

Hester Johnson (c. 1800-1895) and the “Colored” Settlement of Killjordan Creek: Case Study by Riah L. Kinsey

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Hester Johnson was born between the years of 1800 and 1824 in the state of New York. By 1880, she was living in Flushing with her daughter, Mary (1842-?) and son-in-law James Armstrong (1819-?), who was originally from Virginia. It is likely that the family was living on the property of James' employer: James was listed as a farm worker, and their nearest neighbor is farmer David Trainor (1835-), born in Ireland and married to Margaret XXX (1854-) of New York. According to the census, Hester and her family were surrounded by neighbors from a variety of backgrounds; life in what was then “the country” would have likely meant that she interacted with them regularly.

With this in mind, it is difficult to understand how Hester Johnson died elderly and alone, “frozen to death” in a dilapidated shanty. Newspaper reports of her death state that the 90 or 95-year-old “colored” woman passed away during the famously cold and stormy February of 1895. The man who found her, Abraham Van Nostrand (), was one of the local community members long in the habit of bringing her charitable donations of food. By the time he came to check on her post-storm, she'd been dead for three days.

Her record of death, one of the only ones in the Stone-Hartmann Index with a remarkable cause, states only her name, place of birth, approximate age and circumstances of death, indicating that the informant did not know much about Hester, and that perhaps there was no one nearby who could fill in the gaps. As neither she nor her daughter appear in local records aside from the 1880 Federal Census, this leaves us amazingly limited in what we know about Hester's life. In many ways, the articles about her death provide some of the only entrance points to learning anything at all. Chief among these entrance points in research is the mention of Hester's last place of residence: a “shack” in “Kiljordan.”

In learning more about Kiljordan, I tried to tease out the details of Hester's life, a life which was largely either unrecorded or “buried”/“hidden” within the archive. I thought we could learn more about her if we could answer the questions of why she died alone in such isolated and impoverished conditions. Key to these questions is “finding” Hester Johnson's Kiljordan.

Locating Kiljordan proved more difficult than I initially anticipated. I was unable to find the area named on any Flushing map created between 1850 and 1910. From the articles, it appeared that Hester had been living in Kiljordan for a while, and that her neighbor Van Nostrand had a long-standing relationship with her. I tried to look into him as a means of pinpointing where Kiljordan was, but while Van Nostrand was much easier to locate in census records and in newspapers (being a white, landowning man), there was no mention of Kiljordan in any of these documents. This left me with an approximate location for Kiljordan, wherever Abram lived between 1880 and 1895, but no clue of the meters and boundaries of this location, or how it may have been socially divided, or thought of by locals.

My next step then was to return to local newspapers to see if there was any mention of Kiljordan there. I also just tried searching 'Kiljordan' and 'Flushing' noting that the name was unusual enough to potentially bear some clues. This research led me to several relevant texts held by the Internet Archive. Taken together, it was in these newspapers and texts that yielded the majority of the information about the community where Hester lived (at least for the later part of her life), and ultimately died. There were no official records on the neighborhood of Kiljordan in Flushing.

I additionally tried to locate Kiljordan on Google using the same search terms 'Kiljordan' and 'flushing.' This led me to three key texts from the Internet Archive: An autobiography of famous Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), in which he describes his childhood in Kiljordan and provides some landmarks to pinpoint its location (Merton, 1978, p. 10).

The 'Truant School' described in Merton's autobiography is likely the New York Parental School, which eventually became Queens College. Queens College is south of the heart of Flushing, towards Jamaica, providing a possible southern boundary for Kiljordan. "The Fields" likely refer to the meadows that were once located between Queens College and the center of Flushing where the botanical gardens are now. This description becomes an approximate western boundary of Kiljordan. If Merton could look "across the fields" to St. George (St. George's Episcopal Church-located today in the southern area of Flushing), he'd be looking north towards the heart of Flushing, so that defines another approximate northern boundary of Kiljordan (1978, p. 10).

The prefix 'Kil' has roots in both Dutch and Scotch-Irish, which would create links to the original Dutch settlement, or later Irish immigrants (like the man Hester's family likely worked for) in the region. But regardless of the transliteral meaning, this is still an important key to Hester's life. Killjordan is possibly an old name for the area, which would explain both its exclusion from official maps and its inclusion in colloquial, local papers.

With this in mind, I searched two newspaper databases for information on Killjordan: Newspapers.com (a paid service that I often use for genealogical research) and Fulton History: a free index, mostly centered around small-town papers. These databases' findings often intersect in terms of the titles, but generally each search provided new information.

Based on the texts I found on the Internet Archive, I decided to perform searches with two variants on Killjordan: 'Killjordan' with two LL's and 'Kiljordan' with one L. A search for "Killjordan" on Fulton History online database yielded 13 articles: reduced to 9 articles and one illegible was removed through easy reduction through relevance to Flushing. A search for 'Kiljordan,' yielded many more results: 200 and more in total. By adding the search term Flushing' I limited the results to a single page of text. When I removed quotations from my search there were no search findings. Following Gordana's definition that "kiljordan" relates to a creek, I searched 'Kiljordan creek,' which yielded 7 results after removing duplicates. All findings were related to Flushing (Rezab, 2008).

Fulton History Search Results for "Kiljordan Creek"		
Article Title	Year	Link
Flushing Sewer Flood Stopped	1931	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Bary Promises Chlorine To End Killjordan Odors	1931	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Mosquitos 'Eat' Men on Meadows, Says Mrs. Williams: Finds Conditions in Flushing Swamp Like That Doctors Found in Panama	1932	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Olde Flushing [The Village of Flushing]	1935	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Olde Flushing [Postal Services in Flushing]	1935	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Olde Flushing [Poppenhausen's Flushing Railroad]	1936	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Olde Flushing [Bowne's Ireland Mill]	1937	%2FFlushing%2520NY%2520North

Fulton History Search Results for "Killjordan"		
Article Title	Year	Link
News From The Suburbs: The Trouble Caused By Dead Swine	1884	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Garbage Dumps In Flushign Stir Spirited Protest	1930	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
School Days: An Account of Old Flushing For Children	1932	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
WPA Squads To Beautify The Borough	1938	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Flushing Has A Firebug: And The Village Is All Stirred Up About It	1891	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Looking Into The Past: 25 Years Ago	1936 [1911]	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Obituaries: Charles S. Woodby	1940	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Streets in Flushing to be Legally Opened	1910	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p
Flushing Bay to Retain Its Former Glorv	1938	Fulton%255fform%252ehtml%26.p

The same searches on Newspapers.com produced 7 relevant results for articles concerning Killjordan (of 9 total, when search was limited to the State of New York), and 1 result for Kiljordan Creek (also limited to the State of New York).

Newspapers.com Search Results for "Killjordan Creek" [Limited to New York State]		
Article Title	Year	Link
Flushing Sewer Flood Stopped	1931	/image/544866312/?terms=%22killjordan%22&page=1

Newspapers.com Search Results for "Killjordan" [Limited to New York State]		
Article Title	Year	Link
A Town Which Cannot Be Libeled	1884	.com/image/20620587/?terms=%22killjordan%22&page=1
News From The Suburbs: The Trouble Caused By Dead Swine	1884	.com/image/85646839/?terms=%22killjordan%22&page=1
Flushing Has A Firebug: And The Village Is All Stirred Up About It	1891	.com/image/145301782/?terms=%22killjordan%22&page=1
In Mud Up To Chin: Man Makes Danderous Rescue In Killjordan Creek	1909	.com/image/53881991/?terms=%22killjordan%22&page=1
Streets In Flushing To Be Legally Opened	1910	.com/image/54484320/?terms=%22killjordan%22&page=1
Flushing Bay To Regain Its Former Glory	1938	.com/image/52878563/?terms=%22killjordan%22&page=1
Low Life of Queens Skeeters Stung by Blitzkrieg of City, WPA	1940	.com/image/52911290/?terms=%22killjordan%22&page=1

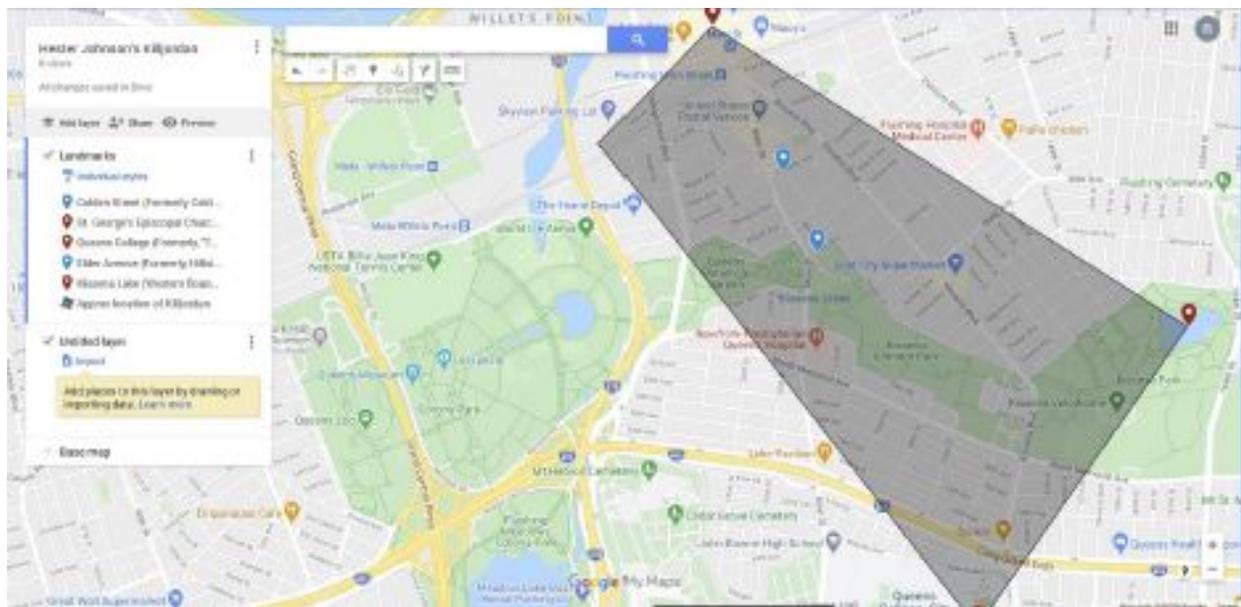
Finally, I found one additional article on Newspapers.com by searching "Kiljordan" "colored" (limited to the state of New York). I adjusted my search terms because the Kiljordan I was seeing seemed very white, when the earliest articles I could find said it was mostly colored, and Hester herself was a black woman.

Newspapers.com Search Results for "Kiljordan""Colored" [Limited to New York State]		
Article Title	Year	Link
He Followed The Show: A Flushing Boy Gratifies His Ambition	1887	ncmVILX2p2XctaWCjCjU1Njk5MjY

Taken together, the articles not only help us to pinpoint the location of Hester Johnson's Kiljordan, but tell the story of a community enmeshed in a period of great social, economic and ecological change.

Approximate Location of Kiljordan:

Kiljordan Landmarks from Selected Newspaper Articles				
Landmark Name	Landmark Place	Source	Year	Current Name
Bowen's Ireland Mill	Asphalt Plant, north of Rodman Street and 500 feet west of Lawrence Street	Worms252oh	1937	
Millpond Near Bowen's Ireland Mill	Fed by Kiljordan Creek and flowing down from Kissena Lake	Worms252oh	1937	
St. Mann's Barn	St. Mann Property	a3453017820	1891	
Corona Meadows	West of the Worlds Fair, 4,000 acres of Kiljordan Creek and valley, several hundred feet from the Federal Building of the Fair	a5291129071	1940	
Fowler Street	Lawrence Street westerly; 1730 feet (from 800 feet-1975); towards Corona	a5449432071	1910	
Blossom Street (shown but never laid out)	Lawrence to Sunnait Street	a5449432071	1910	
Summit Street (shown but never laid out)	Blossom to Cherry Street	a5449432071	1910	
Cherry Street (shown but never laid out)	Summit to Colden Ave	a5449432071	1910	Colden Ave is now Colden Street
Colden Ave (1933)	Franklin Place to Underhill Ave (from Hillside)-between Jumper and Mulberry	a5449432071	1910	
Home of Nellie Butler, daughter of Michael Butler	57 Hillside Avenue	a5388199171	1909	Hillside is now Elder
Old Bridge spanning Kiljordan Creek	200 feet from the greenhouses of A.L. Thoms	a5388199171	1909	
Home of Sam Smith, employe of A.L. Thoms	Colden Ave	a5388199171	1909	
Home of John Duggan	Corner of Colden and Hillside	a5388199171	1909	
Home of Tony Maglas (Anthony Maglas)	[120] Colden Ave	a5388199171	1909	
Kiljordan Stream	Oak Avenue Sewer Outlet	Worms252oh	1931	
Oak Ave Sewer Outlet	Lawrence Street	Worms252oh	1931	
Kiljordan Creek	Sub-Kissena Park outflow pipe	Worms252oh	1932	
Post office at Kiljordan Creek	Main Street Extension, at Sanford avenue	Worms252oh	1935	



Area Biography

In the 1880s, the area that would come to be called Kiljordan, Kiljordan Creek, or Kiljordan Valley. The area was home to a substantial Irish immigrant population, but by the 1880s, the area came to be described as mostly colored. It is unclear if these were local blacks or people came up from the south post emancipation or even on the underground railroad; likely both.

Even as the area diversified, black residents seem to be more concentrated to the east of the area, in Black Stump--also known as poor and crime-ridden--not much improvement. This led to cross-racial supportive connections, such as the case of a white boy who ran away to the circus, who confided his plans to a black friend who lived in Kiljordan. However, tension arose as the population of the area changed. At this time the area has a rush of development; road building, sewer installation and most notably, meadow clearance to remove mosquito-infested swamps that contributed to the malaria induced death of a child on the Stone-Hartmann Index. Black residents had to do an investigation into the swine killing themselves, and both they and the Irish farmer were ultimately turned down when they sought legal assistance. At this point, the area was still poor (with some residents described as squatters, as opposed to homeowners), but was inhabited by Polea, Italian*, colored and white families. The language used in the swine articles is unsettling: "marse" is southern dialect for "master" which would have been out of place here for non southerners, and why would a person who deliberately left the south to come north -choose- to call a white person master if they didn't have to? Perhaps post-war stereotyping? Despite tensions between the Black and white residents of Kiljordan, when Hester died in 1895 she was checked in on by a white neighbor.

By the time of the World's Fair, the Kiljordan area had undergone numerous beautification and sanitation efforts. Over time, a system of navigable streets were erected, meadows were mostly cleared, and a truant school had become Queens College, which was the only free college in the borough.

The latest article I could find mentioning Kiljordan was a 1940 obituary for Charles S. Woodby, a 63-year-old black man living on 46-27 161St Street, in Kiljordan. Born into one of the areas' "old families," Woodby was said to have lived in Kiljordan most of his life. I estimated that Charles would have been about 18 when Hester died, and used that information to locate him in the 1892 New York State Census. Just a few houses away was Abraham Van Nostrand, and two doors from Van Nostand, Hester Johnson. This record had not showed up in previous searches.

List of the inhabitants living in the Dutch Election District of the Town of Flushing,
 N. Y., on Feb. 16, 1892.

NAME	Sex	Age	Mar.	In 1890 COUNTY BANK	Color	OCCUPATION	NAME	Sex	Age	Mar.
William Armstrong	m	44		U	S	C	Graces	m	10	
Henry Armstrong	F	38		u	u	C	Richard Harned	m	7	
Ann Lee	F	48		Inclined		C	John Buntie	m	38	
William Brown	m	30		u	R	C	Amie Buntie	F	50	
Ann Lee	m	6		..	u	C	Amie Buntie	F	15	
John M. Johnson	F	58	C	u	u	C	Lewis Buntie	F	12	
Ann Dauter	m	48	C	u	u	C	Mary Buntie	F	10	
Frank S. Dauter	F	44		u	u	C	John Vogelbach	m	28	
...

I was correct in assuming that “finding Kiljordan” would lead me to records on Hester that were previously impossible to find. However the record I found didn’t tell me as much about her or her life as I learned from looking into her community. The area where she lived was a rough out-of-the-way place, and she was elderly and it’s likely that her only family, a daughter and son in law, had passed away. When this happened her community, the old black and Dutch families and possibly the newer Irish ones, came to her aid despite tensions and upheaval.

Though it may seem that she died from lack of care, my previous assumption that this came from her community dissolving around her as a result of displacement is not entirely accurate. That may have been part of it, but mostly because the area was poor and underserved. Her living situation reflected the same disadvantages. Very important implications for the people on the rest of the Stone-Hartmann Index, as many seem to have been her neighbors in 1880, all of the other case study subjects with the exception of the Sands family live within pages of Hester. Hopefully because we have found out the location of Kiljordan, we can use this information to gain greater insight into the people that lived there, even though they may not be as well documented in official sources.