

The Bold Defenders of Timbuctoo

by Dennis Rizzo

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The dark of night finds you wide awake; branches rustle in the winter wind, and shadows in the woods take on lifelike motion. Moonlight shimmers off the trickling brook running through your yard. You startle and tense at the crackle of leaves—a passing raccoon? Or something much more sinister?

The catchers are about. You check the caps on your shotgun yet again, and lay it back in your lap. You shift the armchair a little closer to the window.

You’re not going back...

Just outside of Mount Holly, on the way to the Renape Reservation on Rancocas Road, one passes the remains of a thriving, though never large, community of color. Referred to often just as “Bucto” [buck-toe] by locals, Timbuctoo took its name from the African city in Mali. That city was home to a bustling caravan economy and a world-renowned university—all this during the Middle Ages in Europe.

Our Timbuctoo, however, is located within the modern bounds of Westampton Township in New Jersey’s Burlington County. Though there remains significant scholarly discourse regarding when this community was founded, it was certainly in place during most of the early part of the nineteenth century. It served as an extended family for many free blacks and mulattos (terms of the day), as well as a few self-emancipated former slaves.

This latter group tended to stay only briefly and then move on to safer homesteads, in New York or Canada. Some, however, found the place inviting and adequate to meet their needs in raising a family. Perry Simmons was one such man.

Perry had been in Bucto for ten to twelve years, according to some, living in a tenant house belonging to Allen Fennimore. He was relatively well-respected in the area, and lived with his wife, seventeen year old son, twenty-one year old daughter and two small children.

The primary means of sustenance was day labor, tenant farming, and trade work for the many farms and businesses in the region. Small family plots also provided fresh vegetables and most people had a few chickens or goats. It is most probable that, in performing some day labor, Perry caught the eye of a slave catcher or his agent.

You see, Perry had been audacious enough to emancipate himself and his family from a slaveholder down South. According to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1853, Perry was a criminal, liable to be returned to his master under federal law for stealing himself. Often, a bounty of \$20 to \$50 was offered for the return of the slave. In 1860 that was six month’s salary.

Posters were issued and newspaper ads circulated nationally, expressly for the purpose of returning self-emancipators to their masters. The Mount Holly [West Jersey] region was relatively safe, owing to the large number of Quakers residing there. Still, there were enough entrepreneurs who coveted the bounty for each returned slave to make life dangerous. In Bucto, there was hope through safety in numbers.

With Abraham Lincoln’s recent election foreshadowing a bloody civil war, George Alberti arrived from Philadelphia in December of 1860. He acquired the services of the sheriff (under federal law) and a few locals looking for a hot time. The raiding party consisted of Alberti, a black former resident, Caleb Wright, and six to eight others, some coming from Philadelphia via Camden. Perry was waiting, but uncertain of the willingness of his neighbors to risk arrest and jail for helping him, an escaped slave.

Locals recall this encounter as the “Battle in the Swamp”—it took place near Timbuctoo in December 1860. The community of Timbuctoo straddled portions of what is now Rancocas Road and went as far South as the Rancocas Creek. The “battleground” could have been at any point in this area, which is swampy and full of streams and marshland. It is very easy to defend and difficult to locate someone who wishes to remain hidden.

Overwhelmed, Perry ran to the attic, awaiting his inevitable fate. To his surprise and delight, however, his neighbors came out in support. The community respected this resident and came to his aid, firing muskets and pistols in return to the fire of the bounty hunters. Henry Shinn relates that several people were injured, though not much factual evidence exists about

this engagement. Mr. Simmons stayed in his attic all night, but was never captured. It is also related that this was one of two failed attempts to capture Perry and put him back into slavery.

We have the following reference from the *New Jersey Mirror* from February 13, 1862:

Perry Simmons, the colored man, whose attempted arrest as a fugitive slave, on two occasions, created considerable excitement in our neighborhood, died in Timbuctoo, a week or two ago. Perry had not been well since the last attempt to capture him, in consequence of taking a severe cold on that freezing night. It will be recollected that he was forced to fly suddenly from his bedroom to the garret, where he was obliged to remain till morning, suffering severely from the cold. Perry is at last beyond the reach of his Southern master.