

HISTORY

A place to 'sit and think'

Stone marker commemorates freed slave's home

By Cheryl Lecesse

clecesse@wickedlocal.com

Saturday morning, residents living near the Brister's Hill portion of the Town Forest, on Walden Street by Route 2, may have eaten their breakfast to an odd whirring sound — the sound of sandblasting on rock.

Those who wandered over would have found Michael Cedrone Jr. using a tool that resembled a water hose to sandblast stenciled words onto a flat stone, not far from the handicapped parking spaces by the Brister's Hill trail. The stone and the words now engraved in it mark the approximate location where Brister Freeman built his house. Why is this worth marking? Freeman was exactly that — a freed slave, finally able to build a house on his own land.

This project is one of several on the Drinking Gourd Project's agenda that may be less high-profile than the Robbins House restoration, but nevertheless just as important to the organization's mission — to shed light on and to preserve Concord's abolitionist and African American heritage.

"We're just hoping it piques people's curiosity," said Dave Fisher, landscape designer and stone marker co-project manager.

The stone marker sits at the convergence of two trails, oriented both toward the location of the house and toward the paths.

"It gives [trail walkers] a place that they can sit and think about things," Fisher said.

"It also fits in so nicely with the Toni Morrison bench we got," said Polly Attwood, vice president of the Drinking Gourd Project. The bench by the Robbins House, Attwood said, also gives visitors a chance to sit and think about the area's historical significance.

The stone engraving tells visitors about the location of Brister Freeman's home, and includes a quote from Henry David Thoreau's "Walden:" "Down the road, on the right hand, on Brister's Hill lived Brister Freeman...there where grow still the apple-trees which Brister planted and tended..."

Brister Freeman, the slave of John Cuming (the namesake of the Emerson Hospital building), acquired a piece of land off of what is now Walden Street after he was freed in the late 1770s. Here he lived with his wife and children. Today walkers can still see an elongated heap of raised ground, which Attwood said is a ditch fence. The ditch fence, also called a "ha-ha," literally fools animals into staying in one place because it plays with their depth perception, Fisher said.

"We think that he had animals as well," Attwood said.

Being free, however, did not mean an easy life was ahead for former slaves in Concord, Attwood said.

This land where Freeman made his home was on the outskirts of town and had been deemed unsuitable for farming.

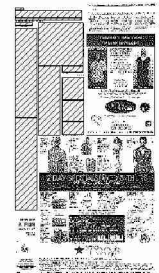
"The freed slaves were really pushed out to the margins of Concord, socially and geographically," Attwood said.

There's not much information about how freed slaves lived in Concord. Thoreau's mention of Freeman in "Walden" is an anomaly, Fisher said. Attwood said the Drinking Gourd Project relies on deeds, tax rolls, census documents and wills in its research, filling in the gaps with any archeological finds and studies.

"It's a big puzzle at this point, but we're hoping to find more information," said Fisher.

The commemorative stone itself is not native to the Brister's Hill area, but is native to Concord — it comes from Fisher's front yard. After working with a stone manufacturer, Fisher thought it would be more appropriate for the stone to come from within town. Fellow Alcott Dad and contractor Mark White donated the time and equipment to move the rock from Fisher's yard to its site within the Town Forest.

The engraving took about three hours to complete. Cedrone and his father, Michael Sr., first applied an epoxy cement to the rock that would hold down a thick mat stencil, sandblasted the 280-letters into the rock, applied a



black paint so the words would stand out, and removed the stencil and cement.

A \$2,000 grant from the Foundation for Metrowest funded the Brister Freeman marker project.

Attwood said the group hopes to install other commemorative markers around

town, including at Peter Hutchinson's grave in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery and at Walden Pond.

"It's an important thing that we've done," said Attwood, "and it's a start."

 **ONLINE EXTRA** Images of the stone marker's creation at wickedlocalconcord.com



Stone engraver Michael Cedrone Jr. uses a sandblaster to carve words into a new stone marker for the approximate location of freed slave Brister Freeman's house in the Town Forest Saturday morning. WICKED LOCAL PHOTO BY CHERYL LECESSÉ

Original source material contains defects