

Witness Stones Installation for John C. Walley, 6/10/2023, Comments by Julie Hughes

It takes dedicated, in-depth, and detail-oriented research to find the merest scraps of the life histories of enslaved people, the emancipated, and their early descendants.

In John C. Walley's case, we are fortunate to have had a team of researchers, beginning with myself, but also including Liz Lightfoot of the Witness Stones Project, and Wilton and St. Matthew's own Sharon Pearson, who made a late-breaking but pivotal discovery that led us to John's likely final resting place in Bridgeport.

It all began two years ago when the Wilton Historical Society secured funding from the Elizabeth Raymond Ambler Trust for research into local Black history, and approached me to do the work. At the beginning of the project we knew of perhaps a dozen people enslaved by Wilton families. Now we know there were over 130, and probably many more that left no traces in the documents that have survived. We now have names for 110 of these enslaved people.

Philes

Pompey Cesar

Hagar Tonquin

Dover

Naomi

And so many more.

While it is important that some of us here today have heard these names and learned as much as we can about who each person was, what they unjustly suffered, and what they accomplished in spite of the prejudice and imposed disadvantages they faced, this is not enough. I hope today can also be about acknowledging the descendants of Wilton's enslaved and what we and the Town of Wilton owe them.

While we know of no direct descendants of John C. Walley, there are many living descendants of John's first cousin Jane Manning James, who (while her mother and grandmother had been enslaved here) was born free in Wilton and grew up on Old Highway. Today members of the family live in the United States, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Among them is Louis Duffy, whom I have had the honor of corresponding with.

Louis has written that one of the things most important to him is "acknowledgement, that YES, we were members of the Wilton community," and how much it means to him for present day Wiltonians to "simplify and say - yes - the Manning family lived here - and they were 'free' black people; here in Wilton."

The most important things our research uncovered about John is not simply that he was enslaved. It is the entirety of his experience, the depths of his love for his wife Harriot and their daughter Betsey, the herculean efforts he clearly took to improve his family's circumstances, and his unwillingness even in his greatest hour of need – sick with tuberculosis and a widower – to impose on his friends without finding a way to guarantee, that after his death, they would be made whole. We all should loudly declare ourselves very proud to be able to claim John as a Wiltonian.