

Brief Biographies of a few of the Enslaved at Cocumscussoc / Smith Castle

Mingo

Mingo is believed to have been born sometime before 1723¹. He was enslaved by Daniel Updike and apparently gained a position of trust in the household so that he was one of the slaves permitted to travel from Cocumscussoc either with the family to various households they visited, or on his own.

He is mentioned in the diary of the Rev. James McSparran, rector of St. Paul's Church, the parish of the Updike family, and a frequent visitor himself to Cocumscussoc. The entry from October 1743 was written in the aftermath of his slave Maroca giving birth to a second daughter. The minister writes of his mounting perplexity on the matter, that while she professes to be a Christian, she

“seems not concerned about her soul, nor minds her promise of chastity”, but continued her unbecoming “Conduct with Col. Updike’s Negro²”.

Two years later another diary entry contains the Reverend’s confession that he gave Maroca “one or Two lashes” for receiving presents from Mingo, as he persisted in trying to prevent what for Mingo and Maroca was the semblance of a family, as best they could while owned by separate masters. There is little to tell us of the Updike’s response to one of their enslaved servants fathering the children of an enslaved woman belonging to their Minister and friend.

The “presents” he gave to his wife might well have been provided by the family, or he may have procured them himself, given that he was still a trusted servant, allowed to travel on errands and visits that would have given him such an opportunity to express his continued dedication to the mother of his children³.

Both Daniel Updike and Reverend MacSparran died in 1757. In Daniel Updike’s probate inventory after his death, Mingo is given a value of L450, a lesser value than five of the other enslaved males of the household, suggesting he is now older, but still capable of some of the harder labor on the plantation.

No documentation is known to tell us if Mingo, Maroca, and their children were ever able to live together as a family.

¹ Cranston/Dunay *We Were Here Too: Selected Stories of Black History in North Kingstown* (2016) pp. 78-79

² Goodwin, Daniel *A Letter Book and Abstract of Out Services Witten During the Years 1743-1751 by the Revd. James MacSparran* (1899) p. 15

³ See also Geake, etc. “The Women of Cocumscussoc” pp. 42-43

Prince Updike

Prince was also enslaved by Daniel Updike during the plantation era. He was forty-six at the time of his master's death, and likely due to his age, was only valued at fifty pounds. Despite this assessment of his worth, he would gain his freedom and commit to a livelihood that earned him more than many craftsmen of his day.

By 1766, Prince was listed as working for Newport merchant Aaron Lopez as a chocolate grinder. As historian Neil Dunay, points out, grinding chocolate was no easy task, requiring that one break and remove the husks off the cocoa and then grind it to a fine powder using a crude stone platform and a stone rolling pin.

The finely ground cocoa would then be exported to England where it was in high demand for those who could afford the luxury of drinking hot chocolate⁴.

Lopez delivered the raw cocoa beans to Prince Updike who then ground them into cocoa powder. Prince was apparently a hard worker, producing 2,000lbs of chocolate in his first year of production, and increasing his output to 4,000 lbs. between 1768-1769 for which he was paid five shillings per pound.

Based upon the numbers of production, it is estimated that Prince earned roughly 1,500 pounds in his four years of working for Lopez, in modern terms, that equals roughly \$300,000⁵.

When he died in January 1781 at the age of seventy, the wealth left by his estate afforded him a handsome gravestone carved by John Stephens of the Stephens shop in Newport. His stone can still be found in "God's Little Acre" the African-American section of the Burial Ground in old Newport.

⁴ Cranston/Dunay p. 79

⁵ Lopez Account Book 715: 37 Newport Historical Society

Lilly Updike

Lilly was the last slave to live and labor at Cocumscussoc. Born at Cocumscussoc late in the ownership of the first Lodowick Updike, she lived, and served in the household through the next three succeeding generations of slave masters in Daniel, Lodowick II, and Wilkins Updike. She was the sister of Prince Updike.

Though her parents were among the enslaved at Cocumscussoc, she was named by her master Lodowick, and when come of age, she would be dressed in fine clothes and taken with other domestic slaves to St. Paul's Church where the Rev. James MacSparran was among those New England ministers laboring to Christianize and provide a minimal education to the enslaved within their neighboring parishes⁶.

Part of this education was that on occasion, the domestic slaves were sometimes invited to sit at the table with family members. On one such occasion, a high society madam from Massachusetts expressed her displeasure at the practice, and pointing to the young child's hand, likened it to the "black hoof" of a goat, an intonation that both blacks and their white masters would understand as a reference to the devil.

Lilly lived a long life, but not an easy one. She saw as a child how her parent's labored: her father at the plantation forge, making nails. Her mother as a domestic worker, rising at dawn to clean the chamber pots and stir the fire in the great fireplace; and a day spent cleaning, spinning fleece, helping to cook for and serve the many guests who came to the Castle, even those who saw her as less than human.

In her mother's life, she saw her own future at Cocumscussoc, and bleak as that was, she too had at least one child. In Daniel Updike's probate inventory of 1757, we find listed "Lille and Lille's unnamed child". They were valued at 500 pounds⁷.

After the Revolutionary War, Lille was one of just four slaves remaining in the household. Though freed, their age and infirmity denied them the choice of leaving and living independent of the plantation where they had labored for so long.

Lille was the last to remain, a personal servant to Abigail Updike who was allowed to continue to occupy the "great house" after the sale of the property.

⁶ See Goodwin, Daniel *A Letter Book and Abstract of Out Services... An Account of the author*, p. xxiv

⁷ *An Inventory of the Personal Estate of Daniel Updike Esqr. Of North Kingstown Deceased taken and approved by us the Subscribers the 5th Day of June A.D. 1757* RIHS MSS 770 Updike papers

Dimas Smith

Dimas Smith was likely born at Cocumscussoc. He is listed as the “son of Robi” who was himself born to a couple enslaved by Richard Smith Jr. Though one of Daniel Updike’s most valued slaves in the 1757 inventory, Dimas appears to have had a contentious relationship with his masters. Even as a young man he seemed of a worldly experience that kept containment at Cocumscussoc a difficult task for his master.

A runaway notice in the Providence Gazette of April 30, 1763 reads

“RUN away from the subscriber at North Kingstown, in the Colony of Rhode Island, a young Negro man named Dimas, born in this Country, a well set Fellow about 5 feet 4 inches high, has a down look, is thin jaw’d, and has a visible Scar from the bridge of his Nose, over his Cheek, reaching beyond the Corner of his Mouth. He had on when he went off, a new double-breasted Jacket of Snuff colour’d Broad-cloth, trimmed with horn buttons, and Breeches of the same; he wore a low brim’d Hat, and affects of the Sailor. He is a subtle fellow, and has got a forg’d Pass, with which it is suspected that he will effect his escape to Boston, as he has some Acquaintances there...⁸”

Perhaps Dimas had hopes of joining the mariners he was likely acquainted with in Boston, whose lives must have seemed so much freer on the water than the restrictions placed on the enslaved while laboring on the land.

Dimas was captured and returned to the plantation. He escaped again in 1767, only to be captured yet again. Though freed by the Emancipation Act of 1784, Dimas could still not free himself of the dependence upon the plantation. He would return as a laborer in the 1790’s working for room and board and the occasional payment of food or clothing.

A Simco Smith, son of Robi-thus Dimas’ brother, is also listed as a farm worker in 1796⁹.

⁸ Cranston/Dunay p. 82 see also Taylor, Maureen *Runaways, Deserters, and Notorious Villains from Rhode Island Newspapers* (1998) 1:2

⁹ Geake, A Cocumscussoc Reader p. 27

Ceaser, Moses & James Updike

In February 1778, the Rhode Island General Assembly issued the proclamation that “every able bodied negro, mulatto, or Indian man slave in this state may enlist into either of the said two battalions to serve during the continuance of the war with Great Britain; that every slave so enlisting shall be entitled to, and receive all the bounties, wages, and encouragements allowed by the Continental Congress . . . that every slave enlisting shall, upon passing muster before Colonel Christopher Greene, be immediately discharged from the service of his master or mistress, and be absolutely FREE, as though he had never been incumbered with any kind of servitude or slavery”¹⁰.

Three of the enslaved men from the Updike plantation enlisted to earn their freedom. Moses and Ceaser Updike enlisted together in May 1778. By June they were serving together at Valley Forge under Colonel Thomas Cole. Records show that Updike was paid £92 for Moses, and the maximum £102 for Caesar. In May 1779, both are listed on the muster roll of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment under command of Colonel Christopher Greene¹¹.

While records for Moses are incomplete, we know that Caesar served for five years, earning an “Honorary Badge of Distinction,” an award given to soldiers who had “served at least three years with bravery.” Caesar Updike served four years in the 4th Company of the 1st Rhode Island. He was furloughed from the Continental Army on June 15, 1783¹². Like many veterans, he returned to his home state and lived quietly. In the spring of 1795, he returned to Smith’s Castle, working as a wage laborer for the Updike family. He was paid in corn, shoes, and sometimes currency.¹ He is listed in the Rhode Island census of 1800 as living in East Greenwich. Like many other veterans, he applied for a pension that was long in coming, not received until April 11, 1818. He died in Kent County on December 13, 1819.

The Daughters of the American Revolution publication of *Forgotten Patriots* also lists a James Updike from North Kingstown¹³. This may have been the James Updike who was once a slave of Lodowick Updike and set free due to the 1784 emancipation act. His record does not show him serving the required time to gain freedom, though he is listed as a “free colored person” and a resident of North Kingstown in the 1790 census with his wife Freelove and their ten children. James Updike and received his pension in 1831.

¹⁰ Bartlett, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island* Vol. 8 pp. 358-363

¹¹ See Cranston/Dunay 82-86, Geake “A Cocumscussoc Reader” pp. 29-30 Daybook 1795-1796 Updike Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society

¹² See *Forgotten Patriots: African American and American Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War* (2008) p. 234

¹³ *Ibid.*