Dated August 20, 1790, this document contains a declaration of James Jay, who wishes to “quieting the mind” of a slave named Claus, whom Jay has “purchased” from Richard Ryerson of Pompton. After a four-week trial period, Claus “is satisfied with the usage he has received” and so declares that “he would like to live with me all his Life.” Certain “mischievous people” have planted the idea in Claus’ mind that once the trial period is over he is “ever afterwards liable to be treated with unmerited severity.” Jay declares that he will always treat well “an honest & industrious Slave who behaves well...” Therefore, Jay pledges that, if after a year Claus “shows just & sufficient Cause to complain of ill usage,” then James Jay agrees to “sell” Claus within six months. Unfortunately, there is no reassurance that he would be sold into better conditions and certainly no offer of freedom. This interesting declaration shows not only that slavery persisted in the North even after the American Revolution, fought on the grounds that “all men are created equal,” but also that there was cruelty associated with the system of forced labor.

The manuscript collections of the Bergen County Historical Society are a rich trove of information upon all aspects of our past. Any additional information that someone can add to this would be welcome.

Deborah Powell / Kevin Wright 01/25/09  •  contactBCHS@bergencountyhistory.org

Whereas Claus, a Negro man, for the purchase of whom I have agreed with Richard Ryerson of Pompton, has lived with me four weeks on Trial, and is so well satisfied with the usage he has received, that he declares that were he sure to be always treated in the same way, he would like to live with me all his Life. Now as the usage he has received is no other that I have always held, and will ever hold to an honest & industrious Slave who behaves well, as he has done during the above Trial: and as it appears to me that the fears he has of being ever afterwards able to be treated with unmerited severity, have been infused into his mind by mischievous people, I am induced from a desire of removing such fears, and quieting the mind of the said Slave, to promise, that if the said Claus shall within a year from the Date hereof, shew just & sufficient cause to complain of ill usage, I will sell him within six months after such complaint, for the money I am to give for him and the expenses I may be at on his account.

James Jay
August 20, 1790
The Sum to be paid for the above Claus is L81.17.4
Fig. 1.—Crimson Cone; grown near New York about 1820.

Fig. 5.—Type of punnet used for the New York City market, 1815–1850.
Berry basket in carrying tray, BCHS collections

Hovey Strawberry
Col. Cheney Strawberry
The growth of New York City spurred the market for strawberries beyond the wild supply. Andrew M. Hopper, of Pascack, recalled, “When I was a boy of ten years, I can well remember picking strawberries with my father. At that time (about 1824) we had no crates, but packed the baskets in larger baskets called hampers. In those days there were no commission merchants in New York that dealt in berries, so each farmer was compelled to go with and sell his own fruit. There were no railroads then; all the berries were carted to New York in wagons, crossing the Hudson at Hoboken, or went by boat.”

Bergen County berry baskets, one with a farmer’s mark. A berry basket form is on the left. BCHS collections.