

More Exciting Discoveries at the Venture Smith Archaeology Site: A Window into the Life of an 18th-Century African Prince, Ex-captive, and Free African American Merchant-Farmer

By Lucianne Lavin, Ph.D.

On a gently sloping hillside above the Salmon River in Haddam Neck lie the unassuming stone ruins of the Venture Smith archaeology site. The average hiker might dismiss the stonework and depressions as talus deposits and tree throws. Nothing could be more mundane and uninspiring. Or could it? Things are not always what they seem, for in this case those cultural features helped uncover a very inspiring story of one man's endurance, resolve, and courage in the painfully restrictive and racist world of 18th century New England.

It is the story of Broteer Furro/Venture Smith (ca. 1729-1805), the eldest son of a West African prince who was kidnapped and sold into slavery when he was about 6 or 9 years old. In 1738 he was bought by Robertson Mumsford, the steward on a slave ship out of Rhode Island, for four gallons of rum and a piece of calico. Mumford changed Broteer's name to Venture and brought him to toil at his family estate on Fishers Island. Venture was sold or pawned several times. After many hardships and much hard labor, he eventually saved enough money to buy his freedom in 1765. Venture the free man was 36 years old; he had been a slave for about 30 years.

For the next ten years Venture toiled to buy the freedom of his wife Meg and their three children; he then moved to the Connecticut Valley and in 1775 bought ten acres of land on Haddam Neck. By 1798, Venture's homestead had grown to over 100 acres with three houses. We know this because Venture dictated his autobiography to a local white schoolteacher, who published it in that year as *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa: But resident above sixty years in the United State of America. Related by Himself*. In the book, Venture credits his success to frugality and a strong work ethic.

The *Narrative* touches lightly on Venture's economic endeavors to win his family's freedom and provide for them in Haddam Neck. One sentence mentions a "farm", and two sentences report his involvement in "fishing and trafficking business" possessing "of boats, canoes, and sail vessels, not less than twenty."

Elizabeth Malloy, Director of the Haddam Historical Society, introduced the Connecticut Trust's readers to Venture Smith in her article, "Archaeology and Preservation at Haddam Neck" (see CPN, May/June 2006). In it she discussed some of the initial findings of excavations directed by Dr. Marc Banks and myself. That archaeological project was completed in 2007. This article summarizes some of our findings. They show how archaeology can support and add to what we learn from written records.

The archaeological finds confirm the vague references to farming and boats in Venture's *Narrative* and provide previously unknown information on his daily life, economic status, and moral standards. More than 49,000 artifacts and at least eight or nine structures including three houses, a blacksmith shop, a wharf, and a "pull in" for boats were discovered. Some artifacts represent architectural remnants and everyday domestic activities such as window glass, nails, hardware and padlock, broken dish and cup fragments, vessel glass, a bone knife handle, metal cutlery, and food remains. Interestingly, no liquor bottles or smoking pipes were found that date to Venture's time, suggesting that he neither drank nor smoked.

Other artifacts represent clothing, weaponry, and recreational activities, such as metal and bone buttons, an early 19th century pistol, and mouth harps. Some indicate farming: ox and horse shoes and the remains of a barn complex with agricultural tool fragments.

Several hand-made nails were identified by the staff of the Mystic Seaport Museum as a special type used for building small boats. A boat caulking iron, boat-related hardware, and lead baling seals for shipping goods were also recovered. These artifacts and the "pull in" support Venture's statement that he was a mariner, and they show that he repaired and possibly built his own vessels. Some of the metalwork was probably accomplished in the adjacent blacksmith shop.

In effect, these archaeological remains symbolize maritime activities that provided the cash income to free and sustain



Clinch nails from the Venture Smith site, used in small boats restored by Douglas Currie of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum.

Venture's family in a race- and class-conscious world and help win the respect of his white neighbors, many of whom eulogized the man in a later edition of his *Narrative* published in 1896.

Venture died on Sept. 19, 1805, at 77 years of age and was buried in the First Church cemetery in East Haddam, even though he was not a church member. His tombstone was made by a professional stone cutter; it is unique in that the "cherub" at its top displays Negroid features. This and other artistic attributes symbolize his high standing in local white society. Every year on September 19th, the East Haddam Historical Society and The First Church Society commemorate Venture with a eulogy, presentations by historians and archaeologists, and the placing of a wreath on the grave.

Venture Smith's story has been told in books, several international conferences, poems by the State Poet Laureate Marilyn Nelson, a school curriculum, and, most recently, the BBC's 2007 film "A Slave's Story". Venture Smith has become an international hero and role model for everyone. 🌿

For more information, see Lucianne Lavin and Marc Banks, "Venture's Nails," *archaeology*, May/June, 2007, page 72.

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