Trials and Triumphs: True Stories of Slavery in Connecticut

Final Draft
The history of the United States is undeniably short in comparison to other global nations. After the discovery of America, people from across the globe immigrated there in search of work, political and religious freedom, adventure, or new lives among various other things. But despite America’s association with numerous freedoms, the institution of slavery was put into practice and continued for three hundred years. Slavery was not abolished in the United States until only about one hundred and fifty years ago.

Slavery existed in North America even before Africans were shipped to this country and sold in markets to serve white masters. The first colonists arrived and forced many Native American tribes from their lands. In this process, a number of Native Americans were captured and forced into slavery.¹

Connecticut established Middletown in 1651. The town’s location on the Connecticut River quickly created an important port and successful shipping industry. In 1661, only ten years after its founding, traders were exchanging rum, molasses, sugar, and slaves between the West Indies and Middletown.

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The institution of slavery was gradual process in Middletown and developed slowly as the town's need for labor increased. It has been suggested that slaves on the whole were treated much better in Connecticut and other New England Colonies than they were in the south and other northern colonies.\textsuperscript{2} This may in part be because New England slaves were predominantly owned by wealthier citizens who used them for household chores.

The demand for slaves in Middletown grew greater as the shipping and industry exploded and farming expanded. Although Middletown was never a center for the slave trade, white residents did buy and sell slaves from time to time. Most often advertisements were placed in local newspapers. A visitor to Middletown in the later 18\textsuperscript{th} century would have seen advertisements for slaves and slave auctions and passed slaves working in the homes, shops, and fields.\textsuperscript{3}

Slaves not only toiled for a master, but also suffered from a system of repressive laws and regulations. In 1717 the Connecticut Legislature passed a remarkably repressive law denying free blacks or mulattos the privilege of living in any town or colony, or owning any property without the

\textsuperscript{2} Edmund T. Delaney, \textit{How a Former Slave Built a Life in Haddam Neck}, Middletown Press (photocopy so no date)

\textsuperscript{3} Roberts, (no page numbers)
town's consent. This law also applied to blacks and mulattos already residing in Connecticut towns by revoking their property ownership and residency. Fortunately this law never seems to have been enforced, including in Connecticut.

Other challenges confronted African Americas in Connecticut. Escaping slavery was a risk the some were willing to take in even that they could gain freedom. But even more often slaves bought their freedom or were released by their masters after having served for a period of generally six years. But survival as a freed man or woman was equally difficult. Society did not make it easy for these men and women of little, if any education to earn a living and support themselves and possibly even families.

Eventually the people of Middletown began to differ on the issue of slavery. In 1828, Black persons in Middletown met at the home of George W. Jeffrey to organize the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. This church served as the seat of the antislavery movement among Middletown blacks. Reverend Jehiel Beman, the first minister of the church, and his wife helped to lead the abolition movement in Middletown. Several blacks and whites even joined together in 1834 to hold the first meeting of the Middletown

\footnote{Ibid., (no page numbers)}
Antislavery Society. Although this organization was short lived, it initiated antislavery sentiments and played a role in the ultimate abolition of slavery in Middletown.

THE JOURNEY (Venture Smith)

Virtually all slaves sought freedom but that route was laden with obstacles. A distinction between the use of the Underground Railroad verses individual attempts of escape must be noted. The Underground Railroad was used primarily by fugitive slaves originating from the south, usually hoping to reach freedom in Canada. Secondly, the Underground Railroad was not established until the 1820’s by which time slavery had largely passed out of Middletown. Earlier, Connecticut slaves longing for freedom had either to purchase it or try to escape.

Both the slaves venturing to obtain freedom through flight, as well as those assisting them faced the threat of certain punishment upon being discovered. Flight was always a risky business and slaves jeopardized their well being, as many of them were physically punished for their endeavors of escape. Those assisting a slave’s escape put themselves in jeopardy by almost inevitable facing high fines and possibly steeper penalties if exposed. Secrecy, alertness, and luck

\footnote{Ibid., (no page numbers)}
were essential to success. For these reasons escapees traveled under the black veil of night. In addition, a master missing his slaves would often send out search parties, alert the community and usually offer a cash reward for the return of his valuable property. The sum of all these impediments made escape even more challenging.

As opposed to fleeing, a series of Connecticut laws were passed, restricting the practice of slavery. Rather than requiring risk, patience was mandatory. A desiring slave freedom had to be patient. In 1774 the Negro population in Connecticut was higher than that of all the other New England states.\(^8\) It was at this time that Connecticut made the law forbidding the importation of all Negro, Indian and Mulatto slaves, both by land and sea. It was only to be ten years later, in 1784, that slavery was abolished in the state of Connecticut. Yet abolition in the sense of this law was deceptive, for rather than completely ending the practice of slavery in Connecticut, the law merely prevented anyone born in Connecticut after March 1, 1784 to be held as a slave after reaching age twenty-five. This change did not mark any significant social or civil advantage for Negroes in Connecticut. For years to come they would be recognized as a distinct social caste, having
segregated churches, schools and public facilities. The state of Connecticut continued to make laws both repressive and beneficial to African Americans. By 1819, slaves in Middletown were almost universally free. But this was not the result of Connecticut Legislation. Slavery was not officially brought to a conclusion until 1848.

Venture Smith labored for years in order to earn the money needed to buy his freedom rather than trying to escape. But ironically, Venture Smith’s story does not begin in slavery but in freedom. Venture Smith recounted his own story in his autobiography, which he lived to see published.

Venture Smith, originally named Broteer, was born around 1729 to the leader of the Dukandra people in Guinea on the West African coast. The young prince at the age of six was captured by hostile African warriors, forced to watch the torture and execution of his father, and then sold to white slave traders. Young Broteer was taken to a ship bound for Rhode Island where he was sold to one of the ship’s stewards, one named Robertson Mumford, for four gallons of rum and a piece of calico. Broteer was then

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8 Lee, p. 25.
9 Ibid., p.25.
11 Ibid., pp.6-7.
given the name VENTURE, as he had been bought on account of having been purchased with Mumford's own private venture.

In America, Venture was transported to Fisher's Island and the place of his master's residence. Venture worked diligently for Mumford for the next 14 years, earning high respect and gaining the utmost trust. During these years working for the Mumfords, Venture married a fellow slave named Meg. Marriage for slaves was not always easy in that it required permission from both owners as well as agreements as to the ownership any children produced as a result of the union. 12 Being that Venture married another slave belonging to Robertson Mumford, the marriage most probably did not provide any difficulties and was most likely somewhat agreeable to Mumford. It was not long thereafter that Venture was sold to a Thomas Stanton of Stonington point. Venture was separated from his wife and one month old daughter. This action was not unusual in the practice of slavery. Often, families would be separated, and more commonly in the south than north, would never see each other again.

Venture spent the following year and a half working for his new master and being hired out by his master's brother Robert Stanton. Not long after, Thomas Stanton purchased
both Venture's wife and daughter from his previous owners, the Mumfords. Venture worked furiously for Stanton and yet had a falling out with him on account of the mistress of the house. Stanton, upon arriving home one evening and hearing his wife's account of the incident she had had with Venture, subjected the slave to severe physical punishment. Venture related his suffering in the following words, "On one occasion I was putting a log in the fireplace, not suspecting harm from anyone, when I received a most violent stroke on the crown of my head with a club two feet long and as large around as a chair post. This blow very badly wounded my head, and the scar of it remains to this day''.

Venture also went on to describe a series of other blows that he endured, as well as being shackled at the wrists and ankles on occasion. Only a short time later he was to be sold.

The man to whom Venture was sold decided to sell him immediately, possibly hoping to make a profit through the transaction. But the man still owed Stanton money for Venture and a debate arose as to whom Venture would be given. Venture was given a voice in the matter and upon his own request, and payment made to Stanton, he was given to Col. O. Smith. Colonel Smith agreed to Venture's request for

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12 Roberts, (no page numbers)
purchasing his freedom. At this time, Venture was 31 years old.

For the next couple years Venture hired himself out and earned his wages by cleaning gentlemen's shoes and drawing boots, catching muskrats and minks, raising potatoes, carrots, and other crops, fishing by night and cultivating land. Colonel Smith required that Venture pay him a quarter of his earnings in return for permission to hire himself out. After several years of cutting and cording hundreds of cords of wood and threshing out seventy-five bushels of grain, Venture was only thirteen pounds and eight shillings short of his freedom. Despite this remaining payment, Colonel Smith liberated Venture, permitting him to pay what was behind when it was ever convenient. Upon being freed, Venture took the last name of Col. Smith as a sign of his gratitude.

The freeing of a slave in many New England towns in the late 18th century was not something an owner could legally do without the permission of the town's government. An owner had to apply to receive this permission and the slave had to fit certain criteria. There were two conditions that needed be met before a slave could be freed. First, the

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13 Smith, p.12.
14 Ibid., pp.15-16.
15 Ibid., p. 16.
slave had to be able to support him or herself, and the
criteria of good and peaceable life needed to be met.
Second, the slave must be between the ages of twenty-five
and forty-five years of age and be of proper abilities,
circumstances and character. It was criteria such as
these that suggest an underlying fear existed in the hearts
of many white townspeople. But despite all odds and
obstacles, Venture Smith was granted freedom.

Venture Smith was described by many as being more than
six feet tall and remarkably strong. It was through his
sheer size, determination, frugality, and industriousness
that Venture was finally able to purchase his freedom. Yet
freedom came at a high price. It wasn’t until after Venture
Smith had made considerable money with seemingly nothing to
derive it from, having been cheated out of large sums of
money by previous owners, and losing much by misfortunes
that he became his own master.

But Venture Smith’s toils were far from over. He
continued to live on the bare minimum while earning all that
he could for the next four years before acquiring enough to
buy two of his sons, Solomon and Cuff, from slavery.
Solomon died of scurvy while serving as a hand on a vessel
and Cuff, who was still young, lived with his father. After

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16 Matt Hobby, Blacks in Middletown Around the 1790's, (photocopy), p.24.
chartering a sloop of about thirty tons, and hiring men to assist him in the navigation, Venture Smith worked in the wood trade earning sufficient money to purchase his wife who was pregnant, and thus saved himself from having to purchase the freedom of another child.

Finally, Venture Smith bought the freedom of his oldest child Hannah, who was owned by Ray Mumford. Around the age of forty-nine, after having bought not only his own freedom but that of his wife, three children and three Negro men.

Venture disposed of his property on Long Island and moved to Haddam Neck. He eventually owned over one hundred acres of land and three houses. He also at different times owned twenty or more boats and was involved in fishing and river trade. Later in life with outside help he wrote a brief autobiography which was published in 1798. Venture died in 1805 at the age of 77 and was buried in the cemetery of the First Church of Christ, Congressional, in East Haddam. Venture Smith's burial is significant since the church is not a Negro church. This demonstrates the respect he gained from his white neighbors. His tombstone bears the following inscription:

"Sacred to the memory of Venture Smith, African,

\[^{17} \text{Ibid., 24}\]
\[^{18} \text{Delaney, (Photocopied Middletown Press Article)}\]
\[^{19} \text{Arna Bontemps, "Introduction" Five Black Lives, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1971)}\]
thought the son of a King, he was kidnapped and
sold as a slave, but by his industry he acquired
money to purchase his freedom who died Sep. 19th AD
1805 in ye 77th year of his age."

His wife Meg, who died in 1809, is buried alongside
him and also has an inscription adorning her tombstone.

Various myths as well as confirmations of Venture
Smith's abnormal strength, industry and good character
accompany the story of his success. Several of those who
became acquainted with Smith during his life in Haddam Neck
later came forward to reaffirm much of his personal
narrative and to testify to his noble character. Traditions
say that not only did Venture stand over six feet tall, but
that he was well proportioned, weighed over three hundred
pounds and measured six feet around his waist.\textsuperscript{20} In his
autobiography, Venture recounts an incident where desiring
to test his own strength, he took upon his knees a tierce of
salt containing seven bushels and carried it 2 or 3 rods.\textsuperscript{21}
A tierce of salt was cask used for packing salt for shipping
and it was constructed in two sizes to hold the approximate
weight of either 304 or 336 pounds. Also, a rod of land was
approximately five and a half yards squared. This popular

\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Ibid.}, "Traditions of Venture", p.27.
\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.}, p.27.
salt lifting incident was repeated and passed down into tradition.

A man named Alex M. Clark of Haddam Neck, over eighty-two years of age once said that Venture occasionally worked for both his grandfather, Robert Clark and for his father, Benajah Clark. Mr. Alex Clark had often heard his father and grandfather say that Venture measured six feet around. He also related the tradition of the salt lifting, with the variation that it had happened in a store in East Haddam. Other traditions are related by those who claimed that Venture worked for their parents, grandparents, or lived nearby. Such stories include debates over the size and weight of Venture’s axe, how Venture was so heavy that he couldn’t ride a horse and how swiftly he could level large quantities of timber.\textsuperscript{22} Venture’s greatness both in life and tradition was followed through by his children who maintained the respected image set by their noble father.

Venture’s hard work and character earned him respect and admiration throughout his community and even beyond. Venture recounted his unique adventure, narrating the trials and rewards of his endeavors toward eventually realizing freedom. It was said that Venture’s tall, strong, family

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, p.27.
maintained a proud presence in Haddam Neck and the surrounding towns for many years.

Triumphs and Struggles (Cuff Boston)

Not many former slaves experienced such success as Smith. Just as a slave struggled for freedom, so too did he struggle to maintain a livelihood for afterward. Work was difficult to come by being a freed Negro. Most ex-slaves had very little, if any form of education. Most had few skills that were mandatory for jobs which paid decent salaries, with exception of those skills that they had learned during slavery. It was for these reasons that many were hard pressed to find work, while those that did frequently worked as unskilled laborers, house servants or launders. It was not uncommon for a freed slave to be turned down work solely upon the fact that he was black.

Even fewer freed men were ever able to collect enough money to purchase a plot of land and construct even a very modest house. Freed slaves had to save the little money they had in order to buy a small portion of land. Furthermore, many had families to support. The success story of Cuff Boston was one of the few exceptions. Although he was probably born a slave, it is clear from census records that Cuff Boston was a free man 1790. Cuff Boston lived in
Middletown, where he married and raised several children at his home on Washington Street. He established himself as a dyer and was undoubtedly successful in his trade.

Advertisements for Cuff Boston's business were frequently printed in the Middletown Gazette. An example of one such add placed on April 14, 1797 read as follows: *The business of dying cotton and linen yarn blue, will be carried on this season at the house of Mr. Abraham Doolittle by Cuff Boston.* 24 Many advertisements of similar content were placed in the Middletown Gazette through out the years. It is evident through the examination of land records that Cuff Boston frequently purchased and sold land from and to various neighbors. Numerous Lands Committee records demonstrate these transactions.

For example, on June 10, 1816, Josiah Wetmore appealed to the Middletown Land Committee. "At the request of Cuff Boston to give under my hand, that I am willing to have the old highway sold him in front of his lot, know therefore all whom it may concern that I am willing that he should have it by leaving me a privilege or a manors road from my lot to the turnpike." 25 The proceeding request was ultimately denied as the committee claims to have found the request

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23 Photocopy from Dione Longley  
24 Middlesex Gazette, July 21, 1797.  
25 Middletown Land Committee Records, June 10, 1816.
inexpedient, yet in several other instances land did indeed change hands. Cuff Boston appears to have been meticulous. He had his property appraised on several occasions. In these inventory records the land of the estate as well as any personal belongings were recorded. One such estate record showed that Cuff Boston held one bond, two inventories had been summoned to court seven times, and had returned to court three times.²⁶

Such land transactions between Cuff Boston, an African-American, and various white members of the were rare in Middletown in the early 19th century. In fact, a significant number of these transactions list Cuff Boston as buying and selling land with the wealthiest and most elite people in the area, for example the Wetmores.²⁷ This was an impressive accomplishment for anyone and it was even more amazing that Cuff Boston, a freed man, had the means by which he was able to make transactions on such a grand scale.

Cuff Boston appears to have been a respected member of his society as a result of his hard work, success and kindness. Documents suggest that his children were well thought of too. The following excerpt is from a letter written by a Ms. Mary Hulburt of Hudson, NY to her friend George Hulburt, living in Middletown. "I wish you would get

²⁶ Middletown Probate Estate Packets, 1752-1880.
that daughter of Cuff Boston’s to come back and stay a little while if she cannot stay all summer. I believe she told me she would come and stay a short time”. This too was quite a compliment for a Negro living in Middletown.

Records indicate that Cuff Boston owned over 30 acres of land upon his death in 1823, including his house lot containing nineteen acres in addition to two other properties. His 1824 inventory accounted for not only the land but appraised his personal goods. Three hogsheads, three iron candlesticks, 8 cider casks and one cherry desk accounted for a very small portion of the $2905 inventory on record. No will was listed but the administrative accounts paid a sum of money to Nancy Boston, Cuff Boston’s wife, to aid in the support of one child. With the exception of specific items that belonged to other people, Cuff Boston’s estate and property were sold at a public auction on September 27, 1824. The estate went to Henry D. Ward and eleven acres adjacent went to Ebenezer Jackson and heirs of Cuff Boston. One of Cuff Boston’s children also purchased a portion of his late father’s estate.

28 Mary Gray Hulburt, Letter to George Huntington Hulburt, June 16, 1831
29 Middletown Probate Estate Packets, 1752-1880.
30 Ibid.
31 Middletown Land Committe Records, September 27, 1824
Unfortunately for this study, information pertaining to Cuff Boston's life prior to attaining freedom could not be found. Yet what little is known of Cuff Boston's life unquestionably makes for a wonderful success story. But is should not be forgotten that an overwhelming majority of freed slaves could never dream of attaining such enormous success. Cuff Boston was an exception. He proved that despite obstacles and unfavorable odds, struggle could be ultimately met with rewards.

WOMEN IN SLAVERY (Membo and Phyllis Rawson)

Very little is known specifically about any women slaves. Women alone were not permitted the same rights as men. Furthermore, women slaves fell a rung further down on the social ladder. However, I found the following minimal information about two black Middletown women, Phyllis Rawson and Mimbo.

Phyllis Rawson was a slave belonging to Dr. Eliot Rawson, a Middletown physician. In December of 1776, Rawson advertised the sale of "a Negro Woman, about twenty-five years old, with three likely children". This advertisement was placed twice in the Connecticut Courant, once on September 22, 1776 and the second time on December 9, 1776. This was highly unusual because not only did
Rawson specify that all should be sold together, but that they should go to a good master.

It seems that Rawson never did sell his slaves at that time. It is quite possible that he was unable to find somebody willing to buy all four of the slaves together. Perhaps he changed his mind. Nevertheless, Rawson is quoted in 1780 in the Middletown Revolutionary Records for having made the following resolution:

"I Eliot Rawson...being truly desirous to do everything in my power to relieve all of those who are suffering for their country, for liberty, or for righteousness sake, do will and determine that my five Africans or Negroes shall be free... that Phyllis Rawson shall be free, in six months from the first day next June, that Duchess, Francis, Lettice, and Eve Rawson shall be made free at twenty-four years of age...".³³

Dr. Eliot Rawson, proving himself to be both good and honest, released all five of his slaves at the previously mentioned times. Phyllis Rawson’s children were later provided for by both her and her husband, Peter Freeman.

³² Connecticut Courant, September 22, and December 9, 1776.
Peter Freeman, like Phyllis Rawson had been a slave. He purchased his freedom from Master Isaac Miller of Middletown on March 30, 1778 and then enlisted and served in the Revolutionary war.\textsuperscript{34} Presumably, as a freed man, he supported the Union.

Although nothing was discovered regarding the treatment of Peter Freeman prior to purchasing his freedom, Phyllis Rawson and her children appear to have been well cared for. Typical care by masters cannot be estimated. Yet slavery was not as prevalent in Connecticut and other New England states as it was in Southern Regions. Moreover the tasks performed by most of the New England slaves were not nearly as labor intensive as those performed by the majority of southern slaves working on plantations. For the most, what author Frank Lee called “democratic relationships between masters and slaves”, were not uncommon in rural Connecticut.\textsuperscript{35} Dr. Eliot Rawson’s action of freeing his slaves was also not uncommon in Connecticut. Many freed their slaves after a set time period, usually of about six years, or upon the slave turning twenty-four. This practice of freeing slaves after a set period of time was most likely borrowed from pratice regarding indentured servants. In the case demonstrated by

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Lee, p.24.
Dr. Eliot Rawson, his decision to free his slaves was not only a combination of these general practices, but a gesture proving that he was, from what little we know of him, a good man.

The second female slave for whom sufficient information is available is Membo. Judging by her name, Membo (also referred to as Mimbo) probably came from Africa as a young child. She served the Wetmore family for many years. She was known from being trustworthy, loyal and obviously loved by the family.

Judge Seth Wetmore, her original owner, was known as a strict, yet affectionate man. As a Christian man he was recognized for all his good works. He purchased a large amount of personal property, which included slaves. Tradition says that he emancipated them, leaving each some property, but this may not be entirely correct, as will be seen shortly.36

Judge Wetmore was especially strict when it came to observing the Sabbath. On several occasions Jonathan Edwards and Timothy Dwight (the nephew and the grand nephew of Mrs. Wetmore) were known to test the Judge by frequently breaking the Sabbath. It was on such occasions that Membo was known to cover for the young men in their youthful indiscretions.
Both Jonathan and Timothy were said to have customarily paid visits to the "Staddle Hill" residence of Judge Wetmore during college vacations. Being young men, whose minds were preoccupied with other more pressing matters, they were not inclined to follow the Judge's custom of observing the Sabbath. On one occasion they conspired to escape the vigilance of the judge and pay a visit to some young ladies, living in the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{37} Membo was said to have been in the kitchen preparing "hasty pudding" but the young men, being impatient, begged her to slip them their supper and then admitted her to their confidence. Disregarding Membo's warnings, the youths eagerly began dipping the pudding from the kettle. But Edwards and Dwight, having dropped some of the boiling pudding on their silk hose, began hopping around the floor in pain. Membo was said to have assisted them in removing the pudding and applying remedies to their burns at the same time lecturing them upon being in a hurry and the impropriety and sin of "gowing to see de girls on Saturday night, de beginnin ob de Lor's day."\textsuperscript{38}

Contrary to the claims that Judge Whetmore emancipated his slaves, his daughter, Mrs. Lucy Whittlesey, and his son,


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p.286.
Deacon Oliver, held servants that had been bequeathed to them by their father. It was they who ultimately enfranchised them. Upon Judge Wetmore’s death, Oliver Wetmore, Seth Wetmore Jr., Chauncey Whittlesey, and Lucy Whittlesey jointly owned Membo.

Lucy Whittlesey appeared to be the primary caretaker of Membo. She and Membo were about the same age and had probably grown up together, although under notably different circumstances. In 1779, when Membo was about thirty-five years of age, Lucy, her brothers, and her husband submitted a request for Membo’s freedom to Middletown’s selectmen. On February 5, 1779, after the request had been reviewed and all parties had signed the agreement, Membo was discharged of all her obligations to the Wetmores and Whittleseys.39

Membo managed to support herself as a free woman until 1815, when she contracted smallpox, leaving her blind and unable to work.40 Although freed, the Whetmores, especially Lucy, cared for her. After having served the Whetmores for a large portion of her life, it was now time for them to care for her. Lucy aided Membo with care and supplies, but billed the town of Middletown for her expenses. A copy of a

38 Ibid., pp.286-287.
40 Photocopy from Dione Longley
bill from 1816 shows the purchase of such supplies as flour, molasses, tea, sugar and flannel.\textsuperscript{41}

When Lucy Whittlesey died in 1826, her will declared, "If poor blind Membo should outlive me, I enjoin it upon my children...that they never forsake her but to see...that she is comfortably supported and that she have those little indulgences and gratifications which conduce so much to the comfort of old age."\textsuperscript{42} Whittlesey's children applied to the town for money to care for Membo. Despite her years of hard work for the Whetmore family, at her death in June of 1828, the town gave Membo a pauper's burial.

The relationship that Lucy, in particular, shared with Membo was not altogether uncommon. Their relationship was clearly more than one strictly between master and slave. Rather, the relationship appeared to be one of mutual love and friendship. Although not all slaves were treated and cared for so kindly, generally the slaves in Connecticut fared much better than those working long hard days on the plantations in the south. The examples of both Phyllis Rawson and Membo are exceptional, as they are two of few female slaves who have been recorded in the history of Middletown.

**SLAVES AND FREED MEN BEFORE THE LAW (Negro Barney)**

\textsuperscript{41} Bill to the Town of Middletown, August 24, 1816.
In addition to having to obey those laws that governed white men in colonial Connecticut, African Americans were subjected to special regulations restricting movement and use of liquor, dealing with theft and or flight, handling military affairs, and monitoring residency in towns, the purchasing of land, and business activity.\textsuperscript{43} It is important to note that the majority of these laws were never enforced in Middletown and other New England colonies.

Although law in Connecticut never officially recognized slavery, enslavement was originally just as acceptable in the north as in the south. But as the practice of slavery was relied upon significantly less in the north, laws made in Connecticut and other New England Colonies protecting the treatment of slaves were probably slightly more successful.

Slaves were seen as both property and persons before the law. They were bought and sold, and could be inherited through wills as part of an estate, and yet they could acquire property, serve in war, and enjoy basically the same rights in court as free white persons.\textsuperscript{44} Despite the numerous repressive laws that governed slave's lives, there were laws passed in Connecticut that served to grant that slaves received proper treatment. It was a continuation of

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Lee, p.25.
\textsuperscript{44} Roberts, (no page numbers)
these laws that ultimately provided African Americans with their freedom. The following account certainly appears to be an exception and yet it is mentioned that crimes of this severity committed by whites were equally harshly punished.

The following account of a slave named Barney who faced criminal charges is gruesome. Despite the ultimate horrible punishment inflicted upon this condemned African, he was entitled to trial by court. He held in custody prior to and following his court sentence to ensure that it would be carried out. This was a form of protection, more than likely only done so that the condemned slave would suffer slowly from the tortures of his punishment rather than die a relatively quick death at the hands of an angry mob. Although this may sound unnecessarily cruel, this decision, as well as the punishment decided upon by the court will perhaps be deemed worthy in relation to the crime that was committed.

On May 12, 1743, in Middletown, a sixteen year old slave known as Negro Barney, servant to a Middletown squire named Jonathan Allyn (aka Alling), maliciously maimed his master’s six year old son Thomas Allyn.45 No information has ever been related to explain the virulent hatred that Barney conceived for his master’s son. However, on May 12,
Barney dragged the boy into a secluded pasture when he
stripped him naked, strangled his neck with his hands and
"feloniously with a knife of ye value of five pence
grievously wounded, castrated and cut out the testicles of
him." The completely emasculated victim was left to die
but found eight hours later, unconscious, covered in blood,
and barely alive. Abijah Moore, Constable of Middletown
brought Barney to the general assembly, where he pled guilty
to the charge of willful castration.47

As was common when crimes of such nature were presented
to the general assembly, the Legislators decided that this
particular crime was too great for them to handle. They then
directed the case to the Superior Court, which was being
held in Hartford. The crime was so unique that there were no
provisions made in any laws of the Connecticut Colony. A
special legislative act was made in order for the case to be
adjudicated and the jury was then told to proceed and
inflict such punishment on Barney as to justice
apppertained.48 This creation of a law to try a particular
crime having already been committed is what is known as Ex
post Facto.

45 Charles J. Hoadly, Colonial Records of Connecticut 1735-1743, (Hartford: Lockwood and Brainard Co.,
1874), p.578.
46 Judicial Department, Hartford County, Superior Court Files, 1711-1899, (Box 11, 1742-1744).
47 Ibid.
At least eight people are recorded as having given testimony to Barney's heinous crime. These people were Jonathan Allyn, Thomas Allyn, John Cheevers, Abijah Moore, Thomas Ward, Nathaniel Gilbert Jr., Thomas Merrifield, and Abraham Doolittle.49 This Superior Court session was held in Hartford on Tuesday, November 15, 1743. Barney was tried, convicted and sentenced to a very severe punishment that began on November 16, 1743.

The following day, Barney was taken to the gallows and forced to sit with a rope around his neck and his arms bound behind him. Irate spectators pelted him with rocks, stick, and garbage, which Barney was unable fend off since his hands were tightly bound and running would make the rope around his neck tighten with fatal results. After the allotted hour he was led to the whipping post where he received thirty-nine hard lashes on his naked body and was then had the letter C (for castrator) branded on his head with a hot iron. Superior Court Records then show that Barney was to be carried back to the common jail and left for twenty-eight days before again being brought up and publicly whipped another thirty-nine times. Following this second whipping, Barney was further committed to the jail for another twenty-eight days. At the expiration of his time

49 Judicial Department, Hartford County, Superior Court Files, 1711-1899, (Box 11, 1742-1744).
in jail Barney was brought up and further punished by castration and having both his testicles cut out after which he was discharged.\textsuperscript{50}

Although no sources could be found pertaining to Barney's life following this incident, one source suggests that it was highly unlikely that Barney survived his punishment. Having checked newspapers, accounts of Jonathan Allyn and various other sources, nothing could be discovered pertaining to whether Barney died as a result of his punishment or, if he lived, when and where he eventually died. Information pertaining to the death of a slave is difficult, if not impossibly to find as a result of their position in society.

Some households respected their slaves and treated them like family, sometimes even burying them alongside the family. This would presumably not be the case in the instance of the Allyn family. For these reasons, nothing further could be discovered in reference to Negro Barney. The judicial system clearly applied relatively fairly to both blacks and whites. As noted earlier, Barney's extreme punishment may be agreed upon by many as a fitting punishment for one who committed an equally terrible crime.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid.}
Although this particular case resulted in the torture and perhaps even the death of a slave, there were instances in which slaves approached courts accusing masters of mistreatment. In a number of these cases, if shown to be abusive, a master was either given warning or fined for his abuses.\textsuperscript{51} So contrary to the evidence given in the account of Barney, a slave was entitled to certain legal protections.

**FREEDOM AT LAST**

The institution of slavery started early on in American history. Even before Africans were shipped in to serve the growing population, Native Americans were being stripped from their lands and forced into slavery by the settlers. But slavery extended into Africa, bringing blacks to the Americas where they would be forced to labor for white settlers for more than two hundred years.

Although not officially recognized by law in Connecticut, progressively restrictive laws constantly monitored the institution of slavery. The first law, enacted in 1774, prohibited the further importation of all slaves, Indian, Negro, and Mulatto, into Connecticut.\textsuperscript{52} Further laws placed age limits within which a black could not be held as a slave. Although by the 1820's the majority

\textsuperscript{51} Lee, p.26.
of Africans living in Middletown, Connecticut were free it
was not until 1848 that slavery was completely abolished,
not only in Connecticut, but in many other states.

But in the meantime, the lives of slaves were full of
hardship, challenges, toils, servitude and occasionally
success. The quest for freedom was a long and difficult
battle. This battle could not be won without its risks as
well as luck and even help from those white men and women
who believed that slavery was wrong. Both blacks and whites
gathered and held abolitionist meetings in Middletown.
Again, in 1834 members of both races came together to hold
the first meeting of the Middletown Antislavery Society.
Although some of these meetings were often broken up by
anti-abolitionists, the movement toward freedom had begun.

There were apparently only one thousand Negroes in all
of New England in 1700 and even then the white settlers
began to worry about their numbers.53 For this reason there
were many restrictive measures designed to keep both slaves
and freedmen under close eye. Connecticut in particular was
never a large slaveholding area. Slavery in Middletown had
reached its peak in 1756 with only 218 blacks in
servitude.54 But regardless of this low statistic, the

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52 Connecticut State Law, 1774.
54 Roberts, (no page numbers)
practice of slavery was relatively common among the townspeople.

For years slaves faced both kind and hard masters, repressive laws, and obstacles both on the road to and after having achieved freedom. The stories accompanying the different aspects of the lives of these specific African Americans in this study were selected to provide a glimpse into what slavery and freedom meant to the blacks. These stories were chosen, with the exception of Barney’s unfortunate tale, to demonstrate various successes experienced by select slaves and freedmen as well as to contrast the actuality of the unfavorable odds they faced. They were also selected largely due to the fact that the uniqueness of their stories provided significantly more information on each one of them than could ever be found about most slaves. It is hoped that through these true accounts readers will be able to understand, even if only a fraction, of what African Americans, not confined solely to Connecticut, experienced.