

Jack John: From Enslavement in East Haven to Freedom in Wallingford By Bobbie Borne

The name Blue Hills today conjures up visions of crisp red apples, cider and beautiful hills with row upon row of orchards flowing in all directions. On the western edge of Wallingford and tucked into the shadow of the Sleeping Giant (called Blue Hills on early maps), Blue Hills Orchards on Blue Hills Road, has been operating since 1904. However, this area acquired its name long before the dawning of the 20th Century and the arrival of the Henry family and their apples. Though no trace now remains, a small house and farm once existed in what was described as the Blue Hills in a will dated 1817. The remarkable story of the man who owned and farmed this land is long forgotten, but is a significant piece of Wallingford's rich history.

If you read my previous article in the *Wallingford Magazine* (Summer and Autumn 2022) about Dr. Jared Potter, you may remember his household included an enslaved man named Jack John. I wanted to explore his story more fully and hoped to locate information. Researching African Americans from the 18th and 19th Centuries, especially enslaved people, is usually challenging. With newspaper articles, U.S. Census documents, and an invaluable will, I was able to assemble small fragments of Jack's unusual story.

The Early Years: 1748-1770

The earliest mentions of Jack John that I found were in documents relating to Dr. Jared Potter's marriage to Sarah Forbes in 1764. Apparently Sarah's father Samuel Forbes, a prosperous East Haven slaveholder with a career in shipping, presented "a 16-year-old colored slave-boy named Jack John" to his daughter as a wedding gift. Several accounts indicate Samuel gave her two slaves, a girl and a boy. The descriptions of this event consistently refer to Potter as holding anti-slavery sentiments and that Jack John not only became part of the family, but was sometimes referred to as Jack Potter. Later events seem to support this contention. [Forbes owned numerous slaves who were listed in his will inventory among property items such as milking cow, wash tub, two baskets, feather bed.]

Jack was born in an unknown location in about 1748 and lived enslaved as a member of the Samuel Forbes household in East Haven. At that time, there were at least 1000 African slaves living in Connecticut. For us, Jack's story begins as he joins the new Potter household. Dr. Jared Potter established a successful medical practice in East Haven caring for the citizens there. He soon moved into a large house still standing on the green left to him by his father. Jack lived with and worked for the family which included daughter Sarah Potter born in 1766. In 1770, Dr. Potter relocated to New Haven in a house on Gregson Street where he continued his practice. It is unknown if Jack made the move with the family because at about this time, feeling the need for adventure and a life of his own, Jack, now 22, left Connecticut and the Potter family to pursue a career at sea.

The Seafaring Years: 1770-1773

Departing the Port of New Haven with his sea chest and pea jacket in hand (items later found listed in his will), Jack must have been both excited and apprehensive anticipating new experiences. One can imagine the Potters bidding him a fond farewell and wishing him luck in his new life. They did not know that he would return into their lives in the future.

Maritime employment offered opportunities for black empowerment in a racist society and generated feelings of self-worth and self-reliance. Though the details of Jack's maritime life are unknown, slaves worked as boatmen, lighter-men, shipwrights, caulkers, riggers, sailmakers, coopers, mariners, and pilots. Former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass worked as a caulker in a Baltimore shipyard in the 1830s. [Jim Crow Museum]

A Return to Wallingford:

About three years later, Jack is found back in the Potter home, now in Wallingford. Dr. Jared Potter was living in the Carrington House by the current Masonic Building in Simpson Square, and pursuing his medical practice. Jack John again was working for the family. Technically still enslaved, he was treated more as a friend and handyman. When Benjamin Franklin's son, the former Royal Governor of New Jersey, was placed under house arrest in Wallingford with the Potter family (see article on this episode in *Wallingford Magazine* Spring 2022), Jack surely would have met him, and probably served his meals and attended him in other ways. He helped Sarah Potter maintain the illustrious gardens well-known in the community. And it is said that he was quite fond of the two Potter daughters, Sarah and Mary, perhaps making toys and games for them. [When the Carrington House was demolished to make way for our current Simpson Square, fragments of 18th Century toys and books were discovered in the rubble underneath the house.]

Jack apparently made friends easily and had good relationships with a number of Wallingford's prominent citizens. He also became friendly with the Kirtland family of Wallingford, relatives of the Potters, who spent many hours at the warm and welcoming home of Jared Potter. Jack had a good reputation as an honest and worthy person, a respected man in Wallingford.

Emancipation: 1782

While Jack John seemed to be enjoying a quality of life unknown among most enslaved people, he was not a free man. But the tides of change had begun. By the time he returned from sea, Connecticut had banned the importation of "Indian, Negro or Mulatto Slaves". Still, roughly half of all ministers, lawyers, and public officials in the state owned slaves, and a third of all doctors. Maybe Dr. Potter had been considering freeing Jack for some time; or perhaps the politics of the day influenced him; but for whatever reason, we know that Potter filed for emancipation of Jack John on January 10, 1782. [Document filed at Office of Wallingford Town Clerk]

Did emancipation change Jack's life? Impossible to know. Most likely he continued in his friendly relationship with the Potter family and assisted them in their move to the

farm they purchased in the South Main Street area. It is here that Potter may have met President George Washington on his march through New England in 1789. They conversed about the cultivation of mulberry trees and perhaps drank tea served by Jack John. All speculation of course.

Freeman Status

Jack John's status changed again in 1790 when he took the Freeman's Oath in Wallingford, granting him the rights of citizenship and permitting him to vote in all elections. This was elaborated on in an interesting letter to the editor that appeared in the *Meriden Daily Republican* on November 25, 1872. Submitted from Ohio by the grandson of Dr. Jared Potter, the esteemed naturalist Jared Potter Kirtland (who in his youth knew Jack John), the letter describes some of the circumstances surrounding Jack John and the fact that he was the "first colored man ever to vote in Wallingford." He supported the Jeffersonian Democratic ticket in the elections of 1790.

In order to take the Freeman's Oath, a man had to be 21 years old and a landowner. It appears that in the eight years since attaining his emancipation, Jack had acquired land—eventually 26 acres in total. The exact amount of land holding is known because Jack left a will with a detailed inventory of real estate and personal estate. His land was located in Wallingford, Hamden, and North Haven. Since the three town boundaries abut near Mansion Road, these properties may have formed one contiguous piece within the three towns. Three of his property purchases are recorded in the Town of Hamden Land Records dating 1790, 1792, and 1798. A fourth transaction was filed under the name of Jack Potter in 1798. Jack John has been described as hard-working and thrifty and probably purchased these land parcels with his earnings. Eventually he created a home for himself on this property on the west side of Wallingford near what is now the Cheshire town line.

Jack John at Home in the Blue Hills of Wallingford

We know only the bare facts about Jack John's family. His will named his wife Sarah (also known as Sally) and his niece Cloe Primus as beneficiaries. Cloe was Jack's sister's daughter. Thus we know he had a sister. Could she have been the female slave who may have been given to Dr. Jared Potter at his marriage? In addition, Jack left a special bequest in his will to provide for a headstone for his mother's grave in Center Street Cemetery. Whether she lived in Wallingford or was only buried here is unknown. And none of the household goods listed in the will's inventory included items related to babies or children. The census data tells us there were four people living in the house including Jack John in 1800, and three in 1810: perhaps his wife, his mother, and his sister or niece.

Based on my research I believe the John house was located on or near today's Tuttle Ave. The reference to Blue Hills and other landmarks help to place it there. In addition, the 1800 and 1810 U.S. Censuses list Col. Thaddeus Cook as a nearby neighbor to the John family. We know Cook lived on Tuttle as his house is still standing there. The 48 page Last Will and Testament left by John and filed at Wallingford Town Hall (it's also available online at ancestry.com) is rich with the details of his home life. No mention is made of how the house appeared on the outside. It was probably something like a log

cabin or simple wood frame structure, as stone and brick houses were rare here, and roofed with pine shingles as referenced in the will. By using the extensive inventory of belongings, I created a reasonable, if sketchy, sense of what the inside of his house might have been like.

Keeping Room

Hungry following his early morning chores, Jack John might have entered his house into the “meal room” or “keeping room”, warmed by the fireplace. A round breakfast table surrounded by four green chairs was set with tin plates. Pewter porringers held steaming oatmeal; and a fresh loaf of rye bread waited on a bread tray with a breadknife and butter boat. A pewter pepper castor and a salt cellar rested beside a glass sugar bowl. Earthen coffee mugs waited by the coffee mill to receive the hearty brew, thus completing the breakfast spread. Had a visitor appeared on a Sunday afternoon, he might have observed the table set with a calico tablecloth, twin candlesticks, place settings of blue rimmed china, a tin pitcher of freshly pressed cider, two sets of knives and forks, probably tin, a tin or earthen salver with a sizzling shoulder of ham. Nearby waited a dish of white beans and corn that had been cooked in a bake kettle with a heaping spoonful of lard from the lard tub for flavor. On special occasions, 3 silver tablespoons and 5 silver teaspoons were placed on the table with the family’s best china. This room was an all purpose area that also included, set in the back, a loom and spinning wheel for use in making the family’s clothing. A sewing bag hanging on a hook included such necessities as pins, tape measure, scissors, knitting needles, and yarn. In a corner sat the “great chair” for relaxing , a candle stand, and a clock perched on a shelf.

Kitchen

The family’s meals were made in a well-outfitted kitchen. The large fireplace held a kitchen crane that supported a variety of tin baking pots and pans over the flames. Andirons held spits and other gadgets to assist in the roasting and baking of food. There were shovels and tongs, pails and bellows handy. Heating water was a constant need and the Johns had plenty of kettles for the purpose: bell kettle, brass kettle, copper kettle, tin kettle. There was a churn, a cheese press, sets of bowls, baskets, funnels, platters, and canisters to keep their provisions fresh. Stored on wooden shelves were a mortar and pestle, measuring cups, and a brass skimmer. Jack John owned a gun which he may have kept in the house leaning up against the wall, or mounted over the fireplace. He used it for hunting the abundant game in the woods and fields nearby.

Bedrooms

Perhaps before bedtime the family enjoyed a sip of wine. The will lists a set of wine glasses and glass decanter among their belongings. In addition, they owned a hogshead, a kind of wine barrel. The house had three bedrooms: the south room, the north room, both downstairs, and the garret (small attic). Each room was outfitted with a bedstead upon which was strapped a canvas bed sacking which supported the feather bed. The featherbed, a sort of primitive mattress, was covered in ticking cloth and filled with feathers. The John’s owned a good variety of bed linens: striped and colorful blankets; blue and calico quilts; blanket linings; linen sheets, cotton sheets;

pillows, pillow covers, and bolsters. One set of sheets was embroidered with the initials "J.J.". Sarah may have made some of these things as the family had all kinds of fabric on hand: linen, silk, cotton, calico, ticking and wool.

Along with the bedsteads, bedrooms contained several pieces of furniture for storage, and a chamber pot: bureau drawers, chests, and a sea chest (from Jack John's days as a sailor). Blankets and linens were packed into these chests. The bureaus held a variety of clothing. Sarah (and the other women) had bonnets, gowns (long dresses) of wool, silk, calico, and lace. Short gowns and petticoats. Socks of wool, cotton and linen. Coats and vests, a red cloak and a calico jacket. Cotton and leather shoes. Jack too was well-outfitted. A great coat, pea jacket, cotton and woolen coats, vests of linen and silk; woolen and cotton shirts, trousers of black cotton, calico, and striped pants. There were boots, mittens, hats, and one silver and two pewter buckles. Toiletries included soap, washtub, towels, razor, and mirror.

Cellar

In addition to the keeping room, kitchen, bedrooms and garret, the house had a cellar which was used for storage. There they kept barrels, casks and kegs that held preserved food, grain, lard, salt mortar, and other supplies.

Barn

Though the John's homestead was not referred to as a farm, it functioned as one and the will inventoried a barn and the many pieces of equipment and livestock expected on a farm. The Johns owned a black cow, a two-year-old colt, a yearling colt, a barrow pig, a sow, an old mare, a black heifer, a two-year-old heifer, and 50 peeps (chicks). Stored in the barn were a cider press, an iron shovel, wood shovel, stone hammer, hoe, rakes, rye riddle and hitchel, scythes, hatchet, brushes, harness, bridle bits, broad ax, adz, chain hooks, pitchfork, and an ox-yoke and plow. Conveyances included a sleigh, ox-sled, and ox-cart. Jack John had a hatcher as well, a warmed cabinet in which eggs were placed to hatch. He grew a variety of grains as indicated by the type of equipment he owned: rye, flax, corn. He also planted white beans and probably other produce as well.

Death, Will, and Final Resting Place: 1817

It can be assumed that Jack John was living in his home until the time of his death in the spring of 1817. Seemingly unusual for a former slave and black man in the early 19th century, he had a long and detailed will. Though he left most of his personal and real estate to his wife Sarah, he made bequests to numerous others to be paid from Sarah's estate after her death. Among the beneficiaries were the wife, children and grandchildren of his former owner Jared Potter as well as the daughter of his first owner Samuel Forbes. These bequests were mostly in the form of cash and silver spoons. It is a testament to Jack John's character that he achieved such success in life without holding onto any bitterness that his enslavement might have caused. He made many friends in Wallingford in all levels of society, not the least of which were his former owners.

In determining where Jack John would be buried, Jared Potter Kirtland, executor of the estate, faced a dilemma. As an old friend who also happened to be the grandson of Jared Potter, Kirtland felt responsible for honoring the memory of this good man. He and Jack's numerous friends in the community wanted to bury him in a respectable plot in the Center Street Cemetery, perhaps near the Potters, his "adopted" family. But in Wallingford at that time black people were buried only in the "nigger quarter", a wretched, weed-infested area in the southwest corner of the cemetery; and there were those who wanted to continue this abhorrent tradition. Angry words were exchanged among the two groups, and a compromise was eventually reached: Jack would be buried in a corner of the cemetery, but not in the "nigger quarter". A red sandstone marker with inscription would be placed on his grave. A newspaper article reported that a great many people attended Jack John's funeral, officiated by an "intelligent colored clergyman of the Methodist denomination".

By summer, the grave was obscured by masses of weeds growing up in this untended corner of the cemetery. And in time, the industrious former slave, friend of many, landowner and farmer, all but disappeared from the collective memory of the Wallingford Community. In a strange turn of events, fifty-six years after his funeral, Jack John once again appeared in the *Meriden Daily Republican*. Jared Potter Kirtland, Jack's old friend and executor, who had moved to Ohio soon after Jack's death, returned to the town of his birth for a visit. He describes in a letter to the editor the difficulty he had in finding Jack's grave. Over the years, the cemetery had doubled in size, evolved from a square to an oblong, and annexed a neighboring rye field. As a result of these changes, Jack John's grave was now sitting in the center of the cemetery, surrounded by fine monuments and cultivated grounds. Kirtland found the stone good as new, but covered in lichens which he cleaned off. He commented on the irony that this man who many thought should be relegated to the "nigger quarter" was now resting in the very center of the old Wallingford cemetery—prime real estate. An undated old cemetery map marks the Jack John plot, sited between the graves of Augustus Hall and Merritt Williams in Section B. Using this map as a guide, my husband and I easily found the location with an empty space between the Hall and Williams markers where Jack John was buried. In confirmation a Hale Collection of Cemetery Inscriptions from 1934 identified an "obliterated headstone with no name" sitting between the Hall and Williams plots. Though this stone has since disappeared and nothing is left to mark his grave, Jack John nonetheless rests peacefully in our beautiful Center Street Cemetery.

I hope in time more of Jack John's story will be discovered. There are so many missing pieces of the puzzle! But without knowing anything more, we can pay tribute to this former slave who in all probability met a president and a royal governor; gained freeman's status; owned property; voted as the first black man ever to do so in Wallingford; and created a good and meaningful life for himself and his family.

Note: If you have something to add to this story I'd love to hear from you. Contact me at bobbieborne@gmail.com

Sources Used for Jack John Story

Ancestry.com. Internet subscription database includes Federal Census data, birth, death, and marriage records, burial locations, city directories, and many more sources.

Jim Crow Museum. <https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/links/misclink/shipyards.htm>, accessed 2/2/2018.

Map of Hamden, CT, from Atlas of New Haven County, F.W. Beers, 1868.

Map of Wallingford, CT, from Atlas of New Haven County, F.W. Beers, 1868.

Land Records. Office of Hamden Town Clerk

Land Records. Office of Wallingford Town Clerk

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Newspapers.com. Internet database indexes hundreds of national newspapers. I used Connecticut papers, primarily *The Record-Journal*.

U.S. Geological Survey Map of Wallingford