

Samuel Ballton (1838-1917)

The Pickle King of Greenlawn

Samuel Ballton, successful farmer, astute businessman, believer in progressive ways, and promoter of Greenlawn, earned the title “Greenlawn Pickle King” in 1899 when he raised 1,500,000 pickles in one season.

He was born a slave on a plantation in Westmoreland, Virginia. In 1861 he married a slave on a neighboring plantation, and when the Civil War broke out, the thought of freedom for himself and his wife became “uppermost in his mind.” However, Ballton, with other able-bodied slaves, was hired out to work as a section hand on the Virginia Central Railroad in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Managing to escape, he obtained a job as a cook with a Northern regiment. So great was his desire to see his wife that he risked capture and stole back to see her. Meeting up with rebels, “he put on a bold face and told the rebs he had been captured by the Yankees, but had escaped and was going back to his ‘old massa.’” Although unable to take his wife with him, he escaped North a second time, but returned to her again soon after. This time he told her, “Rebecca, I’m going to take you to freedom.” They walked 50 miles in 14 hours to Fredricksburg and freedom. Later, Ballton enlisted in a Massachusetts regiment and saw action at many key battles.



Ballton came to Greenlawn in 1873, taking a job as a farmer with Charles D. Smith. Later Ballton sharecropped on the Alexander Gardiner farm and was highly successful as a grower of pickles and cabbages. Working for a while as a buying agent for a large Boston pickle house, Ballton earned 10 cents per thousand for all he purchased and was able to acquire some capital.

Always ambitious, “possessed of a competence ... acquired by hard knocks and ... good common sense,” Ballton began to develop land and build houses locally. He encouraged the development of Greenlawn, an area that he characterized as the most beautiful village along the North Shore railroad tracks. He borrowed money from local farmers, bought land, improved it, and sold it at a small profit. Ballton brought workers up from the South to work on the farms in summer and to build houses in the winter. Several of the houses Ballton built are still standing today.

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(Information taken from materials in the Museum Archives.)

For more information contact the
Greenlawn-Centerport Historical Association
P.O. Box 354, Greenlawn, NY 11740
Phone & Fax (631) 754-1180, E-mail gcha-info@usa.net