

Black History Month: The Early Life and Recollections of Dr. James Still...

By Graelyn Brashear

“It was my lot in life to be debarred from the advantages of education.”

So reads an introductory passage from *Early Recollections and Life of Dr. James Still*, an autobiography about the life of the “Black Doctor of the Pines.” Still, born in 1812 in South Jersey, rose above his early setbacks to become something of a Pine-lands legend.

These days, James Still’s great-great-granddaughter Francine Still Hicks is working to share the real details of his life and his family in Ocean County and elsewhere.

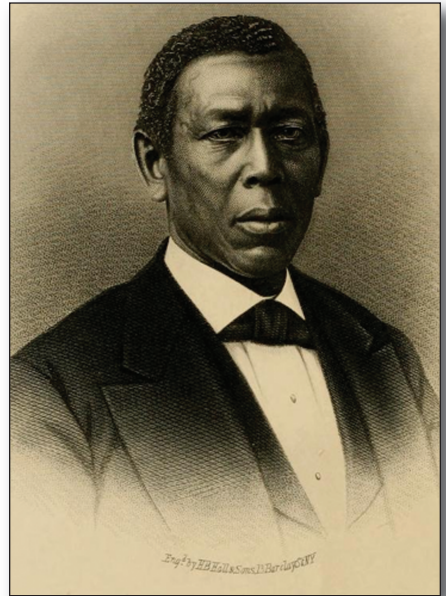
Hicks, an artist and teacher who lives in Palmyra, travels around the state and beyond sharing the story of her ancestor, whose life she has spent years researching with the help of historians. Her presentations – including a string of lectures in Ocean County libraries last year – offer insight into a story that is both a personally appealing family account and an important piece of African American history in New Jersey.

“When I studied the family history, I found out how rich New Jersey history is,” Hicks said. “That’s why I wanted to expand on it, and use the family as a conduit.”

Dr. Still didn’t call Ocean County home, but his life’s work made him an important man there. He was known to travel to every corner of the Pine Barrens to sell his medicines and treat people, and Hicks said she’s heard reports of visits he made to Toms River – then Dover Township – and Tuckerton.

And Still’s observations offer a rare window into the lives of African Americans in Ocean County and the rest of New Jersey’s remote southern pine forests in the 19th century – lives of hard work, poverty and disenfranchisement, but also strong

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Dr. James Still
Photo Credit: *Early Recollections
and Life of Dr. James Still*



Photo Credit: Francine Still Hicks

family and community ties, and, at times, the abandonment of racial divides.

That's part of why Hicks took her presentation on the life of her great-great-grandfather on the road through Ocean County last year, she said, and why she continues to study his book and his life, and spread the word: his life took an unusual path, but he shared the experiences of many. That reality wasn't lost on Still, and he reflected on it as he wrote his memoir late in life.

"I was really drawn to it because of his philosophical side," said Hicks.

Dr. Still was born in what is now Shamong Township in Burlington County to parents Levin and Charity Still, former slaves from Maryland's Eastern Shore who raised 18 children in a rough cabin deep in the pines.

His book tells of an early experience that shaped his life: a visit from a doctor who was inoculating local children. When the young Still watched the doctor at work with his lancet, said Hicks, he knew he, too, wanted to be a healer.

"It became his vision," said Hicks.

But his family's survival depended on him and his siblings working as indentured servants for local white families. As a teenager, he got just three months of schooling.

But Hicks describes the man she's come to know as deeply curious about the world. He managed to get his hands on a book about herbs and became a self-taught botanist, experimenting with plants and eventually making his own herbal remedies and tinctures. He had no money for higher education, and had to accept that he couldn't earn a medical degree. Instead, he made money like many other black men in the area did – chopping wood for charcoal and working in a glue factory – and practiced medicine, his passion, on the side.

Blacks and whites alike bought his remedies all over the region, and began seeking him out. In 1861, as the country entered a war over the question of slavery, Still finished paying off his debts and found himself working full-time in his chosen profession. By the time he wrote his autobiography in 1877, his doctoring had made him a wealthy man, and the third largest landowner in Medford Township.

The somewhat rambling, 274-page story of Still's life is peppered with childhood anecdotes that bring the lives of the Pine Barrens' early African American settlers to life: collecting cranberries from the bogs, learning to read from Comley's Spelling-Book side-by-side with white students, walking home through the woods terrified of ghosts.

There are also stories of racial prejudice, and of overcoming it. Still tells of white patients ignoring the sometimes dangerous advice of their white doctors and instead calling on him.

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The depth and breadth of Still's experience make his words essential reading for New Jerseyans, said Hicks, and the legacy of his family only makes that clearer. His brother, William Still, became a famous abolitionist and writer. His son, James Still Jr., became the third black man to graduate from Harvard Medical School. Another son chose to become an herbalist and carried on his father's work in the Pinelands communities where he had grown up.

In Hicks' eyes, the book her great-great-grandfather left for posterity is a perfect tool to spark peoples' interest in history. The first-hand accounts and the details from another time certainly worked their magic on her.

"I used to hate history in school," she said. "It was so boring. But it's become an inspiration, and more than that – a motivation."

And understanding where you come from matters, she said. "If we don't go back into our history, we will repeat their mistakes, and what they missed and didn't get."

Still's book is hard to find in print these days, but thanks to online library archives, you can view the book in its entirety on the Web. Visit openlibrary.org and search for "Early Life and Recollections of Dr. James Still" to peruse a copy.

Curious about some of the 19th-century remedies Still administered to Pine Barrens settlers? Here's his recipe for "cough balsam," taken from his book:



Spikenard root	...	8 oz.
Comfrey root	...	8 oz.
Horehound tops	...	8 oz.
Elecampane root	...	8 oz.
Bloodroot	...	8 oz.
Skunk-cabbage root	...	8 oz.
Pleurisy root	...	8 oz.

All bruised; then boil in two gallons of soft water down to one gallon; express and strain the liquid, and see that you have one gallon. Then add ten pounds of white sugar, and boil to form a syrup. When done, strain again into something to cool, and when nearly cool take two drachms oil anise and four ounces alcohol, mix and pour into the balsam; also one pint tincture of lobelia. Let the whole stand twenty-four hours to settle, then bottle up in half-pint bottles. Dose: One teaspoonful three, four or five times a day.

This, said Still, "is an excellent remedy for asthma or any bronchial affection attended with difficulty of respiration."