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Connecticut State Department of Education

**Teaching and Learning About Cultural Diversity
Resource Handbook**

African Americans in Connecticut

Coming Full Circle

(Excerpt)

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Topic Four

Holding Onto Ourselves

Key Ideas

1. ***The enslaved Africans brought with them community and personal values and practices that helped them survive their circumstances in the colonies.***

The majority of Africans captured and sold into slavery came from small tribal communities on the fringes of the large West African empires. These tribes had evolved a set of beliefs, values and community patterns that assured the survival and well-being of the tribe, and the individual members of the tribe. There was a clear understanding that the well-being of the individual was tightly interwoven with the well-being of all members of the tribe. Team work, care for the extended family, appreciation and encouragement of special talents and skills were deeply ingrained. Religious rituals, oral histories, songs, dances, and games all reinforced cohesiveness, consistency and continuity within the tribe. Because tribal practices had developed over many generations, there was a very high level of non-verbal communication. A hand gesture, an eye movement and body posture could communicate as much as words in many circumstances. Artifacts not only had practical use, their designs often incorporated tribal stories and cultural values. Individuals within the tribes were all expected to apply their special gifts, skills and talents for the well-being of the tribe. Physical strength, gentleness and loyalty towards tribal members, endurance and bravery were valued personal traits. Especially prized by the West African tribes were their justice systems and their diplomatic and negotiating skills.

2. ***The culture of slavery differed dramatically throughout England's and Europe's colonies in the Americas. Whichever European state controlled the colony, the geographic location of the colony, the number of enslaved Africans in the colony, and the work the enslaved Africans were forced to do all played a role in how the Africans held on to their personal dignity and cultural patterns.***

In South and Central America and the Caribbean Islands, enslaved Africans far outnumbered their French, Spanish and Portuguese colonial masters. They worked in large gangs, sometimes numbering in the hundreds. They worked on agricultural plantations, in gold and silver mines, and on large construction projects. These colonies adopted the Catholic Church's practice of assimilation, accommodation and adaptation of "pagan" cultures that had characterized the Christianizing of Europe. On the other hand, in the English and Dutch colonies in the West Indies and in England's southern colonies in North America, enslaved Africans also far outnumbered their white masters. They primarily worked in gangs of field hands on vast agricultural plantations. The Protestant values that prevailed in England's colonies had no tolerance for assimilation and accommodation of other religious and social beliefs and practices. Enslaved Africans in the English colonies were forced to

abandon all of their traditional cultural expressions and embrace Protestant Christianity as docile children under the chauvinistic control of their masters. In the New England colonies, enslaved Africans did not work as a part of a large labor team, but were dispersed thinly throughout the middle and upper class populations as house servants, trade and agricultural workers.

Ironically, in those places where large numbers of enslaved Africans worked as a part of a labor team, they were able to maintain and nourish many of the cultural values and practices that they brought with them from their homeland. It was easier for them to maintain their language. Even if immediate families and tribes were broken up, the value of the extended family and group cohesiveness prevailed. In the Catholic colonies, the Africans created a unique integration of their traditional religious and cultural practices with those of the native populations and their Catholic masters. Even in England's Protestant southern colonial plantations, where cultural expression was less tolerated, the segregated living and working environments and large gang labor forces nurtured tribal cohesiveness through extended family care networks, story telling, games, healing practices and secretive religious ceremonies. In the New England colonies, where enslaved Africans often lived and worked close to their masters and in isolation from other Africans, it was difficult to sustain the cultural patterns of their homeland. The notion of individual survival within the white world through endurance and skill was a prevailing attitude among New England's African population.

3. ***Over time, in the Catholic colonies of France, Spain and Portugal, a wholistic indigenous culture evolved that incorporated elements of African, Native, and European values and practice. In contrast, in England's colonies, the enslaved Africans learned to survive in a fragmented, dualistic world. They evolved a surface capacity and willingness to adopt the Protestant values and practices of their master. At a deeper level, they held to the cultural beliefs and practices of their African homeland: extended family networks, story telling, music and games, healing practices, food preparation, religious worship.***
4. ***The cultural tenacity of enslaved African's in England's southern colonies provided the foundation for their resistance against the institution of slavery.***

Following the American Revolution, when it became clear to enslaved Africans that they would not join in the freedom that the Patriots had won from the British (often with their help), Africans in the southern states secretly planned a series of violent revolts against their masters and the institution of slavery. These revolts were repressed with equal violence. But a far more powerful energy emerged among the enslaved Africans: escape to freedom. Using all of the skills and cultural practices they had nurtured since their capture in Africa, the southern slaves formed an intricate network of escape routes out of the South to the northern states. Thousands upon thousands of enslaved Africans risked all to escape bondage and start anew in Canada

and the northern states. Thousands more in the South risked all to help their comrades reach freedom. What came to be known as the *Underground Railroad* is a testament to the enduring personal and community courage, strength and cohesiveness of the African people in America.

In the New England states, slavery represented neither the valuable economic commodity nor the threat to public safety that it did in the southern states. Through a process of gradualism, the New England states began to abolish slavery at the end of the 18th century. In Connecticut, slavery was completely abolished by 1849. A growing numbers of "Free Black" communities emerged in New England, especially in the port cities of Boston, New Bedford, Newport, New London and Norwich. These Free Black communities nurtured a different kind of African unity than that which had survived in the southern plantation system. Africans were becoming African-Americans, learning to maneuver within the economic, social, civic, and judicial systems of the prevailing white society. Free Black communities became the spawning ground for the Abolitionist Movement in the North, and a critical link to the *Underground Railroad* out of the South.

Together, Africans in the northern and southern states wove a fragile thread of survival and cultural memory as the United States wrestled with the moral and economic consequences of introducing slavery into the Americas.

5. *Following the Civil War, African Americans confronted an entirely different paradigm in which they must survive.*

Although nominally freed from slavery, their economic circumstances in the northern and southern states kept them in virtual subjugation to the controlling White population. If anything, focused hatred towards African Americans increased. With the loss of control provided by the institution of slavery, White people's hatred towards African Americans became more personal and vehement. Everywhere, but especially in the southern states, the controlling White population recognized that they lived amidst a very large population of African Americans who had been left out of building the economic, social and civic institutions that guided society. What would be the place of the freed slaves within American society? Neither the northern or southern states envisioned integration of African Americans into the white population, nor did they envision the inclusion of African Americans in the democratic process. Organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, and political parties such as the "Know Nothings" affirmed the supremacy of the White race over Africans and other non-Western European races and cultures.

Given these realities, following the Civil War until after World War II, African-Americans held on by creating totally separate societies and communities that could take care of the family, social, educational, economic, religious, health and recreational needs. African Americans formed their own churches, started their own schools, ran their own businesses, created their own music, opened their own theaters,

social clubs, and ball parks. They trained their own doctors, lawyers, nurses and teachers. Underpinning these organizations were the persistent personal and cultural values they had brought with them out of Africa and nurtured throughout the long ordeal of enslavement.

- 6. By the end of World War II, there was a growing body of African American literature speaking to the place of African Americans within the larger society. Also, World War II had shaken loose old attitudes and prejudices by bringing people of all races and nationalities into the war effort.***

The forces of change within the African American community changed from "holding on" to "fitting in." For two more decades, White and Black Americans struggled to find their way along the road from total segregation, to "separate but equal" to full integration of African Americans into the mainstream culture of the United States. With greater mobility, improved communication systems, and the post-war economic boom, the years between the Great Depression and the 1970's witnessed an extraordinary flowering of African American talent and culture. At the same time that the African American people yearned for full opportunity within American society, it was clear that the years and years of cultural isolation had nurtured a rich and uniquely African American cultural expression. From the Black churches, Black schools, Black sports teams and Black theaters and social clubs came great preachers, teachers and scholars, athletes, and entertainers. These leaders not only affirmed the value of African American culture for their own people, they became spokespersons and models to the White society in America.

- 7. During the 1960's and 70's, the Civil Rights movement shifted from divergent voices and divergent struggles into a well-organized social, economic, and judicial force in which African Americans were joined by spokespersons from White and Jewish institutions.***

The momentum of the Civil rights movement was directed towards integration, equal opportunity and "fitting in." As the Movement matured, however, it shifted towards a drive by the African American community to control and direct their own destiny and celebrate their own cultural heritage. Leaders in the African American community recognized the profound damage done to their community from generations of slavery, followed by generations of socioeconomic rejection, followed by decades of welfarism. While a growing number of African Americans were finding their way into skilled labor jobs, the military officer corps, and the professions, many more seemed trapped in poverty and social dislocation, lacking the sense of dignity and power to escape their circumstances. "Holding on" took on a deeper meaning: the whole of the African American community needed to "hold together" and find within their communities the cultural pride, personal dignity and collective power to carry them towards full self-determination.

8. *As the energy of the organized Civil Rights movement waned in the early 1980's the African American community found themselves once again alone in their struggle for acceptance, security and equal opportunity.*

No matter how great their economic and social achievements, no matter how completely they adopted the life style of the White community, individual African Americans still experienced the rejection and personal danger of deeply held prejudices. For the vast numbers of African Americans living in working-class urban neighborhoods or surviving in urban and rural poverty, America had become terrifyingly dangerous. Although the Civil Rights movement had placed African Americans in public office and laws on the books, deadly hatred persisted. Churches still burned, capable students and workers were still denied access to schools and jobs, restaurants and taxi cabs, the welfare lines were longer, jails were overflowing, and African American men could still be lynched. The cultural memories and the instincts implanted over 400 years of contact with the English and Europeans still resonated within the African American community. Holding on remained a fundamental and prevailing theme within the community.

Evidence From Our Past -- New England's African American Communities

In 1784, less than a year after the Treaty of Paris ended the American Revolution, Connecticut enacted legislation that would gradually free all African Americans from slavery. No person could be held in bondage after reaching the age of 25. Amendments were later made to this legislation that continued to reduce the number of enslaved Africans in Connecticut. By 1849, all slavery was abolished. Similar legislation was passed about that time in the other New England states and in New York. This did not mean, however, that the freed Africans enjoyed all of the rights and privileges of the White communities in these states. Free Blacks were still denied access to education, job mobility, voting rights, and to White judicial system.

Practically speaking, this meant that by the early 1800's, there was a growing population of Free Blacks in Connecticut. In cities, towns and villages freed Africans tended to cluster in their own communities where they could socialize and minister to their own needs and interests. Most often, the freed Africans continued to work as day laborers for farmers, tradesmen and manufacturers. But there was a growing number of freed Africans who became business persons, land owners, and civic and religious leaders within their communities.

It was within these Free Black communities that freed Africans were transformed into African Americans with the goal of controlling their own destiny within American society, and shaping the nature of that society. It was in these communities that the seeds of the northern Abolitionist Movement were planted and nourished, often by the religious and civic leaders in the community.

African American Abolitionists were soon joined by White men and women who abhorred what the institution of slavery had done to the morals and economics of the new nation. Religious, Civic and academic leaders, and journalists in New England and New York became vigorous and effective spokespersons for the Abolitionist cause to a White audience. They also were able to acquire the financial and legal resources needed to fuel and sustain the Movement. During the *Amistad* incident in Connecticut, for example, it was an effective alliance between the African American community and the White Abolitionist community that made it possible to sustain the public relations and legal effort needed to free the captives. It was the dangerous and secretive collaboration of African Americans and the White population in the North that allowed the *Underground Railroad* to carry thousands of enslaved Africans to freedom.

Jail House Hill, Norwich, Connecticut

The town, then the city of Norwich grew as a valuable seaport, especially in the West Indian trade. The Thames, a tidal river, allowed ships to travel far inland where they would be protected from the vicious Atlantic storms. During the American Revolution, ships anchored in Norwich were also protected from the British navy. At Norwich, trading vessels could off-load their cargo into warehouses and be quickly on their way. Then goods could be carried overland into central Massachusetts and Connecticut. In 1795, at the height of the West Indies trade, 42 vessels anchored at the Port of Norwich, many of these belonging to Connecticut's prestigious business and civic leaders.

A substantial Black community developed in Norwich, originating in colonial times. The movement of Africans back and forth from the West Indies and southern colonies, and the exploding need for laborers on the docks and in the warehouses contributed to the number of Africans settling in Norwich. As slavery declined in the early 1800's, one neighborhood in Norwich became an important Free Black community. Jail House Hill is high on a bluff overlooking the convergence of the Quinnebaug and Shetucket Rivers into the Thames at the Port of Norwich. The docks and warehouses that would receive goods from around the world were clustered at the bottom of the Hill. (insert more information on Underground Railroad, photo of AAME church.)

Focus On: Staying in Charge of Our Own Community

Connecticut's Black Governors

New Englanders preferred to purchase slaves who were new from Africa, especially very young Africans who would be more easily assimilated into the way of life of their masters. But New England's Atlantic ports were also busy transport hubs where sailing ships laden with produce arrived from the West Indies. These ships also brought with them African sailors referred to as Black Jacks--both free and enslaved--who had roamed the ports of all of the Americas, the Caribbean, and beyond.

This intriguing combination of circumstances gave rise to a unique institution within the enslaved African communities of New England, the Black Kings and Governors.

First, the young Africans enslaved in New England brought with them from their homeland lasting memories and powerful attachments to the government and courts systems that had regulated the affairs of West Africa's empires and tribal communities. A number of these young Africans were recognized as coming from families which had leadership status within their tribe or state. These young people would know about the importance of Africa's courts systems, and perhaps they had already begun their training as a hereditary leader in the courts. They arrived in New England with a belief that a civilized people such as themselves prized their ability to regulate community and personal conduct through a set of agreed upon laws, and that justice would be administered even handedly through the courts. As the European and Muslim journalists had noted on their trips to West Africa long ago, the administration of justice through the courts was the most significant role of the kings and governors of West Africa.

Second, enslaved Africans in New England learned early on that it was important to imitate the conduct of their masters, to value what their masters' valued, and to adopt their practices in religion and government. Although denied access to civic participation, enslaved Africans quickly discerned that election day and local town government were among the most important practices of New Englanders. Also, enslaved Africans realized that their White masters did not want the affairs of their slaves to enter their court system. Slaves were property. That was their relationship to the courts. Their personal and social concerns should not confuse this issue. It served the White community for the Africans to solve their own problems, administer their own justice. The enslaved Africans of New England, therefore, developed a parallel government and justice system to regulate the affairs of their own community. They followed the example of their White masters, electing their Kings and Governors on that day set aside for the election of the White town officials and governor.

Third, the style and deportment of the Black Kings and Governors reflects a colorful union of old African practices and practices picked up by Africans as they encountered English and European cultures. Travelers to ancient West Africa commented on the flamboyance and pomp and ceremony that accompanied the convening of the courts there. Wealthy in native gold and exotic textiles from around the world, the Kings and Governors of West Africa adorned themselves in symbols of their wealth and power that must have seemed extravagant indeed to the severe circumstances of Europeans at the time. The security and stability of the citizens of West Africa's

empires and tribes, however, was largely dependent on the capacity of their leaders to be perceived of as an equal among equals when negotiating with other leaders in the trading world. By the 17th and 18th centuries, the English, and European courts and the clergy of the Catholic Church had adopted the extravagant dress and pageantry of the Mediterranean, African, Middle Eastern and Asian worlds. What enslaved Africans encountered in the Catholic churches and governor's palaces of the colonies exceeded all of the extravagances of their homelands. The rituals of religious worship, government and judicial proceedings seemed as exotic and unfathomable to them as the European journalists had found the African's practices to be.

So, as the enslaved Africans openly imitated the ceremonies of their masters in the colonies, they were secretly resurrecting their old government and judicial structures and practices. With cast off clothing and articles, and with a private humor, enslaved Africans found ways to publicly express their old African way of life. In New England, it was through the election and celebration of the Black Kings and Governors. In the Spanish, Portuguese and French colonies, Black carnivals followed the religious holidays.

In New England, the election and celebration of the Black Kings and Governors was often met with derision of condescending humor by the White community. From written observations at the time, the White community saw the elections and celebrations of the Black Kings and Governors as evidence of the childish and uncivilized nature of their African slaves. It clearly justified their dominance and control of the Africans.

What the White community failed to recognize was that the exaggerated flamboyance of the elections and celebrations of the Black Kings and Governors was an intentional mimicking of the excesses of Election Day celebrations within the White community. These excesses became so offensive that some towns attempted to pass laws to regulate the celebrations.

The Black Kings and Governors played a critical role in allowing enslaved Africans to hold onto cultural traditions and practices and to hold onto control of their communities. It not only benefited those who assumed the positions of King or Governor who were able to model leadership roles, it also benefited the entire African community. It allowed enslaved Africans to openly and publicly express their cultural heritage. It endorsed the right and capacity of Africans to control their own communities. In a region in which enslaved Africans were sparsely distributed among the White population, it provided an opportunity for organizing and participating in community events.

In Connecticut, election days for Black Kings and Governors were held in Hartford, Weathersfield, Norwich, Farmington, Derby, Durham, Middletown, Oxford, Wallingford, Waterbury, New haven, Seymour, and Woodbridge. Between 1810 and 1845, 22 African men are known to have served as Black rulers. One of the more interesting Black Governors was Sam Huntington, the enslaved African owned by Samuel Huntington of Norwich, the first President of the United States Congress, a long term Governor of Connecticut following the American Revolution.

The institution of the Black Kings and Governors faded with the complete abolition of slavery in the New England states. The notion of uniquely African leadership, and African ceremony found its way into African American churches, the Prince Hall Masons, and other societies.