

THE WORLD OF CATO SANDS  
By Jacqueline Bahn

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Who was Cato? The old Roman name "Cato" intrigued me. It appeared in the Cow Neck Peninsula Society's Landmarks Committee recent publication, "The Mill Pond, With Walking Guide," which states that "Mrs. Cato Sands, an early black settler in Port, is buried on the easterly line of the cemetery near Pleasant Avenue," And again the name is mentioned in the will of Simon Sands, a grandson of the ship-captain and early Cow Neck resident, John Sands I.

Cato was a black slave who was freed by Simon Sands' 1782 will. In the nine-teenth century Cato's descendants owned a home in the Mill Pond area. The first written record of him places him on Cow Neck in what is now called Sands Point, after the Sands family. John Sands I purchased land on Cow Neck in 1691 from Richard Cornell of Rockaway who held a British patent to the land. John I's original Sands Point holdings of over 500 acres changed hands twice before Simon inherited about 130 of these acres from hi father, John Sands II, around 1765.

Simon's land was at the very tip of Cow Neck, then called Watch Point and now known as Sands Point. His holdings ex-tended roughly from Half Moon Beach on Sands Point Road, across Sloan's Beach Road to East Creek, across the Creek and beach, then following the coastline back to Half Moon Beach again.

Earlier in 1758, Simon had acquired 39 acres of upland plus marshes, beaches and meadows from Adam and Stephen Mott. This land, today the "Lands' End" section of Hoffstot Lane, was once considered an island according to the old deed.

Simon Sands' will gives a very good picture of what the world of Cato was like. The will discusses pigs, sheep, milk cows, cattle, horses, grain and corn. Henry Sands, a nephew of Simon's who lived nearby a few years earlier, grew wheat.

Simon's second wife, Sarah, according to his will was left:

" ... an equal half of my garden fruit sufficient for her use, the privilege of enough firewood for one fire without damaging the timber ..."

Undoubtedly, the Sands' slaves and family members also fished, clammed and cut the sedge or salt gras from the marshes to feed their animals. They probably shipped the produce they could not use to markets in New York City and elsewhere. Later maps show a dock on what is now called Seaman Road on Simon's land. Appar-ently the beaches and the salt marshes were held in common by various descendants of John Sands I until after the Revolution.

In 1771, seventeen percent of Long Island's population consisted of black slaves. Although the majority of house-holders owned no slaves at all, a wealthy landowner

might own as many as ten. Only large landowners could afford to feed and maintain slaves and make a profit.

Simon Sands owned at least five slaves at the time of his death. According to the 1790 census, Simon's brother Benjamin and his nephew Richard, who shared the rest of John I's original farm, each owned four. James Sands, Simon's son who managed the farm after his father's death owned five slaves. Colonel John Sands, a nephew of Simon living in what later became Port Washington, owned three.

The attitude towards owning slaves was gradually changing in the North. The Society of Friends, at its annual meeting at Purchase, New York in 1767 had elected a committee to visit slave holding members and urge them to free their slaves. Nine years later, the Society decided to refuse all contributions from members who failed to comply. By 1787 there was only one Quaker slave owner in New York City.

Here on Long Island, the eminent Quaker Elias Hicks was active in demanding the abolition of slavery. Hicks traveled about the area urging all citizens not to buy the products of slave labor. According to Bailey in Long Island, a History of Two Great Counties, few slave holding Quakers remained on Long Island before the Revolution.

The Revolutionary War also brought new acceptance of free blacks. The British offered freedom to slaves who fought on their side. Later, the Continental Congress promised that slaves who enlisted in its army would receive their freedom when the war was over. In addition, the words of the Declaration of Independence claiming the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness made many thinking people question the right to own slaves.

In 1799 a system of gradual manumission of slaves was instituted in New York State. Total emancipation was to happen by 1827, However, children born to slaves during the period 1799 to 1827 could not become free until age 25, if female and age 27, if male.

We do not know what prompted Simon Sands in 1782 to free Cato and "my negro woman Sary, both to have their freedom soon after my decease." Simon did not free any of his other slaves. He gave his wife the choice of one of his blacks and directed that the rest be sold, at the discretion of his executors, "for a certain term of life or for life as they shall think proper."

Around the time of Simon's death, a female slave was worth about 30 pounds on the open market while an acre of land on Cow Neck cost in the neighborhood of 10 pounds. A male slave could bring a price between 35 and 50 pounds. Black children were obtainable for 5 to 7 pounds.

Children born to slaves were a special bonus to their masters since they cost nothing and could be sold for pure profit. Perhaps Cato was born to Sands' slaves here on Cow Neck. No Sands documents pertaining to Cato's parents have come to light so far.

If Cato was not born on Cow Neck, he may have been purchased by Simon Sands at the slave market on Wall Street in New York City where blacks and Indians could be

bought, sold or hired. In earlier times, white people were also put on this auction block to be sold as indentured servants,

Black slaves were brought to the new world chiefly from Guinea, Senegal and the Gold Coast of Africa, England exported textiles, metal goods and liquor to these areas and her manufactured products were exchanged there for slaves. The slaves were then sold in the West Indies for sugar.

The New England colonies exchanged rum for slaves in Africa. These slaves were also exchanged in the West Indies--for molasses to be made into more rum. It seems likely that Cato or his ancestors entered the New York area from Africa via the West Indies.

Perhaps Cato obtained his freedom because he aided Simon Sands in some way during the Revolutionary War. Simon was a well-known Committeeman for the Sons of Liberty here on Cow Neck before the British invaded Long Island. As such, he would not have been treated well by the British after the occupation. Simon had also helped the Continental Army by allowing soldiers sent by Colonel John Sands to use his property to watch for "any vessel appearing to be enemy ships of war, transports or tenders." The soldiers were immediately to notify Simon Sands or William or John Cornwell if any ships were sighted.

Provision was made in Simon Sands' will that Cato must pay 40 shillings to Simon's executors yearly in order to "support him in old age or infirmity." New York provincial law around this time required that before freeing a slave, his owner must guarantee against his ex-slave's future insolvency. In 1788 another law was passed permitting the manumission of slaves under 50 years of age providing that the owner obtained a certificate from the Overseers of the Poor certifying that the slave was of sufficient ability to be able to provide for himself.

It seems unusual that Simon's will did not require Sary, the other slave he freed, to pay a yearly sum for her old age insurance. Hannah Cornell's will around the same period required that each of her two freed black women must pay her son or his heirs J pounds per year for 18 years. Her male slave, Pompe, had to pay 4 pounds per year, the equiv-alent of 40 shillings, Cato's amount to Simon's executors. Perhaps Sary was old and Simon knew his family would care for her. Perhaps Sary was Cato's wife and was included in Cato's old age insurance payment to Simon's estate. Again, there are no written records.

The name "Cato" appears on the 1790 and 1800 censuses without a surname. These Catos did not live on Cow Neck and probably could not have been the Cato freed by Simon Sands. Either our Cato had died sometime during this period or he had been missed by the census taker.

By 1810 a "Cato Sands" was living near Daniel and Stephen Mott on Cow Neck. The census is unclear but there seem to be two members in his family. In 1820 Cato Sands and his family were living near Thomas Dodge, Daniel Brinkerhoff, Zebulon Seaman and John Treadwell, probably in what is now called Manorhaven.

It is only from the 1840 census that we receive real information about Cato Sands. He is a black male between the ages of 36 and 55. He is employed in agriculture. This Cato is too young to be the Cato freed by Simon Sands in 1782. More likely, the Cato of the 1840 census is the son of the former slave.

From deeds on microfilm in Jamaica (Cow Neck was part of Queens County until the end of the 19th century) we learn that Cato Sands in 1834 purchased land from Thomas "adjoining to the north side of the Mill Pond and now or late in the possession of Hewlett Cornell," His three and one-quarter acres and twenty rods of upland plus the salt meadow and sedge adjoining his upland and the Mill Pond cost him 400 dollars. Restriction in the deed allowed David Jarvis and his heirs to pass through Cato's property "with creatures and carriages" and William Dodge was allowed to use the road leading to the highway which had been built by David Jarvis.

From Cato Sands' 1841 will we find that Cato had a wife Margaret, three daughters, Sarah, Eliza and Phebe, and two sons Charles and Cato. His will leaves his "houses and land" to his wife Margaret and to his son Cato with the condition that his three daughters be allowed to live on the premises so long as they remain single. Charles, probably older than Cato, received 60 dollars.

To retrace our steps, the 1840 census lists six people as members of Cato Sands' family. There is one male between the ages of 36 and 55. Cato Sr., and one male in the 10 to 24 category, probably Cato Jr. One female is between the ages of 10 and 24, two are in the 24-36 category and one, Cato's wife Margaret, is between the ages of 36 and 55.

By the time of the 1850 census when all family members were mentioned by name, there were only three members of the Cato Sands family left, Eliza age 37, Phebe age 29 and Cato age 25. Then, sometime between 1850 and 1860 young Cato Sands must have passed away. It seems unlikely that he would have moved from a house which he owned and leave it to his sisters.

Phebe and Eliza were still living near the Mill Pond in 1870. They both listed their occupations as "keeping house" on the census of that year. Some of the people living nearby had more interesting jobs by current standards. Lawrence Seaman was master of a steamboat, David Duryea a tailor, Daniel and David Rapelyea were wagonmakers, Stephen Weeks a boot and shoemaker, Henry Jones was an oyster planter. All the wives in the area were busy "keeping house."

We can wonder how Phebe and Eliza managed to remain in Cato Sands' house without any outside income. Undoubtedly, they farmed part of the land. Perhaps they sold their produce to their neighbors. Cato's 1841 will directed that his tools "that may be necessary for use on my land" be left to his wife and to his son, Cato Jr.

Phebe and Eliza listed a few thousand dollars in personal assets as belonging to them on the 1870 census. In this category they seemed to be as well off as any of their neighbors. Cato's will had instructed his executors, Thomas and Silas Mott, to put out at

interest any money his daughters might receive from his estate and to pay them the yearly interest. Perhaps this money had been shrewdly invested by the Motts.

Cato's will had also mentioned "houses" rather than just one Mill Pond house. It may be that an additional house had been rented out to provide supplementary income for the family.

The descendants of the Cato freed by Simon Sands seem far removed from Field's description in *The Two-Fold Slavery of the United States* of the freed slaves he saw in Flushing and Jamaica while on a visit to Long Island from England during the nineteenth century:

"They are in the most degraded and wretched condition, living on a few clams gathered by the shore and begging. They are ignorant, ragged, forlorn and ready to famish in the midst of surrounding abundance for the want of the necessaries and comforts of life."

With the death of Phebe Sands in 1884, the Mill Pond property passed to Hewlett Sands of Roslyn, a cousin, according to Phebe's probate papers. Then five years later, at a special term of the Supreme Court of the State of New York held in Brooklyn, it was ordered that her estate be sold at public auction because of an action brought against Hewlett Sands by a Jennette Levi. Adulbert Jones of Port Washington purchased part of Cato's former property for 845 dollars, the highest sum bid. Edwin Henderson, also of Port Washington, purchased the rest for 545 dollars.

Hewlett Sands had tried to sell his cousin's property a year earlier to his wife Anna for the sum of one dollar. The attempt to save his Sands inheritance did not work. The property was auctioned off to others. The Sands name was forgotten in the area.

In 1979, a tombstone marking the grave of Mrs. Cato Sands was found in the Pleasant Avenue Cemetery near the Mill Pond by Landmarks Committee members doing research for their Mill Pond book. Although they did not know it at the time, they had also found the actual home of Cato Sands which still exists as number 35 Mill Pond Road.

Cato's house as it looks today is pictured and described in *The Mill Pond*. The Hempstead Town Records also mention the property of Cato Sands when a new road was proposed for the west side of the Mill Pond in 1876, Donald Ross'. historical map taken from a nineteenth century map of the area shows the house as belonging to a Mrs. M. Sands.

From the evidence, I believe that Margaret, wife of Cato Sands and mentioned in his will is the Mrs. Cato Sands buried in the Pleasant Avenue Cemetery. It is more than likely that the other family members-- Cato, Cato Jr., Sarah, Eliza and Phebe--are buried there as well,

But what about the earlier Cato freed by the will of Simon Sands? And where is Sary? Perhaps they rest in Manorhaven or under someone's Sands Point tennis court. I wish we knew. There are no records.

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