

Sawney Freeman



In March 2024 Connecticut Public aired a five-part series entitled: *Unforgotten: Connecticut's Hidden History of Slavery*. The series co-producer, Diane Orson, was inspired to tell these stories through her involvement in St. John's Witness Stone dedication for Violet, a formerly enslaved parishioner.

Anyone who has spent time researching their genealogy using an online system like Ancestry knows that the algorithms used to digitize hand-written documents can produce some strange results. In the spring of 2022, we were attempting to place Violet's life into context by determining the extent of the Black community in Essex during the decades of 1790 and 1800. The 1800 US Census recorded no enslaved individuals (which wasn't accurate) and three "free other" families, to be understood as free Black families. These families were headed by men named Caesar, Christopher, and Saxon. Saxon? The computer couldn't have been more ironic if it tried. Checking the original

revealed that his name was Sawn. This was our first encounter with Sawney Freeman, one of the people highlighted in *Unforgotten: Connecticut's Hidden History of Slavery*.

The story of Sawney Freeman's life, at present, is a work in progress, a collection of facts that need to be connected. Linda Matthew, a volunteer at the Essex Historical Society, thought the name sounded familiar. She recalled that there was a Sawney Freeman buried in Riverview Cemetery alongside his wife, Clarissa and son, James. A subsequent search of the GenealogyBank newspaper archive resulted in the following ad in the October 7, 1801, issue of *The Connecticut Journal*:

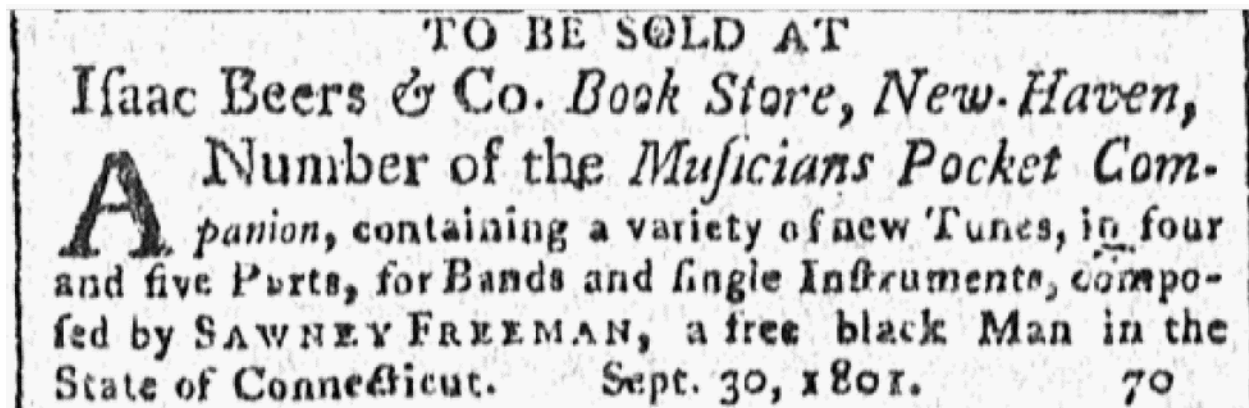


Figure 1: *Connecticut Journal*, October 10, 1801, p. 1

While we haven't yet been able to "connect the dots" between the man buried in Riverview Cemetery and the author of "The Musician's Pocket Companion," there is no doubt that a person named Sawney Freeman was one of the earliest published Black composers in the United States. The Reverend Geof Smith, our former deacon, optimistically wondered if any of his music survived 221 years. In what could be described as a minor miracle, he found a [copybook in the Trinity College Library](#) that contained tunes attributed to Sawney Freeman.

Shown below is an image of the “New Death March” and “Washington’s Farewell” from this book.



Figure 2: Trumbull, Gurdon, "Gurdon Trumbull Music Copybook, 1817. Watkinson Rare Books 3, Trinity College (Hartford, CT).

We knew at once that Sawney Freeman’s music would be perfect to accompany Violet’s Witness Stone Dedication, which took place on All Saint’s Sunday in 2022. Anthony Pandolfe, St. John’s Director of Music, took on the challenge of modernizing the musical notation and assembled a group of musicians to perform Sawney’s music, likely for the first time in over 200 years. Sawney’s voice came back to life and spoke to the gathered community in a way that no other medium could. The lead violinist for this performance was Diane Orson, a special correspondent at Connecticut Public. Through her experience with this music, Diane was inspired to co-produce *Unforgotten*.

The fourth episode of *Unforgotten* focuses on Sawney Freeman’s music and what it meant to those who performed it. In February 2024, as *Unforgotten* was in production, a group of musicians, well versed in the musical stylings of the

era, gathered at The Waveny House in New Canaan to interpret and record Sawney Freeman's music. [Ilmar Gavilán](#), the principal violinist of the Harlem Quartet and a distinguished faculty member at the Manhattan School of Music, [assembled](#) the ensemble in collaboration with Anthony Pandolfe. Through their diverse expertise, these musicians ensured a vibrant and authentic rendition of Freeman's work. The recording was co-funded by Connecticut Public and St. John's Essex through a Regional Entrepreneurial Grant from the Episcopal Church in Connecticut.



Figure 3: L-R Ilmar Gavilan, Jonathan Frelix, Briana Almonte, Paul Vanderwal and Jessica Valiente at the Waveny House recording session. Image by Anthony Pandolfe.

Sawney and Clarissa Freeman's lives are still an active area of research at St. John's. We know that a Sawney Freeman from Lyme married Clarissa Mason from East Haddam in about 1794. In 1797, they moved to the Centerbrook section of Essex where they lived until their deaths in the 1820s. They were members of the Congregational Church into which all of their children were baptized. While the probability is strong that Sawney Freeman of Essex is the same person who composed these tunes, we do not, at this point, have concrete evidence that he was. We are searching for documents in a number of archives for indications that Sawney Freeman of Essex was a musician. We are also researching Mr. Freeman's early life in Lyme. There are two emancipations recorded in the Lyme Land Records for a person named Sawn or Sawney in 1793: one emancipated by Captain Samuel Selden of Hadlyme, and one by Captain William Matson. Another fact to be connected is a 1790 ad seeking the return of a man named Sawn who escaped from Elisha Lay or Stephen Johnson of Lyme. It states that he was a fiddler and carried a fiddle off with him. Was this person a third Sawney or was he one of the people emancipated in 1793?

These questions are due in part to the vagaries of document preservation over the intervening 230 years. They are also due to the de-humanizing practice of referring to enslaved people only by their first names. The Sawney, who was emancipated in 1793, didn't chose his father's or mother's name as a surname,

let alone his former enslaver's name. He chose Freeman, a name that disconnected him from his enslaved past and continues to speak to us of his rebirth as a free human being who was in charge of his own life.

You can read more about Sawney Freeman and listen to his music at <https://www.ctpublic.org/2024-03-15/sawney-freeman-slavery-connecticut-music-composer>.