

Cato Freeman

By: Doris Sherrow

Cato Freeman was the head of a black Portland family of four, according to the 1790 census. In 1774, he had been the slave of **Ebenezer White** who lived at 582 Main Street. How did he gain his freedom?

Several versions of Portland's history portray Cato as if he were a man in his 20s during the 1770s. The book **Black Roots** in Southeastern Connecticut 1650-1900 shows that he was about ten in early 1774. On February 16 of that year, White wrote that Cato and a team had worked half a day for **John Williams**, who was building 584 Main Street for White's oldest son, **David**, soon to be married. And White wrote Cato's name as if it were not the first time he had used it in the diary. Unfortunately, except for this 1774 section on the building of David's house, 1756 to 1779 are missing.

Curiously, White's diary shows that many boys, including his sons David and **Daniel**, and his grandsons **Elnathan** and **Erastus Strong**, also worked for him at or before age 10. Work consisted of planting and tending in the spring and summer, and harvesting and wood-chopping in the fall and winter. White knew that it could be done by a young boy--he had doubtless planted, tended and harvested for his father when he was a child!--so there was nothing unkind in his having 10-year-old Cato work on the farm.

Cato assumed tasks throughout the surviving sections of the diary which match the tasks assigned to White's son David, who was 9 years older, and his son Daniel, who was 2 years younger than Cato.

From 1779 to 1781, Cato is mentioned almost daily in White's diary. Interestingly, he is not recorded any differently than are White's sons, David and Daniel. Sometimes he worked with White or the boys, sometimes he worked alone. Here are some of White's diary notes on Cato; I have added semicolons and a couple commas for clarity.

[Nov.8, 1779] My self Daniel & Cato clearing Ditch great Pond

[Jan.7, 1780] Exceeding cold high wind; I did little more than take care of Creatures; Cato thrash'd wheat

[March 11, 1780] My self David & Cato to ye fur Lott Lower End clearing for wheat next fall

[May 3, 1780] ...Cato carting brick and &c with my team for Seth Overton all day

[May 26, 1780] Cato and my self all Day mending [fences]

[July 27, 1780] My self making hay and puling flax all Day ... Cato mowing A:M in Nicholas meado; P:M he Exchanged work with David and pulled flax for him in Lt Sage's Lot while David made hay for us

[Sept.21, 1780] Cato thrashed three bushels rye for Dan'l Lee wife [the Lees lived at 24 Pepperidge Road]

[Nov.7, 1780] ...my self and Cato and Dan'l carted two load Dung into ye meado

[Dec.18, 1780] ...David help'd me hew timber for stable; Cato thrashed for David; Dan'l went to school

[Jan.25, 1781]...Cato cut wood at ye Door

[Feb.3, 1781].We all, viz, self David Cato to ye great hill to sawing timber for cart hubs

[March 22, 1781] Self, David, Cato and Dan'l all ye fur lott with team

[May 14, 1781] Self at Hartford...David and Cato washing sheep

A couple times, White noted that Cato didn't work because he was sick, or his teeth were hurting. Twice he wrote that Cato had taken the day off because it was election day. In many areas, slaves took election day off and held their own satirical "election." But mostly White noted Cato sharing the daily workload with his boys and himself.

Ebenezer White probably held no racial prejudice. He had been born in 1727 in a house now gone, probably in the vicinity of Fire Station #2 on Main Street. In his neighborhood, there were perhaps half a dozen other white families, and probably fifty Wangunk families, primarily on nearby Penny Corner Road.

White's father and mother, and later White himself, often signed their names as witnesses on the Wangunks' deeds in the 1730s and -40s. While he might have believed devoutly in the Puritan theology of the times, he was almost certainly open and friendly to the many Wangunks who held a strong community in the area for the first third of the 18th century. Thus it would have been no problem for Ebenezer White to take on a young black boy.

Both White and his brother Stephen had fought in the French and Indian War in the late 1750s. For whatever reason, his son David did not go off to war. White's other son, Daniel, was too young to join the army, not turning 18 until the year the war ended. But Cato turned 18 in 1781, while the Revolutionary War was still raging.

On Monday, June 4, 1781, White went to Hartford to serve one of his many terms as state representative, and brought with him young Cato. The previous week he had ridden to Woodstock to meet with Capt. Nehemiah Lyon, a man in his seventies charged with raising more troops for the Continental Army. Now in Hartford, he allowed Cato to enlist in the continental service for three years, then sold him to Capt. Lyon. Lyon subsequently supplied Cato a bill of emancipation in trade for Cato's enlisting "as one of ye qota of ye town of Woodstock."

Cato and White returned to Portland, and Cato worked on the farm for the rest of the week. On Friday, June 8, White wrote, "...the Last Day Cato worked for me." And on Monday the 11th, he wrote, "...Cato Bid farewell and went off[f] to begin his three year service as soldier in ye army."

It isn't clear why White enlisted Cato out of Woodstock. **Capt. Lyon** obtained permission from the Woodstock town fathers to free Cato in trade for three years of service. I have never come across such permission in the town records from Chatham (Portland and East Hampton until 1841), so perhaps Woodstock was one of a limited number of places where a black man could be freed in payment for his service in the Revolution. I don't know for sure!

A bit over a year later, Ebenezer White received \$51 from Lyon, his payment for Cato. While it could be surmised that White had sold him rather than freeing him, White had met all his needs, including two recent pairs of shoes, as long as Cato had lived at his house. The \$51 was not much money at that time--around the same time (April 22, 1780), White had paid \$60 for three quarts of wine! And White was giving up this slave precisely when he became an adult of 18. It looks as if Ebenezer White approved of freeing Cato, and only accepted the money from Lyon because it was available, so why not take it?

Cato returned to White's house on leave two or three times. Now he was called Cato Freeman. He worked a couple days while he visited the Whites--and was paid! When the war ended, he came back to Portland and worked for Ebenezer White for a couple more years. In 1789, he married Rebecca Madee of Wethersfield, and they lived in Portland with two children by the time the census was taken in 1790.

Oddly enough, only the first third of Cato's life took place in Portland. By 1800, he was living in Montville, and a bit later, in Groton or Preston. Amazingly, the 1850 census shows that he and Rebecca were living in Chelsea, Vermont! Rebecca died at age 96 in 1853. Cato survived until March 12, 1863, when he died at the age of 100!