



Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom

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This book originated in the summer of 2006, in the burial ground of the First Church of Christ, Congregational, of East Haddam, Connecticut, where a team of forensic scientists began excavating the graves of two emancipated slaves, Venture Smith (d. 1805) and his wife, Marget (d. 1809). Those requesting this remarkable investigation were the Smiths' direct descendants, members of the eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh generations, who were determined to honor the bicentennial of their founding ancestor's death by discovering everything possible about his life. Opening burial plots in the hope of recovering DNA for genealogical tracing proved a compelling first step.

But what began as a scientific inquiry into African origins rapidly evolved into an unparalleled interdisciplinary collaboration between historians, literary analysts, geographers, genealogists, anthropologists, political philosophers, genomic biologists, and, perhaps most revealingly, a poet. Their common goal has been to reconstruct the life of an extraordinary African American and to assay its implications for the sprawling, troubled eighteenth-century world of racial exploitation over which he triumphed. This volume displays the rich results of that collaboration.

A highly intelligent, deeply self-motivated and immensely energetic slave transported from Africa, Venture Smith transformed himself through unstinting labor into a respectable Connecticut citizen, a successful entrepreneur, and the liberator of other enslaved African Americans. As James O. Horton emphasizes in his foreword to this volume, "Venture Smith's saga is a gift to all who seek to understand the complex racial beginnings of America. It helps to connect the broad American story with the stories of many Americans whose lives illustrate the national struggle to live out the national ideals."

In addition to Horton and volume editor James Brewer Stewart, contributors include Cameron Blevins, Vincent Carretta, Anna Mae Duane, Robert P. Forbes, Anne L. Hiskes, Paul Lovejoy, Marilyn Nelson, David Richardson, Chandler B. Saint, Linda Strausbaugh, Kevin Tulinieri, and John Wood Sweet.

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