

The Narrative of the Life of Peter Gardner

Many years ago, enslaved people lived in Guilford. Still today, people are remembering their lives and legacies. For some enslaved people, their stories are never told. But Peter Gardner has a story. A story of hardship and triumph. A story worth telling.

A large amount of Peter Gardner's life is still unknown. Information from census data and letters provides some insight into what his life was like. But still, the full story of his life is somewhat unclear. Part of the problem for many enslaved people was they were not given names or their names were never recorded. A name may seem like a basic human right, but sometimes enslaved people were not given a name. On many records, enslaved people were reduced to nothing but a number or listed as "slave". The lack of names was not only degrading, but it made it hard to recognize who the census was referring to. On the 1790 census, Peter was never named. However, his owner, Jared Scranton, did appear and he had one unnamed enslaved person listed (1790 U.S. Census of Guilford, CT). Since he only had one enslaved person, it was assumed to be Peter since in a later emancipation letter, Peter is named as the enslaved person of Scranton. In addition, until about 1810 Peter was simply known as Peter. On the 1810 census, for the first time on record, Peter had the surname Gardner (1810 U.S. Census of Guilford).

According to *Jared Scranton Letter of Emancipation To His Negro Man Peter*, Peter was emancipated on January 22, 1793 (Guilford Property Records). The year before, the Emancipation Law was put into place which stated the requirements for emancipation. As stated in the *1792 Addition and Alteration to an Act Concerning Indians, Mulattoes, Negro Servant, and Slaves*, one of the requirements was the enslaved person must be between the ages of 25 and 45 and in good health, (Statutes of the State of Connecticut, 1792). Requiring that enslaved people must be in good health to be emancipated made sure the owner must take care of their

enslaved people to some degree and not overwork them, if the owner desired emancipation. While Peter's age or date of birth was never stated, but since he was emancipated it can be assumed that he was between those ages too. The rules for emancipation involving age and health helped control the economics of owning and freeing enslaved people.

Another requirement for emancipation was that the owner must be the one to seek emancipation of their enslaved person. In the *1792 Addition and Alteration to an Act Concerning Indians, Mulattoes, Negro Servant, and Slaves*, it said, "If any master or owner of any slave shall be disposed to emancipate and make free such slave," (Statutes of the State of Connecticut, 1792). This meant it could not be the enslaved person who requested that freedom. The owner had control over this situation even though it wasn't their own life. Part of the reason a slave owner would seek emancipation was emancipation allowed the owner to no longer need to support the enslaved person. Jared Scranton no longer was responsible for Peter Gardner after his emancipation.

The same year that Emancipation Law was established, a girl named Dinah was purchased to work for four years and promised freedom afterwards. According to the *Bill of Sale of Dinah to the Selectmen of Guilford, CT*, "for the full end & term of four years fully to be compleat & ended; after which time said Girl shall become free, and Thereby be entitled to all the privileges granted by our Laws to Emancipate Slaves," (Caldwell). In this case the girl being referred to was Dinah. In order for her emancipation to follow the Laws of emancipation, in 1796, Dinah would also be between the ages of 25 and 45. Overall, the laws established regarding emancipation gave the owners control over the emancipation.

Even after Peter's emancipation, he still wasn't treated respectfully. As said in *Jared Scranton Letter of Emancipation To His Negro Man Peter*, "from Time to Time & at all Times

hereafter Lawfully, Peaceably & Quietly, have hold, receive, take and enjoy to his & their own proper use,” (Guilford Property Records). This statement in Peter’s letter of emancipation comes across as a threat. Even though the letter declared him no longer an enslaved person, he was still treated poorly.

A few years after both Peter and Dinah were freed, the two of them got married. On January 10, 1799 the two were wed in the North Guilford Congregational Church (North Guilford Congregational Church Records). This was a triumph because many enslaved people, even freed enslaved people like Peter and Dinah, were prohibited from marrying. This was one of the ways Peter was able to show agency and live freely. After their marriage, property records in 1800 showed that Peter owned land and a house which he likely shared with his wife. Owning land as a freed enslaved person was impressive but keeping the property was even harder. According to *The Brief Appearance Constant Disappearance of Dinah aka Dinah Gardner*, Peter’s land was near the area where Jared Scranton (Peter’s former owner) lived even though he lived separately from Jared Scranton (Culliton).

After nearly 29 years of marriage and 35 years of freedom, Peter Gardner passed away. After his death, Dinah was allowed to keep the home and some of Peter’s belongings. Peter Gardner had many possessions. Probate records show his property amounted to \$238.54. He owned a variety of things such as a gun, violin, canoo, and many ordinary household items (Peter Gardner Probate Inventory 1828). The reason he owned some of these items, such as the canoo, still have not been fully explained. For a previously enslaved person, Peter had a decent amount of possessions. Despite many hardships and challenges Peter and his wife seemed to live a successful life after their emcaipations.

Peter Garnder spent part of his life enslaved and controlled by Jared Scranton. Eventually he met the requirements of Emancipation Laws and was freed. He took his freedom as an opportunity to create a desired life. He took this chance to marry Dinah and own his own property. He was able to overcome mistreatment and cruelty to live an independent and more rewarding life. Peter Gardner was able to accomplish so much in his life and deserved the utmost praise