



Black Antebellum Settlements & the Modern-Day Wealth Gap in New Jersey

**Written by:
Carlyn D. Crawley, Executive MPA Candidate
Fels Institute of Government
University of Pennsylvania**

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Abstract

Today, New Jersey has the largest racial wealth gap in the nation. This capstone project explores how legislation passed during the Antebellum period, before the end of the Civil War, stifled the development of once thriving Black communities and led to the racial wealth gap we see today. The paper will illustrate the political environment in the northern colonies at that time as well as the duality of the Black experience. This duality was such that Black Americans had the freedom to create thriving communities for themselves but were subjected to the impacts of discriminatory legislation. These laws not only restricted their freedom in the 1800s, but stunted economic prosperity for generations.

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Background

While much of African American history taught in K-8 curriculum is centered around slavery and the Civil Rights movement, the fascinating experience of free Black Americans and their experience settling their communities during the Antebellum period (before the Civil War victory in 1863 or New Jersey's ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865) is woefully overlooked. Specifically, this is the period before 1861 when the American Civil War began. Doing so proves a great disservice because free Black Americans were enterprising land and business owners, amassing real generational wealth and contributing to America's development as a nation. One such contribution was the establishment of all-black communities, especially in the northern states, such as New Jersey. Dozens of these communities across South Jersey, specifically, provided self-sufficient enclaves with stores, churches, and homes where free Blacks and escaped slaves built lives for their families that offered the promise of prosperity and some level of protection from racial violence. Black antebellum settlers in South Jersey were by no means equal to their white counterparts but they freely enjoyed forms of prosperity that were still outlawed for their Black counterparts below the Mason-Dixon line.

Quality of life and growth in these communities faced barriers, though. Unlike Freedmen's towns established after the Civil War that were destroyed by outright mob violence, antebellum settlements in South Jersey were more likely to quietly cease existing. Fear of being kidnapped and lack of government investment infringed on their ability to live freely and threatened to dismantle what they worked so hard to build. One of these communities, Timbuctoo, an unincorporated community in Westampton Township, New Jersey is the subject of this research project. This paper will explore the

establishment and demise of Black antebellum communities in South Jersey, using Timbuctoo as a primary example. It is pertinent to address the political environment these communities were created in as well as the ongoing history of discriminatory policies surrounding land use and housing that disproportionately impacted Black communities even after the Civil War to demonstrate the systemic nature of these policies. As such, this paper will discuss the settlement and destruction of those communities as well. Additionally, tangible policy recommendations will be made to properly acknowledge the legacy of Black antebellum communities and address the racial wealth gap in New Jersey between black and white families as it is the highest in the nation at \$300,000 (Sullivan, McChristian, and Haygood 2022).

“The wealth gap is where historic injustice breeds present suffering.”

-Mehrsa Baradan

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Chapter 1: The Politics of Abolition

The Beginnings of Abolition

Some of the earliest actions against the institution of slavery were actually political power moves by northern colonies to remain independent. By taking steps to end slavery, southern states saw these actions as a potential threat to economic development if the colonies joined together into one nation. In 1774, both Connecticut and Rhode Island continued to host slave auctions & facilitate trades across the colonies but outlawed the international trading of slaves. In 1777, Vermont created the first full abolition and allowed Black males to vote, led by the Quaker community. These legislative acts were simply a way to agitate other colonies, not a moral condemnation of slavery. This is evidenced by the fact that after abolition in each state, dehumanizing local laws were passed that made it increasingly difficult to be Black and free according to the National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC). The precedent of colonies implementing laws that outwardly appear to support abolition but were systemically racist is important to underscore as they demonstrate both the hostile legal environment these settlements were developed in as well as the very divided Quaker community that led the abolitionist movement. These laws may yield some insights into why communities in South Jersey did not last as the state modernized.

An Excerpt from Vermont 1777: Early Steps Against Slavery

Each state created legal strictures making it difficult for “free” blacks to find work, own property, or even remain in the state. Rhode Island, while legally ending slave importation from overseas, continued to have the highest number of slave auctions in the New England states. Additionally, Rhode Island’s laws governing the treatment of African Americans — free or slave — were continually revised and updated and were among the harshest in the colonies. If free blacks were associated with slaves, both could and would be whipped. Anyone giving an African American a cup of hard cider was leveled with a heavy fine, whipped, or both.

Vermont’s July 1777 declaration was not entirely altruistic either. While it did set an independent tone from the 13 colonies, the declaration’s wording was vague enough to let Vermont’s already-established slavery practices continue.

The harshest treatment for free blacks in New England was found in Connecticut. Through a series of different legislative acts created before and after the Revolutionary War, it became nearly impossible for free African Americans to live in the state. For example, free blacks could not walk into a business without the proprietor’s consent, nor could free blacks own property.

In fact, Connecticut lawmakers were so strident in their efforts to push blacks out of their state, the property law was rewritten to be retroactive. The few free African Americans who did own land were forced to void their titles and return property ownership to the town.

More often than not, New England emancipation declarations provided cover for more covert laws that ultimately sought to force African Americans into leaving their states. Whether free or not, black Americans clearly understood that their day-to-day welfare was dependent on their ability to both challenge and accommodate the racism they faced.”

(Smithsonian 2023)

New Jersey Slaves Codes

In 1704 & 1713, New Jersey followed the lead of other northern colonies and implemented restrictive slave codes through, *An Act for Regulating Negro, Indian, and Mallatto Slaves within this Province of New Jersey*, which prevented free Black residents from living in the state without the threat of being sold back into slavery or assaulted (Smith 2023). According to Geneva Smith of Princeton University, some of these hostile measures in the legislation included:

1. Banned buying from or selling to slaves,
2. Required whipping of slaves 10 miles from their slave master’s home,

3. Required slaves from outside of New Jersey without a “written license” from their masters be whipped and jailed,
4. Removed Christian baptism as a path to emancipation,
5. Required a \$200 annual fee for masters seeking to manumit (free) an enslaved person to pay two hundred pounds each year for their support and maintenance, and
6. Banned freed slaves and their children from purchasing or owning property, which also disenfranchised them and locked them out of holding public office.

“This addition to the law was clearly intended to discourage manumission by making it financially prohibitive. As an unintentional effect, it also galvanized antislavery Quakers who were eager to manumit their slaves but could not afford the two hundred pounds. (Smith 2023).”

“What greater Oppression can there be inflicted upon our Fellow Creature, than is inflicted on the poor Negroes...cruel Whippings, and other cruel Punishments, and by short allowance of Food.”

(Keith 1963)

The Splintered Quaker Abolition Movement

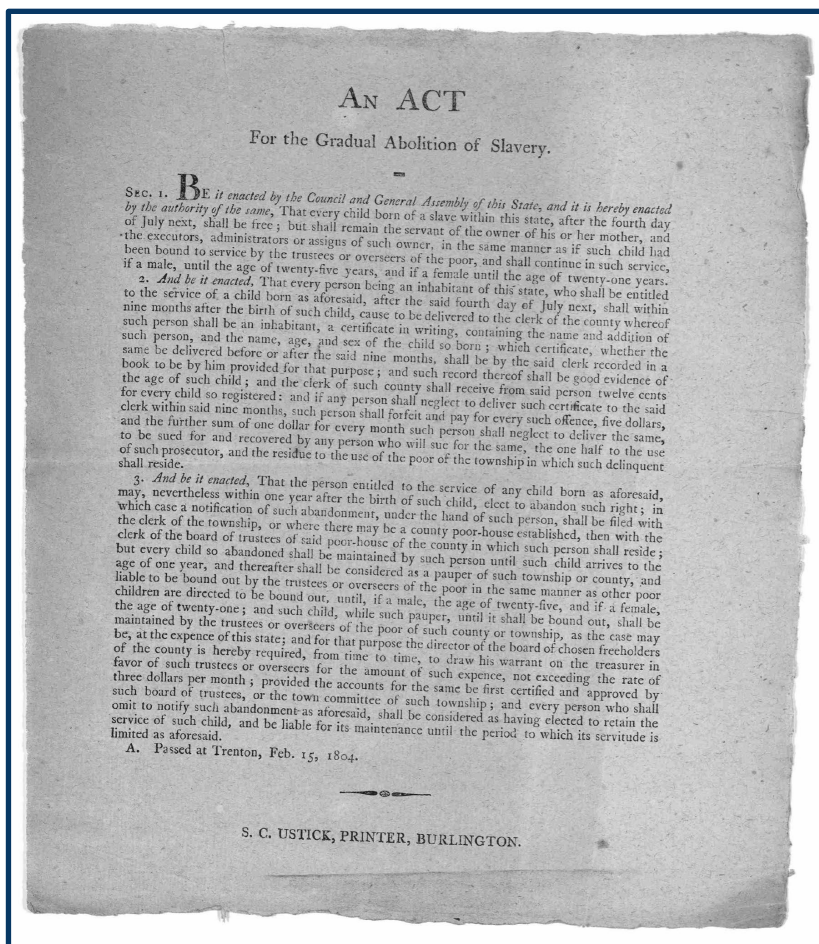
Before addressing how Black Antebellum Settlements in South Jersey came to be, it is important to discuss the political environment they were being created in the midst of. By far, Quaker abolitionists were one of the strongest allies of the anti-slavery movement. While the Quaker community as a whole is often lauded as champions of the Underground Railroad and leaders of the abolitionist movement, it is noteworthy that it was a niche, “fanatic” sub-set of the Religious Society of Friends (referred to as Friends). As early as 1668, a small group of Quakers protested “the traffik of men-body” at the Annual Quaker meeting in Germantown, Pennsylvania. At the time, the majority of Quakers were mainstream and deeply entrenched in the slave trade as wealthy, influential owners. The conversation was quickly shelved and not raised again at the Annual Meeting for 156 years (Cross and James 2003). For 50+ years, early abolitionists like George Keith and Samuel Sewall continued to be outspoken and were shunned by their Quaker peers as a result. (Cross and James 2003). It was not until 1740, when some of the more prominent Quaker slave owners were no longer politically powerful that a more serious anti-slavery effort began to take root (Cross and James 2003).

During the 1740s and early 1750s, the Quakers began to shift positions. In part, this shift coincided with the death of some wealthy, politically and religiously influential Quakers who had been large slave owners and had thrown roadblocks in the way of any meaningful anti-slavery stand at the Yearly Meeting. But, even more so, this shift was encouraged by the gentle persuasion of a new generation of anti-slavery reformers, the most significant of whom were John Woolman and Anthony Benezet (Cross and James 2003).

Even after the 1750s, traction was slow but members of the Quaker community kept advocating. They compromised, passing iterative legislation that made slavery more difficult in place of a full ban. In 1786, they successfully lobbied for legislation outlawing the abuse of slaves and repealed the manumission fee. That same legislation, however, prevented families who had been separated by the slave trade from reuniting by banning interstate travel for freed slaves (Smith 2023).

During the first Congressional Convention in 1790, a congressman from South

Carolina stated, "We took each other with our mutual bad habits and respective evils, for better, for worse. The Northern states adopted us with our slaves, and we adopted them with their Quakers (Frost 2012)." This spoke, not only to the sentiment of Southern, slave-owning legislators but also reflected the sentiments of Friends who believed that the radical methods of abolitionists would incite war instead of facilitating a quicker end to slavery (Frost 2012).

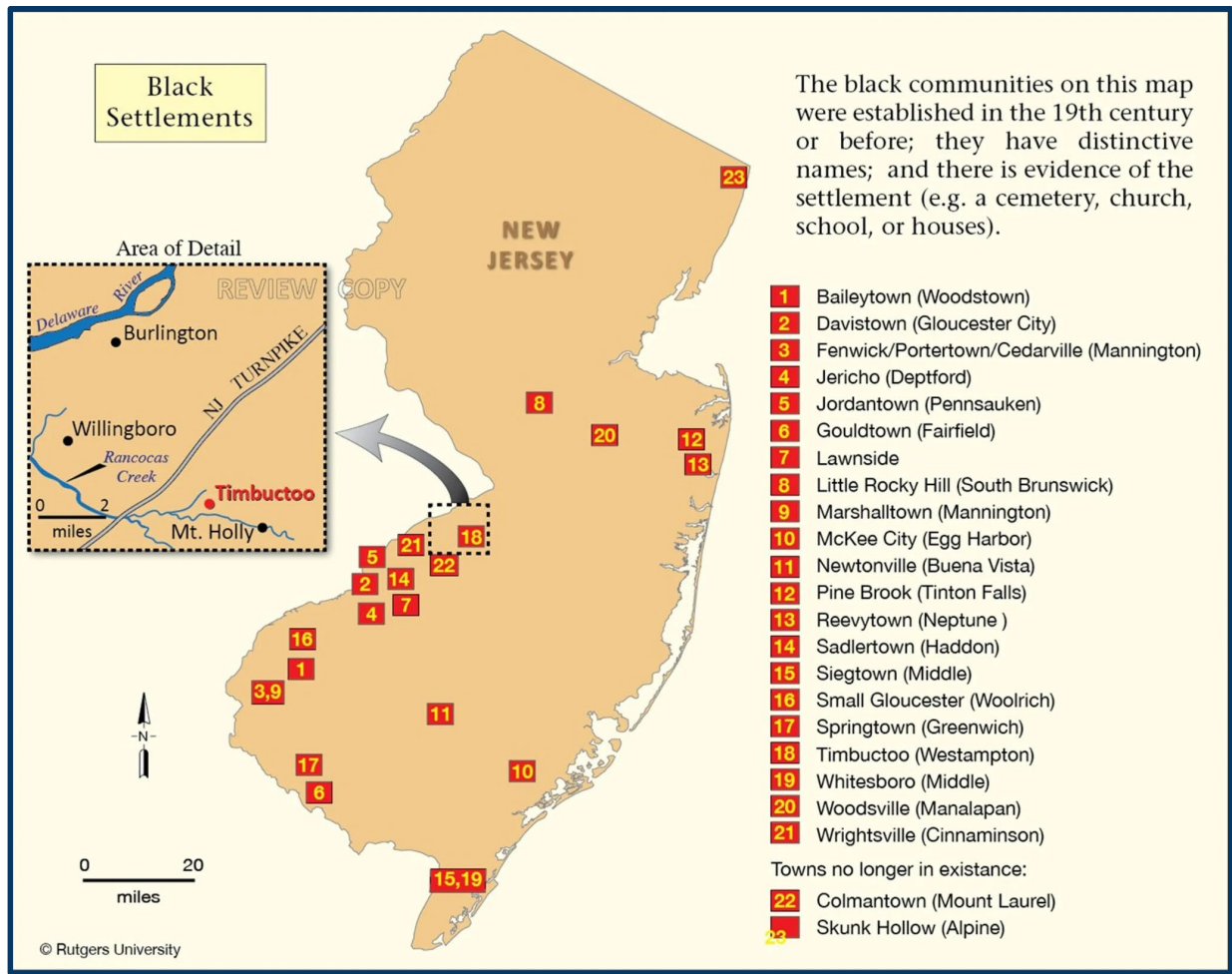


On February 15, 1804, politically powerful Quaker abolitionists from South Jersey successfully lobbied for the passage of "An Act for the Gradual Emancipation of Slavery." This legislation made New Jersey the last northern state to abolish slavery and initiated the "gradual manumission of slaves." Gradual manumission meant that female children

of enslaved people born after July 4, 1804, could be freed once they reached 21 years of age, while male children were freed when they reached 25 (Smith 2023).

As late as 1859 legislators across the country believed that both sides could eventually come to an amicable agreement at the federal level until a raid that year on Harpers Ferry, led by abolitionist John Brown. Harper's Ferry is in what is now considered West Virginia and was home to a federally-owned arsenal of weapons. Brown's goal was to rob the arsenal of enough weapons to supply freedom fighters across the country. Many Quaker Friends in New Jersey considered John Brown and his followers extremist and did not support the battle, fearing it would infuriate legislators in the South (Bordewich 2009). Black settlers were developing antebellum communities across the state in a divided and hostile political environment where even their biggest partners in the anti-slavery movement were splintered on how to settle the matter of black lives.

Chapter 2: The Rise & Fall of Black Antebellum Communities



(White and Whittaker 2022)

Black Antebellum Settlements in South Jersey

After manumission but prior to the Civil War, there were at least 23 free Black settlements established in New Jersey, 17 of which were very close to Quaker strongholds and 14 of which were in what was called West Jersey at the time (White and Whittaker 2022). This was by design, not coincidence. The most fervent, abolitionist Quakers were concentrated in the southwest portion of the Garden State. They spurred the development of Black settlements by selling land to free Blacks, providing employment free of indenture, providing legal assistance, and lobbying in Trenton for anti-slavery laws. From this stronghold, the Quaker community built an elaborate

network of conductors for the Underground Railroad, supporting population growth in these communities.

Timbuctoo, New Jersey

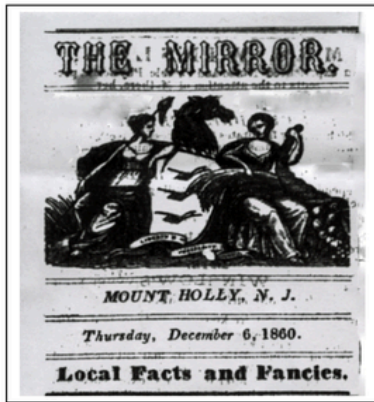
Timbuctoo was a free Black settlement, established in 1826 in what was considered Northampton Township at the time. The 1880 Census identified Timbuctoo as a distinct village within Westampton Township, enumerating 108 residents in 29 households. Timbuctoo's proximity to the Delaware River, being an area heavily populated with pro-abolition Quakers, and its proximity to the Mason-Dixon line, made it a geographically strategic choice for a stop on the Underground Railroad. Though Timbuctoo was a thriving town with as many as 600 residents at its peak, the same geographical factors that made Timbuctoo a strategic stop for "conductors" on the Underground Railroad also made free and previously enslaved residents incredibly susceptible to kidnapping. Timbuctoo residents lived with the looming threat of being kidnapped and sold back into slavery in Maryland and other southern states from the village's inception until New Jersey ratified the 13th Amendment in 1865, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation. The hostile, divided political environment described in Chapter 1 of this paper made this possible.

Despite any hardship, several indicators demonstrate the liberties and prosperity Timbuctoo's residents enjoyed that were not afforded elsewhere. Some of these indicators include homeownership, being listed on the census by name, progressive media coverage, and the ability to protect themselves without the fear of lynching.

Indicators of Prosperity in Timbuctoo

Progressive Media was another indication of a thriving, well-respected community. The *New Jersey Mirror*, a white-owned weekly newspaper in circulation from 1818-1947, reported on Timbuctoo often. The descriptions of Timbuctoo were positive and included marriage announcements, obituaries, social events, and a profile of Timbuctoo in their "Villages Around Us" column. In the feature, Timbuctoo is described as "a haven of rest to many weary wanderers, who had grown under the yoke of slavery for half a lifetime and had last escaped and breathed the pure air of liberty. But its secret borders were not too confined or restricted to elude the vigilant search of the taskmaster--for on several occasions the slave-catchers have come here and carried off their victims, causing great consternation not only to the inhabitants of Timbuctoo but to the friends of freedom throughout the entire neighborhood."

By stark contrast, in *Rumors of Revolt*, author Justin Behrend describes how even rumors of a slave revolt in southern newspapers after President Lincoln was elected could lead to preemptive retaliation from slave owners. Later, in Southwest Mississippi, more than 200 slaves were killed over two years as white paranoia spread and slave owners tried to protect their investments (Behrend 2011).



EXCITEMENT AT TIMBUCTOO
THE BATTLE OF PINE SWAMP-THE INVADERS
FORCED TO RETREAT

Great excitement has been created among the colored population of Timbuctoo and vicinity, in consequence of a recent "visit extraordinary" of some officials and notorious individuals, in search of alleged runaway slaves. The contemplated visit was known to a few persons here some week's sense. Suspicions were first excited in consequence of the notorious George Alberti, being seen in the neighborhood. He was accompanied by a Negro named Wright, a former resident of

Timbuctoo. They were at the house of Elsie Jackson, a colored woman of that place on a Sunday morning, leaving there about daylight.

On Saturday night last, the "grand descent" was made, which, unfortunately for the officers and their assistants, resulted in a "grand failure," and showed that it was no easy matter to capture a runaway slave, who has for 10 or 12 years enjoyed his freedom.

The party started from Camden in four hacks, at about 8 ½ o'clock in the evening. It comprised Deputy U.S. Marshal Schivers, George Alberti, the well-known slave catcher who has been here before on the same business, Caleb Wright, a colored man who formerly lived in this vicinity, and some six or eight others from Camden and Philadelphia. They arrived at Moorestown a few minutes before 10 o'clock where we learn they procured the services of a constable, and then started on their journey. They came through Rancocas, up the Turnpike, turning into the Pine Swamp Road, proceeding cautiously on until a little after 11 o'clock, when they reached the scene of their operations - a one story tenant house on the farm of Alan Fennimore, occupied by a colored man, named Perry Simmons. They already, doubtless, congratulated themselves upon their easy victory. They were well armed, and supplied with handcuffs. Twelve men thus "equipped" could certainly very soon and easily capture a negro or two. All being ready, they

proceeded to the door of Perry's "castle," and gave some tremendous knocks, which aroused the family, consisting of Perry and his wife, a son aged 17, a daughter aged 21, and two small children. Perry asked who was there, when one of them said they had a warrant for Perry Simmons who was charged with stealing chickens at Moorestown. Perry at once suspected who they were and the object of their midnight errand and very coolly answered that they could not fool Perry Simmons with any such story as that and with his family, hastily retreated to the loft, where he had two loaded guns and an axe, and prepared himself for the worst.

The party becoming satisfied they would not admitted, broke open the door and found that the inmates were in the attic which could only be reached by a winding stairway. They called upon Perry to surrender, but he told them "never, while he lived." The family were of course in the highest state of excitement and the alarm, but Perry, considering the circumstances, was firm and undaunted and stood at the head of the stairway, with one of his guns, threatening to shoot the first man who attempted to come up. Two pistols loaded only with powder were fired up the steps thinking to intimidate him - but it was of no use.

He maintained his ground and not a man dared to approach him. Old Alberti, at one

New Jersey Mirror December 6, 1860

The **Battle of Pine Swamp** is a significant moment in Timbuctoo's history as it shows the delicate intersection between freedom and oppression Black residents were forced to balance. On December 6, 1860, the New Jersey Mirror reported "excitement at Timbuctoo," following a slave catcher, George Alberti, leading a group of twelve armed men to capture a Timbuctoo resident. Perry Simmons, an escaped slave, had lived in Timbuctoo for over a decade before the battle. The article pointed out that Alberti was recognized by residents days prior as he had come to capture Timbuctoo residents before providing further proof that kidnapping was an ongoing issue. Perry Simmons, his wife, and 4 children hid in the cold attic overnight, holding off the "invaders." They called out the window until someone heard their calls for support (Excitement at

Timbuctoo 1860). David Parker, or King David, led a militia to save the Simmons family. They succeeded when the attackers retreated. The Simmons family, however, fled. The next indication of Perry Simmon's presence in Timbuctoo was in 1862, announcing that he had succumbed to chronic illness as a result of being in the cold attic overnight (Local Facts and Fancies 1862). The Battle of Pine Swamp was portrayed by the New Jersey Mirror as a triumphant victory. In New Jersey, free Blacks lived in a society where they had the autonomy to protect what they owned but could also be kidnapped and sold back into slavery; though this put them behind their white counterparts, they still had more liberty than enslaved people in the South (Weston 2023).

"Perry Simmons, the colored man, whose attempted arrest as a fugitive slave, on two occasions, created considerable excitement in our neighborhood, died in Timbuctoo, a week or two ago. Perry had not been well since the last attempt to capture him, in consequence of taking a severe cold on that freezing night. It will be recollected that he was forced to fly suddenly from his bedroom to the garret, where he was obliged to remain till morning, suffering severely from the cold. Perry is at last beyond the reach of his Southern master."
Obituary of Perry Simmons
(Local Facts and Fancies 1862)

Threats to Survival of Black Settlements

Land and home ownership have long been hailed as catalysts into or beyond the middle class. Even under impossible circumstances, Black settlers did their best to achieve the American dream throughout the Antebellum period, post-Civil War, and through Jim Crow. Opportunities to attain generational wealth and assets, however, were often interrupted by 1) racial violence, 2) targeted divestment, or 3) disproportionately applied urban planning methods such as eminent domain. Below are Antebellum (before the end of the Civil War in 1863) and Reconstruction era (after the Civil War ended in 1863) examples of how these measures destroyed Black settlements. Not only did these methods rob owners of their land, but they also robbed future

generations of their inheritances. Discussion of the destructive impacts of government decisions is pertinent to explain what may have happened to Timbuctoo and other settlements across Southern New Jersey that quietly ceased to exist. These examples demonstrate that these issues were not bound by time or geography. We can see from their respective demises, how many decades the modern-day wealth gap had to take root.

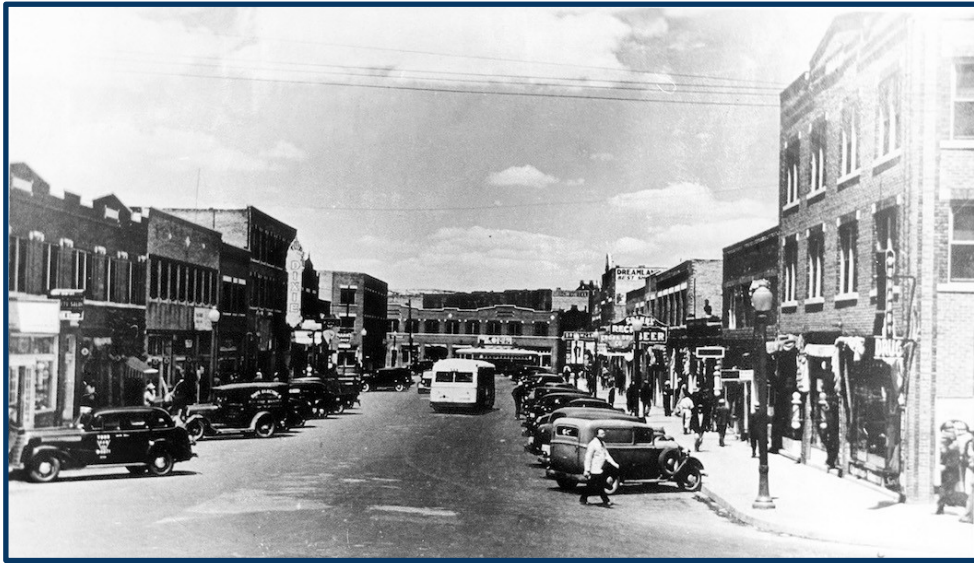
Seneca Village was established in 1825, two years before slavery was abolished in New York City, New York. The enclave was created in Manhattan for Black residents to escape discrimination in other parts of the city. 200 plots of land across 5 acres were purchased by Andrew Williams, a Black shoe shiner from Manhattan. Other African Americans followed him and decided to build schools, churches, and other signs of a budding economic hub. According to the National Park Service, residents were violently displaced in 1857 to make way for the development of what is now Central Park after two years of fighting the government. (Seneca Village, New York City 2019). At the time, homeownership was a requirement to vote meaning that Seneca Village residents were also disenfranchised in the process.

"The town grew to be a middle-class Black community of almost 5 acres. It had streets, three churches, two schools, and two cemeteries. More than 350 people lived in Seneca Village. As well as the Black population, German and Irish immigrants also lived in the community.

As the development of Central Park grew closer, newspapers and politicians began to describe the villages as "shantytowns." They called the residents "denizens," "squatters," "vagabonds," and "scoundrels." Police removed those who resisted: "...the supremacy of the law was upheld by the policeman's bludgeons." Once the people were gone, the city demolished the village. Historians know very little about what happened to the former residents."

(Seneca Village, New York City 2019)

Greenwood



Greenwood District, Tulsa, Oklahoma (Fain 2017)

It was mob violence and the constant threat of lynching that drove millions of Black Americans from the Jim Crow South to various parts of the country to find safety and maybe even prosperity (Wilkerson 2010). Malcolm X was not so optimistic, however, commenting "As long as you South of the Canadian border, you South." Fleeing the South, Black Americans who partook in the Great Migration after the antebellum period continued to find "freedom" disappointing at best. The Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma was settled by one such migrator, O.W. Gurley, who is described as a wealthy African-American from Arkansas (Fain 2017). Gurley relocated to Tulsa, Oklahoma, purchased over 40 acres of land, and only sold plots to other Black Americans (Fain 2017). The 40-acre plot later became known as the Greenwood District, then Black Wall Street. Greenwood was perhaps the most successful settlement with luxuries that were advanced for the time such as indoor plumbing, hotels, excellent schools, and modern homes. At its peak, there were over 10,000 Black residents,

including 6 that owned airplanes (Fain 2017). The massacre that brought Greenwood's end was classified as a riot, meaning insurance companies were not required to compensate Greenwood businesses and homeowners for their losses. Many were left homeless and jobless in a city that did not want them there. Recently, the media has focused heavily on Greenwood. During this period, however, huge strides in Black economic development were also being made in lesser-known districts across the country.

Oscarville, a Black settlement in Georgia, was chronically plagued by racial violence. The town was often visited by "night riders" who would shoot into the homes of residents. In 1912, it came to a head when white mobs became so persistently violent that almost all residents made the heartbreaking decision to abandon their land, homes, and businesses, finding refuge in other Georgia counties. The government used eminent domain to confiscate the land and build Lake Lanier. Oscarville can still be found today, drowned under the lake. Examples like Seneca Village, Greenwood, and Oscarville are dotted all over the country.

Though Timbuctoo was a thriving community, residents could be kidnapped and sold back into slavery in southern states from the village's inception until the 13th Amendment was ratified in the state, bringing a full end to slavery until 1865 (Smith 2023). In 1788 the New Jersey legislature passed a law that slaves could not be forced out of the state, they had to provide written consent, making sales to the deep South legal through a loophole until 1865 (Smith 2023). 41% of slaves provided this consent, Many of them were illiterate (Gigantino 2010, 163-170) so slave owners that did not coerce slaves into signing could have also tricked them into being sold to Southern

plantations. For example, according to James Gigantino, a New Jersey woman was listed as free on the 1850 Census but sold into slavery in 1856 (Gigantino 2015).

Chapter 3: Current State for Black Residents of the Garden State

Timbuctoo Today

Today, Timbuctoo is an unincorporated town “surrounded by both ambiguity and dirt (Fichera 2010, 1).” According to Angelo Fichera, author of Temple News, Timbuctoo, “once a thriving haven for freed African Americans ... is now partially concealed beneath the ground of a hill next to a Civil War cemetery (Fichera 2010, 1).” The only visible sign of its rich legacy is the cemetery where only a fraction of the headstones were able to withstand time.

Over time, the population dwindled as residents left to pursue employment opportunities elsewhere. According to Mr. Weston, “Unlike many other Black populations, Buctonians owned their land. One interesting thing about the generational wealth question is that going back to my great-grandmother’s generation, people moved to nearby urban areas like Philadelphia in search of employment opportunities not available in rural Burlington County. All too often, subsequent generations abandoned their ancestral homes, and many were lost in tax sales. In a report I did for the Township in 2018, I noted that 12 of the 52 acres now known as Timbuctoo are township-owned, largely because of tax sales and adverse possession claims. The point here is that potential transfer of generational wealth was lost in these tax sales and the adverse possession claims.” (Weston 2023).

Weston went on to share that “one of my great grandmother’s sisters purchased a house in north Philadelphia in 1954 for about \$4000 near 15th and Cumberland. Had she

stayed in New Jersey and spent that amount of money on construction in Timbuctoo, it might be worth \$400,000 today (Weston 2023).” Starting in the early 2000s, larger and more expensive homes which is valued twice as much as the county median of \$324,500 (Weston 2023).” Mr. Weston’s research sheds light on how much potential revenue was lost for descendants of this community. Traditional markers of socioeconomic status were not recorded then and in developing solutions, policymakers must be okay with developing solutions.

New Jersey’s Racial Wealth Gap

Following abolition, free Blacks were given an introduction to new, state-sanctioned forms of oppression and violence in the Garden State. With the wealth gap between Black and white Americans rising year over year, the blaring racist overtones of hypocrisy around the phrase “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” cannot be ignored. They fulfilled their civic duty by voting, only to be disenfranchised via loss of homeownership (Smith 2023). They created havens and communities within a system that was politically and socially hostile toward them. Even under impossible circumstances, Black settlers built over 20 towns in New Jersey that faded away without much explanation. The damage this has done to the net worth of the average Black family can be seen today but explained by history.

In New Jersey, specifically, the wealth gap between white & Black residents is \$300,000 according to the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (Sullivan, McChristian, and Haygood 2022). Their report includes a quote from a leading economist on the subject of reparations, Dr. William Darity who stated, “The wealth gap that we observe today is the cumulative intergenerational effect of racial injustice in the United States.”

New Jersey is one of the most prosperous states in the nation, but is, at the same time, characterized by some of the starkest racial and economic inequities. The median household wealth of white families in New Jersey is \$322,500, compared with just \$17,700 and \$26,100 for Black and Latina/o families, respectively. In one of the highest-income and most expensive states in the country, one in five households have incomes of less than \$35,000.

The economic disparities and racial wealth gap in New Jersey were created by design – by our institutions, our public policies, and through social exclusion and violence. Thus, policies that repair past and ongoing harms are needed to make the Two New Jerseys one and to close the racial wealth gap.

(Sullivan, McChristian, and Haygood 2022)

The wealth gap in New Jersey is systemic in nature and prevents Black families from being able to get ahead economically. According to Thomas Shapiro, author of *The Hidden Cost of Being African American*, the accumulation of generational wealth (home equity, pension funds, savings accounts, investments, etc) is better than income as income only covers daily expenses. Wealth accumulates over time and can be leveraged to ride out times of economic volatility or to ensure children have access to better resources like private schools (Shapiro 2004). Until the system is corrected, the wealth gap will not be reduced.

Evidence suggests that even if those antebellum communities persisted today, homes in African American communities are valued significantly less (Rothstein 2018). Shapiro shares that buyers shop for homes with amenities that are found in white communities such as scenic views, parks, accessibility, good public schools, and shopping (Shapiro 2004). In Timbuctoo's case, where land was passed down for generations, it was not an area the government selected for basic amenities such as access to city water, city sewage, paved roads, or public transportation. In fact, few of the original Black communities across New Jersey were. This targeted neglect devalued

the land and ensured the community would not withstand the ebbs and flows of our contemporary economy.

In comparison, Cherry Hill, NJ was mostly rural until it was selected as a site for a new racetrack in 1942 which made the area attractive for development (Mathis 2010). Mount Holly, New Jersey, less than 2 miles from Timbuctoo, has a historic downtown area where the original buildings were preserved. By missing out on those initial investment opportunities, descendants were inheriting land that was valued much less than land in white communities.

Chapter 4: Conclusion & Recommendations

Conclusion

Like many of the Black communities across the state, Timbuctoo was buried over time and little of its legacy is visible. 13 headstones survived in the cemetery - the only remaining structure from the original settlement. At the onset of this project, I thought the recommendation would be to commission a task force specifically for the descendants of Timbuctoo settlers. During an interview with Mr. Guy Weston, he shared the limitations around such a recommendation as the Township budget is too small to support (Weston 2023). Further, having its own municipality would require investments in a new police department, school district, and other services it would not be able to afford (Weston 2023). In 2009, Westampton Township hired a firm to survey the original parameters of the community and discovered over 80 graves and several stone structures. This project was a heavy financial lift at over \$200,000.

In researching the other 20+ black antebellum settlements across the Garden State, it would be equally difficult to implement similar recommendations at the local

level elsewhere. Destruction and divestment of Black settlements was one of the most overt, systemically racist contributions that lead to the wealth gap we see in New Jersey today. **If the disparities were created systemically, the solution must be systemic as well.** I am proposing 2 tangible recommendations: 1) establish a commission to explore the feasibility of reparations as a state-wide solution for the wealth gap and 2) commission the development of a museum dedicated to these communities. The audience for both of these recommendations is the New Jersey Assembly Committee for Community Development & Affairs. This committee has active bills that address the racial disparity, assign appropriation for councils/task forces, and recommends ways to memorialize historic events.

Recommendation 1: Commission Reparations Study

Reparations tend to be a polarizing issue, however, little is being done to address the ever-widening wealth gap. Substantive action must be taken to right this systemic wrong across the state of New Jersey. As generations of inaction continue, we become part of the problem. Nationally in 2017, the wealth of black families in the 99th percentile (wealthier than 99% of other Black families) was calculated as being \$1,574,000 compared to the 99th percentile white family is worth over 12 million dollars (Moore and Bruenig 2017). According to Dr. William Darity, a leading economist on reparations, this means that over 870,000 white families have a net worth above 12 million dollars, while, out of the 20 million black families in America, fewer than 380,000 are even worth a single million dollars. In stark contrast, more than 13 million of 85 million white families are millionaires or higher (Darity et al. 2018).

New Jersey's wealth gap is the largest in the nation according to "Making the Two New Jerseys One," a report from the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice. At \$322,000, the Garden State's wealth gap is twice the national wealth gap of \$160,000. Laura Sullivan, Director of the Economic Justice Program at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice stated "There are Two New Jerseys. Just as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. identified Two Americas over fifty years ago, today the Garden State is characterized by two economic extremes." She continues to explain "In one New Jersey, made up disproportionately of Black and Brown households, families struggle to make ends meet. In the other [New Jersey], predominately white families have substantial wealth and financial reserves to weather the economic uncertainties of life and support mobility for their children. This is the definition of injustice." (Sullivan, McChristian, and Haygood 2022). As one of the wealthier states in the country, New Jersey has the resources to commission a study on reparations and as the state with the largest wealth gap, the need is dire.

The study should focus on the feasibility of cash payments given that traditional markers of socioeconomic upward mobility such as attaining more education and homeownership have proven futile in closing the wealth gap (Darity et al. 2018). Further, other forms of compensation such as returning land have also been ineffective. For example, the city of Manhattan Beach California leveraged eminent domain to demolish a successful, Black-owned beach resort in 1924. At the time, the city justified this by saying a park needed to be built on the property. It wasn't until 2021, that a task force commissioned by Manhattan Beach uncovered that white neighbors were fearful of an "invasion" and resented the popularity of the beach. Additionally, the local government at the time vowed to block any new resorts from being developed to ensure

the Bruce family would not be able to relocate their property. Although Los Angeles County returned the, now undeveloped land to the descendants of the original owners, they ended up selling the land back to the county. The land should have also come with cash because it is unrealistic for the Bruce family descendants, now well over 60 years old, to become real estate developers. They earned \$20 million from the sale which gives them the flexibility to invest the money in a manner that makes sense for them today and offers a straightforward way to close the wealth gap.

So far, reparations programs have been tangible at the local level in cities such as St. Louis, Evanston, and Providence. St. Paul, Minnesota has specifically created the City Council's Legislative Advisory Committee to establish a commission to address the wealth gap in Saint Paul. A resource guide around reparations in partnership with the Saint Paul Public Library was also created.

Recommendation 2: Commission a Museum

We may never know what the Black antebellum communities could have grown into had they not been stifled. Today they are located in Townships with limited resources for major historical projects. When trying to establish a local museum, Guy Weston ran into issues. "The line item for a project like that is the same as parks and basketball courts. If people have to choose between a museum and a basketball court for their kid, they may not prioritize this (Weston 2023)." To that end, the unique history and remarkable resilience of the settlers should be recognized substantially. Because there were over 23 settlements all over the state and it is not feasible to establish them at the local level, I implore the New Jersey State Legislature to establish

one museum that acknowledges the history of these settlements. The museum should also provide grants to research teams looking to uncover more history.

While investments in both of these recommendations would be steep, acknowledging the past and closing the racial wealth gap through reparations is not a question of feasibility but one of moral priority.

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