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## Stonington school project tells the history of enslaved local man



Rev. Norman Eriendson says a few words Friday, April 28, 2023, after receiving the Cato Cuff Witness Stone during the installation ceremony at the First Congregational Church of Stonington. The ceremony was held to commemorate the life of Cato Cuff and presented by the Stonington Middle School eighth-grade class. Donna Brandelli, right, a descendant of the first minister of the First Congregational Church listens in the background. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

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By **Carrie Czerwinski, Special to The Day**

Stonington — Stonington Middle School students presented the findings of their research on Cato Cuff, an enslaved man who was freed after his military service in the Revolutionary War, to members of the public at the Road Church on Friday.

Cuff was a member of the church, also known as the First Congregational Church, and married Flora Palmer there in 1820.

“This was a project that took weeks and weeks, but I think it was really important to have the opportunity to think and learn about slavery in a very local type of way, because I think it can be hard to really empathize people when all you see are statistics,” said eighth grade student Solana Thagnabouth.

The eighth-grade students, had spent the last several weeks researching Cuff’s life and exploring the weighty topic of slavery, including themes of paternalism, resistance, dehumanization, treatment and economics.

Cuff’s local ties made the history much more real for students and made them want to learn his story, said social studies teacher Dan Agins. He added that when students looked at documents, maps or photographs in books, they often recognized some of the locations, and one student even noted that they lived just a few houses away from where Cuff lived with his wife.

“Before slavery was abolished, there were 219 slaves in Stonington, which was the third highest amount in southeastern Connecticut,” said social studies teacher Cindy Cassidy, adding that Cuff was “just one of the 219 enslaved men and women who basically, up until this year, have gone nameless, faceless, story-less.”

“What surprised me most was how much slavery we had here in Stonington and how little we knew about it,” said eighth grader Rori Murphy.

A \$5,000 National Education Foundation Envision Equity grant paid for the program developed and provided by the Witness Stones Project.

The Witness Stones Project, a non-profit organization started in 2017, provides local archival research, professional development for educators and a classroom curriculum to educate students and the public about the local history of slavery and to restore the history and humanity of enslaved individuals by telling their stories.

The project also includes a Witness Stone, a small bronze plaque on a cement block, in honor of Cuff, engraved with his biographical information. It will be placed along the walkway to the church.

“We started about a month and a half ago, and we started by looking at the five themes of slavery,” said Murphy, adding, “once we read all the primary sources and decoded them, we began to work on Cato.”

She said she and her peers worked hard --both in and out of school-- on research, artwork, and the poetry and narratives for the hard cover books each class created on Cuff.

“This was a tough concept for them. They didn’t always connect the dots right away,” about the concepts and documents about slavery said Cassidy. “We really had to hit the brakes a lot and really go through things with them, but once we started to, the light bulbs just started popping on. It was just a really incredible transformation with the kids.”

### **Cuff was worth \$6,705**

Information on Cuff, who lived on Pequot Trail until his 1843 death, is limited, but he was most likely born sometime in the late 1750’s.

Cuff appears by name in a probate inventory of Elihu Chesebrough’s estate in 1769, where he was estimated to be worth 30 pounds sterling about \$6,705 in today’s money.

Enslaved people could earn their freedom by serving in the Continental Army, and in 1778, Cuff appears in military records of the 5th Regiment of the Connecticut Line.

He fought in the battles of Monmouth and Germantown, and spent a winter at Valley Forge, Pa. where he developed frostbite in his foot. In 1820, he was awarded a military pension because he was unable to work in colder months due to the frostbite.

Road Church was the eighth church in the state, and the congregation, which began meeting unofficially in 1657, before the church was built in 1674, is the oldest in the state.

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According to church Pastor Norm Erlendson, Congregationalist ministers had already begun to see slavery as wrong and believed that being a slave holder was incompatible with Christian beliefs.

When Erlendson was asked if his church was interested in receiving a Witness Stone in Cuff's honor, he said he did not hesitate in saying yes.

"We love our history, and he is a part of it that has been long ignored and mostly forgotten," he said.

"I think the most important thing is that now we know who Cato Cuff is and his history is now shared," eight grader Corrine Mercier said, adding, "people can recognize him and what he did and how he lived his life."

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