

Slavery in Rowley West Parish

By Christine Comiskey

Slavery, unfortunately, was a common practice here in the Northeast during the 1700s, although our ancestors preferred the term “servants for life.” Owning a slave was a symbol of status, and many wealthy and prominent citizens owned at least one.

Many long-time Georgetown residents know about Cuffee Dole, the former slave, Revolutionary War soldier and land owner who now lies in the most well-known and visited grave in Union Cemetery. His gravestone bears the inscription: “*White man, turn not away in disgust, thou art my brother, like me akin to earth and worms.*” But few are aware that there were over a dozen other slaves in Rowley West Parish in the 1700s, many of whom lie forgotten in unmarked graves in the same cemetery.

The earliest known record of a slave in Georgetown is December of 1741, when “*Nota, Mr. Job Tyler’s Negro woman*” died at the age of 63, followed a few months later by the baptism of “*Peter, a negro servant of Jeremiah Herriman*” by Reverend James Chandler, a slave-owner himself. Other known slave-owners in the parish were Benjamin Adams, Edmund Dole, Moses Dole, Jonathan Herriman, Jedediah Kilbourn and Deacon Stephen Mighill.

With the exception of Cuffee Dole, little is known of our earliest black residents beyond their names—Chloe, Cesar, Dinah, Candace, Pomp, etc.—in the vital records and in wills, where they were listed as property. Slavery was abolished in Massachusetts by a decision of the Supreme Judicial Court in 1783, a fact that Reverend James Chandler seems not to have known when he wrote his will in 1787. In it, he writes: “*I commit to my said wife my Negro woman Sabina not to be by her sold out of the house, but to serve her and be provided for by her as is mete, but if said Sabina shall live to be a burden which my said wife shall think too heavy for her to bear, my Will is that my Executor assist in providing for her as is fitting for an aged servant that has been faithful.*” He also mentions Sabina’s daughter in the will: “*To my Negro woman Phillis, I give her manumission or freedom and five pounds lawful money, a chest and such other things in my house as are known by the family to be her things. I give her also the bed that her mother and she lodge in and all the bedding belonging to it...*”

Like everyone else, the black servants were expected to attend Sunday services. In the Old South Church, where our congregation worshipped in those days, they sat in the balcony in a pew designated as “the Negro seat.” Cuffee Dole, however, did not sit in that seat. He had his own pew in the balcony.

There were at least two other people who were born into slavery and later lived in Georgetown. Louisa Price was born a slave in Baltimore around 1799. She was purchased at the age of two and brought to Massachusetts. She lived in Georgetown from about 1820 until her death in 1882 at age 83. According to her obituary, she received a quality education and was well respected. She is buried in Union Cemetery.

Robert Williams was born into slavery in Aiken, South Carolina in 1862. He came to Georgetown around 1872, where, according to his obituary, “*he was given the benefit of educational privileges such as the town affords, mixed with white children of his age, and grew up a favorite with all.*” He worked as a farm laborer and was a volunteer firefighter with Engine Company No. 4. He died of tuberculosis in 1888 at age 26 and is buried in Harmony Cemetery.



Grave of Cuffee Dole in Union Cemetery