

African American Connecticut Explored Inquiry Resource: 5th Grade

For original text, see “Venture Smith, from Slavery to Freedom,” *African American Connecticut Explored* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

See also another essay: <http://connecticutexplored.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/VENTURE-SMITH-W1213.pdf>

Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools	
<i>History</i> : Perspectives; Historical Sources and Evidence; Causation and Argumentation	
Words to Know	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• enslaved• indentured servants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• colonial

Venture Smith, from Slavery to Freedom

Lexile: 1070 Word count: 1273

adapted from original text by John Wood Sweet

Did you know that there were almost twelve million Africans who were taken from their homes and families and sold as slaves? These people had to sail across the sea and those who did not die during the journey were sold to other people. Because many slaves were not allowed to read or write, there are only twelve people who wrote about this experience, and one of them was from Connecticut! Venture Smith told his story in a book about his life and adventures published in New London, Connecticut in 1798. His story helps us remember the struggle that enslaved people faced during colonial times. While a new nation was fighting for freedom during the American Revolution, people like Venture Smith were struggling to survive.

Early Life & Capture

In 1730, a family in West Africa had a new baby. They named him Broteer. In his journal, he talks about his father, who was a local leader. He used his power with honor and was a generous person. As he grew up, he learned to tend sheep. One day, an army of enemies came to threaten his people. His father bravely protected his treasure and it cost him his life. The young boy, Broteer, was taken as a prisoner and marched to a slave-trading center to be put up for sale. Later, an officer on a slave ship from Rhode Island bought him for “four gallons of rum and a piece of calico cloth”. He sailed over to Newport, probably on a ship called *Charming Susannah*, which had left Newport in 1738.

Like many people taken from their homes, Broteer was given a new name, Venture, by the people who had captured him. Not only had they taken him from his home and family, they took the only thing he had left: his name. On the long ocean journey to the colonies, called the Middle Passage, slaves often got sick due to lack of food and unhealthy conditions. He survived a terrible disease called Smallpox, which caused many deaths. Even though most of the others on the ship were sold on the island of Barbados, he was brought to New England in 1739. He spent the next thirty years of his life in New York and Connecticut, where as many as one in five people had African roots.

Life in Slavery

In his story, Smith tells us about two of the most important problems he faced. First, he explains how unfair and hurtful the system of slavery was. Then, he describes how his physical strength and self-control helped him to get through this time. During the 1740s and early 1750s, a man named George Mumford owned Venture. He rented

a place called Fisher's Island from members of the Winthrop family. There were more than a dozen enslaved people and indentured servants who worked the large farm. There, they raised mostly sheep and dairy cows.

When he was in his mid-twenties, Venture married a woman named Meg, who was also enslaved. Shortly after, he tried to escape. He did not succeed. His owner placed an ad in the newspaper in April 1784. It also gave us an idea of what he might have looked like. The ad says he is a "very tall Fellow, 6 feet 2 inches high, thick square shoulders" and also describes a scar on his face from when he had been cut with a knife back in Africa.

Shortly after, Venture was sold by his owner to another farmer in Stonington, CT named Thomas Stanton. He was able to get his new master to purchase his wife Meg, but after that things did not go smoothly and Venture experienced a lot of beatings. When he tried to help during a fight between his wife Meg and Mrs. Stanton, his master beat him and stole all of the money they had been saving to buy their freedom. Even though he tried to get help to a local official, nothing was done. He was finally sold to a man named Oliver Smith, a merchant from Stonington. They came up with a deal so he could earn the money to buy his freedom through jobs like cutting firewood. It was because of the fact that this master, Oliver Smith, never cheated him that he decided to take the last name of Smith.

Freedom & Opportunity

Through this deal, he was finally able to earn enough money to purchase his freedom. After that, he wanted to earn money to he could free his family too. His wife Meg and their two sons were still owned by Thomas Stanton. A member of the Mumford

family owned their oldest daughter, Hannah. Families were often torn apart during the time of slavery, and parents had no rights to be with their children. Can you imagine how it might feel to have a family member sold to someone far away?

To earn more money, Smith worked as a sailor on a whaling ship, fished, and cut more firewood for people around Long Island Sound. He also bought land. In 1770, he bought twenty six acres that was right next to the farm of his old master Thomas Stanton. (That area is now part of the Barn Island Wildlife Preserve.)

In 1775, he sold this land and used the money he got to buy a small piece of land on Haddam Neck, Connecticut which later grew to over 100 acres. He was a smart businessman and was able to bring his family back together. He farmed, fished, sold lumber from the trees on his land, and traded along the Connecticut River and the east end of Long Island Sound.

Telling His Story

There are many ways we can learn about people from the past. Not too long ago, scientists who study historic sites wanted to find out more. They dug into the ground and using special tools they found out his home had a house and barn, blacksmith shop, and place to repair boats. This helps us to know that he had found some way to build a life for himself in his family. Looking at these clues from the past helps us to learn more.

We can also learn from Smith himself, since he wanted to tell his story. In 1798, he was getting older. His strong, tall body was bent and tired, and he was going blind. Since he did not know how to read or write, he must have needed help getting his story

written down. We don't know for sure, but some think a local schoolteacher named Elisha Niles helped. Even though he may not have been able to write himself, the story he told is his own. His story matches details found in other books and letters. More importantly, his own voice shines through. He talks about how in some ways, life in West Africa and in North America was similar. He also tells us about how hard it was to fight for freedom and equal treatment in the new nation. By looking at written papers about him from that time, reading the book he published, and digging around where he used to live, we now know more about this important person.

Venture Smith died in 1805. He was buried in the graveyard of a church in East Haddam, CT. His wife Meg, who died several years later, is buried next to him and other members of their family. Smith's gravestone can be seen there to this day. Since then, he has been remembered in this area for his hard work, honesty and the many ways he had success during his hard life.

This essay was originally prepared for connecticuthistory.org.

[1] Smith, Venture. "A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America." New London, CT: Charles Holt, 1798. For a reliable edition of Venture Smith's *Narrative* and the latest scholarship about him, see James Brewer Stewart, ed., *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2010). Venture Smith's *Narrative* was first published 1798, and several editions have been published since his death, some with significant omissions or additions. The 1835 edition omits a sharply worded passage at the end about his children. The 1896 edition, published by H. M. Selden of Haddam, Connecticut, includes a series of "reminiscences" that emphasize Smith's physical prowess rather than his mental fortitude and entrepreneurial savvy. The most authoritative twentieth-century edition of the *Narrative*

is in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (1971). A good online edition is available through the University of North Carolina's Web site at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture2/venture2.html>.

[2] For details about Captain James Collingwood, the *Charming Susannah*, and Anomabo, see the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database available at www.slavevoyages.org.

[3] James Brewer Stewart, *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom*. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).