crammed into a “space so low” that they were incapable of “changing their position, by night or day,” Nancy Beman felt “induced to write a few lines of encouragement to us as a people.”

She quoted St. Peter’s revelation, consistent with white Methodist doctrine, that “…God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation, he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him.”

Although many white churches preached this message of equality before God, Nancy Beman, like countless African American activists, insisted that the Scriptures also promised equality on earth. Because “the same God that made them, hath made us,” whites had no right to enslave those “as good, by nature” as themselves. God, therefore, was on the side of the enslaved. “The God who delivered Daniel from the lion’s den, who protected the three men in the fiery furnaces, and did not suffer so

---

24 See “Horrors of the Slave Trade,” *Liberator*, 23 July 1831 for this account of a Brazilian slave ship. See “To the People of Color. By A Colored Lady,” *Liberator*, 27 August 1831 for Nancy Beman’s reply. While only identified as “a colored lady” from Middletown, the author was almost certainly Nancy Beman. Her husband, who William Lloyd Garrison referred to as “our highly esteemed friend the Rev. Mr. Beman” in the August 11, 1832 issue of the *Liberator*, was Middletown’s only known African American contributor to the *Liberator* during this period. Moreover, on August 1, 1831, three days after this article was written, a “short sermon” based on the same Biblical passage was submitted from Middletown to the *Liberator*, almost certainly written by Rev. Jehiel Beman.

much as a hair on their heads to be injured,” Nancy Beman promised, “is still the same.” She urged “the people of color” to pray, as she did daily, that God would use this power to “send deliverance to the captives, and enlighten the hearts of slaveholders.” And, above all, she insisted that “although men may bind our bodies, they cannot bind our souls.”

Three years later, Nancy Beman put her antislavery message into practice. In 1834, she and her step daughter-in-law, Clarissa Beman, established Middletown’s Colored Female Anti-Slavery Society, one of the nation’s first black female antislavery societies. Remarkably, by 1837, as many as sixty-four percent of Middletown’s African American women, forty-seven in all, were members.

Rev. Jehiel Beman was equally active in spreading the abolitionist message to his parishioners. His submission to the *Liberator* insisted that African Americans’ prayers could bring about divine eradication of both slavery and racial prejudice. In doing so, he applied the Gospel to the immediate political realities and concerns African Americans faced. By the end of the 1820s, nearly all northern whites viewed blacks as a uniformly “degraded” race. Numerous repressive measures, both legal and

---

27 Letter From J.C. Beman, *Emancipator*, 25 September 1837 states that during this society’s recent meeting in Middletown’s AME Zion Church: “The constitution of the Society was read, and thirteen became members- whole number now belonging to the society is 47.” The 1840 census, which classifies residents by age group, reports that 64 of Middletown’s 230 black residents were women over the age of 24. The 47 members of Middletown’s Colored Female Anti-Slavery Society therefore represent 73 percent of these women. While it is possible that women younger than 24 were members of the society, they are not included in this analysis because the 1840 census categorized women age ten through 24 together, making it impossible to determine how many adult women younger than 24 lived in Middletown in 1840. Nancy Beman, available records reveal, was president of Middletown’s Colored Female Anti-Slavery Society while her daughter-in-law, her step-son Leverett Beman’s wife Clarissa, was secretary. For what unfortunately scant additional information is available on this society, see Charles H. Wesley, “The Negro in the Organization of Abolition,” *Phylon* 2, (3rd Qtr., 1941), 229, 232; Horatio T. Strother, *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 154; Joseph L. Yannielli, “Truly This is Our Home: The Political Culture of Abolitionism and the Case of Connecticut, 1827-1848,” B.A. Thesis, Wesleyan University, 2005, 160-161.
extralegal, accompanied this solidification of racial caste. By 1832, every northern state legislature had endorsed the American Colonization Society’s plan to resettle free blacks in the African colony of Liberia, a movement black leaders insisted would perpetuate slavery by eliminating the nation’s outspoken free black population.

Meanwhile, during the 1820s and early 1830s, white mobs attacked black neighborhoods throughout the North, including Middletown. Rev. Jehiel Beman’s son, Leverett Beman, later recalled seeing this city’s African American neighborhood on Cross Street “…crowded with those worse than southern bloodhounds.”28 Cincinnati’s race riot of 1829, meanwhile, was so devastating that several hundred of the city’s African Americans fled to Canada in its wake.29

In the same way whites increasingly proscribed blacks during the 1820s and early 1830s, Jehiel Beman’s submission to the Liberator suggested, the Jews of the New Testament initially believed that “God would never extend his favor to the Gentiles.” Perhaps Beman alluded to Cincinnati’s black refugees when he wrote “how ought we to live; who are considered Gentiles, or strangers and foreigners without any abiding place or continuing city?” Through prayer, Beman implied, African Americans could bring about the divine overthrow of racial caste. Although a Gentile, Cornelius prayed to the Lord, and, Beman insisted, “the Lord heard,” revealing to St. Peter by a vision that God accepts those of “every nation” that “feareth Him and worketh righteousness.” In Cornelius, Beman found “…encouragement to continue in prayer,” hoping that the “praying number be increased…”30

28 “In Memory of Mr. Garrison,” The Constitution (Middletown), 3 June 1879.
30 “A Short Sermon,” Liberator, 20 August 1831.
This church and its Gospel of liberation were central to the politicization of Middletown’s African Americans. At the third black national convention, held in Philadelphia in June 1833, William Levington, an African American Episcopal minister from Baltimore, recommended “a monthly concert of prayer among our people throughout the U.S.” Two months later, Wesleyan University student and abolitionist Samuel P. Dole reported to the Liberator that “our colored friends” met in Middletown’s AME Zion Church to “pray for their brethren now in servitude.” Led by Rev. Jehiel Beman, “all present seemed to realize the importance of offering up petitions for the oppressed...” During the following three decades, this “praying number” would provide crucial support to the activism spearheaded by the Bemans.

Middletown’s AME Zion Church and Elite Community Leaders

Historian Horatio Strother rightfully called Rev. Jehiel Beman the “guiding spirit” of Middletown’s AME Zion church. In May 1830, the same month this church was dedicated, Beman traveled to New York for the AME Zion Church’s tenth yearly conference. Here he was ordained a Deacon and Elder to “serve the Church” in Middletown after this church “recommended to the Conference” that he fill these positions. In going to the conference, he left his first wife, Fanny (Condol)

---

32 “Prayer for the Oppressed,” Liberator, 7 September 1833.
34 Rush, A Short Account of the Rise and Progress of the African M.E. Church in America, 85.
Beman, “very ill at home” in Middletown. Afraid she was dying, he left the conference early. Less than three months later, she died at the age of 37 and was buried in the cemetery on Vine Street, practically within sight of Middletown’s AME Zion Church. A faded, white marble slab decorated with a weeping willow tree, the second oldest surviving gravestone in the African American section of this cemetery, still marks her grave.

Perhaps he remembered leaving his wife during her last sickness when, in 1832, he wrote that “for a number of years, my time, my all” has been “consecrated” to the AME Zion Church. Earlier this year, though the term of his appointment there had ended, he requested to remain with Middletown’s church as a missionary for another year. “I feel as much as ever for this people,” he wrote in a letter to the Liberator. “My earnest prayer to God is that Zion here may prosper.” He remained this church’s pastor for another six years, only leaving in 1838 to become the first pastor of Boston’s AME Zion Church. After Jehiel’s move to Boston, his son, Leverett, and daughter-in-law, Clarissa, followed by Leverett’s son, Charles, and daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, would remain pillars of Middletown’s AME Zion Church and leading activists of this city’s African American community for three quarters of a century.

An almost completely forgotten group of dedicated individuals, however, helped the Bemans sustain Middletown’s AME Zion Church and the political

---

35 Ibid., 85.
37 "Reply to ‘A Methodist of the Old Episcopal Church,’” Liberator, 11 August 1832.
38 “A Voice From the First Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Boston,” Liberator, 27 July 1838.
39 Charles Beman, community and church leader, lived in Middletown until his death in 1915.
activism with which this church was closely tied. In 1829, then twenty-eight year old Ebenezer DeForest and four other founding trustees bought the lot where Middletown’s AME Zion Church would soon be built.\(^{40}\) Thirty-six years later, Ebenezer, then sixty-four, was still a trustee.\(^{41}\) Even after he moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts in the late 1860s, his descendants remained in Middletown and played leading roles in Middletown’s AME Zion Church.\(^{42}\) Joseph Gilbert, brought from Bermuda to the United States in 1801 as a five year old slave, joined the AME Zion Church in 1824, just two years after its organization. A founding trustee, Gilbert both served as trustee and led the church’s weekly class meetings, a Methodist practice in which church members publicly “talk of God and His Goodness,” till his death in 1836.\(^{43}\)

Other church leaders joined the Bemans in activism on both the local and state level. The leadership of the Middletown Home Temperance Society, founded in 1833 with Rev. Jehiel Beman as president, the only black Middletown moral reform society for which we have a complete list of officers, reveals the community activism of these church leaders. The officers of this temperance society included a president, two vice presidents, a treasurer, secretary, and five directors. Three of the church’s five founding trustees, Joseph Gilbert, Asa Jeffrey, and George W. Jeffrey, were among these ten officers while two other officers, Leverett Beman and Samuel Condol, would become trustees later.\(^{44}\)

\(^{40}\) Middletown Land Records, Volume 57, pages 214-216; age determined from listing on 1850 Ms. Census.

\(^{41}\) Middletown Land Records, Volume 101, pages 510-511.

\(^{42}\) “Old Folks’ Concert,” The Constitution (Middletown) 9 February 1876, lists Mrs. C. DeForest as a church concert committee member.

\(^{43}\) “Died,” Liberator, 22 October 1836; Walls, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 98.

\(^{44}\) “Temperance Society,” Liberator, 11 May 1833.
Officers of Middletown’s AME Zion Church were also central to antebellum black activism on the state level. In September 1849, delegates from across Connecticut gathered at the New Haven church of Rev. Amos Beman, Rev. Jehiel Beman’s son, for the first “Connecticut Convention of Colored Men.” Two years earlier, a referendum to amend the state’s 1818 constitution to grant black suffrage had been defeated three to one. These delegates, primarily concerned with gaining the franchise, met to “consider our Political condition, and to devise measures for our elevation and advancement.” Although Rev. Jehiel Beman served as the convention’s president, we should not overlook that he was joined by seven delegates from Middletown, five of whom were trustees of this city’s AME Zion Church.

The officers of Middletown’s AME Zion Church seem to have been equally central to the second state convention, held in 1854. Rev. Jehiel Beman again served as president while his son, Leverett Beman, and Elum Freeman, both trustees of this church, arranged for this convention’s adjourned meeting in Middletown later that year.

---

47 Delegates from Middletown were George Garrison, Elum C. Freeman, George Snipes, H.A. Thompson, Jehiel C. Beman, Leverett C. Beman, Robert C. Huntington, and Charles Daniels. Middletown land records reveal that Freeman, Snipes, Leverett Beman, Huntington, and Daniels all served as trustees of Middletown’s AME Zion Church. It is possible that Garrison and Thompson were trustees but do not appear in land records. Proceedings of the Connecticut State Convention, of Colored Men, Held at New Haven, on the September 12th and 13th, 1849 (New Haven, CT: William H. Stanley, Printer, 1849), 1; Middletown Land Records.
48 Ibid., 4. Robert Huntington, Charles Daniels, Leverett Beman, Elum Freeman, and George Snipes were trustees of the AME Zion Church. Though delegates George Garrison and H.A. Thompson do not appear in available land records, they were probably officers of the AME Zion Church as well. Two of Garrison’s brother-in-laws, Nathan Condol and Samuel Condol, were trustees of this church.
49 “Notice,” Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 18 August 1854; “Circular,” Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 1 September 1854.
As the place of these and other church leaders within Middletown’s African American community illustrates, church leadership, political activism, and elite status were closely linked in antebellum black communities. Among white Americans, class definitions based on occupation solidified by the 1830s, with new, non-manual occupations largely defining the emerging middle class. African Americans, faced with harsh job discrimination, were much more restricted in their occupational mobility. In Boston, the most racially segregated city in the country by 1860, nearly 80 percent of free blacks were limited to jobs that required few or no skills.

Conditions were similar in Middletown. Thirty of this city’s thirty-six African Americans recorded in the 1850 census as working were engaged in unskilled or semiskilled occupations. Of the forty-one African American Middletown families recorded in this census, thirty-seven were headed by those engaged in this type of work. The exceptions were the Beman, Rand, and West families. Both Rev. Jehiel Beman and his son, Leverett, were shoe makers, a skilled trade. Philo Rand and Daniel Rand, possibly brothers, held skilled work as bridle makers while the census lists another member of this family, twenty-seven-year old Robert Rand, as a student. P.W. West was then pastor of Middletown’s AME Zion Church, considered a professional level occupation. (See Appendix D)

---

52 1850 Ms. Census. These classifications follow the model of Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 139-140. Although many African American women worked as domestic servants, laundresses, seamstresses, etc., the 1860 federal census was the first to record their occupations.
The church, more than the workplace, was therefore central to the development of diverging black middle and working classes during the antebellum period. By the early 1830s, those involved with moral reform efforts, which were closely linked to the church, were associated with the growing black middle class. As James Campbell argues in his study of the AME Church, early black churches were "vehicles of class differentiation." In Middletown, the activities of its black church leaders demonstrate that middle class status among African Americans was likewise tied to church leadership and moral reform activity. While Middletown's AME Zion Church, the city's only antebellum black church, left no known nineteenth century records; city land records recorded the names of its trustees each time it was involved in a property transaction. In total, these records reveal the names of twenty-seven men and one woman who served as trustees between 1829 and 1897, fifteen of whom were trustees during the antebellum period. (See appendix H) The Discipline

53 Harris, In the Shadow of Slavery, 119-121.
54 Nash, Forging Freedom, 217-218.; Campbell, Songs of Zion, 15.
55 I searched manuscript indices of Middletown deeds, including grantors and grantees indices, for the years 1821-1900, uncovering the following AME Zion Church land transactions: Volume 57 pages 135-136: Henry Paddock sold property AME Zion Church, March 17, 1829; Volume 57 pages 214-216: Eliza A. Ward mortgaged property to AME Zion Church, September 7, 1829; Volume 57 pages 326-327: Henry Paddock sold property to AME Zion Church, October 26, 1829; Volume 65 page 89: Eliza A. Ward quit claimed property to AME Zion Church, December 29, 1836; Volume 73, page 260: Ferdinand A. Hart and Jesse G. Baldwin quite claimed property to AME Zion Church, April 8, 1844; Volume 79, pages 500-501, AME Zion Church leased property to Nathan H. Burnham, December 22, 1852; Volume 95, pages 58-59: Abigail Stanton and AME Zion Church agreed to share cost for installing well on the boundary of their properties, September 7, 1865; Volume 95, pages 59-60: Mary Allen sold property in trust to AME Zion Church, November 2, 1865; Volume 95, pages 61-62: Mary Allen mortgaged property to AME Zion Church, November 2, 1865; Volume 98, page 340: Farmers' and Mechanics' Savings Bank mortgaged property to AME Zion Church, September 4, 1867; Volume 98 page 422: Caleb Johnson and Davis N. Arnold mortgaged property to AME Zion Church, December 3, 1867; Volume 101, pages 269-270: Mary Allen Thomas Beman (formerly Mary Allen) and Amos G. Beman transferred mortgage of AME Zion Church to Eliza A. Worthington, February 6, 1872; Volume 101 pages 510-511: Eliza A. Worthington transfers mortgage of AME Zion Church property to Alfred Powers, trustee, June 2, 1873; Volume 116, page 426: Eliza A. Worthington sold property to AME Zion Church, August 27, 1888; Volume 117, page 565: Middletown Savings Bank quit claimed property to AME Zion Church, February 10, 1897; Volume 118, page 136, AME Zion Church quite claimed property to Eliza A. Worthington, July 30, 1888; Volume 121, page 426: City of
of the AME Zion Church directs that trustees meet with their pastor monthly to determine local church management and fund distribution. Because of this vital role within the church, it is reasonable to consider these trustees representative leaders of Middletown’s AME Zion Church.

Nearly three decades ago, historians James Horton and Lois Horton found that antebellum black leaders and activists were usually from the most “stable, economically secure elements of the community.” Historian Patrick Rael’s recent study, however, is the first comprehensive economic profile of these leaders. Though he acknowledges the limited economic opportunity available to northern free blacks, Rael argues that property ownership, among other factors, imparted elite status within antebellum African American society. Sampling sixty-five African American leaders from five cities spread geographically throughout the North—Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Detroit—who attended black state and national conventions in the North between 1830 and 1865, Rael found that, while just under twenty-two percent (1,104) of all African Americans in these five cities claimed to own real or personal property on the federal census, over half of these sixty-five leaders were property owners.

Middletown charged sewer lien on AME Zion Church property, March 30, 1895; Volume 122, page 568; Caleb Johnson quit claimed property to AME Zion Church, February 26, 1897; Volume 122, page 569; Alfred Powers quit claimed property to AME Zion Church, March 10, 1897; Volume 124, page 384; Farmers’ and Mechanics’ Savings Bank quit claimed property to AME Zion Church, March 4, 1897; Volume 125, page 153; Wilbur O. Atwater mortgaged property to AME Zion Church, February 11, 1897. All original deeds and deed indices are on file at the Town Clerk’s Office, Municipal Building, Middletown, CT. Microfilm copies of most indices and land records are available at the Russell Library, Middletown, CT.

56 Horton and Horton, Black Bostonians, 53.
57 Rael, Black Identity and Black Protest, 39.
58 Ibid., 39.
Property ownership was an even more pronounced characteristic of the Middletown AME Zion Church's activist leaders. Of the fifteen men identified in antebellum city land records as trustees of Middletown's AME Zion Church, thirteen were located in Middletown probate, land, or 1850 or 1860 federal census records, all of which provide information on property ownership. Twelve of these thirteen, over ninety-two percent, owned property. 59 This is especially remarkable since only 11.7 percent of blacks in the entire North, and just under thirteen percent (22) of African Americans in Middletown, claimed to own property on the 1860 federal census. 60 Historian Gary Nash might as well have been describing Middletown's elite church leaders when he characterized antebellum Philadelphia's "respectable" black families as owning property and serving as trustees and elders of their churches. 61

The Church and the Community

Historians widely assert that, despite social stratification within antebellum black communities, independent black churches, especially Methodist and Baptist congregations, appealed widely to African Americans of all classes. 62 African American church attendance in Providence, Rhode Island approximately doubled after independent black churches were formed while an 1836 survey of Boston's

---

59 Middletown Land Records, Microfilm, Russell Library, Middletown, CT; Middletown District Estate Files, Connecticut State Library; 1850 Ms. Census; 1860 Ms. Census.
60 Rael, Black Identity and Black Protest, 23; 1860 Ms. Census. The 1860 federal census manuscripts identify twenty-two of Middletown's 173 African Americans, 12.7 percent, as property owners.
62 There is broad historical consensus on the inter-class appeal of black churches. Though historian James T. Campbell claims that independent black churches were "vehicles of class differentiation," he acknowledges that they were simultaneously "bulwarks of racial solidarity" in Songs of Zion, 15; Gary Nash found that, especially during the first decades of the nineteenth century, elite and middle class African Americans worshipped alongside the "humblest parishioners," including recently emancipated slaves from the South, in Philadelphia's black Methodist and Baptist Churches in Forging Freedom, 222; see also Horton and Horton, Black Bostonians, 46.
black families showed that over a quarter of males and more than two-fifths of females were "connected with churches." In 1832, two years after he was appointed pastor of this recently dedicated church, Rev. Jehiel Beman reported that his "Sabbath and evening meetings" were "well attended" and that Middletown's African Americans were "generally moral and strict in their observance of the Sabbath, and punctual in attending its institutions." While the membership of Middletown's AME Zion Church was reported at fifty in 1845, about a quarter of the city's African American population, it is possible that, by 1852, as many as two-thirds of Middletown's African Americans attended services there.

The obituary of Amster Dingle, a leader of Middletown's AME Zion Church, further illustrates this church's cross-class appeal. Born in Delaware, possibly a slave, Dingle moved to Middletown around 1852 when he was about twenty-one years old. Within two years, he "held an official position" in the city's AME Zion Church, soon becoming a licensed exhorter. A volunteer in the 29th Connecticut Colored Infantry in

---

64 "Reply to 'A Methodist of the Old Episcopal Church,'" Liberator, 11 August 1832.
65 Minutes of the First New England Annual Conference of the A.M.E. Church of America reproduced in John Jamison Moore, History of the A.M.E. Zion Church in America. Founded in 1796, in the City of New York (York, PA: Teachers' Journal Office, 1884), 140-141. Estimate of 1845 African American population of Middletown is based on the African American population reported in 1840 Ms. Census, 230, and African American population reported in 1850 Ms. Census, 149; Minutes of the Fourth New England Annual Conference of the A.M.E.Z. Church of America reproduced in Moore, History of the A.M.E. Zion Church in America, 141-142 report the membership of Middletown's AME Zion Church as 28 in 1848, Field, Centennial Address by David D. Field, D.D., 183, states that "the average congregation consists of about 100 persons, 30 of whom are communicants," suggesting that only about a third of this church's congregation were official members. The 1850 Ms. Census reported Middletown's African American population as 149. According to Field's estimate, therefore, about two thirds of them were among the congregation of Middletown's AME Zion Church. Though published in 1853, the information for this book was gathered in 1852.
December 1863, one of the state’s two black Civil War regiments, Dingle died of “congestion of the lungs” at the muster camp in New Haven, Connecticut.

Rev. S.M. Giles, pastor of Middletown’s AME Zion Church, eulogized him in the Christian Recorder, the AME Church’s national newspaper. Giles wrote that, as a member of Middletown’s Young Men’s Society for Moral and Mental Improvement, headed by church trustee Leverett Beman, Dingle “came in contact with minds superior to his own, yet was not an idle spectator. When called to take part in discussions, write composition or speak extemporaneously, he never hesitated or shrank for fear of a failure, nor came boasting, but acted as a man sensible of his inferiority, seeking instruction and willing to do what he could...Whatever his failures might have been, may be attributed to this limited education.”

At the same time, Giles lauds Dingle’s “usefulness” as an exhorter, the church official who explains Scriptural passages to the congregation, because he “secured the attention and influence of his hearers by simplicity, which rendered him quite an instructive speaker.” Middletown’s black church, this obituary reveals, brought together roughly three classes of African Americans. There were the “superior” minds of the church. Then there were those, like Dingle, who became community leaders by “seeking instruction” and remaining “willing to do what [they] could.” And, finally, there were the undocumented majority of church goers attracted by the “simplicity” of black Methodism’s insistence on racial justice in this world and promise of salvation in the next.

---

67 Christian Recorder, January 30 1864.
It is not surprising that the AME Zion Church attracted blacks of all classes. The only institution in this city created by and for African Americans, the church forged racial unity by addressing the racial proscription all its congregants shared. The Middletown AME Zion Church’s Sunday school illustrates this church’s vital importance for a wide segment of the city’s African Americans. There is evidence that this is the only schooling many of Middletown’s African American children received. Though funded by both whites’ and blacks’ taxes, many Connecticut public schools practiced de facto segregation throughout the antebellum period.\textsuperscript{68} In Hartford’s integrated public schools, African Americans faced such “difficulties and embarrassments” that the city’s blacks funded a separate school for their children. Financially unable to support their own school while also paying taxes for public schools in which they “cannot be accommodated,” they successfully petitioned the Connecticut General Assembly in 1830 to apportion their tax money for their all black school.\textsuperscript{69} In 1841, African Americans in Bridgeport similarly petitioned this assembly to fund with their tax money a separate black school since “prejudices existing in this community” had made the public schools so “unpleasant and

\textsuperscript{68} Connecticut’s African Americans paid taxes on their real and personal estate until 1844, when the Connecticut General Assembly exempted them from taxation as supposed compensation for denying them the right to vote in school society meetings. See Jarvis Means Morse, \textit{A Neglected Period of Connecticut’s History, 1818-1850}, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 319.

disadvantageous” that “many of the colored children... neglect attending school at all.”\textsuperscript{70}

Though local records are very incomplete, public schools in Middletown appear to have been equally discriminatory. In 1840, Rev. Linus S. Everett, minister of Middletown’s Unitarian church, was surprised to learn that in this city “colored children are mixed in with the white” although “there are enough of the colored inhabitants, to render it practicable to have a school exclusively for their accommodation.” Many apparently shared this Baltimore born minister’s view that integrated schools would “ruin” blacks by “putting it into their heads that they ought to be admitted to terms of equality with whites.”\textsuperscript{71} The city soon created a segregated school for African Americans which, Middletown’s newspaper reported in 1847, had been “for some time in successful operation.”\textsuperscript{72} Yet few African Americans would have described segregated schools as “successful.” A host of African Americans, from a convention of fugitive slaves held in 1850 to the editors of the \textit{Colored American}, one of the most important antebellum black newspapers, to abolitionist Frederick Douglass, denounced segregated schools on principle.\textsuperscript{73}

Perhaps the widespread failure of Middletown’s antebellum blacks to attend school was at least in part a protest against segregation. In 1863, Middletown’s newspaper reported that, although “a separate colored school was provided some time

\textsuperscript{70} General Assembly, African American and Native American Collection, RG 002, Box 1, Folder 16, Connecticut State Archives.

\textsuperscript{71} “Common Schools,” \textit{The Universalist}, 4 January 1840, Microfilm, CT Historical Society Collection for Middlesex County, CT, Reel #1, Russell Library, MDDRM MICROFILM, call # 974.66. For a history of the Universalist Church and more information on Rev. Linus S. Everett, see Field, \textit{Centennial Address}, 183-184.

\textsuperscript{72} “City Schools,” \textit{Constitution} (Middletown), 28 April 1847.

since...for some reason no pupils came, and the school suffered a collapse from which it has not recovered.” According to the 1850 federal census, only eighteen of Middletown's thirty-nine African American children aged five to fourteen, or 46.15 percent, reported attending school in the past year. (See Appendix F) In contrast, public school attendance among whites during this period, while far from universal, reached approximately eighty percent. Three years later, David Field, a local white minister, wrote that the AME Zion Church's “very efficient Sabbath School” taught “on average about fifty.” According to the 1850 census, a total of fifty-three African Americans between the ages of four and seventeen lived in Middletown. This means that, based on Field’s figure, the only one available, perhaps 100 percent of Middletown's African American children attended the AME Zion Church's Sunday school while less than half of them attended public school.

Middletown’s AME Zion Church, like black churches throughout the North, was, in many ways, the center of the African American community. As a spiritual and community center, it provided refuge for all classes of this community in their struggle against racial oppression. At the same time, its moral reform activities fostered the emergence of this community's leadership. As we will see in the next chapter, these community leaders forged in the church were central to the assertion of African American citizenship rights in the political arena. Through their ownership of

---

75 1850 Ms. Census. I calculated this figure from the manuscript federal census schedules for Middletown.
76 Morse, A Neglected Period of Connecticut's History, 150.
77 Field, Centennial Address, 183.
78 1850 Ms. Census. Calculated from manuscript federal census schedules for Middletown.
property, they became leading voices against whites' widespread belief in African American degradation and dependence.
Chapter 3

“A Decent Independence”: Black Property Ownership, the Bemans, and Moral Reform

When Joseph Gilbert died in 1836, Rev. Jehiel C. Beman, pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church that Gilbert helped to establish in Middletown, extolled his ascent from slavery to middle class respectability. Beman’s letter to the abolitionist newspaper the Liberator opens with the news that “Mr. Joseph Gilbert,” his congregation’s founding trustee and “beloved brother,” had died in Middletown five days earlier at just 40 years of age. After pointing out that he was brought to the United States from Bermuda as a five year old slave, the letter emphasizes what Beman must have considered Gilbert’s greatest achievement: he “sustained a good moral character, and, by his industry and prudence, accumulated property to the amount of several hundred dollars.”

Beman’s letter underscores the dual importance property ownership held for antebellum blacks. Like working class whites, countless African Americans strove to achieve property as a mark of respectability and “moral character.” Due to racial proscription, however, property ownership also took on great political significance for African Americans. Based on the common belief that African Americans were a uniformly degraded race, lawmakers in Connecticut and other northern states

1 “Died,” Liberator, 22 October 1836. Published weekly in Boston, Massachusetts from 1831-1865, the Liberator was abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison’s newspaper.
disfranchised blacks during the first decades of the nineteenth century. By adopting middle class values of respectability and encouraging all African Americans to do likewise, Beman and other leaders of the antebellum black moral reform movement strove to discredit this increasingly prevalent belief in racial inferiority. Doing so, they hoped, would persuade whites to grant them the vote.

Numerous studies have detailed African American moral reform leaders’ promotion of the “respectable” attributes of education, temperance, the pursuit of skilled rather than menial occupations, and proper personal appearance. Although equally central to black moral reform leaders’ assertions of their race’s respectability, the political significance of antebellum African American property ownership has received little attention. Under the primary leadership of Rev. Jehiel Beman and his sons, Rev. Amos Beman, pastor of New Haven’s African American Congregational church, and Leverett Beman, an officer of Middletown’s AME Zion Church, Connecticut’s moral reform activists largely argued for black suffrage on the basis of African Americans’ ownership of property. In doing so, they placed property ownership at the center of black political protest in pre-Civil War Connecticut.

The Personal Significance of Property Ownership

As historians have long recognized, attaining property was a central goal for African Americans throughout the antebellum period. Kathryn Grover’s study of African Americans in Geneva, New York argued that blacks valued their homes as

---

both symbols of personal success and havens from the virulently racist public sphere.\(^4\)

By eschewing personal luxuries, Robert Cottrol emphasized in his groundbreaking study of blacks in antebellum Providence, Rhode Island, many African Americans managed to acquire property.\(^5\) In 1860, 11.7 percent of blacks in the North owned property, only 6.4 percent less than whites.\(^6\) That year, a slightly higher percentage of African Americans in Middletown, 12.7 percent, owned property.\(^7\) (See Appendix E)

Probate records reveal that these Middletown blacks strove to buy property despite scant financial resources. These records, official court documents created shortly after a person’s death to ensure the payment of their debts and proper distribution of their estate, were found in local probate court records for 21 African Americans who died in Middletown between the 1820s and 1860s. Files for only fourteen of these African Americans, however, inventory their belongings.\(^8\) These inventories reveal that many of Middletown’s African Americans invested hundreds of dollars in mortgaging or purchasing their homes though they often had no other savings and few personal possessions. Eva Hamilton, for instance, owned a house

---

7 1860 Ms. Census. Twenty-two of Middletown’s 173 African Americans, or 12.7 percent, claimed property ownership on the 1860 census. I calculated this figure from the manuscript census schedules for Middletown.
8 Middletown, Connecticut’s nineteenth century probate records do not indicate the decedent’s race. To locate African American probate files, therefore, I first compiled a list of all Middletown residents listed as black or mulatto in the 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850, and 1860 federal censuses. I then searched the Connecticut State Library’s statewide card catalog probate index for these names. I found 21 probate files from the 1820s through the 1860s for Middletown’s African Americans. Seven of these are not included in this discussion because they do not include estate inventories. These 21 probate files, however, should be considered a sample of most African American probate records from Middletown rather than a complete inventory. It is possible that there are additional probate files I missed, especially since the frequent misspelling of names in census records complicates the effort to compile a comprehensive list of all African Americans who lived in Middletown.
worth 250 dollars when she died in 1862 but had only $6.22 in personal possessions. Numerous other cases, though not as drastic, support Cottrol’s assertion that most African Americans sacrificed personal luxuries in order to buy property.⁹ (See Appendix I)

Local records offer additional glimpses of how much African Americans in antebellum Middletown valued home ownership. When, shortly before her death, Eva Hamilton appeared before a Middletown selectman to request coal to heat her home, he noted in his account book: “House owned by herself...lived there 30 or 40 years.” Her probate inventory, taken shortly after her death in 1862, lists “1 small Dwelling House & Land...the homestead of the deceased.”¹⁰ Together, these sources reveal that Hamilton’s property, though only a “small Dwelling House,” was a special “homestead” owned “by herself” for nearly half of her 85 years.

Here, she not only provided a home for her daughter, who lived with her as an adult, but also unrelated community members in need. The selectman Hamilton approached for coal also noted that Harriet Smith and her four-year-old daughter Julia, African Americans from neighboring Durham, had lived with Eva for the past approximately two years while Harriet’s husband, “a loafer,” was at sea. Similarly, Eunice Cambridge’s small house, which still stands at 9 Vine Street, sheltered her extended family. In her 1864 will, Cambridge, a 63-year-old widow, left “the basement room in the South part of the house...with a chamber over the same” to her

---


¹⁰ This is the only house I found described in probate records as a “homestead.”
son, James Brooks, and the rest of the house to John Samuel Johnson and Harriet E.O. Smith, her grandchildren.¹¹

Aside from their utilitarian and symbolic value as havens for extended black families and kin networks, African Americans' homes were marks of personal advancement. On June 7, 1890, Middletown's *Penny Press* announced 90-year-old Henry Freeman's death. Born in Middletown just several years after his parents' emancipation, Freeman spent 73 years working for the Alsops, a prominent Middletown family that had made its fortune in the West India trade.¹² Having been "taken up by the Alsop family" at 17 years old, he "acted as a servant up to within a few years" of his death, retiring only when he became "too feeble" to work. After complimenting him as an "esteemed colored gentleman," the reporter eulogizes that Freeman, who "proved an excellent servant in his time," was "so faithful...that when hardly able to walk, he would manage to get down street, and do what he could."

Despite his paternalistic emphasis on Freeman's "faithful" service, the reporter could not overlook what Freeman probably considered one of his greatest accomplishments: "He owned the little place where he resided at the time of his death and in his time was considered a prosperous colored resident." Two years earlier, an article in the same newspaper mentioned that Freeman, "who is now too feeble to labor for his daily bread...takes life as easy as he can, from what he accumulated during his early labors, in his snug little home." As his long life of labor drew to a


close, protecting his treasured “little home” seems to have been his main priority. Middletown land records reveal that on June 3, 1890, just three days before his death, Freeman transferred ownership of his property to his wife, probably to protect her claim to it. She inherited the house and the 200 dollars in personal clothing and furniture that it contained, material evidence of her husband’s hard earned rise to “prosperous colored resident.”

Working class whites likewise aspired to own property. As Stephan Thernstrom emphasized in his classic study of Newburyport, Massachusetts’s nineteenth century white workmen, “in the New World, the security and respectability insured by property ownership were considered within the reach of even the lowliest laborers.” In his 1868 book *The Irish in America*, John Francis Maguire extolled property ownership as a “magic influence.” Maguire emphasized that, although Irish immigrants “necessarily form the large proportion of the working population” a “considerable number” managed to purchase “a lot‘—meaning thereby a piece of ground on which a house is or is to be erected,” which, in turn, provided the “best proof of their good conduct” and “an incentive” to continue advancing by “frugality and self-denial.” Like African Americans in Middletown, these white laborers eschewed personal luxuries in order to attain their own homes and the perceived respectability property ownership offered. Thernstrom found that from a

---

13 For the manumission record of Henry Freeman’s father, Ishmael Freeman, see Middletown Land Records, Volume 28, Page 351, as quoted in the Wilcox Collection, Middlesex County Historical Society; “Uncle Harry Freeman,” *Penny Press*, 7 June 1890; “A Colored Swindler,” *Penny Press*, 13 December 1887; Middletown Land Records, Volume 119, pp. 99, 100, as quoted in Wilcox Collection, Middlesex County Historical Society; Estate File of Henry Freeman, 1890, Connecticut State Library.

third to a half of Newburyport's laborers acquired property within their first decade of residence in the city.

While both whites and blacks considered property central to their social advancement, property ownership carried special political significance for African Americans in their struggle against racial proscription. Barbara Burlison Mooney argues that nineteenth and early twentieth century blacks appropriated white values of domesticity, epitomized by the middle class, single-family home, to counter racism.¹⁵ Like most historians, however, she discusses this political strategy in the context of the post emancipation South. In the years after the Civil War both white and black reformers, from Union general Samuel C. Armstrong, founder of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, to Booker T. Washington, stressed African American home ownership as key to both racial advancement and the overthrow of white prejudice.¹⁶

Historians have only begun to recognize that antebellum northern black proponents of the moral reform movement, like black leaders in the late nineteenth century South, asserted political equality on the basis of middle-class home ownership.¹⁷ The activism of Connecticut black leaders Rev. Jehiel Beman and his sons, Rev. Amos Beman and Leverett Beman, who from the 1830s through the 1850s

¹⁶ Ibid., 53-54.
both encouraged African Americans to buy property and asserted blacks’ respectability based on their status as property owners, thus contributes greatly to our understanding of black property ownership’s political significance in the antebellum North.

The Bemans and the Moral Reform Movement

The moral reform movement was both a central and assertive black protest strategy, formed in response to the conditions African Americans faced following northern emancipation. By the time Connecticut and other northern states enacted gradual emancipation laws in the 1780s, a century and a half of slavery had convinced whites that African Americans were naturally inferior and degraded. Black activist leaders combated this widespread view, asserting instead that African Americans’ former enslavement had left them in a temporarily degraded condition. Through moral reform, they insisted, the race could prove itself worthy of civil rights by rising to middle class respectability.

The conduct of the individual African American, historian Patrick Rael emphasizes, was central to the black moral reform movement. Though deprived access to formal politics, antebellum blacks could at least control themselves. Through respectable conduct, black leaders believed, individual African Americans could help combat society’s prejudiced views.

---

19 I discuss Connecticut’s Gradual Abolition Act of 1784 in greater detail in chapter one.
20 Rael, Black Identity and Black Protest, 159.
21 Ibid., 184-185.
Consistent with this belief, the Bemans encouraged blacks to buy property and celebrated individual cases of African American property attainment as powerful symbols of black moral elevation. As an agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society, Rev. Jehiel Beman traveled to African American communities throughout New England in 1837 to “investigate the moral and civil condition of the colored people in their vicinity...” Beman’s letter to Rev. Joshua Leavitt, editor of the abolitionist newspaper *The Emancipator*, reported on a recent visit to New London, Connecticut. Despite the “waves of oppression that roll in torrents...against our race,” Beman declared, “in this city our brethren are striving to roll onward the wheel of moral reform.”

As evidence, he emphasized that fifteen of New London’s African Americans owned real estate. Similarly, during a visit to Providence, Rhode Island’s black community two months earlier, Beman had reported to the editor of the *Colored American*: “There are twenty-five owners of Real Estate, and Tax payers, but no retailers of ardent spirits.” Beman’s careful tallying of black property owners underscores Rael’s argument that, denied access to political power, African American leaders combated prejudice by highlighting individual examples of black respectability.

In their struggle for the franchise, Connecticut’s African Americans, with the Bemans playing a leading role, asserted black respectability and property ownership as a central protest strategy. Connecticut joined most northern states in denying its African Americans the vote during the first decades of the nineteenth century. While

---

this state’s blacks had previously enjoyed suffrage, Connecticut’s General Assembly limited the vote to “free white male persons” in 1814. Between 1822 and 1842, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island likewise changed their voting laws to exclude African Americans. By 1840, some 93 percent of northern free blacks lived in states which disfranchised them by law or practice.

The perceived degradation of blacks due to slavery was central to their disfranchisement. As a delegate to Pennsylvania’s 1837 constitutional convention argued, if granted the vote “every negro in the State, worthy and worthless-degraded and debased, as nine tenths of them are, will rush to the polls in senseless and unmeaning triumph.” Considered too degraded to possess autonomy and independence, the basis for republican citizenship, blacks were therefore viewed as outside the body politic.

According to nineteenth century political economy, however, property ownership signified independence. African American leaders therefore insisted that their property proved their autonomy and independence and should entitle them to vote. Between 1815 and the 1870 ratification of the 15th Amendment, by which blacks in Connecticut and all other states were enfranchised, hundreds of African

---

26 Ibid., 75. This quotation, I hope, accurately reflects similar public sentiment in Connecticut. I have quoted a Pennsylvania politician because the Connecticut General Assembly left no known record of its debate to disfranchise blacks in 1814. See Miles Jonathan Kirchner, “The Shame of the North: The Black Suffrage Issue in Connecticut, 1814-1876.” (M.A. Thesis, Southern Connecticut State University, 1996), 1-4 for a discussion of Connecticut blacks’ disfranchisement.
27 Horton and Horton, In Hope of Liberty, 167-168.
Americans in at least nine different Connecticut cities and towns petitioned this state's General Assembly to regain the vote. Of their twenty-eight extant petitions, eleven argue for the vote based at least in part on property ownership. Six of these eleven petitions specifically highlight African American property ownership while the remaining five protest that blacks in Connecticut remain disfranchised though required to pay taxes.29

In October 1815, one year after their being disfranchised, wealthy black New Haven community and church leaders Bias Stanley and William Lanson petitioned the Connecticut General Assembly: "...your Petitioners although of African descent are both free & native of the State of Connecticut...sustain a fair character for sobriety & integrity...[and] that by their industry & frugality they have been enabled to amass a small portion of property sufficient to purchase for each of them a comfortable home...."30 Their home ownership, therefore, was their evidence that

29 Connecticut General Assembly Papers, Rejected Bills, African Americans, RG 002, Connecticut State Archives, Hartford, Connecticut. The 28 extant franchise petitions included in this collection are from nine different Connecticut cities and towns: Canterbury, Farmington, Hartford, Lisbon, Middletown, New Haven, New London, Norwich, and Torrington. For an inventory of all known extant petitions to the Connecticut General Assembly relating to African Americans and Native Americans, see Bruce P. Stark, "Finding Aid to African Americans and Native Americans, 1808-1869, General Assembly. State Archives Record Group No. 2 (Hartford, Connecticut: Connecticut State Library, 2001). It is likely, however, that additional African American franchise petitions were submitted to the General Assembly but are no longer extant. The Journal of the Connecticut Senate and the Journal of the Connecticut House of Representatives, published yearly since the 1830s, include lists of each petition submitted to the House and Senate during each of its sessions. Though it is beyond the scope of this study, it would be worthwhile to compile, based on these sources, an inventory of each petition African Americans submitted to the House and Senate. This would allow researchers to both trace African American political activism in Connecticut and to identify petitions which may no longer be extant.

30 Stanley accumulated an almost $10,000 estate by the time he died. For more information on Stanley, New Haven activist and first treasurer of the Temple Street Church, the black New Haven Congregational church of which Amos Beman was pastor, see Robert Austin Warner, New Haven Negroes: A Social History (London; Humphrey Milford: Oxford University Press, 1940; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 80, 84, 97, 278. For more information on Lanson, the wealthy New Haven contractor who partially built the city's "Long Wharf," see ibid., 22, 26, 28, 56, 80 and Peter Hinks, "'He Was Capable of Great Things': William Lanson and the Vagaries of Early Free Black Life in
“although of African descent” they possessed the virtue and autonomy required of republican citizens. Through their “industry & frugality” they both earned a “comfortable home,” and, their argument implies, the respectability home ownership symbolized.\textsuperscript{31}

The 1823 suffrage petition of Pero Moody and Isaac Glasko, both of Lisbon, Connecticut, even more explicitly claims independence based on property ownership. Moody and Glasko stressed that, although formerly enslaved, “by indefatigable industry & exertion in the midst of the most mortifying discouragements” they had “acquired some property” and are thus “able to maintain themselves in a decent independence...”\textsuperscript{32}

While these black property owners petitioned the General Assembly on an individual basis, the Bemans’ leadership pushed property ownership to the forefront of organized black protest. During the 1830s and 1840s, the statewide black temperance society, headed by the Bemans, became Connecticut African Americans’ primary platform for asserting their respectability. In helping to establish Middletown’s Home Temperance Society in 1833, Jehiel Beman, pastor of this city’s African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church, had laid the foundation for this statewide society. Organized in Beman’s church, with Jehiel as its first president and his sons, Amos and Leverett, as officers, Middletown’s Home Temperance Society soon allied with black activists from other communities.\textsuperscript{33} This society’s second

\textsuperscript{31} Rejected Bills, African Americans and Native Americans, RG 002, Box 2, folder 1, Connecticut State Archives, Hartford, Connecticut.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., Box 2, Folder 3.
annual meeting, held in Middletown’s AME Zion Church in 1834, attracted African American moral reform leaders from four counties.\(^{34}\) Two years later, in May 1836, delegates from local black temperance societies from across the state met in this church to form the Connecticut State Temperance Society of People of Color, with Jehiel Beman as president and agent.\(^{35}\)

Although African Americans throughout the North likewise formed temperance societies during this period, this was New England’s only statewide black temperance organization.\(^{36}\) This society was therefore a unique foundation for black activism in the antebellum North.\(^{37}\) In bringing together “talented and influential” African Americans from across the state, its annual meetings must have strengthened intercity black activist networks.\(^{38}\) African American moral reform leaders not only promoted temperance at these meetings but also advocated black education, church attendance, the abolition of southern slavery, and, perhaps most consistently, property ownership. “...Our attention has been called to this subject at all the annual meetings of the Society,” Amos Beman wrote in 1847.\(^{39}\)

\(^{34}\) “Middletown,” *Liberator*, 19 April 1834. While no complete list of attendees survives, this article in the *Liberator* reveals that A.C. Luca, of New Haven, and H. Foster, of Hartford, were both at this meeting.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 94.

\(^{37}\) Although this temperance society warrants a great deal of further research, I know of no study on the subject. David Swift briefly discusses this society in the context of the black suffrage movement of the 1840s. See David Swift, *Black Prophets of Justice: Activist Clergy Before the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 187, 196-199.

\(^{38}\) Connecticut Temperance Society of Colored Americans, *Annual Report*, Connecticut [s.n.], 1839. This annual report was also published in *The Colored American*, 9 November 1839. By 1837, the membership of this society totaled 350, approximately four percent of the state’s African American population. See “Letter from J.C. Beman,” *Emancipator*, 16 November 1837 for an account of this society’s 1837 meeting. See Strother, *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut*, 212 for Connecticut’s black population from 1639-1860.

Though deprived access to formal politics, this temperance society’s leaders insisted on adding their claims of blacks’ respectability, largely based on their property ownership, to political debates over their race’s future. In September 1847, one month before a statewide referendum to decide whether the vote would be extended to African Americans, this society met to organize on behalf of black suffrage. These black leaders knew that public opinion was against them. A year earlier, voters in New York State had defeated a similar referendum by more than two and a half to one.⁴⁰ Political calculation rather than support for African American suffrage, moreover, led Connecticut’s legislature to put the issue before the state’s voters. Confident that the referendum would fail, legislators preferred to let the people reject black suffrage rather than alienate the minority of their constituents who supported this cause by voting it down themselves.⁴¹

These black leaders hoped that, despite widespread opposition, they could compel whites to grant them the vote. As president of the state’s black temperance society, Rev. Amos Beman, assisted by two other officers, wrote an address to the voters of Connecticut. As historian Patrick Rael argues, the ultimate goal of the black moral reform movement was to forge “effective racial self-presentation” in the face of white racism.⁴² Central to this protest strategy was the belief that, provided with evidence of black respectability, whites would be forced to change their view of

---

⁴⁰ 224,336 New Yorkers voted against overturning the state’s $250 property requirement for black suffrage, put in place by New York’s 1821 constitutional convention, while 85,406 voted in favor. See Kirschner, “The Shame of the North,” 11; see Leslie Harris, In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863 (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 143 for more on New York’s 1821 black suffrage law.

⁴¹ Swift, Black Prophets of Justice, 198-200. Swift provides the best available account of Connecticut’s 1847 black suffrage referendum.

⁴² Rael, Black Identity and Black Protest, 175.
African Americans as degraded former slaves.\(^{43}\) Connecticut's black leaders, consistent with this ideology, requested that newspaper publish their appeal to the state's whites to "permit us to speak for ourselves to the people of the State."\(^{44}\)

As Beman's address to Connecticut's voters reveals, blacks' property ownership, especially the value of their holdings, therefore took on great political significance as a precise measure of their ascent from slavery. Beman stressed that "there has been a great addition in the amount of property held by [Connecticut's African Americans], within a few years...the amount has largely increased, and as far as we can judge is now more than three hundred thousand dollars."\(^{45}\)

Despite this appeal, Connecticut's voters rejected the 1847 referendum by a vote of 19,148 to 5,345.\(^{46}\) When the General Assembly debated black suffrage again in 1854, however, the proposal was more widely supported. Governor William T. Minor argued that if those to be given the vote "are in the main moral and industrious..." they should be enfranchised regardless of race.\(^{47}\) A prominent legislator similarly argued that "the wonder was not that the colored population was degraded, but that under their depressing circumstances, they had risen so high in the scale of intelligence."\(^{48}\) This time, the black suffrage issue was not even brought before Connecticut's voters, failing by a narrow margin to receive the two-thirds' support in the state Senate necessary to put it up for referendum. Only with the

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 200.
\(^{44}\) "Free Suffrage," Constitution (Middletown), 29 September 1847.
\(^{45}\) "Free Suffrage," Constitution (Middletown), 29 September 1847.
\(^{46}\) Swift, Black Prophets of Justice, 200.
\(^{48}\) Hartford Courant, 1 June 1855 as quoted in Ibid., 273
ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870 would Connecticut’s blacks, along with recently freed slaves, gain the vote.

Yet the fact that, by 1854, at least some leading Connecticut politicians were convinced of blacks’ respectability reflects the impact of the Bemans’ moral reform activism. As they forced Connecticut’s whites to acknowledge, in just one generation hundreds of the state’s African Americans had gone from being property themselves to owning significant amounts of their own property. In doing so, they and other black Connecticut activists brought black property ownership to the forefront of political debate. Even if they did not sway the majority of voters to grant them the ballot, they impressively asserted their independence and respectability in the face of widespread assumptions of their degradation.

During the antebellum period, property ownership remained one of the most powerful symbols of advancement and respectability for free blacks. African Americans desired property for many of the same reasons as their white neighbors. Yet these recently emancipated slaves’ constant struggle against racist stereotypes and legal disfranchisement infused their property ownership with additional meaning. For common African American, their homes were a source of pride and refuge from a virulently racist public sphere while, for the black leaders who spoke against racism in their name, these black owned homes were held up as proof of the entire race’s respectability and worthiness of citizenship rights. The Bemans’ activism reminds us that this political significance of black property ownership is not only key to understanding Middletown, Connecticut’s antebellum black community, but, more
important, how all antebellum African Americans both affirmed and asserted their rights as freedmen and citizens.
Postscript

President Lincoln’s words boomed from the tiny church’s pulpit: “...on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State...shall be then, thence forward, and forever free.” The “large assemblage” gathered in Middletown’s AME Zion Church to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation burst into applause. More than thirty years earlier, when this small wooden church on Cross Street was new, Rev. Jehiel Beman first called for the end of slavery from its pulpit. Now the “hour long desired and prayed for” had arrived.1

Seven years later, Middletown’s African Americans celebrated another long awaited victory. In 1870 the Fifteenth Amendment finally granted the vote to Connecticut’s black men, disfranchised for the past half century. “The manhood of the black man,” leaders of Middletown’s AME Zion Church declared in 1879, had finally been “acknowledged through constitutional legislation.”2

Yet civil rights laws, Middletown’s African Americans were constantly reminded, could not eradicate assumptions of racial inferiority. In 1865, Connecticut’s voters rejected a referendum to expand the suffrage to blacks, as they

1 “Emancipation Proclamation,” The Christian Recorder, 14 March 1863. Although this newspaper article does not identify the location of this meeting, it was certainly in Middletown. Rev. S.M. Giles, who chaired the meeting, was pastor of Middletown’s AME Zion Church during the Civil War while other black Middletown residents, including Amster C. Dingle and Charles S. Beman, officers of this church, are also mentioned as leading the meeting.
2 “William Lloyd Garrison. Adopted by the Middletown Mental Improvement Society. June 3, 1879.” Broadside, Abolitionist Society Collection, Box 1 of 1, Middlesex County Historical Society, Middletown, CT.
had done in 1847.³ Some state legislators had opposed putting the question up for referendum at all, insisting that, although free for nearly eighty years, Connecticut’s African Americans possessed none of the “...marks of intellectual and moral powers that everywhere distinguish the Caucasian.”⁴

With persistent racism, it seems, came deteriorating economic conditions for African Americans in post-Civil War Middletown. Although blacks owned all ten lots on the triangle of land near the AME Zion Church, bordered by Cross Street, Vine Street, and Knowles Avenue, through the Civil War, this autonomous community of African American homeowners began to decline soon after. A local bank foreclosed Menominee Miami’s mortgage, thus forcing him to sell the property his mother-in-law, Elizabeth (Condol) Henry, had owned on this triangle of land for three decades. Similarly, in 1881, the mortgage of Eliza Truitt, who had owned property in this neighborhood for thirty-three years, was foreclosed to pay back taxes.⁵

Perhaps similar economic hardship led many of Middletown’s African Americans, barred from working in the factories increasingly central to this city’s economy, to seek a living elsewhere.⁶ Although always small, Middletown’s black population decreased steadily during the late nineteenth century. In 1860, totaling just over two percent of the general population, 173 African Americans lived in

⁴ “Minority Report of Committee on Constitutional Amendments,” General Assembly Papers, African Americans and Native Americans, RG 002, Box 1, Folder 27, Connecticut State Archives.
⁵ Middletown Land Records, Volume 111, Page 607, as quoted in Wilcox Collection, Middlesex County Historical Society.
⁶ In a 1981 interview, James Davidson, an African American who had migrated to the Middletown area from Florida in 1923, said that only one African American in Middletown was able to obtain a job at a local factory. Davidson believed he was hired because he was “quite fair-skinned and did not associate with the Blacks.” See “One Man’s Venture,” Transcription of Barbara Davidson’s interview with her father, James Davidson, May 1, 1981, African American Collection, Middlesex County Historical Society.
Middletown. By 1920, the black population had dropped to an all time low of fifty-seven, less than half a percent of the city’s general population.\(^7\) Not until the 1930s would a trickle of southern black migrants increase Middletown’s African American population beyond its antebellum size.\(^8\)

Of the two dozen African American families who forged Middletown’s AME Zion Church and nearby black neighborhood nearly a century earlier, only two are known to have remained in Middletown by the 1930s.\(^9\) Yet the lives that they built here for three generations prior to the Civil War left an important legacy. They challenge us to reexamine the nature of black community in the antebellum North. In tracing Middletown’s African Americans through local census, probate, and property records, I was repeatedly struck by how many were connected by ties of blood, marriage, or, in even more cases, common origins from other Connecticut communities. As I have argued in chapter one, these ties were the foundation of Middletown’s black community.

Since historians have not extensively traced family networks and migration patterns within antebellum northern black communities, we cannot yet determine whether those who formed Middletown’s community were unique. Extended family

\(^7\) 1920 Federal Census.
\(^8\) Middletown’s post-Civil War and early twentieth century black community, including southern black migration to Middletown, certainly warrants further study. For transcriptions of interviews with African Americans who migrated to Middletown from the south during the 1920s, see Barbara Davidson’s 1981 interview with her father, James Davidson: “One Man’s Venture,” African American Collection, Middlesex County Historical Society; see also Middletown Oral History Project, Middletown Room, Russell Library, Middletown, CT.
\(^9\) Descendants of Amster Dingle, the exhorter of the AME Zion Church who came to Middletown from Delaware around 1852, still lived at the corner of Cross and Swamp streets (today Knowles Avenue) in 1930. The descendants of the Warmsley family, who during the antebellum period lived in the rural section of Middletown now part of Middlefield, remain in Middletown. See Janice P. Cunningham and Elizabeth A. Warner, Experiment in Community: An African American Neighborhood, Middletown, Connecticut, 1847-1930 (Hartford, CT: Connecticut Historical Commission, 2002); Elizabeth A. Warner, A Pictorial History of Middletown (Norfolk, VA: The Donning Company, 1990), 61.
networks, although not yet studied by historians, may have been equally central to the formation of black communities throughout the antebellum North. While many aspects of Middletown's early nineteenth century African American community deserve further study, this may be the most important. Interpreting all that this story of antebellum Middletown's interrelated black families can teach us will be a challenge. But it is a story too important to ignore.
Appendix A

BLACK POPULATION OF MIDDLETOWN, 1820-1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total population of Middletown</th>
<th>Black Population</th>
<th>% of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>6,479</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>6,892</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>7,210</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>8,441</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>8,620</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 These figures include "Middletown City" and "Middletown, except city."
Appendix B

NATIVITY OF MIDDLETOWN BLACKS, 1850

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or Foreign Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of City’s Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New England:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut²</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>95.971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Country:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


² The birthplace of one of these Connecticut born African Americans, Henry “Harry” Freeman, was incorrectly recorded in the census as Ireland.
# Appendix C

**NATIVITY OF MIDDLETOWN BLACKS, 1860**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or Foreign Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of City’s Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New England:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>77.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North (excluding New England):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>South:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Down South”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foreign Countries:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bermuda</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Thomas</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** 1860 Manuscript Census.
## Appendix D

BLACK OCCUPATIONAL LEVELS, MIDDLETOWN, 1850 AND 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1850</th>
<th></th>
<th>1860</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled and Entrepreneurial</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled and Semiskilled</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70.37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


---

3 In 1850, the following were in the “professional” class: one clergy; the following were in the “skilled and entrepreneurial class”: two shoemakers, two bridle makers, and one student; the following were in the “unskilled and semiskilled” class: one “ostler,” one ferryman, one coachman, three sailors, and twenty-four laborers.

4 In 1860, the first year in which the census recorded the occupations of women, the following were in the “professional” class: two clergymen, one “quack doctor;” the following were in the “skilled and entrepreneurial” class: seven barbers, one shoemaker, one student, one hostler, one bill poster, one tailor, and one farmer; the following were in the “unskilled and semiskilled” class: eight servants, two house servants, three washerwomen, eight laborers, two day laborers, seven seamen, one porter, one gardener, four farm laborers, one hack driver, and one domestic.
## Appendix E

### PERCENTAGE OF REAL ESTATE OWNERS IN 1850

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number with Real Estate</th>
<th>Number without real estate</th>
<th>% with real estate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>6.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### PERCENTAGE OF REAL ESTATE OWNERS IN 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number with Real Estate</th>
<th>Number without real estate</th>
<th>% with real estate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>12.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: 1860 Manuscript Census. In 1860, 11.7% of free blacks in the North owned property while 18.1% of whites in the North were property owners, making blacks just less than two-thirds as likely as whites to own property. Yet, on average, blacks’ property was only 24.2% as valuable as that of whites. See Patrick Racl, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill; London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 22-23.
## Appendix F

### PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF 5 AND 14 ATTENDING SCHOOL DURING THE 1849-1850 SCHOOL YEAR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number Attending School</th>
<th>Number Not Attending</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Attending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>46.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF 5 AND 14 ATTENDING SCHOOL DURING THE 1859-1860 SCHOOL YEAR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number Attending School</th>
<th>Number Not Attending</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Attending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Appendix G

### LITERACY AMONG MIDDLETOWN BLACKS OVER TWENTY YEARS OF AGE, 1850 AND 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1850</th>
<th></th>
<th>1860</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number illiterate</td>
<td>% Illiterate</td>
<td>Number illiterate</td>
<td>% Illiterate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0\textsuperscript{5}</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{5} The census taker may have simply failed to record literacy, or it is possible that Middletown's African American population was completely literate in 1850. In 1854, Leverett Beman reported at the Connecticut State Convention of Colored Men that only three of Middletown's 137 "colored inhabitants" cannot read and write. See "The Colored Convention," Hartford *Republican*, October 1854, Newspaper Clipping of a letter to the editor dated October 3, 1854, Amos Beman Scrapbook, Scrapbook #3, Johnson Wells Collection, Yale Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.
**Appendix H**

**TRUSTEES OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL ZION CHURCH, MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT AS RECORDED IN MIDDLETOWN LAND RECORDS, 1829-1897.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>YEAR(S) RECORDED AS TRUSTEE</th>
<th>PROPERTY OWNER? (ANTEBELLUM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BEMAN, CHARLES A.C.</td>
<td>1868, 1897</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEMAN, LEVERETT C.</td>
<td>1836, 1844, 1852, 1865, 1867, 1868</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONDOL, NATHAN</td>
<td>1836</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONDOL, SAMUEL</td>
<td>1836</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DANIELS, CHARLES</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFOREST, EBENEZER</td>
<td>1829, 1844, 1852, 1865</td>
<td>UNKNOWN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDDY, RUSSELL G.</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARNHAM, HENRY</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FREEMAN, ELUM C.</td>
<td>1852</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GILBERT, JOSEPH</td>
<td>1829</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAMILTON, JOHN</td>
<td>1829</td>
<td>UNKNOWN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUNTINGTON, ROBERT</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEFFREY, ASA</td>
<td>1829</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEFFREY, GEORGE</td>
<td>1829</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLOYD, JOHN F.</td>
<td>1865</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERKINS, NELSON E.</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POWERS, JAMES H.</td>
<td>1867</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROBINSON, MRS. MIRIAM E.</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAYLES, HENRY</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMITH, THOMAS E.</td>
<td>1874, 1888</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNIPES, GEORGE</td>
<td>1852</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNIPES, JOHN H.</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STANTON, SAMUEL V.</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SULLIVAN, WILLIAM</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUITT, ISAAC B.</td>
<td>1867, 1868, 1874</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASHINGTON, GEORGE</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEKS, CHARLES H.</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHITE, HERCULES</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

*6 Middletown newspapers reveal that Charles N. Morgan was a trustee of this church in 1874. See “Come and Help Us,” *Daily Constitution* (Middletown), 27 July 1874. I found the names of all other trustees in Middletown land records.*
Appendix I

VALUE OF REAL ESTATE VERSUS PERSONAL ESTATE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS IN ANTEBELLUM MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and death date</th>
<th>Real Estate</th>
<th>Personal Estate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesse Caples, 1848</td>
<td>$0.00</td>
<td>$31.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles T. Dixon, 1869</td>
<td>$0.00</td>
<td>$175.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asa Jeffrey, 1845</td>
<td>$0.00</td>
<td>$204.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hercules White, 1849</td>
<td>$0.00</td>
<td>$783.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Strong, 1840</td>
<td>$200.00</td>
<td>$0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Stanton, 1852</td>
<td>$200.00</td>
<td>$62.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva Hamilton, 1862</td>
<td>$250.00</td>
<td>$6.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eunice Cambridge, 1867</td>
<td>$280.00</td>
<td>$43.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Ann Jeffrey, 1855</td>
<td>$380.00</td>
<td>$49.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George W. Jeffrey, 1845</td>
<td>$400.00</td>
<td>$67.73 ½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Young, 1850</td>
<td>$574.00</td>
<td>$42.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Daniels, 1867</td>
<td>$575.00</td>
<td>$130.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John C. Moody, 1839</td>
<td>$673.00</td>
<td>$196.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Penny, 1849</td>
<td>$3,370.00</td>
<td>$1,203.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Middletown District Estate Files (Microfilm), Connecticut State Library.
Bibliography

ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS AND MANUSCRIPTS

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Connecticut State Archives, Hartford, Connecticut
General Assembly Papers, African Americans and Native Americans, 1808-1869, Record Group No. 2.

National Archives, Washington, D.C.
Revolutionary War Pension Records, Records of the Veterans' Administration, Record Group No. 15.

Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Connecticut

Middletown, CT District Estate Files (Microfilm), 1817-1880.

Middletown, CT District Estate Files (Microfilm), 1881-1932.

New Haven, CT District Estate Files (Microfilm), 1683-1880.

New Haven, CT District Estate Files (Microfilm), 1881-1915.

Middlesex County Historical Society, Middletown, Connecticut
Abolitionist Society Collection.

African American Collection.

Middletown Apprenticeship Records, 1763-1858.


Middletown Selectman's Records, Letters to the Selectmen of Middletown, 1750-1900.

Middletown Tax Lists, Unsorted City Records, 1805-1820.

Middletown City Records, Unsorted Bills to the Town, 1750-1900.

Milo Wilcox Collection.
Town Clerk’s Office, Municipal Building, Middletown, Connecticut
Common Council Records, Unsorted, 1865.

Middletown Tax Lists, Unsorted.

Russell Library, Middletown, Connecticut
Federal Census, 1790-1930 (Microfilm).

Middletown Land Records (Microfilm).

NEWSPAPERS


Constitution. Middletown, CT, 1842-1876.

Emancipator, New York, 1835-1841.

Frederick Douglass’ Paper, Rochester, NY, 1851-1859.


Liberator, Boston, 1831-1865.

Middlesex Gazette, Middletown, CT, 1785-1828.

Penny Press, Middletown, CT, 1884-1918.

The Universalist, Middletown, CT, Hartford, CT, 1839-1843.

PUBLISHED PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


Beeching, Barbara J. “Reading the Numbers: Census Returns as Key to the Nineteenth Century Black Community in Hartford, Connecticut.” Connecticut History 44 (Fall 2005): 224-247.


Cottrol, Robert J. The Afro-Yankees: Providence’s Black Community in the


Housley, Kathleen. “‘Who Can Blot out the North Star?: The Bemans- Four Generations of Black Abolitionists.” TMs. Middlesex County Historical Society. Middletown, CT.


