

The Battle over the Ex-Slave's Fortune: The Story of Cynthia Hesdra

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ABSTRACT

Few people are familiar with the name Cynthia Hesdra. She was born a slave in the North. During her lifetime though, she owned a successful laundry business and real estate in New York and New Jersey. She was also involved in the historic "underground railroad" station in Nyack, NY. She died at the age of 71 with a fortune estimated at around \$100,000. By today's standards she was a millionaire. Her family fought over her estate in a series of trials, which included a precedent setting trial involving handwriting analysis. The story of Cynthia Hesdra provides insight into the economic contributions of blacks in the North prior to the twentieth century. This article examines the life and times of Cynthia Hesdra and other blacks during her lifetime, using historic census data, court records, historic newspaper articles, and other sources. Initially, Cynthia Hesdra's estate went to her husband, Edward, but the state would eventually take ownership of the ex-slave's fortune.

INTRODUCTION

Fortune and slavery are two words that in some ways go hand and hand and in other ways seem worlds apart. For some, slavery in America brought about a great deal of fortune.² The number of slaves that a person owned was often an indicator of that person's overall net worth. At the same time, slavery was a condition of intense misfortune. People of the African Diaspora, whether free or enslaved, suffered many atrocities ranging from the disruption of their families to the continued threat of bodily harm or even death.³ Nevertheless, there were people of

African descent who amassed fortunes using skills that they brought with them to the U.S. or skills that they developed here.

Cynthia Hesdra was born a slave in Tappan, NY. Slavery officially ended in 1827 in the New York State, several decades before the historic Emancipation Proclamation. As an ex-slave, Cynthia amassed a fortune. Her assets at the time of her death in 1879 included a laundry business and real estate in Rockland County, New York; New York City; and Bergen County, New Jersey. Her story may be more the exception than the rule; but, it is nonetheless a story that needs to be told.

Cynthia Hesdra's life story and the battle for her fortune offer insights into the experiences of many people of African descent. Like hers, the African-American experience, begins for many with forced migration and enslavement. While many view enslavement as a largely southern phenomenon, slavery existed in the North including in New York State. Investigations into the economic impact of people of the African Diaspora in New York have focused largely on the city of New York.⁴ However, slavery existed in areas north of the city too, including in Rockland County. Less is known about the economic impact of people of African ancestry in the county during the antebellum period and beyond, despite the presence of black communities especially along the Hudson River. These historic black communities can be found throughout the Nyacks, Piermont, Sparkill, Palisades, and Haverstraw.

This article explores the economic impact of people of the African Diaspora from the days when Rockland was part of neighboring Orange County to the late 19th century and beyond. The article will show that the experiences of people of African descent along the Hudson were by no means homogeneous. Rather, people of the African Diaspora lived as free people and as slaves. Some were of mixed ancestry and others were not. People of the African Diaspora in these areas worked as farm laborers, domestics, coachman, and even sailors, while others operated their own businesses. Some even owned land, and established houses of worship all the while facing discrimination, arson, the threat of violence, even bodily harm and death.

African-American's have historically made significant contributions to the nation, the state and the communities in which they have lived. However, their contributions have been at times under researched, ignored, or even distorted. Their stories have often been told through the eyes of some members of the dominant group that have either explicitly

or implicitly benefitted from the subjugation of African-Americans. A review of historical census data, historical documents, old newspaper articles, among other items, helps to tell the story of a group of Americans who triumphed in the face of overwhelming obstacles to move from assets to owners, from unpaid laborers to domestics to business owners and so much more. The story of Cynthia Hesdra offers new insight into the American experience in general, and the African-American experience, in particular.

**AFRICAN AMERICANS IN ROCKLAND COUNTY, NEW YORK
BEFORE THE 1900s**

The history of people of African ancestry in Rockland County is similar as well as different from the experiences of this group in neighboring New York City and throughout the state for that matter. Rockland County was established in 1798. Prior to that time, Rockland County was actually an English provisional township in Orange County.⁵ Journeymen had come to the area, which was already inhabited by Native Americans, long before the late 1600s. Henry Hudson sailed up a river in what would become Rockland County. According to sources, “he thought he had found the fabled ‘NorthWest Passage’ and laid anchor in the Tappan Zee, off what is now the Village of Haverstraw. Encamped along the river’s banks were groups the Tappans, the Nyacks and the Naurashawns all belonging to the Monsey Tribe.”⁶ It was along this river the many communities were established. These communities, including those in Clarkstown and Orangetown, would become home to generations of people of the African Diaspora. In fact, some individuals with African ancestry were instrumental in the purchase of the land in and around Rockland County, including in Tappan where Cynthia had roots.

In 1671, Claes Jansen received a tract of land from the Governor of New Jersey, Governor Carteret. Jansen promised the governor six bushels of winter wheat each year. He then sold 400 acres of his patent to Dave Harmensen Taulman. Eventually, more than a dozen Dutch families would form the Tappan Patent.⁷ These families, according to the Historical Society of Piermont (1996), included such familiar names as Haring, Clarke, Blauvelt and De Vries. De Vries was [one](#) of the sons of a Dutch man and a woman who is described as being black or racially mixed. He was the second largest landowner in the Patent. The

Historical Society of Piermont also notes that Nicholas Emmanuel, a black male, was a founder and one in a long line of successful black farmers and business owners whose descendants would eventually intermarry with later settlers. Nordstrom (1980) shows that by 1740 there were 200 men, women, and children listed in the census as slaves for life in the Rockland County area. In 1790, there were 224 Rockland residents of African ancestry and 26 of them were free. Of the 26 that were free, 9 lived in 6 different white households. Ten years later, the number of free blacks grew to 37, or 13% of the total black population in Rockland, yet this increase in the number of free blacks did not lead to an increase in the number of black households.

The names of slaveholders in Rockland County are recorded in census documents. For instance in the 1800 census it is noted that Stephen Thompson owned 11 slaves and that John Smith owned 5 slaves. Peter Demarest is said to have owned 4 slaves, while Isaac Blauvelt, John Tallman and Garret Tallman owned 1 slave each. This is of course not an exhaustive list of slaveholders rather evidence of the existence of slavery in the county during the time period and a window into the number of slaves that each slaveholder was likely to own.

The University of Virginia provides historical census data for various states by county. In the earliest year available, 1820, it shows that there were 58 female slaves in the county and 66 male slaves. During that same year when slavery was still legal in Rockland County and gradual manumission was in progress, there were 198 free colored females and 214 free colored men.⁸ Even earlier records suggest that in 1698 when Rockland was still part of Orange County that there 19 Negro slaves living along side 29 men, 31 women, and 140 children.

Despite the existence of slavery in Rockland the importance of this peculiar institution has been debated in the literature on the subject. There are those who contend that “in Orange and Rockland counties slavery had never become important.”⁹ Nordstrom (1980) agrees asserting that the county was never a notable slave county but rebuffs the lack of attention the subject has received. Still others point to the importance of slavery in the county. Haley asserts, “next to land, these slaves were among the most valuable forms of property owned by Rockland’s residents” (p. 48). Almost all of the wealthiest families, particularly in the 1790s, owned slaves. County Coroner, James Edwards owned five while Orangetown Clerk James Demarest owned

two slaves. Frederick Blauvelt is said to have owned nine slaves while Cornelius Smith, William Sickles, and Adam Blauvelt owned seven each.

Slaves were valued as personal property and not as human beings. This is evident in a 1798 court case involving the murder of Prince who belonged to the Onderdonk family. Court records show that he was a slave and was murdered by Jonathan Bell who resided in Orangetown. Bell did not have a good reputation as he was allegedly known for engaging in deviant behavior. He was indicted for the murder of Prince but the outcome of the case is not known. What is known is that murder was a crime that was punishable by death. There is no evidence that Bell was put to death and this is likely due to the fact that he murdered Prince, a slave, who was considered property and not a person. This case provides evidence into the lack of humanity shown towards blacks in general and black slaves in particular.

Gellman (2006) contends that “if any of New York’s regions bears comparison to the southern colonies in terms of slavery, it is the Hudson River Valley, with its coerced labor, wealthy land elite, and staple agriculture production” (p. 20). Rockland County, in its genesis, was like other areas in the Hudson River Valley, parceled out into what some describe as quasi-feudal estates which placed not only land in the hands of a small number of families but a great deal of power too.¹⁰ Landowners and those working on their behalf, including free and enslaved blacks, engaged in farm work, milling, iron manufacturing and river commerce.¹¹

Blacks in Rockland County faced many challenges in their pursuit of economic freedom after Emancipation in the North. One such challenge was literacy. In 1850 there were 72 illiterate black females in Rockland County and by 1870 there were 118 and the figures were comparable for black males at 75 and 118, respectively. Despite these and other challenges, people of the African Diaspora in Rockland County made significant economic contributions.

The Mine Hole community in Piermont was home to a number of examples. The origins of the community’s name are not known but the name for this black community may have come from a mine in the area as iron and cooper could be found in the area. The black community was significant enough in 1865 for the residents to not only establish but to build a church. The church was referred to as the “Swamp Church.” It is

believed that the church got its name from its proximity to the Sparkill Creek. Reverend Billy Thompson was the Pastor and a resident of Skunk Hollow, an area in Palisades where blacks were residentially segregated. Sara Kane Oliver and others lived in Skunk Hollow too. A historical marker denotes the location of this historic community near the entrance to the Lamont Campus of Columbia University on Route 9W near the New York/New Jersey border. Building the church was not an easy task. At one point, the church ran out of money. However, a Mrs. Charles Kinsley Taylor financed the rest of the construction while living in the parsonage and named the church in her husband's honor. The church which consolidated in 1910 with the Episcopal Church of Color People is known today as St. Charles AME Zion Church.¹²

Black communities were also created in the Nyacks. In the early part of the 19th century, Catherine Street was known as African Lane. Blacks in the area would come to work as independent masons, carpenters, barbers, business owners and in the hospitality industry. Leonard Cooke, a legendary politician and civil rights champion, *iswas* the descendent of a black man that owned a farm on Sickletown Road. It is not a coincidence that historic predominately black churches such as Pilgrim Baptist and St. Philips AME Zion were founded in Nyack during this time period.¹³ Clearly the black residents of Piermont and of the Nyacks were willing and able to come together collaboratively and pool their joint resources to establish, build, finance, and maintain houses of worship which is testament to their economic standing as a community. It is also a testament to the economic diversity that existed within the black population.

THE STORY OF CYNTHIA HESDRA

Cynthia was born near historic Tappan, New York which is located in Orangetown, New York¹⁴ in 1808. Cynthia has been described as a the "daughter of a half-breed Indian...who owned a very large tract of land in Bergen County, NJ, and was in his day, ranked with the wealthy and influential men of that section. In intelligence and education he was far in advance of whites by whom he was surrounded."¹⁵ Cynthia was not an only child. At the very least, she was one of four children. Court records show that her sisters were named Margaret, Elizabeth, and Mahalah.

Cynthia's father, John Moore has been described as a businessman. He is said to have operated a saw mill, grist mill and later a carding mill until William Fredon brought it for \$6,000. Fredon may have used the mill to supply blankets to the Union army during the Civil War¹⁶. Moore was also a partner for a time of one of the members of the DePew family, Peter¹⁷. The DePew family was once one of Nyack's largest landowners. At one time they owned an 80 acre farm which they later added to. Cynthia's father employed three men in businesses and his household was at a time the largest black household in Rockland County.¹⁸ While it is not known precisely how Cynthia became a slave, it could be inferred that at some point that both Moore and Cynthia's mother, Jane were slaves or that only Cynthia's mother was a slave and the mother's status typically determined the status of the child.

Cynthia D. Moore eventually married a man by the name of Edward Hesdra. Edward Hesdra, like Cynthia is described in census records as a mulatto, a Hebrew mulatto to be specific. Edward was from Virginia. His father was foreign-born and of Portuguese or French ancestry. His father was a Virginia planter that owned slaves, while his mother was a free black woman of Haitian decent. "He always identified himself with the fortunes of the negro race...In religion he was a Jew."¹⁹ Cynthia and Edward married when she was still enslaved. Her freedom was later purchased and the couple initially settled on Amity Street in New York.

Edward Hesdra was said to have operated a furniture business while Cynthia Hesdra operated a laundry business among other ventures. She was described as "an industrious, saving, and money-getting woman."²⁰ In the course of a few years Mrs. Hesdra had paid for the property in which she lived, and had also brought the house at 103 Macdougall Street, three houses in Sullivan Street, near Bleecker Street, and seven or eight other properties. In addition to her laundry trade, she carried on a quiet money-lending business among her neighbors of the city, she removed to Nyack, where she also established a laundry and skillfully retained her city trade."²¹

Ken Hamiman grew up in the Hesdra house some years after the deaths of both Edward and Cynthia and gave an account of the layout of the house on Main Street near what is today Route 9W as well as some insight as to how the Underground Railroad operated in Nyack²². He noted that runaway slaves would leave Jersey City at night. They would be given instructions about how to travel. In some cases quilts

embroidered with secret codes, told slaves who could not read or write how to travel.²³ Special attention would be devoted to what areas to avoid. The runaway slaves would be given a description of the Hesdra house as well as its location.

The runaway slave upon arriving in Nyack would make themselves known at the Hesdra house. At which time they would be fed, given clothes and a place to sleep. They would be hidden during the day at the Hesdra house and at night make their way to the next station in Newburgh, New York. The house could easily be identified as, according to Harniman, it was located on the Southside of the Route 9W, it was referred to as the Turnpike back then. The house was located across from the Odell reservoir. The reservoir was also near the Highland Hose Fire Engine Company No. 5.

The house, says Harniman, had a second story balcony that ran around a walnut staircase. The house had marble fire places and huge rooms. He recalled the presence of a coal cellar. He noted that there was an entrance door on the outside which could be locked. The door could be opened from the inside from the kitchen. He noted that this layout was ideal for feeding and hiding a runaway slave. He added that there was a trap door in the cellar that as kids, they never opened²⁴.

Cynthia Hesdra, died in 1879 and immediately following her death there was no evidence that she had written a will. That was until her husband Edward produced a document that he claimed left everything to him. The absence of a will and the fact that she died without ever bearing a child, meant that her estate would go to her heirs at law. An heir in law is defined as “a person who inherits, or has a right of inheritance in, the real property of one who has died without leaving a valid will.”²⁵

Despite Edward Hesdra’s claims that he found the will belonging to his wife, written several years before her death, dozens of people came forward and reported that they had never heard either Edward or Cynthia make mention of any wills. Witnesses also came forth claiming that Edward Hesdra had given them accounts about the sudden appearance of Cynthia’s will than the official account given²⁶. Abraham Eugene Hesdra, who was not related to Edward or Cynthia, told the court that he regularly visited with Edward, including following Cynthia’s death. He testified that he never saw Edward Hesdra with any papers related to Cynthia or her will. Abraham was said to have worked as a clerk for an

individual by the name of Newcomb. Newcomb was a banker and a broker.

Two of the witnesses reported going through Cynthia Hesdra's personal papers with Edward immediately following her death. They were incredulous to the fact that such an important document could be so easily overlooked. According to official court documents, a Mr. Titus, claimed that he helped Mr. Hesdra go over a substantial portion of Mrs. Hesdra's papers in the bureau drawers and found no will.

One of Cynthia's nieces, Ann Truax, claimed to have gone through all of the papers in the bureau drawers in question the day after Cynthia was buried. Ann was born in New York but may have lived for a time in Michigan with her husband Abram, a farmer, and their four children. Cynthia's niece swore that she went through the paper work in the drawers again the next day. In all, she claims to have reviewed documents at the Hesdra home more than 12 times and she did not recall seeing anything that resembled a will. Ann also noted that despite Edward's claims that he found the will in a bureau drawer that his account of precisely where he found the will, as told to her, was much different. He told her that he found the will in a broche shawl on the Monday before May 1. A Mr. Garret said that on the Monday before May 1, he saw Edward Hesdra and that Edward told him that he found Cynthia's will among some of her other papers but he could not recall where exactly he found it. Garrett also said that Edward told him that Cynthia left everything to him. According to Edward's official accounting of the discovery of the will, he took the unopened envelope immediately to his lawyer on April 30 and knew nothing about its contents.

By yet another account, this one made by another relative of Cynthia's, Edward Hesdra claimed to have looked through all of his papers in New York City and in Nyack and found no will but that Eugene Hesdra, whose real surname was Portlock but took on the last name of the planter who owned him in Virginia, found the will in a drawer. A Mr. Truax, possibly one of Cynthia's nephews, came forward with yet another version of how and when the will was found. He claims that Edward Hesdra told him that the will was found in an old bandbox in Nyack. The concerns raised about the many different versions about when and where the will was found were not the only concerns surrounding the ex-slave's fortune but they did call into question the

authenticity of the instrument. The will, dated August 17, 1876, was alleged to have been witnessed by Peter Stephens and I.W. Canfield. Peter Stephens served the people of Rockland County in a number of capacities between the mid- to late 1800s including as Police Justice in the village of Upper Nyack,²⁷ an officer representing Rockland in the New York Agricultural Society,²⁸ as an incorporator of a fire department in Nyack, the Mazeppa Fire Engine Company Number 2²⁹ and also as Deputy Coroner.³⁰ Issac W. Canfield worked as the manager of the Warren Gas Light Company when gas was supplied for the first time to the village of Nyack in 1859.³¹

Cynthia's relatives were growing increasingly suspicious about the authenticity of the will that Edward found awarding the ex-slave's fortune to him and to him alone. Several members of her family contested the will. They included several sisters, and nieces and nephews of Cynthia Hesdra. Cynthia Hesdra's family members believed that they were entitled to her fortune for a number of reasons. They believed that the signatures on the will that Edward found were forged. The alleged forged signatures belonged to Issac W. Canfield and Cynthia Hesdra. The will was supposedly witnessed by Canfield and Peter Stephens. It provided that after all of her debts were paid that her remaining real and personal property would go to her husband Edward Hesdra. In the will, her husband was instructed to purchase a tombstone and ensure that her eternal resting place was well kept. Edward Hesdra was the sole executor.

Her family went so far as to argue that not only were the signatures forged, but that Edward had approached someone about helping him make the will, after Cynthia's death. Cynthia's relatives believed that he approached Theodore Titus and asked him to make up a will. They believe that Edward agreed to pay Mr. Titus, \$2,000 for helping him. He also said, the family contended, Mr. Titus could live in one of his houses without having to pay rent and that he could act as an agent for Mr. Hesdra concerning many of his business dealings. Theodore S.W. Titus, was a real estate agent, collector, and accountant.

The ex-slave's family also called into question the participation of Peter Stephens, the other witness to the will. Stephens, a Justice of the Peace in Nyack said the family, may have actually written the will Edward Hesdra claimed to have found and signed all of the names therein, including Canfield and Cynthia's signatures. With their

untrained eyes, they argued that Stephens tried to make a signature that looked like Canifield's signature and that he traced over one of Cynthia's valid signatures when drafting the will after her death.

The family said that Edward Hesdra executed a well thought out plan to get his hands on his wife's fortune. Part of his plan was to stage things so that once he announced the discovery of the will that he would carry it to Mr. McAdam because of his good standing in the community and legal profession. Mr. McAdam's involvement in the case would remove any hint of impropriety, said Cynthia's heirs. Quentin McAdam was a well known figure in Nyack and in the legal community throughout New York State, especially in New York County.

The claim was made during the trial that the will in it's entirely appeared to have been written by one person, this includes all of the signatures and the body of the will. It was even alleged that "the signature of Cynthia Hesdra, to the instrument, appears to have been executed after the paper had been folded and creased, with that of Mr. Stephens, written across the same crease, apparently must have been written before the crease was made, and that those facts" may have been evidence that the signatures had been forged.³² It was further argued in the battle for the ex-slave's fortune that someone had tried to copy Canifield's signature and that some, perhaps the same person, had written Cynthia Hesdra's signature by tracing over one of her legitimate signatures.

Questions were raised about the credibility of Ms. Truax testimony that she had helped Edward Hesdra look through his wife's papers but found no will. Ms. Truax, Cynthia's niece had a motive for perhaps failing to recall the existence of a will. It could have been, as it was considered during the trial that it was to her benefit not to locate a will that left everything to Edward Hesdra. If no will was found, then she along with other members of Cynthia's family would secure the ex-slave's fortune. Her testimony as well as the testimony offered by Edward Hesdra was questioned because they both had motives to not tell the truth. After all, the victor(s) in this case would be by today's standards millionaires.

Throughout the trial there were disagreements not only about the authenticity of the will but also about how and when it was found. Interestingly enough, this brought to light an issue that is still being debated today. That issue is the reliability of eyewitness testimony. The

justice hearing the case would later comment, “where conversations or dates are given by witnesses, it is a kind of testimony which is liable to be unreliable, being stated from memory, which is so often at fault; and it is a very common experience of those dealing with human testimony that conversations are very imperfectly remembered, and that modes of expression are often misunderstood in their significance.”³³

The issue of whether the signatures of Cynthia and Isaac were authentic lingered. Cynthia’s family swore that they were fakes. To bolster claims made by Cynthia’s family that the signatures were not genuine, a representative from Seaman’s Savings Bank, where Cynthia had an account was called. George H. Jeffrey, also testified on this issue. He was shown a draft from Seaman’s Savings Bank in the amount of \$45 which was signed by Cynthia Hesdra. It was dated November 6, 1878 and it was given to Mr. Jeffrey. He had endorsed the instrument. He testified that his aunt gave him the draft and that he withdrew the money and gave it to her.

This act worried Hesdra’s lawyers. They were seemingly unprepared to have the signature in question compared with a known signature. This was unheard of! Quentin McAdam objected to the line of testimony and the introduction of the draft into evidence. McAdam questioned why the draft was being introduced to which counsel for Cynthia Hesdra’s family replied that they wanted to demonstrate that this signature belonged to Cynthia. The lawyer for the ex-slave’s relatives then said that it was his intention to recall several witness to have them elaborate on comparisons between the signature on the draft and the signature on the will.

At first the Surrogate Court Justice refused to enter the draft into evidence. Mr. Westbrook, one of the lawyers representing some of Cynthia’s family members informed that court that the Legislature had recently passed a law permitting comparisons between known and questionable signatures. The law, he added was modeled after a similar English law. The justice was unaware that the law had been passed. Mr. Westbrook had to produce a certified copy of the law from the Secretary of State to back up his claim that the law had indeed been passed and that the draft should be allowed as evidence in the case. This portion of the trial took place on March 2, 1880 and the law was only a few days old as it was passed on February 28 of that same year!

The expert witnesses, Dr. Cresson and Dr. Southworth stated that in their professional opinion that Mr. Canfield’s signature was indeed

forged. They also stated that the evidence showed that more likely than not, Cynthia Hesdra's signature had been traced as her family had alleged. These handwriting experts went even a step further. They added that all of the signatures were written by the same person and that the author of the signatures and of the body of the will was none other than Peter Stephens. The experts pointed to a number of dead giveaways, including curves, slopes, letter formation, even pen pressure.

Weighing all of the evidence presented, Justice Calvin ruled that Cynthia Hesdra's relatives had not proven their case to the court's satisfaction. Justice Calvin's verdict hinged upon a number of factors. Specifically, he had difficulty believing the experts who were hired by Cynthia Hesdra's lawyers believing perhaps that they would say just about anything to help their clients. Another important factor appeared to have been Calvin's perception of Peter Stephens. He had high regard for Stephens and was unwilling to believe that a man of his social position could have been involved in such an elaborate scheme to defraud so many.

It turns out that Cynthia's relatives won their appeal. The Supreme Court reversed the decree of Justice Calvin. A trial by jury was ordered. Quentin McAdam represented Edward Hesdra again and Robert E. Deyo represented Cynthia's family. The jury agreed with Justice Calvin and upheld Cynthia's will³⁴. When Mr. Hesdra died, there again was a battle over the ex-slave's fortune. His will was disputed also. After many years of litigation, much of the Hesdra estate went to the State of New York as no legitimate heirs to the fortune could be identified.

CONCLUSION

Cynthia Hesdra was among the wealthiest individuals in Rockland County, New York, black or white, prior to the 1900s. Cynthia Hesdra was a phenomenal African American woman. She moved from being an asset to an owner. There is much that we know about her life and other things that we can only infer. This is due in large part to the fact that scholars have ignored the enslavement experience in Rockland County. Despite the fact that the couple was "rich even by white standards, no special notice was ever taken of their accomplishments."³⁵ Like many blacks in the New York area, prior to the 1900s, she was very prosperous running a successful businesses and managing properties in New York

City and in the Rockland County area. Along with her husband, she provided a refuge to fugitives.

Her story takes place with the backdrop of many an historic moment in American history prior to the 1900s. Prohibition, political corruption, slavery, the historic Underground Railroad, Emancipation and the birth of a Jewish community, were all a part of her story. In many ways, her story also points to the existence of racially, ethnically, and economically diverse communities. When reflecting upon the area that Cynthia lived in, one might assume that the level of interaction among and between groups from various social backgrounds were minimal. This supports what some scholars have already shown that the isolation of people on the basis of a number of social and demographic variables worsened after the 1900s, particular during the first half.³⁶ Despite the fact that antebellum Nyack was not pro-abolitionist and despite the fact that sexism and racism existed in the area even in post-Antebellum America, Cynthia and her husband lived among blacks as well as whites, Jews and Gentiles alike. In so many ways, her story shows the multilevel and multidimensional nature of the black experience prior to the 1900s and the complexity of the experiences women during that time frame. While today, women tend to be associated more with the feminization of poverty than with the prospect of wealth, it is imperative that more people come know about the ex-slave's fortune.

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Footnotes

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² Berlin 1974; Hine et al 2006; Nordstrom 2005

³ I use the following terms interchangeably blacks, people of African descent, people of the African Diaspora and African Americans. When within group comparisons are made later in the book I distinguish between Afro-Caribbeans, blacks with recent African ancestry, and blacks who trace their ancestry to the enslavement experience in America.

⁴ Harris 2004; Krueger and Sele 1996; Newman 1995

⁵ Rockland County Clerk, May 14, 2008

⁶ Rockland County Clerk, May 14, 2008

⁷ Historical Society of Piermont 1996

⁸ Historical Census Browser 2004

⁹ Portraits of West Nyack 1973

¹⁰ Gellman 2006

¹¹ Gellman 2006

¹² The Friends of the Piermont Public Library, 1996

¹³ The Historical Society of the Nyacks 2000

¹⁴ A Badly Mixed Up Case: The Liberties a Mulatto Cook Took With Another Man's Furniture. *New York Times* 1883, November 3, (1857-Current file),p. 8.

¹⁵ "Hesdra's Will Sustained:A Large Portion of the Estate Spent in Litigation." *New York Times* 1887, December 16, (1857-Current file),p. 6.

¹⁶ The Official Mouquin Website. (<http://history.mouquin.com/stone.shtml>).

¹⁷ Green 1886

¹⁸ Green 1886

¹⁹ “Hesdra’s Will Sustained: A Large Portion of the Estate Spent in Litigation.” *New York Times* 1887, December 16. (1857-Current file),p. 6.

²⁰“For an Ex-Slave’s Fortune: Litigation Over the Wills of Cynthia and Edward D. Hesdra.” *New York Times* 890, June 8. (1857-Current file),p. 8.

²¹ “For an Ex-Slave’s Fortune: Litigation Over the Wills of Cynthia and Edward D. Hesdra.” *New York Times* 890, June 8. (1857-Current file),p. 8.

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²³ “The Underground Railroad and the Secret Codes of Antebellum Slave Quilts” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. 46:44.

²⁴ Harniman, Ken. “A History of the Rockland Underground Railroad.” *Rockland County Government News*. August 1974.

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²⁶ Information concerning testimony and the discovery of the Cynthia Hesdra’s will, unless otherwise noted, come from official court records. See the reference pages for full citations.

²⁷ Green 1886

²⁸ *Transactions of the New-York State Agricultural Society for the Year. By New York State Agricultural Society*. Published by The Society. 1856

²⁹ *Laws of the State of New York*. 1861.

³⁰ Henry Lauren Clinton. *Celebrated Trials*.Published by Harper & brothers, 1897

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³³ Redfield, Amasa. 1882. P. 54.

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³⁵ Nordstrom 2005. Pg. 82.

³⁶ Massey and Denton 1993