Enslaved Africans in the Colony of Connecticut

by Peter Hinks

Introduction: Enslavement was many Africans' first experience of life in Connecticut where they were forcibly delivered from their native land, owned as property by white colonists, compelled to work, and largely deprived of individual autonomy. They would contribute importantly to the expanding prosperity of the colony in the eighteenth century. Even in the midst of slavery, Africans and Americans born of African ancestry in the colonies would begin to establish a place for themselves while striving for greater freedom and independence.

1. The Connecticut Colony: A Background

- English colonists from Massachusetts settled in Connecticut in the 1630s to found a new religious colony and to block the movement of the Dutch into the area.
- Over the following decades, the colonists in Connecticut enslaved some local Native Americans such as the Pequots and imported only a relatively few Africans for enslavement. Slavery was not an important institution in the colony in the seventeenth century.

In the early decades of the seventeenth century, the English began to settle some colonies in North America. The Spanish already had well established colonies in South and Central America and in the Caribbean. The French too had begun to explore the Mississippi and the major rivers of Canada and launched commercial ties with local peoples over this vast terrain. At the same time, the Dutch were at war with Spain and were increasingly successful at assaulting Spain's ships on the high seas of the Atlantic. The Dutch had also laid the foundation of their own colony of New Amsterdam in the 1620s centered around settlements at modern-day Manhattan and Albany. The principal interest of the Dutch was trading with regional Native Americans in furs and other

valuable commodities. This pursuit led them to explore Long Island Sound and the Connecticut River in search of further commercial contacts. By the early 1630s, they had established a trading fort near what would become Hartford.

At precisely the same time, the English had launched several settlements in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The English were very uncomfortable with Dutch encroachments immediately to the south of their lands. Concerned to secure control over territory that was a controversial part of their land grant from the British crown, several hundred English colonists moved into Connecticut in the mid-1630s. They soon established small settlements at Wethersfield, Saybrook, and, eventually, Fairfield. While they had only a few spats with the Dutch, these English colonists staged horrible, bloody wars with the Pequots, the dominant tribe of Native Americans along the colony's shoreline. Fought between 1635 and 1637, the Pequot Wars not only vanquished the main obstacle to the further colonization of Connecticut; they provided the English settlers with their first slaves.

However, slavery never had a large presence in seventeenth century Connecticut. Most of the Native Americans, especially Pequot women and children, had been captured in conflicts in the colony's early decades and condemned to slavery in Connecticut. The men were more commonly transported to the British West Indies. While some Africans did arrive in the latter decades of the seventeenth century, their numbers were small. For example, the British Board of Trade reported in 1679 that few African slaves were present in Connecticut and that only three or four entered the colony each year.

Even with its limited use, Indian slavery did not prove very valuable. Because of their knowledge of the terrain and the proximity of un-enslaved tribal members, running

away could be readily accomplished. Native Americans were also declining by the late 1600s. They were increasingly confined to "praying towns" under the supervision of colonial authorities. By 1700, the number of enslaved indigenous people in the colony was diminishing. Demand for slave labor in the Connecticut colony remained low as well throughout the seventeenth century. However, in the neighboring colonies of Massachusetts and New York (newly named after British capture in 1664), slavery was growing slowly but steadily; but this was a slavery of Africans, not of Native Americans.

2. Connecticut Slavery in the 18th Century:

- After 1700, British imperial policy mandated a much greater use of Africans as slaves in the North American colonies to promote economic growth.
- The numbers of Africans in Connecticut grew significantly between 1700 and 1775. They contributed greatly to the expanding prosperity of the colony.
- The white colonists believed slavery was natural and moral. The Native Americans and Africans subjugated by this system viewed it very differently.

After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, Great Britain and its Board of Trade looked outward to strengthen and expand the empire. Its sugar colonies in the West Indies were growing and were enhanced enormously by the addition of Jamaica late in the century. Great Britain longed to stimulate commercial and demographic growth in its North American colonies. England understood the advantage in generating profitable plantation crops such as tobacco, rice, indigo, and naval stores as well as food crops to provision its expanding Caribbean colonies. While the Crown sought to meet the escalating cry for labor in North America with indentured and penal laborers from Great Britain, human supplies were inadequate to meet the rapidly growing demand for labor by the early eighteenth century. Enslaved Africans were increasingly relied upon to meet

that demand, not only in the southern plantation colonies but also in the northern colonies. It was in the New England colonies where indentured British labor increasingly proved inadequate to meet demand. In 1699, Parliament ended the monopoly of the Royal African Company on the trade in African slaves to the British colonies and opened the 'traffic' to independent, separate traders as well. Over the ensuing decades this trade dramatically increased the influx of Africans into the Caribbean and North America.

Farmers and others in Connecticut would benefit from this imperial expansion. For example, the fertile soils of Fairfield County ensured its position as the leading grain producer of New England by the early decades of the eighteenth century. Connecticut crops were readily traded not only with other local colonies but increasingly with the British West Indies. Flax for the production of linen was widely grown there and its seeds profitably sold in Ireland, the British Empire's largest producer of linen. Sheep, hogs, and cattle thrived in the county. Connecticut meat and dairy products, especially cheese, were in strong demand in New York, Boston, and beyond. Fairfield was also famous for its horses which commanded very high prices. With its rich lands, safe harbors, and proximity to major merchants at the port of New York City, Fairfield County by the mid-eighteenth century was prospering. Elsewhere in the colony, timber and staves for barrels were produced and sold to the West Indies where wood was lacking. The onions of Wethersfield were famous as were the vessels built in the numerous shipyards along the Connecticut River, in New London and Norwich. Iron was mined in Kent and Salisbury and processed in local furnaces.

Economic growth on this scale would have been very difficult without increasing numbers of Africans to supplement the colony's labor force. In 1700, only a few hundred

Africans at most were enslaved in the colony. By mid-century, they numbered well over 3000 and by 1775, more than 5000. They represented only about 3% of the colony's total population but in larger towns such as New Haven, Stratford, Fairfield, Middletown, and New London and in shoreline districts where agriculture was primary, their proportion of the total local population exceeded 5% and even approached 10%. For example, by 1775 320 slaves lived in the Fairfield County town of Stratford. Many of the enslaved entered Connecticut by way of New York City or Newport, Rhode Island, the two most important centers of the Atlantic slave trade in North America. A few even arrived on vessels owned by Connecticut merchants. Both male and female slaves were common in the homes of middling and affluent white townsfolk. They performed a wide variety of the endless domestic tasks required in a colonial household. Female slaves were particularly valued for childcare, spinning and sewing, cleaning, cooking, and producing cheese. While male slaves were most commonly employed in farming and husbanding animals, a number were trained as artisans for work as carpenters, coopers, blacksmiths, and shipwrights. Primus, the slave of Dr. Alexander Wolcott of Windsor, eventually established his own medical practice.

Few white colonists were troubled by slavery. To the extent that they even thought about it, most believed that slavery was a Christian institution thoroughly supported by Scripture and beneficial both for themselves and the Africans. Both Hebrew and Christian Scripture offered many guidelines for the respectful and mutual performance of duties to each other by masters and slaves. Nevertheless, the colonists wrote numerous laws commanding obedience and deference from the enslaved. In 1650, the General Court of Hartford formally recognized the lawfulness of enslaving both

Indians and Negroes. Over the ensuing decades, further laws were passed prohibiting slaves from fleeing their owner, from travelling within the colony without a pass, from trafficking in stolen goods, from insulting or abusing a white person, from gathering for any reason at night, and from speaking any 'defamatory words'. These laws commonly included punishment by whipping. The enslaved were defined as fundamentally different from white colonists before the eyes of the law and bound to defer to white colonists under most circumstances.

The need to write these laws made it clear that the enslaved were not voluntarily submitting to white authority. In 1659, enslaved Africans and indigenous people burned down the house of their master in Hartford**.** Venture Smith, captured in Africa and eventually brought to Stonington as a slave, had learned in his native land of Dukandarra, West Africa that one's word was one's bond. As a boy in Connecticut he obeyed the commands of his owners. However, he soon discovered their failure to treat him with the respect he merited. Furthermore, Venture's owners failed to honor other business agreements they had made with him. In the face of this abuse of authority, Venture concluded that they were not honorable men. Thus began Venture's long journey to secure his freedom.

3. Colonial Family Life:

- By the mid-eighteenth century, 25% of the colonists' households included slaves. Generally, no more than a few slaves were owned in any household. As a consequence, black and white inhabitants usually lived under one roof and came into frequent contact routinely.
- Most of the colonists were very devout Congregationalists and families commonly prayed and read from the Bible together within their homes. Sunday was spent worshipping at church. Many slaves were exposed to Christianity in

these communities. They came to embrace Christian religions and to join local churches.

- While marrying and forming families was very difficult for the enslaved in Connecticut, many did. A number even married within the local Congregational church. The children from these unions added to the slave population of the colony.

As harsh and arbitrary as slavery could prove in colonial Connecticut, the enslaved were able to create some haven for themselves in family and faith. From the early eighteenth century up to 1750, Africans comprised a significant number of the enslaved in the colony. Unfortunately, the remaining records afford little information on the practices and beliefs they brought over from Africa. Advertisements for slave runaways in early newspapers, however, reveal some dimensions of their lives in Africa. A few of these notices identified male runaways by markings they bore on their faces. These long lines and special markings were administered as part of West African ceremonial rituals marking a young man's entry into puberty. Markings also identified family and religious groups. Some advertisements also mention that the runaway could speak very little English. Distinctive methods of hair braiding were noted sometimes as well and were probably specific to certain groups in West Africa. While the vigor of their African culture must have persisted in Connecticut, it has been challenging for us to delineate the specific forms it took.

In Connecticut, slaveholding colonists usually owned no more than a few slaves within their family. The enslaved had personal, daily interaction with owners and their families. Black and white labored together, may have eaten at the same table, and perhaps, relaxed at days end by the hearthside. Yet separate spheres always existed. In the Bush household (Cos Cob,Connecticut), the enslaved had separate, uninsulated

sleeping quarters in the attic, under the eaves of the house. Such sleeping arrangements were common in households with slaves. But in those spaces the enslaved also found a treasured privacy away from the controlling gaze of whites. These involuntary captives found private places to connect with family; to rekindle hope; to re-tell stories thus preserving memories and traditions. In the nooks and crannies of colonial life, these enslaved people reaffirmed their self worth; reinforced personal beliefs and found a momentary respite from the constant, psychological assault that slavery demands.

On the rice and tobacco plantations of the colonial South, large numbers of African slaves commonly lived and worked at a physical distance from their owners and other whites. Subsequently, they were often able to maintain many of the cultural practices from their West African homelands. In the close environment of the colonial Connecticut household where whites overwhelmingly dominated, retaining African rituals and values was much more difficult. By contrast, enslaved Africans learned English and adapted to English customs much more quickly than did their southern peers.

One of the most important customs they learned was Christianity, facilitated by the intensely religious life of Congregational Connecticut. Slaves were welcomed into the churches as members where they were assigned to sit with their owner's family or in special pews reserved in the rear for slaves. Many masters taught their slaves how to read because they believed it was important for them as Christians to read the Bible. By the mid-eighteenth century as slave numbers were increasing in the colony, the names of more and more slaves appeared in church registers. In a measure to prevent intimate relations outside of the marriage bond, to foster marriage and the growth of families, some owners encouraged their adult slaves to marry and to have children. Church

registers recorded these marriages and the baptisms of the children they yielded. For example, John Read of Reading oversaw the marriage of his "Servant Negro Man to my Servant Indian Maid Cate" in February 1736 and they had no fewer than ten children between 1736 and 1755. For many slaves, however, marrying and making a family proved very difficult because the marriage partners were not necessarily owned by the same household. Many owners also did not want their slaves' time and attention focused on any family other than that of the slaveowner. Already harshly circumscribed by bondage, life for unmarried slaves was rendered even more frustrating. Yet those who did marry and form families within the sanction of the local church could find a modicum of dignity and satisfaction which afforded some refuge from the indignity of enslavement.

A market for the buying and selling of slaves did exist and the possibility of sale was an ever present warning to the enslaved. A number of advertisements testified to that reality. Yet economic and territorial growth was not explosive in late colonial Connecticut. Most slaves were purchased to supplement existing labor needs in a household and therefore, could have some confidence that they would remain in the place they called 'home'. Those slaves allowed by their owners to marry and have families could have some security that they would remain together like the slaves of John Read (previously mentioned). By the 1750s and after, more and more of the enslaved would be born on American soil within the colony or elsewhere in New England. They would be much more a part of that world than were the Africans who arrived before them.

4. Expressions of Self-Determination:

- Slavery attempted to strip the enslaved of autonomy and to subject individuals to the arbitrary will of another. The fact of this demeaning and sometimes dangerous unpredictability was always present for the enslaved. In open acts of resistance, many slaves ran away from their owners in order to be released from this predicament and gain independence.
- Running away or otherwise resisting a master required great courage and forethought. In colonial Connecticut, whites greatly outnumbered blacks. Few refuges existed to which slaves could flee, and the authorities were fully poised to seize the rebellious and punish them harshly. Acting against one's enslavement could easily fail and jeopardize the rebel. While all slaves chafed under their bondage, many chose to wait carefully for an opportune time to strike for freedom.

Many whites in colonial New England believed that the slavery in their land was unusually mild. They liked to compare it with slavery in the sugar islands of the West Indies where they said the cracking of the whip and the screams of the enslaved never stopped. Grinding toil without end led to the misery and rapid death of the exhausted slaves there. In comparison, they exclaimed, what existed here in Connecticut was almost not slavery at all. But slavery in Connecticut had its whips, chains and barbarities too. Slavery's brutalities were felt not only by the body but also by the mind. Slavery threatened one's self respect and dignity. In colonial Connecticut, no movement against slavery yet existed, no ideology condemned it as a fundamental wrong. Individuals had to make a very clear choice, fueled by courage and faith, to renounce their enslavement. They had to keep alive the determination to identify with freedom and accept the great risks to seize it. Little else other than personal resolve and resourcefulness existed to assist those held in bondage at that time.

Venture Smith suffered all the harshness of slavery and still refused to submit to it. Born in Dukandarra, West Africa in 1729, captured, and transported to North America, Venture Smith was by the age of nine a slave in Rhode Island. Thirteen years

later, he was sold to Thomas Stanton of Stonington, Connecticut. While as a young man Venture attempted to serve his masters faithfully, he found their exercise of power over him arbitrary and abusive. One master applauded him for guarding his valuable trunk diligently and then forced the boy to work ceaselessly at pounding corn. That master's son later beat young Venture for not performing as commanded, even though Venture was complying with his master's orders for the day. Venture was hung from a gallows in preparation for whipping. Married at roughly the age of twenty-three, Venture rescued his young bride from a brutal whipping by his mistress for some trivial offense. He seized the horsewhip from the enraged mistress and threw it into the fire. Venture was injured and her husband was subdued in an ensuing struggle. When the husband again attempted to club Venture with the assistance of another man, Venture hurled both of them to the ground and stomped on them. Finally overcome by the constable and two other men, Venture was handcuffed, encumbered with a large ox chain padlocked to his feet, and told to get to work, under threat of sale to the West Indies. Instead he was sold several more times to other deceitful and abusive men. Venture recognized that he was just a possession to these men, a commodity to be worked, abused, and traded for profit. They did not acknowledge his humanity. The brutal hardships he endured were not unusual for slaves in colonial Connecticut.

Venture determined at an early point in his enslavement that in order to exercise control over his identity and his very life, he had to be a free man. Imagining this state of total, personal freedom was challenging because very few blacks in colonial Connecticut lived as free persons. When he was about twenty, Venture escaped in the company of an indentured Irish man who deceived him and ruined the plan to flee. He soon recognized

that the surest path to freedom for a slave was to purchase himself from his owner. Over many years, Venture worked at various labors late at night and in all seasons to accumulate the money necessary to purchase himself. At one point all his money was burned in a fire; on another occasion, an owner cheated him of some of it. Yet his vision of ultimate independence sustained him through these misfortunes. About 1765, Venture finally purchased himself and over the ensuing years, he would purchase his wife, children, and a comfortable farm as well.

Although his experience in slavery was not uncommon, Venture was an exemplary individual and has left us a unique and powerful account of his life. To date, no similar autobiography recounting a life of slavery in colonial Connecticut has been uncovered. However we do know that many other individuals resisted their enslavement, especially by running away. Advertisements for male and female runaways in colonial newspapers reveal important information about them and their resolve to be free. Many of these runaways had skills that were readily marketable elsewhere. As noted in these runaway advertisements, a number of escapees were literate, artful and pleasing conversationalists. They commonly took clothing and other items with them to sell. Many had traveled broadly in New England and beyond, were comfortable in navigating the roads and reckoning with whites in different towns. One man had run away from New Jersey, been seized in New Haven, sold there, and then run away again. He was a good carpenter and probably knew how to read and write because he had a pass. In order to disguise her appearance, one resourceful young woman from Killingworth included articles of men's clothes in her travel sack. Another man was described as very strong, an excellent sailor, and "speaks much of his being a Free man, and will endeavour

to pass for such." A runaway claim was made on a man who spoke very good English, had been in Jamaica, and was "very artful and insinuating." By way of description, an escaped slave was portrayed as "pleasant in his manners and behaviour" while yet another was so determined to be free that "he went away in Irons which tis likely he has got off." Many of these people would be re-captured, punished, and enslaved again. Yet, free or re-enslaved, their vision of personal freedom always bore witness to their rejection of bondage.

Rebelling, running away, and even purchasing oneself were acts of radical self-definition in colonial Connecticut. The state, church, and society at large were all opposed to those who struck for self independence. All slaves recognized the great odds weighing against them if they resisted. Nevertheless, hundreds chose to accept those risks to seek the self-determination of freedom.