

# Documenting a Former Slave's Life

## Westtown Resident, First Black Person In The County To Have A Will Probated

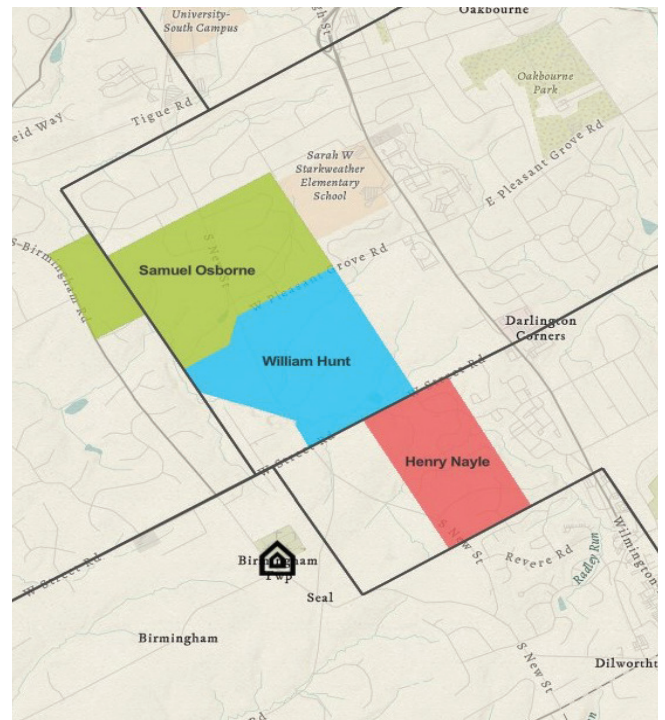
By Gail O. Guterl, Former Member, Westtown Township Historical Commission

When we think of historic events and Crebilly Farm, we think of it as the place where action occurred before and during the Battle of Brandywine. But Crebilly Farm has what one could call "small" history, everyday events that are just as interesting and significant. The story of Bilha, a freed slave from Thornbury Township, is significant for what we have learned about her life, and for the fact this Westtown resident was the first identified Black person in Chester County to have a will probated, way back in 1769.

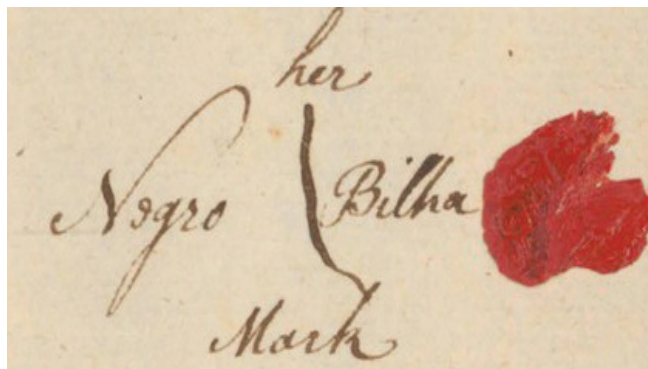
To learn more, let's go back to the 1700s. Slavery was legal in Pennsylvania until 1780 when it was abolished by the Gradual Abolition Act. You would think that because Pennsylvania abolished slavery in 1780, we would know about any slaves freed by the act who lived in Westtown Township. We know very little.

So, it is notable that because she left a will, we know about one former slave named Bilha (sometimes referred to as Bella) who lived on the Hunt property, now part of Crebilly Farm. We know things about her through implications or interpretation of her will, according to research conducted by the Chester County Archives and Record Services. We know what property she owned during her lifetime and who her neighbors and friends were. We also know she was literate because she owned several books. However, we also know that rather than sign her name to her will just before her death, instead she made her mark.

We know Bilha stayed in the area, possibly because her brother, Jack - who it is believed was free - and her cousin Jacob and his wife Sarah (owned by Joseph Hunt, who lived on 60 acres of what is now part of Crebilly Farm) were local. The 60 acres Joseph Hunt lived on was owned by his son, William.



This map shows the location of the Nayle, Hunt and Osborne properties. After Bilha was freed, she lived on the Hunt property, which is now part of what we know of as Crebilly Farm, on the western end of Westtown Township. Map, courtesy Chester County Archives & Records Services.



It is believed Bilha was literate, but because she was so ill at the time of her death, she made her mark on her will, rather than sign her name. Document, courtesy of Chester County Archives & Records Services.

Bilha belonged to Henry and Deborah Nayle of Thornbury Township, just south of what is Route 926 today. Henry died in June 1726 and left Bilha, whose age we do not know, to his wife. His will specified that when Deborah died Bilha was to be sold and proceeds from that sale were to become part of the estate. Bilha remained Deborah's slave for the next 24 years, but when Deborah, a Quaker who belonged to nearby Birmingham Meetinghouse, died in 1750 her will freed Bilha.

Bilha lived in a small cottage on William Hunt's property (also part of what is now Crebilly Farm) and because she did not bequeath anything to children, it is believed she may have been widowed but childless. It is notable that the executors of her will when she died in 1768 were, "Trusty friends William Hunt & Peter Osborn," two Quakers. Osborn (modern-day maps list the name as Osborne) owned the property just north of Crebilly Farm, where Dunvegan Road, Niels Lane, and John Anthony Drive are now.

It is believed that Bilha came to know Peter Osborn because of Peter's frequent visits to the property to court Joseph Hunt's daughter Elizabeth, whom he married in 1767.

Again, the will tells us things in a roundabout way. In this case, we know two things about Bilha: that she had friends in the community, and that she probably attended Birmingham Meetinghouse. Her first bequests in the will are not to her

brother, cousin, or cousin's wife. They are to 7-year-old Deborah Darlington and her 11-year-old sister Elizabeth. Deborah received a green "grazatt" apron (grazet is a silk or worsted lightweight dress material, often with a warp of one color and a weft of another), Bilha's best pair of silk mittens and a pair of small silver shoe buckles. Elizabeth was bequeathed another green "grazatt" apron and another pair of silk mittens. The Darlington's lived just north of the stadium and sports fields that are now West Chester University. They attended Birmingham Meetinghouse and that's probably how they knew Bilha. It is thought that Bilha attended Birmingham Meeting with Deborah Nayle and continued to attend when Deborah died. She would not have been a full member of the meetinghouse, probably because she was Black.

In those days, when a person died every single possession was inventoried. Clothing, bedding, pillows, tools, livestock; everything had value. They were itemized, and all were bequeathed to someone. Bilha's will, filed March 26, 1768, listed linens, a side saddle, pottery, books, furniture, a spinning wheel, iron pot hooks, blankets, knives, spoons, silver buckles, and much more. Her will tells us that she lived a domestic lifestyle.

Her will also shows her care of her possessions. In 1750 when Deborah died, Bilha inherited £55 and an assortment of household goods and clothing, such as books, a bed bolster, armchair, chest, spinning wheel, clock reel, round table, tea kettle, teapot, dough trough, and a mare. Bilha still owned some of these items upon her death 18 years later, including six books. The fact that she kept the books, which had value, implies she knew how to read. If she couldn't read, she probably would have sold them.

The final record of Bilha's estate was filed in 1769, when all her debts were settled. This too tells us a lot about Bilha. Her brother received 10 shillings for four days' travel to the doctor for Bilha. Also, a Catherine Pain received 1 pound 5 shillings for nursing. These two payments tell us that Bilha must have been sick at the time of her death, probably too sick to sign her name to her will, so therefore she made a mark. From this final record, we know Bilha was buried in a coffin because William Johnson was paid for constructing that coffin, and William Dilworth for digging her grave.

What is known makes any lover of history want to know more. Who were Bilha's parents? Who gave her the name Bilha and was it significant? Was she born into the Nayle's household or was she purchased? Was she well treated during her lifetime? Where exactly was her dwelling on what is now Crebilly Farm? What did she do during the 18 years of her freedom? So many questions.



The Township Historical Commission recently placed an interpretive sign along the walking trail at the site of the historic Maple Shade Farm. Now the site of Bayard Rustin High School and Rustin Walk residential community, the farm had a prominent place in Township history.

## Memorial Monument Dedication

SATURDAY, MAY 20, 2023 | 10 A.M.

1147 S. Concord Road

Mark your calendar to attend Westtown Township's dedication of a memorial monument to Westtown's Revolutionary War Militia soldiers. The new monument is located on Township property at the pumping station at 1147 S. Concord Road. The public is cordially invited to the brief ceremony. The monument is sponsored by Westtown Township and the Historical Commission, local businesses, descendants of the Taylor family, patriotic and veterans' organizations, and citizen donations.