



DISCOVERING BLACK VERMONT

African American Farmers
in Hinesburg, 1790–1890

Elise A. Guyette

TEACHER'S GUIDE



TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR

Discovering Black Vermont

*African American Farmers
in Hinesburgh, 1790-1890*

ELISE A. GUYETTE

Vermont Historical Society
Barre and Montpelier, Vermont

Copyright© 2000 by University of Vermont and State Agricultural College

Second Edition Copyright© 2020 by Elise A. Guyette

First Vermont Historical Society printing, July 2020

Published by the Vermont Historical Society

60 Washington St, Barre, VT 05641

www.vermonthistory.org

History as Interpretation

You may be done with the past, or think that you are, but it's never really finished with you.

—James Brooks quoted in Scott McLemee,
The Slave History You Don't Know

If we don't make students feel that history matters and matters profoundly, we are missing the essence of what we are doing.

—Gerda Lerner quoted in Lee W. Formwalt, “Demystifying and Rethinking the Study of History”

The people who lived on the Hill were single threads in a social fabric with unique viewpoints, experiences, and feelings. Their lives, however, cannot be substantially represented through the artifacts they left behind. This is a limitation of all historical research. With that in mind, it is important to impress on students that this interpretation of the Hill is not *the truth*. For centuries past, historians claimed to be scientific and factual and to have discovered “how things really were.” Today, to claim that any interpretation is the whole story seems a “naive and strange conceit.”¹ I do not claim that this is the entire story of the Hill; however, I interpreted the documents I found as honestly as I could and trust that there are truths contained within this narrative.

Students of history should question traditional notions about our nation's story—none is so sacred as to be beyond inquiry. When I questioned received notions about people of color in Vermont, and wondered why their voices were missing from the history, I discovered this long-lost story of life on the Hill. Historian Eric Foner contends that historical knowledge is a reasonable explanation of the past based on accepted

methodological standards and on numerous perspectives. The constant search for new perspectives, he contends, is the “lifeblood of historical understanding.”² Each new point of view adds another clue to the puzzle of the past. This approach, which sees knowledge as multifaceted and socially constructed from various perspectives, returns richness and complexity to our histories.

One of the most important concepts we can teach students is that *history is interpretation* from someone’s point of view. It is therefore vital to gather as many perspectives as we can on any given issue—all the points of view through which the issue can be viewed—before coming to conclusions. Even then, the conclusions should remain tentative, leaving room for more evidence to be found in the future. Through the questions and activities in this guide, students will reflect on perspectives from the nineteenth century with which they may not be familiar, be encouraged to question the analyses in the text, and come to some of their own conclusions that take into account their own experiences. This guide also provides a methodology that students can try when doing their own historical research on local communities.

Teaching the Text

I have found it much easier to begin in the past when teaching students about racism and prejudice. It is natural for people to get defensive when analyzing their own society. Both black and white students become self-protective in those situations: White students often deny the existence of prejudice and racism to avoid being targeted as perpetrators of discrimination, and black students may fear being singled out as victims. Both might fear losing friends because of their views. It is much easier to start in the past and have students identify prejudice there. Later, ask them to transfer that knowledge to the present by asking if they see anything similar around them today. It might still be difficult, but the eyes of students will at least be opened to something they may not have encountered personally. For that reason, you might want to return to the questions in brackets after you have finished the book and have dealt with issues of racism in the nineteenth century.

Introduction

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Enlightenment, emancipation, yeoman, ideology, revivals, racism, identity, world-as-lived, world-as-thought

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can silence be a form of violence? To what type of violence is the author referring? Do you agree with the metaphor? [Have you ever felt it?]

2. “The idea that African Americans were second-class citizens can be traced to a widespread fallacy generated in early America. This fallacy was the idea that blackness and whiteness carried different quantifiable and inheritable characteristics” (p. 3).

Explain the author’s thinking on blackness and whiteness – how did these nineteenth-century stereotypes about people lead to silence about the Hill families?

How does the book account for “amnesia” about black settlers in the state? Is it convincing to you? Explain.

How did skin color come to stand for certain human qualities? [You have been affected negatively or positively because of these stereotypes – explain how they have affected you. What can you do about it? See the resources section for online ideas on how to discuss these issues.]

[Why would some African-descended people want to hide their ancestry? How might that benefit them? Have you ever felt like hiding your ancestry? Why or why not?]

3. “The spreading whiteness in northern Vermont allowed the state to often be identified as the whitest state in the union, leading to a second fallacy that contributes to the silence surrounding this Vermont community of blacks: the mythology that Vermont is now and has always been not only slave free but also almost completely white” (p. 4). According to *Discovering Black Vermont* how did this fallacy lead to silence about the history of the Hill? Do the book’s arguments make sense?

4. “Their Revolution was not yet over” (p. 6). What does that quote mean to you? [Is it over yet?]

5. “Our northern forebears, with their selective backward gaze, rejected the world as it was lived and replaced it with the world as they wished it had been” (p. 7). Paraphrase this sentence. Explain how this phenomenon affected the way history has been written. How does this book try to rectify that? Have you read other books that try to return the world as it was lived to our histories?

6. The author says that nineteenth-century writings by both races bring to light their experiences with racial differences. “Black or white, American or foreign, they all examined this indefinable, irrational thing called prejudice and how it affected both blacks and whites in different

ways” (p. 11). How did prejudice affect nineteenth-century people, both black and white? [How is it still affecting people today?]

7. Themes covered in the book include: the nature of agricultural neighborhoods, family and military history, religion, prejudice, racism, and identity issues. As you read, take notes on the claims the book makes on these themes. Different people in the class may want to choose different themes and pool the data at the end. Are the book's assertions convincing? What evidence do you find the most compelling? Do you find any unconvincing? What other important themes can you identify?

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading the text, ask your students to write down a number of adjectives to describe a “pioneer.” Have them draw a pioneering picture. Do not answer specific questions about what to draw—just say they can depict anything they want in any way they desire. Collect the work and put it away until after you have finished the book. (See “Some Conclusions” for how this can be used later.)

🌿 Chapter One

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Calvinists, push and pull of migration, survival, conflicts with nature, the white problem, middle class

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Both *push* (out of one place) and *pull* (toward another place) are factors in migrations. What were the push and pull factors for the Peterses and Clarks? What may have pushed them out of where they lived in the 1790s and what may have pulled them to Vermont and to the Hill, according to the book? What other factors can you imagine might have been involved in their decisions to move?

2. What most likely were some initial settlement experiences of the Peterses and Clarks as they cleared the Hill to make farmland? What conflicts with nature might they have had? What conflicts might they have had with neighbors? Once settled in their homes with the crops planted, what household tasks did early settler families have to perform to survive? How did the typical nineteenth-century family partnership aid in their survival?

3. Why might the Clarks and Peterses have craved isolation from other townspeople at first? Although they were free in Vermont, how might the fact that slavery existed elsewhere have affected their lives in Hinesburgh?

4. What evidence did the author use to show that the Hill people were members of the middle class? Does this go against any views you have of nineteenth-century people? Explain.

5. Revolutionary War veteran Jeffrey Brace wrote, “My master consented that I might go where I pleased and seek my fortune” (p. 26). If he was free why did he need the consent of his “master”? From other evidence so far, try to explain this from an eighteenth-century perspective.

6. What was the “white problem” (p. 32)? How might it have affected these families when they traveled to town? [Does this problem still exist?]

7. Do you find the examination of laws in Vermont persuasive in showing what the powerful white people in Hinesburgh may have thought about blacks? Explain. [Could modern laws, such as hate crime laws, illustrate similar elements of our society?]

TALKING TO TEACHERS

For some of the conflicts with nature in this chapter, the author relied on memoirs by early Vermont settler Seth Hubbell. Primary sources such as this are invaluable for painting a realistic picture of the past. However, they can also distort the real story, and we must be cognizant of that fact. For example, Hubbell never uses the pro-

noun “we” as he tells of his suffering and that of his wife and daughters during their early years in the state. He uses only “I.” At this time the singular pronoun, used by a white man, encompassed the entire household, since wives, children, and enslaved people had no identity separate from the head of the household. Once you know how the “rules” have changed, you can understand that females and servants had roles in stories in which they were active participants but from which they have been excluded in the telling. This simple change returns women, girls, servants, and enslaved people to our histories. For example, Hubbell wrote:

I had now reached the end of my journey. . . . I had not a mouthful of meat or kernel of grain . . . nor had I a cent of money to buy with, or property that I could apply to that purpose. I had now lived three weeks without bread; though in the time I had bought a moose of an Indian, which I paid for by selling the shirt off my back and backed the meat five miles, which answered to subsist upon.³

We know that Hubbell’s wife and daughters were with him, but they are rarely mentioned in his telling of the sufferings they shared. We must be careful to discover if, in fact, chroniclers were alone or if it only seemed that way because of the way they told the story. The following activity could help students decipher historical accounts.

What if women had written the history? The text of Seth Hubbell’s pamphlet is found at: <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~vermont/LamoilleWolcott.html> in the middle of a history of early Wolcott, Vermont. Hubbell says that his story “is a simple narration of real facts.” However, it is the facts from only his perspective. How might the story be different if written by Mrs. Hubbell? Mr. Hubbell wanted to help others by relating his experiences. How might Mrs. Hubbell’s experiences help other women breaking “the way into the wilderness”?

For example, students could write Mrs. Hubbell’s narrative, commenting on preparing her children for the trip, helping them put on snowshoes, and dealing with solitude in Wolcott—especially since Mr. Hubbell seemed to be away often during the early years. The first baby born in Wolcott was the Hubbells’ daughter Charlotte, in 1790. Did Mrs. Hubbell go through that alone with only the aid of her daughters? Mr. Hubbell does not comment on that. A woman’s narrative would most likely discuss such an important event.

It was the task of the woman to take raw materials and make them useable for the family. Therefore, your students could add Mrs. Hubbell’s perspective by remarking on the need for wheat and meat and her most likely needing to gather wild foods to keep her family alive. When they both bartered with their shirts and linen, it was Mrs. Hubbell’s job to make more linen from flax and sew more clothing. It was

her job to milk the cow and make cheese — what must she have felt when the cows died? The year she died (1806), Mrs. Hubbell held a quilting bee for fourteen women of the town. Might she have been a leader among the women?

After Mr. Hubbell's booklet at the website is a list of other early male settlers to the town. Again, women are almost totally absent in the written descriptions. Students could rewrite some of those smaller pieces, adding in the women and children who were also early pioneers alongside their husbands.

❁ Chapter Two

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

embargo, pension, tariff, Missouri Compromise, colonization, revivals, stereotypes, civil disobedience, divine right of kings

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What new nineteenth-century stereotypes of blacks and whites do we find being put forth at this time? Did any of them surprise you? How do they reflect the times?

2. How did the Clarks' experiences in the Hinesburgh Baptist church illustrate their status in the community? If Shubael and Violet Clark were characters in a novel, how would you describe them? What leadership skills would they exhibit?

3. During the War of 1812, why was disobeying a presidential order seen as an act of good citizenship by some people? Are there any twentieth- and twenty-first-century parallels? How were Samuel Peters and other black soldiers involved in the war on Lake Champlain?

4. John Lewis, a nineteenth-century Free Will Baptist, said, "If the divine right of kings received a mighty overthrow on the plains of Lexington, Saratoga and Yorktown, the divine right of ecclesiastical tyranny and sanctified oppression received a mightier overthrow in

the pulpits of New England” (p. 54). Explain this quote within the nineteenth-century context.

5. “The black farmers on the hill were progressing with the changes in farming, raising wheat and merinos as some of their white neighbors did. They had shown they could successfully navigate the rural culture of this hillside and had built thriving farms that supported their expanding families” (p. 50). Do you agree with this conclusion? What evidence does the book use to support it?

6. Do you think Charles Bowles’s experiences can be compared to the people of the Hill? Might the ideology of the inferiority of blacks have created rougher times for him because he was preaching to whites? Perhaps black farmers were more easily accepted by their farming neighbors. Or do you think they all had to contend with the same prejudices regardless of occupation?

TALKING TO TEACHERS

Reading historical fiction is a popular method for getting students interested in history. We could also be helping students to fictionalize history themselves. In this way, they will learn how hard it is to do it correctly and be better able to spot badly written historical fiction. One idea is to use the *Black Snake* Affair of 1809 as the factual basis for a story.

FACT: The Black Snake Affair occurred when the government tried to stop smuggling to Canada prior to the War of 1812. One night, twelve U.S. government officers pursued the cutter, *Black Snake*, a forty-foot-long boat that had a single mast and a tarred hull, making it hard to see at night as it plied the waters of Lake Champlain smuggling barrels of potash and the like to the Canadians. During a confrontation with the crew, two officers, Asa Marsh of Rutland and Ellis Drake of Colchester, were killed near Joy’s Landing on the Winooski River. One of the crew, Cyrus Dean, received a death sentence for his part in the killings. On November 11, 1809, he was hanged in front of the courthouse in Burlington. About 10,000 people gathered to watch him on the scaffold as he exhibited a “careless unconcern” over his fate. The population of Burlington at the time was only about 1,600!⁴

FICTION: We have no evidence that any of the people from the Hill attended the hanging, but it would be realistic to assume that people from Hinesburgh were present. Therefore, it would be acceptable historical fiction to take one or more of our real people and write a story about this event through their eyes.

If students choose the Peters family, they will need to include Prince and Hannah and their children, Josephus and baby Electa. The harvest was over by November, so they would have had time to make a trip to Burlington. Writers would need to find out where the courthouse was, how far it was from their house in Hinesburgh (thirteen miles), and how they would get there. This type of historical detail would need to be accurate, but one could fictionalize the conversations and experiences of those watching the gruesome event. The important thing to remember is not to put real people where they could not possibly have been or doing things unheard of at the time. That's the historical part—staying true to history.

🌿 Chapter Three

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

craniologist, Nat Turner, Colored National Conventions, dower, insolvent, primary sources, colonizationists, inventories, abolition, antislavery

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was the major difference between antislavery advocates and abolitionists? Which group was also antiracist? Which one was most likely pro-colonization? Explain. To which group did the people of the Hill likely belong?

2. What do the accountings of Prince Peters's and Shubael Clark's estates tell us about their households? What conclusions does the author draw from the inventories? Do you have other interpretations? What might the inventories tell us about other farming families of Hinesburgh at that time?

3. What cross-racial relations were evident on the Hill? Was there evidence of friendly or hostile relations? Was there any indication of racism? What is your evidence?

TALKING TO TEACHERS

It is important for students to analyze and interpret primary source documents. Rather than simply accepting the author's interpretation, have them discuss the data from primary documents such as memoirs, census records, and court documents found in the book in small groups. Help them to come to their own conclusions about family, neighborhood, and town life in nineteenth-century Vermont. This will help them become critical thinkers and, perhaps, come to some new conclusions based on the evidence. You might use the handout on page 27 for this type of work.

❁ Chapter Four

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Fugitive Slave Act, Dred Scott v Sanford, extra-judicial, sophistry, gender roles, emigration, Liberia, colonization, usurp

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would the death of the woman of the house affect these farm families? What were their nineteenth-century duties? How would survivors be able to cope without the typical nineteenth-century partnership? What are the similarities and differences to today?
2. Black activist Martin Delaney supported emigration to Canada, Haiti, and South America but not Liberia, since Liberia, “being the offspring of slavery—is in itself, sufficient to blast it in the estimation of every colored person in the United States” (p. 91) Explain why Delaney now supported emigration for blacks when he had not in previous decades. Why not to Liberia? Why did his friend Martin Freeman migrate to Liberia?
3. How did Loudon Langley's position on colonization compare to Delaney's? Where did the Holly brothers fit in the debate? How do you think you would have felt in the 1850s?

4. All blacks in nineteenth-century America had to “work against the greatest disadvantage African Americans faced—the institution of slavery,” according to Horton and Horton (p. 94). How was slavery a disadvantage to those living in freedom? Who were some of those working against this disadvantage at the time? What were their methods?

5. William Cooper Nell wrote, “This prejudice was never reasoned up and will never be reasoned down. *It must be lived down*” (p. 99). What did Nell mean by “never reasoned up”? Could prejudice be “lived down” under nineteenth-century circumstances? Explain your thinking. [Can prejudice be lived down under twenty-first-century circumstances? What can be done to decrease it or at least to minimize its effects?]

6. The Vermont General Assembly resolved, “That these extra-judicial opinions of the Supreme Court of the United States are a dangerous usurpation of power, and have no binding authority upon Vermont, or the people of the United States” (p. 101). What did the legislators mean? How could a Supreme Court decision be “extra-judicial,” when the justices are the highest judicial authorities in the country? Are there other Supreme Court decisions in our history that people consider extra-judicial? Why?

7. What impact did the Dred Scott Decision have on people of color on the Hill? What impact did it have on people elsewhere in the country? Were these effects uniform across the country? Why or why not?

8. How were the families of the Hill impacted by economic depression and changing farming practices? How did they react? What were the differing results for the families, top and bottom of the Hill? Why?

TALKING TO TEACHERS

The colonization issue presents another opportunity for historical fiction. Imagine if Charles Clark, Loudon Langley, and their parents attended a debate. Perhaps Tony and Eliza Anthony from Burlington were there, too. The Langleys and the Anthonys have been documented as being on the Underground Railroad. This topic would certainly interest activists. Other people who may have attended such a debate are

James Taylor, a barber in town; Augustus C. Jackson; and Andrew J. Dolby, a Burlington cook. We know little about them beyond their names, but in 1850, James Holly wrote and asked Mr. McClain to send free copies of *The African Repository* to these men, who wish to know more about colonization and “are willing to Read and circulate it amongst their friends.”⁵ Imagine a meeting of all these people and others, perhaps in a church in Burlington. What fireworks might ensue among these strong-minded people? What kind of historical fiction could your students write to bring these issues to life? Students should research the arguments for and against colonization among African Americans and write a historically accurate argument using the real people mentioned here as their main characters.

Chapter Five

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

muster in, USCT, Militia Act, Enrollment Act, regiment, quota, Emancipation Proclamation

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the author mean by “The completion of the Revolution for people of color had begun” (p. 117)? Did it turn out to be true?
2. Frederick Douglass hoped that black soldiers would be able to prove their equality with whites, once each had “an eagle on his button, a musket on his shoulder and the star-spangled banner over his head” (p. 119). Did military service have the hoped-for effect in the long or short run? Why or why not?
3. The Massachusetts Fifty-fourth was the first *northern* Black regiment. What black regiments preceded it? When and where were they formed? What experiences did these men have during the war? What was the reward for their service?
4. What caused the “agricultural turmoil” of this decade? How had

the culture of farming changed? Are there any similarities to today's agricultural way of life?

5. How would the discrimination in pay affect people, both blacks and whites, on the battlefield and the home front? Who gained? Who lost? What type of resistance to inequality in the military did black soldiers mount?

❁ Chapter Six

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

resistance, conservatism, Reconstruction, changing gender roles

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Historian Mia Bay writes that African Americans' "intellectual resistance to racism's relentless ideological assault was in many ways as historic and difficult as the protest actions against slavery" (pp. 154-55). Do you agree? Cite examples of such intellectual resistance.

2. How did the lives of the residents of the Hill "illustrate the lowering expectations of people of color in the aftermath of the war" (p. 139)?

3. How did the Langley family in South Carolina epitomize the highs and lows of the Reconstruction era? How were some aspects of Loudon's life similar to his grandparents' lives? With what issues from that era do we still struggle today?

4. Find a description of the Reconstruction era in a typical textbook. How was Loudon Langley's life in South Carolina different from or similar to that account? Does his life add complexity to the description? Rewrite that section of the text to reflect new information that you have.

5. How did the Civil War affect gender roles for women? How is this similar to what happened during other wars in our nation's history?

TALKING TO TEACHERS

For those students inclined toward historical fiction, Violet Clark's life lends itself beautifully to telling the history of the United States between the Revolution and Civil War through her eyes. She was born in 1775, the year the Revolution began, and died soon after the Emancipation Proclamation. She lived through times of heightened hope for justice and equality and through times of disillusionment. Students could be encouraged to imagine what stories she told her grandchildren. What complexities would her perspective add to our national or state histories? Different students could write about different decades from her point of view and put the accounts together into a story, play, or video, with Violet as the narrator.

❁ Some Conclusions

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

social construction of knowledge, institutional racism, pioneers, white privilege

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What makes this a quintessential pioneering story? What were the crucial differences between white Yankee pioneering experiences and this one of the Hill?

2. Why was land ownership so important to the survival of these people? What kept them from following in the footsteps of other middle-class landowners of the time and going to college, opening businesses, or becoming professionals? How were descendants of both blacks and whites from the time affected by this?

3. What might account for the eventual longevity of the Peters family on the Hill and the disappearance of the Clarks?

4. Why did people of color feel betrayed by their country during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Has anything similar happened since then? Research what activists did about it during various eras (e.g., post–World Wars I and II, or the 1960s): What were their methods of resistance to discrimination? What worked best? What still needs to be done?

5. Historian Elizabeth R. Bethel states, “Disillusionment inevitably followed each moment of heightened hopes and expectations by people of color and their allies.” What were the major moments of heightened expectations for equality in America? Do you agree that disillusionment followed after each one? Have there been similar disillusionments for other groups (women, native people)?

6. What, then, is *progress*? Is it measured differently for different groups? What makes people persevere and continue fighting for their rights in the face of great obstacles? What are their choices?

7. How did ideas about biology contribute to racist ideas? How did these ideas affect both blacks and whites in the nineteenth century? Do they still impact us today? Is there such a thing as “race” in biology today? Explain the term “social construction of race.”

8. What is institutional racism? How did the social construction of race contribute to it? How did it affect the economic situations of the people from the Hill? How did these effects change over time? Research some pioneers who fought or are fighting against racism and made or are making positive changes.

9. The concept of “white privilege” refers to advantages that white people have over others due to skin color. What examples of white privilege do you find in this story? How do whites benefit from negative stereotypes of blacks today? From positive stereotypes of whites? What can be done about these long-lived stereotypes from the age of slavery? (See the resource section for websites that discuss white privilege and might help students answer these questions.)

10. The author states, “We will know the world has changed when people can choose their own complex identities across racial distinctions and be treated as such” (p. 157). What does this mean? Do you agree? What are other important aspects of identity? Do you know people who are you free to choose their own complex identity? Do you know others for whom societal pressures keep them from choosing their identities freely? Where do you fit?

11. Can a white woman write a reliable history of black people? How might the story be different if a black woman or man had told or researched the story? What different questions might they have asked?

12. Why are these conclusions called “Vulnerable Spaces”? What are the two major concepts that the author sees as vulnerable? Do you agree? What can you do to strengthen or weaken these vulnerabilities?

13. At this point, you might go back and answer some of the questions in brackets from the earlier chapters.

POST-READING ACTIVITY

Your students have probably forgotten what they wrote and drew for the prereading activity. Ask them to do it again—describe “pioneers” with adjectives and a pioneering picture. Pass out their original work and have them compare and contrast the two. Their first sketches were social constructions—images that they had learned through readings and other media. They may have depicted people who were stereotypically white and/or male. Their second works should be more complex: perhaps they have women, men, and children of color in the picture—possibly a whole family or a neighborhood. Maybe they have added farm implements or other details of life. Hang both sets around the room. Discuss why and how the pictures are different. Are the second ones less stereotypical? Did they also have pioneers from other eras—people who fought for equality over the decades? How and why have their social constructions changed? Has their understanding of the concept of “pioneer” become more complex?

Trying This Methodology with Your Students

There are most certainly spaces like this Hill all over our country—places where people of color lived, worked, and were buried, but where no written history survives. High school and college students could certainly replicate some of the work done on this Hill to resurrect other hidden communities. How would you go about doing that? I would recommend that you find out what types of documents might be available for such research and put students into pairs to comb them. (Use the handout provided.) The artifacts and other sources that I found were located in local libraries, town clerk's offices, museum archives, court records, on the land itself and with community people. They included:

- The site of the community
- Census and court records
- Records of land transactions
- Business directories
- Historical maps
- Store account books
- Grand lists
- Accounts of school trustees
- Church records
- Birth, death, marriage, and cemetery records
- Legal, military, and business records
- Newspapers
- Town meeting reports
- Town histories and local historians
- Letters to newspapers
- Interviews with longtime residents

Photographs

Local and state historical societies

Preservation groups

If you know of a place nearby where a history needs to be told, you will need to find names of people who lived there. A good place to start is with national census reports to discover people identified as “other,” which is how African Americans were identified on early reports. There may be local historians or townspeople who already know the names or have other information that can be gleaned through an interview. Once you have names, you can look for them in town records. Groups of students might be assigned different types of sources and be instructed to gather as much information on the named people as they can from that source. They will need to record their information and share it with the class. It is a good idea to display it around the room for all to study, question, and discover contradictions and patterns. By using various primary sources, students will begin to understand how perspective and the purpose of the documents affected the evidence.

Secondary sources will also be important. Have the students insert context into their research by reading about what was happening socially, politically, and economically during the decade(s) of the research. They should ask questions about what they find and do further research to answer them. Invite various historians to class in order to help the students ask questions and make their interpretations.

There may be few extant documents in the voices of the people you are researching. To get around this problem ethnohistorians reconstruct past cultures through the use of official documents. One method that was important for *Discovering Black Vermont* was the technique of interpreting “contact across the lines of race and culture.”⁶ Documentation of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century African Americans in Vermont is written almost solely from the white perspective. It was therefore necessary to cross the line to another point of view and try to glean the perspectives of the subjects of this story, who are often treated like objects in the sources. Although “culling meaning from archival snippets is difficult,” and they must be carefully parsed, they can nevertheless provide tantalizing glimpses into peoples’ lives.⁷ Often one must fill in the holes from various sources of data. For instance, research for this book found no clues as to why the Clarks moved out of Monkton, but the book offers an idea of what may have happened based on the

lives of other people of color who wrote about their Vermont migration experiences.

Anne E. Yentsch, a historical anthropologist, provides a model for culling meaning from terse documents. She discovered that a close reading of inventories can yield information about the nonmaterial aspects of a culture, for example, reciprocal relations, social structure, and interactions between people and the environment. She found probate and merchant inventories “unintentionally informative [and] rich in ethnographic detail that disclosed the social structure of daily life.”⁸ By carefully examining people’s possessions, one can uncover the web of interconnections in a community.

The intellectual history methodology of John Demos is also fruitful for research. In *The Unredeemed Captive*, Demos used a very close reading of his documents to situate his eighteenth-century subjects within the broader intellectual and cultural issues of the times. In piecing together the lives of a family torn apart by an Indian raid on Deerfield, Massachusetts, he found a single source from the point of view of the one daughter left “unredeemed” with her kidnappers in Quebec. Nevertheless, he read every source about her with close attention to every word, including pronouns—we, they, you. In the examination of such small words, he saw boundaries between people, “experiential boundaries, physical and psychological ones felt in peoples’ heads and bones and bellies.”⁹ This will be your students’ task if they do similar research.

What binds these methodologies together is that they try to *see human thought* in documents and material culture. They use their methodologies to discover not just physical activities, but also mental activities. As anthropologist Henry Glassie put it, they try to see the “internalized, organizational rules” that people learned as they grew up within a particular social space.¹⁰ This is particularly important for a study of whites and blacks who created new ways of living side by side in freedom, as in this community on the Hill, and may well be important for a “lost” community near you.

A particularly enlightening part of letting students *do history* in this way will be in the final products. Have students take the raw data that they have collected and write their own historical interpretations about life in the community. Their interpretations and conclusions should have some similarities but also some differences of opinion. Make sure they support all their interpretations with details from the data or secondary sources they used to help them understand the community. In

this way, they will clearly see that historians have differing, honest interpretations.

As the National Archives website states: “Best of all, by using primary sources, students will participate in the process of history. They will debate with teachers and classmates about the interpretation of the sources. They will challenge others’ conclusions and seek out evidence to support their own. The classroom will become a lively arena in which students test and apply important analytical skills.”¹¹ They will not be students just completing another assignment, but they will be historians who are creating new knowledge for the world.

Document Analysis Worksheet

Use as many pages as you need and attach all your information. Take a digital picture, if appropriate, or scan into your computer.

1. Type of document (check one):

newspaper map advertisement land record
 letter telegram congressional record court document
 patent press release census report inventory
 memorandum report grand list other—describe:

2. Unique physical qualities of the document (check one or more and describe):

interesting letterhead notations

Description:

handwritten “RECEIVED” stamp

Description:

typed seals

Description:

other

Description:

3. Dates of document:

4. Author (or creator) of the document:
position (title):

5. Intended receiver (or user) of the document:

6. Credibility (or reliability) of the source (check one and explain):
___ very ___ reasonably ___ questionable ___ not at all

Explanation:

7. Perspective or bias of the author:

(a) Why was this document written? What purpose does it serve?
Quote from the document to support your contention:

(b) List interesting things the document helps you infer about life in the United States at the time it was written:

8. List important data/information for your study:

9. Questions this document brings up:

10. How this document might be useful to other historians?

Adapted from “Teaching with Documents” from the FDR Presidential Library and Museum (<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/primsrce.html>) for use in Elise Guyette’s *Discovering Black Vermont: African American Farmers in Hinesburgh, 1790–1890*, published by University of Vermont Press.

Notes

1. Sigurdur G. Magnusson, "Social History as 'Sites of Memory'? The Institutionalization of History: Microhistory and the Grand Narrative," *Journal of Social History*, Spring (2006): 905.
2. Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002), xvi.
3. Seth Hubbell, *A Narrative of the Sufferings of Seth Hubbell and Family* (Bennington: Vermont Heritage Press, 1824).
4. Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash, *Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont* (Barre: Vermont Historical Society, 2004).
5. Information on the colonization perspectives of the Hollys is from Carter G. Woodson, *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969).
6. John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), xii.
7. Mark J. Sammons and Valerie Cunningham, *Black Portsmouth: Three Centuries of African-American Heritage* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2004), 7.
8. Anne E. Yentsch, "Farming, Fishing, Whaling, Trading: Land and Sea as a Resource on Eighteenth-Century Cape Cod," in *Documentary Archaeology in the New World*, ed. Mark C. Beaudry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 140.
9. Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive*, 75.
10. Anne E. Yentsch, *A Chesapeake Family and Their Slaves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 309.
11. The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, *History in the Raw* available from <http://www.archives.gov/education/history-in-the-raw.html> (accessed February 9, 2008).

Bibliography

- Demos, John. *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Foner, Eric. *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2002.
- Formwalt, Lee W. "Demystifying and Rethinking the Study of History: An Interview with Gerda Lerner." In *Organization of American Historians Newsletter*, November 2006.
- Hubbell, Seth. *A Narrative of the Sufferings of Seth Hubbell and Family* (electronic version). Bennington: Vermont Heritage Press, 1824.
- Magnusson, Sigurdur G. "Social History as 'Sites of Memory'? The Institutionalization of History: Microhistory and the Grand Narrative." *Journal of Social History*, Spring (2006): 891–913.
- McLemee, Scott. "The Slave History You Don't Know" (electronic version). *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 16, 2003. Available from <http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i36/36a01401.htm> (accessed March 22, 2007).
- Sammons, Mark J., and Valerie Cunningham. *Black Portsmouth: Three Centuries of African-American Heritage*. Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2004.
- Sherman, Michael, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash. *Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont*. Barre: Vermont Historical Society, 2004.
- The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. *History in the Raw*. Available from <http://www.archives.gov/education/history-in-the-raw.html> (accessed February 9, 2008).
- Woodson, Carter G. *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.
- Yentsch, Anne E. *A Chesapeake Family and Their Slaves*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- . "Farming, Fishing, Whaling, Trading: Land and Sea as a Resource on Eighteenth-Century Cape Cod." In *Documentary Archaeology in the New World*, edited by Mark C. Beaudry, 138–60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.