An Invisible Presence: African Americans in a Rural New Hampshire Town 1860 to 1940

Preface

Gilmanton is a small town in Belknap County, New Hampshire, twenty miles north of the state capital Concord. Over the last ten years, the author has concentrated on the history of the town from 1860 to 1930. An obvious observation in his studies has been the lack of African Americans in Gilmanton and surrounding towns. The story of a black minority in a small New Hampshire town in the post-Civil War years has not been told. This work is an attempt to tell at least part of that story.

This study is highly dependent on census statistics. Unfortunately, detailed U.S. census statistics are missing for the year 1890 due to a 1921 fire, there are blanked out portions of various census pages in different years and the handwriting of many census-takers was illegible. Particularly frustrating is that their "m" for mulatto is often indistinguishable from the "w" for white. Furthermore, a person's color was frequently recorded differently in one census from another: the determination of a person's color was left to the census-taker. For consistency, however, the author has used census results except in obvious situations. The consequences of the census problems is that African Americans were undercounted, but not enough to change the basic conclusions which follow.

The author has developed a large amount of the analysis himself, but he would be remiss not to mention the fifteen years of work that Jane Wescomb of Epsom, New Hampshire, has done in studying the Battis family which was intermarried with several other local black (and white) families. Her knowledge has "put the meat on the bones" of this work. This presentation is copyrighted in the author's name, but he gives permission to Jane Wescomb and the Gilmanton Historical Society to use this material with attribution in any publication or presentation.

An Overview of the State of New Hampshire Black Population

The most obvious observation is that the state's African American population was small, at one point the second smallest in any state except for Nevada. New Hampshire never had a large slave population due to an absence of plantation agriculture. The state's slave population never exceeded five between 1810 and 1857. Since slavery was not a local issue, it was not banned under New Hampshire law until 1857:

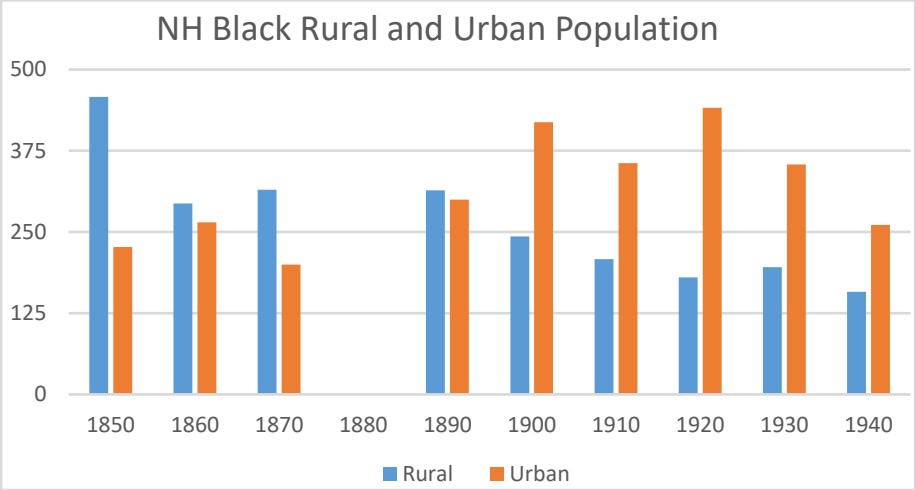
> The Negro Law of New Hampshire (1857):
>
> Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court convened, that neither descent, near or remote, from a person of African blood, whether that person is or may have been a slave, or color of skin, shall disqualify any person from being a citizen of this State or deprive such person of the full rights and privileges thereof.

Interestingly, the 1783 New Hampshire Constitution granted the vote to all free men, and blacks could legally participate in its political process:

> Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by this state on account of race, creed, color, sex or national origin.

New Hampshire's Black Population

From 1860 to 1940 the African American population neither reached 1000 nor exceeded 0.2% of the state's population. As is shown in the graph below the majority of New Hampshire's black population was in rural areas until 1900. The U.S. census defined a rural area as a town with less than 2500 people.



Source: US Census
Notes: No rural-urban count is available for 1880. The 1930 urban population has been corrected for obvious census errors

The black rural population declined because New Hampshire's agricultural economy was reduced as the country took advantage of better growing areas and improved transportation. The depression which commenced in 1929 greatly reduced the number of blacks in non-rural areas.

An 1870 United States census summation included a listing of the number of blacks in each New Hampshire rural town in the censuses of 1850, 1860 and 1870. More than one-third of the towns had no black residents recorded in any of the years. More than one-quarter had one or two people. For these towns the black presence was almost invisible for most white citizens. Over one- third of the towns had three to nine black residents in at least one census year. The result is that only ten of the towns had ten or more African American residents recorded in any of the three censuses. The reader will notice below that only five of the towns had ten or more people in two separate censuses. The reader will also notice that the number of people could vary widely from one census to another. This variance often arises from what the author calls the "two families effect." In all cases except Canterbury the departure of the two largest black families would drop a town's African American community below 10.

Below are shown the black populations of the ten towns:

Towns with at Least Ten Black Residents from 1850 to 1870

		Black population		
Town	County	1850	1860	1870
Belmont	Belknap	NA	20	4
Canterbury	Merrimack	18	36	18
Gilmanton	Belknap	11	6	13
Goffstown	Hillsborough	11	10	12
Hanover	Grafton	5	5	10
Meredith	Belknap	10	0	1
Pittsfield	Merrimack	1	12	4
Sutton	Merrimack	3	11	19
Walpole	Cheshire	11	0	0
Warner	Merrimack	17	11	3

For more understanding of the African American experience, the author looked in detail at the family listings in the 1880 census for sixty rural towns in the counties of Belknap, Rockingham and Merrimack. This census was chosen because it was the first to list family relationships and because it is for the year of the highest number of blacks in Gilmanton between 1850 and 1940. For contrast, the 1880 censuses for the urban Concord in Merrimack County and Portsmouth in Rockingham County were studied in detail. In 1880 these two municipalities had the largest African American populations in the state. The conclusions from the detailed study include:

- African Americans in the cities were more likely than their rural counterparts to come from out of state. In 1880 Concord most the African American male heads of families were born in the Deep South.
- African Americans in cities were far more likely to be in the servant class than their rural counterparts.

- Many black servants were from the Deep South, and they were more likely to come from the South in the cities than in the rural areas.
- Approximately half of black marriages in rural areas were of black and white couples. In the cities the majority of marriages were between black and black. Racism was probably quite evident in a city where blacks were clearly in subservient occupations. In the small towns, however, a large percentage of both whites and blacks were small farmers, farm laborers and common laborers. They had similar challenges in an agricultural economy.
- Blacks were labelled as "paupers" in the censuses far more frequently as a percentage of their population than whites. They frequently resided in "poor farms" established by towns and counties.
- The number of blacks in a rural town had more to do with the size of black families than the number of family units.
- In Belknap County plus three towns abutting Gilmanton, a large percentage of all black residents came from a limited number of families. In Gilmanton this fact was especially true.
- A 1910 U.S Census analysis showed that of 564 African Americans in New Hampshire 234 were born in New Hampshire, 45 in Massachusetts, 13 in Vermont and 11 in Maine. Seventy-four were born in Virginia, 32 in North Carolina and 30 elsewhere in the Old South. In Gilmanton as well as all of Belknap County only one in five African Americans were from outside New Hampshire.

An Introduction to Gilmanton

The soil of Gilmanton is thin and the terrain hilly. The U.S. Agricultural Department classifies only four percent of the land as prime farming land. The winters are extreme and "mud season" in the spring turns unimproved roads into a thick, brown soup. In the early nineteenth century, the opening of the West by the Erie Canal and the early railroads made Gilmanton increasingly non-competitive in major crops such as corn and wheat. Hay was the major remaining crop and was used to feed cattle, horses and a declining sheep population.

Gilmanton's Early Years

Gilmanton was first settled by non-Native Americans in 1761, when Benjamin and Hannah Mudgett trudged through the late December snow to settle on what is today known as Pancake Hill. Prior settlement had been delayed by the ferocity of raids by the St. Francis Indians. When the New England phase of the French and Indian War drew to an effective close in 1761, that risk had significantly declined.

The Gilmanton of the 1790 census included today's towns of Gilford and Belmont as well as a large part of today's Laconia. The 1790 U.S. census counted 157 slaves in New Hampshire with one in Gilmanton. At that time Gilmanton's census showed a total of 2610 white people and 23 African Americans, of whom Prince Cogswell was the slave. Black Cogswells would remain in the town until the 1870's. Prince

Cogswell spent at least part of his life on the town poor farm. The Cogswell name came from the Cogswell family who owned Prince in 1790.

By 1800 Gilmanton had no slaves and the State of New Hampshire had only eight.

In pre-Civil War Gilmanton the African American population remained small, but white attitudes were, at best, insensitive. An entry from the Smith Meeting House journals noted the baptism of a black resident with only the name "Salem". In 1847 a white Henry Clarke left the Congregational Church because "it did not unchurch all slave-holders and those who commune with them". Later he regretted leaving the church and was accepted back.

While there was no slavery in Gilmanton after 1800, local families eagerly purchased such slave-produced items as molasses, sugar, indigo, and cotton. Local newspapers ran comical stories featuring ignorant blacks. There were frequent newspaper articles about southern fears of slave revolts. In such newspapers as the Laconia Democrat, letters to the editor were often characterized by vile epithets for blacks. Even the editor S.C. Baldwin wrote on April 12, 1861 that "in case of division (secession of the South) we shall have no further occasion to discuss the slavery question, which has overshadowed *all other matters of real importance*."

The Gilmanton of 1860 had two principal population centers: Gilmanton Corner and Gilmanton Iron Works. Gilmanton Corner developed as the center of the political process and was the primary location for town meetings. Key to the Corner's development was the presence of the Gilmanton Academy which opened in 1797 to both young men and women. Its principal's recommendation was all that was needed to give a young man access to Dartmouth College. The academy was even mentioned in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1837 short story "John Swain": "Be it enough to say that he was a native of New Hampshire, born of respectable parents, and had received an ordinary school education, with a classic finish by a year at Gilmanton Academy." There is no known record of the Academy accepting black students, though it always accepted girls.

The Iron Works, so named because of small iron deposits in a local lake, was the center of the town's manufacturing base situated around Suncook River dams. Major operations included saw mills, a soap and fertilizer producer, the Hussey plow manufacturing operation, and a shoe factory.

From 1860 to 1930 Gilmanton's overall population declined more rapidly than that of any other town in Belknap County, going from 2073 in 1860 to 676 in 1930 as poor local farming conditions drove its white population elsewhere for opportunities.

With a small African American population, Gilmanton's black residents must have been largely invisible to other town residents. The author in studying local newspapers from 1860 to 1940 has found no reference in any news article to a Gilmanton African American by name. There are no photos in the Gilmanton Historical Society of black residents or their homes.

The table below shows that in 1880 Gilmanton had the largest black population in Belknap County and that there were substantial shifts in where African Americans lived, as they often moved in groups of families from one Belknap town to another. Between 1860 and 1880 Gilmanton's black population increased from six to twenty-eight. Five members of the black population had the surname Hall in 1860; by 1880 that surname was gone and three new surnames appeared: Battis, Burbank, and Robinson. Each of these families had six or more members.

Belknap African American Population

Town	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940
Alton	1	0	0		6	4	0	3	0
Barnstead	0	1	0		1	2	0	0	0
Belmont	20	4	1		1	2	0	2	3
Centre Harbor	2	1	0		0	0	0	0	0
Gilford	2	15	13		0	0	1	1	3
Gilmanton	6	14	28		21	17	12	6	0
Laconia	7	3	11		21	8	15	7	6
Meredith	0	1	6		0	0	4	2	1
New Hampton	1	0	4		0	3	0	0	0
Sanbornton	0	3	5		5	4	9	7	7
Tilton		0	0		6	4	9	8	0
Total	39	42	68		61	44	50	36	20

Note: There was definite undercounting of New Hampshire African-Americans in the US Census. The author knows of at least three black Americans in 1940 Gilmanton.

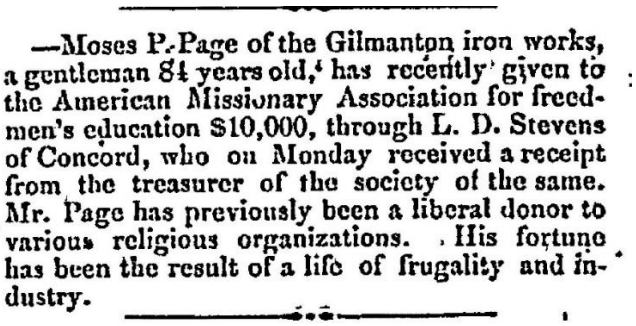
It is hard to speak of black communities in the towns above with five or less African Americans. Furthermore, many African American were servants living with or near their employers. In no Belknap town outside of Gilmanton did African Americans represent more than 1.5% of the population. The "two family effect" must also be recognized.

White Acceptance of Gilmanton's Black Population

New Hampshire towns such as Gilmanton were run by town meetings in which all free men could participate. Could a small disadvantaged African American population influence town policy? Even Gilmanton, whose black population was frequently larger than surrounding towns', never had an African American population of more than 2.5 % between 1860 and 1930.

In 1864 Gilmanton, unlike most of Belknap, voted for Lincoln over the anti-emancipation McClellan. (See Appendix xxx.) This vote might have signified a friendlier environment than in other Belknap towns.

The 1879 article below from the Farmers' Cabinet demonstrates the good-hearted ness of at least one Gilmanton resident.



—Moses P. Page of the Gilmanton iron works, a gentleman 84 years old, has recently given to the American Missionary Association for freedmen's education $10,000, through L. D. Stevens of Concord, who on Monday received a receipt from the treasurer of the society of the same. Mr. Page has previously been a liberal donor to various religious organizations. His fortune has been the result of a life of frugality and industry.

Discouraging is the reference by Gilmanton residents to a part of the terrain as "Nigger Hill." Strangely, it was not near an area where local African Americans were concentrated. A town road was known as "Nigger Road". It may have led to the home of African American John F. Battis. Offsetting these unpleasant situations was the presence of members of the Quaker Smith Meeting House, the Methodist Church and the Freewill Baptist Church. All three groups had strongly disagreed with slavery and were committed to bettering the lives of African Americans. These groups and the Congregationalists not only accepted black members, but ordained black ministers. Gilmanton's Congregational Smith Meeting House baptized and accepted blacks including Prince Cogswell in 1818. But the positive influence of local churches could have had on some hardened local whites was probably minimal. When African American Civil War veteran Moses N. Dustin died in 1895, he was buried apart from white graves in the Beech Grove cemetery. Local lore is that whites wanted his grave set apart. Jane Wescomb suggests a different reason: Dustin did not want to be buried near the whites who had mistreated him. This view seems reasonable because other blacks were buried near whites.

The Civil War

Moses Dustin was a member of Company D of the 54th Massachusetts Brigade, the unit about which the movie Glory was made. He joined after the gallant, but suicidal, charge at Fort Wagner, South Carolina. He was mustered out of the Union Army in South Carolina, but returned to the Army in the 3d U.S. colored troops.

Several other Gilmanton black citizens served in the Civil War. John Battis served as a private in Company A of the 6th New Hampshire Regiment. He was present for the 1864 siege of Petersburg, Virginia. It is unclear what his personal mission was, but black soldiers were often used for "fatigue duty" such as the construction of fortifications and burial details as well as fighting. As remembered by a union officer at Petersburg the confederates were particularly aggressive against one black unit:

> "The especially severe and persistent firing kept up by the enemy along the front line of our corps had one reason in the fact that on the 18th of June, the Fourth (Colored) Division….had joined us…..In front of other corps' not having the colored element in their organization there was little firing." (History of the 6th NH Regiment, 1891)

Alonzo Burbank was a member of Troop L of the 1st New Hampshire Cavalry. Apparently he was wounded. William Sidney and Elijah Hale also served. Sidney was wounded.

Why Did African Americans Move to Gilmanton?

The most likely reason for a larger black presence in Gilmanton was that the prices of land were low because of the rapid outflow of local whites to better opportunities elsewhere. Even at that, few blacks owned farms, their farms were small, and their land was not as valuable as that of most white farms.

The group that entered Gilmanton between 1860 and 1880 included several Civil War veterans who had shared the horror of war, and there were marital ties between the families.

In 1867 the brothers John and Calvin Battis bought 70 acres of low-quality land along what is today's Route 107/Province Road in an area between the Town Pound and Joe Jones Road. Seventy acres was far smaller than a typical farm in Gilmanton which had about 120 acres. The brothers shared a horse. (Each was taxed for ½ horse!). Each owned an ox, a cow and two other cattle. They lost the 70 acres due to indebtedness in 1883. Calvin Battis became a farm laborer. Later, John Battis bought a 30 acre farm south of Currier Hill Road which he held until his death in 1912. At one point the nearby white Currier family provided him with grazing rights on their property.

African American Occupations

As is shown below, in 1870 and 1880 more Gilmanton blacks were engaged in agriculture occupations than elsewhere in Belknap. This does not mean that overall Gilmanton had a larger number of farms or a greater number of acres than the average town.

Belknap Black Farmers

Year	Gilmanton	Other Towns
1860	None	Belmont (2)
1870	John Battis, Calvin Battis, Elijah Hale	Belmont (1)
1880	John Battis , Calvin Battis, Elijah Hale	None
1900	John Battis	Barnstead (1), Tilton (1)
1910	John Battis	New Hampton (1), Sanbornton (1)
1920	None	Gilford (1), Sanbornton (1)
1930	None	None

Belknap Black Farm Laborers

Year	Gilmanton	Other Towns
1860	None	None
1870	Five	Barnstead (1), Gilford (4), Meredith (1)
1880	Four	Belmont (1), Gilford (1)
1900	None	Sanbornton (2)
1910	Two	Belmont (1), Laconia (1)
1920	One	Laconia (1), Sanbornton (1)
1930	None	Gilford (1), Sanbornton (1)

Besides farming, most Gilmanton blacks worked in such low level jobs as laborers and servants.

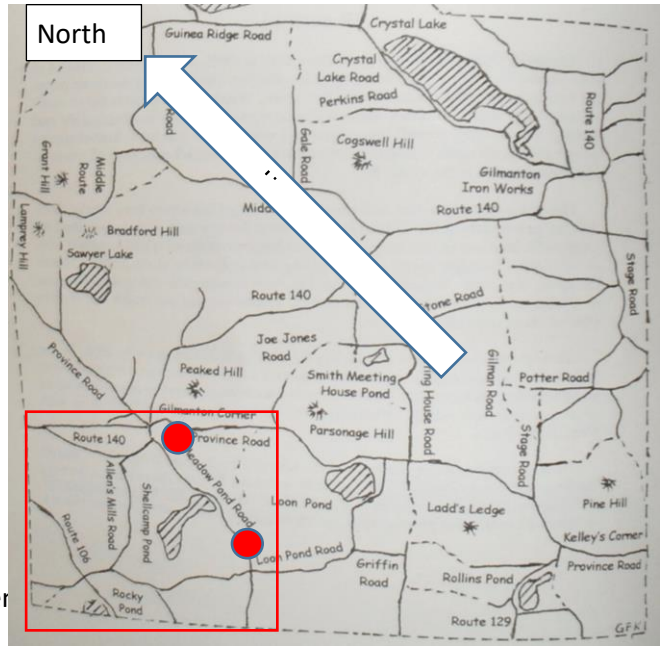
Educational Status

In Belknap County and Gilmanton almost 9 in 10 black residents over the age of 20 could read and write. For the white Gilmanton population the figure was over 95%. How well the two populations could read and write is not clear. Black children were slightly less likely than their contemporaries to attend school between the ages of 8 and 12. According to the 1900 census, however, the typical black child in Gilmanton who did attend school spent five months in school the previous year as did the typical white child.

The black children primarily went to the Gilmanton Corner School, one of the 18 schools in the town. At least six different black families had children in that one school. It is probable that black students at times made up a third of a Corner School's class. They also attended the nearby Jones Mills and Allens Mills schools. We know where the black students went to school because they were cited frequently in the annual Gilmanton Town Reports for perfect attendance. Perfect attendance must signify some acceptance and fair treatment by white students and the white teachers.

The Corner school

The filled circles below show the location of schools known to have been attended by black residents



Where did they Live?

From an 1892 map, deeds, schools attended, and graves we can establish that black residents of Gilmanton grouped in the Western area of the town, in and near Gilmanton corner. (See the boxed area in the above map.) The families included the Battises, Burbanks, and Haskells all living close together along today's Route 107. There were other locations as well: for example, the Burres family appears to have been located in the center of the town near Smith Meeting House. Servants, one as young as seven years old, often resided with their employers.

Origins, Marriages, and Births

In Gilmanton and the rest of Belmont, the largest proportion of African American residents had been born in New Hampshire. Even their parents were overwhelmingly from New Hampshire.

Joan Wescomb has found significant intermarriage among members of Gilmanton's black community, with today's descendants able to trace their ancestry to several different local surnames. There was also intermarriage between the white and the black communities

In Gilmanton marriages of blacks were often not recorded (as sometimes was the case for whites). The town clerks frequently marked marriage partners indiscriminately as white. This classification also was used frequently for the parents of newborns.

Summary

African Americans were a small group in New Hampshire and never exceeded 0.2% of the state's population. In rural towns they rarely exceeded 10 people. Two large families leaving a town of 10 or more African Americans could drop the black population to near or at zero. Black families moved frequently driven by poverty. In rural communities, unlike urban areas, a large majority of African Americans had been born in New Hampshire, and they frequently married whites. Most blacks did not own farms.

Gilmanton was unusual in the size of its rural black population, exceeding 15 people in several years. Even more unusual was the concentration of several black families in a small area of the town. As a result, African American children were a significant percentage of the students attending the Corner School. Their frequent perfect attendance records demonstrated the commitment of their parents to education. The presence of a "Nigger Hill" and a "Nigger Road" revealed an inherent racism in the white population.

Gilmanton African Americans were heavily involved in agriculture in a town rapidly losing its farming population. The presence of John F. Battis from 1867 until he died in 1912 may have provided an anchor for the local black population.

New Hampshire's Population

Year	Total	Black
1790	141,885	788
1800	183,858	860
1810	214,460	870
1820	244,161	786
1830	269,328	607
1840	284,574	538
1850	317,976	685
1860	326,073	494
1870	318,300	580
1880	346,991	685
1890	376,530	614
1900	411,588	662
1910	430,572	564
1920	443,083	621
1930	465,293	790 (550?)
1940	491,524	414

Note: The 1930 results for the African American community are overstated by some 240 people in Portsmouth. The author has studied the actual census results for individuals for 1930 Portsmouth and they do not match the number given in the above census summary figures for that year.

1880 Black Population by New Hampshire County (per U.S. Census)

Belknap	72	
Carroll	12	
Cheshire	15	(Keene 2)
Coos	15	
Grafton	20	
Hillsborough	119	(Manchester 40, Nashua 20)
Merrimack	158	(Concord 68, Northfield 11, Loudon 9, Canterbury 8, Pittsfield 0)
Rockingham	189	(Portsmouth 82)
Strafford	47	(Dover 38)
Sullivan	29	(Claremont 20)

Note: The total black population for Belknap is four higher than the author could verify.

The Transient Life of John F.L. Battis

- 1829 – Warner, NH (birth location?)
- 1853 – Franklin Falls, NH
- 1864 –6th Regiment NH Infantry (Petersburg, VA)
- 1867– Gilmanton, NH
- 1912 – Gilmanton, NH (death)

The Transient Life of Moses N. Dustin

- 1831 – Henniker, NH (birth)
- 1854 - Franklin, NH
- 1860 - Henniker, NH
- 1864 – 54th MA (Morris Island, SC)
- 1880– Canterbury, NH
- 1895 - Gilmanton, NH (death)

1864 Belknap Presidential Vote

	Lincoln	McClellan
Alton	205	225
Barnstead	92	335
Belmont	90	191
Centre Harbor	50	72
Gilford	346	294
Gilmanton	238	202
Laconia	152	204
Meredith	241	225
New Hampton	164	127
Sanbornton	277	311
Belknap	1855	2246

Non-Farm African American Occupations in Belknap County

Town	1860 to 1880	1900 to 1930
Alton		Servant Shoe shop foreman Logger
Barnstead		Laundress Servant
Belmont	Laundress Servant	Stable hand
Center Harbor	Servant	
Gilford	Barber Cook Hostler Laundress Sawyer Textile mill worker	
Gilmanton	Basket maker Servant	Carpenter Fireman at sawmill Laborer Lumber truck driver Nurse Servant Teamster
Laconia	Servant Textile mill worker	Electrician Florist Laundress

		Machine shop worker
		Manager of flower shop
		Molder
		Packer in department store
		Railroad engineer
		Railroad laborer
		Railroad station master
		School teacher
		Seamstress
		Servant
		Textile mill worker
Meredith	Servant	Electric lineman
		Hairdresser
		Lumber mill worker

Non-Farm African American Occupations in Belknap County cont'd		
New Hampton	Servant	
Sanbornton	Cooper	Driver
		Garage sales representative
		Knitting machinist
		Laundress
		Molder
		Servant
		Teamster
Tilton		Auto mechanic
		Blacksmith

	Chauffer
	Floor man in public garage
	Servant
Note: Most towns had African American general laborers.	

John Battis's 1912 Probate Assets

Homestead farm		$ 500.00
Household furniture		$ 25.00
1 Plow	$ 2.00	
1 Drag	$ 0.50	
Chains	$ 3.50	
1 Wagon	$ 4.00	
2 Sleighs	$ 2.00	
Scythe and Swath		$ 0.25
Harness	$ 1.00	
1 Ox sled	$ 0.50	
1 Traverse sled	$ 4.00	
1 Wheelbarrow	$ 0.25	
1 Dumpleash	$ 5.00	
2 Harrows	$ 1.00	
Ox yoke	$ 1.00	
Fork rakes	$ 1.00	
Tools	$ 4.00	
Hay	$ 30.00	
Shingles	$ 1.00	
2 Oxen	$ 160.00	
3 Cows	$ 65.00	
2 Heifers	$ 30.00	
2 Hogs	$ 30.00	
17 Fowl	$ 8.50	
2 Guns	$ 5.00	
Misc	$ 0.10	
Total	$ 884.60	

Sources

1790 to 1940 U.S. Census

Gilmanton Town Reports 1880 to 1930

U.S. Agricultural Survey 1880

Smith Meeting House Baptism Records

Gilmanton Congregational Church Records

Belknap County, NH Registry of Deeds

Ancestry.com

Interviews with:

- Jane Wescomb
- Marian McIntire
- Mary Morse
- J.R. Stockwell