

Revelation from Records: Reuben Cuff's Domestic Landscape

Part I. The 1798 Connection

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An old frame and stone house stands on a rise of land above small tributaries of Silver Lake Meadow, a tidal estuary in Lower Alloways Creek Township. Its weather-worn appearance and forgotten history belie its importance to understanding a marginalized and understudied group—free people of color. After seeing this house up-close late in 2007, I connected it to one named Reuben Cuff. In this article, I will explain how I did that and how the evidence of a house and a tax list has shed light on his life. With a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission in 2008, I made measured drawings and made linkages to Cuff through primary documents such as wills, inventories, census and tax records. The project located the everyday life of Reuben Cuff upon a domestic landscape for the first time.

Reuben Cuff is significant for his role in preaching and organizing the earliest known black church in New Jersey, the “United Society for Religious Worship” in 1800, and for his role in the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816.¹ It is likely that Cuff knew and was inspired by Richard Allen, who preached across South Jersey in the 1780s. Allen later invited Cuff as the sole New Jersey representative to the organizing meeting of the A. M. E. Church in Philadelphia in 1816, whereupon Cuff established Mt. Pisgah in Salem as the first A. M. E. church in New Jersey.² Mt. Hope United Methodist Church in Salem also grew out of Cuff’s early society, but continued in the original Methodist Episcopal movement.

The oldest section of the Cuff-Dubois house is the rear ell, built of stone at the first story with a frame second story (Figure 1).³ It began as a one-story stone house, built sometime prior to the Revolutionary War. Stone houses were always rare in Salem County, which occupies the Inner Coastal Plain of New Jersey. Here, scattered deposits of an iron-rich concretion of quartz pebbles and sand, variously called iron stone, Jersey sandstone, peanut stone, bog ore, or more technically, limonite, are found. This stone is the most recent deposit in the Inner Coastal Plain, formed 11 million years ago, and is consequently found near the surface.⁴

¹ “Mt. Pisgah African Methodist Episcopal Church” flyer, Mt. Pisgah A. M. E. Church, Salem.

² Giles Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey, A Short History* (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1988), 30.

³ Solomon Dubois acquired the property sometime before 1821 and his descendents owned the property until 1948. Solomon’s son Richard is probably the one who made most of the alterations of the house. Hence I call it the Cuff-Dubois house. (Deed Book Z, Page 317, and Deed Book 283, Page 370 in Salem County Clerks Office.)

⁴ “Lenape Woods Nature Preserve: A Human & Natural History,”

The rarity of stone houses makes it easier to link this house with a particular document which is also rare in New Jersey, the 1798 Federal Direct Tax list. Lower Alloways Creek Township has the distinction of being one of only five townships in New Jersey for which this record survives, and three of those are in Salem County. Only three stone houses were reported from the Salem County townships for which 1798 “A” lists survive—one among the 127 houses in Lower Alloways Creek, two among Mannington’s 110 houses, and none among Pittsgrove’s 125 houses.⁵ There are only a small handful of colonial stone houses known to exist in all of present-day Salem County, though there is no official count. A 1984 township survey refers to this house as the only stone house in the township, one that “is unique and merits further research.”⁶

The 1798 A List detailed houses in terms of owner, occupant, material, dimensions, number of stories, windows, kitchens, outbuildings, acres associated for tax purposes (two or less), and the tax valuation in dollars. On the Lower Alloways Creek list, it is Reuben Cuff who owned and occupied the singular stone house. It had one story, three windows, a kitchen, measured twenty by twenty feet, and was assessed at \$300.⁷ Today’s sole stone house in the township also measures twenty feet square and was a one-story house. There are only two windows, but the missing south wall probably contained a third. Unless the 1798 surveyor missed a stone house of identical description, which has also been lost, this evidence convincingly links Cuff to this house.⁸

Quantitatively analyzing these tax records puts Cuff’s house in context with the cultural landscape of the whole township and helps us to understand his relative economic status. In 1798, township house values ranged \$105 to \$1,300 with a mean of \$340 and a median of \$250. Put within the context of the whole township, Cuff’s property value of \$300 fell in the 59th percentile of value, below the mean but above the median. Of the 127 properties, his was among the seventy-seven or 61% that had kitchens. With regard to gross square feet of house (accounting for stories), Cuff’s one-story house of 400 square feet ranked at the 36th percentile, below both the mean of 654 square feet and the median 504. But compared to just the seventy, one-story houses, Cuff’s value fell at the 87th percentile, well above both the mean of 215 square feet and the median of 158 square feet. In sum, by comparison to all houses valued above \$100, Cuff’s fell slightly below the mean but above the median values for dwelling value, and compared to one-story houses, Cuff’s was rather outstanding in terms of both value and gross area. Cuff was also among the 55% majority on the A List who owned their own

<http://ahnj.com/ahnj/Parks/Lenape%20Woods.html> (accessed January 15, 2008).

⁵ Janet L. Sheridan, “‘Their houses are some Built of timber’ : The Colonial Timber Frame Houses of Fenwick’s Colony, New Jersey.” (M. A. Thesis, University of Delaware, 2007), 10. The “A” list accounted for houses valued higher than \$100. The “B” list accounted for house worth less than \$100, other buildings, and the total acres of land. Unfortunately, however, the attributes of B List houses were not recorded as in the A List.

⁶ Maria M. Thompson and John M Dickey, “Salem County Cultural Resource Survey Phase I,” Salem County Cultural and Heritage Commission, August 1984, property #1704-84-A. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton. Local historian David A. Fogg knew of no other stone house in the township (personal communication, January 8, 2008).

⁷ United States Direct Tax, 1798, “A” List. Salem County, New Jersey: Lower Alloways Creek Township. Copy of original list, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware. Original in New Jersey State Archive Record Series New Jersey General Assembly / Tax Ratables (Duplicates), 1786-1846, Book 1520.

⁸ Land records could theoretically prove it, but deed research has been thus far unsuccessful in identifying the 1798 owner of this parcel.

home. Almost as rare as a stone house, his house was one of only five square houses among the 127 houses on the A List. The other four were brick (two 18x18 and one 22x22), and wood (one 18x18).

The “B” list also survives for Lower Alloways Creek, the only Salem County township to have both lists survive, allowing a complete enumeration of housing, other kinds of buildings, and an accounting of land ownership as well. There were 280 parcels of land, 76 barns, 76 dwellings valued less than \$100, one stable, three mills and three shops. Reuben Cuff owned and occupied 38 acres of land valued at \$476 on which was a barn measuring 25 feet by 20 feet and no house.⁹ Since he had only one record on each list, his A List house was undoubtedly associated with his B List barn and land. In terms of acreage, the parcels ranged from less than an acre to 900 acres, with a mean of 75 acres and a median of 40 acres. With 38 acres, Cuff was below these values. Land values, which included outbuildings but not dwellings, ranged from \$13 to \$4,600, with a mean of \$653 and a median value of \$300. Cuff’s \$476 was therefore below average but above the median. These simple statistics place Reuben Cuff as a middling landowner within the context of the local economy and its cultural landscape. As a man of color, he seems exceptional. Despite Cuff’s history of being black-identified, only one person was noted as “black” on the lists—one William Davis who owned a house and land on the B List.

Before now, we have known Reuben Cuff in the church realm, but now we have a better idea about his everyday life in the domestic realm by knowing his house and linking it with detailed tax records of the day. Subsequent articles will more fully discuss the house and Reuben Cuff as revealed by other kinds of records.

⁹ United States Direct Tax, 1798, “B” List. Salem County, New Jersey: Lower Alloways Creek Township. Copy of original list, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware. Original in New Jersey State Archive Record Series New Jersey General Assembly / Tax Ratables (Duplicates), 1786-1846.



Figure 1. Cuff-Dubois House, looking southwest. The stone portion is the remnant of Reuben Cuff's House.