



With this issue we are reviving the tradition of publishing research about our history that we began in 1914. Submissions are welcome!—Ed.

Greenwood Forest Farms: An African-American Hamlet Rediscovered

by Dr. Richard Hull

What makes Warwick so fascinating is its tapestry of hamlets, each with its own identity and history. There are dozens of them scattered throughout the town but Greenwood Forest Farms, tucked away in a delightfully sylvan setting of 143 acres off Route 17A and just a few miles east of Greenwood Lake, is special. It was New York State's first African-American resort community.



E.H. Wilson, one of the original incorporators, with community leader Rose Lawrence, c. 1970's.

Founded in 1919 by a group of prominent African American families from New York City, this community became a weekend and summer retreat for the Black intelligentsia of Harlem, Brooklyn and beyond. It was spearheaded by nine members of the Carlton Avenue Y.M.C.A. in Brooklyn who had organized a club to study foreign trade opportunities in South America. Then came the War and they decided to use their accumulated savings to establish an incorporated vacation community instead. Picturesque serpentine roads were set out and land was subdivided and sold to friends and professional colleagues.

The 'colony' as it came to be called was an immediate success and by 1938 it boasted of

twenty-eight neat cottages set in individually-landscaped trellised flower and vegetable gardens. The corporation, known as Sterling Forest Farms, then set aside land for a club house and a man-made recreational lake. Community roads were owned and maintained by the residents, wells were private, and until the 1940s the colony generated its own electricity.

Greenwood Forest Farms was widely known by New York's Black elite. Properties were owned by such luminaries as the famous lyricist and music publishing magnate, Cecil McPherson ("Cecil Mack"), and his wife Dr. Gertrude Curtis who was New York's first African-American woman dentist. There was also Robert J. Elzy, an early civil rights leader and head of Brooklyn's Urban League. A neighbor, Hon. Myles A. Paige, was a prominent Family Court Judge and was one of the first Black graduates of Columbia Law School.

Then there was J. Rosamond Johnson, a composer and conductor, who performed on Broadway in 'Cabin in the Sky' and 'Porgy and Bess' and who in 1912 had become Director of London's Grand Opera House. The world-famous writer Langston Hughes was only one of many literary figures who frequented the bucolic colony. It also became a haven for such civil rights giants as James Farmer and Harold W. Cruse.



Langston Hughes in 1953, at Gladys Taylor's home, Nelson Rd.

At the secluded and exclusive Greenwood Forest Farms residents and guests could enjoy live music, dance, poetry readings, swimming, boating, tennis, billiards, and even horseback riding. Relations with such white farmer neighbors as the Everett Cox family were extremely cordial and endure to this day.

The community began to decline in the 1960s as the older generation passed away and their children moved on or vacationed farther afield. Also, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the gradual elimination of racial discrimination in housing and public accommodations African Americans became more geographically mobile. Nevertheless, Greenwood Forest Farms endures though in a much-diminished state. Some descendants of the original pioneers now live there year-round and continue to interact with each other. It remains a proud hamlet of Warwick and one with a distinguished past. Our historical society is now partnering with them to erect a roadside historic marker so that Greenwood Forest Farms will not be forgotten.

References: *Amsterdam News*

Memoirs of Nathaniel Jones, Teacher, Merchant & Statesman 1788-1866

by Sue Gardner

There are few local documents that mention the name of Nathaniel Jones; he is mostly found as a brief mention in histories of Bellvale. It is astonishing that our memory of him is nearly a clean slate, as he was one of just a few of our citizens who rose to sit in Congress.

Recently, a copy of the transcript of his memoirs, written in 1856, was unearthed in the family belongings of Burton Kendall and Sally Towse of Saratoga, California. Mr. Kendall is direct descendant of Nathaniel and his wife Mary Burt. We are most grateful to Mr. Kendall and Ms. Towse for sharing his legacy with us!

According to the Biographical Directory of the Congress (<http://bioguide/congress.gov>), Nathaniel was born here in Warwick—but we

know now from his memoirs that like many of our early citizens, he was born in Massachusetts. (in New Marlborough, Feb. 17, 1788) and migrated here as a young man seeking employment. Adjusting to life in Warwick town could be fraught with difficulties, however, and not knowing much about area nearly resulted in his demise:



*Nathaniel Jones, painted in
1827 by Frederick R.
Spencer. Private Collection.*

“In the month of May in this year (1808, when he was 20) my old school fellow and friend, Eleazar Bullard, and myself agreed to visit Orange Co., NY and engage as school teachers, and we accordingly left on horseback with our limited wardrobe and plainer horse equipage to try the fortunes of pedagogues. I engaged a school in the Florida Village district two days after reaching that place—he took the school at the Village of Amity. My predecessor as teacher was John Smith of, or near Florida, either a native of that vicinity or of Long Island—though a majority of school teachers in this part of New York were from Ireland. I found my scholars had not been accustomed to any correct discipline and in consequence was obliged to observe much leniency until they were gradually drilled into order and salutary restraint....Situating as is this neighborhood in the selva of the ‘Drowned lands’, then being drained and reclaimed, its festering miasma acted fearfully on the health of the surrounding inhabitants, annually prostrating scores of them with ague and intermittent fevers. Not being acclimated, I soon fell prey to that malady and for several weeks was obliged to abandon my school. My sufferings I thought were extreme, and from accidental removal of the bandage

after the use (or abuse) of the lancet in my arm by Dr. Seward, I was nearly relieved from them by death...Being a part of the time unconscious of what was passing and apparently neglected by the nurse, the flood had flowed to that extent as to pass through the feather and straw beds forming a puddle on the floor. Persons were called in to see me die, but one gentleman more considerate than the others had me placed in a sheet, four persons at its corners bore me into the open air & by some other quickning (*sic*) applications, brought me back to a moving body. This excessive depletion left me weak indeed, nor did I regain the natural color in my face for about two years...old Phineas Tompkins watched over me with parental care.... after finishing my six months term, my system yet weak and my mind set against a climate I then detested as breathing in its atmosphere nought but poisonous gasses; I left in the month of November for my native and salubrious hills, determined never gain to set myself down in Florida.” (p.19-20)

What an unappealing portrait! Jones had apparently arrived at one of the worst possible times in the history of the Black Dirt region and Florida, when population pressures and lack of available land were forcing the populace to drain the swamps to gain more arable fields--thus creating temporarily an even worse situation of mosquito infestation and resulting sickness, from the stagnant pools. After this inauspicious introduction to the area, it would not be surprising if Nathaniel had shaken off the dust of Warwick and never returned.

He did come back, however, a year later in 1810:

“...I returned once more to Orange County...and whilst stopping a day or two with a friend near (*Florida*), I received from the Trustees of the Warwick Village School district an invitation to teach at their school...during the discussion (*meeting with the trustees at Geraghty’s hotel, which later became the Wawayanda House*), the Hon. James Burt ...said that he had been told by

the people of Florida and particularly Dr. S.S. Seward that he was a first rate teacher.” (transcript p. 24).

Small wonder that after a lapse of care that nearly killed him, his employers felt obliged to give him a glowing recommendation! Jones stayed as teacher in Warwick Village until 1814. His tenure was not without challenges; even at this early date there was controversy over the teaching of religious values in a public school:

“About his time Rev. John I. Christie settled as Pastor, in the Village, of the Dutch Reformed Church and being zealous in good works, professed much anxiety to have me teach my school the Westminster or Heidelberg Catechism. My first objection was the same as I had made on a previous occasion in Florida, and that was, I was not a teacher of theology, nor was its teaching contemplated by me or my employers when I was contracted to teach...the places for teaching Christ’s precepts were at the fireside and church by parents and pastors....and lastly my patrons were of different religious persuasions, consisting of Reformed Dutch, Baptists, Methodists and at least one Friend or Quaker...” (p. 25)

While teaching at Warwick, Nathaniel had become acquainted with James Burt and his family— especially his daughter Mary. He was set to win her hand, and she was willing, but the match had an uphill battle:



Mary Burt Jones, painted in 1829 by Elias V. Coe. Private collection.

“I allude to my marriage with the eldest and favorite daughter of the Honorable James Burt of Warwick, whose reputation, political, social and religious,

standing and influence, were equal to any resident in the county. It would reasonably be supposed that he would, consequently, have corresponding pretensions regarding the marriage alliances of his children, and therefore, feel and manifest a repugnance to the uniting of his very favorite daughter to one, who was comparatively a stranger and whose family connexions were to him entirely unknown...I had made up my conclusion that no human agency should be permitted to defeat the consummation of a contract, the sanctity of which, its obligations, and concerns, belonged only to the parties themselves....the ready consent of the Mother was given and after a homily of a half hour or more (with a few interruptions from the suitor) from the father, he concluded with remarking 'that painful and trying as was the circumstance to his feelings, he had made up his mind to resign his daughter to a destiny which Providence seemed to have permitted'... On Tuesday, the 14th day of May (1811) the Nuptials were celebrated under the paternal roof." (p. 27)

Nathaniel volunteered in the local militia during the War of 1812. In 1813 he, his wife and child established their home in the "Smith House" in the north part of the village, and Nathaniel desired to improve his income. His father in law discouraged migrating west, and helped him with land to build a wool carding and fulling mill at Bellvale in 1814-1815, later to be expanded by Joseph Brooks. A series of bad luck, bad tenants, and trouble with in-laws led to him to take the dramatic step of a journey out west without his family starting in June of 1820, at the age of 32. He went by covered wagon to Pittsburgh, and with a few others bought a flat boat and proceeded down the Ohio River to Cincinnati. They did not even take the precaution of purchasing maps, and none had any experience on the river. He did indeed have many adventures, including some hair-raising threats to life and limb. He gives vivid descriptions of daily life in what was then the West (Illinois, Missouri). "...During the three weeks I remained in the place, four murders occurred..."! He heads

home at last and after nearly dying again of an illness returned home.

With a clearer sense of purpose now, he bought a house and store in the Village of Warwick formerly owned by Benjamin Barney and became a merchant; he began to turn toward political life and was elected Warwick Town Clerk in 1821, and thereafter gradually pursued a career in government. He was one of the local civic leaders who purchased the infamous "Dolson's mill pond" --the culprit which made the lower village an unhealthy place to live and work-- with the resulting clause in the land deed that there would never again be a dam erected there.

He purchased a farm near Newburgh in 1840 and moved his family there, after residing in Warwick for thirty years. Many descriptions of political life in the early 19th century are also recounted in the memoirs. His accomplishments include being elected a member of the State assembly in 1827 and 1828; engaging in banking in 1834; elected as a Democrat to the Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth U.S. Congresses (March 4, 1837-March 3, 1841). He became surveyor general of New York from February 1842 to November 1844, State canal commissioner from 1844-1847, superintendent of schools and clerk of the Board of Education of Newburgh in 1851, and a member of the State senate in 1852 and 1853. He died in Newburgh, NY. on July 20, 1866.

The transcription of his memoirs is 132 pages in length, and contains many interesting anecdotes about Warwick. A copy will be in the local history collection and one for check-out will be available at Wisner Library soon, for those who would like further details on trouble with in-laws, desperate land deals, and the ups and downs of commerce and politics nearly a century ago.

References: Information from Burton Kendall and Sally Towse; Obituary of Nathaniel Jones (New York Times, July 31, 1866).

Haven't read the original 'Warwick Historical Papers'? A reprinted two volume set is available from the Society for \$25.00, postage included. Copies are also available from Albert Wisner Public Library for checkout.