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Keith W. Stokes is the executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce and a student of the history of the local black community. Stokes is standing in the God's Little Acre section of the Common Burying Ground in Newport, which Stokes calls 'the most significant African burial ground in America.' (Jacqueline Marque/Daily News staff)

Newport's black community rooted in Africa, slavery

By M. Catherine Callahan/Daily News staff

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The immigrants who left their homelands in the 17th and the 18th centuries to settle on Aquidneck Island arrived with dreams of freedom and hopes for a better life.

The exception is Newport's earliest black residents, who were brought to the city against their will. They were enslaved Africans from Ghana, the property of wealthy English and Scottish colonists who were drawn to Newport by its promise of religious freedom.

In the ensuing centuries, the sons and daughters of those African slaves became free Americans who founded local religious, civic and professional organizations. Black men and women opened restaurants, neighborhood stores, barbershops, beauty parlors, nightclubs, taxi companies and other area businesses.

They built churches, bought homes and established neighborhoods. Some have served the community as doctors or nurses, while others were hired to be teachers, police officers or firefighters. Blacks have been elected to serve on councils, school committees and in the General Assembly,

and many have elected to serve their country by joining the armed forces.



Paul L. Gaines, who was Newport's first and only black mayor, was a prime mover behind the monument in Portsmouth that honors the Black Regiment, which battled the British in the 1778 Battle of Rhode Island. (Jacqueline Marque/Daily News staff)

Keith W. Stokes, the executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce and a former member of the Newport City Council, grew up in the City-by-the-Sea and has done extensive research on its black history. The first Africans were brought to Newport in the 1650s, he said, and Sea Flower, the first slave ship to sail into Newport Harbor, arrived in 1696.

In the 1700s, Newport was one of the most prosperous ports in Colonial America. Its booming economy depended on the trade of rum, spermaceti candles and slaves.

"Nearly all the dissident followers of religion would come to Newport," Stokes said during a presentation he gave in 2005. "Ironically, all of them were participants in the slave trade. Nothing was more profitable than the slave trade."

But the slavery operation in Newport was far different from those found on the plantations of the South, where blacks were treated as beasts of the field, Stokes said recently. The Africans brought to Newport usually were children who learned trades and served apprenticeships to become barrel makers, seamstresses, boat builders, rope makers, stonecutters, stonemasons, candle makers, carpenters, silversmiths or furniture makers because the city needed crafts people to continue to thrive.

By 1770, there were 24 rum distilleries operating along Newport's waterfront. The rum was made from sugar and molasses harvested by African slaves in the West Indies and transported to Rhode Island. Once distilled, the rum was shipped to West Africa to be traded or sold for more local labor to be shipped to the West Indies and America, Stokes said.

Black slaves such as Neptune Thurston produced the rum in Newport and made the hogshead barrels in which it was stored and transported.

The African children sent to Newport lived in the homes of their masters and mistresses and often shared their children's bedrooms. They were educated and they worshipped where their masters worshipped, converting to Christianity or Judaism, depending on their owner's faith, Stokes said.

"It was a most unique situation - slaves living, worshipping and working with the white families who owned them," he said. "We didn't have a slave economy as we traditionally know it. I call it creative survival."

"By 1770, Africans were the entire work force," Stokes said, adding that other ethnic groups such as the Irish and the Swedish had yet to arrive in Newport.

Slave labor built many of the Colonial buildings that survive in the city, including the Colony House, Redwood Library, Brick Market and Touro Synagogue.

"I think we should celebrate the fact that Africans built what today we consider masterpieces," Stokes said.

Religious freedom

Occramar Marycoo was 14 when he was sold in 1760 to Caleb Gardner, a local ship captain who changed the slave's name to Newport Gardner. He was a gifted musician who in 1780 helped found the Free African Benevolent Society, the first association formed by Africans in America.

Members of the society worked to raise money to provide proper burials for Africans, to hire white teachers to educate black children and to pay for passage to Africa for those who wished to return to their homeland.

"They also begin to have discussions about religion," Stokes said. "They decided the (existing) churches didn't give them full religious freedom."

Many of Newport's black residents gathered for prayer services in a building on Division Street, where the Union Colored Congregational Church was founded in 1824. It was the first free black church in America.

The surrounding streets, most of what today is referred to as Historic Hill, composed the city's first black neighborhood, Stokes said. The area began at Touro Street and extended to Bath and Levin streets, thoroughfares that no longer exist, replaced by Memorial Boulevard.

The Rev. Mahlon van Horne, Stokes' great-great-uncle, became pastor of the church in 1869 and continued to serve until President McKinley appointed him U.S. consul to St. Thomas in 1896. Van Horne, the first black elected to serve

in the General Assembly, was pastor in 1871 when the congregation built a new church at 49 Division St., which was converted into a private home after the church closed in 1960.

Years earlier, in 1826, Marycoo - who had reclaimed his African name - left Newport with several church members and returned to Africa, to what is now known as Liberia. He died of coastal fever within a year.

Marycoo is buried in Africa but his wife and several of his descendants are buried in Newport, in a section of the Common Burying Ground known as God's Little Acre.

"It is the most significant African burial ground in America," Stokes said.

Zingo, an African whose name was changed to Pompe Stevens after he went to work for the John Stevens Stone Shop on Thames Street, signed his name to the stone he cut for his brother, Cuffe Gibbs, in 1768. It may be the first piece of art signed by an African-American, Stokes said.

Freedom fighters

In February 1778, Gen. George Washington offered freedom to every "able-bodied negro, mulatto or Indian man-slave" willing to fight in the Revolutionary War. Locally, free black men and slaves who enlisted joined the First Rhode Island Regiment and held off the British forces during the Battle of Rhode Island in August 1778.

"The majority of the soldiers in the First Rhode Island Regiment were believed to be of African descent, which has led to its being celebrated as the Black Regiment; regimental rosters reveal a significant number of the soldiers to be Indians," reads an inscription on a monument at Patriots Park in Portsmouth, the site of the regiment's historic battle.

Members of the Newport County NAACP and the late Sen. Eric A. O'D. Taylor, D-Newport, set a natural stone, without inscription, at the site in the 1960s to commemorate the Black Regiment. The late Alva and Victoria Burton held annual ceremonies there to honor those who fought and to preserve their history.

Paul L. Gaines, who was Newport's first and only black mayor, was among those who attended the ceremonies and worked tirelessly for a permanent tribute to the regiment.

"It's significant that this was the only black regiment to fight in the Revolutionary War," he said shortly before the monument's dedication in 2006. "This memorial was the dream of those people in the 1960s. It started when they put that first rock down."

The polished black granite monument is inscribed with the names of the soldiers who served in the Rhode Island Regiment. It was designed by Derek Bradford of Providence and cost \$400,000.

The Black Regiment's distinguished service pushed the General Assembly to pass in 1784 the Negro Emancipation Act, which provided for a "gradual emancipation" of slaves, Stokes said. The lawmakers decreed that after March 1, 1784, male children born to slaves would be free when they turned 21; female children born to slaves would become free at the age of 18.

Building a community

Newport's role as a major seaport ended with the Revolutionary War. Many blacks left to find work in bigger cities. But the 19th century brought a new wave of black immigrants, many from the South. The group included van Horne, as well as entrepreneurs and civil-rights advocates who pushed for industrial training and racial equality in Newport 100 years before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a national campaign.

George T. Downing arrived in Newport in the 1840s and opened the Sea Girt Hotel on Bellevue Avenue in the mid-1850s. He later built the Downing Block, which housed a mix of food and retail businesses.

Downing was involved in the abolitionist movement and helped to desegregate Newport schools in 1865. He provided job training and employment opportunities for blacks and an award bearing his name is presented during the annual Rev. Robert L. Williams Black History Assembly at Rogers High School.

Another award is presented in memory of Dr. Marcus F. Wheatland, the first black physician to practice on Aquidneck Island. Born in Barbados in 1868, he graduated from Howard University and opened an office on John Street, where he specialized in radiology.

"When we wanted to rename West Broadway (in 1994), we wanted to name it after Dr. Wheatland," said Eleanor Keys, a lifelong Newporter and expert in African-American history and culture.

The 84-year-old, who has suffered poor health in recent months, has received numerous awards for her efforts to share her extensive knowledge of black history with people of all races and ages.

"I'm a teacher without a degree," she said.

Keys is particularly proud of her own family's Newport history, which began in 1891. Her paternal grandfather, Lindsay R. Walker, was among a large group of blacks that moved north from Culpepper, Va.

"They came to Newport to work on the farms in Middletown," Keys said.

Her father, Louis Walker Sr., was born in Newport and built a garage on Bridge Street, where he started City Taxi Garage, a successful transportation business, in 1947. Keys' brother, the late Louis Walker Jr., and her husband, the late John Keys, worked in the family business.

Keys' maternal grandfather was William H. Jackson Sr., who also was Paul Gaines' maternal grandfather. (Keys' mother and Gaines' mother were sisters.) Jackson moved to Newport in the late 1800s from Petersburg, Va.

"He was a Republican, the party of Lincoln, and became the first black doorkeeper at the Rhode Island Statehouse," Gaines said.

Jackson served at the Statehouse in Newport, now known as the Colony House, and the Statehouse in Providence. In 1932, he was appointed to serve at the Republican National Convention in Chicago, where he wrote an anti-lynching plank for the Republican platform, Gaines said.

Al Gaines, the former mayor's father, and his two brothers moved to Newport from Georgia in the 1930s.

"They were ordinary folks," Paul Gaines said. "They were craftsmen and they were looking to get involved in trades and such. My mother and all the women in the family were homemakers."

Born in 1932, the youngest of six children, Gaines has fond memories of growing up on Johnson Court.

"That was known as the West Broadway area ... we had everybody there," he said. "It wasn't a ghetto. It was a neighborhood."

There were three black churches in Newport: Shiloh Baptist and Mt. Olivet Baptist, which later merged to become Community Baptist Church; and Mt. Zion A.M.E. Among the neighborhood stores that Gaines remembers are Addison's Variety, West's Variety and Lisbon Variety. Other black-owned businesses included Trent's Beauty Shoppe, Turner's Barber Shop and Penna's Gravel & Roofing.

Ernest Triplett Sr. and Henry Cross organized the city's first black Boy Scout troop, Warren Weston and George Newton ran "The Rec," the popular recreation facility frequented by black families, and Thomas Thornton started the Newport Youth Federation Band for black musicians.

Lillian Triplett, Mora Hammonds and Helen Speedwell were among the schoolteachers who served as role models for Gaines and other black youngsters who followed in their footsteps and became educators themselves. Among them, Victoria Johnson, who served as a teacher and later the principal at Rogers High School. Johnson remains involved in local educational and civic organizations. She belongs to the Women's Newport League, which was founded in 1895 by Mary Dickerson, a dressmaker who operated a shop on Bellevue Avenue.

"It is the oldest colored women's club in the United States," Johnson said.

Its noble objectives include: promoting the education of and protecting the rights of women and children, while working for their moral, economic, social and religious welfare; raising the standards of the home; improving conditions for family living; and promoting interracial understanding so justice may prevail among all peoples.

"Lifting as we climb for God and humanity" is the club's motto.

President Barbara R. Jackson, 84, and the other club members are hosting a National Association of Colored Women's Clubs conference this weekend at the Best Western Mainstay Inn. About 100 women, traveling from as far

away as New Mexico, are expected, Jackson said.

Members maintain Dickerson's home at 24 Gould St., which she willed to the league to insure that its work would continue. Members hold their monthly meetings in the finished basement, and rent out two upstairs apartments.

The local club is the only remaining charter member of the Northeastern Federation of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Keys is among the small, and aging, membership.

"The important thing for people to know is that African-Americans came to this country and they had a brain," she said. "They brought crafts with them. They knew a lot of things before they came here that people didn't know."