

## Ishmael Coffee

November, 2023

Ishmael Coffee, son of Jupiter Coffee and Deborah (Alden) Dunton, was born in Needham in 1741, and moved to Medway in the 1760's. Coffee was of Black and Indigenous (Nipmuc tribe) descent. When he first arrived, he was "warned out of town." This common practice was used by towns to reduce their liability should any newcomers (regardless of race, age or gender) stay in town, fall on hard times and become financially dependent on the town. Many newcomers, like Coffee, remained in their new town despite the warning.

There was, at this time in Medway, little potential for employment of the townspeople. The shops and mills along the river were for the most part family businesses, with the fathers and sons doing the work. An exception, in fact, was the Bullard sawmill, where one individual outside of the family worked – Ishmael Coffee.

In 1768, Coffee married Hannah Gay, a white woman from Wrentham. They remained in Medway for the rest of their lives and raised their 17 children (including two sets of twins), not all of whom survived into adulthood.

Coffee served in the Revolutionary War with several Medway men in expeditions and battles of that war at Bunker Hill, Fort Ticonderoga, Warwick, Providence, and as far away as New Jersey. In this war, our Black inhabitants marched with their fellow townsmen. Every able-bodied man served including Ishmael Coffee, his son Thomas, Prince Brewster and freed slave Sambo Freeman.

As the years passed, the burden of poverty and a large family took a toll on the Coffee family. They increasingly became more dependent upon the town of Medway. During the difficult financial times it became necessary for the town of Medway to try to recoup the cost of their care. In 1819, Medway sued the town of Needham claiming that was his legal place of settlement. Needham countered, however, saying that the marriage was invalid as interracial marriages were illegal in Massachusetts.

Surprisingly, the judge decided in favor of Medway. Ishmael and his wife were actually married in Rhode Island where interracial marriages were "not unlawful." The judge demonstrated that, based on precedent, it was necessary and important to uphold the laws of other governments.

By carefully researching through town record books and original cash books from the early 1800's it was determined that Ishmael Coffee and his wife Hannah died sometime after 1821. That means Coffee led a long life, surviving at least to age 80. More than 60 of those years were spent in Medway.

Fran Donovan, in his booklet *Early Medway Settlers and Land Records*, explains that "when our streets were named in 1869, one of the most sensible choices was to name Coffee Street in his honor, as he was a responsible citizen, and served with distinction in the Revolutionary War." Today the Ishmael Coffee Estates are also named in his honor.

The Historical Society and Historical Commission thank Marian Pierre-Louis, who researched Ishmael Coffee's history over a period of two years. Before this research, very little was known about Ishmael Coffee. Marian is a professional genealogist, Historical Society Director, our House Historian, and a resident of Medway.

There are no known drawings or photos of Ishmael Coffee in our archives, but we do have this early photo of Coffee Street, named in his honor.

Online research also brings up this service record for Ishmael Coffee from the Revolutionary War.



A Winter's Walk on Copley's road

