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## Vermont Town Honors Former Slave's Life with Historical Marker

By Nina Keck

Poultney, Vermont

21 October 2008

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**More than 60 members of the Brace family gathered recently in the tiny New England town of Poultney, Vermont, for a historic reunion. They came to meet one another, share stories and celebrate their common history. And as Nina Keck reports, they came to pay tribute to their common ancestor, a former slave and Revolutionary War veteran named Jeffrey Brace.**

Jeffrey Brace's amazing story was not uncommon in the 18th century. Abducted from Africa, he was taken by European slave traders on a horrific trans-Atlantic voyage. He endured cruel masters as well as kind ones, learned to read and write, and eventually won his freedom fighting in the Revolutionary War.

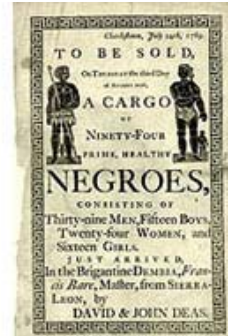
What makes Brace's life story so unusual is that it was written down and published in an [1810 memoir](#).

Green Mountain College Professor John Nassivera specializes in African-American literature. He says that while there are a fairly large number of slave narratives in existence, "There are very, very, very few that are written by someone who remembers being captured in Africa."

Brace was 16 years old when he was captured.

"His original name was Boyrereau Brinch, and he used Brace because it was similar to Brinch," Nassivera explains. "And he remembers the whole act of the capture and his accounting of it is very accurate and graphic and detailed."

After winning his freedom in 1784, Brace moved to Poultney, Vermont, where he married and raised a family. Though he became blind in his later years, he traveled around the state telling his life story to promote the antislavery movement. Audiences were so moved that a white abolitionist lawyer named Benjamin Franklin Prentiss asked if he could write the story down for publication. Brace agreed, and the resulting book includes vivid accounts of his



Reproduction of a 1769 handbill advertising a slave auction in Charleston, South Carolina

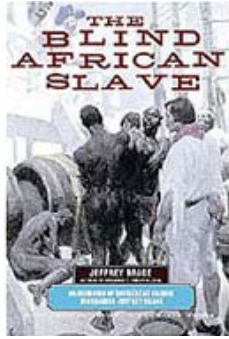
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capture and treatment as a slave.



**The cover of the new edition of Brace's memoir shows Africans in captivity on a slave ship**

"Thus I remained for about three months from the time I was taken from the ship, starved, whipped and obliged to work unceasingly, in order I suppose that the benevolent and charitable white man should be satisfied that the heathen spirit of an African boy of noble birth should be sufficiently subdued; and all for my good that I should thereby become a tame, profitable and honest slave....," Brace recalled.

Kari Winter, a professor at the State University of New York in Buffalo, came across one of the few surviving copies of the memoir in a rare book collection in Vermont.

"When I first read it," she recalls, "no one knew if it was a true story or if it was a novel by Benjamin Franklin Prentiss. No one had done sufficient research on it to know the story. I was persuaded by the voice in the narrative - the voice of Jeffrey Brace."

Winter says Brace recalled specific names, dates and locations that enabled her to confirm his story with colonial documents and local archives. She published a book about him in 2005.

For many Vermonters and Brace descendants, it was the first they'd heard of the former slave. Sean Henry is president of the African-American Culture Club at Green Mountain College, in Poultney. He says Brace's story is one every American should know.



**Jeffrey Brace's descendants gather around the memorial plaque erected in Poultney, Vermont, in his honor**

"And the best way to do [that] was to put up a permanent marker," he explains, adding that it would serve a dual purpose. "Not just to recognize [Brace's] accomplishments, but to recognize that Vermont was one of the first states ever to not have any kind of slavery at all, to abolish completely in its constitution, and it's something that needs to be recognized."

Henry helped lead the campaign for the marker to honor Jeffrey Brace.

On a sunlit autumn afternoon in Poultney's historic town square, more than 60 Brace descendants gathered to see the marker unveiled. Robin Murphy of Springfield, Massachusetts, was there with her daughters and grandson. She is related to Jeffrey Brace through her mother, Madeline Brace.

"I can't take it all in," she said, looking around at the town her ancestor called home. "It's just so amazing. Especially where he

lived, where he built his home with his wife, and just, just the paths that he walked. I can't say it enough!"

After the dedication, townspeople and family members gathered in the meeting hall of Poultney's historic church. Jeffrey Sylvester Brace the Third addressed the crowd.

"I used to wear that [name] proudly anyway," he told them, "because my grandfather and my father..."



**Jim Brace looks through a family album with his newly discovered relatives**

He stopped for moment as his emotions overcame him. Then he continued strongly, "because I think they are great men anyway. So I was proud to have that name anyway. But now knowing where it really comes from, my chest is really going to be poked out now!"

As the enthusiastic applause died down, Jim Brace, a white relative from St. Albans, Vermont, stood up to speak.

"Myself, I've always wondered why I was so light-skinned," he began, to laughter from the crowd. "In St. Albans, when I was growing up, no one ever mentioned anything about our family being half white, half black."

He said history is not something to be hidden away or feared. Looking out over his newfound family, he said it feels good to see their history shared and celebrated.

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