

2. THE COMMUNITY SETTING

*Nathan Williams lived in a community
where three distinct racial or ethnic groups
were recognized and segregated by law and custom*

The project site lies near the center of a community of mixed-race people of mostly Native American ancestry once known as "moors." This community has maintained its separate identity since the seventeenth century in Little Creek Hundred and parts of Dover and Duck Creek hundreds. The project area was for a time also partly in Murderkill Hundred.

Little Creek and Duck Creek hundreds, including what is now Kenton Hundred, were known in the seventeenth century as the Indian territory of Mitsawokett, over which the chief sachem was Petticoquewan, alias Christian. After he had sold several tracts, Christian disappeared from the public record. Thereafter, no traditional Indian leader was to claim the territory. Even without an identified sachem on the ground, Indians continued to live and maintain a community in Mitsawokett territory between the St. Jones and Duck Creek, where their descendants remain today.

Over the centuries these Indian descendants have rigorously maintained a distinct identity, even though the surrounding community has frequently considered them to be negroes or mulattoes. An abolitionist writer in 1837 lumped all the Kent County "colored" population, regardless of origin, because all nonwhites were suffering under the same discriminatory laws (Hancock 1971). In researching the Nathan Williams property history, this ambiguity has complicated the task of defining the subject's place in the

community racial "pecking order" of the period.

The ambiguous term "moor" was applied to this community at some time in the nineteenth century, and has adhered until recently. The 1888 Scharf history describes the community and the legends that already had begun to accumulate around their origins:

"West of the town of Moorton are a class of people who claim that they are original Moors. At one time they owned over a thousand acres between Seven Hickories and Moorton. They claim to have settled here about 1710. In 1785 there were several families owning quite large estates, among whom were John and Israel Durham. They have always lived apart from both white and colored neighbors, and have generally intermarried, and steadily refused to attend the neighboring colored schools. In 1877, Hon. Charles Brown, of Dover, gave them ground and wood for a building near Moore's Corner, and since that time they have maintained a school there at their own expense. There are about fifteen families remaining." (Scharf 1888:1124)

THE INDIAN COMMUNITY

"Moors" now are generally identified as Indian descendants, whose antecedents have lived in this part of Kent County, at least since the seventeenth century. Beginnings of today's community are not well documented. None of the related people were identified as Indians in Kent County official records until 1853, when a member of the community was described as "Indian" for identification purposes at the Philadelphia customs house (Macdonald 1992).

The earliest mention in the Kent County records of one of the interrelated families is the birth of

Adam, son of Adam and Ellinor Butcher, in 1686 (Will Book B, page 29).

In 1698, Thomas Gonsela of Kent County received a deed to 120 acres on the north side of Little Creek from Griffith Jones. He had been Jones' tenant for at least five years, for in 1693 he was taxed for land owned by Jones. His earmark was registered April 30, 1700 (Deed Book C-1, page 243)

Thomas died in 1720, and left a widow, Johanna. Her name was spelled Conselar, while his was still written as Gonsela (Will Book F-1, page 14)

When the will of Thomas Conselor the younger was probated in 1739, he named three daughters and a grandson. The grandson was William Conselor, and the daughters were Elizabeth Francisco, Sarah Butcher, and Mary Conselor (Will book I-1, page 10). At about the same time, William Handsor moved to Kent County from Sussex, where he already had raised a family among the Indian community (Heite and Heite 1985:10).

Butcher, Conselor, Francisco, and Handsor descendants would continue to maintain a community down to the present day at Cheswold, occasionally intermarrying with families of known Indian origin from elsewhere. In Kent County records, ethnic or racial origins are not mentioned; the people are indistinguishable from their white neighbors as far as the records are concerned.

Because racial or ethnic origin was not required to be included in the Delaware public record during the Colonial period, it is sometimes difficult for historians and genealogists to identify Indian families in the record. The lack of racial designation in a record has been taken as indication that the person was white.

The term "mulatto," which meant any non-African, non-white, was applied in Virginia and Maryland to Christianized Indians and to any other people who were not European. In those colonies it was much more common to identify people by race during the colonial period. This practice appears to have been followed in Delaware counties, as shown by the case of Jacob Frederick, a "mulatto" who demonstrated in 1698 to the Sussex County court that he had no African ancestry (Horle 1991:1049).

At least one of the local Indian surnames can be identified with a specific tribe. Two men named Sisco [short for Francisco] represented the Nanticoke Indians in negotiations with the Governor of Pennsylvania in 1760, after they removed to the north (State of Pennsylvania 1852, VIII: 492), and the surname occurs among other Indian remnant communities in New Jersey.

Spanish Indian bondservants are known to have lived in the area, including one who had an English wife. Some of these Hispanics appear in the early records with English wives.

Other families lost their Indian identities in the record by integrating themselves into European society. Individuals surnamed Puckham, Williams, Coursey, Game, and Cambridge were clearly identified as Indians during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but their descendants were described under other labels.

Indian people were a sizable proportion of the population of this area during a period when their Indian identity was not recognized. When a separate racial identity was required, they were identified merely as "colored" or as "free persons of color." Normally, however, Indian origin was

1800 CENSUS OF LITTLE CREEK HUNDRED	
White population	1,229
Free persons of color, race not specified	546
[Free persons in Indian-headed households	133]
Slaves	133
<i>Total Population</i>	<i>1,908</i>

not distinguished from white in the public records, such as the assessment lists.

A 1779 Duck Creek Hundred [partial] tax list specifies the race of only one taxpayer, Ned Gibbs, "negro," who apparently was a member of a well-known and prosperous Kent County black family. The Indian-descended families would be indistinguishable if their surnames were not known from other sources. For convenience, they are italicized here by the author. The eight members of the community represented a third of the taxables on the list, which is now at the Historical Society of Delaware.

When the list is rearranged by relative wealth, the Indian-descended population are squarely in the lower-middle range of a scale dominated by a few white families:

<i>Jno Conselar</i>	1
Thomas Cutler.....	3
<i>William Conselor</i>	4
<i>Thomas Butcher</i>	4
Jno Macey.....	4
Patrick Conner.....	6
Evan Denney.....	6
Ned Gibbs, Negro.....	6
<i>Elijah Conselor</i>	8
<i>Isaiah Durham</i>	8
<i>Jno Durham Jr.</i>	8
Daniel Macey.....	10
Jno Denney.....	12
John Van Gaskin.....	12
<i>Whittington Durham</i>	15
Jos. Denney.....	15
<i>William Durham</i>	15
Francis Denney.....	20
Robert Rees.....	20
Sarah Allee.....	20
Jno Joy.....	25
Edward Rees.....	25

Christopher Denney.....	35
Jno Allee.....	40
James Raymond, Esq.....	50

Race definition in the region has been vague over the years, to the eternal frustration of historians (Heite and Heite 1985: 18). After the national census began in 1790, and as tensions increased over slavery and other racial issues, it became customary to identify individuals by race for the first time.

Racial description was not a science, and seldom was consistent. A few contemporary sources distinguish between "mulattoes" and "free negroes."

THE 1797 ASSESSMENT

One of these is the Little Creek Hundred 1797 assessment, which apparently reserved the "mulatto" designation for people of Indian descent. This document is further unique because the tax assessor required each taxable person to sign his entry; we therefore have a record of literacy in the hundred as well. Moreover, for each farm in the hundred, the principal tenant is listed, which provides even more detail about the locations of non-landowner farmers.

All the people listed here were identified as mulattoes. All signed with a mark unless there is an asterisk [*] after the name, indicating at least enough literacy to write a signature.

Isaiah Durham, tenant of Benjamin Stout
Daniel Songs [Songo]
John Farmer
Thomas Conselor*
William Durham, Jr., tenant of John Hamm on 136 ¹ / ₂ acres
Charles Sisco*
John Cott*
Thomas Butcher
Peregrine Jehanna*
Rachel Williams
William Durham, Sr., tenant of Robert Holliday and George Wilson
Thomas Hughes
James Dean on the land of Elijah Conselor
Elijah Conselor
John Saunders, no signature

John Johnson, cooper*
 Peter Cook
 Benjamin Sisco, tenant on 350 acres of Walter
 Williamson
 George Sisco
 Stephen Sparksman

In some cases there were people with the same name listed in different racial categories. There was, for example, a Thomas Butcher, "negro" and another labelled "mulatto." Charles Sisco, who signed his name, was listed without race. The only one of these people who was allowed to vote in the all-white elections was the "mulatto" Thomas Butcher.

The Rachel Williams on the list may have been a widow. Another Rachel Williams, widow of Solomon, was listed among the white taxpayers. Her husband, Solomon Williams, of Maryland, had owned land east of the present Bishop's Corner.

In the 1804 Duck Creek assessment, Benjamin Sisco (Francisco) was identified as tenant of William Killen on a tract with a log dwelling, 200 acres clear, 52 wooded, and 100 marsh. There are only "n" notations after nonwhite names in this list for that year, and Sisco was noted.

Again in the 1819 reassessment, the assessor identified mulattoes in Little Creek Hundred, but he did not require signatures. Here are the mulatto entries:

Benjamin Conselor
 Elijah Conselor
 Elias Butcher
 John Cott
 George Colbert
 Jesse Dean
 Daniel Farmer
 William Holston
 David Hutt
 John Johnson
 William Muntz
 Robert Muntz
 James Songo
 Benjamin Sisco (Francisco)
 John Sanders

The 1828 Little Creek Hundred assessment describes houses in some detail. The following are the "mulatto"

references, with their real estate ownership or tenancy:

Rachel Butcher, 4¹/₂ acres, log dwelling
 Elizabeth Carney
 John Cott, 2 acres, log house, in tenure of Becket, tenant with John Cooper on 271 acres owned by William Keith
 John Cott, jr.
 Benjamin Concealor, 36 acres, no improvement
 Hannah Concealor, 66 acres, log dwelling
 Jeremiah Concealor heirs, 36 acres, log dwelling
 Perry Cork
 John Carney
 Jesse Dean, 20 acres, 2 log tenements
 Benjamin Francisco, tenant on 358 acres owned by Sarah Cowgill
 Jonathan Hughes
 John Hughes, 6 acres, old log house, tenant on 340 acres of Alexander Murphey with a brick dwelling
 Samuel Songo
 Stephen Sparksman
 Zed Songo

Log dwellings appear to have been the standard shelter for the mulatto families, like most of the poorer residents. Those who were listed without a piece of property are presumed to be landless persons who also did not rent a farm as principal tenant.

William Yates reported in 1837 that among the "people of color" were "not a few who rank among the most respectable of the tenantry, and are skilful and successful farmers." Yates reported that two Francisco brothers had moved a few years since to Ohio, reputedly with \$10,000 cash (Hancock 1971:215). The Francisco brothers were, of course, members of the Indian family and not blacks. We may with some confidence identify them as Benjamin and, possibly, William Sisco.

MINORITY LITERACY

Nathan Williams was literate, which should have given him a relatively good start in life. Literacy was not common among nonwhites in Delaware at the time, and after the 1829 school law was implemented, nonwhites were excluded from public education.

The signed 1797 assessment list for Little Creek Hundred reflects a literacy rate of five among eighteen mulatto heads of household, or 27%, among the labelled mulatto population. Clearly they could get education from some source, if they had the means and the desire.

William D. Yates, an anti-slavery activist from the North, wrote a description of the state of Kent County colored people in 1837, while the Nathan Williams house was occupied (Hancock 1971):

... Formerly, that is prior, it was said, to the passage of the free school law, and the arrangement of the school fund system it was not uncommon for colored children when there were no other opportunities of instruction open for them to be admitted to the ordinary schools of the State. Indeed a number of my informants told me, both men and women, that when they went to school, colored youths were often admitted, some of whom were named to me and who are now respectable citizens. But since the passage of that law, which gave a legal sanction to the exclusion of the colored children, the appearance of one of them in a school of white children is an unusual phenomenon. The free people of color in Delaware are in a most dreadful state of destitution in regard to schools. There is now but a single school for the instruction of colored children during the week, as far as I can learn, in the whole state. ...

The Yates letter, written to encourage abolitionist activism, is important because it is a rare sympathetic antebellum account of the local nonwhite population. Abolitionists on the scene apparently destroyed or never kept records of their illegal activities.

ANTE-BELLUM NONWHITE EDUCATION

During the years before the school law was passed, children of all origins could obtain fee-paid education from private teachers, or from Sunday schools or other "poor" schools. Someone taught Nathan Williams to write, possibly in a school.

Free school law essentially closed the door on nonwhite education in Delaware for another half-century. Soon after the law was passed, the nation was gripped by a movement that can be described only as racist panic. Slave rebellions in the south stirred legislatures to pass racial codes that restricted the rights of nonwhites in many aspects of civil life. Some voted with their feet, establishing new homes in Canada and other places beyond the racial tensions of the South.

Kent County's trustees of the poor, when they bound a poor child as apprentice, generally required masters to provide twelve months of schooling for girls and eighteen months for boys, regardless of racial origin. The loose original indentures, now at the state archives, describe abandoned children and children who were given up by parents who could not afford the cost of raising them. Children born in the poorhouse frequently were bound out if there was no family to care for them.

The trustees were the principal welfare agency during the nineteenth century, and continued to operate the poorhouse into the twentieth century.

At this remove, it is impossible to determine if the education requirement was enforced. Some minority education clearly existed, but it has not been studied in detail, or even identified by historians.

Enforced or not, Kent County's provisions for nonwhite apprentice education stand in stark contrast to the Virginia law of 1804 that forbade the education of colored children (Rountree and Davidson 1998:182).

There were several private attempts to educate nonwhites in the immediate area. One was the White Oak Colored School, established in 1830 by a Quaker activist, Sally [Mrs. Daniel]

The Pleasanton Distribution

Extracts from notes in Kent County assessment books
in the Delaware Public Archives

<i>First entry</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>value</i>	<i>Final entry</i>
T[ransferred] to William Duhamel 1839	1 208 acres of land @ \$10 per acre brick dwelling out buildings in bad repair 150 acres improved in tenure of D. Rash	2080	Dover Dela Dover Dela Dover Dela
T[ransferred] to W. Cowgill 1839	2 600 acres of land @ \$7 per acre two wooden dwellings outbuildings in bad repair 340 acres improved in tenure of Herrington and Songo	4200	180 acres now T[ransferred] to P. Hamm Mar 1843
J E Palmer 1839	3 32 acres of land @ \$8 per acre small log dwelling in tenure of E. Hollis	256	
T[ransferred] to the heirs <i>Project Area</i>	4 275 acres land @ \$5 per acre wooden dwelling outbuilding in bad repair 75 acres improved in tenure of William Bedwell	1375	W. DuHamel 885 Eliz. Webb 185 Alice Cabbage 200 Susan Hamm 90 Eliza Cabbage 90
T[ransferred] to B F Hamm	5 133 acres of land @ \$7 per acre old brick dwelling outbuilding in bad repair in tenure of James Ward	931	Transfer to Francis Register and James Kerbin
T[ransferred] to B F Hamm	6 100 acres of marsh @ 50 cts per acre	50 8892	

Disposition of the John Pleasanton estate in Dover Hundred, as described in the county assessments after his 1838 death. His home farm and major holdings were in Little Creek Hundred, east of the project area and are not listed here. The assessor has noted the initial transfers to heirs in the left column, and the final transfers in the right column.

Cowgill, on the Little Creek Hundred farm of her brother, Hon. Jacob Stout. This site was about midway between Persimmon Tree Lane and Cowgill's Corner, along the present Route 9 (Scharf 1888:1120).

Governor Stout [1767-1857] of Leipsic was a near neighbor as well as business partner of John Pleasanton in the firm of Pleasanton and Stout. In the 1816 assessment, he was credited with 935 acres in Little Creek Hundred. He was married to Angelica [1755-1827], daughter of William Killen. The Stouts were at the center of the local establishment; others of the governor's sisters married John Cowgill, William Ruth, William Denney, and Robert

Register. From 1844 to 1847, Governor Stout was president of the Smyrna Bank (Martin 1984; Scharf 1888: 1118).

The White Oak school was burned down during the Civil War, rebuilt and then burned again. It is hinted that the fires were not entirely accidental. In the 1880s, it was again rebuilt.

In the 1828 Little Creek assessment, Mrs. Cowgill's 358 acres was listed in the tenure of Benjamin Francisco, a well-off member of the Indian-descended community who reportedly moved to Ohio a few years later. His descendants have made contact with local researchers, and bring the news that Benjamin moved to

Beaver County, Pennsylvania, and worked there as a coal miner, according to information received from his descendants.

Near Little Creek Landing, a school was kept for both white and colored pupils in 1832 (Scharf 1888:1120, 1121). This may refer to the Stout school.

Methodist churches in Delaware, from their beginning in the late eighteenth century, sponsored Sunday schools for the education of both white

and colored children, which received public subsidies for the white scholars (Clerk of the Peace returns, Delaware Archives). Quakers in Wilmington offered nonwhite children a night school in 1798 (Munroe 1954:57, 176). Between 1772 and 1798 the Wilmington Friends Meeting recorded numerous bequests to provide schooling for both black and white poor children. John and Mary Dickinson secured their annual pledge for this purpose by a mortgage on a Kent County plantation in 1794 (Friends School 1948: 5).