

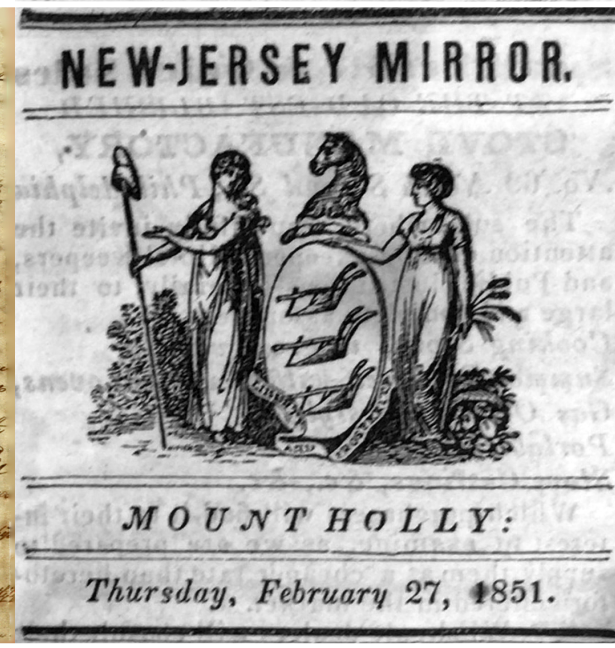
# The Notion of Timbuktu/Timbuctoo in the African Diaspora

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Prepared for the Sankofa Collaborative  
11 October 2023



*This Indenture* Made this fifteenth day of the Twelfth month in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and twenty seven Between Samuel Atkinson of the township of Northampton in the County of Washington and State of New Jersey and Hannah his wife of the one part, and John Brice of the township and County aforesaid of the other part Witnesseth that the said Samuel Atkinson and Hannah his wife for the consideration of thirty dollars paid or secured to be paid to the said Samuel Atkinson by the said John Brice do grant, bargain, sell, convey and confirm unto the said John Brice unto his heirs and assigns all that lot or parcels of land being part of a larger lot or tract of land which the said Samuel Atkinson became seized of by virtue of a deed of conveyance duly executed from Samuel Atkinson his wife and estate the first day of April in the year of our Lord 1818 and is recorded in book B's of deeds page 544 & in the Clerk's office at Mount Holly, separate thirds being had with more fully and at large appears which said lot or parcel of land hereby conveyed is bounded as follows To wit Beginning at a stake in a line of large belonging to Major Wiley and situate in the township of Northampton a parcel and Corner to p. lot of land No. 1 sold by the abovesaid Samuel Atkinson to Henry Porter and runs partly by said Henry Porter lot and partly by another lot sold by the said Samuel Atkinson to Samuel Barber South seventy four degrees and 4/4



# Timbuctoo in America

Timbuctoo, New Jersey - 1826

Timbuctoo, New York - 1846

Timbuctoo, California - 1855

# Timbuctoo, California

- Founded in 1855<sup>1</sup> by gold miners working the nearby river placer deposits.
- Legend says the name was coined by a Black miner who panned in the area. He was reportedly from Timbuktu, Mali.
- Not clear if the town was named by him or after him.

<sup>1</sup> Durham, David L. (1998). California's Geographic Names: A Gazetteer of Historic and Modern Names of the State. Clovis, Calif.: Word Dancer Press. p. 568

# Timbuctoo, New York

- Founded in 1846 by abolitionist and real estate baron Gerrit Smith, who devised a "scheme of justice and benevolence" that he hoped would provide refuge to African-Americans families
- Smith sought to provide a number of African-Americans with \$250 in real estate, which was required by law in NY in order to have the right to vote

# Timbuctoo, New York

- In 1846, Smith divided 120,000 acres of untouched land that he owned in the Adirondacks into 40-acre plots; began granting them to three thousand free African-Americans living in New York State.
- To secure the right to vote, settlers would have to cultivate the land to improve its value, but Smith believed this was feasible.
- The project drew families from urban areas where they had previously held jobs as cooks, barbers, and domestic workers. For most, farming untouched land proved to be a massive challenge: cutting down evergreens, clearing rocks, and securing money for taxes and other expenses.

# John Brown in Timbuctoo, NY

Springfield Mass 28<sup>th</sup> Oct 1848

Friend Willm A Hodges

Dear Sir

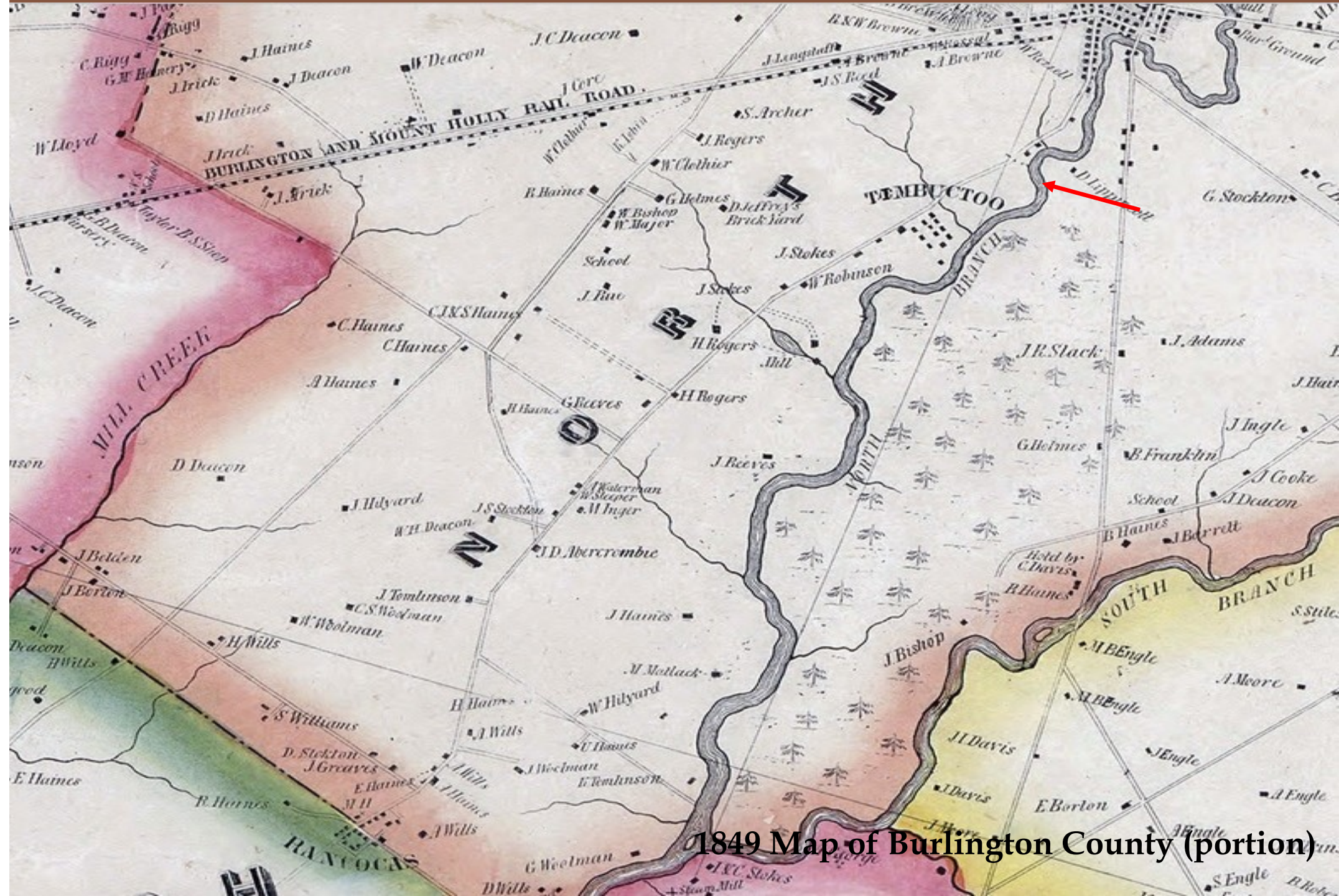
I have just returned home & on my way at Troy I bought 5 Barrels of Pork & 5 Barrels of Flour. Three barrels of the Pork & three barrels of the Flour are directed to yourself care of Colvin & Allen, Port Kent. The other two Barrels of Pork & of Flour I have sent to Timbuctoo. I wish you so to divide with the different families as to make all as happy & comfortable as possible. I think the Pork & Flour will be at Port Kent before you get this but you can find out by sending to Colvin & Allen. You will have the Freight to pay from Troy as I had not sufficient funds with me to pay it. You must try & make your money reach now until Spring as I have now paid a pretty a sum in the different ways. I shall expect to hear from you soon how you all get along, & whether you get the provisions all safe. Yours in truth  
John Brown

- In 1849, Brown moved his family to upstate New York to live near a small free black settlement in Essex County, near Lake Placid, known as Timbuctoo
- Brown purchased land near the settlement and was dedicated to helping settlers adjust and learn the skills they would need
- His family continued to live there after he was hanged for his involvement in the raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859.

# Timbuctoo, New Jersey

- Settled beginning in 1826 by formerly enslaved and free African Americans with the assistance of Quakers
- Was one of several antebellum free black settlements in New Jersey, most were located in the southern part of the state
- Timbuctoo, like many of the settlements, was a stop on the Underground Railroad

Timbuctoo was a recognized community on maps as early as 1849



1849 Map of Burlington County (portion)



# *Many lessons in early landowners and the institutions they established*

Earlier area consisted of about 15 acres

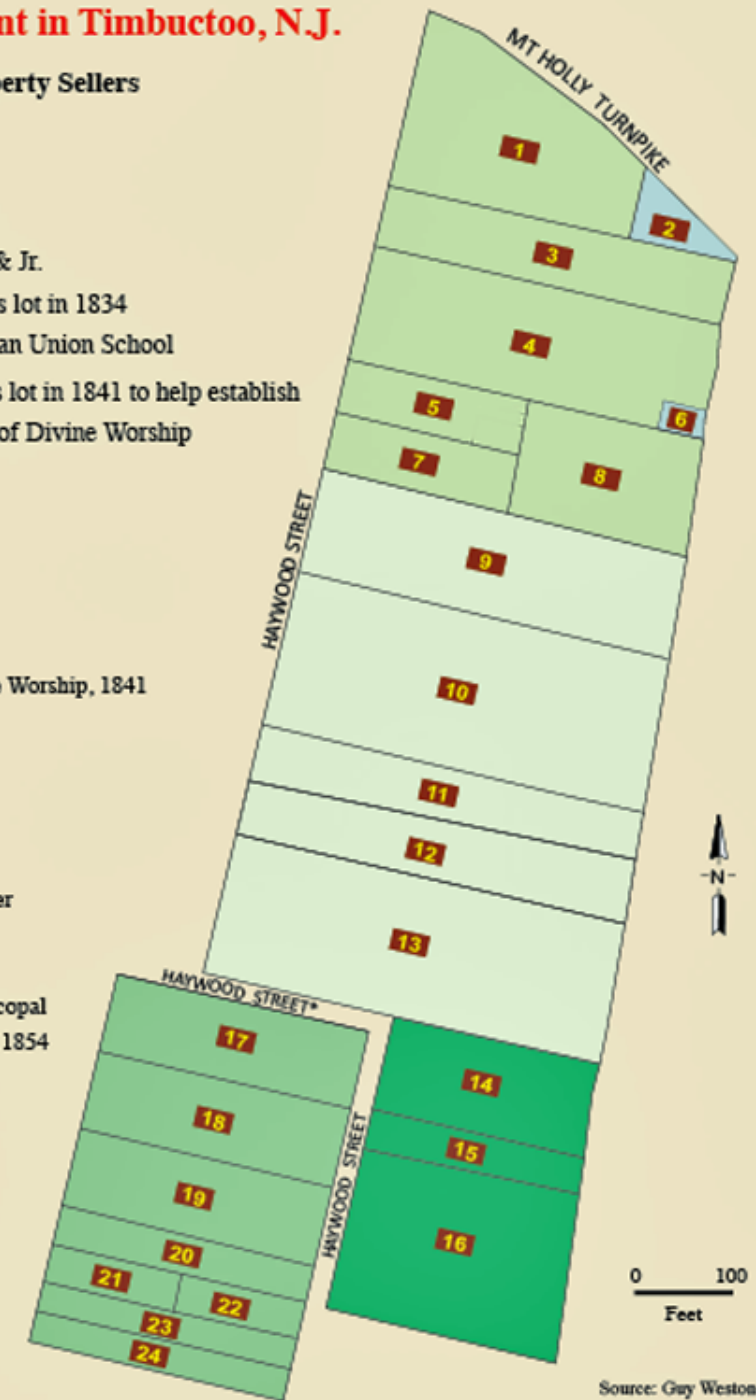
What's known as Timbuctoo today is about 52 acres

## Early Settlement in Timbuctoo, N.J.

### Original Property Sellers

- 1st-William Hilyard
- 2nd-Samuel Atkinson
- 3rd-Abigail Haywood
- 4th-Thomas Grissom Sr. & Jr.
- Peter Quire subdivided his lot in 1834 to help establish the African Union School
- John Bruer subdivided his lot in 1841 to help establish the Schoolhouse & Place of Divine Worship

- 1 Peter Quire, 1831
- 2 African Union School, 1834
- 3 Major Mitchel, 1830
- 4 John Bruer, 1829
- 5 John Bruer, 1831
- 6 Schoolhouse & Place of Divine Worship, 1841
- 7 David Parker, 1831
- 8 Samuel Parker, 1831
- 9 David Parker, 1826
- 10 Wardell Parker, 1826
- 11 Hezekiah Hall, 1826
- 12 George Wilmore, 1826 or earlier
- 13 Ezekiel Parker, 1826
- 14 Mary Hugg, 1838
- 15 Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church (& Cemetery), 1854
- 16 Joseph Hargrove, 1834
- 17 Henry Simmons, 1834
- 18 William Hill, 1839
- 19 Joseph Parker, 1833
- 20 David Parker, 1842
- 21 Levi Griffin, 1840
- 22 Gillis Parker, 1842
- 23 Joseph Hargrove, 1834
- 24 Alexander Armstrong, 1842



\*note: prior to 1834, this section of Haywood St was a part of a parcel owned by Edward Giles.

# Why call it Timbuctoo?

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Lots of discussion; few firm conclusions:

1. What consciousness about Timbuctoo might people have had in the 1820s -1830s in mainstream America?
2. What consciousness and understanding may have existed among Black people during that period?
3. Who named Timbuctoo? Black settlers and White supporters who were proud of Black settlements, or detractors who criticized their efforts?

# What was known about Timbuctoo in 1820s to 1830s in “mainstream” society?

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- Subject of great curiosity for British intellectuals, who thought it was a great failing of the Age of Enlightenment, for explorers to know geography well enough to be able to sail around the world, while the geography of “the dark continent” (Africa) almost totally uncharted.
- Exports of gold from the area were so great that the city took on the reputation in the outside world of possessing endless wealth.
- Travel to Timbuctoo could be dangerous for non-blacks or non-Muslims; Scottish explorer Mungo Park was reportedly attacked and disappeared after his second attempt

# What did black and antislavery publications say about Timbuctoo, 1820s - 1830s

A great African Civilization

A place of commercial wealth and opportunity

A place where African youth were sent from great distances to further their education

In parts of Africa (i.e.: Timbuctoo) never “profaned by the unhallowed foot of a slave dealer-civilization advances and the arts of social life flourish...the natives cultivate cotton and indigo”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Genius of Universal Emancipation. Baltimore, 1826

Freedom Journal, published in New York City, also had references to Timbuctoo

# My Conclusions

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- More likely reflected a desire to have a connection to their own heritage, history, and self-determination.
- Many were creating their own communities for the first time; wanted a name that reflected the “great civilization, wealth, opportunity, education,” etc. of the motherland.
- Given the supportive Quaker environment, where Black people purchased land, took out mortgages, had their institutions recognized, etc., the idea of Timbuctoo being a pejorative reference is illogical.

Land purchased for

# African Union School <sup>1</sup>

January 4, 1834

**Peter Quire** is the seller. **Edward Giles, Hezekiah Hall, and Major Mitchell** are identified as Trustees in the deed, which states:

- *“whereas, in the Settlement of Tombuctoo...and in the vicinity thereof, there are many people of Colour (so called) who seem sensible of the advantages of a suitable school education and are destitute for a house for that purpose.*
- *And the said Peter Quire and Maria, his wife in consideration of the premises and the affection they bear to the people of Colour and the desire they have to promote their true and best interests are minded to settle, give, grant and convey...said premises to the uses and intents hereinafter pointed out and described.”*

The deed further describes some rules of operation, such as the **requirement that any future Trustees be people of Colour who live within ten miles of the premises.**

<sup>1</sup>Burlington County, NJ, Deeds, G3:389, Peter Quire to Edward Giles, et al, January 4, 1834; Burlington County Clerk's Office, Mount Holly

*African American  
was not a new  
term when Jesse  
Jackson began  
using it in the  
1980s*

- The term African-American may seem to be a product of recent decades, exploding into common usage in the 1990s after a push from advocates like Jesse Jackson, and only enshrined in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2001.<sup>1</sup>
- An ad in The Pennsylvania Journal on May 15, 1782, used the term *African American*.
- Note the names of our earliest organizations
  - African Lodge Number 459 Prince Hall, a free Black man, organized this body in Boston in 1787 (Precursor to Masons)
  - Free African Society (1787)
  - African Methodist Episcopal Church (1794)
  - African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (1796)
  - African Union School (1834)

<sup>1</sup>Jennifer Schuessler "Use of 'African-American' Dates to Nation's Early Days," New York Time, April 20, 2015

My 4<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather purchased a one-acre parcel in Timbuctoo on December 15, 1829 for \$30.

My introduction to genealogy came through a gift of the original deed and other nineteenth century supporting documents which remain in my family today.

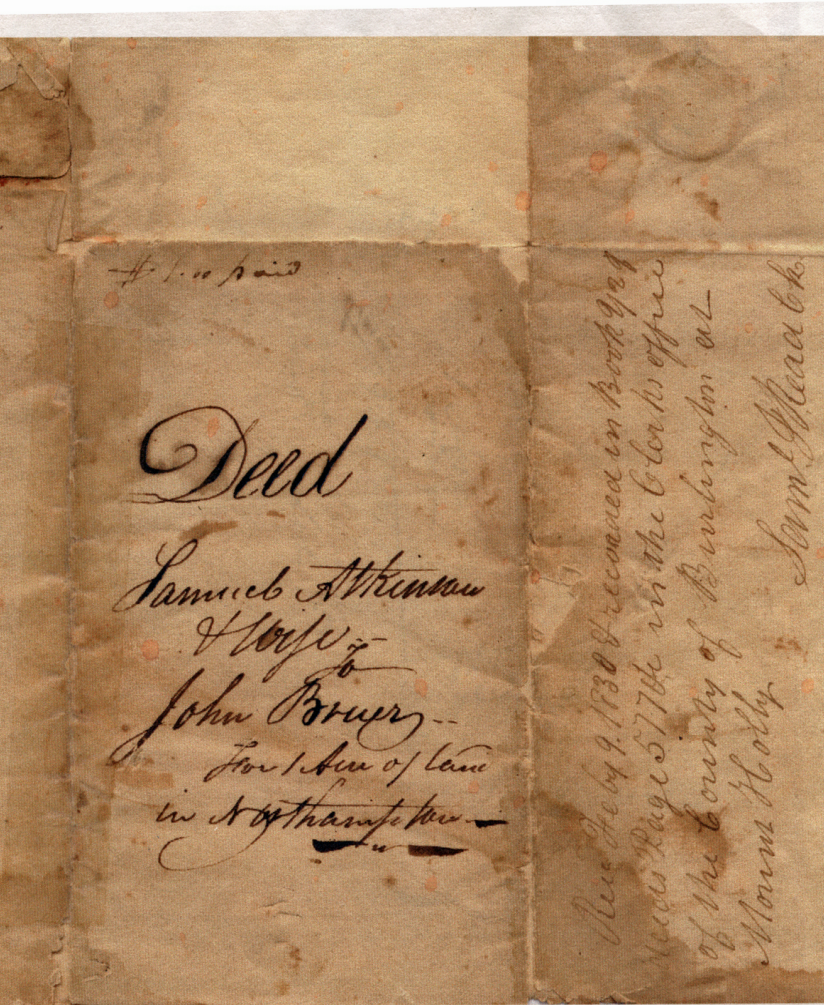
To obtain clear title in 1992, we had to file a Quiet Title Action that had 15 defendants, five of whom were born before the Civil War.

Names from these documents combined with microfilm research at the New Jersey State Archives in 1992 facilitated identification of relatives going back as far as c.1792.

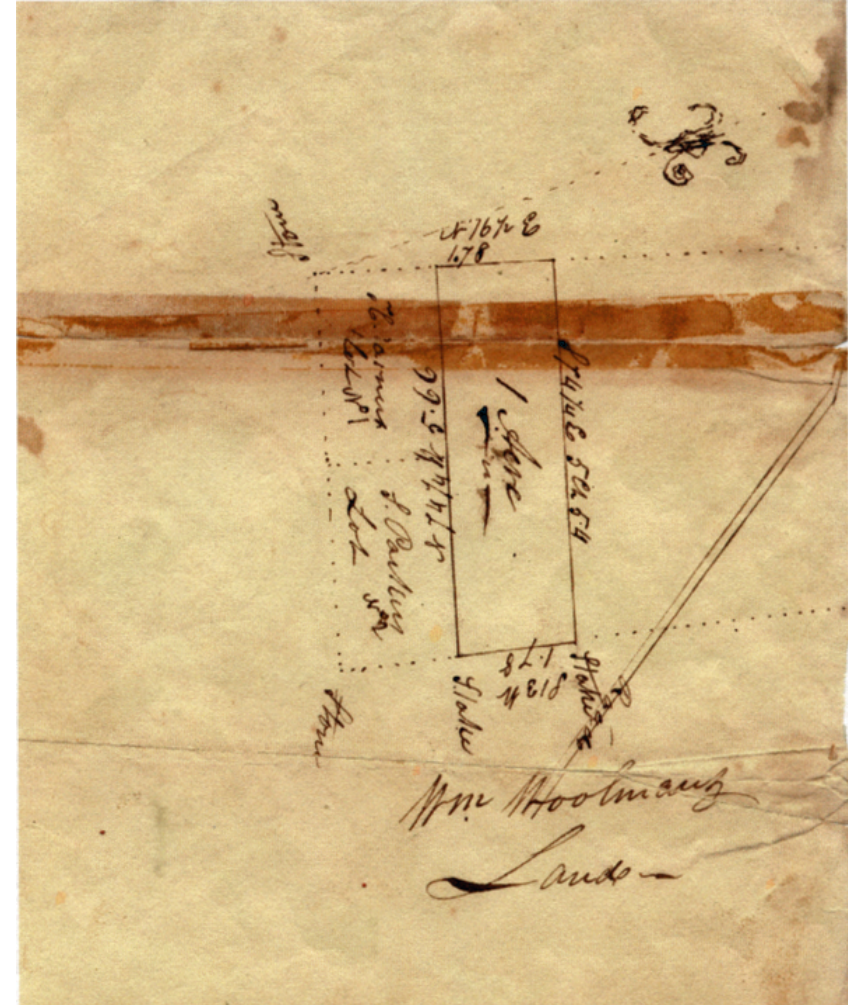
Conclusion: I cheated  
(regarding my ability to find an ancestor born in the 18<sup>th</sup> century  
😊 )

# Where do I fit in to this discussion?





This Indenture made this fifteenth  
 day of the twelfth month in the year of our Lord  
 one thousand eight hundred and twenty nine  
 Between Samuel Atkinson of the township of  
 Northampton in the County of Burlington and State  
 of New Jersey and Hannah his wife of the one part, and  
 John Bruere of the township and County aforesaid of the  
 other part Witnesseth that the said Samuel Atkinson  
 and Hannah his wife for the consideration of thirty  
 dollars paid or secured to be paid to the said Samuel  
 Atkinson by the said John Bruere, do grant, bargain, sell,  
 and convey unto the said John Bruere and to his heirs  
 and assigns, all that lot or parcel of lands, being part  
 of a larger lot or tract of land which the said Samuel  
 Atkinson became seized of by virtue of a deed of conveyance  
 duly executed from John Lucas & Lydia his wife and dated  
 the first day of April in the year of our Lord 1818,  
 and is recorded in book 112 of deeds page 304th in the  
 Clerk's office at Mount Holly, reference thereto being had  
 will more fully and at large appear, which said lot  
 or parcel of land hereby conveyed is bounded as follows  
 To wit: **Beginning** at a stake in a line of land

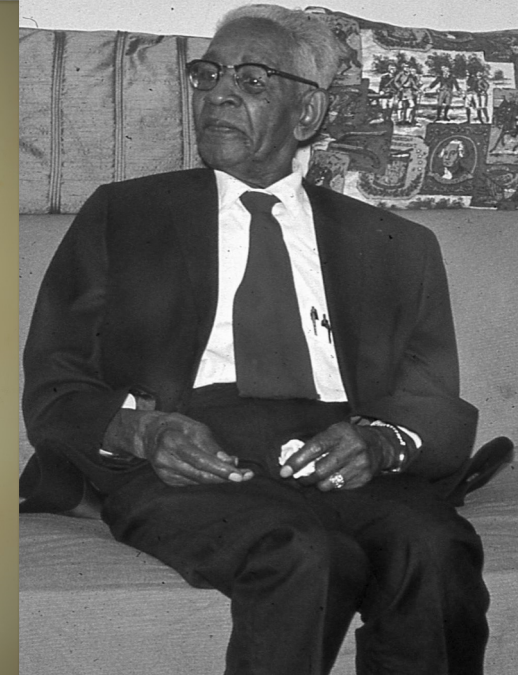
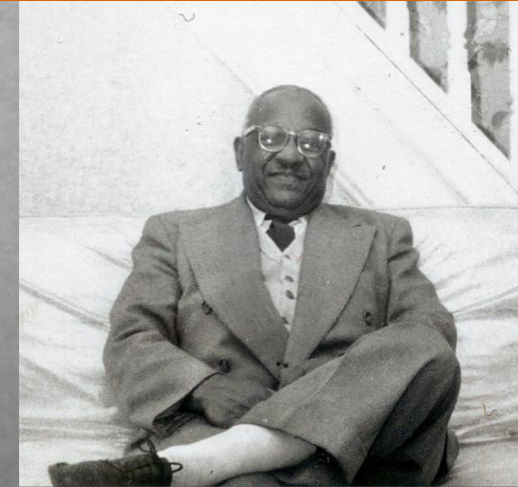


## Sale to John Bruere: December 15, 1829<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Burlington County, New Jersey, Deeds, Y-2:577, Samuel Atkinson and wife to John Bruere 15 December 1829; Burlington County Clerk's Office, Mount Holly.

Descendants of John Bruer, born between

1881 and 1917 in Timbuctoo



# Review: Points of Discussion

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- Where is Timbuctoo? How is it related to Timbuktu?
- How might Timbuktu have entered the mindsets of nineteenth century African Americans who chose this name for their communities?
- How are the themes of resistance, persistence, and self-determination manifested in the early settlement of Timbuctoo NJ
- How does this perspective challenge the dominant narrative of African American history?

