THE STATE THAT SLAVERY BUILT ; AN INTRODUCTION: [STATEWIDE EDITION]

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Through the 17th and 18th centuries, thousands of enslaved people lived in Connecticut. They were nearly all of African origin, although we began by enslaving Indians. At the height of slavery in Connecticut, half of all ministers, lawyers and public officials owned slaves.

A few years ago, Connecticut anointed Canterbury resident Prudence Crandall the state heroine for opening New England's first school for black girls. Posthumous honors are fine. But here's what actually happened to Prudence Crandall:

By the late 19th century, the view of life under slavery in Connecticut had been neatly sanitized, and summarized, by the historian who declared that Connecticut "had little to be ashamed of in her treatment of the Negroes."

FULL TEXT

Connecticut was a slave state.

Does that sound wrong? Does it feel wrong?

It shouldn't. Connecticut has a history to confront as much as any Southern state.

This reconsideration of Connecticut and its complicity in the institution of slavery is not an academic one. It is driven by the growing, clamorous debate across our country over reparations.

Connecticut is one of the richest states in the richest country, but much of that wealth is stained with the blood of slaves.

That may shock many in Connecticut, who know their state was a force in the abolition of slavery, and that it sent thousands of its young men to die in the war to free the enslaved and end an inhuman, ungodly institution.

But the fact is that politically and socially and economically, Connecticut was as much a slave state as Virginia or Mississippi. It even had that most iconic of slave institutions: the plantation.

The big difference is that we hid most of our involvement because, well, we could. In large part, the slavery that Connecticut benefited from happened somewhere else.

Consider:

Connecticut became an economic powerhouse in the 18th century, far out of proportion to its tiny size, because we grew and shipped food to help feed millions of slaves, in the West Indies.

The rivers and streams of Connecticut in the 19th century were crowded with more than a hundred textile mills that relied on cotton grown by hundreds of thousands of slaves, in the South.

Up to the edge of the 20th century, two towns on the Connecticut River were a national center for ivory production, milling hundreds of thousands of tons of elephant tusks procured through the enslavement or death of more than a million people, in Africa.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Hartford's most famous abolitionist, said this was slavery the way Northerners like it:

All of the benefits and none of the screams.

It wasn't just about commerce.

Through the 17th and 18th centuries, thousands of enslaved people lived in Connecticut. They were nearly all of African origin, although we began by enslaving Indians. At the height of slavery in Connecticut, half of all ministers,

lawyers and public officials owned slaves.
Slaves were bought and sold and traded, often between friends. They lived under laws designed to control and terrify them.
Connecticut was the last state in New England to free its slaves. When a policy on gradual emancipation was adopted, the law was so loose it was easily ignored.
At the Constitutional Convention, Connecticut delegates brokered a fatal agreement to extend the importation of Africans by 20 years.
A few years ago, Connecticut anointed Canterbury resident Prudence Crandall the state heroine for opening New England's first school for black girls. Posthumous honors are fine. But here's what actually happened to Prudence Crandall:
Her neighbors ostracized her, tried to destroy her school, passed laws to shut it down, put her on trial and put her in jail. She fled the state.
The first time a black person's name appears in a public record in Connecticut was in 1639, when a man named Louis Berbice was murdered by his owner in Hartford.
But by the late 19th century, the view of life under slavery in Connecticut had been neatly sanitized, and summarized, by the historian who declared that Connecticut "had little to be ashamed of in her treatment of the Negroes."
He must have missed James Mars' hair-raising account, published in Hartford in 1868, of his childhood as the slave of a Litchfield County minister. Mars' story is laced with whippings, threats, fear and the punishing uncertainties of life as human chattel.
In Connecticut, as in the South, slaves were property, no matter how we have deceived ourselves, perhaps, into thinking that those Southerners were the bad guys, and we Northerners were the good guys.
And that concealment continues. If Connecticut schools even approach slavery, they generally focus on topics that show the state in a positive light, such as the Amistad episode, or the Underground Railroad.
This is understandable. Our role in slavery is hard to talk about. It's hard to know that Connecticut flourished because human beings, most of whom did not even live here, suffered and died as slaves.
But it is important to know this, and important to talk about it.
The story of slavery is not over. The reparations movement is compelling the nation to re-examine its past, to reconsider how we think of ourselves. But, more than that, as a state, as a people, we should know where we come from.
Flora, the young woman on our cover, is as much a part of Connecticut's story as Nathan Hale or Mark Twain. Flora, and thousands of people like her.
Just look at her.
-- The Editors

Illustration

PHOTO: (b&w), Photograph by Stephen Dunn; Caption: The Simpson Collection, the Amistad Foundation at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

DETAILS

Publication title:	Hartford Courant; Hartford, Conn.
Pages:	3
Number of pages:	0

Publication year:	2002
Publication date:	Sep 29, 2002
Section:	NORTHEAST
Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Hartford, Conn.
Country of publication:	United States, Hartford, Conn.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	10474153
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	256713014
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/state-that-slavery-built-introduction/docview/256713014/se-2?accountid=10341
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Last updated:	2011-09-14
Database:	Hartford Courant