

## United States History – A Level: 11<sup>th</sup> Grade

Jeffrey Bourque, Alvirne High School: Hudson, New Hampshire

Jennifer Henley, Morrow High School: Morrow, Georgia

**Unit:** New England Colonial Slavery

**Lesson:** Venture Smith

**Class Time:** 1-2 Class periods

**Objectives/Standards:** Students should be able to...

- **D2.His.1.9-12.** Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- **D2.His.4.9-12.** Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
- **D2.His.7.9-12.** Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.
- **D2.His.8.9-12.** Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time.

**Materials:**

- PDFs of resources (see below)

**Lesson Procedure/Outline:**

- Students will read USA Today Article
- Students will read Venture's narrative
  - o Students will circle questionable facts
  - o Students will underline what they think is true
  - o Students will go back to this article and highlight what they can corroborate using the other article and documents
- Students will examine the Haddam Historical Society timeline of Venture Smith
- Students will read the article in The Day
- Students will review pictures of artifacts
- Class will engage in a discussion about what we know are facts about Venture's life, and what they can infer about Venture's life.
  - o In front of the class create a T chart to sort between facts and inferences.
- Ticket Out: Students will write a paragraph justifying why they think Venture Smith was or wasn't successful.

## Archaeologists unearth tomb of Venture Smith, 'the black Paul Bunyan'

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[Enlarge](#) By Bob Chalk, AP

Archaeologists dig at the 200-year-old gravesite of freed slave Venture Smith and family in East Haddam, Conn., this week. The dig has the blessing of many descendants of Smith, who believe science can lend credence to the tales of how the lumberjack used his strength to win his freedom.

EAST HADDAM, Conn. (AP) — Archaeologists have begun digging up the 200-year-old graves of a slave family in hopes of separating fact from fiction in the legend of "the black Paul Bunyan."

The dig has the blessing of more than a dozen descendants of Venture Smith who believe science can finally lend credence to the tales they have heard all their lives about the fabulous feats of strength that helped the lumberjack slave win his freedom.

Standing 6-foot-1 by his own account and weighing more than 300 pounds according to local lore, Smith is said to have carried a nine-pound ax and split seven cords of wood each day. His biography describes him carrying a barrel of molasses on his shoulders for two miles and hauling hundreds of pounds of salt.

Smith's story became one of the nation's first slave narratives in 1798 and is regarded by scholars as one of the most important such works. But slave biographies — particularly those told to writers, as Smith's story was — were sometimes embellished.

Scientists say a look at Smith's remains could indicate his height and weight, his diet and any injuries he suffered during a life of labor. And DNA taken from him, his wife, his son and his granddaughter could help pinpoint where in Africa he was born and corroborate the account of his early life there.

"It could substantiate that these are not fables, stories," said Frank Wamsley Sr., who at 85 is believed to be Smith's oldest living descendent. "They're truths. He was a great man."

Historians and literary scholars say the dig represents a remarkable opportunity — one that could help yield one of the most complete reconstructions of American slave life.

"Of all the early black writers, his is the only grave that we can identify. He is the only one we could try this on," said Vincent Carretta, an English professor at the University of Maryland who studies slave narratives and was the first to compare Smith to Paul Bunyan. "This is extraordinary. There's nothing to compare it to."

Moreover, scholars will have the rare advantage of being able to draw on documentary evidence, too. Unlike most other slaves, who left behind no records and were buried in unmarked graves, Smith died a free man and landowner with local records to supplement his biography.

"It's absolutely an extraordinarily rare opportunity to have such documentation about one man and his family," said Nicholas F. Bellantoni, Connecticut's state archaeologist. "We can look at the biology and match it up with that history."

Family members and historians believe Smith was born in or around modern-day Ghana. Smith's owner allowed him to work side jobs until, in 1765, he bought his freedom for seventy-one pounds and two shillings, according to his biography, which was based on the story he told to a local teacher. He then saved up to buy freedom for his wife, Meg, and their sons.

He was buried beneath a marked headstone in a small, well-kept cemetery in this riverside Connecticut town.

Archaeologists working beneath a white tent slowly began digging this week. By midweek they had gone about three feet deep, and Bellantoni said it could be next week before they locate the remains.

The remains will not be exhumed. Rather, scientists will take small samples of bone, teeth and genetic material to study. It will take months for genetic results to come back.

The process hit a snag Tuesday when Nancy Burton, a disabled Connecticut lawyer who no connection to the Smith family, challenged the dig in court. She said it was disrespectful to Smith's legacy. A judge denied her request for an injunction and said digging could continue at least until she came to court Friday.

Wamsley said family members were consulted and all agreed that Smith would have wanted them to know their history.

David Richardson of the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, a British group helping support the dig, concurred.

"He wanted the world to know his story. It was a story of optimism and hope, of someone who was brought from Africa as a slave but nevertheless freed himself and built a new life," Richardson said. "In a way, we're carrying on what Venture himself wanted to accomplish."

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## Venture Smith's narrative

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.

I was employed in cutting the aforementioned quantity of wood, I never was at the expence of fix-pence worth of fpirits. Being after this labour forty years of age, I worked at various places, and in particular on Ram-Ifland, where I purchafed Solomon and Cuff, two fons of mine, for two hundred dollars each.

I will be here remembered how much money I earned by cutting wood in four years. Befides this I had confiderable money, amounting in all to near three hundred pounds. When I had purchafed my two fons, I had then left more than one hundred pounds. After this I purchafed a negro man, for no reafon than to oblige him, and gave for him fixty pounds. But in a fhort time after he run away from me, and I thereby loft all that I gave for him, except twenty pounds which he paid me previous to his abfconding. The reft of my money I laid out in land, in addition to a farm which I owned before, and a dwelling houfe thereon. Forty four years had then completed their revolution fince my entrance into this exiftence of fervitude and misfortune. Solomon my eldeft fon, being then in his feventeenth year, and all my hope and dependence for help, I hired him out to one Charles Church, of Rhode-Ifland, for one year, on confideration of his giving him twelve pounds and an opportunity of acquiring fome learning. In the courfe of the year, Church fitted out a veffel for a whaling voyage, and being in want of hands to man her, he induced my fon to go, with the promife of giving him on his return, a pair of filver buckles, befides his wages. As foon as I heard of his going to fea, I immediately fet out to go and prevent it if poffible. ð But on my arrival at Church's, to my great grief, I could only fee the veffel my fon was in almoft out of fight going to fea. My fon died of fcurvy in this voyage, and Church has never yet paid me the leaft of his wages. In my fon, befides the lofs of his life, I loft equal to feventy-five pounds.

My other fon being but a youth, ftill lived with me. About this time I chartered a floop of about thirty tons burthen, and hired men to affift me in navigating her. I employed her moftly in the wood trade to Rhode-Ifland, and made clear of all expences above one hundred dollars with her in better than one year. I had then become fomewhat forehanded, and being in my forty-fourth year, I purchafed my wife Meg, and thereby prevented having another child to buy, as fhe was then pregnant. I gave forty pounds for her.

During my refidence at Long-Ifland, I raifed one year with another, ten cart loads of water-melons, and loft a great many every year befides by the thieveifhnefs of the failors. What I made by the water-melons I fold there, amounted to nearly five hundred



# The Haddam Historical Society

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## Venture Smith: The Man

**Who:** Venture Smith was born Brotesar Furro in 1729. He was the oldest son of a West African Prince and spent his early years in what

would be present-day Guinea. At age six, Brotesar was captured by an enemy tribe and sold into slavery and sent to New England. Upon arrival, Brotesar's first owner changed his name to Venture. For over thirty years, Venture worked under three different masters before purchasing his freedom for 71 pounds and 2 shillings - an enormous sum for the time, enough money to purchase hundreds of acres of land. Once free, Venture adopted the last name Smith, in honor of his final owner, and began his new life as a successful business man in Haddam Neck, CT. Venture was sometimes called a "black Paul Bunyan" because of his impressive size. It is recorded that he was 6'2", weighing 300 pounds with a 6 foot diameter waist.



16. The Birthplace of the Abolitionist, 1729

### When:

- ♦ **1729** - Brotesar Furro, the first son of the prince of "Dukomadara," is born
- ♦ **Fall 1738 or early 1739** - Brotesar's father is killed by a raiding army and Brotesar is captured
- ♦ **1739** - Brotesar is taken to Anomabu District on Gold Coast of West Africa (present-day Ghana). There he was kept in a slave castle for an indeterminate amount of time
- ♦ **mid-1739** - Brotesar and other slaves are purchased by American slavers
- ♦ **fall 1739** - Ship carrying Venture arrives in Rhode Island. Robinson Mumford gives Venture to his sister in Newport, RI to learn some English and colonial customs. Mumford's sister also teaches

Venture English, which improves worth as a slave. It also enables him to make connections and later

establish himself as a successful business man after he buys his freedom.

- ♦ **1740** - Venture is taken from Rhode Island to the Mumford homestead on Fishers Island
- ♦ **1744** - Venture marries Meg
- ♦ **March 1744** - Venture runs away with two other slaves but later returns voluntarily
- ♦ **1744** - Meg gives birth to their first child, Hannah
- ♦ **end of 1744** - Venture is separated from his wife, Meg, and sold to Thomas Stanton of Stonington, CT
- ♦ **1746** - Their first son, Solomon, is born
- ♦ **1748** - Their second son, Cuff, is born
- ♦ **1750** - Venture is hired out by Hempstead Miner of Stonington to work for Daniel Edwards of Hartford
- ♦ **1760** - Venture is sold the last time to Oliver Smith Jr. Smith agrees to permit Venture to purchase his freedom for 71 pounds and shillings
- ♦ **1762** - Venture begins farming a plot of land near Stanton's Stonington farms to earn money to buy his freedom
- ♦ **1763** - After five years of saving money from side jobs, Venture earned enough to buy his freedom from Oliver Smith. Around it Venture adopts Smith's last name: officially becoming Venture Smith.
- ♦ **1762** - Venture moves to Long Island
- ♦ **1760** - Venture purchases his two sons, Solomon and Cuff
- ♦ **1770** - Venture buys 26 acres in Stonington
- ♦ **1773** - Venture purchases Meg's freedom. That same year, Venture's first son, Solomon, dies at sea
- ♦ **1774** - Meg and Venture's third son is born and named Solomon
- ♦ **1774** - Venture sells his land in Stonington
- ♦ **1774-1775** - Venture leaves Long Island for Haddam, CT
- ♦ **1775** - Venture purchases his daughter, Hannah. He also buys 10 acres on Haddam Neck
- ♦ **1777** - Venture buys 70 additional acres from Abel Bingham and builds his home. Later that year, Venture and Stephen Knowlton buy 48 acres of adjoining land
- ♦ **1778** - Venture buys Knowlton's share of the land
- ♦ **1798** - Venture dictates his narrative to Elisha Niles and is published later that year
- ♦ **September 1804** - Venture Smith dies at age 77 in Haddam Neck

101. Charles B. and George A. E. Kinsley, *Who Was Venture Smith: The Extraordinary Life of an African American*



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Source: [www.Beecherhouse.org](http://www.Beecherhouse.org)

VENTURE SMITH: THE MAN

VENTURE SMITH: THE LEGACY

VENTURE SMITH:  
THE HOMESTEAD

HISTORY OF THE SLAVE TRADE

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TheDay.com

Historian at New London Maritime Society program says former slave produced landmark work  
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By [Judy Benson](#) Day Staff Writer

New London - After more than a dozen years of digging through historical maps and documents, traveling as far as to Africa, and analyzing and reanalyzing the words Venture Smith chose carefully for his life story more than 200 years ago, historian Chandler Saint is making a bold pronouncement.

The 32-page autobiography of this wealthy Connecticut tradesman and farmer, first published in New London in 1798, is the first known "pure African-American literary work known to be produced in America," Saint said, supplanting the narratives of Frederick Douglass' and others.

"Once you realize that all these things that people thought were issues in the narrative weren't, you're turning around and able to say, 'this is just a great piece of literature,'" said Saint, who spoke to about 25 people at the New London Maritime Society Sunday in advance of the pending publication of "Venture Smith - Making Freedom," a book he co-authored with George Krinsky.

Saint, who began the Documenting Venture Smith project in 2004 and has been doggedly uncovering and promoting the inspiring story of the former slave-turned-businessman from the halls of Congress to elementary school classrooms, presented new findings of his recent research. The findings, he said, elevate the significance of Smith's narrative by clearing up what scholars believed were discrepancies and factual errors that had cast doubt on the authenticity and historical accuracy of the work. "It made the narrative a joke" in some circles, Saint said.

Working with other scholars, he said, he has been able to reconstruct a credible timeline of Smith's life from the narrative. This fall, he traveled to Africa with five of Smith's descendants to visit the slave castle in Anomabo, Ghana, where the boy Broteer Furro - Smith's original name - was taken after his capture. By sheer luck, Saint found a historic map in Switzerland that showed the kingdom of Ouangara, the Central African homeland Smith referred to in his book but was obliterated by Islamic invaders. "It was a lost piece of history in African and Venture has returned that part of Africa's history in his narrative," Saint said.

After establishing the place of his birth and passage, Saint set about to resolve questions raised by the narrative about two parts of his life on Long Island. Smith, who died in 1805 and is buried in East Haddam, spent his first years in this country as a slave on a plantation on Fishers Island, then was bought by a Stonington farmer, Thomas Stanton, and at one time owned his own small farm at Barn Island. After Stanton, Smith went to Capt. Oliver Smith of New London, who allowed Smith to buy his freedom. The two developed a business relationship that lasted 30 years, as Smith prospered and bought the freedom of his wife and four children and eventually settled on a 130-acre farm on the Salmon River in Haddam Neck. A portion of the site is now owned by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Two parts of his narrative took place on Long Island, and both called the account's credibility into question, Saint said. In one section, Smith recounts an attempt to escape the Fishers Island plantation and taking a route to the Mississippi River, a location that seemed impossible given the times and subsequent events. Saint determined that a typesetter's error changed "Massepe," a river in Long Island, to "Mississippi." Near what is now the Long Island town of Massapequa was a native American village where Smith met the woman who would become his wife, Marget. "Venture is running away to hide out with a native American tribe on Long Island where he's got a real chance," Saint said.

Long Island reappears again when Saint describes how he "acquired and disposed of" a farm at a place he called Ram Island. Historians could find no place matching the description on Long Island, nor any deed for the land transfer, but Saint said the problem was that no one was reading the narrative correctly. "Acquired and disposed was not the same as bought and sold," Saint said. Saint found an area owned by the Shinnecock tribe that matches the Ram Island description, where he surmised Smith farmed under "an agreement between honorable people" that was not recorded in the official records.

The linchpin in establishing the narrative as the significant work that it is, Saint said, was in piecing together how Smith learned to read and write, and how the narrative was dictated to his children and grandchildren. He was 69 at the time, and blind. Instead of being a "black message in a white envelope," as some scholars both black and white have termed it, Saint said, the narrative is told by an African American to other African Americans, who then found a publisher and sold it. "He's old and he's dying and he wants not to be forgotten, and for his story to live on," Saint said. "Other narratives have sold well. The family is looking to make money." Smith's former homesite in Haddam Neck, Saint said, "is truly a national landmark, because that's where the narrative was produced. Connecticut can be proud."

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, which acquired the site from Connecticut Yankee in 2013, has not yet opened the site to the public. In addition to the pending publication of the book, the story of Venture Smith is also being furthered through the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture, which is making an educational curriculum based on the story, Saint said. Two quotes from the Smith's book, originally titled, "A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by Himself," have been made into displays now depicted at the slave castle in Ghana and in a traveling exhibit, Saint said. One shows a photograph of a wooden rum barrel and a piece of cloth. Next to it are Smith's account of first becoming a captive on the slave ship: "I was brought on board for four gallons of rum and a piece of calico and called Venture. Thus I came by my name." The other display tells of the deal he made with Oliver Smith to gain his freedom. "I asked my master one time if he would consent to have me purchase my freedom ... I paid an enormous sum for my freedom, seventy-five pounds two shillings. My freedom is a privilege which nothing else can equal." Saint said Smith's story continues to inspire him and those who hear it. "Venture's is the ultimate act of showing the resilience of a human being to succeed in a world where he was definitely not meant to succeed in," Saint said. "We thank Venture every day."

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