



370 Beach Road, Fairfield, CT 06824
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Slavery and Slave Owners in Fairfield County

During the 1600s, hereditary, race-based slavery slowly infiltrated New England's local economies. By the early 18th century, African-American slavery had become an established institution. At the time of the American Revolution, Connecticut was the largest slaveholding colony in New England, with slaves comprising about three and a half percent of the population. In Fairfield, the percentage ran higher: about six percent, or 260 of its 4455 residents. Most slave owners in this area owned one or two people, whereas slave owners in parts of southeastern Connecticut tended to own more. Only a handful of Fairfield families owned five or more slaves.

Fairfield's slave owners were mainly people of moderate wealth, in addition to more prominent, wealthy citizens. Among them were several of the patriots who supported the cause of liberty—Gold Selleck Silliman, Caleb Brewster, Thaddeus Burr, and others—as well as Loyalists.

African-Americans, including some Fairfield residents, served in Connecticut regiments during the Revolutionary War, and some earned freedom for their service. But for most enslaved African-Americans, freedom was slow in coming. Connecticut first began to address slavery in 1774 by banning the importation of slaves.

In 1780, two Fairfield slaves named Prince and Prime made a bold move to petition Connecticut's General Assembly for the emancipation of all slaves. Other slaves had petitioned for their own freedom, but none before Prince and Prime had argued that skin color should not oblige their race to serve another. Although Fairfield's Judge Jonathan Sturges supported the petition, it was denied.

Finally, in 1783, a state law was passed that gradually ended slavery. Freedom was granted to those born after March 1, 1784 when they reached age twenty-five. However, there were qualifications. Only slaves in good health and less than forty-six years old could be released, because towns did not want to support elderly or disabled slaves cast off by their masters. The number of slaves slowly dwindled, but slavery was not formally abolished by Connecticut until 1848.