The Washington Post

The Black people who lived in Walden Woods long before Henry David Thoreau

Sydney Trent   November 28, 2021 at 7:00 a.m. EST

A boulder marks the location where Brister Freeman's house is thought to have stood in Walden Woods. (Courtesy of the Walden Woods Project) (Matt Burne/Courtesy of The Walden Woods Project)

And yet, Freeman, known then as Brister Cumings, was very ambitious as well. Ambitious to be free.

He won his liberty by serving as a soldier in the Revolutionary War, then cast off his enslaver's surname and declared himself 'Freeman' — a risky move at the time.

Next, he sought to win the same civic rights as White property owners, purchasing a parcel in 1785 with a fellow Black soldier and building a home

for his family in a largely barren swath of forest known as Walden Woods.

She sued her enslaver for reparations and won. Her descendants never knew.

In 1845, two decades after Brister Freeman died, a White man went to live in the very same woods, determined to put his own ideas of independence to the test. His name was Henry David Thoreau, and in his contemplative 1854 classic, "Walden: Or, Life in the Woods," the famous naturalist, essayist and philosopher described Freeman and some of the other formerly enslaved inhabitants of the land.

Today, in a warming world in which humans yearn to live sustainably on the planet again, the 462-acre Walden Pond State Reservation has become an international destination for more than a half-million nature lovers annually as a birthplace of the modern conservation movement.

Yet, until very recently, there has been little acknowledgment that Walden Woods was first occupied by Black people whose experience of self-sufficiency was harrowingly different from Thoreau's two-year experiment.

"Walden was a Black space before it was a green space," said Elise Lemire, a professor of literature at Purchase College, State University of New York, and author of "Black Walden," which chronicles the lives of the formerly enslaved people of Walden Woods.

The existence of these earlier residents also runs directly counter to the popular myth of Massachusetts as the cradle of American liberty and home to an abolitionist movement that had been untarnished by slavery, Lemire notes.

"You just go back to the Minutemen statue at the Old North Bridge" in Concord, the site of the shot heard around the world that set off the war with the British, she said. "The picture someone has of a citizen soldier is a

farmer who is White and reluctantly picks up his musket … then returns to his farm, where he proceeds to live a virtuous life of self-sufficiency.

“The actual story of Concord and the story of New England is very different,” Lemire said. “Yes, there were lots of self-sufficient farmers, absolutely. But it’s also the case that anyone with any kind of ambitions” — lawyers, doctors, preachers, thinkers — “needed a break from that labor. And so they often turned to enslavement.”

Walden Pond in autumn. (Matt Burne/Courtesy of The Walden Woods Project)

Even as he spent his early life in bondage farming and managing Cuming’s vast lands, Brister Freeman was hardly a naturally subservient person.

Prone to strike back if accused or demeaned, he was “a passionate Negro, profane and suspicious,” recalled a local White historian at the time. Today, he might be perceived more favorably as a man with a healthy sense of self-respect and ample reason for suspicion, Lemire notes.

Freeman did not respond to emancipation as many New England enslaved people did — by continuing to serve his owner for little or no pay. Instead, in 1785 he used his small savings as a soldier to purchase land and strike out

on his own.

But while Freeman was able finally to reunite with his older sister in Walden Woods, he was still only as free as a Black man was then permitted to be.

Slavery cost him his family. That's when Henry 'Box' Brown mailed himself to freedom.

As a former enslaved person, he could not leave Concord at risk of being "warned out" — or ousted — by neighboring towns loathe to support indigent Black people.

Then, too, the only land made available to formerly enslaved people in Massachusetts was generally the most inhospitable to farming and as far as possible from White society. In Concord, it consisted of Walden Woods, where survival was unsparingly arduous, and the nearby and somewhat more fertile edge of the Great Field, also known as "Caesar's Woods" for Caesar Robbins, a Black formerly enslaved Revolutionary War veteran who had made his home there.

Most of the formerly enslaved people who lived in Walden Woods were allowed to squat there after they were freed or had wrested their freedom, Lemire said. In Massachusetts, emancipation happened gradually through lawsuits, with freedom finally ordered by the state in 1780.

In all, about 15 Black people moved into Walden Woods, their cabins clustered in a "small village," as Thoreau would later describe them. Brister Freeman stood out as a Black landowner.

"Down the road, on the right hand, on Brister's Hill lived Brister Freeman, 'a handy Negro,' slave of Squire Cummings once…With him dwelt Fenda, his hospitable wife, who told fortunes, yet pleasantly – large, round, and black, blacker than any of the children of night, such a dusky orb as never rose on Concord before or since," Thoreau wrote in "Walden."

This simple rock cairn, photographed on July 3, 1945, marks the site of the small cabin where Henry David Thoreau, naturalist and author, started a solitary two-year residence on the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Mass. (Dan Goshtigian/AP)

Thoreau also recalled Freeman’s sister, Zilpah White, in her tiny cabin, where she wove linen into cloth for people in town while “making the Walden Woods ring with her shrill singing, for she had a loud and notable voice.”

Once, Thoreau wrote, a frequenter of the woods passed Zilpah’s house and claimed to have heard her muttering to herself, witchlike, over a gurgling pot — “Ye all are bones, bones!”

But Zilpah was no witch; she simply shared her brother’s stubborn freedom-seeking streak. She seems to have declined to continue as a domestic after bondage, as many formerly enslaved women had done, and struck out on her own.

Zilpah shared her tiny hut with her hens, straining her eyes to near blindness with the intricate task of weaving, Lemire writes. Her measly wages barely covered the cost of her soup, likely made with beans, the rare food source that could be grown in the forest soil.

Meanwhile, as Thoreau had ample opportunity to dine with friends and parents in town, Brister Freeman struggled to provide his family with enough protein to survive. Ever resourceful, he found work pulling wool for a fellow former soldier, a White man named Peter Wheeler, who paid him partially with meat.

By 1790, however, Freeman was in arrears on his poll taxes, and his land was then in jeopardy. Money was available, just not to Freeman. His then-

deceased former master, John Cumings, had bequeathed Concord funds in the event his former slaves ended up on the poor list. Town leaders appear to have used it to pay the debt but still confiscated Freeman's land. They allowed him to continue occupying the acre but excluded him from the town's civic life, Lemire writes. (Years later, Thoreau would note that Freeman's land had been taken "because he was a foreigner," meaning a Black noncitizen.)

Soon after, the man with whom Freeman had bought the property died of scurvy; Freeman's daughter-in-law and two of his grandchildren also perished. Finally, in 1811, his wife, Fenda, died of malnutrition possibly due to a long-term lack of protein.

Henry David Thoreau, the Concord, Mass., naturalist and author who set out on what would be a two-year experiment to live a life of self-sufficiency in Walden Woods. (Courtesy of The Walden Woods Project)

Next, Freeman, determined to recover his land, did what many widowers do. He found another partner — this time a White woman, whom he could not legally marry. Rachel Le Grosse bought Freeman's lost acre back instead of paying her former landlord back rent.

That landlord, Wheeler, soon grew resentful. He lured Freeman to his property, asked him to fetch an ax in the barn and then locked him inside with a raging bull. The beast, already worked into a frenzy, charged, forcing Freeman, by then 68, to dodge and dart with the kind of moves that would have made him a worthy "French dancing master," according to Wheeler's memoirist.

As Wheeler and his helpers guffawed outside the barn doors, the Black man grabbed an ax and slew the bull.

Shortly after Freeman's escape, arsonists burned Zilpah's home to the ground. Local Whites blamed the fire on British military prisoners. Another possibility: Brister Freeman was being further punished for trying to live out his independence, Lemire writes.

In 1822, Brister Freeman died in his 70s, two years after his older sister. Barely a decade later, few traces remained in Walden Woods of the siblings or the other formerly enslaved inhabitants. Their community had not lasted into the next generation.

Elise Lemire grew up a privileged White girl in nearby Lincoln, just a mile and a half from Walden Woods, where she was a frequent visitor. In graduate school, she read Walden in its entirety and learned for the first time that enslaved people had lived in the area. She also became drawn to Thoreau — his storytelling powers, his deep reading of nature, his staunch abolitionism as one among Concord's literary luminaries, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, known as "transcendentalists."

In graduate school, Lemire also met her future husband, a Black man. To her dismay, her liberal parents first objected, she said. But by the time the couple's first child was born, the tensions had eased, and the literary and the personal began to mingle within Lemire.

The racism of then made Lemire think of the racism of now, and she found herself "awakened through love to a fuller account of our nation's history," she said, telling herself, "I cannot perpetuate this myth on this generation. My son cannot grow up thinking that Concord was a town of White farmers who were self-sufficient … because we know the wealthiest people in Concord were enslavers."

Lemire, now 58, decided to write "Black Walden," and the admiration she bore for Thoreau soon extended to Brister Freeman.

Throughout his battles to keep his land and life amid the racism of the time,

Freeman demonstrated “tenacity, persistence and creativity” in managing independently to raise his children and grandchildren on his small plot in Walden Woods and ward off starvation for decades, Lemire said.

“What is more heroic than that?,” she said. “I can’t think of anything.”

And yet she lamented in her 2009 book that the only sign that Brister Freeman had ever lived in Walden Woods was the name “Brister’s Hill,” making his homesite, like “Caesar’s Woods,” part of the long New England tradition of naming places for the people who lived there.

The placement and dedication in 2013 of the “Bench by the Road” on Brister’s Hill in honor of Brister Freeman, with representatives of the Toni Morrison Society and the Walden Woods Project in attendance. (Courtesy of The Walden Woods Project)

Soon, that began to change. In 2013, the Toni Morrison Society placed a “Bench by the Road” for visitors to Walden Woods to contemplate the lives of Freeman and the other Black people who had lived there. Meanwhile, local resident Maria Madison had led an effort to buy and restore Robbins House, the early-19th-century home of the first-generation of Robbins’s

descendants and other inhabitants of Caesar's Woods.

Thoreau would sometimes encounter members of this longer-lived Black settlement, relying on them for their hard-won knowledge about the natural world around him, as the author faithfully described in "Walden."

As for Freeman and those who had lived in Walden Woods decades earlier, Thoreau "is waxing poetically about these earlier Black inhabitants without describing their pain," said Madison, the director of the Institute for Economic and Racial Equity and associate dean of equity, inclusion and diversity at Brandeis University.

"Thoreau is able to leave Walden after his experiment, but the Blacks didn't have that choice, did they? They died of hunger," she said. "Thoreau was a brilliant and wonderful person in many ways, but he was also privileged."

In lieu of marking Freeman's burial site, which is unknown, Madison's group oversaw the installation of a boulder on Freeman's homesite inscribed with an excerpt of Thoreau's words about him in "Walden."

A boulder that has been engraved with words by Henry David Thoreau about Brister Freeman marks the site in Walden Woods where Freeman, a formerly enslaved man in Concord Mass., once lived. (Courtesy of Robbins House)

There is just one more memorial Lemire would like to see. Brister's Hill should be changed to Brister *Freeman's* Hill, she said, to reflect the independent life the formerly enslaved man fought to create when he so audaciously adopted his new surname.

[At 88, he is a historical rarity — the living son of a slave]

[White supremacists attacked Johnny Cash for marrying a 'Negro' woman.]

But was his first wife Black?

Robert Frost wrote this masterpiece in about 20 minutes. It belongs to all of us now.

Two families — one black, one White — shared a harrowing history rooted in slavery. Then they met.