

THE HISTORY OF SAMBO CREEK

by Danny Younger

Although local newspapers would have one believe that the first reference to Sambo Creek appears in “an 1806 land sale,”¹ the creek’s name is actually earlier to be found in land surveys undertaken by George Palmer, the deputy surveyor of Northampton County, dating back to 1775.² In Palmer’s surveys, this waterway is initially named “Sambo’s Creek” (utilizing the possessive grammatical case).³ After several decades had elapsed, surveyor Palmer would then subsequently refer to this waterway as Sambo Creek (without the apostrophe and trailing letter “s”).⁴ The surveyor’s use of this frontier naming convention thus places this creek within that set of bodies of water which included Brodhead’s Creek, McMichael’s Creek, and Longshore’s Creek – all named after the family name of the area resident who first settled the land in proximity to the waterway. Of course, this raises the question: “if Brodhead’s Creek was named after the Brodheads, and if McMichael’s Creek was named after the McMichaels, and if Longshore’s Creek was named after Robert Longshore, then doesn’t it make sense that Sambo’s Creek would have been named after someone commonly known by the surname Sambo”?

¹ Janis Dahlman, “Revisiting Sambo Creek,” *Pocono Record*, December 28, 2015, <https://www.poconorecord.com/story/entertainment/local/2015/12/28/revisiting-sambo-creek/32819245007/>.

² See, for example, Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission land survey #A-58-254, <https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17-114CopiedSurveyBooks/Book%20A1-A89/Book%20A-58/Book%20A-58%20pg%20510.pdf>.

³ For another example, see PHMC Survey #C-044-093, <https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17-114CopiedSurveyBooks/Books%20C1-C234/Book%20C044/Book%20C-044%20pg%20185.pdf>.

⁴ See, for example PHMC Survey #C-047-285, <https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17-114CopiedSurveyBooks/Books%20C1-C234/Book%20C047/Book%20C-047%20pg%20572.pdf>. See also PHMC Survey #F-400 and Survey N-280. <https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17-114CopiedSurveyBooks/Books%20A%20-%20Z/Book%20F/Book%20F%20pg%20812.pdf>; <https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17-114CopiedSurveyBooks/Books%20A%20-%20Z/Book%20N/Book%20N%20pg%20560.pdf>

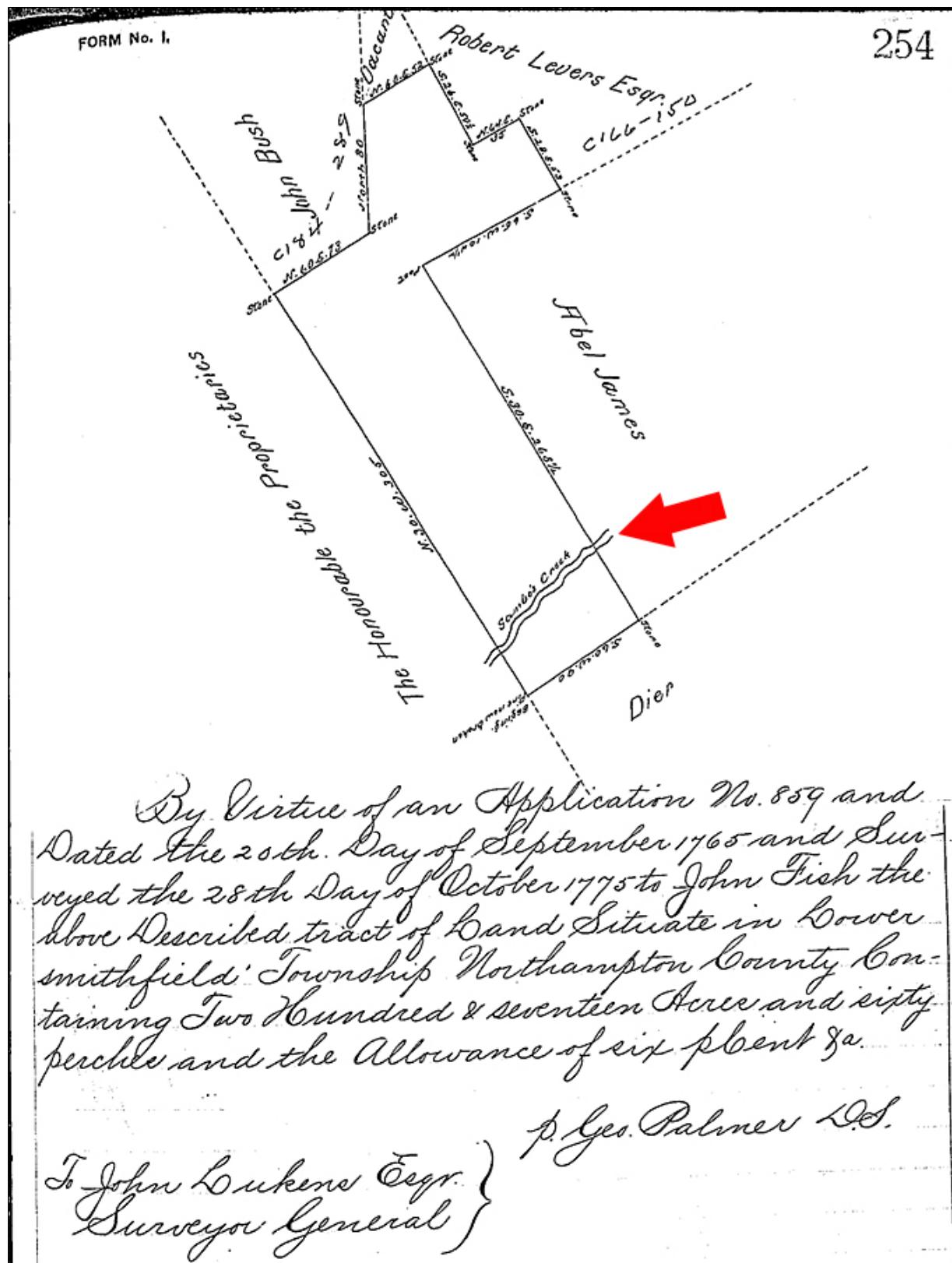


Figure 1: Sambo's Creek as depicted on PHMC Survey# A-58-254 (1775)

This otherwise eminently logical supposition is unfortunately belied by the fact that our rather comprehensive collection of area land records offers absolutely no evidentiary proof whatsoever that anyone with the surname Sambo ever obtained a land warrant for property alongside this creek. Thus, while the surname “Sambo” does appear within the roster of Pennsylvania names, and the State’s historical records do, in fact, offer up a sparse set of individuals whose last name indeed was Sambo,⁵ the truth of the matter is that none with such a last name were ever known to have been historic property owners within the boundaries of our county.⁶

Further, as the Sambo appellation in today’s society is currently regarded by some as a racially charged divisive pejorative term (thus prompting local geographical re-naming considerations),⁷ a wee bit of preliminary contextual history is warranted prior to continued sustained discussion. By way of etymological background, the name “Sambo” first appeared in English literature in 1657 as a forename (given name) in Richard Ligon’s work, *True & Exact History of the Island of Barbados*, wherein a slave named Sambo expressed a desire to become Christian.⁸ We’re told that “Variants of the name Sambo can be found in several African cultures, including Samba in Bantu; Samb and Samba in Wolof; Sambu in Mandingo; and Sambo in Hausa, Mende, and Vai. Throughout census materials and assorted other eighteenth-

⁵ For example, Andrew Sambo is listed as a Slavic coalminer who succumbed to a fatal accident at the Raub coal mine – see https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r45_MineAccidentRegisters/AnthraciteSs1924_1932.pdf. One also notes a non-fatal coal car accident sustained by Polish worker Stanley Sambo – see https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r45_MineAccidentRegisters/SsBituminous1899_1906.pdf, as well as the non-fatal accident of George Sambo who was struck by a coal car hoisting rope – see https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r45_MineAccidentRegisters/SsBituminous1918_1924.pdf. Additionally, the deaths of John A. Sambo, Mary Sambo, Rosie Sambo, and L. Mike Sambo are to be found listed in the State’s PHMC records, as well as the births of Louisa Sambo and P. Sambo.

⁶ Northampton County Warrantee List: https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17-88WarrantRegisters/NorthamptonPages/r17_88NorthamptonCountyWarrantRegisterTranscription.pdf

⁷ For the view that the word “Sambo” is derogatory, see the NPS proposal to “Change Sambo Island (FID1186891) to Turtle Island,” https://geonames.usgs.gov/docs/pubs/DNCMinutes/DNC%20834_May13_2021%20Minutes.pdf.

⁸ See <https://slaverylawpower.org/richard-ligon-history-barbados/>

century documents, these names emerge as those of new world slaves.”⁹ For purposes of local history, at issue then is whether surveyor Palmer might have found himself prompted by circumstance to utilize a slave name (or, for that matter, what may well have been a descriptive¹⁰ or perhaps a pejorative term), instead of a surname, in conferring an identifying moniker upon this particular creek. We thus find ourselves asking, “Is it then conceivably possible that a group of escaped slaves, a so-called ‘maroon community’,¹¹ might actually have been domiciled alongside one of our local waterways as early as 1775, thereby prompting the use of Sambo as a relevant descriptor?” As it turns out, there is, indeed, sufficient reason to believe that such may well have been the case.

Our area’s first settler, Nicholas Dupui, was a merchant who hailed from Kizenick, a Rochester Township village in New York’s Ulster County. Tax records from the Rochester area marked family members as among the wealthiest freeholders in the entirety of the region. As per the Ulster County Historical Society, the practice of holding slaves in the county during this period of time was “almost universal, so that all persons of consequence were expected to be in possession of a greater or lesser number of slaves.”¹² Nicholas Dupui was certainly a man of

⁹ For the quotation source, see <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100439179>

¹⁰ “A sobriquet that had already acquired pejorative connotations, “Sambo” might refer to a “half Negro, half mulatto” as well as a manipulative, self-deprecating, or compliant black slave. See Oxford English Dictionary, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 14:426. For a detailed study of the Sambo figure, see Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Fall of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). It is likely that the term “sambo” arose as early as the sixteenth century from the Spanish or Portuguese word for “monkey,” as well as later signifying mixed black and mulatto or black and Native American ancestry.” Quotation source: Arthur Scherr, “‘Sambos’ and ‘Black Cut-Throats’: Peter Porcupine on Slavery and Race in the 1790s,” *American Periodicals*, Vol. 13 (2003), 27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20771154>

¹¹ A maroon community is defined as: “a group of formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants who gained their freedom by fleeing chattel enslavement and running to the safety and cover of the remote mountains or the dense overgrown tropical terrains near the plantations. The word maroon, first recorded in English in 1666, is by varying accounts taken from the French word marron, which translates to “runaway black slave,” or the American/Spanish *cimarrón*, which means “wild runaway slave,” “the beast who cannot be tamed,” or “living on mountaintops.” The Spanish originally used the word in reference to their stray cattle.” See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/maroon-community>

consequence. Thus, when Dupui ultimately arrived in Penn's Woods at Shawnee-on-Delaware to set up an Indian trading post immediately next to the neighboring Shawnee Tribe, merchant Dupui doubtless brought with him a sizable contingent of slaves to assist in the building of his post, in the building of his house, in the building of his grist mill, and in the farming of his newly acquired property.

Yet the historical record indicates that Dupui must have been somewhat of a harsh taskmaster. We can infer this conclusion from the contents of a June 1732 letter from the Chiefs of the Shawanese Indians (Noochickoneh, Pawquawsie, Uppockeaty and Queequeepto), to Pennsylvania Governor Gordon wherein they precisely detail exactly why they had relocated to the Susquehanna upon leaving their former tribal home along the Delaware River: "One reason of our leaving our former settlements and coming here is, several negro slaves used to run away and come amongst us; and we thought ye English would blame us for it."¹³

Thus, the scenario presented by this account is that of Dupui's runaway slaves seeking the prospect of refuge among the Shawnee Indians. Yet in light of the fact that the Shawnee tribe wholly departed from Shawnee-on-Delaware in 1728, one must necessarily ask: "what then ultimately happened to these freedom-seeking folk?" Did they in due course decide to travel along with the Shawnee tribe upon their relocation to the Susquehanna, or instead, in their noble quest for freedom, did they opt to domicile themselves somewhere in reasonably close proximity to their former homes, perhaps along the nearby Sambo Creek? The possibility of having had a maroon community in our midst admittedly is most certainly rather intriguing.

¹² For the quotation, see Ann Gibbons, "Hudson Valley Roots: Slavery played a big role in Hudson Valley History," *The Daily Freeman* (February 27, 2011), <https://www.dailym Freeman.com/2011/02/27/hudson-valley-roots-slavery-played-a-big-role-in-hudson-valley-history/>.

¹³ For the quotation, see Chester Hale Sipe, *The Indian Chiefs of Pennsylvania*, (Butler, PA: Ziegler Print Company, Inc., 1927), 111.

That runaway slaves had actually settled in the area is apparently more than mere conjecture; we have by way of confirmation this evidentiary vignette that appears in the *Pennsylvania Archives*:

This Examinant [Henry Hess] says further, That Teedyuscung was frequently in conversation with a negro man a Runaway, whose Master lived somewhere above Samuel Depuys, and he overheard Teedyuscung advising him to go among the Inhabitants, & talk with the negroes, & persuade them to kill their Masters, which if they would do he would be in the woods ready to receive any negroes yet would murder their Masters, & they might live well with the Indians.¹⁴

This likelihood of a slave settlement in the area is also, to some degree, supported by later mapping efforts (1875) that portrayed a Sambo Creek tributary as “Nigger Run” (thus strongly suggesting that a significant black enclave had at one point actually been resident thereabouts).



Figure 2: Sambo Creek renamed as "Nigger Run" in Beers' 1875 Atlas (Smithfield/Shawnee quadrant)

There are, of course, other theories yet remaining to be analyzed regarding the origin of this creek's name. The first theory comes to us by way of a Van Vliet family legend that purports that “the creek took its name from Chief Sambo, who along with his small, friendly

¹⁴ Pennsylvania Archives 1756, vol. III (Philadelphia: Joseph Severs & Co., 1853), 57, <https://books.google.com/books?id=qsPnSCoSVKgC&pg=PA57>

band of wandering Indians camped on the nearby meadow, accepting food from the local families.”¹⁵ While the depiction is quaint, linguistic considerations would tend to argue against the validity of this particular account as both Delaware and Shawnee Indian names were known to be at least tri-syllabic. Examples of area Delaware Indian chief names include Lappawinzo, Nutimus, Sassoonan and Teedyuscung, while names of Shawnee Indian chiefs – such as the previously cited Noochickoneh, Pawquawsie, Uppockeaty and Queequeepto – all were similarly multi-syllabic. Neither can one find any extant documentation of the existence of any Indian chief named Sambo (other than a single reference from the Southern Oregon Historical Society to the son of a Klamath River Shasta Indian leader named Sargent Sambo, born in the 1850s, “son of Chief Sambo (a native American Indian leader during the Rogue Indian Wars).”¹⁶

A second theory comes to us by way of the overall prevalence of “Sambo” in local geographic place names: to wit, we have Sambo Creek, Lower Dam Sambo Creek, Sambo Creek Lower Reservoir, Sambo Island, Sambo Rift (alternately known as the Mary and Sambo Rift), Sambo Ridge (NJ) [Sussex], Sambo Island Brook (NJ) [Warren], and Sambo Island Lake (NJ) [Warren]. One might reasonably therefore speculate that the origin of the name perhaps then came by way of reference to the only known slave in the region with the name Sambo (owned by Sandyston Township resident John Emans). Eman’s property, surveyed on April 26, 1732, was located just north of the Dingman’s Bridge, along the Delaware River.¹⁷ However, as this particular locale was sufficiently remote from the area through which Monroe County’s Sambo Creek flows, there is truly not much therein to support the notion of a definitive causal

¹⁵ See earlier-cited Dahlman, “Revisiting Sambo Creek”, *Pocono Record*

¹⁶ For the quoted reference, see <https://research.sohs.org/node/3955>

¹⁷ “Ancient gravesite located,” New Jersey Herald (September 25, 2016), <https://www.njherald.com/story/lifestyle/2016/09/25/ancient-gravesite-located/411720007/>

relationship (as slave Sambo had no other particular claim to fame that would have warranted his name being geographically utilized to such an extent).

We do note, however, that by the time that Beers' Atlas in 1875 utilized the name "Nigger Run" on a Sambo Creek tributary, there was already a strong developing relationship between the name Sambo and the derogatory term "nigger". One sees the popularity of the Sambo name evinced in a folksy "air" (lyrics displayed below) that was entitled "Mary & Sambo," and sung to the tune of "A little more cider."¹⁸

¹⁸ Mary & Sambo. Air. "A little more cider." Jackson, Printer, 190 Houston Street, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/amss.as108640/>

MARY & SAMBO

Air. "A little more Cider."

I knew a white gal of sweet sixteen,
As near as I can figure,
Who slighted all her dashing beaus—
And fell in love with a nigger.
The blackest kind of a nigger,
A dreadful ugly nigger;
A sleepy, lazy, dirty, crazy,—
Cotton picking nigger.
But soon her father found it out,
And looking at his daughter;
He swore before the night,—he'd bring,—
A black sweep to his daughter.
He swore he'd thrash the nigger,
The dreadful ugly nigger;
The sleepy, lazy, dirty, crazy,—
Cotton picking nigger.
Then Mary she began to cry,
And put her arms akimbo,
And snickered in her father's face,
I'm bound to marry Sambo.
Suppose he is a nigger,
A poor degraded nigger;
I truly swear no hand shall tear
Your Mary from her nigger.
The nigger's love was strong enough,
But couldn't stand a licking;
He thought that picking such a muss,
Was worse than cotton picking.
The poor deluded nigger,
The unromantic nigger;
Not all the love of turtle-dove,
Could change the frightened nigger.
"He knelt at Mary's father's feet,
And said he would resign her,
That she could marry when she pleased,
And he would marry Dinah.
The prudent cautious nigger,
The compromising nigger,
The point he saw of social law,
That "nig" must marry nigger."

Jackson, Printer, 190 Houston Street.

I knew a girl of sweet sixteen,
As near as I can figure,
Who slighted all her dashing beaus—
And fell in love with a nigger.

The blackest kind of nigger,
A dreadful ugly nigger;
A sleepy, lazy, dirty, crazy,—
Cotton picking nigger.

But soon her father found it out,
And looking at his daughter;
He swore before the night,—he'd bring,—
A black sweep to his daughter.

He swore he'd thrash the nigger,
The dreadful ugly nigger;
The sleepy, lazy, dirty, crazy,—
Cotton picking nigger.

Then Mary she began to cry,
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And snickered in her father's face,
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The nigger's love was strong enough,
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The poor deluded nigger,
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Not all the love of turtle-dove,
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"He knelt at Mary's father's feet,
And said he would resign her,
That she could marry when she pleased,
And he would marry Dinah.

The prudent cautious nigger,
The compromising nigger,
The point he saw of social law,
That "nig" must marry nigger"

We thus see from this song that Emancipation had portended that which was deemed to be a major societal threat – the prospect of miscegenation. While a Caucasian male engaging in coitus with a member of another race was regarded as "de rigueur", the mere thought of a Negro male engaged in marriage, or sexual intercourse with a Caucasian female was broadly regarded as anathema. Widely distributed song sheets conveyed this popular sentiment; they associated

the name “Sambo” with “nigger”, and this conjunction doubtless led to the local naming of a troublesome stretch of rapids in the Delaware River as the Mary and Sambo rift.

Remaining at issue then, is whether every geographic instance of “Sambo” should necessarily be re-named. As noted by East Stroudsburg University assistant history professor Christopher Brooks, “If you’re going to name a place,” you need to be asking, “is this really representative of history?” In the case of the location known as the Mary and Sambo rift, the argument can indeed be made that the name truly is representative of history and thus does not warrant a change (which many might well view as “carrying political correctness too far”).¹⁹



On the other hand, the Sambo Creek itself, has already gone through at least one significant name change already, appearing on the adjacent cartographic representation as “Sanboes Creek”. One might therefore contend that yet another name change won’t deleteriously impact this given Creek’s underlying history.

As a racial term, most will agree that “Sambo” first came to prominence through the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 anti-slavery book, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

¹⁹ See Christina Tatu, “Group wants new name for Sambo Creek,” *Pocono Record* (October 28, 2011), <https://www.poconorecord.com/story/lifestyle/2011/10/28/group-wants-new-name-for/49853202007/>

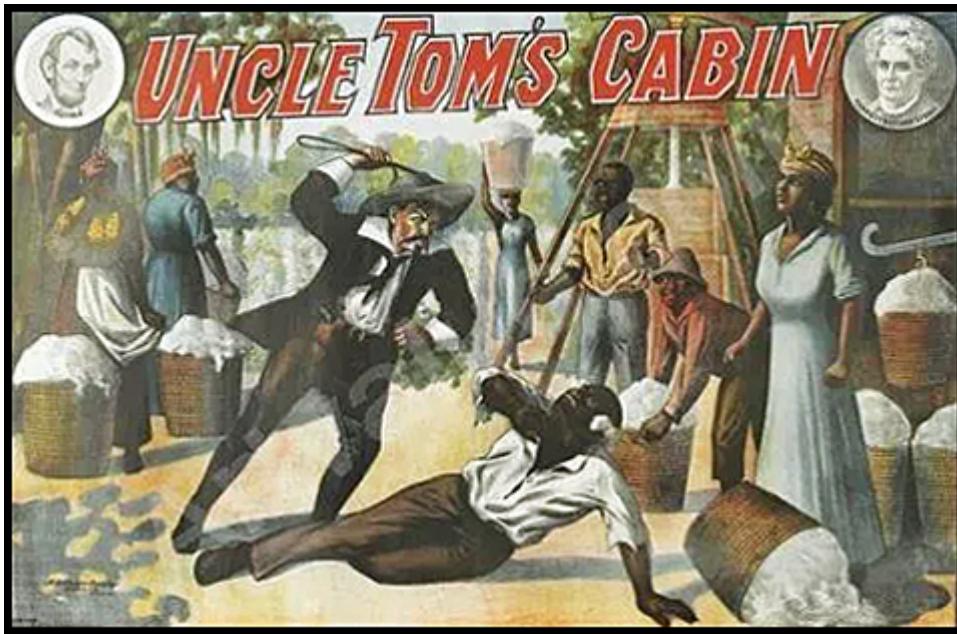


Figure 3: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Yet as a descriptive term, as an identifier not conveying any particular racial animus, Sambo had also long been used (at least since 1748) to denote “a light skinned person of mixed ancestry.”²⁰ Of interest to local historians therefore is whether documentation exists within our own immediate geographic region that can confirm very early instances of local interracial mixing... and yes, we do find at least one prominent example of Irish/Native intermarriage. We have a January 3, 1741 letter addressed to Governor George Thomas and signed by Lower Smithfield residents Jacob Kuykendael, Abram Van Kampen, Nicholas Dupui, and Jacobus Kuykendall that addresses the rogue behavior of one John McCahon.²¹

²⁰ Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 39.

²¹ Jacob Kuykendal, et al., letter to Governor George Thomas. *Huntington Digital Library*, <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/56173/rec/10>

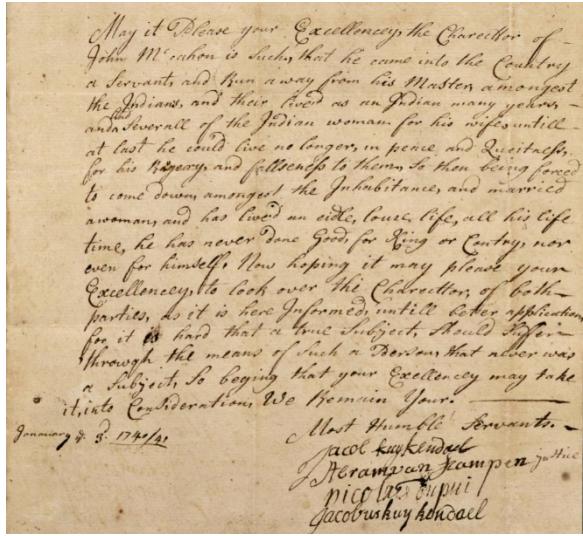


Figure 4: Letter to the Governor referencing racial inter-marriage

May it Please your Excellency, the Character of John McCahon is Such, that he came into the Country a Servant, and Run away from his Master amongst the Indians, and there lived as an Indian many years, and had Several of the Indian women for his wife, until at last he could live no longer, in peace and Quietness, for his Roguery and falseness to them. So being forced to come down amongst the Inhabitants, and married a woman, and has lived an idle lousy life, all his life time, he has never done Good, for King or Country, nor even for himself. Now hoping it may please your Excellency, to look over the Character, of both parties, as it is here informed, until better application, for it is hard that a true Subject, should suffer through the means of such a Person that never was a Subject, So begging that your Excellency may take this into Consideration, We Remain Your Most Humble Servants.

What the letter therefore illustrates is that prior to surveyor Palmer's 1775 naming of Sambo's Creek, it was not uncommon for chattel in our area to run away from their Masters and to live amongst the local Indians; neither was it uncommon in such circumstances for wives to be taken from another race. Hence it stands within the realm of probability that the area slaves that fled from Indian trader Nicholas Dupui might also well have taken indigenous wives in the period leading up the tribe's departure in 1728, ultimately resulting in a Sambo (mulatto) population that may well have been witnessed almost five decades later by George Palmer along the route of the Sambo Creek.²²

Finally, with regard to the proposition under consideration to replace "Sambo" in our watershed with some other innocuous designator, we are, admittedly, to some degree, tampering

²² For the likelihood of intermarriage or miscegenation in the Sambo Creek area, see Christopher Brook, "Sambo Creek: A Short History of a Troublesome Toponym," 6. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324783092_Sambo_Creek_A_Short_History_of_a_Troublesome_Toponym

with history. Historians are certainly among the first to recognize campaigns of “*damnatio memoriae*” whose tacit goals have always been to erase portions of history in the name of social justice. While as a matter of principle, historians don’t typically condone such actions, they do recognize and understand that the institution of the State has always had the right to respond to that which the State deems to be either derogatory or offensive.

With regard to geographic names, we note that there is a federal Board on Geographic Names (BGN) with the power to declare certain words as derogatory in all occurrences. Thus far, the Board has exercised restraint by only circumscribing three distinct words: the pejorative for Negro (1963), the pejorative for Japanese (1974), and the pejorative for an indigenous female (2021).²³ At issue then is but one question: “is the name/term/word ‘Sambo’ overwhelmingly derogatory to the degree that its inherent offensiveness would necessarily warrant its geographical erasure through replacement?” As outside of the historian’s remit, this is an issue that only policymakers can address.

²³ For commentary on the ‘three words’, see <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/does-board-geographic-names-bgn-decide-what-derogatory-or-offensive>