

# FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM

## The African American Blew Family of Stoutsburg

The starting point for research on the African American Blew family has to be the scenic Stoutsburg Cemetery off Province Line Road, perched high above Route 518. Among the many stones in this idyllic historically African American burial ground are markers for JUDITH BLEW, MOSES BLEW, MARY BLEW, and SUSAN MINAH. The inscriptions (below) are detailed and tell a story by themselves.



Attractive Stoutsburg Cemetery, looking north.  
Photo courtesy Jack Davis

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**Judith Blew** – In Memory of Judith, relict\* of Thomas Blew and Mother of Moses Blew died Aug. 1857 in the 94th year of her age [So, there was a Thomas Blew who married Judith. He died long before her. Judith was born about 1763 and was the mother of Moses]

**Moses Blew** – Moses Blew, died Aug. 1874 in the 88th year of his age [So Moses was born about 1787]

**Mary Blew** – In Memory of Mary, wife of Moses Blew, died Jan. 19, 1864 in the 77th year of her age [So Moses married Mary, who was also born about 1787.]

**Susan Minah** – In Memory of Susan, relict of Joseph Minah, and sister of Mary Blew, died Nov. 1853 in the 77th year of her age [So Mary's older sister (in-law?) was Susan, born about 1776. Susan married Joseph Minah, who died long before her.]

\*Relict is an old fashioned term for the widow of a man who she long outlived

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By examining the "white" Blew families in the vicinity, I hoped to learn important information about the African American Blew family. The name Blew was originally written Blau and belonged to a Dutch family

that first settled in New Amsterdam (New York) in the 17th century. Many Dutch families spread south from New York into Somerset County in the 18th century. They often brought slaves with them. MICHAEL BLEW, born about 1704, apparently came to the area just east of Stoutsburg around 1740. His father John had owned about 500 acres south of current Route 518 in the vicinity of Blawenburg (which was named after this family). The land which Michael bought from his father included some acreage along the Great Road, where Michael operated a mill at an early date.

MICHAEL BLEW had children by a first wife who died in 1769, when he was 65. He then married a much younger woman, ELINOR "NELLY" HOLLINSETT, and had sons MICHAEL and DANIEL, who were born in the 1770s. When MICHAEL BLEW, SENIOR died in 1786, his estate was probably not easily settled. There was the question of who would run his large farm of 360 acres. He had two sons who were under age (teenagers) and needed to be provided for. His older sons were in their 60s.<sup>1</sup>

We know from tax records that Michael had a slave (and only an adult male slave would be listed as "taxable") as early as 1779. The inventory of MICHAEL BLEW's 1786 estate listed many possessions, and unfortunately slaves were among them. Following is the human "property" of MICHAEL BLEW at the time of his death and the values (in English pounds) assigned to them:

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Negro man named Tom – 50 pounds; woman named "Jonah" and child (64 or 69 pounds); boy Charles (45 pounds); boy Neane (40 pounds); boy Josha (30 pounds); girl Patti (20 pounds)<sup>2</sup>

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The writer believes that "Jonah and child" listed above, refers to Judith (nicknamed "Judah") and her infant son Moses (who we know was born ca. 1786). Their relationship, if any, to the other boys and girls listed above is uncertain.

A newspaper advertisement in 1786 regarding the estate of this MICHAEL BLEW stated that his property included "a likely negro wench, 3 negro boys, and 1 girl, from 4 to 14 years old." The advertisement indicated that the slaves listed were to be sold privately (where the rest of the farm equipment and household goods were to be sold at auction). This MAY indicate

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In Stoutsburg Cemetery, looking south toward Route 518, the stones of Moses Blew, Mary Blew, and Susan Minah stand in foreground. Photo credit: Jack Davis

a human impulse to keep these children from being sold to strangers at auction. The description of the slaves for sale lines up well with the slaves listed in the estate inventory above, with the exception of Thomas (nicknamed "Tom") (who was undoubtedly needed on the farm) and infant Moses (who would probably stay with his mother). In the will of MICHAEL BLEW, he left a "negro wench" to his widow. We assume this refers to JUDITH, but that for some reason widow NELLY BLEW did not wish to keep her as her slave.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that the MICHAEL BLEW estate could not be fully settled until Michael's sons MICHAEL and DANIEL, came of age. When they reached the age of 21, they could legally take possession of the land they had been given in their father's will.

The records of tax ratables covering the Blawenburg area show the following very interesting entries:

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- 1779 – Michael Blew, Senr – 360 acres, 1 slave [note: Michael died in 1786]  
 1786 – Tom Negrow – householder (i.e. house and minimal plot of land)  
 1788 – Tom Negrow of Blew – 210 acres (i.e. farm land)  
 1789 – Blue, tom Negro – 210 acres  
 1790 – Blue, Tom Ne – 210 acres  
 1791 – tom Nagrow of Blew – 210 acres  
 1792 – Blue, tom Ne – 210 acres  
 (Note the evolution of a surname for Tom seen in the above entries)  
 1793 – Blew, Daniel - 210 acres [NO entry for Tom this year]<sup>4</sup>
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Of additional interest is that in 1788, a financial account from the estate of MICHAEL BLEW, SENIOR indicated that the estate paid "for...liberating Negro Tom 10-0-0" (ten pounds). Putting these facts together, it appears likely that Tom took over 210 acres of the 360-acre farm on behalf of the estate and ran it for several years. There was some kind of financial arrangement in which Tom, obviously highly trusted and capable, was given his freedom by the estate executors and was nominally leasing the land (and he would thus be taxed for it) and running the farm, dividing produce and profits between the white Blew family and his own family. Helping to confirm this theory, in 1793, DANIEL BLEW, the elder of Michael's young sons, turned 21 and took possession of exactly 210 acres. At the same time, THOMAS BLEW disappeared from the tax list.<sup>5</sup>

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## INSPIRATION FOR THIS STORY

I first became interested in the African American Blew family of Stoutsburg several years ago while researching the history of the Stoutsburg crossroads (at Route 518 and Province Line Road). The crossroads, at the boundary between Hopewell (in Hunterdon County till 1838) and Montgomery (in Somerset County), was once home to a tavern and several businesses. I noticed several deeds in the area that mentioned Moses Blew, who seemed to be a successful African American farmer in the early 19th century, which was interesting. My curiosity was revived a couple of years later when I heard Beverly Mills and

Elaine Buck speak about the Stoutsburg Cemetery, and discovered that they were also interested in learning more about Moses, who is buried in the cemetery. Both Beverly and Elaine gave me enthusiastic support on researching the Blew family. They are devoted to shining much-needed light on the history of African Americans in our area, through their involvement in the Stoutsburg Cemetery Association and the planned Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum. Visit [www.stoutsburgcemetery.org](http://www.stoutsburgcemetery.org) for more information. —JD



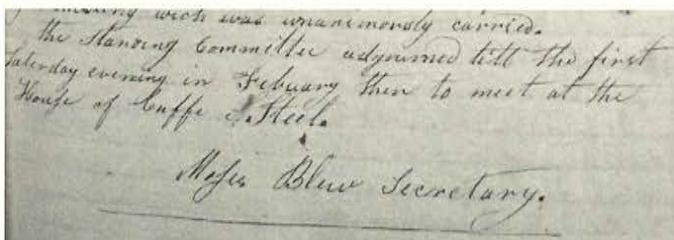
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Tom next appears on the 1802 tax list for Montgomery Township as "Blew, Thomas Negro," a "householder" with 2 horses, 2 cows, and 1 dog. He did not then own any farm acreage. Tom perhaps continued to work on the Blew farm, or elsewhere, as a farm hand. It is interesting to note that the records of Doctor BENJAMIN VAN KIRK, who lived in the same neighborhood, contain entries in the late 1790s for medical visits to the family of "Free Tom, the Priest." Further research is needed to determine whether this might refer to THOMAS BLEW. We know Thomas died by 1805 – as in that year JUDITH BLEW "widow" appeared on the tax list instead of Tom. Also in that year, deed records show that SUSANNAH LANE, a widowed white woman, sold 1/2 acre of land to "JUDE BLAW and MOSES BLAW," the mother and son. Their small lot is very close to the southeast corner at Stoutsburg, where an old Dutch Colonial house now stands. The writer believes this was the house of Moses and Judith. SUSANNAH LANE was elderly, and it is possible that the Blews (including Thomas prior to his death) had been her tenants and/or employees before the sale.<sup>6</sup>

Moses and his mother Judith were neighbors to Doctor Van Kirk, whose home (and mill) were just down the mill lane which later became Province Line Road. The doctor's medical records, which still exist, show visits to the MOSES BLEW household. Moses paid the doctor for his services in a combination of cash and agricultural work (harvest and mowing grass), a common type of arrangement at the time. In addition to medical services, Moses also paid Dr. Van Kirk for pasturing his mare.<sup>7</sup>

In 1809, the records of the Old School Baptist Church in Hopewell show that "Jude Blue" was received into communion on the same day as members of the Stout and Weart families, her neighbors on the Hopewell (Hunterdon) side of Province Line Road.<sup>8</sup>

Moses purchased an additional six acres in 1811 adjoining his corner house lot, presumably for farming, yet by 1814 he had decided to move on. In that year, he and Judith sold the 6.5 acre plot in



Minutes Book, African Association of New Brunswick, with page of minutes from 1817 signed by Moses Blew, Secretary (source: Rutgers Univ. Special Collections). Photo credit: Jack Davis



This is likely the house occupied by Judith and Moses Blew, 1805-1814, in the southeast corner at Stoutsburg. Photo credit: Jack Davis

Montgomery. In the deed, Judith is described as "of Hunterdon County," while Moses is "of Middlesex County." Possibly Judith remained in the Stoutsburg area, on the Hopewell (Hunterdon) side, where she could have worked and lived in one of the nearby households. She remained a member of the Old School Baptist Church for many years. In 1815, Moses appeared on the tax list for Franklin Township in Somerset County as "Blew Moses B.M." (black man). This could place him in the New Brunswick area, near the border between Middlesex and Somerset Counties. To this researcher's surprise while reading a book about New Jersey's African American history, he stumbled on a reference to the "African Association of New Brunswick," which operated from 1817 to 1824, with one "Moses Blew" having served as secretary! The minute book, kept in part by Moses, is in the collection of Rutgers University.<sup>9</sup>

By 1829, Moses had returned to Stoutsburg, where he purchased a large farm plot of 144 acres in Hopewell and a 29 acre woodlot in Amwell, which was all for about \$4,000. He used mortgages to help fund the

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1875 map with overlaid plot of the 144 acres Moses Blew bought in Stoutsburg in 1828, the 100 acres he sold in 1849 and the 44 acres sold in 1852. The two small rectangles show the pre-1829 cemetery and its 1868 expansion. The intersection at bottom right is the current Route 518 & Province Line Road. Plotting courtesy of David Blackwell.

purchase. The Hopewell farmland was “up the hill,” just north of the lots that border on Route 518 (see map, courtesy of David Blackwell). This large tract specifically excluded “a Burying ground part of which is enclosed” of about .28 acres. This burying ground is part of the current Stoutsburg Cemetery! The land was sold to Moses by MARY SEXTON, who described it as an inheritance from DAVID STOUT, Senior, her father, in the deed. Per DAVID BLACKWELL, this land is a part of the earliest land owned by the Stouts in Hopewell Township, and he believes the burying ground could have been an 18th century cemetery for African American slaves owned by the Stout family and other families in the area.<sup>10</sup>

Moses seems to have been a dynamic, risk-taking businessman. In 1835, he added to his land holdings, purchasing a 12-acre lot in Montgomery Township at a sheriff’s sale. This property was apparently just east of the lot that Moses and his mother had owned years before. By 1849, Moses had apparently moved across the Province Line to Montgomery. At the same time,

he sold 100 acres of his 144 acre Hopewell farm, perhaps to raise money for a new venture. In 1850, Moses purchased a tannery in south Trenton which had previously been owned by FRANCIS CLOVER, an African American man. Moses was listed in the Trenton directory of 1850 under “Tanners and Curriers.” This business venture seems to have failed, for in 1852, it appears that Moses became insolvent, and lost the remaining 44 acres in Hopewell, as well as the tannery. I am not certain what happened to the land in Montgomery.<sup>11</sup>

By 1860, Moses and his wife Mary were living in West Amwell. His mother, Judith had died the previous year. Mary died in 1864. By 1870, Moses was living in an African American household in Raritan Township (Flemington area). He died in 1874 in Philadelphia at the age of 94, and his remains were returned to the cemetery on the peaceful Stoutsburg hillside, where he had once lived.<sup>12</sup>

While Moses lost control of the 144 acres he had once farmed in Hopewell, the fate of the Stoutsburg cemetery by his property was secure. In fact, it was to expand. In 1868, RANDOLPH STOUT and his wife sold a .34 acre piece from the land Moses had once owned, which was adjacent to the “old cemetery,” to three African American men: STACY STIVERS, MOSES BLEW (both of Hunterdon), and HENRY LANE (of Somerset), for \$30. These must have been the cemetery trustees. It was stipulated that the land was only to be used as a burying ground and to be accessed by the same lane which provided access to the older part of the cemetery.

There are many unanswered questions raised in this article, leaving avenues for future researchers to pursue. Moses and his father Thomas were clearly dynamic men (and their wives must have been powerful figures as well). They may have left more records of their activities. The religious life of African American families was very important, but we know little about that of the Blew family. It is unclear when Moses and Mary married and whether they had children. Was ELIZABETH A. BLUE, aged 21 in the 1850 census, a daughter of Moses and Mary? A grand-daughter? What became of her? Why did Moses die in Philadelphia?! Do family photographs exist? Etcetera! We look forward to learning more.

— Jack Davis

**END NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> National Blue Family Association, website: [freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~bluefamily/genealogies/early.html](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~bluefamily/genealogies/early.html); Skinner, Pauline K., *The Ancestry of John Blew, Hampshire Co., Va., from John Blaw Sr., Somerset Co., NJ*. Newark, DE: 1973; Baker, *Family Burying Grounds, Montgomery, Somerset Co., NJ*, Revised, 1993

<sup>2</sup> Probate Records, William Blew, Sr., NJ State Archives (continued on page 839)



# THE MERCER AND SOMERSET RIGHT OF WAY

On November 19th, 2016, railroad historian, JOHN KILBRIDE, invited HVHS board members to walk portions of the former Mercer and Somerset railroad right of way to explore some of the remaining artifacts and structures from the railroad that was only active for a brief period of time in the 1870s. The railroad ran from Somerset Junction, which is along the Delaware river across from Jacob's Creek Road, up to Millstone, NJ. Kilbride had organized a bus trip along the right of way in April 1992 and has provided talks based on the pictures and material he has collected over the years since.



Explorers begin carpool journey at historical plaque on new Jacob's Creek bridge. Photo credit: Hilary Burke

Many artifacts in the Hopewell Valley area are still visible, but several from the northern portion of the railroad have disappeared. Some of the structures disappeared due to a couple of housing developments in Montgomery that have obliterated the right of way.



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<sup>3</sup> NJ Gazette, 2/6/1786

<sup>4</sup> Rev War era tax ratables, NJ State Archives

<sup>5</sup> Somerset Co. - Surrogate's Office - Misc. Estate Papers at NJSA

<sup>6</sup> NJSA RevWar tax lists; Dr. Van Kirk Medical Records, Hopewell Museum (on mfilm at NJSA); Somerset Co. deeds

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Van Kirk medical records

<sup>8</sup> Gedney, Hopewell Town Records

<sup>9</sup> Somerset Deeds; Somerset Tax Records; "African Association of New Brunswick Minute Book", RU Archives

<sup>10</sup> Hunterdon deeds; Discussions with David Blackwell

<sup>11</sup> Montgomery deeds; Hunterdon deeds; Mercer deeds

<sup>12</sup> US census records; NJ death records; Philadelphia death records



John Kilbride's encore presentation of his Frog War talk on Jan. 11 - a joint HVHS/Mercer Co. Library program. Photo credit: Bob Warznak.

The most prominent structure that still exists may be the Pennington Station which is along West Delaware Avenue, just past Route 31. Although the station was rotated forty-five degrees from where it originally stood, it still retains much of the same character that it had in the 1870s. Inside the structure, one can still see the area where the ticketing office once was.

When visiting a culvert along Stoney Brook Road, we encountered a walker. After explaining our expedition, she explained that there was a decaying railroad car that was not too far off into the woods. Much to our disappointment, we later discovered that it was an old tractor trailer and not a railroad car.

Along our journey, we discovered that the Hillsborough station, which existed in the general area of Hillsborough Road and Willow Road, may have been torn down and the materials from it used to build a garage closer to the intersection. The station, which had a later life as a post office, general store, and a blacksmith shop, was last known to be standing in the 1930s.

—Robert Warznak

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