

If These Stones Could Talk: African American Presence in the Hopewell Valley, Sourland Mountain, and Surrounding Regions of New Jersey

Elaine Buck and Beverly Mills

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Elaine Buck and Beverly Mills have transformed our understanding of African American life in New Jersey with their award-winning book, *If these Stones Could Talk: African American Presence in the Hopewell Valley, Sourland Mountain, and Surrounding Regions of New Jersey*.

This collection presents the reader with a rich arsenal of research and reflective techniques drawn upon by two women. The beautifully written narrative showcases how Buck and Mills constructed their history of areas in old Hunterdon County. I felt like a history detective following in the authors' footsteps, reading step-by-step how Buck and Mills brought a vibrant African American history to life. Sources including oral history interviews, archival research in the David Library of the American Revolution, personal interpretation of events and family history, and stories that highlight white supremacy, sports legacies, genealogy, Revolutionary and Civil War African American soldiers provide powerful evidence of African American life. This text provides a thorough reconstruction of a community history suppressed and often ignored by the larger white culture. Turning historical stones as they work to save African American cemeteries from destruction, Buck and Mills resurrect the individual stories behind the names listed on tombstones, those missing from recognition, and names buried in archival documents. Buck and Mills have produced a New Jersey treasure in this book, grabbing the reader's attention in Chapter One detailing how their interest in expanded research and preservation of African American culture began.

The New Jersey Studies Academic Alliance (NJSAA) recognized this local history with its Authors Award in the category of non-fiction in 2019. And in December 2020, both the *New York Times* and the *Smithsonian Magazine* printed detailed features about the leadership of Buck and Mills in preserving New Jersey African American history, referring to these researchers as ‘history detectives.’ I can see why. The book moves from slavery to freedom, and presents a powerful lens to understand the meaning of black citizenship, or the lack thereof, for African Americans in the region. Additionally integrating national figures and events in their narrative demonstrates that the African Americans of greater Hopewell Valley, Sourland Mountain, and nearby regions were recognized as important to other African Americans outside the region. For example, the authors describe how the founder of the AME Church in Philadelphia, Richard Allen, traveled to Pennington in 1784 and stayed with a local white couple while visiting the community. The authors include important background information on Allen to show his prominence in Philadelphia as a church and community leader. Buck and Mills address that Allen was involved directly in the controversial debates over the American Colonization Society, and as the authors argue, Allen sought to help freed blacks achieve their full citizenship, quoting directly from his writing.

In reviewing the 125th Anniversary commemorative guide for Pennington, there are five references for African Americans related to churches, but no reference to Richard Allen visiting. Buck and Mills document Allen’s visit, noting that Allen stayed with Jonathan and Mary Bunn. Our authors note that Allen had a fondness for Bunn, a founder of the Pennington Methodist Church. Later, Bunn’s son donated the land for the Bethel AME Church built in Pennington. Buck and Mills ask the reader to consider how the Allen visit must have precipitated the movement for the Pennington’s AME church and later the construction of an African American cemetery with land first purchased in 1863. One of the many strengths of this book is showing how local

historians can excavate and uncover how building a local and national religious community created an environment for the emerging black church in Pennington.

Another significant part of the book traces the history and descendants of Private William Stives, an African American Revolutionary War hero awarded the Badge of Merit, the highest recognition for his service by General George Washington, for his five years of service. Drawing upon research about this Hopewell American hero, including the help of a genealogist, and through an oral history interview with his great-great-great-great grandson, Buck and Mills highlight his movement as a fifer, an instrument in the flute family, as a non-combatant soldier, and to his life as a farmer owning 22 acres in Hopewell. He may have been the first settler of the Sourland Mountain region with his wife. We see the evolution of Stives' life as a decorated soldier who served at the Battle of Monmouth in 1778. A "full man" is unveiled with references to his religious life (Baptist), his marriage, his 10 children, life as a farmer, and then the sadness about not being able to locate his grave. A commemorative plaque marking his life and death has been placed at the Stoutsburg Cemetery to honor his life, along with other plaques that also document African Americans for whom no burial sites have been found. The Stives story shatters historical memory that depicts the American Revolution as a white revolution for freedom against tyranny. With the coming 250th anniversary of our nation's declaration of independence, Buck and Mills provide a book that demands the inclusion of African American stories of Patriots, enslaved African Americans, and free blacks in New Jersey's celebrations and to-be-written narratives.

Please make room for this important history on your bookshelf, in your classroom teaching, in research assignments, as you share and present African American history not only in Black History Month but throughout the year. This book inspires the reader to want to learn more about

New Jersey history and the accomplishments and sacrifices made by African Americans, from slavery to freedom, as they struggled to create meaningful and equal citizenship.

Sue Kozel, Retired Professor and Independent Scholar