

East Brunswick Slave Ring

In February 1804, New Jersey became the last Northern state to begin the process of emancipation and the total elimination of slavery in the Garden State when it passed an Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. The law declared children born to slave mothers after July 4, 1804, “shall be free, but shall remain the servant of the owner of his or her mother . . . and shall continue in such service, if a male, until the age of twenty-five years, and if a female until the age of twenty-one years.” The abolition law essentially declared a freedom of the womb as it freed all children born to slaves but required them to serve their mother’s master until they reached the statutory age.

Men like Jacob Van Wickle realized the economic potential of these slaves and their enslaved parents and sought to reap an immediate profit by selling and transporting them to the Deep South. Indeed, this trade represented the largest loophole imbedded in Northern gradual abolition programs, for while it helped destroy the institution of slavery in the Garden State by reducing the total number of slaves, it allowed the removal of slaves for a term from the grasp of the law created to eventually free them. Sale to the South then illustrated that most slaveholders never wavered in their support of slavery and sought to garner as much profit from them as possible.

The Illegal Van Wickle Slave Ring of East Brunswick. Richard Sears Walling, August 28, 2017

“Jacob Van Wickle sat in his Middlesex County home in the spring of 1818 with money on his mind. He realized slaves [and free people of color] in New Jersey sold at far below the prices Mississippi and Louisiana plantation owners paid for similar [purchases] in the Upper South. With this knowledge, Van Wickle sought to sell dozens of “cheap” New Jersey born slaves to the New Orleans market. As the ringleader of the largest slave trading organization in the Garden State, he helped undermine the promise of abolition which had begun in New Jersey in 1804.” (Gigantino, p. 282).

“Although in the documents he filed with Middlesex County Van Wickle swore he properly judged the consent of those he examined, he routinely lied to slaves by promising them high wages in the South and a safe return to New Jersey in the future. He also ignored the law, since seventeen of the sixty he interviewed were less than twenty-one years of age and therefore could not give their legal consent. Only one had a parent available, coincidentally a mother who also agreed to leave New Jersey. He then further proceeded to attack the very notion of freedom when he approved the transfer of thirteen slaves for a term. Van Wickle certified the thirteen children, ranging from six weeks of age to nine years, “as far as they could answer . . . declared their willingness” to remove to Louisiana. Van Wickle took the crying of a six-week-old for a term for approval of a life of unfreedom in the Deep South. Isaac Holmes, who vividly recounted his remembrances of the slave trade in Middlesex County, referred to Van Wickle as an “outrage on humanity,” as he blatantly failed to certify any slave’s consent and ceded all pretense of legality in the service of his own profits.” (Gigantino, pp. 285-286).

Sources:

- Off the Record: The Production of Evidence in 19th Century New Jersey By Jarrett M. Drake, M.S.I., NJS: An Interdisciplinary Journal Summer 2015 file:///C:/download/16-60-2-PB.pdf
- Trading in Jersey Souls: New Jersey and the Interstate Slave Trade, James J. Gigantino II University of Arkansas file:///C:/download/59937-61463-1-SM.pdf
- An Abominable Business: The New Jersey Slave Trade 1818, Frances Pingeon, New Jersey History 109 no. 3-4 (1991)

Email regarding community protest about the name of their street:

Subject: Van Wickle name option

Good day -

I've walked the neighborhood (with my two grandsons) yesterday and today and out of 23 homes, I spoke with about 12 residents. Of the original owners (from 1978) there was only one vocal person opposed to changing the name, and the other original owners were only concerned about the hassle of changing the address on bank accounts, licenses, etc. The newer residents were much more open to changing the name.

One council person, Camille Clark, is a staunch right-wing person, and she has written a very nasty letter to me telling me to mind my own business and not appear before the town council again. (Ha!)

One resident had an interesting idea, which is to change one letter of the name, making Van Wickle into Van Winkle (as in Rip Van Winkle). This very slight change takes away the Van Wickle association, while keeping the name more easily acceptable to the process of changing paperwork (at least it is perceived as such).

Please share the Van Wickle Road name issue with other groups and individuals, notably the Rutgers Branch of the NAACP, and any other group/organization you may think of.

Also, please come to the Monday, Sept. 25th East Brunswick Township Council meeting to publicly support the name change. Van Wickle was the equivalent of Josef Mengele by acting to force mothers to choose freedom in the North without their children, or to be enslaved in the South with their children.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask.

Warmest regards