Brister Freeman

— Jeffrey S. Cramer

Thoreau wrote in *Walden*:

> Down the road, on the right hand, on Brister's Hill, lived Brister Freeman, "a handy Negro," slave of Squire Cummings once, — there where grow still the apple-trees which Brister planted and tended; large old trees now, but their fruit still wild and ciderish to my taste. Not long since I read his epitaph in the old Lincoln burying-ground, a little on one side, near the unmarked graves of some British grenadiers who fell in the retreat from Concord, — where he is styled "Sippio Brister," — Scipio Africanus he had some title to be called, — "a man of color," as if he were discolored. It also told me, with startling emphasis, when he died; which was but an indirect way of informing me that he ever lived. With him dwelt Fenda, his hospitable wife, who told fortunes, yet pleasantly, — large, round, and black, blacker than any of the children of night, such a dusky orb as never rose on Concord before or since.

We know very little about this man. It is telling that even in his unconscious attempt to give a story to the unhistoried Brister Freeman, Thoreau confused him with another freed black man, Sippio Brister.

We do know a few things and what we know, and what we don't know, is this: we know Brister Freeman died in 1822 but we do not know where he was buried; we know he was born sometime around 1744, but we do not know where, or whether he was born in slavery or enslaved on the coast of Africa. We know he was 5 feet 7 inches tall, but we do not know if his first name was Brister or Bristol, or even Bristow as Thoreau wrote it in his journal.

Brister was the slave of John Cuming, a wealthy and benevolent man who, among other things, was a firm supporter of the American Revolution. It was perhaps his advocacy for American freedom which led to his allowing Brister to fight in this war. Brister was freed around this time. This may have been either as a condition of his fighting in the war — he enlisted as Brister Freeman not Brister Cuming — or as part of the post-war legal decision under the Massachusetts Constitution that all men were free and equal which eliminated all slavery in the state by 1790.

He was married to a woman named Fenda who was born in Concord in 1751 and died in 1811 at age 60. Together they had had at least three children: Nancy, Edward and Amos. Nancy was born in slavery, Amos was born free, and Edward, who died before his seventh birthday, somewhere in between freedom and slavery. Both Nancy and Amos married. Nancy was married by Emerson's step-grandfather, the Reverend Ezra Ripley, minister of the First Parish in Concord, although it is not clear whether she was married in the church, or whether she had children. Amos had two children, both of

whom died young. Whether Brister Freeman has descendants living today remains a mystery.

Brister had land, now known as Brister's Hill, on the east side of Walden Street. On this land he grew apples, although we don't know what kind of apples. When he died the land was taken by the state because, according to a survey note by Thoreau, Brister "was a foreigner." He had water, or spring, privileges at a spring northeast of Walden Pond, now known as Brister's Spring.

Edward Jarvis, a Concord resident who was 18 when Brister died, reminisced that he was "a passionate negro, profane and suspicious. He was said to have once stolen a haddock and was therefore tormented and hooted by boys. Then he would swear and storm. This gathered boys and men about him who insulted and violated him to greater passion." One such violation is told at great length in the *Centennial of the Social Circle in Concord, 1782-1882*:

> Mr. Wheeler once had a most ferocious bull to kill. He and his men succeeded with some difficulty in getting the animal into his slaughter-house. They were afraid, however, to go in and encounter his fury, and, while outside conferring upon the safest mode of proceeding, Brister Freeman, the celebrated negro, happened along. Wheeler, giving his men the wink, inquired very affectionately after Brister's health, and told him if he would go into the slaughter-house and get an axe, he should have a little job to do. Brister never suspected mischief, at once opened the

> door and walked in, when it was quietly shut upon him, and the appalled negro found himself face to face with the enraged bull. It was already a "case of fight or die," after sundry minuets about the house, the celerity of which would have established a French dancing-master, Brister fortunately spied the axe he had been sent in for, and, seizing it, commenced belaboring his adversary, giving him a blow here and there as he had opportunity. All this while stood Peter and his men watching through the dry knot-holes the valiant exploits of Brister, and cheering him on with the most encouraging roars of laughter. Fortune at length decided in favor of the negro; he laid the bull dead upon the floor, and casting down his weapon of fight, came forth unharmed. But imagine the amazement of his tormentors when at length he emerged, no longer the dim, somber negro he was when he entered, but literally white with terror, and what was once his wool, standing up straight like so many pokers, they could hardly persuade themselves to believe it was Brister; but without waiting for them to identify him, or receive their congratulations for the notable manner in which he sustained himself, the affrighted and indignant negro turned his back upon them and departed.

This story is revealing not for what it tells of Brister, but for what it exposes of the men of the town in which he lived, the conditions of a free black man in the liberal north, and even more of the men who

thought the story worth telling and printing without regret, remorse or apology.

Thoreau wrote that in "a thousand apparently humble ways men busy themselves to make some right take the place of some wrong —" Here, where Brister Freeman lived, grow apple trees. "It is remarkable how closely the history of the apple tree is connected with that of man," Thoreau wrote in "Wild Apples." Here that connection is made manifest: a man, a slave, a freed man; an orchard, a land mined, a land reclaimed. On land which ultimately he could not own, Brister Freeman's name is now indelibly etched in stone. An epitaph may tell us only indirectly that he ever lived but it will insure that he will not be forgotten.

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