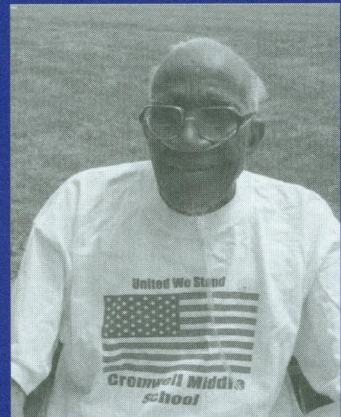
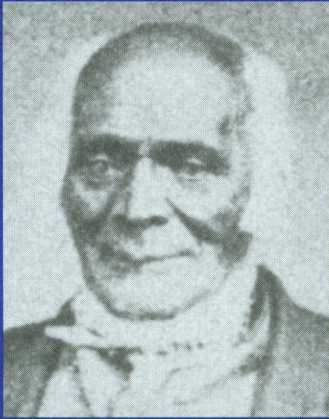


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The African American Experience in Connecticut

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The Connecticut Curriculum

Teaching the African American Experience: A Review of Resources and Curricular Options

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Recently, an article in the *New York Times* (Sunday, 3 April 2005) complained of the lack of resources available for the teaching of African American history in Connecticut. This announcement startled those of us who have long worked in this terrain because we know the supply of material has increased significantly over the past several years. Work on the *Amistad* story has proliferated since the late 1990s, as has material on the Underground Railroad in Connecticut. The *Hartford Courant* collected several revealing articles in a 2002 supplement entitled “Complicity,” and both the Mattatuck Museum and the Historical Society of the Town of Greenwich have recently featured important public history exhibitions on slavery and emancipation in their regions. The Connecticut Historical Society (CHS) has a permanent exhibition on the *Amistad* story. Numerous public conferences, lectures, and workshops throughout the state have also extensively explored this history over the past several years and more are planned. If anything, this history—so central to understanding the past and present of the state—is finally getting off the ground.

There are many examples of the growing availability of this history to the public and educators. Probably the most accessible are the magnificent and comprehensive films produced and directed over the past several years by Ms. Karyl Evans. Her oeuvre includes the award-winning *The Amistad Revolt: “All We Want Is Make Us Free” The Amistad Story in Farmington, Connecticut*; *The Road to Freedom: Connecticut’s African American Freedom Trail*; *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Connecticut*; and the monumental two-hour series *History of African Americans in Connecticut: Colonial Era to Civil War (Part 1) & Civil War to Civil Rights (Part 2)*. Complementing the *Freedom Trail* movie, though purchased separately, is a box of four tapes which can be played in a car or bus as groups travel about the state visiting the various sites. All of these videos are inexpensive and are ideal for home or classroom use. These films have single-handedly amplified the accessibility of this history to Connecticut’s citizenry and beyond. They were avidly supported by Connecticut Public Television and the Connecticut Humanities Council (CHC) precisely because these institutions recognized the paucity of resources available for public education on the history of African Americans in the state. These films are excellent vehicles for introducing this history in classrooms ranging from the middle

school to undergraduate levels.

In addition to Ms. Evans' work, there is a great deal more material available for classroom use which can either supplement or be used independently of the films, including articles and books, document collections, bibliographies, other films, and lesson plans. Most of these materials can be found at one or the other of a number of readily accessible local historical societies, public libraries, and state and private archival repositories which are rich in resources on African American history in Connecticut and have very knowledgeable and helpful staff. Several of the most important of these archives have specially prepared bibliographies or inventories of all or most of their African American documentary materials. The CHC also has an online biographical dictionary which includes many individuals key to the state's black history.¹

A comprehensive history of African Americans in Connecticut has yet to be written. Several treatments, however, admirably cover lengthy terrains of the state's history. Among the best is a recent dissertation written by Professor Guocun Yang, entitled "From Slavery to Emancipation: The African Americans of Connecticut, 1650s – 1820s" (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 1999). Yang's work thoroughly traverses the world of slavery and runaways, its disruption during the American Revolution, and its steady collapse in the years after 1783. Yang's bibliography affords the most extensive collection of sources currently available for the study of slavery and emancipation in Connecticut. Whereas their assumptions of black racial inferiority are now preposterous, two earlier works do still offer some novel information and sources: William Fowler, *The Historical Status of the Negro in Connecticut* (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1875), and Bernard Steiner, *History of Slavery in Connecticut* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1893). While older and treating the whole of New England, Lorenzo Greene's *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942) is deeply researched and still provides insights into slavery in Connecticut. David White, *Connecticut's Black Soldiers, 1775-1783* (Chester: Pequot Press, 1973) is excellent for the American Revolution.

Robert Warner's *New Haven Negroes: A Social History* (1940; New York: Arno Reprint, 1969) spans the whole of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth and is not encumbered by the racial preconceptions of earlier studies. A social scientist by training, Warner focused on one particular black community and closely studied its institutional infrastructure, its employment patterns and opportunities, the impact of discrimination upon its development, the nature and scope of its political activism, and the effect on the community of the arrival of black Southern migrants in the early twentieth century. This was a pioneering study of black community life in the North and is invaluable for anyone who wants to teach about local black life in the state in the nineteenth century and after.

There are smaller works which consider other towns and regions in Connecticut. James Rose and Barbara Brown authored a very revealing portrait of black family life in and about the New London area in the nineteenth century in *Tapestry: A Living History of the Black Family in Southeastern Connecticut* (New

London: New London County Historical Society, 1979). They have also written *Black Roots in Southeastern Connecticut* (New London: reprint New London County Historical Society, 2001). Jeffrey Mead has written about slavery and emancipation in Fairfield County in *Chains Unbound: Slave Emancipations in the Town of Greenwich, Connecticut* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1995). Vincent J. Rosivach has also written about Fairfield County in "The Hubbards, An African-American Family in Connecticut, 1769-1810," *Connecticut History* 35 (Fall 1994): 263-77. Daniel Cruson, *Newtown's Slaves: A Case Study in Early Connecticut Rural Black History* (Newtown: Newtown Historical Society, 1994) offers excellent insight into the world of the enslaved in this town. Both Barbara Beeching and David White have also written important studies on the Hartford black community in the nineteenth century.² Arna Bontemps' *Five Black Lives: The Autobiographies of Venture Smith, James Mars, William Grimes, The Rev. G. W. Offley, James L. Smith* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) is invaluable for illuminating the lives of key individual African Americans and the Connecticut towns in which they lived during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The best place to begin research on the local Underground Railroad is Horatio T. Strother, *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1962). All of these books are located at the Connecticut State Library (CSL) in Hartford as well as numerous other public and college libraries.

Bibliographies on state African American history are also very useful and readily available. While Guocun Yang's is cited above, another excellent source is the chapter, "Slavery and the Black Experience," in Christopher Collier, *The Literature of Connecticut History* (Middletown: Connecticut Humanities Council, 1983). A splendidly thorough review of documentary materials and historical literature at the CSL has been prepared by Ms. Beverly Naylor, "Finding Aid to Materials Relating to African-Americans in the Connecticut State Library."³ This guide is available at the CSL and greatly facilitates public access to documents pertaining to black history by identifying a number of them and explaining exactly how to request these items. An even more thorough list of documentary sources was prepared for the CSL by Dr. Bruce Stark in 2001 entitled, "Finding Aid to African Americans and Native Americans, 1808-1869: General Assembly State Archives Record Group No.2."

As a result of recent intensive efforts to catalog county court records, Dr. Stark and the CSL have compiled further invaluable bibliographies to relevant sources in the CSL: "The Litchfield County Minorities Collection, 1753-1854"; "New London County African Americans Collection, 1701-1774"; and "New London County Native Americans Collection, 1698-1774."⁴ This guide is essential reading for anyone researching African Americans during this time period. Additionally, the CHS in Hartford has inventoried every item it owns pertaining to black history in the state. A list of hundreds of items is readily available on-line and in printed form in its archival department. The CSL and the CHS have also made available an exhaustive index of names and subjects contained in the leading state newspaper, the *Connecticut Courant*, for the years 1764-1799. If researchers have the name of a particular individual a search of this published index will provide information on any articles or listings in which the individual appear – so long as they were active in the

late eighteenth century.

Local historical societies and public libraries with information on local black history abound throughout the state. The Connecticut League of History Organizations annually publishes a Directory of Connecticut History Organizations with complete addresses, phone numbers, and online information. While many of them may not highlight African American material as their primary collection, they nevertheless possess some books and documents pertaining to blacks in particular towns or areas, and always have helpful staff ready to assist with inquiries. Relevant material is almost always available at historical societies in the larger towns and cities. The same is also commonly true with public libraries. Most public libraries have a room dedicated to local history and/or a filing cabinet or some similar informal repository with newspaper clippings, pamphlets, photocopies, and other miscellaneous materials which often include sources on local black history. Sometimes this research requires a little more time and the documents have a range of organization, but patience and guidance from the staff often lead to exciting discoveries.

Curricular plans for teaching Connecticut African American history are also available and can be ably supplemented by drawing on the above resources. Christopher Collier notes three plans for teaching the history of slavery and the black struggle for equality in the state at the end of his bibliographic chapter.⁵ Another little known but very useful curricular resource is a spiral-bound work by Frank Andrews Stone, *African American Connecticut: African Origins, New England Roots* (Storrs: The Isaac N. Thut World Education Center at the University of Connecticut, 1991). A copy is available at the CSL. This volume is organized chronologically and contains a very good overview of African American history in the state from Africans' first arrival here through the late twentieth century. At the end of each chapter are numerous curricular suggestions for teaching that particular era in the classroom. Stone includes several oral interviews with black women who migrated from the South to Connecticut earlier in the twentieth century, and interviews with young African Americans in the 1980s. He also has very good chapters on West Indians and Haitians who settled in the state over the past century. Finally he has gathered a very useful bibliography at the end of his book (pp.317-332), which is particularly strong on twentieth century materials. Mark Williams, a Connecticut teacher, has also developed curriculum materials (*A World Apart*) related to the state's African American citizens, focusing mainly on twentieth century subjects.⁶

The numerous sources can help identify important supplements to use in the classroom in conjunction with the viewing of Karyl Evan's many films on the African American experience in Connecticut. These films span the whole of African American history in the state and will provide students with both a valuable overview and a spur to further research and reading.

The remainder of this essay is dedicated to designating a variety of documents that teachers might use in conjunction with Ms. Evan's film, *History of African Americans in Connecticut: Colonial Era to Civil War*. This lengthy era from English settlement to the end of the Civil War in 1865 was characterized by four central

themes: slavery, emancipation, the formation of free black communities, and the black struggle for racial justice and equality.

The documents below will allow teachers to work with several National Council for the Social Studies thematic strands and Connecticut's Social Studies Curriculum Framework.

National Council for Social Studies:

Strand II: Time, Continuity, and Change

At the middle school level, students will have the opportunity to explore the development of the African American experience in Connecticut and connect it to the wider themes of national history. High school students will be able to analyze the major elements of each period and explain how national events and developments affected Connecticut's black community.

Strand VI: Power, Authority, and Governance

Many of the documents below deal with how the white community tried a variety of legal strategies designed to control African Americans. Middle school students can explore how these laws stemmed from the cultural and societal norms of who should be a part of the civic community. At the high school level, teachers can help students analyze the underlying assumptions of these legal attempts to control African Americans, as well as the efforts of African Americans to challenge these legal restrictions.

Connecticut's Social Studies Curriculum Framework:

Content Standard 1: Historical Thinking

At both the middle and high school level, students are called upon to evaluate primary sources. Middle school students should "see persons and events in their historical context" and high school students should examine primary sources for bias and evaluate data within the "historical, social, political, and economic context in which it was created."

Content Standard 2: Local, United States, and World History

Local history and its connection to the wider national narrative are important at both the middle and high school level, but in the earlier grades the standard calls for students to "demonstrate an in-depth understanding of major events and trends in local history."

Slavery:

Slavery was the foundation of black life in Connecticut through the colonial era and into the years immediately following the American Revolution. By 1775, there were about 5100 slaves in Connecticut, comprising a little more than 3% of the total population. The enslaved provided an important form of labor which supplemented free and indentured white labor, especially in the eighteenth century. Slave labor ranged from the unskilled to the skilled.

1. Early eighteenth century slave laws passed by the colonial General Assembly.

October 1690: “Whereas many persons of this Colony doe for their necessary use purchase negroe seruants, and often times the sayd seruants run away to the great wronge, damage and disapoyntment of their masters and owners, for prevention of which for the future . . . it is ordered by this Court that whateuer negroe or negroes shall hereafter, at any time, be fownd wandring out of the towne bownds or place to which they doe belong, without a ticket or pass from the authority, or their masters or owners, shall be stopt and secured by any of the inhabitants, or such as shall meet with them, and brought be fore the next authority to be examined and returned to their owners, . . . ; and all ferrymen within this Colony are hereby required not to suffer any negroe without such certificate, to pass ouer their ferry by assisting them therein, upon the penalty of twenty shillings.”

(Charles J. Hoadly, ed., *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, from August, 1689, to May 1706 (Hartford, 1868), 40.)

May 1708: “Whereas divers rude and evil minded persons for the sake of filthie lucre do frequently receive from Indians, malattoes and negro servants, money and goods stolen . . . , thereby encouraging such servants to steal from their masters and others: for redress whereof, *Be it enacted by the Governour, Council and Representatives, in General Court assembled, . . .* , That every free person whomsoever, which shall presume either openly or privately to buy or receive of or from any Indian, molato or negro servant or slave, any goods, money, merchandize, wares, or provisions, without order from the master or mistress of such servant or slave, . . . shall be sentenced to restore all such [money or goods], unto the partie injured, in specie . . . and also forfeit to the partie double the value thereof over and above, or treble the value where the same are disposed of or made away. And if the person so offending be unable . . . then to be openly whipt.

“And whereas negro and molatto servants or slaves are become numerous in some parts of this Colonie, and are very apt to be turbulent, and often quarrelling with white people to the great disturbance of the peace . . . That if any negro or malatto servant or slave disturb the peace, or shall offer to strike any white person, and be therefore convicted, such negro or molatto servant or slave shall be punished by whipping.”

(Charles J. Hoadly, ed., *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, from October, 1706, to October 1716 (Hartford, 1870), 52-53.)

May 1723: “*Be it enacted by the Governour, Council and Representatives, in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, That . . . if any negro or Indian servant or slave shall be found abroad from home in the night season, after nine of the clock, without special order from his or their master or mistress, it shall be lawful for any person . . . to apprehend and secure such negro or Indian servant or slave so offending, and . . . bring before the next . . . justice of the peace [who] shall have full power to pass sentence upon such negro or Indian servant or slave . . . and order him or them to be publickly whipt on his or their naked body.*”

(Charles J. Hoadly, ed., *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, from May, 1717, to October, 1725 (Hartford, 1872), 390-91.)

Learning Activities:

- a. In groups, have students rewrite the laws above into modern language.
- b. Ask students to consider why authorities may have passed such laws.
- c. What forms of slave resistance did the authorities feel was the most threatening?

2. Runaway and For Sale ads from the late colonial era.

Insert Image: Hinks 1

(A runaway advertisement from Canterbury. *New London Gazette*, 7 September 1764.)

Insert Image: Hinks 2

(A For Sale advertisement from New Haven. *Connecticut Journal & New Haven Post Boy*, 20 October 1769.)

Insert Image: Hinks 3

(A runaway advertisement from Windham. *Connecticut Journal*, 25 October 1775.)

These advertisements reveal that slaves were present in both rural and urban locales within Connecticut. Africans newly arrived in the colony were sometimes sold in towns like New Haven, New London, and Middletown. They are just a few of the hundreds of similar advertisements which appeared in Connecticut newspapers before the Revolution. Many of the enslaved voiced their opposition to slavery by using their feet.

Learning Activities:

- a. What do the runaway advertisements reveal about the life of the enslaved?
- b. Are the people offered for sale all from the same family?
- c. What would happen if several different buyers wanted to buy only one or two slaves from a slave family.

3. The life of the enslaved in colonial Connecticut.

The following passage is from the autobiography of Venture Smith, a slave brought to New England from Africa. Because we have the benefit of his dictated story, he is one of Connecticut's most well known slaves. The following scene is from approximately 1740 when he lived in Rhode Island. He resided there until he was twenty-three, at which time he removed to Stonington, Connecticut. The labors he describes here would have been common in Connecticut at the same time.

“After an ordinary passage [from Africa], except great mortality by the smallpox which broke out on board, we arrived at the island of Barbadoes: but when we reached it, there were found, out of the two hundred and sixty that sailed from Africa, not more than two hundred alive. These were all sold, except myself and three more, to the planters there. The vessel then sailed for Rhode Island and arrived there after a comfortable passage. . . .

“The first of the time of living at my master's own place, I was pretty much employed in the house at carding wool and other household business. In this situation I continued for some years, after which my master put me to work out of doors. After many proofs of my faithfulness and honesty, my master began to put great confidence in me. My behavior to him had as yet been submissive and obedient. I then began to have hard tasks imposed on me. Some of these were to pound four bushels of ears of corn every night in a barrel for the poultry, or be rigorously punished. At other seasons of the year I had to card wool until a very late hour. These tasks I had to perform when I was about nine years old. Some time after I had another difficulty to and oppression which was greater than any I had ever experienced since I came into the country. This was to serve two masters. James Mumford, my master's son, when his father had gone from home in the morning, and given me a stint to perform that day, would order me to do *this* and *that* business different from what my master directed me. . . . I replied to him that my master had given me so much to perform that day, and that I must therefore faithfully complete it in that time. He then broke out into a great rage, snatched a pitchfork and went to lay me over the head therewith; but I as soon got another and defended myself with it, or otherwise he might have murdered me in his outrage.”

(A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa (New London, 1798).

Learning Activities:

- a. What does this passage reveal about the life of a slave in southern New England?
- b. What sort of labor did he perform and what sort of pressures and anxieties did he endure?

Emancipation:

While the enslaved sought freedom and personal dignity throughout the colonial era, the disruptions and democratic ideology of the American Revolution created unprecedented opportunities for many to seek their freedom. Some fled their owners, a few pursued freedom through petitions, a number gained freedom by joining militias, and many more negotiated with their owners to be set free. In 1784, a law was enacted freeing all the children born to slaves that year and after. By 1800, there were only about 1000 slaves left in the state and more than 5000 free blacks. Yet that freedom was often insecure for most African Americans, the vast majority of whom were poor, lacked property, and had little political power—although those with enough property could vote.

1. The petition of Prime and Prince of Fairfield County seeking slave freedom in 1779.

“To the Honbl General Assembly of the State of Connecticut to be held at Hartford on the Second Thursday of Instant May—The Petition of the Negroes in the Towns of Stratford and Fairfield in the County of Fairfield who are held in a State of Slavery humbly sheweth—

That many of your Petitioners, were . . . most unjustly torn, from the Bosoms of their dear Parents, and Friends, and without any Crime, by them committed, doomed, and bound down, to perpetual Slavery; . . . May it please your Honours, we are most grievously affected, under the Consideration of the flagrant Injustice; Your Honours who are nobly contending, in the Cause of Liberty, whose Conduct excites the Admiration, and Reverence, of all the great Empires of the World, will not resent our thus freely animadverting, on this detestable Practice; although our Skins are different in Colur, from those who we serve, yet Reason & Revelation join to declare, that we are the Creatures of that God who made of one Blood, and Kindred, all the Nations of the Earth; we perceive by our own Reflection, that we are endowed, with the same Faculties, with our Masters, and there is nothing, that leads us to a Belief, or Suspicion, that we are any more obliged to serve them, than they us, . . .”

(Revolutionary War, Series 1, Volume 37, Document #232, Connecticut State Library, Hartford.)

Learning Activities:

- a. Why do the two petitioners think slavery is wrong?
- b. What impact do you think the American Revolution had on the petitioners' arguments?

2. Gradual Emancipation Act of 1784 and 1791 passage from Jonathan Edwards, Jr. supporting immediate emancipation.***Gradual Emancipation Act:***

“And whereas , sound policy requires that the abolition of slavery should be effected as soon as may be consistent with the rights of individuals and the public safety and welfare, Therefore, *be it , &c.*, that no negro or mulatto child that shall, after the first day of March, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-four, be born within this State, shall be held in servitude longer than until they arrive to the age of twenty-five years, notwithstanding the mother or parent of such child was held in servitude at the time of its birth; but such child at the age aforesaid shall be free, any law, usage, or custom to the contrary notwithstanding.”

(Acts and Laws of the State of Connecticut (New London, 1784).)

Jonathan Edwards, Jr. in 1791:

“Every man who cannot show, that his Negro hath by his voluntary conduct forfeited his liberty, is obligated immediately to manumit him. . . . To hold a man in a state of slavery, who has a right to his liberty, is to be every day guilty of robbing him of his liberty, or of manstealing. The consequence is inevitable, that other things being the same, to hold a Negro slave, unless he have forfeited his liberty, is a greater sin in the sight of God, than concubinage or fornication.”

Learning Activities:

The Gradual Emancipation of the slaves in Connecticut as of 1784 was an important event, but it only freed the children born to enslaved mothers after 1 March 1784. Many enslaved adults at the same time, however, negotiated with their masters to secure freedom, which new laws facilitated. A number of white male ministers, lawyers, and merchants created a society in Connecticut in 1790 to promote the eventual abolition of slavery in the state. From among them, a number of ardently antislavery Congregational ministers like Jonathan Edwards, Jr. argued that slavery was so horribly sinful that it should be abolished immediately without any consideration of the consequences.

- a. Why do you think the Connecticut Assembly voted only to free the children of

- adult slaves?
- b. What did they mean by “sound policy”?
 - c. What does Edwards think of freeing the slaves gradually? Why?

3. James Mars’ Autobiography:

“My mother was born in old Virginia, Loudin county. I do not remember the name of the town. The minister of North Canaan [in Connecticut], whose name was Thompson, went to Virginia for a wife, or she came to him; in some way they got together; so that they became man and wife. He removed her to Canaan and she brought her slaves with her, and my mother was one of them. . . . My mother had one child when she came from the South; I was the first she had after she was married. . . . I was born March 3d, 1790.

Mr. Thompson used to come up from Virginia and talk about our going South; he would pat me on the head and tell me what a fine boy I was. Once when he was in Canaan, he asked me if I would not like to go with him and drive the carriage for my mistress. He said if I would go he would give me twenty-five cents. . . . He had come to sell his farm and to take us all South. My father said he would not go alive; the minister told him he must go; my father said he never would. . . .

It was a matter of doubt with my father what course to take, how he could get away with his family the best and safest; whether to go to Massachusetts, which joined Canaan on the North, or to Norfolk, which joined Canaan on the east. . . . He concluded to take them to Norfolk.

[After many months of trying to find Mars’ family, Thompson] proposed to sell the boys [James and his brother] until they were twenty-five, sell them to somebody here that my parents would select for that was as long as the law of Connecticut could hold slaves, and he would give the other members of the family their freedom. It was finally thought best to do that if the purchasers that were acceptable could be found. . . . The bargain was made on the twelfth of September, 1798.”

(Life of James Mars, A Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut (Hartford, 1865).)

Learning Activities:

While the numbers of free blacks in the state grew after the Revolution, hundreds still remained enslaved. Although laws existed barring anyone from removing a slave from the state for re-location or sale elsewhere, a surprising number of whites still attempted to do so. Because of this reality, Connecticut African Americans, free or enslaved, encountered a great deal of insecurity following the Revolution. “Free” black children to whom the 1784 law applied could still have their labor sold until they were 25. But a number of blacks also responded by shrewdly negotiating with white owners.

- a. What did Thompson attempt to do with the young James Mars and his family,

- and why?
- b. How did James' father respond?
 - c. What do you think it would have been like to be a "free" black in Connecticut in 1800?

Formation of Free Black Communities:

By 1810, Connecticut had only 300 slaves, but 6500 free blacks. Many of these African Americans began gathering together to form their own communities. A small group would sometimes settle on the edge of a town, on land owned by a white person but which the individual did not use for farming or grazing. More commonly, however, much larger numbers of free blacks settled in certain neighborhoods in the growing towns of Connecticut, like New Haven, Hartford, and New London. Many found work as servants, day laborers, mariners, bootblacks, and barbers. Some owned a little piece of property and a few owned much more and gained some wealth and power in the community. By the 1820s, black churches and other institutions began appearing in New Haven and Hartford communities. These communities helped African Americans feel a little more secure in a world where they remained very vulnerable both politically and economically.

1. William Lanson's statement on life in black New Haven, 1829.

William Lanson was an important businessman in New Haven from the early 1800s through the 1830s. He and his numerous employees quarried stone in East Haven which they used to complete the extension of the Long Wharf in 1809 and to build the retaining walls for the basin serving the Farmington Canal in New Haven harbor in the late 1820s. He also owned a thriving hostelry in the town as well as extensive property and residences in the New Township section of New Haven.

"I have several small houses in this street, which contain about twelve small families, and there are a number of other buildings in the same street, which I think, together with mine, are generally filled up with second and third classes of people of color. . . . I consider that there are some families in that street as smart and industrious people of color as any in town. Why I style those people above mentioned to belong to the lower classes, is on account of their slothful manner of living, and the awful disadvantage of being brought up in ignorance. These are mostly transient people—bred in ignorance until they came or ran away from their bondage. . . . Here there may be a great number of them together, and how do they live?—by working along shore, sawing wood, going to sea, &c. . . . When I have work on hand, I generally keep 20 or 30 in constant employ, which I consider is worth a good deal to this town. You will find by the selectmen of this city that there has not been half so many assisted by this town from the New Township [the section of New Haven where Lanson owned the houses], as there were two years ago. . . .

I have stated these facts to show that stories are not apt to lose by carrying, and

that this class of colored people's walks or behaviour cannot be expected to be equal to the best bred gentlemen in this city. I would say one word further—that is, whenever this class of people get into any quarrel that comes to my knowledge, I can stop it very quick, and I tell them once or twice a month, if they are found to steal the value of one shilling, I would have them reported, and more than this, I offer a small bounty to those that I call the honest ones, to catch the others; and I feel as if I might be some advantage to the seafaring merchants, when their sailors get on their sprees. I have often advised them to go on board and attend to their business, which I have known to have a very good effect, and if they were to attempt to hide, or run away from their employers, after having shipped and taken the advance money, I would do all I could in favor of their employers. . . . I shall not boast of any public business that I have done, or the taxes I have paid within the last twenty years, which have been several hundred dollars; but my losses for the last seventeen years have been very heavy indeed. My business has been within those years transporting goods and keeping livery stable, and I have lost in property and bad debts up to 1827, about \$6000. Then I became sub-contractor in building the pier by the side of the basin, for the Farmington Canal: I suffered a loss of about \$2000. In 1828 I took a contract from the Company, to the amount of about \$6000; I completed about one-third of the job, which was the worst part.—I then had to break off [because the company failed to pay] . . . But I am willing to finish, if possible, for I never made a contract or a bargain but what I was willing to fulfil—nor ever contracted a debt but what I meant to pay. As Providence has smiled on me, I have, with making great exertions, paid up every laboring man that has ever done any work for me on or about the Farmington Canal, who has been employed by me.”

(Columbian Register, 14 March 1829)

Insert Image: Hinks 4

2. Advertisement for William Lanson's stable in New Haven, 1819. (*Connecticut Herald*, 22 June 1819)

3. William Grimes in New Haven in the early 1820s.

William Grimes was born in 1784 and fled enslavement in Savannah, Georgia in the late 1810s or early 1820s. He soon settled in New Haven, where at one time he worked for the Lansons.

“When I arrived in New Haven, I found that all the money I had left amounted to no more than seventy-five cents. That night I lodged at a boarding house, kept by a certain Mrs. W., who took me to be a white man; . . . The next morning I went to work for Able Lanson, who kept a livery stable. He set me at work in a ledge of rocks, getting out stone for building. This I found to be the hardest work I had ever

done, and began to repent that I had ever come away from Savannah, to this hard cold country. After I had worked at this for about three months, I got employment in taking care of a sick person, who called his name Carr, who had been a servant to Judge [Henry] Clay, of Kentucky; he was then driving for Lanson. I took care of him, and took his place for some time. One day, as I was assisting Isaac (a son of Lanson) to harness a horse, to my great astonishment and surprise, master Stephen Bullock [of Savannah] . . . came up to me and said, why, John, it is as hot here as in Savannah. . . . I was so much surprised to see Mr. Bullock, that I could scarce give him an answer. . . . After he had gone, Isaac said to me, why, he appears to know you. I replied, yes, it is no wonder that he knows me. I then went and informed my friends that I had seen my young master, and I did not think it prudent for me to stay in New Haven long. Accordingly I left town, and went on to a place called Southington, a few miles back in the country, where I went to work on a farm.”

(Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Brought Down to the Present Time (New Haven, 1855).

Learning Activities:

- a. What does the passage from Lanson above reveal about his life and that of African Americans in New Haven in the 1820s?
- b. What sort of work did they do?
- c. What sort of relationship did Lanson have with blacks in the Town?
- d. Were there other blacks there who had fled slavery in the South?
- e. Why was Lanson so imperative about honesty, both that of others and for himself?
- f. Who do you think Lanson is talking to in the above passage?
- g. What is he trying to explain to them and why?

The Black Struggle for Racial Justice & Equality:

As free black numbers grew in the state after 1800, the state Assembly moved to deny the vote to all black men—first by a law passed in 1814, then by a provision of the new state Constitution in 1818. At the same time, all white men—even those who owned no property—were granted the vote. After 1815, the economy of towns such as New London, Hartford, and New Haven grew enormously and thousands of neighboring Americans and white immigrants, especially from Ireland, were drawn to the prospering towns. More and more white people began to claim that blacks were by nature inferior to whites and that they were not capable of being responsible citizens. Some said they should be sent to back Africa or else confined to the most menial work. From 1814 onward, blacks in Connecticut organized against their disfranchisement, unfair taxation, racial discrimination and prejudice, and the enslavement of African Americans in the South. By the 1830s, some whites opposed to slavery and racism allied with these blacks. One of the great triumphs for the

state's blacks in the century was to participate in the fight to destroy slavery during the Civil War, although in the first two years of the War, no black troops were used or recruited.

1. Statement from “Aristides” in New Haven, 1827.

“There is not a considerate person in this city, who does not view the residence of coloured people here a calamity. . . . Let us encourage and protect our own citizens—our free white citizens to the exclusion of all others—then, and not until then, shall we emancipate ourselves from the evils which all seem to deprecate. Then will the members of our coloured population leave us. . . . The white natives of New Haven have a right to be employed as labourers in every department of business to the exclusion of those who are black. And if the business of the city increases so as to afford employment for more labourers, white men have a right to come from abroad, and black men have no right. Therefore if we take any measures that are calculated to elevate the character of our coloured people, and to make them more industrious and virtuous and enterprising, we are guilty of injustice towards white men, who have an exclusive right to be employed.”

(New Haven Chronicle, 21 April 1827).

Learning Activities:

- a. How does this writer view black New Haveners?
- b. Does he consider them citizens and entitled by right to reside and work in New Haven? For whom did he argue America was created?
- c. What did he think blacks should do?
- d. How do you think William Lanson would have responded to him?

2. Preamble to a petition from African Americans in New London to the Connecticut Assembly seeking the vote for black men in Connecticut, 1841.

“To the Honorable the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut, the Petition of the Subscribers, Colored Men, of this State, respectfully sheweth:

That we consider ourselves unjustly deprived of the right of suffrage, and not for any acts which we have committed, or causes that we control. But simply, because God in his good pleasure, has seen fit to give us a colored skin, mankind have taken the responsibility of depriving us of the use of those free gifts, which we believe the Creator of the Universe designed for our enjoyment. . . .

Your petitioners have frequently been taxed, and those taxes have been promptly paid, while all representation on our part, at the ballot box, has been denied us. We are well aware of the construction of the Constitution of the State of Connecticut, and of its express declaration of the word White, in regard to voters; but it is violated to our knowledge, by people that are only part white, and some of them foreigners.

Your honorable body can judge of our feelings, when we see men at the polls, enjoying the elective franchise, that take no interest in the Institutions of the State, or care for its welfare.

Your petitioners wish to be considered as Men, possessing inalienable rights, and ask for nothing more than the guarantee of the privileges which are based upon those rights, and which we, as citizens, wish to enjoy. Many of our Ancestors took an active part in the Revolutionary war, fought, bled, and died, sealing with their blood, in common with other heroes, that sacred compact which is now held up as a model for older nations to imitate, and will stand as a chart for those which are yet to come into existence. . . .

Your Petitioners therefore most respectfully and humbly pray that measures may be taken so to amend the Constitution of the State of Connecticut, that color may no longer be one of the qualifications required of Voters.”

(General Assembly, African Americans and Native Americans, 1808-1869, State Archives, Record Group No. 002, Box 2, Folder 13, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Connecticut.)

Learning Activities:

- a. What arguments do the petitioners use to defend their right of suffrage?
- b. What role do you think voting played for these petitioners to think of themselves as “Men”?
- c. What impact do you think excluding blacks had on white people’s thinking of themselves? Consider “Aristides” above in answering this question.

3. James Linsley Smith giving an antislavery lecture in Torrington in 1840s

“We had better success when we went to Torrington, for here the people had just passed through a terrible mob, on account of an anti-slavery lecturer. The mob broke the windows of the church, and the lecturer had to escape for his life. We arrived here on Saturday, and put up with one of the deacons of the church. The next morning, after breakfast, he harnessed up his horse and sleigh, (for it was winter), and he and his family and I drove off to the church. Every eye was upon me. The deacon said to me: “Follow me, and sit with me in the pew.” I did so, and every eye was fixed upon me, I being a colored man; and, being seated in a deacon’s pew, caused quite a stir or bustle among the worshipers. There was such a commotion that the minister could hardly preach. . . .When the controversy was over we went home and ate dinner.

In the afternoon we started for the church again, and after arriving there I took my seat with the deacon; it did not affect the worshipers so much this time as it did in the morning. After the meeting closed we started for home and ate our supper: and in the evening the Doctor and I intended to have the church for our lecture.

On arriving there, Oh! Such a crowd met us at the door that we could hardly get in. Through perseverance we made our way to the pulpit and took our seats. Some

of the men who were engaged in the mob a few months before came and took the front seats, and looked as though they could devour us. I did not know what would become of us that night.

We began our meeting. The Doctor spoke first. They did not intend to have him speak, (being a white man), for the men were desirous to hear me; they kept quiet, however, for the sake of hearing me. When the Doctor was through I took the stand, and before I had finished my talk took all the fight out of them; some of them wept like children; so you see that it changed those men's hearts towards us, for a sympathetic feeling seemed to pervade through their hearts. I made many friends for myself that night. I heard one of them say that "if master came there after me he would fight for me as long as he had a drop of blood in him." There were no more mobs in Torrington after that."

(Autobiography of James L. Smith . . . , 2d ed. (Norwich, 1882).

Learning Activities:

- a. What seems to have been the common white attitude in Connecticut towards antislavery speakers and activists?
- b. What was the attitude towards whites and blacks working together against slavery?
- c. What was the attitude of the audience towards Smith before he spoke?
- d. Why do you think he was able to change their attitude?

4. James L. Smith recalls the formation and bravery of the Connecticut 29th Colored Regiment during the Civil War.

"As soon as it was made known that colored volunteers would be accepted they came pouring in from all sections. In Norwich a regiment was soon formed, (29th Conn.) which did good service in the field. Never did we feel prouder than when, after a few weeks' encampment in New Haven, they marched away with flying banners and marshal music.

Some of the ladies of color instituted a Ladie's Aid Society, which met once a week at the houses of its different members to make up both fancy and useful articles, as they intended to hold a fair in one of the largest halls in the place—the proceeds of which were to be devoted to getting up a box for the brave 29th. . . .

On the 27th of April, 1864, the regiment left for the front. Its sufferings in the bloody struggle before Richmond were terrible and heart-rending. It went into the fight of eleven hours with four hundred and fifty brave, armed and equipped men; it came out with one hundred and eighty men, all told—no field officers, and one wounded company officer.

On the morning of Oct. 14th, 1865, orders were received to prepare to be mustered out of the U.S. service. Oct. 16th the boys bade good-bye to hard-tack, salt horse, and other delicacies known nowhere but in the army. They embarked on

board the steamer, singing “Homeward Bound.” After reaching New York they embarked for Hartford, where they would be paid off, and receive their discharge papers. Here they were met by the Mayor and a committee, and marched up to Central Row, headed by Colt’s Brass Band, where they stacked arms and unslung knapsacks; then the battalion formed in two ranks and marched to City Hall, where a splendid feast awaited them.”

Learning Activities:

- a. Why do you think it was important to black men in Connecticut to fight for the North in the Civil War?
- b. What sort of civic outcomes do you think they hoped would issue from their service?

¹ See, <http://www.ctheritage.org/>

² Barbara Beeching outlines the life and work of Nelson Primus, in “Nelson A. Primus, African American Artist 1842-1916, *International Review of African American Art* 18, no. 4 (2002): 46-50. See also Barbara Beeching, “Remembering Rebecca Primus,” *Twain’s World: Essays on Hartford’s Cultural Heritage* (Hartford: The Hartford Courant, 1999), 34-47; David O. White researched the black community as depicted in one set of letters in “Addie Brown’s Hartford,” *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, 41, no. 2 (April, 1976):57-64. See additional articles by David O. White, published in the *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*: “Augustus Washington, Black Daguerreotypist of Hartford,” 39 (January 1974): 14-19; “Hartford’s African Schools, 1830-1868,” 39 (April 1974): 47-53; “Addie Brown’s Hartford.” 41 (April 1976): 57-64A; “Fugitive Blacksmith of Hartford.” 49 1 (January 1984): 5-29.

³ Ms. Naylor’s bibliography is also available at the following web address: <http://www.cslib.org/blagen.htm>.

⁴ The *Finding Aid to African Americans and Native Americans, 1808-1869* as well as these three bibliographies are all available at the following Connecticut State Library web address: <http://www.cslib.org/archives.htm>.

⁵ These plans include David L. Parsons, “Slavery in Connecticut, 1640-1848,” in *The Present as History* (New Haven: Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute Curriculum Units, 1980), VI:116-36; and John Roper, “The Struggle of Connecticut Blacks for Equality in the 18th and 19th Centuries” in *Curriculum Units on Connecticut History* (New Haven: Yale Institute on Connecticut History, 1981), II:62-88.

⁶ For more on Mr. Williams’ materials, see http://www.connhistory.org/afam_guide.htm

Connecticut Connections:

African American Sites in Connecticut: A Laboratory for the History of Slavery and Human Rights

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“Why is it,” a prominent Connecticut museum director asked recently, “that when Americans talk about the story of freedom, they always seem to focus on the Revolution and leave the rest of our history out?”

Why indeed? The basic reason is that for much of American history, the theme of freedom has been tarnished and obscured by the contrary story of the attempt to defend slavery, the largest single economic interest in the antebellum U.S. Such a history reflects poorly on our national self-image, and we find ways to suppress it, minimize it, and cordon it off to a narrow piece of time and space. As a result, the twentieth century’s great movements for civil rights, and many other major social changes, are cut off from history and deprived of context and meaning.

The history of Connecticut, the quintessentially Yankee state, provides an exceptional window into this veiled but vital heritage. Connecticut’s history clearly demonstrates that slavery was a national and even global issue, not merely a problem of the southern United States. Connecticut provided many milestones in the story of liberty, from its colonial struggle for religious freedom, its central logistical role in the Revolution, to its extensive involvement in the Underground Railroad and the Civil War. Yet Connecticut also had the longest experience of slavery of any state in New England (to 1848). Known as the “Mississippi of the North,” Connecticut had close ties to the slaveholding South. While early Connecticut legislators such as James Hillhouse fought to restrict slavery’s expansion, other lawmakers marched in lock step with southern planters to suppress abolition, and rewrote the state’s laws to deny civil rights to their black neighbors.

Connecticut’s traditional nickname, the “Nutmeg State,” makes explicit its role as a provisioner to the other colonies of products from the slave plantations of the West Indies, including molasses and spices. As the U.S. Steering Committee of the UNESCO Transatlantic Slave Trade Education Project has recognized, Connecticut—the site of the *Amistad* incident—represents an ideal location to link the story of resistance to slavery in the United States to the global story of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the African Diaspora. Moreover, Connecticut is the home of the state-chartered African American Freedom Trail, which incorporates

more than 90 sites throughout the state that illustrate the many stories of the contributions that African Americans and their allies, progressive Whites, made to the struggle for freedom, equality and the fashioning of the history of Connecticut and the nation.

Two other advantages make Connecticut an exceptional location to tell the story of American slavery and its destruction. The first is our compactness. It is just an hour and a half from New Haven to Thompson in the northeast corner or to Salisbury in the northwest, and every historic site in Connecticut is an easy one-day field trip from the most distant schools in the state. The second advantage lies in our centuries-old designation as the “Land of Steady Habits.” Throughout its history, Connecticut has faced the same problems that have afflicted other states, from struggles over political representation and religious freedom in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries to the campaigns for civil rights of the 1960s and the continuing push for school desegregation today. For the most part, however, we have solved our problems without violent conflict, often in ways that became models for the nation. As the mayor of war-torn Freetown, Sierra Leone, observed on a recent visit to its sister city New Haven, “the people of Connecticut love liberty, harmony, and the rule of law. That is why my countrymen [the Africans of the *Amistad*] were freed.” This is a heritage worth celebrating, and extending.

The Impact of *La Amistad* on Connecticut

In 1839, a “long, low black schooner” arrived in Connecticut manned by forty-four Africans. Kidnapped from their homeland and sold in Cuba as slaves, they had seized the ship and killed its crew, and had sought to pilot it back to Africa. Their struggle for freedom dramatized the criminality of the slave system and put a human face on an institution most Americans preferred to ignore. The *Amistad* story, nearly forgotten for a century and a half, has led in the last fifteen years to a remarkable flowering of understanding about the Atlantic slave system and its destruction, and the role of Connecticut natives, black and white, in the struggle to realize the American promise of freedom.

Sites related directly to the *Amistad* incident include the Old Customs House in New London, the Old State House in Hartford (which also houses the permanent *Amistad* exhibit at the Connecticut Historical Society and the *Amistad* Foundation at the Wadsworth Athenaeum), and a constellation of sites in New Haven and Farmington. (The Austin F. Williams Carriage House, built as a home for the *Amistad* Africans in 1840, later became an important station on the Underground Railroad; one of the twelve key sites designated by the National Park Service.)

The completion of the freedom schooner *Amistad* and the attention it has generated has served as a catalyst for numerous educational programs, exhibits, and other projects throughout the state. Just to cite a few of the most notable examples, permanent *Amistad* exhibits have helped to revitalize such venerable institutions as Mystic Seaport, the Connecticut Historical Society, and the New Haven Colony Historical Society. The story has also given life to cultural and heritage tourism in

Farmington, New London, and other parts of the state. Indeed, the *Amistad* has become one of the most recognizable symbols of Connecticut, both nationally and globally.

Beyond *Amistad*

Other Connecticut stories of slavery and freedom are equally significant and dramatic, but not at all as well known. Collectively, they represent one of the most remarkable clusters of important historic sites related to the struggle for liberty anywhere in the world.

New Salem Plantation

On the largest slave plantation in New England, several hundred Africans worked the holdings of the Brown family of Salem, Massachusetts, chiefly producing foodstuffs for the family's West Indian sugar plantations. Before the outbreak of the American Revolution, the proprietor left Connecticut to serve as governor of Bermuda.

Venture Smith

Venture Smith, born Brotheer Furro in West Africa in 1729, is perhaps the best-documented of the twelve to fifteen million survivors of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The son of a king, Venture was purchased by Robert Mumford (of the family of the New Salem Plantation overseers), and later sold to Thomas Stanton of Stonington, Connecticut, where he lived for six years (1753-54 to 1760). After purchasing his freedom from his next owner and living several years on Long Island, Smith moved to Haddam Neck, Connecticut, eventually purchasing more than 110 acres there, and becoming a prosperous farmer, merchant and fisherman. In 1798, seven years before his death, he dictated his unique life story to a local schoolteacher. His gravestone stands in the cemetery in East Haddam.

Several extraordinary facts make this remarkable story truly astonishing. First, Venture's home in Stonington, Connecticut, the 1670s homestead of Thomas Stanton, remains intact and unrenovated, and in the ownership of Stanton's direct descendants, who have retained a strong family memory of Venture to this day. Moreover, the site on which the homestead stands has never been developed and remains archeologically intact, having to this day remained a working farm since the arrival of its first European inhabitant, the grandfather of Venture's owner.

Astonishingly, Venture's home for the last 35 or so years of his life, on Haddam Neck, which has had only a handful of owners since the natives, has also never been built on (with the exception of the nuclear fuel rod storage facility that is currently being constructed on a small portion of it). It, too, is archaeologically pristine. Incredibly as well, both Venture's descendants and the descendants of his owners still live in Connecticut, and still retain strong family memories of Venture.

Oliver Ellsworth Homestead

Connecticut also possesses numerous sites that testify to its pivotal role in the founding of the American republic. Among these is the homestead of Oliver Ellsworth, in Windsor. Ellsworth was a key figure in the constitutional convention in Philadelphia in 1787, contributing, among other things, the language "We the People" in the Constitution's preamble. Perhaps even more significantly, Ellsworth and his colleague Roger Sherman of New Haven were the key figures in drafting compromise language on slavery that secured the support of South Carolina and Georgia in exchange for a twenty-year ban on closing the slave trade and several other concessions. Ironically, Ellsworth's son William would later represent Prudence Crandall and make an impassioned defense of the full citizenship of blacks, while Sherman's grandson Roger Sherman Baldwin would represent the Africans of the Amistad, successfully arguing before the Supreme Court that Africans have the right to use lethal force against Europeans in the defense of their liberty.

Cornwall Foreign Mission School

The quiet Litchfield County town of Cornwall was the site between 1817 and 1826 of a school intended to teach Christianity to students from around the world. It hosted pupils from China, Burma, Hawaii, Tahiti, Malaysia, Greece, Britain, and other countries, as well as more than half a dozen Indian nations. It is likely that during the period that the Foreign Mission School was in existence, Cornwall was one of the most multicultural communities on the planet.

Torrington Sites

The city of Torrington, the largest population center in Litchfield County, may soon be the nation's preeminent center for the study of the antislavery movement and of equal rights. The birthplace of the legendary abolitionist John Brown, home of black Congregational minister Lemuel Haynes, and many other important figures in the fight against slavery, Torrington is expected to become the site as well of the Wadsworth-Beecher House, the birthplace of the preeminent antislavery novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe and four of her siblings. The house, moved from its original location in Litchfield and erected adjacent to the Torrington campus of the University of Connecticut, will become the centerpiece of the projected Beecher Center for the History of Equal Rights. The Beecher Center will work closely with the History, English, and American Studies Departments of the University of Connecticut, the UNESCO Institute of Comparative Human Rights at UConn, and the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale to develop innovative and exciting programming and curricula on antislavery, women's rights, and other historic and contemporary movements for human freedom.

Prudence Crandall Museum

In 1832, the young teacher Prudence Crandall was invited to start a school for girls in the eastern Connecticut village of Canterbury. When, a year later, Crandall agreed to admit a black girl to the school, white residents of Canterbury and the rest of the state reacted with fury, ultimately passing a law barring blacks from entering the state for purposes of education. After months of persecution and even brief imprisonment, Prudence Crandall's school closed for good. A century and a half later, however, Crandall has become a symbol of the principle of equal rights and education for all, and in 1995 she was named the State Heroine. Crandall's school is currently one of four State history museums, although in recent years the support it has received from the Connecticut legislature has been spotty.

Brooklyn: Home of Godfrey Malbone and Samuel J. May, Site of Marriage of William Lloyd Garrison

Next to Canterbury is the town of Brooklyn, home of the Rev. Samuel J. May, famous in his own right as an abolitionist and also as the chief defender and supporter of Prudence Crandall. May's Unitarian Church, an unusual octagonal masterpiece, still stands in its original 18th-century form. A few hundred yards from the Unitarian church is the former home of abolitionist George Benson and his sister Eliza, who married the most famous of all abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison, in its parlor in 1834. Brooklyn is also known as the home of Godfrey Malbone, the largest slaveholder in Connecticut in the colonial period.

Hampton

The town of Hampton, located close to Storrs, is the birthplace of Theodore Dwight Weld, perhaps the most effective and influential of the abolitionists. His home, which still stands, is currently the residence of Hampton's town historian.

Ivoryton and Deep River

The story of Connecticut's ties to slavery do not end with the Civil War. The Connecticut River towns of Ivoryton and Deep River were the centers of ivory manufacture in the United States, between them producing more than 80% of the ivory worked in this country. From the 1790s to the 1930s, thousands of pounds of elephant tusks were transported to factories in these towns to be turned into piano keys, combs, and other manufactured objects. The harvesting and transport of these tusks was a bloody business that took the lives of literally millions of Africans and enslaved millions more.

These are only a few of the many remarkable stories of slavery and freedom to be found in Connecticut. As research on many suppressed and overlooked assets of Connecticut's history continues, we anticipate that many more important stories will

be uncovered. This unique constellation of historic sites is deserving of far wider recognition than it has thus far achieved.

The *Amistad* story—perhaps the most dramatic and significant illustration of the “Connecticut way” of solving problems—could serve as an example to people and nations everywhere of our state’s honorable tradition of voluntarily—if not always enthusiastically—embracing change without conflict. Connecticut has a long way to go in acknowledging its own diversity, both in the present and the past, and in admitting its multicultural population to full recognition and truly equal opportunity. Recognition of the national significance of Connecticut’s historic gems could play a vital role in helping the citizens and leaders of our state to embrace Connecticut’s proud heritage of “liberty, harmony, and the rule of law.”

African American History in Connecticut: A Review of Internet Resources

JOSEPH YANNIELLI

Naugatuck, Connecticut

- ❖ Hartford Courant (http://www.courant.com/news/local/northeast/hc-slavery_0,3581810.special?coll=hc-utility-local-northeast) and (<http://www.courant.com/news/local/northeast/hc-complicity2-sp,0,7473864.special?coll=hc-utility-local-northeast>)
- ❖ Mattatuck Museum (www.FortuneStory.com)
- ❖ Hartford Black History Project (<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/HBHP/>)
- ❖ Wesleyan University, Olin Library (<http://www.wesleyan.edu/libr/schome/amezion/>)
- ❖ Yale University (<http://www.yaleslavery.org/>) and (<http://www.yale.edu/glc/info/amistad.html>) and (<http://www.yale.edu/glc/crandall/index.htm>)
- ❖ Mystic Seaport (<http://amistad.mysticseaport.org/main/welcome.html>)
- ❖ Connecticut Humanities Council (<http://www.ctheritage.org/encyclopedia/topicalsurveys/blacks.htm>)
- ❖ Dinsmore Documentation (<http://www.dinsdoc.com/steiner-2-0a.htm>)
- ❖ Connecticut Freedom Trail (<http://www.ctfreedomtrail.com/>)
- ❖ Connecticut State Library (<http://www.cslib.org/slaveryCt.htm>)
- ❖ Connecticut Historical Society (<http://www.chs.org/afamcoll>)
- ❖ Documenting the American South (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture/venture.html>) and (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/penning49/menu.html>)
- ❖ Accessible Archives (<http://www.accessible.com/default.htm>)
- ❖ Connecticut History Online (http://www.cthistoryonline.org/classrm_lessplan_family.html)
- ❖ Connecticut History on the Web (http://www.connhistory.org/afam_guide.htm)
- ❖ Connecticut State African American Affairs Commission (http://www.cga.ct.gov/aaac/About_AAAC.htm)

Over the past decade the Internet has revolutionized both the research and the teaching of history. Vast amounts of primary and secondary data are now readily accessible to people of all ages and skill levels. Unfortunately, this information is often poorly organized, superficial, outdated, or at worst, erroneous. Websites dealing with the African American experience in Connecticut run the gamut from mediocre to outstanding. A quick Google search for “Connecticut African Americans” produced about 1.8 million hits. This essay will focus on a few of the best sites and their pedagogic potential.¹

The first Africans to arrive in Connecticut were slaves, servants, and laborers. Even though their hard work allowed the state to flourish, they were marginalized in early America and their history is still relatively unknown. In 2002 the *Hartford Courant* sparked new interest in this little-known chapter of local history with the publication of “Complicity: How Connecticut Chained itself to Slavery.” This series of articles, which appeared in a special issue of the *Courant’s Northeast Magazine*, discussed slavery and the slave trade in Connecticut, the state’s lucrative relationship with the slaveocratic South, its role in perpetuating the peculiar institution, and the struggles of local slaves and their descendants. “Complicity” has since been expanded into a full-length book on slavery and the North. But the original articles are still available online. (<http://www.courant.com/news/local/northeast/hc-slavery,0,3581810.special?coll=hc-utility-local-northeast>) In September of 2005 the *Courant* published a sequel entitled “Beyond Complicity,” which deals with “the forgotten story of Connecticut’s slave ships.” (<http://www.courant.com/news/local/northeast/hc-complicity2-sp,0,7473864.special?coll=hc-utility-local-northeast>) Both specials contain well-written, popularly accessible articles that would be great springboards for research papers or circle discussions.

In some cases, the only records we have of African Americans in the early years of the state are their physical remains. The Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury acquired the skeleton of a slave known only as “Fortune” from the descendents of his owner, and recently initiated an impressive study into his life and times. The museum set up a website entitled “Fortune’s Story,” which includes information on the DNA analysis of the remains as well as a plethora of fascinating facts about African Americans and slavery in late eighteenth century Waterbury. The site is elegant and informative, with great images and concise descriptions. There is even a list of African Americans and slaveholders who lived in Waterbury during this period, with surprisingly detailed background information on most of them. (<http://www.FortuneStory.org>)

African Americans in Connecticut struggled to establish their own communities despite the constant harassment and harsh restrictions imposed by white leaders. At the same time, they pioneered the movement for equality, civil rights, and the total

¹ Because of the capricious nature of the Internet, some of the URLs provided below might cease to work at any time. It is always a good idea to do a “reality check” prior to using a particular website, especially to make sure that the site loads properly and has working links.

abolition of slavery. This chapter of state history is covered by a number of websites.

The “Hartford Black History Project” presents the story of that city’s African American community from about 1638-1960. (<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/HBHP/>) The information is interesting and the images are great. There is a useful section on Connecticut’s “Black Governors.” But the narrative is often cumbersome and the author’s analysis is questionable in some areas. At one point, for example, the author writes: “the issues over which the War of Independence were fought was a matter of complete indifference to Blacks because they were not involved in commerce.” In fact, the war against British Colonialism was not limited to questions of “commerce.” The Independence movement encouraged abolitionism with its rhetoric of human equality and natural rights, and many Connecticut blacks fought and died for the Revolution or invoked its ideals to sue for their freedom.

The online exhibition on the history of Middletown’s AME Zion Church describes the struggles of local blacks from the early nineteenth century through to the present day, and is a good launch pad for further study of African American activism. (<http://www.wesleyan.edu/libr/schome/amezion/>)

“Yale, Slavery & Abolition,” a well-designed website focusing on Yale’s relationship to slavery and the ill-fated New Haven “Negro College,” is another great source of information. The authors of this study claim that New Haven elites, including the Yale leadership, encouraged racism and opposed abolition, and that Yale disproportionately honored its pro-slavery alumni. The evidence is damning and the authors’ call for reparations (see the “What’s New” section) is controversial. This site would be great for critical thinking essays or circle discussions. (<http://www.yaleslavery.org/>)

The famous Amistad incident is well-represented on the Web. Mystic Seaport’s “Discovering Amistad” site is by far the best. (<http://amistad.mysticseaport.org/main/welcome.html>) It boasts a simple interface and offers a wealth of information, including links to primary sources and a teaching guide with a number of specific curriculum ideas. Also worthy of note is the “Amistad Page” compiled by the Gilder-Lehrman Center at Yale, which provides links to a variety of online sources and lesson plans. (<http://www.yale.edu/glc/info/amistad.html>)

For a broad overview of African American history in Connecticut, it is worth checking out David O. White’s essay “Blacks in Connecticut,” posted online at “Connecticut’s Heritage Gateway.” (<http://www.ctheritage.org/encyclopedia/topicalsurveys/blacks.htm>) Also available online is Bernard Steiner’s classic, but very dated, “History of Slavery in Connecticut.” (<http://www.dinsdoc.com/steiner-2-0a.htm>) The Connecticut Freedom Trail website provides a survey of important locations related to African American history in the state, mostly concerned with the Underground Railroad. But the information is patchy and parts of the site are badly out of date. (<http://www.ctfreedomtrail.com/>)

For more in-depth studies, in addition to the websites already mentioned, there are a number of ways to access primary sources online. The Connecticut State Library has posted a research guide to materials in the state archives related to slavery, including a large bibliography of published material, manuscripts, and

newspapers. (<http://www.cslib.org/slaveryCt.htm>) The Connecticut Historical Society maintains an online, indexed list of its extensive holdings related to African American history. (<http://www.chs.org/afamcoll>) The Gilder-Lehrman Center has transcribed and posted a significant number of documents connected to the Prudence Crandall debacle. And the well-known autobiographies of Venture Smith, a former African slave who settled in East Haddam, and James W.C. Pennington, the “fugitive blacksmith” of Hartford, are both available online. (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture/venture.html>) and (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/penning49/menu.html>)

Many early American newspapers are now being transcribed and indexed online, and these are an excellent way to discover the activities of local blacks. If your school or institution has a subscription to “Accessible Archives,” it is possible to log in and search the full text of seven nineteenth century African American newspapers as well as the *Liberator* for any mention of Connecticut or a particular town. (<http://www.accessible.com/default.htm>) A search of *Freedom’s Journal* for “‘New Haven’ and August and 1827,” for example, produces ten articles, including a little-known but important four-part series written by John Russwurm during his tour of black communities in New Haven, Middletown, and Hartford. Digital newspaper archives are thus a great source for independent research exercises or term projects.

For younger students, Patrick W. Flynn’s lesson plan, “Understanding the Similarities and Differences of Two Connecticut Families,” is published on the website of Connecticut History Online. (http://www.cthistoryonline.org/classrm_lessonplan_family.html) This well-thought-out guide “offers students an opportunity to examine two nineteenth and twentieth century families, one African American and one Anglo American.” Using biographies and photographs posted on the site, students compare and contrast the lives of both local families over multiple generations.

Most websites concerned with African American history in Connecticut are heavily skewed toward the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But there are a few notable exceptions. Mark Williams’ outstanding resource and teaching guide “A World Apart” focuses on Connecticut’s African Americans from about 1914 to 1970. (http://www.connhistory.org/afam_guide.htm) Although the information could be better organized, Williams has transcribed and posted a wealth of primary documents related to this time period. He also provides helpful comments on the use of these materials in the classroom. Although it is much more limited in scope, the “Ties that Bind” website, created for a display at the Mattatuck Museum, surveys the life and experiences of African Americans in Waterbury from 1920 to 1940.

For more recent history, teachers and students might want to explore the website of the Connecticut State African American Affairs Commission. (http://www.cga.ct.gov/aaac/About_AAAC.htm) As far as this author is aware, there is no substantial site devoted to the controversial Sheff v. O’Neil case and its impact; a quick Google search yielded only 78 hits. But this is understandable because the case is still ongoing.

Even though the accompanying analysis and presentation are sometimes lacking, there is a growing body of primary source material available online for the study of

Connecticut African American History. As more materials are scanned and digitally indexed, they will no doubt become an integral part of classroom instruction. It is worth remembering, however, that these cover only a small fraction of the developing African American experience in the state. Most websites are great as a supplement or gateway to further study with more traditional sources. But they should always be approached with a critical eye for what is said and, more importantly, what is left out – because there are many stories out there still waiting to be discovered.