

The Acknowledging the History of Enslavement and Liberation of African Americans in Pequannock Project is a collaborative, community-engaged effort to rebury the displaced remains of Black unfree people in Pequannock Township and honor the lives and histories of enslaved people in New Jersey. Led by an advisory committee of community leaders and researchers sharing knowledge and contributing diverse perspectives, this project aims to promote community engagement with histories of race, slavery, liberation, and unfreedom in New Jersey and promote public engagement on these topics.

During a review of the collections at the Rutgers Geology Museum in 2022, researchers determined that Rutgers University-New Brunswick was in possession of human remains from multiple cultural and geographical contexts. Among these remains were those of four individuals whose burials were disinterred during sand mining in Pequannock Township in January 1936, and whose remains were brought to the museum shortly thereafter. At the time of disinterment, local residents were consulted about the likely provenance of the remains, which university researchers have been able to substantially corroborate through archival research in deeds, wills, census, birth, death, and marriage records, newspaper articles, and other records that establish evidence for the ownership of land where the remains were found.

The exact identities of the individuals represented in the remains disinterred in Pequannock cannot be ascertained without destructive analysis; however, pathological and osteological analysis suggests that the remains had been buried for approximately 80-100 years at the time of disinterment. They are believed to be African American, and a living witness at the time indicated they were likely to have been people who were enslaved by the DeMott family. The burials were made on land that was owned by the DeMott family for the majority of the nineteenth century, and the witness reported that several burials of “Negro slaves” were made in the early 1850s at that site. At this location, the DeMotts enslaved dozens of people, many of whom lived and worked at this site, including individuals named York, Dinah, Andrew, Isaac, Amzi, Frank, Jude, Phebe, Manus, Harry, Jack, Charles, Bill, and Mercy. Several other enslaved people whose names were not recorded in the surviving written records, who were described in dehumanizing terms as “negro wench” and “black boy,” also lived and worked at this site. This project aims to honor the ancestors whose remains have been held in storage for decades, by recognizing their humanity and facilitating reburial.

Slavery was common in New Jersey from the colonial period through the mid-nineteenth century; many hundreds of thousands of people were enslaved in New Jersey since the arrival of early Dutch and English investors, settlers, and later colonists. The northern counties had the highest rates of enslavement among people of African and indigenous descent. In 1810, Morris County’s population included approximately 856 enslaved people (about 4% of the overall population) and approximately 204 free people of color (about 1% of the overall population). In this period, many people experienced a spectrum of freedom and unfreedom during their lives, including people of African descent who lived in Pequannock, some of whom were born enslaved and later emancipated themselves or were manumitted (released from bondage) or became indentured servants, sharecroppers, etc.

Some cemeteries and burial grounds received burials of people of different races, while others, especially later in the nineteenth century, were segregated or barred African Americans from being buried in cemeteries near white people. As a result, African Americans often had very few places to conduct burials, and their interment sites were often treated with disrespect and disregard; many are under-documented and unmarked. As the *Paterson Morning Call* wrote in 1936 when residents were investigating the disinterment of the burials in Pequannock, "Old residents here recall that slave owners buried their slaves in any handy spot."

The current disposition of the remains is not in keeping with ethical practices for human remains in cultural collections. Historical, museological, and anthropological professional guidelines for ethical practices with human remains in cultural collections suggest that members of stakeholder communities should be integral parts of the decision making process for how to address reburial, repatriation, and interpretation. With this in mind, the university's collections provenance research team assembled a council of experts with academic and vernacular expertise to issue recommendations about how to appropriately reinter these ancestors. Grant funding from the Henry Luce Foundation-funded Grounded Knowledge Project of the Institute for Diversity & Civic Life, administered by New Brunswick Theological Seminary, is facilitating this work among a collaborative, interdisciplinary group representing diverse individuals and professional backgrounds engaged in this community-centered effort to consider the reburial of these ancestors, and to acknowledge and document the legacy of slavery and dispossession within the community of Pequannock. These efforts hope to inform the ongoing work of the Rutgers Geology Museum and its collections, and the ways in which our public and religiously affiliated educational and non-profit institutions throughout New Jersey address the past, present, and future of these histories, which continue to resonate in diverse ways throughout our communities.

The advisory council began meeting in February 2024 to review the existing evidence and to discuss the best resolution for the remains of these ancestors. Informed by more than a year of research and after spending many hours of community knowledge-sharing, the committee has issued the below list of recommendations. These are informed by the consensus among council members that the ancestors under consideration should be buried respectfully in the places they lived, worked, worshiped, married, and raised families. There were several free Black landowners and farmers who lived in Pequannock in the mid-1800s, including a family who had been previously enslaved and became free and purchased land from the DeMotts after living on it and working it for many years. Many enslaved and free African Americans, and the white people who enslaved them, in Pequannock and the surrounding area, were members of the Pompton Plains Dutch Reformed Church.

The Council welcomes community feedback and input, especially from people with a shared heritage of nineteenth-century North Jersey and contemporary Morris County and nearby residents. The project presents an opportunity to speak in various contexts about the history of enslavement and liberation of the African Americans who lived in Pequannock in the colonial and early national periods in New Jersey.

Council Recommendations

- 1) The advisory council recommends the work of this public history project be named:
Title: Acknowledging Enslavement and Liberation of African Americans in Historic Pequannock
Mission statement:
Acknowledging the Past, Reconciliation in the Present, Charting a Course for the Future
- 2) The advisory council recommends that the ancestors' remains should be reinterred in the cemetery at the First Reformed Church of Pompton Plains (FRCPP). Reburial ceremony planning and details will be supported by this council.
- 3) The advisory council recommends that a succinct document for dissemination of information and knowledge about this work be written and approved by this council. This document should include a simple explanation of events and historical framing.
- 4) The advisory council recommends that a plan for continued acknowledgment & education about this project to the community be created and enacted in collaboration with community members, local residents, and regional historians and in partnership with FRCPP and this advisory council. These groups will continue this work immediately, and will include the following:
 - Develop tools for the dissemination of information and knowledge
 - Recommend learning resources and opportunities to employ within the community
 - Develop a list of resources for community stakeholders to utilize
 - Seek to place markers at appropriate locations, including the site of disinterment
 - Develop and enact a plan to make the information and resources from this project publicly available
- 5) The advisory council recommends that a plan be created and enacted to seek additional funding to ensure the continuation of this work in partnership and collaboration with FRCPP, community members and this advisory council.
- 6) The advisory council recognizes that it is not possible to identify exact individuals among the ancestors being reburied in Pequannock. Given those circumstances, the council recommends that outreach be conducted intentionally to share the research related to this project with broad communities of descendants who trace their lineage to this community in the nineteenth century, particularly people of African descent who may have been affiliated with the family stories represented in this project. The council recommends reaching out to the NJ African American Genealogical Society, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Morristown and other entities to be identified. Members of descendent communities should be welcomed to attend the burial ceremony and be invited to participate in shaping the ongoing community-engaged process of recognizing, exploring, and commemorating Pequannock's African American History and histories of enslavement and liberation.

We hope that these recommendations provide a basis upon which council members and community organizers can continue the work of acknowledging and documenting this history in Pequannock Township.

Signed

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