English Language, Large Print

Creating Community:
400 Years of Fairfield Stories

People & Community

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Fairfield Museum
AND HISTORY CENTER

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How Do Museums Use Objects to Tell A Story? What Objects Might You Use to Tell Your Story?

One of the main purposes of a museum is to collect, preserve, and display objects that tell our stories. The objects a museum chooses to collect may change over time, depending on standards in the field, changing interests, or shifts in the museum's goals and values. The Fairfield Museum and History Center (which started as the Fairfield Historical Society in 1904) has collected many objects in its time. To date, the museum has over 15,000 objects in its collection. But no matter how trends and tastes change over time, one thing stays the same: when we add new pieces to the collection, we do it to promote a better understanding of our constantly changing communities and their history.

The selection on view here shows how artifacts can tell us stories and ideas that words alone cannot.

Look! Do you recognize some of the objects? Which are you curious about?

People and Community

Many people and communities have called Fairfield home. People with different traditions, religions, and backgrounds have overcome obstacles, crossed paths, and worked together to build the community of Fairfield we know today.

Native Communities

Native communities use oral traditions to teach, record history, and pass down knowledge.

Sky Woman, oil painting by Ernest Smith (Tonawanda Seneca, Heron Clan), 1936. Courtesy of the RMSC, Rochester, NY.

Creation stories play an important role in helping communities express their understanding of the world. A local creation story teaches us how Turtle Island (North America) came to be, and how the figure of Sky Woman and animals worked together to make a home on a great

turtle’s back. Native Americans in the Northeast believe that the creation of Turtle Island forged a spiritual connection among all living things and gave us the land we live on today.

Listen to Golden Hill Paugussett Clan Mother Shoran Waupatukuay Piper tell the story of Sky Woman (approximately 8 minutes).

The Indigenous People of Fairfield

Thousands of Native people resided in many communities along the coast.

Local Native communities have deeply rooted connections to the land and living things. They also have complex cultures, structures of government, and longstanding traditions. The area now known as Fairfield was home to at least three Native communities: the Sasqua, Pequannock, and Unquowa people. The Sasqua had seasonal villages inland and on the coast. They may have

had close ties with other local groups, as Native communities commonly traded with their neighbors and through long-distance networks. Tribal communities were often part of larger Native nations. While little is known about the Unquowa, and it is uncertain who the Sasqua were directly related to, the Pequannock were known to be a part of the larger Paugussett nation. The Paugussett continue to have an active and vibrant community today.

Tributary Relationships

Tributary relationships are part of a political system in which a less powerful group pays “tribute” to another group to acknowledge dominance. In northeastern Native American communities, a tributary relationship was not always the result of conquest but depended on mutual expectations of giving and receiving. Tribute might come in the form of food, resources, or even military support during times of war. In return, the dominant community was expected to provide support to those who paid tribute in times of famine or conflict, and provide access to trade

items or other resources. Tributary relationships were fluid and subject to change over time.

Arrival of the Europeans

As early as 1614, Europeans were in contact with Native communities in the area.

Dutch explorer Adriaen Block's Long Island Sound expedition introduced the Dutch to Native communities, including the Paugussett and Sasqua. Following Block's expedition, Dutch traders began to trade along the Long Island Sound area regularly, including along the Connecticut shoreline. Around 1624, Dutch traders made an agreement with the Pequot, who would provide wampum and furs in exchange for European goods. In 1633, the Pequot allowed the Dutch to build a trading post on the Connecticut River at the site of present-day Hartford, forging a powerful trade relationship between their tribe and the Dutch.

The Significance of Wampum

Living near the shoreline, the people of Sasquanaug and Uncoway had easy access to the raw materials for wampum.

Wampum is a bead made from either the white core of the whelk shell or the dark purple portion of the quahog shell. Indigenous people created belts of wampum for storytelling, ceremonial gifts, and recording important treaties and historical events, among other uses. Highly valued for their craftsmanship, wampum was also exchanged between Indigenous people.

Watch Allen Hazard of the Narragansett Tribe make wampum.

Indigenous people used tools made from antlers to break up whelk or quahog shells to make wampum. These small pieces would then be rolled on a grinding stone with water to create a tubular shape, then sanded until smooth. Next, the craftspeople used wooden pump drills with stone drill

bits to make holes through the tubular beads so they could be strung together.

Courtesy of Rhode Island PBS Education Services.

A Changing World

New goods like cooking kettles, iron tools, and cloth were offered to Native people in exchange for animal fur—particularly beaver pelts—that were highly valued in Europe.

Trading Political Power

The Pequot, who lived in what is now southeastern Connecticut, had political, economic, and military dominance over the Connecticut shoreline, eastern Long Island, and the lower Connecticut River Valley. Native nations in those areas, including the Sasqua and Pequannock people located in what is now Fairfield, paid tribute to the Pequot. By the early 1600s, the Pequot's

dominance was strengthened by their alliance with the Dutch in controlling trade.

In 1633, the same year the Pequot allowed the Dutch to establish a trading post near present-day Hartford, an epidemic of smallpox spread through the Connecticut region. The disease decimated Native communities who had no immunity to European illnesses. Devastated by disease, several tribal leaders, or sachems, sought to challenge Pequot and Dutch dominance by inviting the English to settle in the valley. The English agreed and settled Windsor (1633), Wethersfield (1634), Hartford (1635), and Saybrook (1635). In just three years after the first English settlement, war broke out and led to the end of Dutch and Pequot dominance.

The Start of War

The arrival of Europeans escalated unrest between tribal communities and the Pequot.

In 1634 and 1636, two English traders were killed, and the English blamed the incident on the Pequot. While the Pequot provided several explanations for the first man's death and the second was found to be at the hands of the Manisses of Block Island, the English did not want these deaths to go unpunished. In August 1636, English soldiers demanded that Pequot sachem (tribal leader) Sassacus turn over the killers.

When negotiations failed, the English burned two Indigenous villages in retaliation, launching the Pequot War (1636-1637). The Pequot and English exchanged attacks, and prompting the English to officially declare war on May 1, 1637. Nearly a month later, the English burned the Pequot fort at Mistick (now Mystic), killing hundreds of people, including Pequot women and children. Pequot sachem Sassacus and others were forced to flee west along the shoreline, seeking help from other tribal communities that paid tribute to them.

English troops followed the Pequot and found them taking refuge with the Sasqua, a tributary community located near Sasquanaug (present-day Southport). The final battle of the Pequot War began, concluding in Munnacommuck Swamp (where Southport Park is today). As a result of the war, hundreds of Indigenous people lost their lives, dozens of Pequot men and sachems were executed, and Sasqua and Pequannock women and children were held captive or sold into slavery. The Pequot's defeat allowed English colonists to flock to the area to settle.

The Battle of Munnacommuck Swamp

The Pequot War's final battle unfolded in 1637 in present-day Southport. On July 13, 1637, English forces climbed present-day Mill Hill in Southport and looked south. They came upon a Sasqua village near a swamp known as *Munnacommuck* (near what is now Southport Park), where the Pequot and their allies took refuge. At the swamp, the Pequot exchanged shots with the English. Fighting continued until English interpreter Thomas

Stanton negotiated a ceasefire to spare the Sasqua, Pequot, and Pequannock women, elderly, and children. Over a hundred people surrendered. Some Native forces continued to fight until the next morning, when “sixty or seventy” Pequot escaped the swamp, as recorded by Captain John Mason, commander of the English troops. When the battle finally ended on July 14, so did the Pequot War.

What can these musket balls explain?

Different sizes of musket balls could travel different distances. Smaller shot could go farther or be loaded together into muskets for a buckshot effect. Heavier caliber musket balls went shorter distances. The number of dropped musket balls found on the site of the Battle of Munnacommuck Swamp in Southport shows that the English were reloading their muskets often.

Archaeology of the Swamp Fight

How does archaeology inform our understanding of the Battle of Munnacommuck Swamp?

Locating objects in the soil, noting their depth, and checking their relationship to other artifacts helps archaeologists evaluate an artifact's age and the area's land use over time. The location and frequency of musket balls found in Southport Park, paired with primary sources such as handwritten accounts from English soldiers, provide a good understanding of how the Battle of Munnacommuck Swamp unfolded between English and Native forces.

The Swamp Fight Monument pictured here was dedicated in 1904 by the Connecticut Society of Colonial Wars to commemorate the end of the Pequot War. Today, it sits along the Post Road in Southport. It is inscribed, "The/Great Swamp Fight/Here Ended/ The Pequot War/July 13, 1637." Southport Park maintains a small area

of the land where the Swamp Fight took place, but the rest of the battlefield has since been developed.

Scan the QR Code to learn more about the Pequot War's legacy in the region.

Arrival of the English

Fairfield's settlement by English colonists was a direct result of the Pequot War.

Only two years after fighting in the final battle of the Pequot War in 1637, Connecticut's Deputy Governor Roger Ludlow returned to the area with English settlers. They sought to build a new community based on their

Puritan values. Ludlow remembered the desirable cleared lands of the Sasqua and Unquowa from his time fighting in the war. He negotiated with the Pequannock people who remained after the war to settle what would become Fairfield.

Building a Puritan Community

Fairfield was settled by people seeking to reform religion. Pequot War veteran Roger Ludlow was commissioned by the General Court at Hartford to establish a settlement at Pequonnock (present-day Bridgeport) for the Connecticut Colony. However, the English colonists were interested in the land known as Uncoway (now Fairfield) because it had been previously cultivated by Native people. Ludlow chose to disregard his orders when he discovered others from Wethersfield, Connecticut also wanted to settle in Uncoway and claimed the land first. The Court found out, but only issued a fine to Ludlow. The settlement at Uncoway remained. In 1639, Fairfield’s original four-

square layout was established at Uncoway, located at the intersection of the current Beach and Old Post Roads.

A Puritan community like early Fairfield was organized around the church and had clear roles for all its members to create an orderly, disciplined society. In building a new community alongside (or in spite of) Native presence, the English colonists decided what rules to live by and who was welcome. Not just anyone could join the town. People who might become a burden to the community or who did not share its religious practices could be asked to leave. Newcomers had to ask permission to be accepted and everyone was expected to play a part in supporting the whole community.

Rules to Live By

Roger Ludlow was one of Connecticut's first lawyers, and he put together the first set of laws for the Connecticut Colony in 1650.

These laws included a fine of 5 shillings for anyone who did not go to church on worship days; a punishment for burglary by branding the thief's forehead with the letter *B*; and a fine of 20 shillings for neglecting to teach children and servants to read and to know basic religious ideas. Notably, one of the most severe offenses was leaving an English settlement to live with "Indians," a "crime" that would result in three years in prison.

Ludlow's early laws also made clear that only white adult men could vote to make decisions on taxes, matters of defense, education, and the church. Like Indigenous communities that had a chief and council of elders to meet and resolve issues, the townspeople elected selectmen, who were responsible for enforcing the laws, acting as a court, resolving conflicts, and taking care of residents in need.

Establishing Boundaries

The local Sasqua and Pequannock people did not view land through the lens of ownership. Instead, they moved from place to place according to the seasons and to be closer to essential resources. They built shelters called wetus or wigwams that had tree sapling frames and reed or bark coverings and could be disassembled and moved easily. By contrast, the English brought their ideas of property with them when they came to live on Native American land. They designated areas for permanent settlement and relied on their English traditions of building houses, using wood from the vast forests.

Though the English settlers arrived in Fairfield in 1639, precise boundaries were not marked until the late 1700s. At that time, the system of measuring land used compass readings, descriptions of distances like “a day’s walk inland,” and natural landmarks such as trees and waterways to define boundaries. Measurements could be made with chains like the one on view here, which were composed of 100 links totaling 66 feet.

Colonial Life

The permanent settlement of Fairfield began in 1639 when Roger Ludlow laid out four “squares” of land divided by five roads. Homes were located within the four squares, and surrounding land was set aside for pastures and farming. The large, open space known as the town green was also established in 1639, serving as a common area for the town that still exists in part today. Notably, the green was also home to the meetinghouse of the Congregational Church, used for worship and town business. The green has also served as a meadow, marketplace, or parade ground, becoming the heart of the community.

In settling the town, English colonists built homes and filled them with objects they created or purchased. The earliest homes featured more utilitarian objects. Later, borrowing from European styles, the English furnished their homes with additional decorative objects and furniture, like the early 1700s chair with finials and a leather seat seen here.

Mary Staples

Accused of witchcraft twice

1600s

In 1653, Goodwife Knapp of Fairfield was accused of witchcraft, convicted, and sentenced to hanging. On the gallows, she told town founder Roger Ludlow that her neighbor Mary Staples was a witch. Ludlow later accused Staples of lying about not being a witch, and her husband Thomas sued him for slander. Ludlow was ordered to pay 10 pounds for defaming Mary Staples, but she was named a witch again in 1692, the same year as the Salem witch trials. Mary Staples was accused along with her daughter, granddaughter, and three other women, but the court acquitted all but one and none were executed.

Suspecting Witches in Fairfield

Fear caused Puritans to cast accusations of witchcraft.

Living in an unfamiliar place surrounded by wilderness in the 1600s, English Puritans suspected others of witchcraft when “unnatural” events like the death of cattle, fits of

hysteria, or crop failures affected the community. Women were often accused, as they had less power in the community and were thought to be more prone to sin than men. Between 1653 and 1692, six women were accused of witchcraft in Fairfield: Goodwife Knapp, Mercy Disborough, Elizabeth Clawson, Mary Staples, Mary Harvey, and Hannah Harvey. Only Knapp was hanged, and although Disborough was found guilty, she was spared any punishment.

Scan the QR code to discover more about Fairfield's witch trials.

The Legacy of Enslavement

When the Pequot War ended in 1637, Native Americans were among the first enslaved people in the area.

In 1639, the first Africans were brought to Connecticut and enslaved. By the 1770s, Fairfield County was home to the largest percentage of enslaved Africans in the colony. Yet this history is not just about enslavement, but also how enslaved people built and protected their families and communities. Part of their legacy lies in their fierce advocacy for Black freedom and humanity, and their role in building and establishing the community we know as Fairfield today.

Enslavement in Fairfield

In 1774, Fairfield County had the largest percentage of enslaved Africans in the county.

By the time of the American Revolution, Connecticut had more enslaved Africans than any other New England

colony, mostly because of its growing agricultural industry. In Fairfield, most slaveholding households were families of moderate wealth: ministers, public officials, and other prominent members of the community. Colonists needed laborers and turned to the system of slavery to support an expanding economy. Enslaved Africans did domestic, agricultural, and artisan work. The women often worked in sewing and childcare and men were predominantly assigned to farming, animal husbandry, and tasks associated with trades like making shoes or hats.

As early as the 1640s, Connecticut and other New England colonies had created policies that required the return of runaway enslaved men or women to their owners and issued fines for people who were accused of assisting or harboring them. The Black Codes, established between the colonial period and the 1840s, restricted the rights of enslaved and free Blacks, Native Americans, and other people of color. Among other restrictions, they were prohibited from gathering publicly and verbally challenging or disparaging white people. However, these communities

did have the right to challenge these restrictive policies in court.

Nancy Toney

Separated from her enslaved parents in Fairfield, and she lived most of her life in Windsor, Connecticut 1774-1857

Nancy Toney was born into slavery around 1774 to parents Nancy and Toney, in the household of Reverend Andrew Eliot (her father was enslaved in the nearby household of Jeremiah Sherwood). Like her parents, Nancy Toney was treated as property, and “given” to the daughter of Hezekiah Bradley upon her marriage to Dr. Hezekiah Chaffee Jr. of Windsor, Connecticut. She was then passed down through multiple generations of the Chaffee family, eventually receiving her official legal freedom in 1848, when Connecticut abolished slavery. Nancy Toney died in 1857 and is buried in Windsor’s Palisado Cemetery.

Prince and Prime

Enslaved Black men petitioned the Connecticut General Assembly to abolish slavery

1779

Prince and Prime pursued their freedom and insisted on their humanity before public officials. Little is known about their family histories or personal lives, but they were both owned by affluent families in Fairfield. While they were unsuccessful in their petition, their words—"we have Endeavoured rightly to understand, what is our Right, and what is our Duty, and can never be convinced, that we were made to be Slaves”—may have prompted legislators to consider the rising anger among enslaved people towards a government that claimed to be fighting for “freedom.” Perhaps this effort contributed to the passage of the 1784 Gradual Emancipation Act, which stated that enslaved people born in Connecticut after 1784 would legally be free by the age of 25. By 1790, the state’s Black population was half free and half enslaved, but the full abolition of slavery in Connecticut would not come until 1848, just 13 years before the start of the Civil War.

Rebelling Against Restrictions

Enslaved people often fought against their owners.

Bill of Sale for Amos. Fairfield Museum Manuscript Collection, Fairfield, Connecticut Municipal Papers, MS 27.

Escaped Slave Advertisement from Greens Farms (once a part of Fairfield) for Amos, 1787. Fairfield Museum Manuscript Collection.

Slaveholders were concerned that enslaved people, whom they viewed as their property, would rebel against their control. This bill of sale and runaway slave advertisement published in the *Connecticut Courant* illustrate how a man named Amos is considered the property of Nathaniel Adams of Fairfield and documents his attempted escape. But running away meant great risk for enslaved people. Through laws known as Black Codes, white residents had the power to interrogate and apprehend any person of color found outside after nine o’clock at night or seen

away from their owner without written permission. The danger for people like Amos was multiplied when a public deputized as “slavecatchers” had the help of detailed newspaper advertisements posted by owners describing the people they enslaved.

Enslavement and Museum Collections

Learning more about the history of enslavement in Connecticut can be a challenge.

The details of Black history are often erased or hidden by the stories of white members of society, making it difficult for museums, researchers, and scholars to link physical artifacts to enslaved individuals. However, objects that demonstrate the labor typically done by enslaved people in Fairfield can give us a sense of their daily life. Some objects provide insight into the lives and circumstances of the individuals or families that enslaved people in the 1700s and 1800s.

Sarah Rulin

Chose indentured servitude in order to marry

b. 1762

In 1781 in Fairfield, a young Native American woman from Long Island named Sarah “gave of herself” an indentured servitude of 99 years to a man named Simon Couch, Sr. so that she could marry an enslaved African man named Tom, also enslaved by Couch. Some slaveholders encouraged the marriage of enslaved people, in accordance with their Christian faith and belief in the importance of marriage and family. Regardless of their bondage, enslaved people as well as indentured servants tried to make decisions based on their values if they could, considering the happiness and wellbeing of their family and loved ones. Families who had been separated by trade, sale, or inheritance could sometimes visit one another across estates if they lived nearby. During these visits, enslaved people shared meals, swapped stories, pursued love interests, saw extended family, cultivated family traditions, and celebrated milestones.

Fight for Family, Fight for Freedom

Life within the system of slavery was undoubtedly harsh and restrictive for those in bondage, and this was no different in Fairfield or Connecticut. However, enslaved people sought ways to keep their families together, find respite, and cultivate unique traditions. In cases of desperation, enslaved Black men and women chose to take on those who challenged their families' desire to stay together, sometimes in court.

The sad truth was that separation was common in the system of slavery. To counter this reality and keep loved ones close or protected, enslaved people debated with their owners, took their cases to public officials, or made more radical or dangerous decisions like running away with loved ones to reunite with them.

The American Revolution

As Fairfield grew in the 1700s, so did tensions between Great Britain and the colonies.

By the 1770s, after more than a decade of increasing hostility with the British crown due to its attempts to exercise greater control over the colonies, colonists felt the need to act. In 1775, fighting between British troops and colonial armed forces at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts ignited the American Revolution. Before long, Fairfield would be drawn into the struggle.

Trade and the Creation of Wealth

Before the Revolution, the economic power of Fairfield grew as farmers sold their goods in New York, Boston, and the West Indies.

As colonists built wharves and ships at the natural harbors of Black Rock and Southport, Fairfield became more connected to the world. Grain, flax, and livestock were exchanged for sugar, molasses, and rum from the West Indies as well as goods imported from England. As trade

expanded in the 1700s, local merchants and farmers grew more affluent.

Economic success created class distinctions among Fairfield's population. Many of the wealthier residents sought to show their status by spending money. They built bigger houses and churches, purchased new kinds of goods (including luxury items such as full-length mirrors, silver, and clocks), and invested in the ever-expanding trade opportunities. Fairfield's prosperity came partly from participation in the slave trade, and by 1774, Fairfield had the highest percentage of enslaved people in the county.

Fairfield's leading families also became more prosperous by acquiring land and establishing social connections that enabled their children to marry into other wealthy, successful families. As their property and economic prospects expanded, sons of families such as the Burrs and Sillimans were able to attend Yale University,

becoming leaders in the profession of law and in politics and coming to dominate local government.

Mary Fish Silliman

Escaped the burning of Fairfield in 1779

1736-1818

Born to Joseph Fish and Rebecca Pabodie, Mary Fish spent the first fifteen years of her life in North Stonington, Connecticut. Her family then sent her to Sarah Osborne's school in Newport, Rhode Island. After completing her education, she dedicated herself to a life of learning, even quoted as finding it important to always have access to her second husband's library. After the death of her first husband, Fish married Brigadier General Gold Selleck Silliman, and moved to Fairfield in 1775. During the Revolutionary War, her husband was captured by the British and imprisoned on Long Island after he helped form and then lead Connecticut's militia. Silliman, for the safety of her unborn son Benjamin, escaped the Burning of Fairfield in 1779 finding refuge in Trumbull, Connecticut. She helped negotiate her husband's release from

imprisonment, and they returned to their home on Holland Hill in Fairfield.

Revolution Comes to Fairfield

The American Revolution divided the citizens of Fairfield.

Not everyone believed that fighting for independence from Britain was necessary for the good of a new nation. But supporting either side—whether the colonies or the crown—had consequences, sharply dividing communities and even families.

When the American Revolution began, Fairfield men who supported the colonies joined the Continental Army as well as local militia units made up of citizens with limited military training. These militias patrolled the coast and attacked British ships in the Long Island Sound. Farmers throughout the region also played an important role in supplying colonial troops with grain from their fields, cattle, horses, and other goods.

The war came close to home in 1777 when British troops led by General William Tryon landed at Compo Beach (part of present-day Westport) and marched inland through North Fairfield (present-day Weston and Easton). When they arrived at Danbury, the British destroyed the colonists' military supplies and burned homes.

As the British marched back toward their ships, they were attacked by colonial militias at the Battle of Ridgefield and again at Compo Beach. Once again, the British troops overpowered the local militias, but these battles helped strengthen local support for the Patriot cause in the countryside. While the British never launched another inland attack in Connecticut, the coastline would be subject to catastrophic raids two years later.

Caleb Brewster & the Culper Spy Ring

One of the most successful spy operations on either side of the Revolutionary War was the Culper Spy Ring.

As the Revolutionary War progressed, the need for intelligence on British activities to support the cause for independence became clear. A network of spies called the Culper Spy Ring was formed to pass information between British-held New York City to Fairfield and beyond. One member was Caleb Brewster. Born in Setauket, Long Island, Brewster lived in the Black Rock neighborhood of present-day Bridgeport. He commanded a fleet of whaling ships on the Sound, and his familiarity with the Connecticut and Long Island coastlines made him an ideal person for passing coded messages on the activities of British troops. Brewster received messages from Robert Townsend, a merchant in New York City and passed them to Benjamin Tallmadge, ringleader of the spy network. Tallmadge then relayed them to General Washington, who used the information to help defeat the British.

Scan the QR code to learn more about Caleb Brewster and the Culper Spy Ring!

The Burning of Fairfield

As British commanders became increasingly outraged by colonists' resistance, they conducted a series of raids to punish New Haven, Fairfield, and Norwalk civilians and destroy supplies meant for Washington's army.

On July 7, 1779, Isaac Jarvis, commander of the colonial fort at Black Rock, fired a cannon to warn residents that a British fleet had been spotted anchoring off the coast. Residents prepared for attack: livestock was driven to safety; people hid their possessions; and some loaded

wagons with household goods and food and took refuge inland. Others stayed to defend the town. A few remained in their homes, believing the British would not harm them. No one predicted the destruction that was about to occur. The British killed about a dozen civilians and destroyed 83 houses, 54 barns, 47 shops and stores, two schools, the Congregational Meeting House, the Anglican Church, the jail, and the Fairfield courthouse.

The Need to Rebuild

Much of the town center was destroyed during the Burning of Fairfield in 1779. The community had to rebuild. Though buildings were slowly reconstructed, the British attack left an indelible mark on the landscape. When George Washington traveled through Fairfield in 1789 as the nation’s new president, he observed the burned buildings that still remained, as well as area farmers busily preparing goods for market. The legacy of such devastation still resonates in the community today, with commemorative plaques marking the buildings that survived on nearby Beach Road.

While farming and trade were already well established in Fairfield, after the Revolution, new opportunities presented themselves as the nation's economy strengthened. No longer tied to the British Empire, Americans were free to find new markets in Europe, China, and elsewhere. At home, the young nation built roads, ports, and eventually railroads to connect farming communities with cities like Bridgeport, where manufacturing and commerce were leading to rapid growth of another kind.

A Promise of Freedom

In the midst of the fight for freedom from British rule, many enslaved people struggled for their own liberty. During the war, thousands of enslaved men fought for both the British and the colonies, in the hopes of gaining their freedom after the war. Many of those promises of emancipation were not kept. Despite the ideals of all men being "created equal" and provided "with certain unalienable rights" presented in the Declaration of Independence (adopted in 1776) many of the founding document's authors were slaveholders. An initial draft of the Declaration included a

passage written by Thomas Jefferson criticizing enslavement, but it was ultimately removed after much debate. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence was the uncle of local judge Roger Minott Sherman (whose portrait is on view here).

American Colonization Society Certificate, between 1816 and 1844. Fairfield Museum Manuscript Collection, Roger Minott Sherman Papers MS 2 Fairfield Museum Collection.

The American Colonization Society worked to relocate America’s Black population to Liberia in Africa. Local Fairfield residents Roger Minott Sherman and Benjamin Silliman were both members of the Society. While some members believed that Black and white people could not coexist on the same continent, others thought Black Americans would experience less racial discrimination in Liberia.

While a few thousand free Black people would eventually emigrate to Liberia, an overwhelming majority chose to stay in the United States, where they had already established vibrant communities.

Sengbe Pieh (also known as Joseph Cinque). 1840. Nathaniel Jocelyn (1796-1881). Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the New Haven Museum.

In 1840, New Haven portrait artist Nathaniel Jocelyn painted this likeness of Sengbe Pieh, also known as Joseph Cinque. Pieh led a group of 53 enslaved Africans who overthrew their captors aboard the vessel *La Amistad* in July 1839. Accused of murder, they were imprisoned in New Haven. In March 1841 the African defendants won their case in the United States Supreme Court, convincing the federal government to restore their rights as free people. One of their attorneys was Roger Sherman Baldwin, grandson of Roger Minott Sherman (lawyer and politician from Fairfield). With the help of abolitionists, painter Nathaniel Jocelyn and his brother Simeon raised

funds to send the Amistad defendants to Sierra Leone in Africa.

Taking a Position on Slavery

People had many different opinions on enslavement in the years following the Gradual Emancipation Act.

When the Gradual Emancipation Act became law in 1784, slave owners across Connecticut had to confront the beginning of the end of slavery. The Act stipulated that enslaved people born in Connecticut after 1784 would legally be free when they reached the age of 25. But as abolitionists sought freedom for enslaved people, others found ways around the law to maintain the status quo—and their wealth—at the expense of enslaved people. After 1784, Fairfield began the transition to emancipation, though it was not consistent. Recently freed people were often forced to provide labor at significantly lower wages than white workers. In response, free Black Fairfield residents fought back against exploitative work contracts and formed networks and strong communities of their own.

Black-owned homes, businesses, and social clubs became centers for families, leisure, work, and advocacy. The stories of Edwin Bulkley and his daughter Susan illuminate Black residents' experiences in Fairfield.

Susan Bulkley

Daughter of Edwin Bulkley, supported soldiers and youth

1835-1914

Susan Bulkley, born in 1835, lived in a house at the intersection of Judson and South Benson Roads in Fairfield. Her father Edwin farmed the land, while she and her siblings had a fairly quiet childhood. When the Civil War broke out, 26-year-old Bulkley worked with other Black Fairfield residents to send money, clothing, and books to an encampment of runaway slaves at Fort Monroe, Virginia. After the war, she married a Black Civil War veteran and moved to Manhattan. She returned to her old neighborhood in Fairfield in the early 1890s and operated a cottage for The Fresh Air Fund—a program that brought children in need from New York to spend the

summer in the “country” under her care. Bulkley remained in Fairfield until her death in 1914.

Scan the QR code to learn more about William Hallett Green (Susan Bulkley’s son), the nation’s first Black meteorologist.

Edwin Bulkley

Experienced manipulative work conditions after Gradual Emancipation

1802-1881

Edwin Bulkley was born in Fairfield to parents Prince and Priscilla around 1802. His mother had been the legal property of a widow, Rebecca Jennings, who passed away in 1816. It is unclear whether Edwin Bulkley was born free or enslaved, but he entered into an exploitative

arrangement with David Judson, the executor of the Jennings estate. Bulkley worked for him and his wife without pay. In his will, Judson offered Bulkley land with a home and barn as payment, but it would only be granted after Judson and his wife's deaths. Bulkley's experience was unfair, but common for Black people at the time. Nevertheless, he went on to raise a family with his wife Mary in a free Black community in Fairfield near Round Hill Road.

Gradual Emancipation

For enslaved people in Connecticut, the pursuit of emancipation intensified in the 1700s.

During the Revolutionary War, many slaveholders resisted freeing their slaves, yet some felt compelled to grant enslaved people freedom in their wills. Other enslaved people took matters into their own hands. They collected money to purchase their freedom or advocated for themselves in court, beginning the push toward the end of

enslavement. In Connecticut, the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1784 began the legal process of ending slavery, though slavery was not completely abolished in the state until 1848.

Black and Native Communities

Members of enslaved and free Black communities found a common bond with Native American residents.

Black and Native communities faced similar obstacles and began forging connections almost as soon as Africans were brought to the Connecticut Colony as part of the slave trade in the 1600s. Laws written by the Connecticut Colony and the state's Constitution targeted Native and African Americans. Those laws prohibited their free movement, speech, and rights as citizens. Such restrictions prompted these two groups of people to strategically build communities together, where they could advocate for themselves, exercise agency and live with dignity.

One such community was Little Liberia, a neighborhood of African Americans and Paugussett people located in the South End of Bridgeport. Little Liberia began with the purchase of property by John Feeley and Jacob Freeman in 1821. Between the 1820s and the 1850s, the Freeman family and other residents put their efforts into developing a multicultural, diverse community. A stop on the Underground Railroad, Little Liberia became a refuge for enslaved people escaping the South as well as a safe haven for many Black migrants and immigrants, who came from as far as Haiti and Jamaica. With more than 40 structures and 300 residents at its height, Little Liberia was one of the largest and earliest free communities of color in the US.

The Power of Education

Enslaved Black men and women often could not read or write in the 1700s.

Though some enslaved people were taught to read the Bible to ensure their obedience and loyalty to Christian

faith, they were not typically given additional opportunities to further their education. Many slaveholders feared they would use their literacy skills to try to gain freedom. In a few cases, however, enslaved youth in Connecticut were able to attend common schools (a publicly funded school for all citizens) especially after 1784. The Black community also built their own schools, like the Stratfield Special School for Colored Children in the Little Liberia neighborhood of Bridgeport, established in 1845.

Edward Randolph

Moved to Fairfield after the Civil War

1845-1934

Edward Randolph was born into enslavement near Richmond, Virginia, and made his way to Connecticut after the Civil War. Though the details of his journey and his reasons for settling in Fairfield remain unknown, we do know that he moved close to his sister-in-law Ida Miller, and lived with his wife Lottie and six children on Barlow Road in the Round Hill neighborhood of Fairfield. His likeness is documented in photographs taken in Bridgeport

in the late 1800s and in a drawn portrait, both in the Museum's collection. These items tell us that Randolph was successful enough to afford portraits. He was part of a demolition crew that took down the Fairfield House hotel, and helped save a burning barn in town. Randolph was also well-known as a farmer and for his habit of digging for clams at Fairfield's beaches. He died in 1934, the last person in the community with a firsthand experience of slavery.

Building New Communities

Two hundred years after the English settled in Fairfield, the population began to shift.

Immigrants and migrants within the United States were often compelled to leave home in search of a better life, fleeing obstacles because of their race, religion, language, or background. Some of them came to Fairfield, which became increasingly more diverse as people from across the United States and immigrants from Ireland, Sweden,

Hungary, Italy, and Poland settled here. More recent waves of immigration continue to power the region's economy and enrich Fairfield's culture, helping to build the community we know today.

Immigration in Fairfield

Major waves of immigration to the region began in the mid-1800s.

The Great Hunger in Ireland prompted mass immigration to America in the 1840s and 1850s. Irish immigrants took employment in the area as laborers and domestic servants, sometimes displacing African Americans. Although Irish immigrants experienced prejudice for their Catholic religion, Fairfield's Irish population grew to thirteen percent of the total population by 1860. Migrants from other parts of the United States, particularly Black migrants moving north from southern states after the Civil War, also found a home in Fairfield.

As Bridgeport's industrial economy grew in the late 1800s, immigrants found their way to the area to work in the factories. Chain immigration—where individuals settle in an area and family members from their home country follow—brought people of similar ethnic backgrounds together, creating neighborhoods with names like Little Italy and Little Poland. These immigrants established cultural clubs and organizations to help pass their heritage and language down to later generations. Some immigrants eventually purchased land to farm in Fairfield and later built homes.

Immigration did not stop in the 1800s. Today, newcomers come here from all over the world to find work, opportunity, and community.

Who Came to Fairfield?

Finding Home

The stories of Fairfield's immigrants are full of heartbreak and obstacles as well as hope and humanity.

Although their journeys have been quite different, the individuals featured here share the experience of finding new homes in the Fairfield area and rebuilding their lives. Despite the difficult paths that brought them here, each person possesses remarkable optimism and determination. Many were moved by a desire to help other immigrants and their stories help shine a light on issues that many people face around the world.

Domenic Mercurio

Sailor in the Italian Navy and owner of Mercurio's Market

1873-1952

Domenic Mercurio, born in Sicily in 1873, was a sailor in the Italian Navy before he came to the United States. He married Josephine Polito in 1898 and immigrated shortly after. They moved to Bridgeport together the next year, following Mercurio's brother Angelo. There, Mercurio began selling fruits and vegetables door-to-door from a horse and wagon. By 1900, he had established Mercurio's Market, which became a fixture in downtown Fairfield with a reputation for good food, personal service, and home

delivery. The store operated for more than a hundred years, later managed by his sons, Jimmy and Domenic Mercurio, Jr., before it closed in 2005.

Agnes Tobis Kranyik

Grocery and meat market owner
1885-1948

Born in Viszlo, Hungary, Agnes Tobis first immigrated to the United States in search of her father. She lived in Pennsylvania before moving to Bridgeport, where she married Imre Kranyik, also from Hungary. Like many Hungarian immigrants, Kranyik's family made a home in Bridgeport's West End. They later saved up to buy a piece of land in Fairfield's Tunxis Hill neighborhood, where there was room for them to have a garden and chickens. After her husband died in 1923, Kranyik operated a grocery and meat market out of their home to support her four children.

Ely S. Parker

Seneca leader, diplomat, and engineer
1828-1895

Ely S. Parker (born Hasanoanda, later known as Do-ne-ho-ga-wa) was a Seneca leader, diplomat, and trained engineer who served as an aide and Secretary to General Ulysses S. Grant during the Civil War. Parker drew up the documents that Confederate General Robert E. Lee accepted for his surrender at Appomattox, Virginia. After resigning from the Army in 1869, Parker became the first Native person to serve as Commissioner of Indian Affairs. He settled in Fairfield in the 1870s, working in New York City until his death in 1895. After being buried in Fairfield's Oak Lawn Cemetery, the Seneca Nation requested that his remains be relocated. In 1897 he was reinterred in Buffalo, New York, next to his ancestor, Chief Red Jacket.

Betty Deutsch

Immigrated after surviving imprisonment in concentration camps

b. 1927

Born in Hungary, Betty Deutsch survived the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps in Poland and Germany during World War II. Deutsch arrived in the United States in 1950, sharing: "It was very, very

hard. We had to start a new life again. It wasn't easy, not at all, but we tried to make the best of it. It was a beautiful country, and we came here to stay. And we had to go out and work to survive." She and her sister came to the west end of Bridgeport, where some relatives lived and had a bakery. Reflecting on leaving Hungary, she says, "We had chickens, dogs, [beautiful furniture], and you can imagine what we felt. To leave everything behind us, you know…. We never knew what happened to what."

Evelyne Mukasonga

Refugee from Rwanda during the 1994 genocide
b. 1969

Evelyne Mukasonga escaped from Rwanda to Congo after both her parents were killed in 1994 during the Rwandan genocide committed by members of the Hutu majority government. After being imprisoned in Congo, she spent a year in a refugee camp in Benin. Mukasonga came to Bridgeport in 2000 with her young son, and studied to become a dental hygienist. She and her husband, Francis

Kalangala, started an organization called African Families Synergy to help other refugees from eastern Africa.
Of her refugee experience, she says, “It was hard to trust anybody…. [When I left,] the only things I had, I had my Bible, I had my underwear, and…the family pictures, and my black jacket…. You can survive [in America] if you want to. So we help [other refugees].”

Bunseng Taing

Escaped the takeover of Cambodia by the radical communist group Khmer Rouge

b. 1958

Bunseng Taing arrived from Cambodia in 1980 after escaping to Thailand from a Khmer Rouge concentration camp. He was sponsored by his brother, who had recently settled in Bridgeport with help from the International Institute. Taing eventually established a painting business, which he has operated for 28 years. Describing his experience leaving Cambodia, he says, “When the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia in 1975, I was 17 years old. So I was with my family when they…came to our house and told us we had to get out…. So they came last minute

to tell you to get out, and if you didn't get out, they kill you right there. I was rescued and I came to U.S. in April 1980."

Joshua Kangere

Came to the United States as a refugee from the Congo

b. 1976

Joshua Kangere arrived from Congo in February 2017, after spending five years in Nairobi, Kenya, where he applied for refugee status. In his country, he was a medical assistant/nurse in a hospital. Since coming to the United States he has been working in a restaurant.

He says of his refugee experience, "I come from Congo, South Kivu, Uvia is the name of my village, my town. There is a war in my country…. So there I was doctor's assistant, like a nurse. I was a human rights officer in the department of health…. [In America, it] was my first time to work in a restaurant…. If there are things that I don't understand, they show me…. I can say I've found good people in America."

Jatin Mehta

First immigrated to Bridgeport as a student

b. 1940

Jatin Mehta immigrated from Mumbai, India in 1969. Mehta came to the United States as a student, getting his M.B.A. from the University of Bridgeport and working in a financial investment firm. He eventually became a U.S. citizen in 1977. Mehta describes immigrating to America: “My roots are sunk. My one son was born in India but the other son was born here. My parents followed, so my side of the family all of them came…. Everything that I have is because of Bridgeport. My American son, my American-born son, was born in Bridgeport, my first and only job was in Bridgeport, my first house was in Bridgeport. I always felt I always that I owed a lot to Bridgeport, Connecticut, and the United States.”

Maha Karamahad

Left Syria in 2013 with rising conflict

When Syria became too dangerous, Maha Karamahad fled to Egypt, where her son was born and she raised her two daughters. She worked as an English teacher and

translator, applied for resettlement through the United Nations, and came to the United States in 2016. Describing leaving home with one bag, Karamahad says, “It was always there next to the door. And you would have your passport, your, like, official documents, with you…. I was so lucky to have some of my pictures, my kids’ pictures with me…. And, so the last time [I saw my house] was in 2012. I’m lucky because I speak English…. But for other refugees…no English, a whole different culture, a whole different tradition, it’s not easy. A lot of challenges.”

Carmen Goiricelaya

Left Cuba for Venezuela, then immigrated to Bridgeport

b. 1949

In 2003, Carmen Goiricelaya, her husband, and their three children settled in Bridgeport, where her aunt was a dentist. Since 2004 she has worked with new immigrants at the Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants. Goiricelaya says of her experience, “I was born in Cuba, I know that I have the possibility to emigrate to the United States and take my family with me, and that was the first

thing that made me think, OK, I am the mother of three, I can help my family. Leaving behind a life, but starting a new one here. And we, we are really grateful of that decision… all our children are, you know, growing, and they are all of them American citizens now.”