

This essay on the Manton Family is originally from "If Jane Should Want to Be Sold: Stories of Enslavement, Indenture and Freedom in Little Compton, Rhode Island," by Marjory O'Toole for the Little Compton Historical Society, 2016. Marjory updated the essay in 2021 with some additional information and images recently shared with the Historical Society.

The Manton Family

"The Only Negroes in Town"

There were the Nickersons and the Mantons. Those were the only Negroes in town. They came down from slave days.... The Mantons lived near Pottersville village between Over left t'Eastward and the Psalming Country. There's nothing of their house but the ruined foundation.

David Patten, Adventures in a Remembered World¹¹⁷

Though Henry Manton was born in North Carolina and arrived in Little Compton prior to 1870 via the Underground Railroad, and Pardon Nicholson's father immigrated from Cape Verde around 1830, David Patten is not wrong in saying the families came down from slave days. If we focus on the women in the family, there are local ties leading back to the time of slavery in the North. Pardon's mother, Catherine Cook, descends from generations of locally enslaved people. Henry's wife, Dora Isabel Johnson, was a New Bedford woman of color. Her father, William H. Johnson's race was "I" for Indian on his death record. He was the son of Caleb Johnson and Mercy Terry Johnson of Dartmouth. He was also a Civil War veteran.¹¹⁸ Dora's mother was Sarah Chevis Rooks.

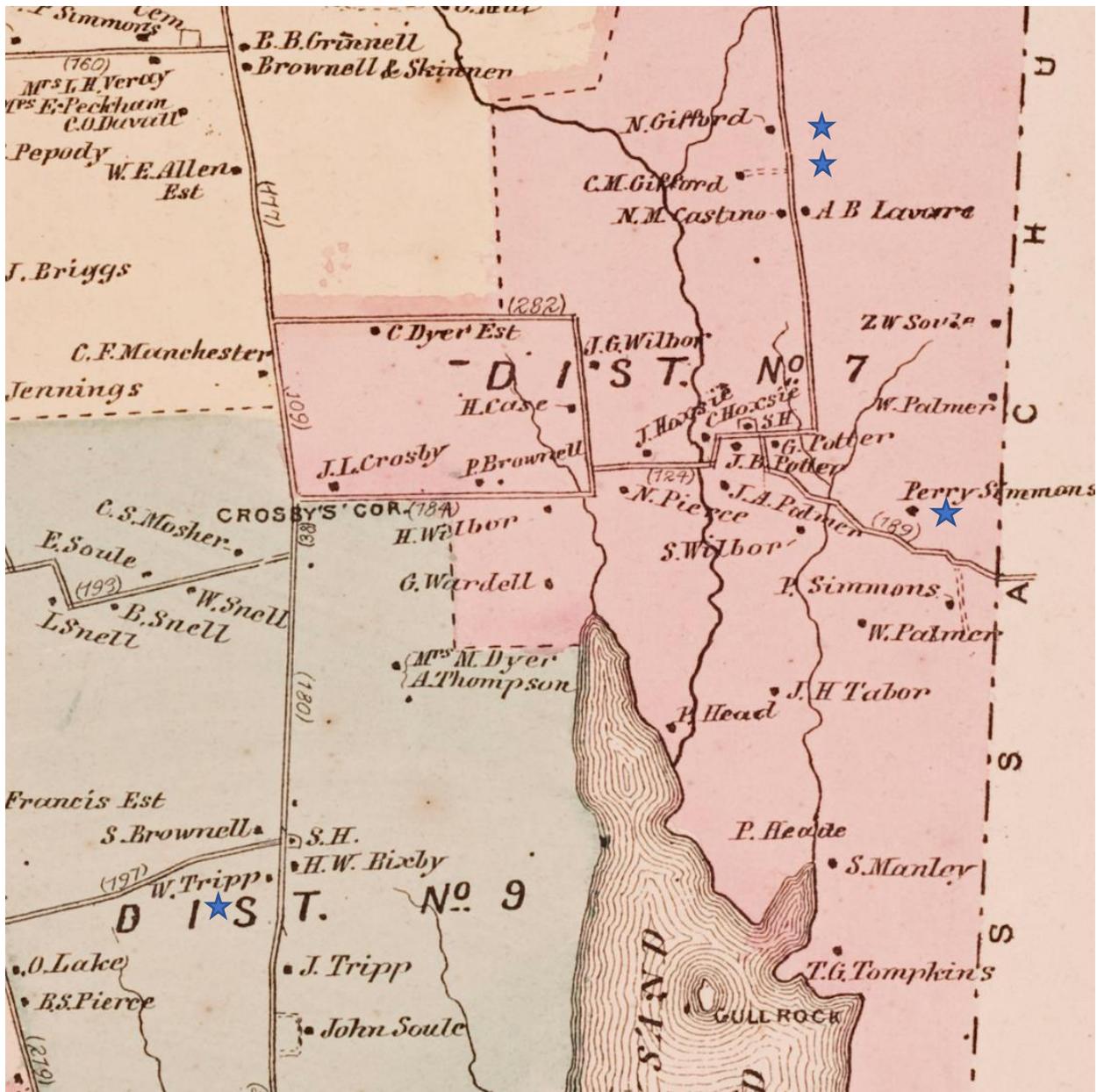
Many Little Compton residents living today remember Henry Manton's descendants as the only African American people in Little Compton. His three grandsons Henry, Raymond and Billy lived on their family's land on Mullin Hill Road off and on throughout the second half of the twentieth century. They also maintained their family ties in New Bedford and attended church and school there.

What most residents do not know is that for a brief moment in history the Mantons were an "anchor" family who helped two other African American families set down roots in Little Compton. For a decade or so at the beginning of the twentieth century Pottersville was a small multi-racial neighborhood with three African American families and twenty-seven Black residents. The children in the three families attended the one-room schoolhouse in Pottersville. At least two of the families also had Indigenous ancestry through William Johnson.



Pottersville School c. 1900. Little Compton Historical Society Collection.

Years earlier Henry Manton also attended Little Compton schools after a long journey from North Carolina. Born around 1860 to an enslaved woman named Susan Tucker, Henry Manton did not know his father's name. By 1870 Henry was living in Little Compton with Nathaniel and Mercy Gifford's family on John Dyer Road. It is likely that Henry, aided by "conductors" on the Underground Railroad traveled at least part of the way North on a ship that landed in New Bedford. It does not appear that his mother came with him. Little Compton resident, Nathaniel Gifford, a known supporter of the Underground Railroad, took Henry home with him to his farm on John Dyer Road. From age 10 to 20 Henry lived with several Little Compton families, working on their farms and going to school at least part time. He was with Clarkson and Frances Gifford, Nathaniel's son and daughter-in-law in 1875, and with William Tripp, the breeder of the Rhode Island Red Hen in 1880. Henry may have had a front row seat, and maybe even played a part, in the development and national distribution of that famous bird.



Henry Manton's Little Compton Homes. Detail from 1870 map.

In January 1884 Henry and Dora Johnson married in New Bedford, and settled in Little Compton, most likely renting a home where their first seven children were born. Henry and Dora Manton purchased their 30-acre Pottersville farm in 1892 for \$500 with a one-year mortgage that they paid in full.¹¹⁹ On more than one occasion Henry and Dora asked neighbors to hold small mortgages on the property, but the land remained in the family even after Henry's death in 1935.¹²⁰

Henry and Dora had 12 children, 10 of whom survived. Their oldest child, Bertha was born in November of 1884 but had passed away before 1900. The couple also lost a two-year old son due to severe burns in 1890.

LITTLE COMPTON.

A Child Burned to Death.

A young son of Henry Manton (colored) was left alone for a few minutes Friday while his mother went out of doors. She heard a scream and hastened in, to find the little fellow, about 2 years of age, in a blaze. When she left the room he had some paper in his hand, and it is supposed he lighted it at the fire. A physician was at once sent for, but before his arrival death had mercifully put an end to the child's sufferings.

The Providence Journal, November 23, 1890.

Most, but not all the Manton children left the area when they were adults. Census records list the surviving Manton children as:

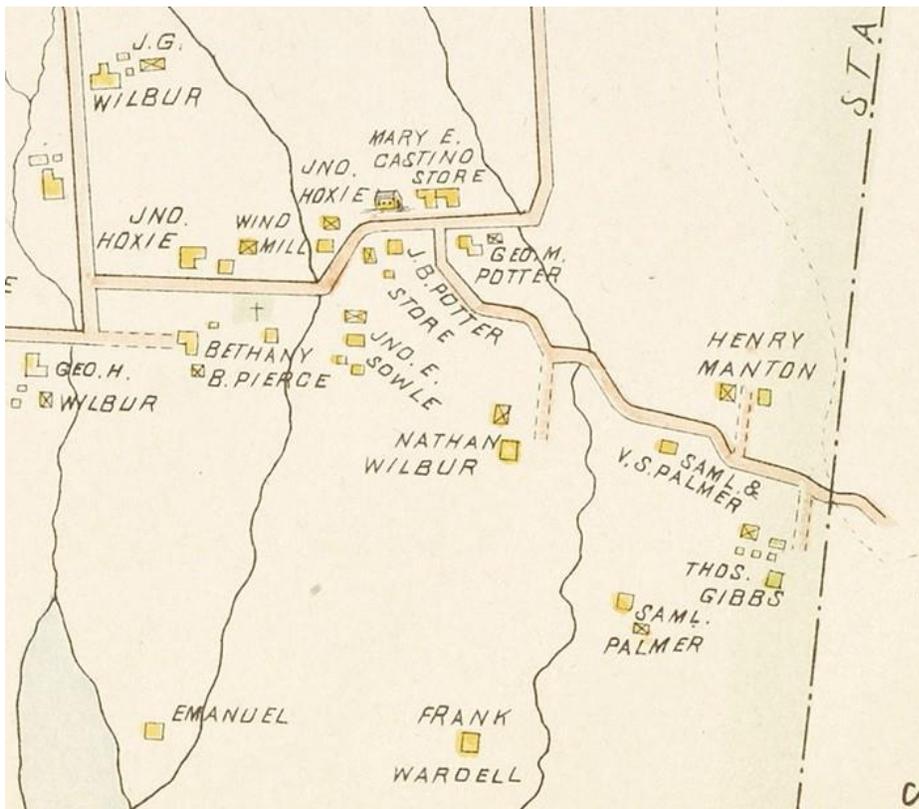
Flora 1886
Walter 1887
Clara 1889
Melvin 1890
Frederick 1892

Ida 1895
Leroy 1898
Everett 1901
Byron 1903
Lillian 1904



Five of the Manton children on the Manchester Farm in Westport. Photograph from Josephine Simmons Manchester's photo album dated 1891. Josephine, a neighbor of the Mantons, labeled this photograph, "Henry Manton's Tribe." Courtesy of Richard Manchester.

Sometime before 1900, the Mantons' residency in Pottersville drew Dora's younger brother Joseph Johnson and his wife Nellie to come to Little Compton to live near them and raise their own large family. The Johnson's rented a property for a while, but in 1908 the Palmer home immediately to the southwest of the Mantons was foreclosed upon and came up for public auction. The Johnsons were the high bidders at \$830 for the house and one acre property. Joseph and Nellie mortgaged a small portion of the purchase price, just \$150, not with neighbors like Henry and Dora had done, but with a more professional lending company in Fall River, named Lincoln and Hood.¹²¹ By 1919 the Johnsons were behind on their payments, and Lincoln and Hood foreclosed upon them.¹²² The Johnsons left Little Compton, and the community has forgotten the twenty years they lived there.¹²³



The Manton's house and barn (The barn is indicated by an X.) as they appear on an 1895 map of Little Compton. Note that their Portuguese neighbor Emanuel is identified by only a first name. Little Compton Historical Society Collection.



The third African American family to settle in Pottersville around 1910 was the Fosters, Benjamin, Julia and their four children. The Fosters came from Connecticut, where Benjamin had worked in a brass factory, and rented a place in the Pottersville area. Benjamin did odd jobs to make a living. The Fosters did not stay very long. By 1920 they were back in Connecticut with Benjamin working in a brass mill again. Their son Ebenezer married the Manton's daughter Ida. Ebenezer and Ida went with the Fosters to Connecticut.

Ida Mae Manton Foster in her later years. Courtesy of her family

Only the Mantons stayed in Pottersville. They were the only Black family in Little Compton in 1920, and they were well-remembered by their neighbors. Dora took care of Abe Quick, born in 1915, while his mother was at work. Abe recalled his time with the Manton family in *Jonnycakes and Cream*.

There was only one telephone in the neighborhood. There was a colored family lived across the street, the Mantons. He was a mason and a plasterer and quite successful. He did all the work at the Point, Warren's Point, Sakonnet Point; built walls, stone walls you know things like that, and he had an automobile and he had a telephone. He was quite a celebrity in the neighborhood.

I used to spend a lot of time over there. Mrs. Manton, she was a midwife. She was half Gay Head Indian and Half African-American. He was the son of a slave, Henry Manton was, and they moved up here and bought this place in the late 1800s, and, as I say, he was very successful. And they had a large family; they had eleven children.

She was a great lady! She used to steep up all kinds of herbs. They had a big room in the back with an iron stove and she'd have these big kettles with all these sticks in there, and she was stirring 'em up, you know, and she'd make the darndest stuff. She'd bring it over in the spring for tonics. You couldn't stand the taste of it. She'd make you take a tablespoon of the darn stuff. Cured everything! Oh, yuh, she was quite a lady. I'll tell you.

They used to baby-sit me. My mother used to be working at Westport. She was companion for a family down there.... So I used to spend a lot of time over there. They were characters, those boys. They all played musical instruments...they had cars and I used to go to Adamsville with them and all over the place. It was a great time.¹²⁴



Henry Manton digging a well at Quaker Hill Farm in 1910 with Arthur Carter. This is probably Friendship Well at Town Landing. Henry is the shorter man in the center of the photo. Courtesy of Brad and Susan Barrett. There are no known photographs of Dora Manton. The photographs of Henry and the Manton children were shared with the Historical Society recently.

As successful as Henry may have been, the family lived a very modest existence. Their property was almost always mortgaged, and Henry, Dora and their son Walter all passed away at the Howard State Hospital in Cranston. The state-run facility was a complex that included prisons, the state mental hospital, the poor house and a medical facility for the poor. Dora had Walter committed to the mental hospital in 1926.¹²⁵ Henry was also there by 1930. Henry passed away in the medical facility in 1935, and Dora did the same in 1937.¹²⁶ Walter and Henry were buried in the institution's cemetery with only identification numbers carved into their gravestones. The family had Dora buried in the Taber Cemetery in Acushnet, Massachusetts.

In 1940 Henry and Dora's son Leroy, a cobbler, was the only person of color living in Little Compton.¹²⁷ His sister Lillian, the Manton's youngest child, married, and eventually divorced, a man named Raymond Woods from Connecticut. Lillian and Raymond lived on the Manton farm in the 1930s.¹²⁸ The Manton-Woods seem to have come and gone from the farm in the 1940s and 50s. Lillian and her children were the next generation of Mantons to be remembered as the town's only Black people.

Neighbor Nate Wilbur remembered playing with the boys, Raymond, Henry and Billy. He was especially impressed one day with their determination to bring an old couch Nate's dad was giving away up Mullin Hill to their home. After some deliberation, the boys ran home and got some roller skates. They put one skate under each leg of the couch and rolled it up the hill. The Manton's old house eventually fell into disrepair. By the 1950s, only the cellar hole from the original farmhouse remained. Terry Quick, a neighbor to the south, remembers Lillian and the boys living in a stone structure with a roof and a dirt floor in the mid-1950s. Lillian, a Seventh Day Adventist, asked Terry to remove his shoes before entering the house, and Terry remembers that the floor was so clean, his socks did not get dirty. Eventually, the Manton-Woods moved into a trailer on the property.

Terry also remembers Lillian grew and acre, or even two, of flowers and sent him home with bouquets for his mother and grandmother. Lillian was known for her piano playing, and her children were also musical. They moved back and forth between Little Compton and New Bedford where the boys attended school. Neighbors remember enjoying the music that emanated from their home.¹²⁹ Tragically, Lillian died in a car accident in 1963.

Barry Peckham had the opportunity to work with all three of Lillian's sons when he was a young man and remembers the influence they had on him as the first people of color he had the opportunity to know. He wrote:

Both Billy and his older brother Henry Woods worked for Raymond Peckham from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s. Being the oldest of Raymond's grandkids, I may remember Billy best and his departure from the family farm felt to me like the loss of a big brother.

Until the late '50s I was merely a spectator on the farm, watching the men perform their many chores and catching stories as they drifted by. I learned that Henry and Billy were half-brothers with the same mother, who moved her family back and forth between Little Compton and New Bedford. The shifting homesteads kept Billy from a formal education. My dad said it was the mother's way of protecting her kids from the thing that is now called racism. Billy consequently couldn't read much, and it surprised me to see him struggle with writing his real last name in the dirt one day, for my benefit. I called him Billy Woods until I was about ten, and he was about twenty.

As a veteran farmhand in his early twenties, Billy was a talkative story-teller, singer, actor, entertainer, body-builder, biker, hot-rodder and chronic competitor. My father Al Peckham may have served as Billy's mentor at that time, and the two would often race each other through tasks like hoeing squash or loading hay, but Billy's role models were Elvis Presley and Cassius Clay. In the middle of a cabbage field, with his mild-mannered brother Henry nearby, Billy would strike a body-builder's pose and yell out, "I am the greatest! And I'm pretty too!"

By age ten I had a social security number and worked alongside Billy as often as possible. It was easy to spend time with him during summer vacation but he did not work on Saturdays, which was a regular workday for Peckhams and other hired hands. My dad told me that the brothers were Seventh Day Adventists and their Sabbath was Saturday.

In hay season, the hardest bales to load were the last few which needed to be hurled to the top of the pile. Billy loved to do this as a show of strength. He would toss his bales like a dodge ball, trying to hit the packer on top of the load. Sometimes they would sail over the load and land back on the ground. If I kidded him about the extra work, he often replied with something like, "You are gonna look pretty funny with a hay bale shoved down your throat!" Over the years, dozens of farm objects were used in the "shoved down your throat" threat.

One afternoon in the early 1960s I spied a different mood on Billy's face as he crossed Peckham Road. He looked angry but also hurt. His mom had passed away that day, the result of a recent car accident. I was told by my folks that a rib had punctured her lung and that she didn't go to a hospital with her injury, fearing the standard dose of discrimination. I can't guarantee that I was told the whole story, considering my age at the time, but it reminded me that my "big brother's" life was a minefield of racial considerations. I tried once to invite Billy into my folks' house and he declined the invitation, standing just outside the front door. My mom explained that he may have felt "uncomfortable" entering a white person's home. These concepts were a wake-up call for a white kid in the early 1960s.

Raymond put forth a persona almost completely opposite to his rambunctious kid brother [Billy], but they each had fashioned characters based upon the same world view. Billy, at least in his Little Compton youth, was a rebel without a cause, pushing back against everything in any way possible. Raymond was more of a Shakespearean

actor, moving through town like a closely watched player on stage and spouting clever, wordy phrases thick with subliminal meaning. Like an actor, Raymond took pains to obscure his authentic self, the better to portray his concocted character. His aim, as I saw it, was to favorably impress everyone he met, and he worked hard at that, harder than most of us.

With Compton Construction Company, Raymond did masonry work, painting and shingling, along with regular construction chores. Every so often we would find ourselves at the same jobsite; these made up most of my best days with Dick Rogers' company. Like his young brother Bill, Raymond's urge was to entertain, engage, impress and inform. He also obfuscated with the best. Straight answers were hard to get. Raymond refused to give away any personal information and would construct his refusals in creative ways until insistent questions put him on defense.

The primary purpose in Raymond's elaborate posturing, it seemed clear to me, was passed down from his mother: like brother Bill, Raymond had acute racism radar. His method was to detect it and then to dance with it, like a boxer in the ring. It wasn't a chip-on-the-shoulder thing. I doubt anyone has ever accused Raymond Woods of that.

One fine summer day we found ourselves prepping and shingling a pyramid-shaped garage roof. The summer people who owned the property took a demeaning tone with us that pushed Raymond's button. I watched as he slipped seamlessly into an exaggerated "Uncle Tom" mode, and then heard the owner speak to him like she would a servant in the Old South. We were warned not to let a single nail linger on the lawn below and were ordered to take special care of the family dog, lest it be struck with falling debris. Raymond's revenge looked like this: hours spent combing the lawn for nails and hours spent cradling the family dog. It took us a week to finish this small roof.

Foreman Eddie Sousa was no fool for Raymond's antics. He sympathized with and supported Raymond's employment whenever possible, and he also scolded Raymond a lot. On one fine fall day I watched Eddie create a fake emergency job for Raymond so that he would have to leave a jobsite where "coloreds" were suddenly unwelcome. Eddie could barely hide his disgust.

K. Barry Peckham, 2015 ¹³⁰

For many Little Compton residents in the 1950s-1970s, most or all of what they knew of African Americans they learned from the Manton-Woods. That education only hinted at the prejudice encountered by people of color in the world beyond almost exclusively white Little Compton. By this time, any understanding of northern slavery and the lives of people once enslaved in Little Compton were very distant and very cloudy memories.