
TWO NARRATIVES ABOUT A NINETEENTH- CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN SETTLEMENT IN RURAL MAINE

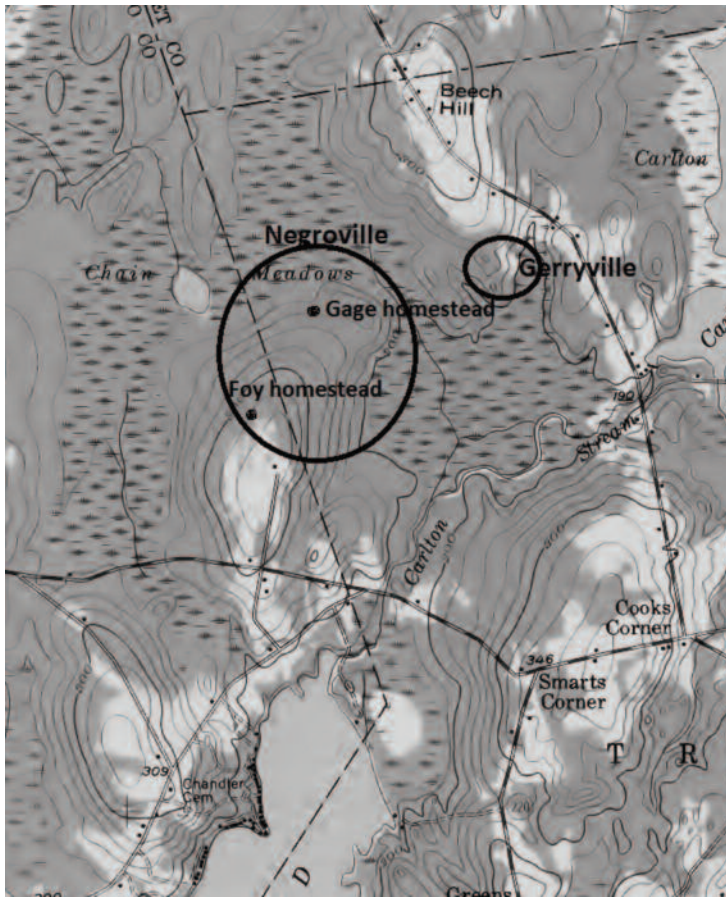
by Christopher Marshall

African Americans lived in the central Maine townships of Troy and Burnham in the nineteenth century, and a region there is said to contain their abandoned settlement. This is a study of two local narratives about the settlement. Older residents maintain an oral tradition largely based on field evidence, while in-migrants tell a very different story linked to national meanings and events. Using oral histories, documentary research, and archaeological survey work, our research has uncovered much of the story of the African American presence in these towns. While bearers of each narrative tradition feel theirs is an accurate historical account of the place, it appears that the older local narrative is more accurate than the story told by in-migrants. Traditions differ in their factual reliability for historians: the accuracy of a traditional narrative is strongly affected both by the purposes for which it is told, and the rhetorical devices used to achieve those purposes.

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This is a study of a reputed African American settlement and the presence of African Americans in two central Maine towns during the nineteenth century. The evidence we will adduce comes from our documentary and archaeological research, but an important additional source is provided by two local narratives about the settlement. These stories of place constitute “legends” in the folkloristic sense: their content need not be fictional (though it may be), their forms are conversational, the traditions are communally reenacted and place-based, their tellers feel the stories convey true and compelling information, and they symbolically reaffirm traditional local values. The two narratives coexist and are superficially quite similar, but differ importantly in content and emphasis, rhetorical strategy, and the ways in which different groups of narrators put them to use. This article describes the two accounts and compares their claims with the archaeological and documentary record, arriving at conclusions about the history of African Americans in these towns.¹

Scholars have not frequently studied the in-



Map of the Troy-Burnham boundary, showing the general area locally recognized as Negroville. Location of the Gage settlement has been established archaeologically; location of the Foy homestead is approximate. The older ethnic settlement of Gerryville is to the east. Adapted from U.S. Geological Survey, *Burnham NW Quadrangle, Maine*. 15 Minute Series (Reston, VA: United States Department of the Interior, USGS, 1957). New Hampshire Library Digital Collections Initiative.

tersection of place and race in northern New England. Some accounts exist of interactions between rural African Americans and Euro-Americans in particular places in Maine, but scholars have said little about local perceptions and traditions about such places in northern New England. This study attempts to ground a discussion of this issue in historical and archaeological research.²

I conducted research between 2003 and 2009, carrying out interviews and participant observation with twenty-six informants in Troy and surrounding towns to elicit stories and observe natural conversations about the settlement and African Americans. I supplemented this

with documentary research in town, state, and federal records, newspapers, news accounts, local histories, and unpublished documents like land titles, probate records, letters, tax-books, and receipts. With my Unity College classes I also conducted research in landscape archaeology, doing pedestrian surveys and phase 1 (exploratory) excavations of old house foundations and their surrounding gardens, fields and woodlots over an area of about twelve acres.³

Background

Troy is a rural township in inland mid-coast Maine with a population of 1030 in 2010. The population has grown gradually but steadily since the 1950s, largely through in-migration. The percentage of people in poverty in 2009 was 20.2%, and the area and town have historically been poor relative to most other Maine towns. Troy's traditional resource bases were its farms and forests, but workers in those areas are ageing, and their numbers have declined precipitously since the 1960s. More people commute to work outside Troy than work within town. The generalized social profile is that of a fairly poor traditional farming community transitioning to a town of fairly poor in-migrant commuters.⁴

In 2000, 97.4 per cent of the inhabitants of Troy identified themselves as white, one individual as African American and white, and none as African American. In the nineteenth century, however, several African Americans lived in rural western Troy and contiguous eastern Burnham, Maine, some of them in the area known locally as "Negroville." "Negroville" is my name for the place: it actually used to have a more pejorative name that referred to African Americans, and people still refer to it apologetically by that name. Many people under the age of thirty have never heard of it; conversely, most people older than age thirty had heard about it from an older relative raised in Troy. The name was probably modeled on "Gerryville," a neighborhood just to the east that pre-existed it. This was a settlement of the Gerrys, said to be an extended family of immigrants from Ireland in the late 1700s who intermarried with Penobscots and Anglo-Americans; like the "Negroville" settlement, it was situated on lower-lying, less desirable land.⁵

Troy's African American heritage is like that of many small inland rural towns in Maine. African Americans have been part of the community since the arrival of the first non-Indigenous peoples, though typically never in large numbers. In contrast, Maine towns with active ports had larger African American populations, partly because work in coastal shipping was open to poorer men without an inheritance. As in other inland towns, the African American residents of Troy were members of the community, but they were labeled according to their perceived race and ignored or stigmatized as a result. Some towns had recognized neighborhoods, like the "Negroville" settlement, where people were expected to live who were stigmatized by their race, ethnicity, or religion, or by perceptions associated with their family name.⁶

As in other towns in Maine and across the United States, some African Americans in Troy intermarried with members of other races as well as with other African Americans. Marriages also took place among local towns. Thus, the Brownville settlement of African Americans shows connections by marriage to African Americans in Detroit, Maine, and also to Euro-Americans in Troy.⁷

Two narratives about the settlement

The oral records of the settlement are all in the form of conversations. These discussions take place in pairs and small groups in informal settings when the topic happens to come up. The nature of conversation creates a text that is constructed by multiple narrators, each contributing motifs and comments to the whole. A special type of conversation also took place between a father or grandfather and a grandchild for the purposes of instruction. Several informants remember this conversation from childhood, and one remembers his grandfather actually taking him to the site for that purpose.

As is typical of some rural Maine speech events, conversations I observed tended to be egalitarian in tone, avoiding confrontation, debate, and anything that could be construed as claims of privilege or knowing more than someone else. Qualifiers were common ("I heard that. . . , " "I don't know, but seems like. . . , " "You think that. . . ?"). This conversational style

seems more typical of an older generation, and indeed more middle-aged and elderly people hold the knowledge of the settlement.

Two distinct narratives about the African American presence are enacted in these conversations. The first is told by people who were born in Troy or in the immediately surrounding towns and who came from farming families (whether or not they were actually farming themselves). The second narrative is enacted in conversations of people who were not born or raised in Troy or surrounding towns and who were not farmers. For sheer convenience, though at the risk of essentializing the social categories, I will refer to the first one as "the farmers' narrative" and the second one as "the in-migrants' narrative."

Each narrative is made up of motifs, units of meaning that are selected from a pool known to the tellers from previous tellings. Narrators added, emphasized, elided, or left out motifs in particular conversations according to their rhetorical strategies, but the two narratives each contain distinctive sets of motifs.⁸

The farmers' narrative, as told by people who had been born in Troy and who came from farming families, contains the following motifs: African Americans **arrived** in the nineteenth century, before my parents' or grandparents' time.

They were **socially segregated** from whites and settled on poor land by the Chain Meadows bog.

They were **not numerous**: a few families.

We **don't know why they came**—maybe to escape slavery via the Underground Railroad.

They were **very poor**.

They ate almost nothing but **potatoes**.

The land was bad: extremely stony, the soil very infertile, and the growing season shorter than the surrounding areas.

They **mowed marsh grass** on Chain Meadows to sell as high-end packing material.

An **adolescent white boy** with family trouble fled to live with the African American community, where he died young: his grave is still visible.

An old African American man called **Snow** lived **on the hill**.

We don't know why they disappeared—they just died out, or moved on.

The settlement and roads were **abandoned**, though some foundations are still visible.

The in-migrants' narrative contains the following motifs:

The first African Americans in this area **arrived via the Underground Railroad** in the mid- nineteenth century, coming up the Kennebec River to the Quaker settlement in China and then along a "spur line."

They were **socially segregated** from whites and settled on poor land by the Chain Meadows bog.

They were **numerous** (anywhere from 30-120).

They formed a **self-sufficient parallel community** of their own called "Negroville," with farmers, smiths, and other craftspeople.

They **mowed marsh grass** on Chain Meadows to sell as high-end packing material.

An **adolescent white boy** with family trouble fled to live with the African American community, where he died young. His grave is still visible.

Most of the men **enlisted in the Civil War**, and most were killed.

Most of the rest died in an **epidemic** after the war.

Those that survived **left for Canada**.

The settlement and roads were **abandoned**, though some foundations are still visible.

While the narratives have many motifs in common, there are significant differences in the inclusion of and level of emphasis on particular motifs:

1. The in-migrants' story tells of scores of people in a socially well-developed settlement ("**Numerous**," "**Self-sufficient parallel community**"). The farmers' story tells of only a few families and says nothing about a settlement ("**Not numerous**").

2. The in-migrants' narrative scarcely mentions the settlers' poverty (other than sometimes in relation to "**Socially segregated**"). The local farmers' story gives a great deal of narrative space and emphasis to the settlers' poverty and the

low quality of their land ("**Very poor**," "**Socially segregated**," "**Potatoes**," "**Land was bad**").

3. The in-migrants' story gives narrative space and emphasis to the causes of events. The causes are national in scale, dramatically compelling, and usually connected to the American national story as told by schools and in the media ("**Arrived via Underground Railroad**," "**Self-sufficient parallel community**," "**Enlisted in the Civil War**," "**Epidemic**," "**Left for Canada**"). The locally born farmers' narrative, on the other hand, gives very little space to the causes of events and even elides the discussion of the settlers' origins and ultimate fate ("**Don't know why they came**," "**Don't know why they disappeared**").

Different narrative purposes and rhetorical strategies

The two narratives differ because the two categories of narrators have different purposes for telling them. People from local farming families have these conversations largely to share local knowledge essential to farming and logging. Narrators of the in-migrants' story, on the other hand, are mainly trying to render local places and events more meaningful by reinterpreting them in terms of wider cultural meanings.

Participants in the farmers' narrative told me that their conversations about the settlement are at least partly intended to be a way of assessing land and land use. Informants all have first-hand knowledge of the location through hunting or working in the woods nearby, and they have learned facts from hearing these narrative conversations many times before. Through narrative the speakers assess the soil and climate in that spot, the settlers' agricultural practices, and their degree of agricultural success. The speakers are at least partly treating the settlement as a case study in land use, presenting hypotheses based on the facts they have observed or heard, considering new interpretations of traditional knowledge from their interlocutors, and otherwise honing the skills essential to farming and working with the land in rural Maine.

Though informants never said so, it seems likely that participating in the farmers' narrative event serves other personal purposes as well—making a good impression on one's neighbors as a capable farmer, sharing and reinforcing moral

norms about thrifty farming and poverty, making statements about race, and constructing a dramatically compelling story. Nevertheless, assessment of land and place is what informants mention as the most important purpose. Indeed, they say discussion of land is a common intent of ordinary conversation and that they even talk about their neighbors' places that way when they are not present. To illustrate this point, what follows is a sampling of actual comments overheard in a conversation regarding wood harvesting in the settlement area: "Yeah, I was hunting back there last year, come on that foundation up on the hill there—that's some stony soil, don't suppose those colored people had much corn growing;" "I heard they was so poor they used to mow marsh grass on Chain Meadows to dry for packing things, for shipping. Still, there's some good saw-logs back there, what McCormick didn't cut twenty years back;" "My grandfather told me they ate potatoes...those stone piles in their old fields they had to been growing potatoes and not much else. Maybe they cut timber too."

The non-farmer in-migrants, on the other hand, tell their version of the legend for different purposes. They say they like to converse about the settlement because "it's a dramatic story;" it excites empathy, suspense, and resolution. For instance, narrators reported, "I like to connect little old Troy to the rest of America" (that is, to larger national stories that communicate meanings about race and history); and "it's different from what you expect" (it makes Troy into an exotic place, with African Americans as a marked category of unusual people.)⁹

Different rhetorical strategies

In order to achieve its own purposes, each group chooses its motifs strategically. The farmers' narrative gives priority to motifs that can be validated by observations of the actual place, or inferences from those observations. For example, narrators choose to emphasize the poverty of the land, which can be inferred from known soil quality, tree cover, and climatic information, and the poverty of the people (inferred from clues such as the presence of many small stone-heaps, suggesting potato culture and few draft animals).

The farmers' narrative chooses to elide any

connections to larger social and cultural motifs, refusing to speculate on the settlement's origin and fate and confining itself to observations of place. Further, its rhetorical project eschews high drama in favor of ground-truths about land use and the lives of the farmers who worked there. Finally, the farmers' narrative chooses to include what seem like genuine oral traditions, not so much because they contribute to land-use assessment but simply because they are traditional knowledge and therefore worthy of preservation. The in-migrants' narrative does the same, and so these motifs are shared and equally emphasized. We will return to these genuine oral traditions when we consider the actual evidence for the settlement.

The in-migrants' story uses different rhetorical strategies to achieve its purpose of connecting local history to national meaning and human drama. The tellers seem to prioritize a story with emotional resonance and pathos over factual accuracy (e.g., "**All the men died in Civil War**"). Their story references wider and more emotionally compelling cultural meanings and themes (e.g., "**Underground Railroad and freedom**," "**Military duty**"). The narrative prioritizes motifs that are nationally significant and dramatic, whether or not there is any ground evidence, reasonable inference, or tradition to support them. Thus "**Underground Railroad**," "**Enlisted in Civil War**," "**Left for Canada**." The story uses dramatic exaggeration as rhetorical device, again regardless of support (thus "**Numerous**," "**Self-sufficient parallel community**," "**Epidemic**"). The tellers appear to reshape their motifs over subsequent retellings to make them consistent with each other and with these larger cultural themes. The tellers of each narrative, then, have selected its motifs and constructed its story using different rhetorical standards, devices, and strategies in pursuit of their own communicative purposes.¹⁰

Assessing the evidence

The people who tell these stories feel they are recounting factual histories. Where does the truth lie? Was the settlement as the in-migrants' narrative would have it—the site of a populous self-sufficient community of farmers, smiths, and other craftspeople, parallel to the white settlement of Troy—or the way the farmer's narra-

tive expresses it, a place inhabited by one or two poor homesteads with no communal institutions? As I will now show, the truth lies mainly in the local farmers' narrative. This narrative is supported by documentary evidence, and it adheres more closely to observable archaeological facts on the ground.

Documentary evidence

None of the written town histories of Troy or Burnham refer to "Negroville" or African Americans, nor do any recorded articles, speeches, or sermons. This silence may only reflect a general pattern that "[f]ew observers of the day thought to write about, or comment on what to them made up the lower strata of society." The national census, however, recorded race in most of the decades relevant to this study, and designated several individuals as "mulatto" or "black." More details emerge about these named individuals from deeds, liens, town tax records and warrants, and court records. These sources reveal that just two African American families lived in the actual area of "Negroville": the families of Jesse Gage and Rev. William E. Foy.¹¹

1. Jesse Gage: "Old man Snow on the hill"

The oral tradition about an old man called "Snow" living on "the hill" in the settlement area almost certainly refers to Jesse Gage. Jesse Gage appears in 1840 in the census records of Albion, a town with a hardscrabble frontier reputation, living with the family of the farmer John Abbott, probably as a hired hand. He is described as "mulatto," which means that he may have been multiracial or had relatively light skin. Other people the census called "black" or "mulatto" lived in that town in those times, as few as one and as many as six depending on the year. It seems they moved slightly more often than "white" people on average, probably because they were poorer, thus more often landless, and needed to seek better opportunities more often. Gage was 24 years old, or 30, or 33—his varied responses to the national census suggest he really did not know. He said he was born in New Hampshire, and his parents also, but other times he said it was Canada (though "Canada" might

be a census-taker's misunderstanding of "Candia," a New Hampshire town). Jesse may have wanted to establish a firmly northern past for himself because of the risk of capture by bounty hunters and slave catchers. There is no birth record in New Hampshire, Maine, or Massachusetts for Jesse Gage in any year.¹²

Five years later, in 1845, Jesse and an unnamed woman had a child; they named her Mary E. Gage. If they were married, no record survives. Two years later Charles Gage was born. By 1850, the five-year-old girl was living with John Abbot's family. Jesse's employers took her under town expense as a "pauper," which may mean that Jesse was unable to support her—a situation that was quite likely on a farmhand's wages in central Maine. It may also mean he had gone away: Jesse Gage does not appear on the 1850 census in Albion or several local towns, nor does the three-year-old Charles and his unnamed mother.¹³

By 1860, ten years later, Jesse was listed again as living in Albion, this time with his sixteen-year-old daughter. He lived in his own house—no deed survives, so perhaps he was a renter or sharecropper. The \$50 of real estate and \$10 of personal property he owned mark him as quite poor. His son Charles (now twelve) was living with the farm family of W.E. Robinson. The son of a poor family with no patrimony to count on would start early in life to earn his keep elsewhere as a hired hand. The mother is not mentioned in any of these sources. Charles would later fight in the Civil War.¹⁴

In 1866 Jesse Gage bought land from Joseph Williamson of Belfast for \$273.33. It was in Troy bordering the Burnham line — Lot 10 Range 10, the area later to be known locally as "Negroville"—and amounted to 243 acres. He was a resident there: the deed calls him "of Troy." Two years later he sold about 108 acres of this land to a neighbor for \$200, and six months afterward sold another 40 acres to another neighbor. These land sales suggest poverty, which is not surprising, given the low quality of the land.¹⁵

The 1870 census records that Jesse was now married (or seen as being married) to Jane Gage, white, "keeping house." Jane was thirty-five years old, and thus too young to be the unknown mother of Jesse's children, neither of whom are recorded as living with them. Jane appears to be the same person as Eliza Jane

Laughton, born in England in 1832 (Eliza Jane signed her name as “E. Jane” on deeds, and she is within a year of being the right age). Jesse is recorded as owning \$800 in real estate and \$250 worth of personal property, but he may not have been telling the truth—he owned only about 90 acres at this point.¹⁶

Two years later Jesse sold about fifty acres to Jane for \$200, and a few months later she sold him back five acres “together with one half the dwelling house,” located in the southwest corner of Lot 10 Range 10 (all of which he used to own). This may have been a way to ensure that she got her value for the money she put into the relationship while ensuring that he had a house to live in, no matter how poor he was. It is unlikely they were married, regardless of what the census man thought: she signed with her original name. Interracial marriage was forbidden by Maine state law until 1883, which may be the reason they were not legally married.¹⁷

Four years later, in 1876, Jesse sold forty acres to another neighbor. Probably this was the last land he owned, except for the five acres and share of the house. He still had pride, though, or delusions of grandeur: the 1880 agricultural census recorded his ownership of 130 acres, including thirty improved acres, thirty of meadows and orchards (twenty-eight mown), fifty of woodland, and twenty not in use, as well as numerous livestock animals and tools. He did not own that much land—even Jane’s land did not amount to that much—and he could not even have been using or renting it from his neighbors, because a walking survey of the site’s land contours shows that no more than five acres were ever cultivated.¹⁸

That same year of 1880 found Jane taking out a mortgage for fifty-five dollars on the forty-five acres she owned—a mortgage she never paid off. The reason became clear three days later, when “Miss” Eliza Jane Laughton married Leander A. Pomroy. She was forty-eight years old, “servant and housekeeper” in a local farmer’s family (and thus not living with Jesse anymore), and Pomroy was twenty-five years old and a farm laborer. They left Troy. That same year Jesse (then seventy-three years old) was listed as widowed or divorced, though it is more likely that he and Eliza Jane were never married. A check mark on the census sheet may indicate that Jesse was illiterate, but the significance of the mark is unclear.¹⁹

In 1883 in Belfast, Jesse’s daughter Mary E. Gage married William W. Carter of Bath and left the area. She seems not to have been living with Jesse at the time. Now Jesse was apparently alone, and poor. In 1881 and 1882 Jesse filed with the town for abatement of taxes; in 1886 his deed was taken over by the town. In 1888 and 1889 Jesse was being boarded as a pauper with a well-known shop owner and then with a town selectman who kept a private poorhouse. In 1890 a doctor attended on Jesse at town expense, and some time that year Jesse died and was buried without a stone in a pauper’s grave.²⁰

2. The Reverend William E. Foy: “unknown prophet”²¹

The Reverend William E. Foy was a noted figure in the origins and development of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, not only in central Maine but nationally, and his biography has been published as a book. He and his family lived in Burnham for between three and eight years in the area of “Negroville.” The Foy family is listed on the 1860 Burnham census as “mulatto,” right after the Whitten family, which may suggest that they lived at a location just north of Whitten Road in southeast Burnham, right across the town line from Jesse Gage’s residence.²²

Foy was born in 1818, a free man in a free family, in a town north of Augusta whose population contained other African Americans. His father was a builder and farmer. Foy and his wife moved to Portland and then Boston so that he could become a minister. Millennial theology had been popular on the frontier between the Kennebec and Penobscot Rivers since the earliest European settlements, with egalitarian, emotional preaching of an imminent second coming that appealed to people from a variety of backgrounds. William Miller was one minister with a substantial following, whose adherents fully expected the end times to come in 1844 and prepared for it by selling all their goods. The failure of the prophecies was followed by the Great Disappointment, out of which a more measured theology grew, one leading to the formation of the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

Foy became a minister in Boston in the Freewill Baptist Church, published an influential account of his visions and sermons, and went on

the lecture circuit. He and his family (wife, mother, and children) moved to Portland, Augusta, and then to New Bedford, Massachusetts, some time before 1850. There he preached to members of the African American seafaring community. Foy returned to Chelsea, Maine, in 1855 and moved to Burnham before 1860, where he and his family boarded with a young farmer named Riley Whitten and acquired land worth \$150. The 1860 census lists Foy as a Freewill Baptist preacher (presumably in one of several local congregations). After three years the Foy family moved to “south Maine,” East Sullivan, and Otter Cliffs on Mount Desert Island.

The Foy family’s presence may be one reason why Jesse Gage bought the land he did. It seems almost certain that Foy had a congregation in Burnham or Troy, though I could find no remaining record of it. The land they lived on was transferred to the Freewill Baptist church in 1876 and then to the Burnham Seventh Day Adventist society in 1882. It is likely that the presence of the Foy family contributed to the legend of the settlement.

3. Other African Americans

Other African Americans lived in Troy, but not in the area of the settlement or not within the mid-nineteenth century. The 1840 and 1850 censuses list Lucy Hutchins, forty years old (thus born in 1800), “mulatto,” born in Massachusetts, and living alone. No other records mention her before or again. According to a west Troy neighborhood tradition, “Little John” was an African American man who lived some time before the early 1900s in an area of town that is not near “Negroville;” his name is preserved in the local toponyms such as “Little John’s field,” “Little John’s gap,” and “Little John’s house,” which is now a foundation in the woods. At least three other African Americans married into white families at various times between 1860 and 1950, but they are known to have come from outside Troy, and none of them settled in the area of the settlement. Two of these families seem to have connections to Brownville, where about twenty families came north after the Civil War to work in the slate quarries.²³

No other individuals were designated as “Black” or “Mulatto” during the nineteenth century in any of the tax, warrant, and vital

records for Troy, town histories, records of land transfers, court records, any of the federal decennial and supplementary censuses, or any oral traditions I have been able to discover. It is possible that others lived there who passed as “white.” Some may have lived in Troy before 1830, when many records did not usually record race. Perhaps other African American residents of the settlement lived there between census years and so were not recorded. Town tax and census records are likely to have given fairly accurate counts of whoever lived in town because tax bills relied on their data. Perhaps the white community omitted black residents from local records simply because they were regarded as marginal.

To summarize, the documentary evidence contradicts the in-migrants’ story and confirms many aspects of the farmers’ narrative: only two African American families lived in the area called Negroville, at least one was very poor, and the “community” had nothing to do with the Civil War or the Underground Railroad.

The archaeological field evidence also contradicts the in-migrants’ story and confirms many aspects of the farmers’ narrative. The settlement is located in a very poor area for farming. USDA surveys rate its soils as “very stony” fine sandy loams of variable drainage and depth underlain by dense, compact glacial till. The surveys state, “Soil is not suited to the crop or the crop is not generally grown on the soil” for all the major crops—corn, potatoes, apples, hay, and pasture. The location is low-lying compared to the rest of Troy, which means it is frost-prone and may have a three weeks shorter growing season. The land has been intensively logged many times, with the exception of some large pines and the remains of a sugarbush whose trees are probably not older than 1850 and not younger than 1910.²⁴

The feature we provisionally named the “House” has a well-made rock-walled cellar, small and square, and six feet deep. The “Back-house” attached to it was set on a foundation of flat stones, and the lintel stone suggests that the main entrance was set in its south wall. The house had a brick chimney set on rock piers. There is no indication that the house was destroyed by fire. The eastern wall of the cellar has collapsed and was covered with earth backfill by a skidder sometime after 1980, according to the landowner. Window glass and mortar frag-

ments from the chimney were found in the cellar. The Backhouse contained the following within five inches of the surface (but more extensive excavation was hampered by brush):

Scythe blade, 42 in.

Small sickle blade, 11 in.

Barrel hoops

Blade of a frame saw, broken

Two small fragments of a small cast-iron stove, probably potbelly style

Window glass fragments

Metal band that holds on the chimney of a kerosene lamp

Excavation of stone piles within 20 feet of the house to the north and west discovered the following:

Three bottle fragments: each one was a neck and collar, aqua, with applied double collars. Two were blown in mold with wiped seams, one free blown.

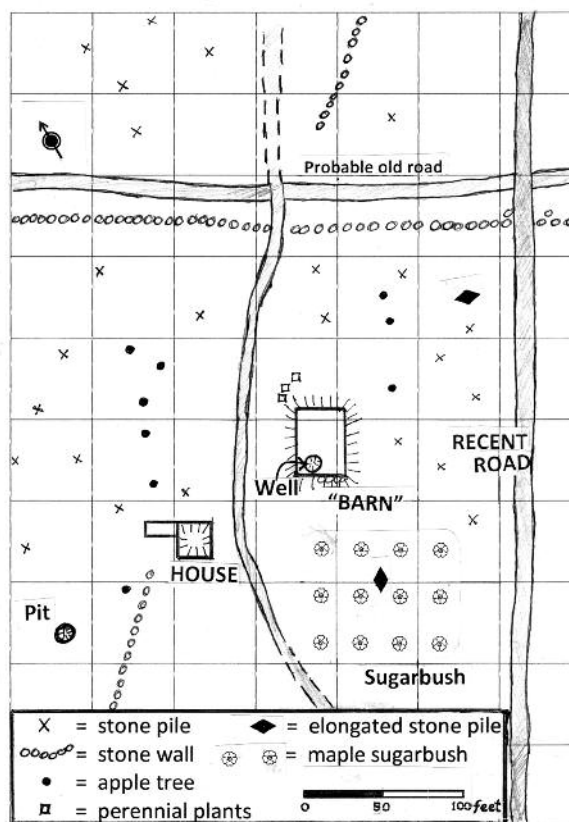
Three fragments of a medicine bottle, pressed glass words: “/re /d /owe’s / mass.”

Fragment of a canning jar: aqua, blown in mold, hand finished, ground top.

Twelve fragments from five different dishes: glazed stoneware plate, teacup, two saucers, unknown vessel.

All the artifacts from the House point to domestic and agricultural uses of the space. None are distinctively post-1890; the glass bottles date more typically from 1840-1870. None are luxury items.

The “Barn” has been extensively plowed over on its south and west sides by the skidder and apparently contained a well that the skidder filled in, so it is hard to draw conclusions about the building. The location of the well under the building is unusual for an outbuilding and suggests it was another residence, as does the presence of perennial horehound, lilac, and cultivated roses (magenta, large, single) in a line extending to the north from the northwest corner of the structure. The plants were destroyed between 2003 and 2008 by mowing. However,



Archaeological site map of the Jesse Gage Homestead site in Troy, based on phase-1 research done from 2003-2009.

no documentary evidence supports the existence of a second house. In fact, land transfer documents refer to only one residence and none before or after it. Also, the artifacts at this site do not suggest residential use (although subsequent skidder damage may have obscured domestic artifacts, and more excavation is needed):

Metal fragments from an agricultural machine, cast-iron, about 12 x 12 in.

A stove or furnace door, cast-iron, 14 x 10.5 in.

The socket of a shovel

To the southwest of the House, a pit measuring nine feet in diameter by two and a half feet deep may be the foundation of a chicken coop or other outbuilding. Several low stone walls extend across the land, and piles of stones (averaging two feet in diameter composed of five-inch stones) are located about every forty feet. In at least two places the elongated shape of the piles suggests graves (to the northeast of the “Barn” and in the sugarbush). The land surface has been

cultivated over an area of about five acres: there are no hummocky “pillow and cradle” topographical features or large rocks as would be found in an undisturbed forest. Apple trees are dead but still standing to the north of the “House” and “Barn.”²⁵

The buildings were located to the south of a road that began in its east from Beech Hill Road at a spot where the town still owns a right-of-way entrance. The road went about due west from the end of the right-of-way (where Gerryville was located), skirting the bog on its south on a corduroy road, came up to the settlement (its remains are still visible to the northeast of the buildings), passed them on the north, and went on to connect with Whitten Road in Burnham. Thus, the area was connected as well as anywhere in Troy to the rest of the world.

Discussion

Historical narratives of place are often contested, and the contest is usually asymmetrical. For example, a mountain that is sacred to a tribal band may be valued by an environmental organization, or a creek where locals fish may be incorporated into a viewscape for a corporate building. The case of “Negroville” is interesting and probably unusual because the two narratives are so evenly matched. Both narratives are local: voices originating outside the area in the wider culture (a state tourism office, for example) have never told versions of the story to further their own external interests. Both narratives are traditional: motifs and story have been transmitted through the oral folk process, with no known pressure (from a town historical society, for example) to establish a canonical version and preserve it in writing. Both narratives have fairly equivalent local traction: the two groups of tellers are about equal in prestige, power, wealth, numbers, and ability to control the discourse.²⁶

Historians have rightly been cautious about turning to folkloristics for methods and materials, but cooperative efforts have long been fruitful (especially with the rise of oral history as a discipline). This case shows that certain kinds of traditional legends are more factually accurate than others, and thus more reliable for the historian’s use. As we have said, the accuracy of a legend is strongly affected by the purposes for which it is told, and the rhetorical devices used

to achieve that purpose. The more accurate farmer’s narrative aims at landscape assessment, not myth-making, and accomplishes this purpose through a rhetoric of field observation, assessment of efficient land use, and rejection of larger cultural meaning. If we can understand the rhetoric of traditional accounts, we can better assess their accuracy and usefulness as historical texts.²⁷

Afterword

It is worth noting in closing that both narratives reflect the privileged views of White Mainers. The stories mention the inhabitants were poor and lived in their segregated community, but never propose discrimination by local Whites as a cause. On the contrary, Whites appear in an indirect but sympathetic light, as helpers on the Underground Railroad and fellow soldiers with the community’s Black men who left to fight and die for the virtuous cause of the Union. The motif of the thriving alternative community suggests that racial segregation can create “separate but equal” settlements. The narratives express a certain degree of sympathy but not responsibility.

The more accurate farmers’ legend of “Negroville” is disappearing, leaving the more mythic one to persist. The farmers and woodworkers of Troy are ageing, and fewer are left who know how to look at local places with a discerning eye for efficient land use practices and pool their insights with neighbors through a common narrative. Their children are leaving for careers outside the area and break the link of oral transmission. “People from away” (that is, not born in Troy) now form the majority of the town’s population, and they bring their own in-migrant’s sensibilities to the places they have come to know. The in-migrants’ legend of “Negroville” may eventually prevail over the farmer’s story through sheer attrition. Also, the sites themselves are deteriorating because of heavy logging, construction of ATV trails, abandonment of old roads to forest, and natural erosion of cultural features. These factors are obscuring the clues to land use that used to be visible.

We may regret that the future narrative may be less factually accurate than the one it is supplanting, and it is true that historical facts are precious and ought to be preserved. Nonetheless, the in-migrants’ legend of the settlement,

accurate or not, has narrative life and explanatory power for its tellers, as any legend should have. We can expect that the place will be inter-

preted and reinterpreted through legend according to the evolving intentions of the people who know it.

NOTES

1. Jan Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meanings* (New York: Norton, 1981); Timothy R. Tangherlini, "‘It Happened Not Too Far From Here...’: a Survey of Legend Theory and Characterization," *Western Folklore* 49.4 (1990): 371-390.

2. See Marcus A. LiBrizzi, *Lost Atusville: A Black Settlement from the American Revolution* (Orono: Maine Folklife Center, 2009); Steve Mitchell, *The Shame of Maine: the Forced Eviction of Malaga Island Residents* (Brunswick, ME: Author, 1999). Numerous cases are described in Harriet H. Price and Gerald Talbot, *Maine’s Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of its People* (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, 2006). LiBrizzi’s work is noteworthy because it treats the ongoing narratives that people use to reinterpret the place (81-86), as well as the history itself.

3. For a description of landscape archaeology see Michael Aston, *Interpreting the Landscape: Landscape Archaeology and Local History* (London: Routledge, 1997).

4. "Troy, Maine Community Profile," Kennebec County Council of Governments, accessed June 3, 2012, <http://kvcog.org/Towns/troy.htm>.

5. "American Factfinder: Race and Ethnicity," United States Census, accessed January 8, 2009, <http://factfinder.census.gov>; see LiBrizzi, *Lost Atusville*, pp. 8-11 for a discussion of using traditional racist place-names in research.

6. Price and Talbot, *Maine’s Visible Black History*, 113-116; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); See William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: the Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Randolph Stakeman, "A Black Census of Maine 1800-1910" (unpublished draft, Maine Historical Society, Portland, Maine, 1997); For example, Negrotown in Palmyra, Peterborough in Warren, Negro Ridge in China, Gerryville in Troy, Harveytown in Belfast.

7. See William R. Sawtell, *Of Brownville—and the Junction* (Milo, ME: Milo Printing Co., 1983), 25.

8. The concept of motif is drawn from folklore studies; see Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Dryden Press, 1946); Vladimir J. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).

9. For an original statement of the distinction, see Linda R. Waugh, "Marked and Unmarked: A Choice Between Equals in Semiotic Structure," *Semiotica* 38 (1992), 299-318: 1982.

10. Some of the in-migrants’ rhetorical strategies, as it happens, are nearly identical to those employed by professional interpreters of natural and cultural resources. Freeman Tilden’s classic work *Interpreting Our Heritage* lists five best practices: relating the subject to the lives of listeners, using information to reveal deeper meanings and truths, shaping a story that informs, entertains, and enlightens, inspiring and provoking listeners to broaden their everyday perspectives, and presenting a complete theme that speaks to the whole person. Similar principles appear to motivate the in-migrants’ narrative. See Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957). Another narrative tradition about a Maine African American place is described by Marcus LiBrizzi in *Lost Atusville*: "(I)ts poverty and associations with smuggling and the Underground Railroad made the place a locale for tales of an other-worldly nature... Atusville in its very separateness evoked the mysterious and exotic, a unique version of the American gothic that grafted the Deep South onto the Downeast... The narratives from the decline of Atusville display a sad, gothic quality involving haunted houses, living ghosts, and vanishing landmarks. A new, isolating sense of ‘otherness’ emerged from the folklore..." LiBrizzi, *Lost Atusville*, 81-82, 86. In my terms, the Atusville traditions take the narrative form of ghost stories (rather than conversations); they use the rhetorical strategy of trying to evoke strong emotions of eeriness and "otherness" (rather than stating landscape observations or dramatizing local events); and they are told for a purpose, presumably to excite scary thrills (rather than to assess land use or connect to nationally historic meanings).

11. Price and Talbot, *Maine’s Visible Black History*, 9; Edith M. Mitchell and Leola A. Mitchell, *Troy Past and Present: 1793, 1827-1977* (Troy, ME: Authors, 1977); George J. Varney, *History of Troy, Maine* (Boston: B. B. Russell, 1886); Bertha F. Hillman, "Historical Sketch of Troy, Maine", *Waldo County Herald*, September 16,

- 1915; Harry W. Rowe, "Troy, Maine: Its Early History", *Pittsfield Advertiser*, November 21, 1907; Frederick Weymouth, *History of Troy, Maine* (Troy, ME: Author, 1969); For African Americans in Troy and Burnham at other dates, see Christopher Marshall, "African Americans in 19th Century Troy and Burnham, Maine: a research report", unpublished document, Maine Historical Society.
12. Several decades before, Albion (previously named Freetown and Fairfax) had been especially impoverished town in the backcountry. For a description of economic conditions and resistance activities see Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: the Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press: 1990), 181-189; Albion, Kennebec County, Maine, Sixth Census of the United States, 1840, page 1, line 2; By 1850, most African Americans coming to Maine were born in states bordering Maine or in Canada, so Jesse may well have been of northern origin. See Randolph Stakeman, "Black Population of Maine: 1764-1900", *New England Journal of Black Studies* 8: 1989.
13. Albion, Seventh Census of U.S., 1850, household 88, name 97.
14. Albion, Eighth Census of U.S., 1860, 53, 53. Ruby C. Wiggin, *Albion on the Narrow Gauge* (Auburn, ME: Little Guy Press, 1964, 187).
15. Deed of Williamson to Gage, 1866, book 127, page 476; Gage to Sidelinger, 1868, 142, 255; Gage to Ward, 1868, 142, 449; Waldo County Registry of Deeds, Belfast, Maine.
16. Troy, Waldo County, Maine, Ninth Census of the U.S., 1870, 249, 259.
17. Deed of Gage to Laughton, 1872, 158, 277; Laughton to Gage, 1872, 159, 169; Mary Freeman, personal communication, October 6, 2019.
18. Deed of Gage to Handy, 1876, 170, 249. Troy, Tenth Census of U.S., 1880, 89, 99, and Schedule 2, page 6, line 3.
19. Mortgage deed, Laughton to Handy, 1880, 186, 222, foreclosed 204, 336. Ralph E. Hillman, ed., *Vital Records of Troy, Maine Prior to 1892*. Maine Genealogical Society Special Publication 21. (Camden, ME: Picton Press, 1995), p. 122. Troy, Tenth Census of U.S., 1880, 167, 169 and 89, 99.
- 20 Alfred Johnson, ed. *Vital Records of Belfast, Maine to the Year 1892*. (Belfast, ME: Maine Historical Society, 1917), p. 273; "Annual Report of the Municipal Officers of the Town of Troy", 1881, 1882, 1886, 1888, 1889, 1890. (Troy, ME: Town of Troy). In town office files.
21. A biography of Rev. Foy discusses his theological life and significance in the church: see Delbert W. Baker, D. W. 1987, *The Unknown Prophet* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishers, 1987). Unless otherwise cited, information in this section comes from Baker's book. Foy is also mentioned in Price and Talbot, *Maine's Visible Black History*, 158-160.
22. Burnham, Waldo County, Maine.
23. Troy, Waldo County, Maine, Sixth Census of the United States, 1840, 280-283; Sixth Census of the U.S., 1850, 57, 57; Price and Talbot, *Maine's Visible Black History*, 25-26, 361-362.
24. United States Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service, *Soil Survey of Waldo County, Maine* (Washington, DC: Soil Conservation Service, 1981).
25. See Tom Wessels, *Forest Forensics: A Field Guide to Reading the Forested Landscape* (Woodstock, VT: Countryman Press, 2010), 9.
26. A classic description of narratives of place is Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996). For examples of contested narratives of place, see Andrew Blaikie, "Photographs in the Cultural Account: Contested Narratives and Collective Memory in the Scottish Islands," *The Sociological Review* 49.3 (August 2001), pp.345-367; Philip G. Terrie, *Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press; 2nd edition, 2008).
27. Folklorists and historians have occasionally had a fraught relationship, but the disciplines have substantially contributed to each other's research methods. See, for example, Edward D. Ives, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press 1980; *The Bonny Earl of Murray: The Man, The Murder, The Ballad* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). For a discussion of the uses of folklore materials in history see Lynwood Montell and Barbara Allen, "The Folklorist and History: Three Approaches," in William M. Clements, ed., *100 Years of American Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History* (Washington, DC: American Folklore Society, 1988). For subjectivity and story-telling in oral history, see Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal* 12.1 (1981): 96-107.