

A Teacher's Guide for

On My Own

THE TRADITIONS OF
DAISY TURNER

and

Journey's End

THE MEMORIES AND
TRADITIONS OF DAISY
TURNER AND HER
FAMILY

by Gregory Sharrow



VERMONT
FOLKLIFE
CENTER

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*Daisy's family
home on
Turner Hill—
Journey's End.*

Daisy Turner and Lucy Terry Prince:

Parallel Lives of Two African American Women in Vermont

Daisy Turner of Grafton, Vermont, was a remarkable individual. When folklorist Jane Beck first met her in 1983, it was clear that her stories must be recorded. Over a period of a year, Jane devoted one day a week to interviewing Daisy. These tens of hours of tape-recorded conversation gave Jane a solid basis for planning the video project that eventually became *On My Own: The Traditions of Daisy Turner*. After Daisy's death at the age of 104, this same material was edited to become the Peabody Award-winning radio series *Journey's End: The Memories and Traditions of Daisy Turner and Her Family*.

Daisy Turner's storytelling had long been appreciated by members of her family and her Grafton neighbors, but Jane Beck felt strongly that it was important to present her stories to a larger audience. Not only was Daisy a master storyteller, but she was also an African American; her stories vividly portrayed her family's experience under slavery in the American South, reaching back even to her grandfather's youth in Africa. As Daisy often explained, "See we didn't just come from nothing and nowhere, we've got a background, and the background can be traced right down to the roots." Because white society, and by extension, white historians have overlooked, denied, or even suppressed the history and cultural traditions of African Americans, it is essential that the stories of people like Daisy now see the light of day.

Alex Haley's pioneering book *Roots* presented his family's saga, beginning in Africa and coming forward through slavery to the present day. Haley's research was based on the "long, cumulative family narrative that had been passed down across the generations," which he remembered hearing Grandma, Aunt Liz, Aunt Plus, and Cousin Georgia tell "snatches and patches of" as they relaxed in front-porch rockers on warm summer evenings. In the process of tracing his family back to Africa Haley learned about a form of folk history which for generations has been an integral part of African culture. A group of Gambian men who had assembled to advise his research "... told me something of which I'd never have dreamed: of very old men called *griots* still to be found in the older back-country villages, men who were in effect living, walking archives of oral history. A senior griot would be a man usually in his late sixties or early



seventies... who told on special occasions the centuries-old histories of villages, of clans, of families, of great heroes. Throughout the whole of black Africa such oral chronicles had been handed down since the time of the ancient forefathers, I was informed, and there were certain legendary griots who could narrate facets of African history literally for as long as three days without ever repeating themselves.”¹

In Africa the griot carries on a very specialized and time-honored tradition that requires a mastery of spoken language, a prodigious memory for detail, a compelling interest in history, and the ability to compose spontaneously. Daisy Turner satisfies these requirements to a “T.” Consider, for example, that on her 104th birthday she recited from memory, without hesitation, a poem that went on for 17 minutes. Daisy grew up in a family environment that valued storytelling and “verbal art,” carrying on a tradition with deep roots in Africa. Her facility with language combined with her forceful personality, her fearlessness, and strong sense of justice made Daisy a force to be reckoned with, as you’ll discover in the accompanying recordings. One has the impression that Daisy Turner was one-of-a-kind, a memorable individual unlike any other. Yet recollections of another African American woman, Lucy Terry Prince, who came to Vermont when this area was being settled by colonists from southern New England, paint a portrait of a woman who seems to bear an uncanny resemblance to Daisy.

Lucy Terry was probably born in Africa sometime around 1725, was brought to New England as an infant via the Rhode Island slave trade, and later was a slave in Deerfield, Massachusetts, in the household of Ebenezer Wells. During the summer of 1746 the last Indian attack on Deerfield took place just south of the village. The only surviving account from the period is a 30-line poem Lucy Terry composed recounting the experience of her friends and neighbors. Seeing a parallel between Lucy’s poem and the recitations of the African griot, one scholar observes, “It is oral history, meant to be recited aloud, and there is evidence that Lucy herself was fond of repeating it into old age.”² On the basis of this poem Lucy Terry Prince is sometimes cited as America’s first African American poet.

Later the wife of Abijah Prince, Lucy and her husband lived as free people in the frontier community of Guilford, Vermont, where “Lucy was a noted character and her house a great place of resort for the young people, attracted thither by her wit and wisdom, often shown in her rhymes and stories.”³ Their abutting neighbors there were a wealthy and powerful white family by the name of Noyes. In 1785 tensions in the neighborhood came to a head. Abijah and Lucy were being harassed, their fences torn down and their hay ricks burned. Lucy Terry Prince took the matter in hand. Addressing a petition to Governor Thomas Chittenden and his councilors who were meeting at Norwich, Lucy claimed that “Abijah, Lucy and Family, are greatly oppressed & injured by John and Ormas Noyce” and asked the governor to direct the selectmen of the town of Guilford

to take measures to protect them. Her grievance was upheld. Later Lucy applied for one of her sons to be admitted to Williams College: “He was rejected on account of his race; the indignant mother argued the case in a ‘3-hours speech’ before the trustees, quoting abundantly text after text from the scriptures in support of her claims for his reception.”⁴

At the time of her death in 1821 at 97 years of age a lengthy obituary notice was published in the *Vermont Gazette* of Bennington, Vermont, in that era a rare event for a woman, let alone an African American and a former slave. Again her personality and capabilities are vividly apparent: “In this remarkable woman there was an assemblage of qualities rarely to be found among her sex. Her volubility was exceeded by none, and in general the fluency of her speech was not destitute of instruction and education. She was much respected by her acquaintance, who treated her with a degree of deference.”⁵

Modernize the language and exactly the same could be said of Daisy Turner. As you come to know Daisy through these recordings, you’ll agree that the resemblance is striking. It seems remarkable that two African American women who were born more than 150 years apart and lived in the almost all-white world of rural Vermont could share so much in common. Is it a matter of coincidence? The evidence suggests otherwise: Lucy Terry Prince and Daisy Turner as keepers of history, as eloquent speakers, as spontaneous composers, as engaging storytellers, were raised in and became masters of a folk tradition that was part of their common cultural legacy as African Americans.



Daisy Turner as a young woman

1. Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 31-315.
2. David Proper, “Lucy Terry Prince: ‘Singer of History.’” *Contribution in Black Studies* no.9 (1990-92): 187.
3. Abby Maria Hemenway, *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, vol. 5 (Brandon, VT: Carrie E.H. Page, 1891), 79.
4. Hemenway, op. cit.
5. *Vermont Gazette* [Bennington, VT] XII:41, Whole No. 613 (Tuesday, August 1, 1821).

Content Summary and Discussion Suggestions for Video and Audio Programs

The video *On My Own: The Traditions of Daisy Turner* and the 20-episode audio series *Journey's End: The Memories and Traditions of Daisy Turner and her Family* cover much of the same material: the video presents highlights from Daisy's repertoire of stories while the audio series explores individual incidents in much greater depth. Below are some suggestions for using the video in classroom setting, followed by a summary of the content of the audio series—by episode—and further suggestions for class discussion. If you have access to both the video and audio programs, consider using the video as an introduction and the audio series as a framework for an extended unit of study.

I. The Video: *On My Own*

Before showing *On My Own*, establish a context for what your students are going to see. Use the video to enhance an established unit from your curriculum—on the Civil War or the civil rights movement, for example; draw on the storytelling or African American history activities suggested below; or choose a book from the bibliography to read with your class that explores some aspect of African American experience.

When you're ready to introduce the video to your students, be sure to ask them to listen for the incident from which the title *On My Own* is taken. Discuss afterward why this is a particularly fitting phrase to use as a title for a video about Daisy Turner's life.

On My Own is 28 minutes long and includes:

- Daisy remembering the heroism of Union soldiers in the Civil War
- Explanation of folklorist Jane Beck's role in recording Daisy's stories
- Beck's summary of Daisy's family's history
- A sampling of Daisy Turner's family stories:
 - *Daisy's Black Doll*
 - *How Daisy's Sister Shot the Bull*
 - *Alec Turner, the Strong Man*
 - *Daisy Turner Goes to Market*
- The Turner home as social center
- Daisy remembering the drama of the Civil War

Summaries of Daisy’s stories and issues relating to each are included here to facilitate class discussion after viewing the video:

Daisy’s Black Doll

To conclude the school year Daisy’s teacher organized a program for parents in which each child would represent a different country or nationality and recite a poem—in competition for first prize. Daisy’s teacher wanted her to take Africa and the black doll, Dinah, but Daisy didn’t want to do it. Her father eventually talked her into it, but at the last minute Daisy changed her mind and in anger recited a defiant piece that she composed spontaneously.

The issue here for Daisy was race. Daisy didn’t want attention focused on her skin color in an all-white environment. When pushed to cooperate, Daisy fought back by tackling the issue head-on: “You needn’t crowd my dolly out although she’s black as night. And if she is at the foot of this show, I think she’ll stand as good a chance as the dollies that are white.” Why do you suppose that this is the story Daisy told over and over to everyone she met?

How Daisy’s Sister Shot the Bull

Daisy suffered from rickets as a child and during her younger years was unable to walk. At a young age she heard prayers, recitations, hymns, and songs, which she learned and which formed the basis for her life-long interest in poetry. Since she couldn’t walk she entertained herself by composing in verse—making up poems about farm life was something all the Turners did. In this episode Daisy recites part of a narrative poem about her sister Violet saving their mother’s life.

Daisy’s poem paints a vivid picture of a very dramatic incident. Have your students listen to the story and retell it in another medium, i.e. as a skit, a series of drawings, a song, etc. Have each student tell a story about a memorable incident in their life or the life of a family member.

Alec Turner, the Strong Man

Alec was a big man and very strong. Using a heavier axe—five pounds as opposed to three-and-a-half—he could cut twice as much wood as an ordinary Vermonter. In this story Alec accepts a challenge: if he can carry a 100-pound barrel of flour home to Turner Hill without stopping to rest he can keep it free of charge.

Strong men are a favorite subject of folk legend because they “beat the odds” and triumph over situations that ordinary people cannot control. Discuss why Alec’s arrival home turned into a party. (Keep in mind what happens when a home team wins.) What does Daisy do at the end of this story to emphasize that she is telling the truth? Find out if your students know any stories about unusual feats of strength.

Daisy Turner Goes to Market

Daisy's father shipped his poultry to Barry's Market in Boston. All went well until one time when a check arrived from Boston short by several hundred dollars. In response to the crisis Daisy decided to take matters into her own hands and go to Boston.

By now you've heard enough about Daisy to begin to have a sense of her as a person. How would you describe her? What about her do you admire? Write an essay, poem, or song text about Daisy.

II. The Audio Series: *Journey's End*

The following are content summary and discussion suggestions for the 20-part audio series *Journey's End: The Memories and Traditions of Daisy Turner and her Family*:

EPISODE 1: DAISY TURNER, VERMONT STORYTELLER

Introducing Daisy Turner who lived to be 104 and was an extraordinary storyteller, sharing experiences from her lifetime and from her parents and grandparents before her.

Discuss the concept of oral tradition, i.e. a body of knowledge and information passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. In many cultures—European as well as African—history was spoken rather than written and historians were poets and singers. Discuss why oral tradition might be especially important for black slaves who were not permitted to learn to read and write. Talk also about storytelling in families today (grandparents' stories about their lives, stories from deer camp, etc.). Find out if your students have a favorite family storyteller and why their stories are so good.

EPISODE 2: AFRICA, SLAVE SHIPS, AND A CHEROKEE PRINCESS

The story of Daisy's grandfather Alexander, whose parents were a shipwrecked English merchant's daughter and an African chieftain's son. This episode follows Alexander from his childhood in Africa to his capture and transport to United States, his sale to a Virginia plantation owner, and his marriage to "Princess" Silverbells (known as Rose or Rosabelle).

Talk and read about the slave trade in anticipation of this episode. The Newbery award book *Slave Dancer* by Paula Fox is an excellent resource for information about what it was like on board a slave ship.

EPISODE 3: YOUNG ALEC AND HIS RED MOCCASINS

Alexander and Rose had a son Alec, who was Daisy Turner's father. The senior Alexander was accidently killed, probably in 1849, and Rose worked as a seamstress, making fine clothes for the master's family. In this

episode Rose secretly makes a pair of red moccasins for her son Alec with disastrous consequences.

Here Daisy talks about her father's dawning awareness of his status based on clothing: the elaborate pants and shirts worn by the master's children in contrast with his nightshirt-like tunic. Discuss the symbolic importance of clothing with your students, exploring clothing as a status marker (a mink coat or a dress from Talbots), as an occupational marker (a surgeon, nun, priest, or postal worker's uniform), as a cultural marker (an East Indian woman's sari or an African man's dashiki), and as an imposed indicator of difference (a convict or a maid's uniform). Talk about why a plantation owner would not allow black slaves to dress like white people and (after listening to the episode) why the red moccasins became such an issue.

EPISODE 4: MORE STORIES OF PLANTATION LIFE

Alec was born on the Gouldin plantation in 1845 and remembered his childhood there in stories he told his children and grandchildren. Many of these were not happy memories.

In this and several later episodes Daisy talks about the importance of music in her family's life. Find out more about the role of music in African American culture: the NPR teacher's kit "Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions" is an excellent resource. Discuss also why music might be especially important to an oppressed people and think of examples from other situations (e.g. South African freedom songs, American mine workers' songs). In this episode Daisy touches on the issue of white men taking sexual advantage of slave women. Be prepared to respond to students' questions about the slave girl's suicide.

EPISODE 5: A FISHING STORY

John Gouldin's plantation was on the Rappahannock River in Port Royal, Virginia. He owned 2,000 acres and 77 slaves. If the slaves didn't work fast enough, hard enough, or early enough they would be beaten. Alec told about being treated well because he was valuable as a "breeder."

Bruce Turner, Daisy's nephew, observes that the plantation overseers used the threat of physical violence—whippings with boards that had holes drilled through them to crack the skin—as a means of keeping the slaves "under control." School children often raise the issue of fairness in response to school rules and their treatment by teachers. To try to get your students to imagine the experience of slavery, talk about their concept of "fair treatment" in the context of the life of a slave. Can there be such a thing as "fair" in system of slavery?

EPISODE 6: THE BLOOD-STAINED PRIMER

The plantation owner's granddaughter secretly taught Alec to read and write while he worked in the plantation dairy. Her mother became suspicious and interrupted a lesson with a bullwhip. Alec kept his blood-stained primer for the rest of his life. At 16, Alec escaped to join the First New Jersey Calvary and he fought in the Civil War.

Discuss why literacy—the ability to read and write—was such an important issue to both the plantation owner and to Alec Turner. Why didn't plantation owners want slaves to be literate? (One slave owner observed that it “made Negroes saucy to be able to read.”) What about literacy today? Is it still an important issue?

EPISODE 7: THE RAID

After escaping, Alec acted as guide for a union raiding force which went across the river to the Gouldin plantation. During the raid Alec shot Pressley, the overseer, in revenge for ill treatment.

The bibliography lists a number of excellent resources on the role that African Americans played in the Civil War. Use one of these resources (e.g. Zak Mettger's *Till Victory Is Won: Black Soldiers in the Civil War*) to find out more about the war experience of African Americans.

EPISODE 8: THE DOCTOR'S LETTER

Daisy recites a Civil War-era poem—a doctor's letter to the parents of a dead soldier who was his comrade in arms.

This poem stands for the experience of many—indeed, Daisy suggests that one of her Grafton neighbors received just such a letter—and captures the pathos of a young man, full of unrealized promise, cut down in his prime. The poem tells a vivid story and, true to its time, is a “romantic” literary creation. What aspects of this story seem idealized, i.e. most unlike the life story of a real person?

EPISODE 9: MARRIAGE AND NEAR-DISASTER AT SEA

After the war Alec worked helping freed slaves find jobs off the plantations. During this time he met his future wife, Sally Early, the daughter of a slave, Rachel, and a Confederate general, Jubel Early. After their marriage, Alec and Sally traveled by ship with other former slaves bound for work in Maine. Caught in a terrible storm at sea, all seemed lost until “Liza” took the situation in hand and stilled the tempest.

The central event of this story is a miracle. Have your students find out if any miracles have occurred in the lives of people that they know. Ask them to share these stories with the class.

EPISODE 10: THE SLATE QUARRY

Alec and Sally Turner lived for a time in Williamsburg, Maine, as members of a colony of freed slaves who worked in the Merrill slate quarry there. Although the colony lasted for only a very few years, it lived on in the memory of the Turner family through the many songs Alec and Sally remembered singing as members of that community.

As in other episodes of this series, Daisy emphasizes here the important role that music—particularly religious music—played in the life of her family and as an expression of community. Using the NPR kit “Wade in the Water” or other resource, find out more about such African American congregational singing traditions as “call-and-response,” the “union chorus,” and the “ring shout.”



Daisy's father, Alec Turner, in his wedding clothes—Washington, D.C., September 1869.

EPISODE 11: COMING TO VERMONT

Grafton, Vermont, sawmill owners, Charles White and Vestus Wilbur, were down on their luck when they chanced to meet Alec Turner in Boston. They needed an investor and people to work in their mill; Alec needed to move his family to a healthy environment to help Sally recover from tuberculosis. Alec found an investor for White and Wilbur and the Turners moved to Grafton. By 1883 when Daisy was born, Alec had bought 100 acres and called his farm Journey's End.

Why do you think Alec Turner chose to call his farm “Journey's End?” What does this tell you about his perspective on his past and his hope for the future?

EPISODE 12: ALEC TURNER, THE STRONG MAN

Alec was a big man and very strong. Using a heavier axe—five pounds as opposed to three-and-a-half—he could cut twice as much wood as an ordinary Vermonter. When Alec and Sally moved to Grafton in 1872, many local people were curious about the color of their skin. One boy asked Alec to roll up his sleeves to see if he was the same color all over. In this episode Alec accepts a challenge and performs a feat of strength.

Difference is an important issue in American society. Although our

system of government is structured to protect the rights of the individual, people who are different—African Americans, homosexuals, Native Americans, Jews—often encounter prejudice and hostility. Have your students talk about race, ethnicity, sexual preference, religion, and social class in the context of their community. How often do they interact with people who are different from themselves? How do they react to difference? Other people’s prejudices often stand out clearly but one’s own are harder to see.

EPISODE 13: HOW DAISY’S SISTER SHOT THE BULL

Daisy suffered from rickets as a child and during her younger years was unable to walk. At a young age she heard prayers, recitations, hymns, and songs, which she learned and which formed the basis for her life-long interest in poetry. Since she couldn’t walk she entertained herself by composing in verse—making up poems about farm life was something all the Turners did. In this episode Daisy recites part of a narrative poem about her sister Violet saving their mother’s life.

Daisy’s poem paints a vivid picture of a very dramatic incident. Have your students listen to the story and retell it in another medium, i.e. as a skit, a series of drawings, a song, etc. Have each student tell a story about a memorable incident in their life or the life of a family member.

EPISODE 14: DAISY’S BLACK DOLL

To conclude the school year, Daisy’s teacher organized a program for parents in which each child would represent a different country or nationality and recite a poem—in competition for first prize. Daisy’s teacher wanted her to take Africa and the black doll, Dinah, but Daisy didn’t want to do it. Her father eventually talked her into it, but at the last minute Daisy changed her mind and in anger recited a defiant piece that she composed spontaneously.

The issue here for Daisy was race. Daisy didn’t want attention focused on her skin color in an all-white environment. When pushed to cooperate, Daisy fought back by tackling the issue head-on: “You needn’t crowd my dolly out although she’s black as night. And if she is at the foot of this show, I think she’ll stand as good a chance as the dollies that are white.” Why do you suppose that this is the story Daisy told over and over to everyone she met?

EPISODE 15: DAISY TURNER GOES TO MARKET

Daisy’s father shipped his poultry to Barry’s Market in Boston. All went well until one time when a check arrived from Boston short by several hundred dollars. Daisy decided to take matters into her own hands and go to Boston.

By now you've heard enough about Daisy to begin to have a sense of her as a person. How would you describe her? Write about Daisy in an essay, poem, or song text.

EPISODE 16: DAISY'S PREMONITION

Daisy and her father were so close that they could communicate psychically. Once while she was living in Boston she was visited by an apparition of her father telling her to come home. Daisy left for Grafton immediately and in the end saved her mother's life.

Daisy tells of being visited by her "father's form" which "seemed" to speak to her. This may at first sound far-fetched, yet many people tell strikingly similar stories. Individuals who are recently bereaved—particularly older people who've lost a long-time companion—often speak of sensing their loved one's presence or seeing their form and sometimes even receiving a message, although not necessarily through spoken words. Have your students ask friends or family members if they have ever had this kind of experience. Caution students that people may be reticent to talk about it, fearing that they will sound foolish. Near-death experiences would also be an interesting phenomenon to investigate.



Sally Early Turner, Daisy's mother.

EPISODE 17: A NEW YEAR'S RECITATION

By the turn of the century the Turner household had become a kind of community social center. For parties they would hire a fiddler and Daisy would call the dances. The highlight of the evening would sometimes be a poetry recitation.

In this episode Daisy recites a narrative poem with a very pointed moral. Have your students discuss the lesson that it's trying to teach. Do they find it relevant to their lives and experience today? Find out if any of your students know contemporary narrative poetry—rap or song texts, for example—that is trying to teach a lesson or make a particular point. Compare Daisy's recitation with these.

EPISODE 18: DAISY'S NEAR MARRIAGE

At 40 Daisy became engaged to Joseph Bonet. When he later broke off the engagement, Daisy sued him—and won!

Is this something you would expect of Daisy Turner? Why or why not?

EPISODE 19: ALEC TURNER'S FUNERAL

Alec Turner and his family cultivated 100 acres and planted fruit trees, potatoes, corn, beans and hay. He had two working oxen and two milk cows. At the time of Alec's death in 1923, Journey's End had been his home for 50 years.

Daisy tells about people recognizing that her father was unusual and smart and suggests that he got a part of his strength and smartness from his spiritual life: "He fell on his knees and he talked with God, he talked with Jesus." Prayer plays a central role in many of Daisy's stories, reflecting the role that religion has played in the Turner family and the African American community. Have your students think back over the episodes they've listened to in order to remember the occasions on which Daisy has talked about divine guidance and intervention. What were some of the ways in which Daisy felt that she and her family had been helped by prayer?

EPISODE 20: JOURNEY'S END

For most of her 104 years Daisy lived in the house built by her father at Journey's End. In 1962, when Daisy was nearly 80 years old, Journey's End burned and everything was lost. But Daisy continued reciting poetry, singing songs, and telling about her family heritage until her death 26 years later. She was proud of her heritage and understood the value of her family tradition.

As Daisy explained, "We didn't just come from nothing and nowhere. We've got a background and the background can be traced right down to the roots." Daisy is referring to factors that contribute to a person's sense of identity in the world. Encourage your students to talk about their heritage—family history, holiday customs, food traditions, and stories—and to reflect on how these affect their sense of who they are.



*Turner Hill
in Grafton,
Vermont.*

Suggestions for Additional Lessons

What is the potential significance of Daisy Turner to teachers in New England? As a resourceful, intelligent, outspoken woman she offers a positive role model for boys and girls of any age. Her stories present a wonderful opportunity to explore the role that families play as keepers of history. And as a person of advanced age (102 at the time that the video was made) Daisy's energy and vitality fly in the face of stereotypes about senior citizens. We present these ideas simply to suggest the many possibilities that the Daisy Turner materials represent. Here are two additional sets of activities that we feel are especially important—"African American History in New England" and "Storytelling as Verbal Art."

I. African American History in New England

Daisy Turner's parents came to Grafton, Vermont, after the Civil War, drawn by the possibility of work in the north. They were not alone in making this journey: many African Americans came to Vermont looking for the opportunity to begin a new life. Former slave William Anderson, for example, was befriended by soldiers of the Eleventh Vermont Infantry and came back to Shoreham, Vermont, with Colonel Charles Hunsdon when he returned to his hometown. There Anderson became a farmer, a teamster with a wagon and sleigh for hire, and also a blacksmith and wheelwright. His son William J. Anderson later was elected to the Vermont legislature, and his daughter, Mary Annette, graduated from Middlebury College as valedictorian.

In Vermont the story of a former slave coming north with a returning Union soldier to settle in his hometown is told over and over again in towns throughout the state (the number of blacks living in white households in Vermont increased by 24% from 1860 to 1870). Few achieved the prominence of the Anderson family and many, in fact, lived in poverty on the margins of white society. But individual African Americans or African American families were often a part of life in 19th century rural Vermont communities. Did former slaves come home with soldiers in other parts of New England or was this experience for some reason peculiar to Vermont? Local research is the only way to answer a question like this, and local, original research may be the only way to recover much of the unrecorded history of African Americans throughout the region.

And there is much African American history to know. Although scholars disagree about exact dates, there were Africans living in New England at least as early as 1638 when the Salem ship *Desire* traded Pequot Indians for enslaved blacks and brought several Africans to Boston from the West Indies. Slave labor never played a large role in the economy of New

England—in 1680 there are estimated to have been less than 1,000 slaves throughout the region—but New England merchants were themselves deeply implicated in the slave trade. Many of the ships that carried Africans into slavery were owned by New Englanders and shipped out of New England ports; during the 18th century, Newport, Rhode Island, controlled between 60 and 90 per cent of the American trade in African slaves.

Even before the Revolution, there were free blacks as well as slaves living throughout New England. Yankee African Americans were among the 5,000 blacks who fought as free men in the American Revolution. And in the republican fervor of the war, each soon-to-be New England state outlawed slavery: Vermont with the adoption of its constitution in 1777, Massachusetts in 1780, and Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Hampshire in 1784. Freed from slavery, African Americans nevertheless were denied opportunities to advance economically in the north: “Unlike other immigrant groups who were remunerated economically and socially for their initiative and perseverance in assimilation, blacks were, more often than not, punished for such behavior by a white community that feared black advancement might threaten the stability of caste relationships.”¹

In the period following the Revolution the majority of African Americans in New England found employment as laborers and servants.



Daisy Turner (second from left) as a school girl in Grafton, Vermont.

The aristocrats of this system were self-employed blacks who worked as barbers, carpenters, and blacksmiths; even with the development of factories there were no black mill girls. With a major exception: in the early 19th century, seafaring offered African American men a greater degree of tolerance and better wages than any other occupation. On board ship black men could not only rank higher but also earn more than their white co-workers. Racial boundaries that were never transgressed on shore became secondary to those established by the institution of the ship. This situation drew a great many African American men to the sea and professional seaman became a bulwark of a developing black middle class.

During this same period increasing numbers of African Americans were able to establish their own households independent of their white employers, and in urban areas African Americans worked toward the development of their own community institutions. Thus black churches, schools, and fraternal organizations grew up in Hartford, New Haven, Newport, and Boston, promoting both a movement for reform and an attack on slavery. African Americans in New England were speaking up and speaking out, and with notable results: in 1843 the Eastern Railroad, under considerable pressure from Boston's black community, ended its policy of separate cars for blacks; and in 1855 Boston city schools were integrated. Boston was regarded as one of the nation's great liberal communities. It was by reputation "foremost in advocating the Negro's cause and vouchsafing him the immunities of citizenship."² Much of the anti-slavery agitation was centered there and it was one of the stations in the Underground Railroad. But Boston was "liberal" by the standards of the era, "which in the field of race relations meant that Negroes were tolerated but not promoted, nor were they completely integrated into the warp and woof of the community."³

In 1860 on the eve of the Civil War there were 4.5 million African Americans in the American South, 4 million of whom were slaves and 500,000 free. This in contrast with a total of 24,711 free African Americans living in New England. The New England number was small, only about five per cent of the total free black population, but it was nevertheless significant. African Americans had lived in New England for generations before the "Great Migration" that brought blacks from the rural south to the urban north during the 20th century. African Americans were, in fact, among the founding families of New England, and their history here, although largely unknown, is deserving of attention. We encourage you to use the Daisy Turner materials as a springboard for exploring African American history in your community. Here are some ways to get started:

- **Contact African American organizations and institutions in your community**—churches, cultural and fraternal organizations, community centers. It may be that there are few print resources, but a number of

human ones—people who know a great deal about the recent past or have researched more distant eras and would be willing to share their knowledge with your class.

- **Contact community institutions**—the public library and local or regional historical society—to find out what kinds of resources their collections include.
- **Consult published town histories.** The material treating black experience may be patronizing or outright racist in tone, but town histories are often one of the few published resources for researching African American history locally.
- **Contact state-wide organizations**—the state historical society, the state archive, manuscript/oral history collections at state universities—to explain your project and solicit guidance. Racial equity programs at your state department of education and or multicultural programs at your state humanities council may be able to help as well.
- **Contact African American Studies programs** at colleges and universities near you. Faculty members in these programs can be excellent guides to regional resources and may even have done research in your community.
- **Invite parents of children in your school to come to class** and share stories about their families and their history. Members of the local community, whether or not they have children in the school, might be willing to visit your class as well.
- **Work within local networks.** Generally one contact leads to several more, and before you know it you’ve discovered a host of resources you never imagined were there.
- **Keep your focus as local as possible.** It will require more work, especially if it hasn’t been done before. But the rewards are great as you move toward presenting a more complete and inclusive history of your students’ hometown.

See also the list of resource organizations that follows the bibliography.

1. William Pierson, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 47.
2. James Oliver Horton, “Blacks in Antebellum Boston: The Migrant and the Community, an Analysis of Adaptation.” In *Making a Living: The Work Experience of African Americans in New England*, edited by Robert Hall and Michael Harvey (Boston: New England Foundation for the Humanities, 1995), 310.
3. Charles Sumner Brown, “The Genesis of the Negro Lawyer in New England, Part I.” *Ibid.*, 394.

II. Storytelling and Verbal Art

Daisy was very skillful at using language in general conversation, in storytelling, and in her more formal compositions. Folklorists refer to the “artful” use of spoken language as verbal art.

Speaking well is prized in many cultures. Daniel Webster is still remembered as a great American orator. In Ireland pilgrims kiss the Blarney Stone in hopes that the “gift of blarney”—smooth talk—will be given to them. Perhaps this is the legacy of a pre-literate past: centuries ago “smooth talkers” were inducted into a bardic tradition to sing of heroes and their exploits. They acted as the collective memory of the society, they were the keepers of history. Thus the ability to spin a good yarn was not simply a matter of casual entertainment. An Irish, African, or Greek “Homer” performed an important social function and was much celebrated for the achievement.

Even in American culture in the generations before the introduction of radio or TV, back when the old-timers recall having to make their own fun, storytelling often played a prominent role in everyday life. What better way to pass the time than with a good story? Stories were passed from generation to generation and certain family members were well known for having the largest repertoire and being the best storyteller.

Although times have changed and some storytelling situations have fallen away, storytelling, like other forms of folk culture, remains very much alive and well. Stories are, after all, a basic medium of communication. Our lives are rich in stories and it’s only their utter familiarity that makes them seem routine and unexceptional. Consider, for example, the tales born by recess “tattletales” or the basic story-form of gossip. Among the premier storytellers of everyday life are, of course, our senior citizens, who take special pleasure in reviewing their lives and experience through stories. And family is often an important conduit for stories, as family identity is reinforced through the repeated telling of a few select stories.

It is this vernacular, everyday tradition of storytelling of which Daisy Turner was a master—in contrast with storytelling as a form of paid, professional entertainment. And it’s this tradition of everyday storytelling that we encourage you to explore with your students. Here are some suggestions for creating a unit on storytelling:

Day 1—Talk with your students about story form: How do they recognize a “story” when they hear one? What would they think of a story that didn’t have a conclusion, that ended before a problem was resolved? Does something always have to happen in a story? What do they think makes a good story. Does it have to have romance? violence? suspense?

Activity: Tell a story around the room: have one student start a story and then pass it on to another, who in turn passes it to another—with each

adding a new component to the story. Talk afterward about the different kinds of pieces that each contributed.

Day 2—Find out if your students know a person that they think is a particularly good storyteller. Discuss what they think makes someone a good storyteller. Is there anything special about how they use their body, their face, their voice? Every telling of a story is a mini-performance.

Activity: Watch the section of the Daisy Turner video where she tells the story about her school recitation with the black doll, Dinah. Have your students watch carefully to see what makes her performance so effective. Later on Daisy also tells a story about her father as strong man. Pay close attention to the way she ends this story (“Now that’s the truth or I’ll never speak a word again”). Storytellers often use stock phrases to mark the beginning or end of a story. Have your students think of examples from fairy tales.

Day 3—Explore with your students the kinds of situations in which storytelling “naturally” occurs: at bedtime, after holiday meals, when relatives visit, at deer camp, while watching family slides or looking at photographs, at reunions. See if individual students can describe specific occasions from their experience which included storytelling.

Activity: Imaginatively create a storytelling situation in the classroom—a campfire at night, for example—and invite students to tell an appropriate story. Talk afterward about how the context—

location, activity, and audience—shapes the telling.



Daisy Turner in the early 1900s.

Day 4—Stories that people tell about themselves and their lives are known as “personal experience narratives.” Everyone has a stock of stories that they tell about themselves. These often recount an experience that was out of the ordinary or reflect a person’s values and their sense of themselves in the world. Encourage your students to talk about the different kinds of stories they have heard adults tell about themselves.

Activity: Have a storytelling session in which each student tells a story about themselves. Think together afterward about what you can learn about each person from their story.

Day 5—Researchers working on a family folklore project for the Smithsonian determined that family stories usually fall into one of the following categories: heroes, rogues, mischief-makers, survivors, innocents, migrations, lost fortunes, courtships, family feuds, and supernatural happenings. Find out from your students how the family stories they know do or don’t fit these categories.

Activity: Encourage each student to bring a family heirloom to school to share with the class. (Discourage things that are especially fragile or valuable.) Ask that they also bring a family story that is somehow connected with this artifact. Think together afterward about how these stories reflect America’s culturally plural history.

Culminating lesson—Storytelling is one form of verbal art among many. Consider also folktales, legends, proverbs, riddles, jokes, game rhymes, and folk speech, not to mention folksongs and ballads. As forms of oral folklore, people learn these informally from one another by example, much as small children learn to speak. African American oral folklore is especially rich with such distinctive traditions as dozens and toasts. Find out from your students how they learn jokes—from whom, in what situations, etc.

Activity: Host a “verbal art fest” in which each member of your class performs an item from the above list that they learned traditionally, i.e. from another person. Reflect afterward on the ways in which oral folklore enriches our lives.

With this introduction enjoy the artistry of master storyteller Daisy Turner!

Time Line

- c. 1795-1805 Daisy's great-grandmother's ship is wrecked.
- c. 1796-1806 Daisy's grandfather, Alexander, is born in Africa.
- c. 1818-1828 Alexander is captured, brought to the U.S., and sold as a slave.
- 1845 Daisy's father, Alec, is born.
- 1862 Alec Turner runs away from the Gouldin plantation.
- 1869 Alec Turner marries Sally Early.
- 1872 Alec and Sally Turner move to Vermont.
- 1883 Daisy Turner is born.
- 1889 Journey's End is built.
- 1891 Daisy makes up the verse about the black doll.
- 1899 Daisy goes down to the Boston Market.
- c. 1902-1923 Daisy works and lives in the Boston area.
- 1923 Alec Turner dies.
- 1933 Sally Turner dies.
- 1962 Journey's End burns.
- September 1983- June 1984 Jane Beck interviews Daisy weekly.
- 1984-1985 Interviews continue with videotaping.
- 1988 Daisy Turner dies.

Additional Resources on Slavery and African American History in New England

Other Vermont Folklife Center Titles on Daisy Turner and Her Family

Working with talented children's book writers and illustrators the Vermont Folklife Center has adapted two of Daisy Turner's family stories to picture book format.

Alec's Primer, by Mildred Pitts Walter. Paintings by Larry Johnson.

32 pages, illustrated. ISBN: Cloth, 0-916718-20-4

<http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/childrens-books/alecs-primer/>

Daisy and the Doll, by Michael Medearis and Angela Shelf Medearis.

Paintings by Larry Johnson. 32 pages, illustrated. ISBN: Cloth,
0-916718-15-8, Paper, 0-916718-23-9.

<http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/childrens-books/daisy-doll/>

Online Resources for African American History

- Teaching Resources
- Spirituals and Songs about Slavery
- Slave Narratives
- Images of Slavery
- African American History in New England

Teaching Resources:

Digital History: Using New Technologies to Enhance Teaching and Research, University of Houston. Classroom-tested handouts and fact sheets on slavery:

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/us16.cfm>

Best of History Web Sites. Resources, lesson plans, teacher's guides, activities on slavery:

http://www.besthistorysites.net/USHistory_SouthSlavery.shtml

Civil War Preservation Trust History Center and Classroom: African American Troops in the Union Army:

http://www.civilwar.org/historyclassroom/hc_usctlesson.htm

Yahooligans, The Web Guide for Kids: Resources on Slaves and Abolitionists:

<http://kids.yahoo.com/directory/Around-the-World/Countries/United-States/History/Slavery/Slaves-and-Abolitionists>

Lesson plan on spirituals from EDSITEment: The Best of the Humanities on the Web. The National Endowment for the Humanities in partnership with the National Trust for the Humanities and the MarcoPolo Education Foundation:

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=318

Spirituals and Songs about Slavery

The Legacy of the African-American Spiritual.

Minnesota Public Radio Sound Learning:

<http://soundlearning.publicradio.org/features/2003/12/>

Spirituals and Songs about Slavery: The Enoch Pratt Free Library Collection of Broadside Verses from the Civil War:

<http://www.prattlibrary.org/digital/index.aspx?id=7424>

The Folk Music Index listing of current recordings. Chose the

“bottom of the file” option and scroll up to find “Darling Nellie Gray”:

<http://www.ibiblio.org/folkindex/d02.htm>

Links to online resources for “spirituals” on TeacherServe, from the National Humanities Center:

<http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/tserve/nineteen/nlinksaarcwgm.htm#spirituals>

Slave Narratives

Been Here So Long: Selections from WPA American Slave Narratives at the New Deal Network (NDN). A research and teaching resource based at the Institute for Learning Technologies (ILT) at Columbia University:

<http://www.newdeal.feri.org/asn/index.htm>

Online resources listed at *Been Here So Long*:

<http://www.newdeal.feri.org/asn/bib.htm>

Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project.

American Memory at the Library of Congress:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

Voices from the Days of Slavery: Former Slaves Tell Their Stories.

Recordings with former slaves from the Federal Writers Project.

American Memory at the Library of Congress:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/>

American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology at the University of Virginia: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/wpahome.html>

Slave Voices from The Special Collections Library, Duke University:
<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/slavery/>

African American History: A Guide to Resources & Research on the Web.
University of Colorado links page for slave narratives:
<http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/govpubs/us/blackhistory.htm>

Creative Folk: African American History & Heritage Site. A personal website with a little bit of everything:
<http://www.creativefolk.com/blackhistory/blackhistory.html>

Images of Slavery:

Primary Source Set: Photographs of Slaves and Slave Life (1862- ca. 1907)
Library of Congress Learning Page:
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/lessons/psources/slavpho2.html>

The Museum of American Photography: The Face of Slavery and Other Early Images of African Americans:
<http://www.photographymuseum.com/faceof.html>

Digital Schomburg Images of 19th Century African Americans, Civil War.
New York Public Library:
http://149.123.1.8/schomburg/images_aa19/cwar.cfm?cisq8528

Digital Schomburg Images of 19th Century African Americans, Slavery.
New York Public Library:
http://149.123.1.8/schomburg/images_aa19/slavery.cfm?cisq8528

Slavery in America, Teacher Resources. Slavery in America Image Gallery:
<http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/scripts/sia/gallery.cgi>

African American History in New England

- General
- Connecticut
- Maine
- Massachusetts
- New Hampshire
- Rhode Island
- Vermont

GENERAL

African American Research in New England. New England Historic Genealogical Society. Articles available online include, “New England African American History Resources” ; “Researching African American Participation in the Civil War, Part One: New England Regiments” ; “Using Local Histories to Research New England African Americans.” http://www.newenglandancestors.org/education/articles/research/special_topics/african_american/african_american_research_in_new_england_659_210.asp

The African-American Mosaic: A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History & Culture. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/intro.html>

The Progress of a People. American Memory Project, Library of Congress. “Negro in the Wars of the Nation,” featuring the pamphlet *The Negro as a Soldier*; written by Christian A. Fleetwood, Sergeant-major 4th U. S. Colored Troops, for the Negro Congress held in Atlanta, Georgia in 1895. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aap/aapwars.html>

African American Research at Ancestry.com For many African Americans, tracking down ancestors can present a unique set of challenges—few cultural groups face as many obstacles when it comes to family history research. Often, a lack of credible documentation can make the journey both difficult and time-consuming. Fortunately, a vast collection of resource materials are now available and locating key information and records can often be done online at home or at your local library. As with any family history research, it all comes down to a question of persistence, know-how, and even a little luck. <http://www.ancestry.com/learn/contentcenters/contentcenter.aspx?page=africanam>

CONNECTICUT

Exploring Amistad. Mystic Seaport, Mystic, CT. The Amistad Revolt of 1839-1842 was a shipboard uprising off the coast of Cuba that carried itself to the United States--where the Amistad Captives set off an intense legal, political, and popular debate over the slave trade, slavery, race, Africa, and ultimately America itself. <http://amistad.mysticseaport.org/main/welcome.html>

MAINE

Maine Black History Resources A comprehensive list of online resources ranging from advocacy to the underground railroad.

<http://www.visibleblackhistory.com/Resources.htm>

MASSACHUSETTS

Guide to Black Boston A web site created as a resource for the Boston African American community and to provide a service to visitors that have an interest in African American culture and community activities throughout the city. <http://boston.blacksoftware.com/about.htm>

Boston African American National Historic Site Located in the heart of Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood, the site includes 15 pre-Civil War structures relating to the history of Boston's 19th century African-American community, including the African Meeting House, the oldest standing African-American church in the United States. The sites are linked by the 1.6 mile Black Heritage Trail. Augustus Saint-Gaudens' memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the African-American Massachusetts 54th Regiment, stands on the trail.

<http://www.nps.gov/boaf/>

The Museum of Afro American History (MAAH), Boston The Museum is a not-for-profit history institution dedicated to preserving, conserving and accurately interpreting the contributions of African Americans during the colonial period in New England. Through educational workshops, youth camps, special events and unique partnerships with professional organizations and educational institutions, the Museum places the African American experience in a social, cultural and historical perspective. <http://www.afroammuseum.org/about.htm>

Memorial Hall Museum, Old Deerfield, Massachusetts "Turns of the Centuries," an online exhibit contains a section titled, "Struggle for Freedom: Working Black Yankees."

<http://memorialhall.mass.edu/turns/index.jsp>

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Black History of the Seacoast at Portsmouth. African American history in New Hampshire begins as early as 1645. Hundreds of blacks, enslaved and free, lived in the seacoast in the 1700s. Black men fought in the Revolution and the Civil War. Their stories are presented on this web site. <http://seacoastnh.com/blackhistory/>

RHODE ISLAND

Rhode Island Black Heritage Society. The Society is constituted for the purpose of: Procuring, collecting, and preserving books, pamphlets, letters, manuscripts, prints, photographs, paintings, and any other historical material relating to the history of the Blacks of Rhode Island; encouraging and promoting the study of such history by lectures and otherwise; and publishing and diffusing information as to such history. http://www.providenceri.com/RI_BlackHeritage/



VERMONT

Rokeby Museum. Ferrisburg, Vermont. The Robinsons were devout Quakers and radical abolitionists, and they harbored many fugitive slaves at Rokeby, their family home and farm, during the decades of the 1830s and 1840s. Among the thousands of letters in the family's correspondence collection are several that mention fugitive slaves by name and in some detail. Rokeby Museum is one of the best-documented Underground Railroad sites in the country.

<http://www.rokeby.org/underground.html>

