

Tools of a Shameful Trade

Black History Month Exhibition



During nearly 400 years of Atlantic-centered trade, between 11 and 15 million Africans arrived in the Americas as slaves. While actual numbers are not known, scholars speculate around 1 million people were brought to North America.

Crossing the Atlantic in the hold of a slave ship, or slaver, was a horrific ordeal. Perhaps one third of the captives perished on this journey, known as the Middle Passage—the middle leg of a three-part trade in slaves and goods between Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

On view here are two kinds of shackles, one type used in the harrowing Middle Passage journey, the other, a rare 18th-19th-century West African iron ankle shackle. Note the unsettling geometric patterns carved in the cuff – likely Adinkra symbols meaning “bond,” “imprisonment,” and “handcuffs.” Carved by an enslaved African, for an enslaved Africa? Possibly.

There is a slave manumission document, freeing “a mulatto Girl, about twenty four years of age about five feet five inches and a quarter has a small scar on the upper lip” – but no name is mentioned, a reminder that this individual was considered property, not a person. Noting that she is described as “mulatto,” she was possibly the daughter of Charles Ross, her owner.

Though many of the objects in this case are from the south, slavery in Connecticut dates back as far as the mid-1600s. The 1808-1824 ledger kept by Samuel Wakeman of Fairfield, includes references to eight individuals with African ancestry – Jeffrey Freeman, Frederick, Primus Burr, Titus Freeman, John, Ned Freeman, Hiram and Primas Jennings.

There were a number of families who owned enslaved Africans in Wilton, including the well-known Lambert family, whose ancestral home can be seen at 150 Danbury Road at Lambert Corner. A 1757 letter from the Wilton Historical Society’s permanent collection confirms the sale of an enslaved African named Jack to David Lambert, which is exhibited on the “History is Here” wall behind you. Wilton had a stop on the Underground Railroad, at the home of the abolitionist William Wakeman on Seeley Road, also included in the wall exhibit.

Research has revealed that an enslaved African named Hagar, born 1770, and owned by Wilton’s Samuel Belden II, was married to Bill Tonquin, a Native American slave. Tonquin was owned by another branch of the Belden family in Wilton. Hagar and Bill Tonquin had three children, Prince, Nancy and Black Jack, and lived in the Belden Store at the corner of Ridgefield Road and “Danbury Pike,” a crossways that is at the heart of Wilton’s town center. Hagar Tonquin is documented as being the last slave in Wilton. Her children were slaves, but were born with the promise of freedom, as they would have been freed at age 21 by the Connecticut law passed in 1783.

This exhibition was made possible by generous exhibition loans from John and Samantha Reznikoff.

Information in bold is from the Smithsonian Museum of American History.

From the State Historian: Connecticut's Slow Steps Toward Emancipation

by Walter W. Woodward for Connecticut Explored

After American independence, Connecticut, like many Northern states, examined whether slavery was compatible with American ideals. It decided, in a half-hearted way, that it was not. Connecticut chose to emancipate its enslaved people, but, concerned about the property rights of owners did so very gradually. In 1784, the state passed legislation freeing any child born to an enslaved woman after March 1, 1784, but not until that child reached the age of 25. It did nothing to free either the child's father or mother. Later, laws were passed lowering the age of emancipation and forbidding the sale of any slaves out of state (where emancipation laws could be circumvented), but slavery continued here well into the 19th century.

Supported by vocal abolitionists such as Jonathan Edwards Jr. and Theodore Dwight, many Connecticut masters freed their slaves well before the emancipation laws required. By 1800, there were more than 5,000 free blacks in Connecticut. Other Connecticutans, however, including such prominent people as Noah Webster and the jurist Zephaniah Swift, felt such moves were ill advised. They believed gradual emancipation was important for both public safety and the welfare of the enslaved. Connecticut's blacks—both free and enslaved—not surprisingly thought otherwise, and they were a steady voice urging faster emancipation. In the end, slavery remained in the Land of Steady Habits until 1848, though the number of enslaved people dropped to 97 by 1820 and 17 by 1840, according to US Census data.



Detail from Freedom to the Slave, ca. 1863, lithograph – New York Public Library Digital Gallery, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

| A RETURN of the Number of INHABITANTS in the State of CONNECTICUT, February 1, 1782, and also of the Indians and Negroes. | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------|---------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Counties | Towns | Males above 20 | Males above 15 and under 20 | Males under 15 | Females | TOTAL of Whites | Indians and Negroes |
| Hartford | 22 | 2514 | 10,812 | 42,211 | 27,805 | 25,547 | 2320 |
| New-Haven | 9 | 1450 | 4794 | 1947 | 22,025 | 20,815 | 755 |
| New-London | 8 | 1885 | 2824 | 2208 | 16,924 | 20,231 | 1910 |
| Meriden | 10 | 1602 | 3724 | 7703 | 15,044 | 18,271 | 1134 |
| Windsor | 11 | 1648 | 3364 | 5723 | 14,404 | 18,135 | 413 |
| Litchfield | 12 | 1255 | 4700 | 2320 | 14,408 | 22,177 | 170 |
| TOTAL | 72 | 10,159 | 29,018 | 47,025 | 109,718 | 101,277 | 6122 |

A return of the number of inhabitants in the State of Connecticut, 1782 – Library of Congress, American Memory

Opposing slavery was never the same as advocating equality, and here in the state William Lloyd Garrison called “the Georgia of the North,” racism remained deeply entrenched long after slavery ended. Views on Civil War emancipation were mixed: While Connecticut Republican Governor William Buckingham personally traveled to Washington to urge President Lincoln to emancipate enslaved people months before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, other political leaders protested vigorously that the war was only being fought to save the Union, not to end slavery. After the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863, Connecticut's State Democratic Convention adopted a resolution saying the Proclamation, as reported in the February 21, 1863, issue of the *Columbian Register*, “would disgrace our country in the eyes of the civilized world, and carry lust, rapine, and murder into every household of the slaveholding states.”

A similar popular racist response met the 1865 passage of the 13th Amendment, which ended slavery nationally. When the Republican-dominated Connecticut General Assembly sent voters an amendment to the state constitution removing the word “white” from the description of who could vote in state elections, the electorate soundly rejected it, maintaining political inequality as state policy.

It is hard for many of us to conceive that the 15th Amendment guaranteeing blacks the right to vote was subsequently passed as much to address the actions of states like Connecticut as to address such actions in the South.

While the Civil War that ended slavery did indeed pit the North against the South, it is sobering to recall that our nation remained united by deeply embedded racism for at least another century.

Walter Woodward is the Connecticut State Historian

© Connecticut Explored. All rights reserved. This article originally appeared in Connecticut Explored (formerly Hog River Journal) Vol. 11/ No. 1, WINTER 2012/2013.