

Enslavement at the Schuyler-Colfax House

Sources from the early 18th century tie the Schuyler family to the enslavement of Africans. Arent Schuyler, who built the first portion of the Schuyler-Colfax House ca. 1696, owned the Schuyler Copper Mine in North Arlington, NJ, which relied on the labor of enslaved peoples.¹ In “The Black Freedom Struggle in Northern New Jersey, 1613-1860”, Christopher Matthews describes how an enslaved man was even credited with discovering the mine, and was given “a dressing gown like his master and some pipe tobacco” for the discovery.² Schuyler was also involved in the slave trade; in 1733, *The Catherine*, a ship he co-owned with John Watts, returned from the West African coast, bringing 110 enslaved Africans to New York City, and 130 to Perth Amboy.³ By 1757, about 600 enslaved people had entered bondage in the American colonies through Perth Amboy’s port.⁴ (Matthews, 11)



Figure 1- A modern view of the Schuyler-Colfax House. The 1690s, one-story portion of the home is seen on the right. The two story, 4-bay structure was added on in the 1780s. The home, as well as the farm that once surrounded it, were once supported by the labor of enslaved people. From the Wayne Museum.

Like the Van Rippers, the Schuylers, and later the Colfaxes, owned farmland supported by enslaved labor. These individuals had a variety of tasks, among them planting and harvesting, livestock care, food preparation, and more skilled tasks, like barrel-making and carpentry. (Matthews, 13). A letter from General William Colfax to Col. A Cobb from September 1817 notes the labor of enslaved people on the Schuyler-Colfax property; “The negro man Abraham has been sick since you was here with a gathering in the neck...therefore I could not have sent him to you if I could have spared him from the farm.” Jack,

¹ *Geological Survey of New Jersey: Annual Report of the State Geologist for the year 1906*. Trenton: MacCrellish & Quigley, 1907. <https://www.state.nj.us/dep/njgs/enviroed/oldpubs/SG-Annual-Report-1906.pdf>. 141.

² Matthews, Christopher N. "The Black Freedom Struggle in Northern New Jersey, 1613-1860: A Review of the Literature." Montclair State University. Prepared for the Passaic County Department of Cultural & Historic Affairs. July 2019. <https://www.montclair.edu/anthropology/research/slavery-in-nj/>. 13-14.

³ *Ibid*, 11.

⁴ *Ibid*.

another enslaved man, may have taken care of the Colfax's livestock, as General Colfax writes that "[Jack] is healthy, stout and perfectly well in all respects except the blemish in his face and eye occasioned by the kick of a horse."⁵ A runaway advertisement sent in by Casparus Schuyler, father of Esther Schuyler, gives a description of the type of clothing worn by the enslaved people who labored on the Schuyler's property; "a brown homemade jacket, trowsers of flax and wool (white) and a wool hat."⁶ It is not currently known where those enslaved by the Schuyler-Colfax family slept, whether in the home itself or in a quarter of their own closer to the fields. When interviewed in the 1930s, Eliza Dawes, a great-granddaughter of General and Esther Colfax, recalled that "Grandfather [referring to George Washington Colfax] had a number of slaves here [referring to his own house, later known as the Dawes House], and some distance fronting the house up on the ledge were the huts."⁷ It is possible that the Schuyler-Colfax House had similar enslaved quarters onsite.

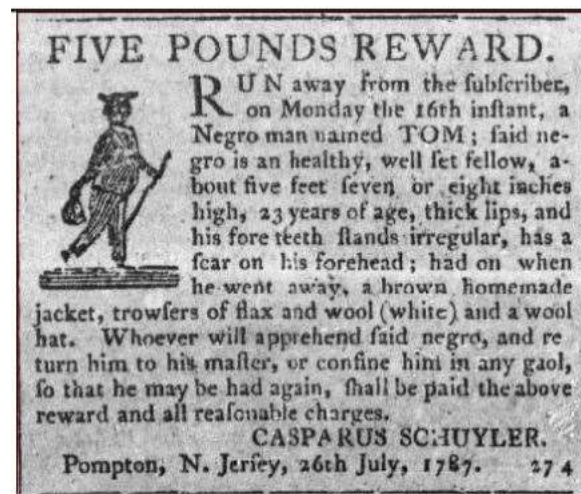


Figure 2- An advertisement placed by Casparus Schuyler reporting the self-emancipation of Tom. From the *New York Packet*, September 4th, 1787.

One of the best sources for understanding enslavement at the Schuyler-Colfax House are a series of 19th century bills of sale. Though largely legal jargon, these documents, provide names and ages for enslaved people purchased by General William Colfax and his son, William W. Colfax, from other local enslavers, and serve as a glimpse into the interstate slave trade. Covering a period largely between 1799 and 1839, fifteen bills of sale survive. Twelve document the purchase of enslaved people, ranging between the ages of 30 and 60- Sam, Tone, Bob, Cuff, Pero, Nelly, Sarah, Harry, Deyoun, Prince (or Touseant), Joe, and Peg. Six of the bills of sale include children born after the 1804 Manumission Act, who were to be freed once they came of age; twenty-five for men and twenty-one for women. For example, Nelly was purchased by General Colfax in 1816 along with her son, aged around two and a half, while Sarah was purchased in 1823 along with her sons, John and William, by William W. Colfax.⁸ The Colfax bills of sale

⁵ Genl William Colfax to Col. A Cobb, 22 September 1817, Pompton. From the Wayne Museum, Wayne, NJ.

⁶ Runaway Ad- Tom. The *New York Packet*. September 4th, 1787. Aemy, Alexis; Boyce, Eryn; Craft, Rachel; Harshbarger, Patrick; Lee, James. "Slavery at Dey Mansion Washington's Headquarters and Its Passaic County Environs: A Research Report on Archival Sources, Material Culture and Interpretive Themes." Hunter Research Inc, March 2021. Page 3-22.

⁷ Rauchfuss, William H. "[A Visit To The Dawes House.](#)" *Paterson Evening News*, February 2nd, 1935.

⁸ George Ryerson to William Colfax. Bill of Sale, Nelly and son, July 29th, 1816. From the Wayne Museum.; John Vreeland to William W. Colfax. Bill of Sale, Sarah, John and William, November 1st, 1823. From the Wayne Museum.

illustrate how children born to enslaved parents after 1804 were often treated as slaves themselves, rather than apprentices, and could be bought and sold before reaching their majority; Mary, aged fifteen, and Tom, aged sixteen, were purchased in the 1820s under the terms that they would labor for William W. Colfax until reaching the set ages of freedom “agreeably to the Laws of New Jersey in such case made and provided.”⁹

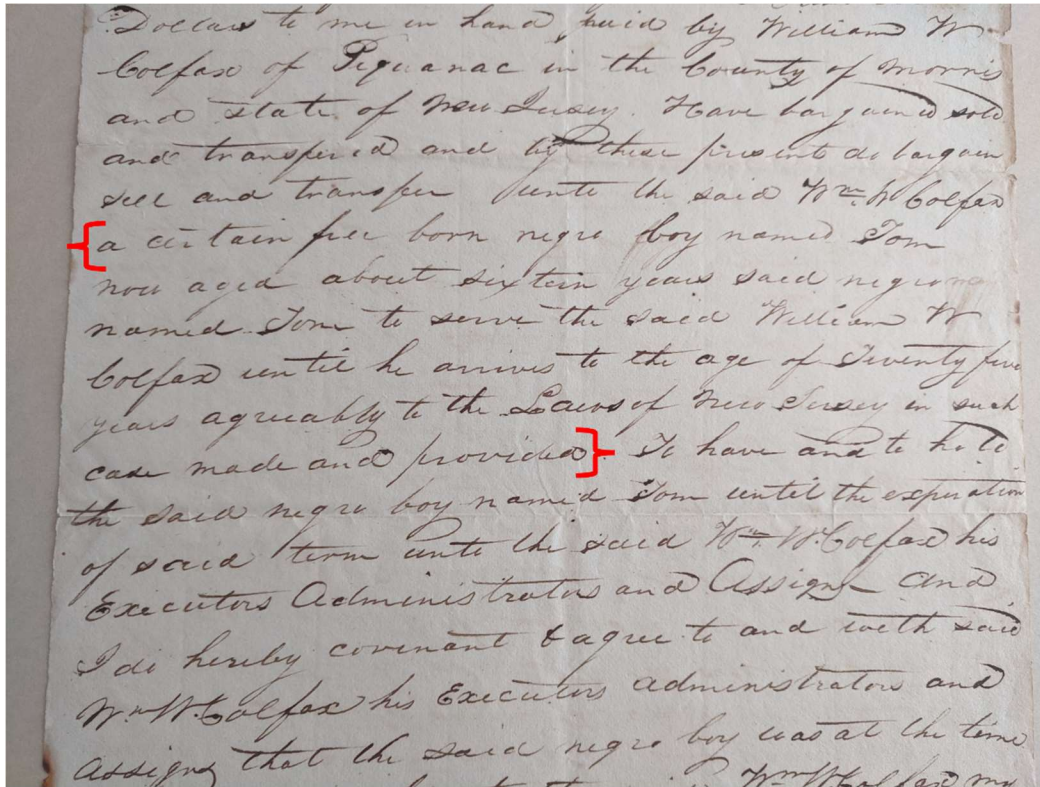


Figure 3- The bill of sale for Tom, dated June 1827. The parentheses enclose “a certain free born negro boy named Tom now aged about sixteen years said negro named Tom to serve the said William W Colfax until he arrives to the age of twenty five years agreeably to the Laws of New Jersey in such case made and provided.” From the Wayne Museum.

Three enslaved people who appear in the surviving bills of sale are also referenced in General William Colfax’s will, written not long before his death in 1838. In his first statement, Colfax included, “Joe and the Negro woman Peg to be sold by my executors without reservation.”¹⁰ While Joe’s fate is unknown, a surviving bill of sale states “received April 2nd 1839 of Esther Schuyler Colfax one dollar in full for Peg wife of Joe who were the property of the late General W. Colfax deceased,” suggesting that Peg remained at the Schuyler-Colfax House.¹¹

Colfax’s sixteenth statement provides a glimpse into the life of domestic work at the Schuyler-Colfax House. It reads “I give and bequeath to my negro girl Phebe six dollars as a reward for her faithful

⁹ Jacob Field to William Colfax. Bill of Sale, Tom, June 22nd, 1827. From the Wayne Museum.

¹⁰ Will of William Colfax, July 8th, 1838. New Jersey Surrogate’s Court (Passaic County). Ancestry.com. New Jersey, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1739-1991 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015.

¹¹ William W. Colfax to Esther Schuyler Colfax. Bill of Sale, Peg, April 2nd, 1839. From the Wayne Museum.

services to her mistress in her last sickness.”¹² Like Mary and Tom, Phebe was born after 1804- and thus would technically be free when she turned twenty-one- and was purchased by William W. Colfax in March 1832 at the age of ten.¹³ Her inclusion in General Colfax’s will may suggest that Phebe served as a personal maid to Esther Schuyler, General Colfax’s wife; this would have put Phebe in close contact with her enslaver, helping her to dress and style her hair, and maintaining her wardrobe and personal belongings.¹⁴ Annie Comstock, a granddaughter of Esther Schuyler Colfax, would later describe her grandmother’s role in the enslavement of African Americans, “Each Sunday she attended church with a tiny colored boy whose express duty it was to carry her train as she swept down the church aisle. Never in all the years of her life did she ever comb her own hair. This as well as the other duties of the home was taken care of by slaves.”¹⁵

As with the Van Riper family, census records also confirm enslavement by the Colfax family. The 1830 census notes that William Colfax enslaved one African American man between the ages of 55 to 99. Five free people of color are also listed on the census, though their identities are unknown.¹⁶ His son, George W Colfax enslaved a man and a woman between the ages of 55 to 99 and 24 to 35, respectively. ¹⁷ These listings could correspond with the enslaved people that Eliza Dawes mentions in her 1935 interview by the *Paterson Evening News*, among them Bashy, “old Mose at Colfax House”, Elijah, and Yahny.¹⁸ With further research, we hope to uncover the names and stories of these countless enslaved individuals who lived and labored at the Schuyler-Colfax House.

¹² Will of William Colfax, July 8th, 1838. New Jersey Surrogate’s Court (Passaic County). Ancestry.com. New Jersey, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1739-1991 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015.

¹³ It is possible that William W. Colfax purchased Phebe on behalf of his father, or that Phebe labored at the Schuyler-Colfax House.; Henry Vreeland to William W. Colfax. Bill of Sale, Phebe, March 1st, 1832. From the Wayne Museum.

¹⁴ NotYourMommHistory. “A Day in the Life of an Enslaved Lady’s Maid|These Roots Episode 1.” YouTube. May 25th, 2021. Accessed September 30th, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zg94KjclLJo>.

¹⁵ “[Mrs. Annie Comstock At Ninety Gives Recipe For Long Life.](#)” *The Paterson Morning Call*, September 23rd, 1926

¹⁶ “William Colfax, Saddle River, Bergen County, NJ.” Ancestry.com. 1830 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

¹⁷ “George W. Colfax, Saddle River, Bergen County, NJ.” Ancestry.com. 1830 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

¹⁸ Rauchfuss, William H. “[A Visit To The Dawes House.](#)” *Paterson Evening News*, February 2nd, 1935.