

Fall 2006 Book Discussion Series

*“The Problem of the 20th Century is the Problem of the Color Line”:
Exploring the Civil Rights Movement*

The Spring 2006 book discussions sponsored by the Flow of History—“‘America’s Unfinished Revolution’: Searching for Democracy and Equality Through Reconstruction and the Great Migration”—have just wrapped up. We had 36 participants in the groups meeting in Hartford, Brattleboro, and Claremont, including several first-timers. By all accounts, the readings were found to be very stimulating, the integration of brief exercises and learning strategies into the sessions were welcome, and the discussions were vigorous and thought provoking. Two hours was never enough time, and only the call of dinner, family, and dead-tired bodies prevented conversations from careening into the night. (Another group of teachers from the Rivendell interstate school district participated

in a series of workshops on interpreting local primary sources and using them in the classroom.)

Next fall the book groups will continue to follow the threads established in the previous two sessions on the Progressive Era and African-American history from Reconstruction through the Harlem Renaissance. In line with the organizing theme of Change and Continuity in American Democracy: Ideas, Institutions, Practices and Controversies, the fall 2006 session will explore the modern Civil Rights Movement and its role in shaping American society in the second half of the 20th century. We will consider the roots of the movement, its evolution and divergences, the interaction between grassroots politics and government, the contribution of the Civil Rights Movement to the social and cultural

transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, the ensuing backlash, and the long-term historical impact of these developments.

The Flow of History staff welcomes any suggestions about topics or readings to consider for this program.

The sessions will take place on four Wednesdays from 4-6 p.m.: October 11, November 1, 15, 29. Locations will again be in Hartford, Brattleboro, and Claremont, New Hampshire. These book study groups are open to all teachers in the Connecticut River watershed. Books will be provided and teachers in grades 3-10 are eligible for a \$150 stipend. Watch for further details in the mail and on the Flow of History website, www.flowofhistory.org; or contact Sarah Rooker, 603-298-9907, sarah.rooker@valley.net.

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Weaving a Historical Web between New England and South Carolina

By Alan Berolzheimer

In preparation for this year’s summer institute for teachers at the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, we’ve been alluding to the intriguing web of connections between that area and Vermont and New Hampshire. Here are some of those stories.

Several people from Vermont and New Hampshire played important roles in the Port Royal Experiment, the “Rehearsal for Reconstruction” staged in the Sea Islands following the liberation of the area from the Confederate planters in November 1861. (For brief descriptions of the Port Royal Experiment, see the articles by Walter Mack and Susan Bonthron in the Winter 2006 Flow of History newsletter.) Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase launched the Port Royal Experiment with both economic and social reform objectives. He had jurisdiction over the collection of abandoned Confederate property, making him the highest ranking federal official in the mix. Because maintaining the Sea Island cotton harvest was deemed of critical importance to financing the Union war effort, and

because that harvest depended upon the labor of the former slaves who had other objectives, Chase’s authority was pivotal in a drama that was very contentious from the outset. A passionate abolitionist and organizer of the Free Soil Party in Ohio, Chase was described as “the mainspring of anti-slavery influence” within the Lincoln Administration.¹ He later served as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Perhaps you already know: Chase was born in Cornish, New Hampshire, attended school in Windsor, Vermont, for a time, and graduated from Dartmouth College in 1826; his birthplace is on the National Historic Register.

(Somewhat tangential to our story but still of interest, was the Sprague family. Governor William Sprague of Rhode Island was a wealthy cotton manu-

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A boardwalk allows closer inspection of a Sea Islands salt marsh.

Saxton believed that the abandoned plantations should be turned over to the local blacks, and he oversaw the initial land sales to them, even going so far as to encourage squatting as a way of establishing clear claim to the land, in direct contravention of President Lincoln's orders.

facturer and a scoundrel, who sought to profit illicitly from confiscated Sea Island cotton. Sprague pulled the wool over Secretary Chase's eyes (please excuse the mixed metaphor) and manipulated events in his own favor, to the detriment of the freedmen; he also wed Chase's daughter in a high-profile 19th-century

celebrity marriage, which eventually dissolved because of Sprague's serial infidelities. Sprague was a cousin of Achsa Sprague of Plymouth, Vermont, one of the era's best-known spiritualists who was also a passionate abolitionist and advocate of woman suffrage.)

Mansfield French, born in Manchester,

Vermont, in 1810, like Salmon Chase moved to Ohio in his youth and eventually became a part of Chase's circle. A Methodist minister, French arrived in Port Royal in February 1862 as a representative of the American Missionary Association, charged with ascertaining how the AMA could help the freed slaves in the Sea Islands. French was one of the more vigorous defenders of the rights and interests of African Americans on the scene, and as such he was a key figure in the Port Royal Experiment.

Martha Johnson of Peacham, and Loudon Langley, an African-American farmer from Hinesburg, were two Vermont residents who migrated to the Sea Islands during the Civil War, dedicated their lives to improving the fortunes of the black population, and died there. Langley's story, still being uncovered by Vermont historian Elise Guyette, appeared in the Winter 2006 Flow of History newsletter. More about Martha's story is told in this issue. Chances are, there were other teachers and farmers and soldiers from Vermont and New Hampshire who cast their lot with the Sea Island blacks, whose stories remain completely undiscovered.

It's a bit of a stretch to claim General Rufus Saxton as a Vermonter—but he was awfully close, being a native of Greenfield, Massachusetts, who grew up breathing “the free air of the valley of the Connecticut” in a family of abolitionists.² Saxton is undoubtedly one of the heroes of the Port Royal story, because as the Union military officer responsible for governing the area beginning in May 1862, he strongly supported the efforts of the teachers and missionaries who came to assist the freedmen, and he worked assiduously to protect and advance the interests of the local black population. Saxton believed that the abandoned plantations should be turned over



The Rhett House Inn in Beaufort. Now a bed and breakfast, this home of prominent Confederates was spared the wrath of Sherman's March because it was occupied by Union soldiers.

TEACHERS PRESENT AT NELMS

By Jen Brown

This spring, four teachers who have been long-time Flow of History participants presented classroom work at the New England League of Middle Schools conference in Providence, Rhode Island. In a program entitled “Connecting Primary Source Documents and Nonfiction Literature in Four Classrooms,” the teachers shared how they have brought history to life for their students using primary sources, nonfiction resources, and literature.

Their presentations were an extension of action research projects created last spring through a course offered by Flow of History that focused on creating units of study combining reading and history.

Jennifer Boeri-Boyce, Hartford Memorial Middle School, shared student projects based on local Civil War primary sources and the census. She also talked about reading the poetry of African-American poet Phillis Wheatley with her students. Dot Gorenflo, Green Street School in Brattleboro, brought extensive timelines and projects created by students after studying the Civil War through both literature and primary research. Frank Kelley, Chester-Andover Elementary School, brought his 5th-

grade projects based on colonial American broadsides found both online and at the Vermont Historical Society. Jennifer Brown, Dummerston School, described using the historical fiction of Mildred Taylor (*The Land*) in conjunction with related nonfiction readings and primary sources.

All of these teachers got their students out of the classroom and into the community, connecting local stories to the national picture. NELMS conference participants were excited to hear about the combination of close readings of nonfiction and fiction, primary source analysis, and community explorations developed by these teachers with the support of the Flow of History.

Flow of History participants presented classroom work using primary sources and historical fiction at the recent conference of the New England League of Middle Schools. From left to right, Frank Kelley, Dot Gorenflo, Jen Boeri-Boyce, and Jen Brown.



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Explore topics in the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement...

The Flow of History is pleased to announce a unique partnership with the Gullah Studies Institute this summer from July 15-22. Teachers in grades 3-10 who teach along the Connecticut River Watershed are invited to join the Flow of History in South Carolina for a week of workshops, tours, and place-based journaling.

Offerings include:

- The Port Royal Experiment as a Model for Reconstruction
- The Low Country and the Underground Railroad
- The Low Country in the Civil Rights Movement
- African Origins of the Gullah People
- The Gullah Diaspora
- The Laura Towne Diary
- Creating Gourd Vessels
- Exploring Nature in the Low Country
- Tours to Fort Sumter and neighboring historical attractions
- Place-Based Journaling
- From Vermont to South Carolina: Researching our Connections to the Low Country

Dates: July 15-22, 2006

Location: The Penn Center, St. Helena Island, South Carolina
www.penncenter.com

Cost: This institute is offered to teachers in grades 3-10 who teach along the CT River Watershed. It is limited to 15 teachers on a first-come, first-served basis. There is a \$100 registration fee (checks made out to “Flow of History”). Participants must provide their own transportation to Savannah, GA. Institute fees, books, excursions, room and board are all free. To register, go to: www.flowofhistory.org.

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

THE CENSUS

by Sarah Rooker

In 1880 Betsy Griffin, recently widowed, worked hard to feed and clothe her children Patrick (19), Katie (14), Michael (11), and Thomas (5) in the mining town of Ely, Vermont. Patrick and Michael both helped by working in the dressing house at the mines—a place where several of their young friends also worked. Betsy and her husband had come from Ireland to Vermont by way of Canada—joining many of their countrymen. After her husband died, Betsy managed by taking in nine young miners, many from Ireland. She could not read or write, but her daughter Katie had been to school and helped at home. Soon, the Ely mining industry was to collapse. What would be the future for this family?

This snapshot of Betsy Griffin and her family was taken from just one page of the 1880 Ely census. It provides a strong local link to larger historical themes of immigration, paternalism, and child labor. With guidance, students can learn to trace the stories of real people who lived in their town during particular periods of time. Access to the census is fairly easy as long as you have an internet connection and a membership with the Vermont Historical Society.

The first census of the United States (1790) was actually completed in 1791 for Vermont, just after it became a state. The census was organized by State, County, and Town with only heads of families listed. Other categories included free males over 16 years, free males under 16 years, free white females, all other free persons, and slaves. The census grew more sophisticated and collected more data in later years, such as occupations, countries of origin, and values of real estate.

To work with students, first introduce them to the census in general by giving them one page and asking questions such as: When was this document written? Where was the information gathered? Who gathered the information? What categories of information were gathered?

Then have them analyze a particular household. Choose a household that illuminates themes you have in mind. For instance, in studying immigration and child labor, these questions might be asked:

Look at the Griffin family (#284).

Where was the mother born? What is her current marital status?

Does the mother have an occupation?

Where were the children born?

Did the family come to Vermont straight from Ireland?

How old are the children?

Do the children have occupations or go to school?

Has the mother gone to school?

Who else lives in the home?

Where are they from? How old are they? What are their occupations?

Finish up by providing room for further digging:

What questions do you have?

What conclusions can you make based on this census page?



Flow of History visitors gazed out over the shore of St. Helena Island last September.

to the local blacks, and he oversaw the initial land sales to them, even going so far as to encourage squatting as a way of establishing clear claim to the land, in direct contravention of President Lincoln's orders. Historian Willie Lee Rose called Saxton's actions "a deliberate obfuscation in a worthy cause." While his aims were ultimately thwarted, Saxton asserted that "The experiment with the freedmen in this department is a success, [for] amid all their obstructions. . . they have made constant progress and proved their right to be received into the full company of free men." This was due in no small measure to his own efforts.³

Photographers from New Hampshire and Vermont provide us with some extraordinary imagery from the Sea Islands during the Civil War and in the Jim Crow era. The Third New Hampshire Regiment was part of the fleet that bombarded Confederate defenses in Port Royal Sound with "the Big Gun Shoot" and chased away the "Secesh," leaving the slaves behind. Sensing a business opportunity—and perhaps with a nose for history, too—Concord, N.H. photographer Henry P. Moore followed the Third New Hampshire in February 1862, and set up shop on Hilton Head. His photographs of "soldiers, sailors, slaves, and ships" in the Sea Islands provide a unique documentary record of the area in a transitional state between war and peace, slavery and freedom. Moore became

best known for his photographs of Sea Island slaves, which are historic because photos of slaves are relatively rare. Some of them have been reproduced frequently. Historian W. Jeffrey Bolster sums up Moore's legacy by saying, "thanks to [his] exacting work, his technical skill, and his bold artistry, [contemporary] viewers can see the unyielding humanity and creative survival of enslaved American ancestors, along with the circumstances in which they lived."⁴

Forty-two years later, a prominent photographer who subsequently established deep roots in Vermont also journeyed to the South Carolina coast. Julian A. Dimock, who was gaining prominence as a magazine photographer, visited Beaufort in 1904-05. Driven by empathy for the poor, he took many photos of African Americans there, on Hilton Head, and in Columbia, including some of black leader and Civil War hero Robert Smalls. (Vermonteer Loudon Langley, like Smalls, became a political leader of South Carolina blacks, and lived next door to Smalls for a time.) According to a biographer, Dimock "determined...to depict the average black person caught on the cusp and to portray the conditions of the majority of African Americans in this place at this time who lived out their lives in poverty and isolation—marginalized, degraded, segregated, reduced to debt peonage, socially and econom-

ically and politically deprived."⁵ Dimock eventually donated over 6,000 images to the American Museum of Natural History. In 1911, Dimock went to Vermont to photograph maple sugaring for a magazine article, and he was so captivated by the area that he stayed. He bought an apple orchard in Topsham (postal address East Corinth) in 1912, became a successful orchardist, is credited with introducing the seed potato as an important crop in Vermont, participated in the reforestation of the state, and served as a town official. His wife, Annette, wrote regularly for the *Burlington Free Press* (under the name Aunt Serena) and served in the Vermont legislature in 1925. The place is still known as the Dimock Orchard.

Perhaps these stories will spark your interest in searching for more. And we're barely into the 20th century. To be continued. ■

Footnotes:

- 1 Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (1964; Oxford University Press, 1976), 17.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 153.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 275, 329.
- 4 W. Jeffrey Bolster and Hilary Anderson, *Soldiers, Sailors, Slaves, and Ships: The Civil War Photographs of Henry P. Moore* (Concord: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1999), 19.
- 5 Thomas L. Johnson and Nina J. Root, eds., *Camera Man's Journey: Julian Dimock's South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 21.

The Census Online

Enumerator Instructions by Decade

www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/voliii/tEnumInstr.html

HeritageQuest (available through a Vermont Historical Society membership) www.heritagequest.com

For access: Go to: www.vermonthhistory.org/library.htm

Click on "Heritage Quest" and enter your membership password into the screen.

To browse through a community, go to the "browse" button. To print, it is best to download as a PDF and then print.

Historical Census Browser

<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>

This website provides data at the state and county level. You can map ethnicity, education, occupations, etc.

African-Americans in Vermont Database

www.historyharvest.org/census/africanamerican.html

This database was drawn from the census years 1790-1970.

Contemporary Census Information

www.census.gov/

The Census in the Classroom

www.vcdh.virginia.edu/teaching/vclassroom/jobinst.html

This lesson plan uses census information to explore occupations in a particular community today and in the past.

FINDING MARTHA

By Alan Berolzheimer

h i s t o r y

We really don't know much about Martha Johnson. She was born in Peacham, Vermont, in 1822, to Betsy Merrill and Leonard Johnson, both Peacham natives, the eldest of their nine children. The Johnsons were a family of devoted abolitionists. Local tradition has it that their house was a stop on the Underground Railroad, though no corroborating evidence has turned up yet. Leonard's younger brother, Oliver, trained as a printer, went to Boston to work for William Lloyd Garrison on *The Liberator*, and helped found the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1832. Oliver became a close confidant of Garrison, and served the national abolitionist movement as an influential publicist, editor, and liaison.

Martha Johnson also followed a path of social reform. In 1855 she took a job working with female inmates at the New York State Penitentiary on Blackwell's Island. Then, in 1863, she received a commission from the National Freedmen's Relief Association of New York to teach newly freed slaves in the South Carolina Sea Islands. Martha Johnson got in on the ground floor of the Port Royal Experiment and never left. She lived and taught in the Port Royal/Beaufort area until 1871, when she contracted yellow fever and died on the day before Christmas.

We only know these facts of Martha Johnson's life because a descendant of Leonard Johnson, Betty Wilkinson of Barre, donated a small collection of the family documents to the Vermont Historical Society in 1997. Most of them are letters written by Martha to her family back in Peacham. These letters describe her life and work among the freedmen in the Sea Islands, and echo the observations of her more famous colleagues, Laura Towne and Charlotte Forten of the Penn School. For example, on April 11, 1863, she wrote:

"The men and women work in the field, and both receive the same pay. . . . They work very industriously and save their money most of them. . . . And they seem so anxious to save enough money to buy them a little house some day. . . . To be able to read the Bible is their great desire. They come in after a hard days work to read a few verses and then go home and read it over again by their pitch pine fires until they can read it quite well. They seem so grateful for a little instruction it is a pleasure to teach them. The children are quick to learn as white children and as full of fun and mischief. I never think of their black skins when I am with them and have become as much attached to them as to any white children. I shall be very sorry to leave them."

The letters describe Martha's final illness and death, and reveal that she is buried in the cemetery of the Episcopal Church in Beaufort. So when our Flow of History group visited the Penn Center in September 2005, we decided to try to find Martha's grave. Finding the church was easy—it's large and prominent on a side street just off the downtown. But how would we find this one gravestone among hundreds? Six of us

fanned out across the cemetery, stooping and squinting to read worn-out or moss-covered inscriptions, trying to figure out if one area or another seemed promising or unlikely. After about twenty minutes a cry went up: "We found it!" Lo and behold, there was Martha Johnson's headstone, beautifully preserved, the lettering crisp and clear. "Born in CALEDONIA COUNTY Peacham, Vermont, September 22nd 1822. Died in BEAUFORT, South Carolina, December 24th 1871." It felt as if we were completing a circle, and I for one pondered the mystery of our interconnected journeys. We left some small offerings and headed back to the Penn Center.



Martha Johnson of Peacham, Vermont, is buried in the graveyard of the Episcopal Church in Beaufort, South Carolina.

At dinner that night, we were excited to tell the story of finding Martha's grave. As it happened, another group of Vermonters was visiting the Penn Center at the time, led by Margaret MacLean, head of the Vermont Rural Partnership, and her husband Bruce, a veteran social studies teacher at Oxbow High School in Bradford. (The VRP, a "coalition of rural communities committed to making a seamless connection between school and community," was an original Flow of History partner.) They listened with interest, of course, nodding sagely and smiling as we expressed our amazement at the pristine condition of the headstone. And then Margaret and Bruce revealed that they had in fact gone to the cemetery earlier in the day to look for Martha's grave, and in honor of the kindred spirit, had carefully brushed off and cleaned up the stone! Little did I know, but the Vermont Rural Partnership is based in Peacham, home of Port Royal Experiment teacher, Martha Johnson.

Margaret reflected on the experience. "As an educator for the past 30 years, 15 spent as principal of Peacham School, it felt like a privilege to be able to read Martha Johnson's words while in the environment of the Penn Center. In the muggy heat of South Carolina it was easier to imagine her experiences as a teacher there and her journey from Peacham to the South. We felt compelled to find her and made the jour-



"we have buried Martha in a corner of the cemetery near a shade tree and by the wall," and so it was we found her with the tree now dominating the scene.

ney to the church earlier in the day. Fortunately, we had the help of the sextant, who gave us access to the cemetery records—so finding her grave turned out to be quite easy for us. As her friend Mattie had written in the letter home to her parents in Peacham, 'we have buried Martha in a corner of the cemetery near a shade tree and by the wall,' and so it was we found her with the tree now dominating the scene. I must admit that while we got the cloth and water to clean the stone, we were able to have quite the conversation with Martha, tell her of our journey in finding her, and give her lots of best wishes from her home of Peacham. Would she not have been amazed to learn that 130-plus years later teachers from Peacham would be talking to her while she rested there, all due to her letters home being treasured and passed along!"

*Photo top:
Children newly freed from slavery practicing reading at the Penn School.*



*Photo bottom:
The Penn School, c. 1865*