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Vermont town to honor former slave's life

By LISA RATHKE The Associated Press Monday, October 6, 2008; 4:56 AM

POULTNEY, Vt. -- A former slave whose memoir is among the only ones known to describe abduction from Africa is about to get a historical marker in the small Vermont town where he ended up settling.

Descendants of Jeffrey Brace _ who fought in the Revolutionary War and eventually earned his freedom _ will gather Saturday for the erection of the memorial on a town green.

"The importance of Brace's story is not just that he's a remarkable individual but it's part of Vermont's history and American history that had disappeared," said Kari Winter, who edited the memoir "The Blind African Slave: Or, Memoirs of Boyreareau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace."

His memoir traces his abduction in 1758 in West Africa at age 16 and the wretched trans-Atlantic voyage that ensued, in which he was starved, shackled and whipped, and watched others die of starvation and beatings.

"Over the course of about 350 years, something on the order of 12 million people were shipped across the Atlantic and yet we could count on our hands the number of surviving first-person written accounts of people who made that journey," said James Campbell, a Stanford University history professor.

"So to have an account like this be discovered and made available to students describing the experience of capture in Africa, the experience of the Middle Passage and a life in slavery right up until the early 19th-century New England, that's an extraordinary find," said Campbell, who specializes in slavery history.



Shawn Henry, left, and Prof. John Nassivera hold a historical marker at Green Mountain College in Poultney, Vt., Thursday, Oct. 2, 2008. On Oct. 12, the historical marker will be placed in Poultney to honor the life of Jeffrey Brace, a former slave, who won his freedom by fighting in the Revolutionary War and later settled in Vermont, the first state to abolish slavery. Henry, president of the African American Club at Green Mountain College and Nassivera, a professor and adviser to the group, helped to get the marker made. (AP Photo/Toby Talbot) (Toby Talbot - AP)

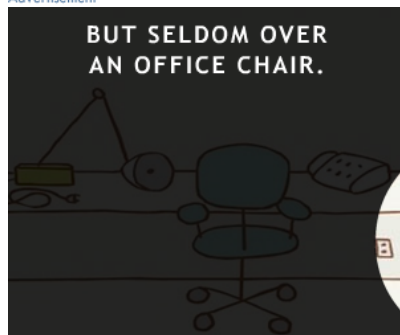
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Brace ended up in Connecticut after being enslaved on an English trade ship in Barbados that engaged in skirmishes during the Seven Years' War. He was sold to a New England ship captain, and then auctioned off several other times, the final time to widow Mary Stiles in Woodbury, Conn., who sent him to school and taught him to read.

He later enlisted in the Revolutionary War with her sons and fought for five years, eventually earning his freedom in 1783 and moving to Vermont.

"I enjoyed the pleasures of a freeman; my food was sweet, my labor pleasure:

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and one bright gleam of life seemed to shine upon me," he wrote.

He worked for a tavern keeper in Dorset, where he met his wife, Susannah Dublin, a widow and former slave. But life in Vermont was a constant challenge, Winter said.

They lived in Manchester for a time, but the town indentured his wife's two children to work in different households. It was a common practice for poor people who could not support their children, but in this case: "The complaint amounted to this: that I was a black man," Brace said.

The family returned to land Brace had bought in Poultney.

He cleared fields and grew crops but endured constant confrontations with a neighbor over land, crops and livestock. Fearing his children could be indentured again, he moved the family twice more.

Brace became blind in his old age but says he felt it was his duty to publish his memoirs _ "that all may see how poor Africans have been and perhaps now are abused by a Christian and enlightened people."

He was helped by a white abolitionist lawyer, Benjamin Prentiss, who wrote down his story, adding his own research and interpretations.

Winter, a professor at the University of Buffalo, found one of the original copies published in 1810 in the special collections library at the University of Vermont, where she used to teach.

In Poultney, John Nassivera, a Green Mountain College professor took a special interest in Brace after Winter gave a talk on him.

He wrote a play based on the book and urged the school's African-American Club to take up the cause. They worked with the Poultney Historical Society and Vermont Division of Historic Preservation to have a marker made honoring Brace's life.

For Brace's descendants, who didn't know of their ancestor until the memoir was published or they were contacted by Winter, their heritage is something to be proud of.

James Brace, who's white and lives in St. Albans, calls his ancestor a hero.

Rhonda Brace, whose grandfather and an uncle are named Jeffrey, realizes they're one of few African-American families who can trace their ancestry to a particular slave.

It gives new meaning to being African-American, she said.

She said she still pinches herself that something of this magnitude _ the memoir _ was found. The interest in it in Vermont has been phenomenal, she said.

"I've always felt that Jeffrey Brace would really come to life when a lot of people would participate in reclaiming his memory," Winter said.

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