

Excerpt From: "If He Had Been a Man, You Know?": Jo, Town Founder

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<https://millmuseum.org/joe-ginne/>

If John Cates is a mystery, even less is known about Joe Ginne, besides that he was Black and enslaved. Even his name is a question mark. It is unlikely, for example, that he was actually called Joe. In the only 17th-century document in which he is named, Cates's will, he is called "Jo," perhaps an abbreviation for Joseph (or Josiah or Jonathan). In the recording of 17th-century English names, abbreviations were commonplace but nicknames were not, and it may be that he was called Joseph rather than Joe. Or perhaps Jo (without an -e) was not an abbreviation for Joseph, but a name he acquired in some other way. As we peel back the layers to his identity, we would probably be closer to the mark, then, to call him simply Jo. And what was the origin of the surname, Ginne? Was it pronounced with a soft or hard "G"? In the 17th, 18th, and even 19th centuries, "Ginne" was often an alternate spelling of the feminine name "Ginny," with a soft "G" and a long "E." The 19th-century poet Jane Gay Fuller, however, thought "Ginne" might be an alternate spelling of "Guinea," a place in Africa, calling him "Guinea Joe." The English word Guinea derives from the Portuguese Guine, which is pretty close to Ginne, and which referred to the Atlantic coast of Africa south of the Senegal River. There are several hypotheses about the meaning of the place name Guine, the most common being that it derives from a Senegalese word for "black," and "guinea" has often been used in English as an alternative word for "black." Also known as the Gold Coast or Slave Coast, from the 1400s through the 1700s Guinea was a major source of gold, spices, and slaves, and the majority of the Africans transported to the Americas in the transatlantic slave trade came from there. The English gold coin called a guinea, dating from the mid-1600s and valued at one pound and one shilling, was minted from gold from Guinea. Had Jo been born in Guinea and survived the dreaded Middle Passage across the Atlantic, to wind up in Connecticut? Perhaps. But a quick search on Ancestry.com failed to find any examples of African Americans bearing the name Guine, Guinea, or Ginne. Ancestry.com did turn up a few white Americans with the surname Guinea, most of whom were Irish. There were even fewer Americans with the surname Ginne, and all of them seem to have been of German descent. Could "Ginne" have been a contraction for "Virginnny" (for Virginia), where, according to tradition, Jo once lived? Another possibility is that Ginne was an alternate spelling for Ginnings, itself an alternate spelling for Jennings. Jonathan Ginnings and his family were among the early settlers of Windham, but Joseph was never enslaved by the Ginningses, so it is unclear how he would have come to carry their name. Furthermore, if he was born in Africa, his African name is lost. And while it is most likely that the name Jo (or Joseph) was bestowed upon him by his owner, it is true that enslaved people occasionally named themselves. The best known example of such self-naming in 17th-century Connecticut was the enslaved man John Jackson of New London. A more famous (although 18th-century) example is Olaudah Equiano, although in Equiano's case, the self-naming came after he became free. The most accurate answer to the question of the origin of the name Joe Ginne is, "we don't know."

Larned and other 19th-century writers all claim that Jo was a "loyal" and "faithful" servant. Was he really? Or did he actually resent his enslavement, but wisely choose not to say so? Nineteenth-century white Americans, even Northerners, frequently accepted uncritically the myth that Black slaves became

emotionally attached to their white owners. But the historian Eugene Genovese has written about “puttin’ on ol’ massa,” the wisdom of acting happy around whites, who could exercise the power of life and death over enslaved people. It was simply safer if white folks thought you were loyal, faithful, and happy. Jo may have been playing a role. Or, it is possible that 19th-century writers simply assumed that he must have been loyal, faithful, and happy, because they assumed that Cates, as the town’s first settler, must have been the sort of master who would have inspired such feelings.

It does seem that Jo worked hard. Larned said that the “cave or cellar” that he and Cates lived in for their first winter in Windham was “fashioned by the hands of [the] faithful negro.” Considering Cates’s age, it is likely that she was right — if Cates was around 80 years old, such work was likely beyond him. Moreover, the next summer Cates abandoned the cellar, purchased a settler’s lot from the Legatees, and built “with his servant, in the summer of 1689, the first house in the new Plantation.” Again, because of Cates’s age, it is likely that Jo did much, most, or all of the work. Weaver wrote that Jonathan Ginnings had also helped with the construction, although Larned said that Ginnings did not arrive until the next year in 1690. And there was other work for Jo to do. A. W. Parkhurst, another 19th-century Windham local historian, wrote that, during their first winter in Windham, Cates and Jo survived largely on game that Jo had hunted or trapped. Parkhurst also said that Cates and Jo inhabited the cellar “happily.” Did they really? Was Jo actually pleased to be occupying a hole in the ground during a cold New England winter with a man who owned him? It seems more likely that 19th-century white folks, living after abolition, wanted to believe that Jo was happy, loyal, and faithful. Postbellum Northerners did not always want to recall that slavery had once been commonplace in New England as well as in the South. While the story of Joe Ginne did remind late-1800s Windham residents of their own uncomfortable history with slavery, choosing to believe that Jo had been a happy and faithful servant would have served to minimize that history.

Jo did not, of course, play any public political role in the new settlement. Several of the 19th-century local historians reproduced documents relating to Windham’s early history, such as its petition to the Connecticut General Assembly for incorporation as an independent town. Cates was a frequent signer, as were most of Windham’s other adult male heads of household. Neither a freeman nor a householder, Jo signed none of these documents. Like women, children, and indentured servants, he could neither vote nor hold office. His name was absent from church records.

John Cates died in 1697, apparently of old age. He left a will, in which he made specific reference to Jo.

I John Kates of Windham, in the Colony of Connecticut, doe make this my last Will & Testament: I give 200 acres of my Land not yet laid out to the Poor of the Town of Windham, to be Instayled to sd. Poor for their Use forever. I doe also give and Instayle 200 acres more of my lands not yet laid out to a scoole House for the Use of the above said Town forever. And further I doe give unto the Reverend Mr. Samuel Whiting (Minister of the Gospel), of said Towne, I say I give unto him my Negro Jo, one bed and bedd Clothes, one Chest, and my Wearing Clothes. And further, I do give unto the Church of Windham ten pounds in Money. I doe make Mary Howard my Executrix, and doe give unto herr all my Estate not above mentioned, both personal and real. And I appoint Ensign Jonathan Crane and sergt. Thomas Bingham to

be Overseers of this my Will. Always provided that if any of my Children should Come over out of England, then my Will is that they, he or she, should enjoy my Estate notwithstanding what is above exprest. Otherwise, to stand Exactly in all Points. The Negro Jo An Exception. Jno. X Kates.

What can we discern from Cates's will? For one thing, he was illiterate (or perhaps disabled), signing his name with a X. For another, he was prosperous. Larned and other 19th-century sources agreed that he brought a quantity of gold and silver with him to Connecticut, which he used to purchase several hundred acres of land in Windham. How had he acquired such wealth, especially if he was indeed illiterate? Piracy is one possibility. (And if he was illiterate, that would have made him a very atypical Puritan man.) Cates wanted to be a benefactor, leaving 200 acres of land to benefit the poor and another 200 to finance a school. He also had plenty left over to endow his housekeeper, Mary Howard, the unmarried sister of one of his neighbors. He had left children behind in England. Did he always hope they would come looking for him, even after his death? In any case, none ever did. And then there was Jo, whom he bequeathed to the town's minister, Rev. Samuel Whiting. Whiting was young, a recent graduate of Yale, and was said to be a passionate preacher. Whiting remained in Windham for the rest of his life, settling into the role of community pastor. He spent at least as much time caring for his parishioners' social needs as for their spiritual well-being. Whiting's negotiations with the town to become minister had been protracted, and he had received a decent living as part of the bargain. He was not poor, as ministers in other towns sometimes were. His father, Rev. John Whiting, was minister of the prestigious Hartford church. Samuel Whiting was married, with children. Did Cates bequeath Jo to Whiting as a further economic incentive to stay in Windham, a valuable servant still able to contribute a good day's work? Or was Jo, like Cates, getting on in years, and Cates wanted to place him with someone he trusted to care for him? In addition to Jo, Cates also bequeathed Whiting a bed, bed clothes, a chest, and his old "wearing clothes." It is likely that these were for Jo. Larned reported that Jo did not long survive his old owner, evidence that he, too, may have become infirm by this time, worn out either by old age or by a life of toil. (Larned also reported that Jo exhibited much grief at Cates's death.) Although we cannot be certain, it seems likely that the bequest of Jo to the minister was made to ensure that Jo was cared for more than anything else. That Cates made Jo the sole exception in the clause in his will that provided that all of his property would pass to any of his children who might show up to claim it reinforces that interpretation. It suggests that while Cates continued to see Jo as property, he may have viewed human property as something different from other kinds. It hints that the relationship between Cates and Jo was complex.

Parkhurst wrote that both Cates and Jo "were buried near the place of their concealment [the cellar in which they had lived together during their first winter in Windham], and a rough stone, rudely initialed, marked for a time the spot. When the first cemetery was laid out, the body of Cates was removed thither." In other words, the townspeople exhumed Cates's body and reburied it in the new town cemetery. Did they also move Jo's body? Parkhurst did not say. If they did, they did not mark it with a stone. Was a slave's body not worth the effort? Cates's new gravestone, paid for by the town, was for its time large and ornate. By contrast, there are no slaves' gravestones in the Windham Cemetery.

As the poet Jane Gay Fuller wryly noted, the inhabitants of 19th-century Windham considered Cates their town's first settler and founder, but did not extend that designation to Jo who had arrived at the same time, dug the cellar hole in which he and Cates had lived for a winter, hunted and trapped to make sure they had enough to eat, and built or helped build the first house in the town. "He would have been a settler, too, / if he had been a man, you know!" she wrote with accusing sarcasm. Because Jo had not been "a man" – not a freeman, anyway, not a person in the same legal sense as free white men – local tradition made Cates the first settler, the "father of our town," but relegated Jo to a supporting role, a shadow standing on the edge of the community, not fully part of it, not even worthy of a gravestone. Like Fuller, not everyone in 1892 thought that was just. Theron Brown, who also wrote a poem to commemorate Windham's bicentennial in 1892, thought Jo deserved better. After several verses extolling Cates, Brown – a Windham native, Yale graduate, and in 1892 an editor at Youth's Companion magazine in Boston – brought up the subject of Jo. In 1892 the people of Windham remembered the recent Civil War as (at least in part) a war to end slavery, and doubtless some of them were embarrassed that their ancestors had once accepted slavery as normal. Not as sentimental as Fuller, Brown was a didactic writer who expressed strong disapproval at Jo's marginalization.

Pious he [Cates] was, and Puritan, possessed / Of worldly goods, a gentleman, a guest / Of Pilgrim Land, a friend of high and low, / A freeman – and he owned a slave, black Joe!

Enough that by the moral light he saw, / When liberty was only white man's law, / His human chattel was no swift reproof / To one whose soul had felt oppression's hoof, / Since Right, to even a Mayflower refugee, / Implied no negro's title to be free.

We trust the legend that John Cates was kind, / As kind of heart as liberal of mind. / And, after twice four years of upright deeds, / And generous thoughts for Windham's future needs, / When, praised for scattered blessings, he who gave / The town's first dwelling filled its earliest grave. / That the green threshold of his churchyard inn / Was watered by the tears of black Joe Ginne.