# Episode 10, 2005: 1667 Land Grant, Fairfax, Virginia

Tukufu: Our final story takes us back to a time when African Americans owned some of the choicest real estate in the new world. December, 1609. Henry Hudson, a British sea captain in the employ of the Dutch East India Company, is searching for a trading route to the Orient. At the gateway to North America, he stumbles upon a great island in a mighty, natural harbor. The settlement of New Amsterdam gives the Dutch a toehold in North America. But much of the colonists' labor came from imported Africans. Those enslaved men and women cleared the land and laid the foundations of the urban community that would one day become New York City. Mark Mitchell, a collector from Fairfax, Virginia, has a 1667 document which he believes tells how some of those slaves fought for their freedom and won land, some 200 years before the Civil War.

Mark Mitchell: I remember going to the library when I was only eight years old and getting hooked on history. When I first saw the land deed, it just sent chills throughout my body. An early-American document pertaining to a free person of color, in what is now New York City, was just extraordinary to me.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi. I'm meeting with Mark Mitchell to learn more about his land deed.

Mark: Got it for you right here on the table.

Tukufu: Okay, what is it?

Mark: This is a land deed from 1667 signed in New York city for a black man who owned land in Manhattan.

Tukufu: Now, that's impressive. This might be a truly historic document. How did an African win freedom and land so early in American history? Where did you get this from?

Mark: I bought this from a dealer in New York.

Tukufu: I've seen some of these, but nothing as early as 1667. What can I find out for you?

Mark: I'd like to know precisely where this land was located.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm.

Mark: And I'd like to know what happened to it.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm.

Mark: And also a bit about the status of the black community in early New Amsterdam and New York.

Tukufu: Is there anything you could tell me that might aid in my investigation?

Mark: Frankly, I'm just interested in anything you can find out about this.

Tukufu: Okay, all right. Well, good. So I'm going to go do what I can do, and get back to you as soon as I can.

Mark: All right, thanks so much.

Tukufu: Richard's document was written in 1667 and signed by the British governor of New York. It says that a freed African named Groote Manuell had been given land by the Dutch in 1644, some 23 years earlier. The document transfers the property to Manuell's widow, Christina. And it gives her full legal right to transfer



© 2005 Oregon Public Broadcasting all rights reserved

the property to her children forever. The text establishes an African as a landowner... in the 17th century. It could be historically priceless, but is it real? I'm headed to Nyack, New York, to get the opinion of Wyatt Day, an appraiser who specializes in African-American documents. What we have here is a document that I think could be invaluable historically. The first thing that catches Wyatt's eye is the brownish-looking writing, which he says has been done in iron gall ink. Now, what is iron gall ink?

Wyatt Day: Well, actually, it tends to go into this nice, deep sepia color.

Tukufu: I see. Wyatt explains that iron gall was the most commonly used ink before the 19th century, so the ink is from the right period.

Wyatt: We're going to look at the paper.

Tukufu: All right.

Wyatt: And that's going to be pretty much the deciding factor here. If you notice, this paper is handmade paper, about 17th-century paper. And in here are distinct, what we call chain lines, so you can see it's from the hand –

Tukufu: It's going down like this.

Wyatt: Exactly. The paper was handmade with -- a roller would actually produce that.

Tukufu: Right.

Wyatt: And also, the thing here that's the clincher, and here where my thumb is, do you see that? It's faint, but it's there. That's a watermark. Can you see it?

Tukufu: I see it, right there, yes, I do.

Wyatt: That is – definitely tells us that this is 17th-century paper.

Tukufu: Now, is this an authentic document?

Wyatt: It is the real deal. It's definitely -- it's dated 1667. It's 17th century. Everything about it is right. The sealing wax, this seal, which is what a notary would put on today, is the same sort of thing. It's a notarized -- it's a seal to -- that lends the authenticity of this as a legal document in the time when it was written. This is a fabulous document.

Tukufu: The document is real. More than 350-some years ago, at the very dawn of European colonization of the Americas, a black man was granted his freedom and land for his family. How was this possible? I'm starting my investigation at the New York public library, where they have some of the best reference materials on New York's early colonial history. Unlike the later cotton and tobacco plantations of the south, the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam did not require such large numbers of slaves or extreme manual labor to produce profit. Dutch slavery was similar to the treatment of indentured servants: they had rights, but it was still bondage. I'm getting a sense of what Groote's life might have been like, but I still don't know why he was given land or freedom. Mark wanted to find Groote and Christina's property. It's a long shot, but Stokes iconography of Manhattan Island traces the physical development of the colony and lists the earliest owners of land in New York. Groote Manuell, here it is, I found it! It was once farmland, but some of the street names



© 2005 Oregon Public Broadcasting all rights reserved

and numbers remain the same, and I'm able to find the former location of Groote's land. 350 years can bring a lot of change. The heart of Greenwich village. It's hard to believe that this was once farmland owned by free Africans, but the question remains: how did Groote Manuell get his freedom and why was he given this land? I'm heading to the New York state library and archives in Albany, where some of the earliest documents from the colonial period are stored. Charles Gehring is director of the New Netherland project. He discovers that the first mention of Groote Manuell in the historic record appears three years before he is freed and given land. I'm shocked by what he tells me.

Charles Gehring: The earliest document that we have is 1641 and it refers to a murder trial. Very interesting stuff.

Tukufu: So our guy was involved in a murder.

Charles: That's right.

Tukufu: Now what's the story?

Charles: Well, he and eight other black slaves are accused of murdering one of their compatriots, a man by the name -- or a slave by the name of Jan Premaro, in the woods near their house. They will not tell who actually dealt the final blow, who killed him. So they are about -- rather than hang all of them, they have them draw lots, and luckily Groote Manuell doesn't -- doesn't draw the short end.

Tukufu: The mystery deepens. Groote is a suspect in a murder case. But three years later he wins his freedom and land. Ultimately, no one is executed for the crime. Charles tells me that, ironically, the reason Groote and the others were not hanged for murder is, in part, the same reason Groote was granted freedom.

Charles: Well, I think it's mostly economical, they say. The Dutch probably feel that they'll be -- be more useful farming their own land and providing the Dutch with grain and hogs, whatever.

Tukufu: The colony needed labor, and executing able-bodied men made little sense. Similarly, granting slaves land and freedom helped provide food for a fast-expanding population. Charles has located the original document that granted Groote his freedom in 1644. It confirms that the Dutch were thinking of themselves first when they granted Groote freedom. A condition was a heavy annual tax to be paid in crops and livestock.

Charles: And it all supports the operation -- the trading operation of the fort. It's very interesting because it's the first example of freeing blacks on Manhattan.

Tukufu: Our document is telling a remarkable story. The first Africans in Manhattan fought for their freedom and chose a unique moment to strike. But why were they given so much land and in what seems to be such a prime location? I'm heading back to New York city to meet with Chris Moore, an historian from the Schomberg Center for Black Culture. He suggests that it wasn't just economics that motivated the Dutch. In the mid-1600s, the colonists were running scared. Their military campaign against the Native Americans had stirred a hornet's nest of retaliation.

Chris Moore: On February 25, 1643, the Dutch had declared war against the Indians and they really set out to exterminate them. They sent a contingent of soldiers to New Jersey. They killed about 80 Native Americans that evening, then rode back that night, killed 20 or 30 more in Manhattan. Well, the Indians fought back and they burned literally every farm north of New Amsterdam.



© 2005 Oregon Public Broadcasting all rights reserved

Tukufu: The slaves saw opportunity to ask for freedom and land, and in their hour of need, the Dutch consented. But the property was some of the most contested territory in the new world, an arrow-strewn no-man's-land between the Indians and the Dutch. So what you're telling me is that the political act was on the part of the enslaved.

Chris: They clearly understood the situation because they petitioned the government. The 11 men saw the situation that there was a war going on. If ever there was a time in New Amsterdam to ask for your freedom, it was during the Indian war.

Tukufu: Chris tells me that as the Indian Wars ended, Groote and Christina's land was at the spiritual center of the earliest and most important African-American community in North America.

Chris: It's actually the first free black community right on Manhattan Island in 1644. Right in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village in New York City was -- was really the center of freedom, the freedom center for this black community.

Tukufu: Chris shows me a register from the collegiate church, the first church built in the Dutch colony and the center of Black Christian life. A church text known as the kinder book, or children's book, offers us a rare window on the life of an early African-American community.

Chris: In terms of information about the free black community and the enslaved black community in 17th-century North America, this is a very important book, because there aren't many records, but in this particular book, it contains their baptismal records and also their marriage records.

Tukufu: Chris Moore has traced his own family back to the New Netherlands and to those free blacks who lived surrounding Groote and Christina. In the kinder book, he shows me something from his own family which also concerns the land in our document. I'm sure it will interest Mark. Your document sent us on a fascinating journey. I tell Mark his document is a priceless record of how African Americans won freedom 200 years before the Civil War. I also tell him that two years after being granted land, in the heart of what is now Greenwich Village, Groote and Christina took the next step in their life together, a commitment which extends all the way to the present day.

Chris: Here in 1649 is the entry of Groote Manuell's child, Nicolas Manuell. I consider him the first in my family, the first freeborn African-American.

Tukufu: So you're related directly to Groote Manuell and Christina.

Chris: That's right. My mother told me stories about her family and I'm trying to pass that on to my children as well.

Mark: So you were able to track Groote Manuell all the way to the present.

Tukufu: Yes. Look, I want to thank you for letting us investigate your story.

Mark: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you for finding out this important information.

Tukufu: What happened to Groote and Christina's land? In the 1660s, the British imported a more brutal form of slavery, designed to maximize profits on southern plantations. And in 1712, a New York law prohibits blacks from inheriting land. This effectively ends land ownership, and a golden era of freedom for African-Americans comes to an end.



© 2005 Oregon Public Broadcasting all rights reserved