By 1808, the United States officially rejected slavery, banning slave trading. As some forward-thinking whites and freed blacks would soon find out, it would take the country much longer to discard the notion of racial inequality.

Nowhere was that struggle more evident than in Connecticut. The incidents, at times, seem unthinkable in the state where the American abolitionist movement took hold: New Haven residents voting to kill a proposed “Negro College,” planned by Yale graduate Simeon Jocelyn in 1831; the preaching of pastors - even Lyman Beecher - advocating to send blacks back to Africa; an 1834 mob attack on Prudence Crandall's integrated school for young women in Canterbury.

"The colored people can never rise from their menial position in our country," wrote Andrew Judson, a federal judge and the school's next-door neighbor. "They are an inferior race of beings, and never can or ought to be recognized as the equals of whites."
Crandall's school never reopened.

With the mission of navigating Connecticut's complicated history of slavery, freedom and equality - as well as to highlight the achievements of the state's black citizens against many odds - the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery Resistance and Abolition recently launched Citizens All, an interactive website and repository for new scholarly research on this chapter in American history (http://cmi2.yale.edu/citizens_all/).

Filled with anecdotes, pictures, interactive video and links to historical documents, the site aims to change people's view of slavery and dispel long-propagated myths, including that a free, progressive North existed vs. a slaveholding South, and that the North instantly embraced freed blacks.

Historical documents found in Connecticut town basements and archives, according to David Blight, center director, serve as the site's main sources for piecing together the state's complicated - and sometimes very complicit - past.

"Local history matters, because a larger history of the nation and of the world has to begin somewhere," said Blight, a Yale professor and one of the foremost scholars of slavery and its legacy in America. "It has to begin with individual stories, with family stories, with local stories. "Citizens All illustrates the extent of connections to broader, more global issues that often have roots intertwined with our local hometown stories."

The account of New Haven resident's William Lanson's challenges is one of many exhibits proving that Connecticut had its share of opponents to freedom and equality for all.

Born in the bustling port city on Long Island Sound in 1776 to a prestigious black family, Lanson built his own reputation and fortune by engineering the extension of New Haven's Long Wharf out to deep water in 1812, turning it into the largest wharf in the U.S. of the period.

Shortly after, Lanson, who started a livery and hotel, fell out of good grace with state legislators for drafting a petition objecting to a new law that added "white" to Connecticut's voting requirements. He also irked city officials - and white business rivals - when he began constructing affordable-housing developments around the city for newly freed blacks.

An 1831 raid of Lanson's Liberian Hotel for "immoral entertainment" - based on misinformation likely spread by these merchants - and his subsequent arrest accelerated his decline. Incarcerated several times after that, Lanson died penniless in 1851.

"I have been in prison five times since, which will make out in all about 450 days in six years, and I ... do not know what it is for," he testified in 1845. "I should think that in 5 or 6 years they would find something, but I never have known anything found ... by anyone."

Other stories on the website demonstrate a willingness by some white Connecticut residents to accept freed blacks as fellow citizens.

Cesar and Lowis Peters. who were the property of an Anglican minister named Samuel Peters, continued to work their master's Hebron farm after he fled to England during the American Revolution. When a relative of Peters arrived years later to claim the black couple and their eight children, the Hebron townspeople came together and rescued the highly regarded family, preventing them from being separated at auction.

"I can't begin to tell you how much I have learned personally since starting this site," said Angela Kaiser, a special projects coordinator at the Gilder Lehrman Center who oversaw development of the website. "We're only now beginning to address and to break the silence about the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

"In order to understand the modern world, we need to understand the role the slave trade played in it."

Research, Education

Developed in partnership with UNESCO through its Transatlantic Slave Trade Education Project, Citizens All employed a number of Yale historians, as well as local journalists and curators, over the course of a year to dig for information on slavery and its aftermath in Connecticut. The site, according to Kaiser, was built to encourage more investigation and discussion, largely among middle- and high-school students.

"We're trying to get the story straight by expanding the scholarship and then bridge the gap between that
scholarship and public knowledge," Kaiser said.

Greenwich High School created a summer program for students to conduct their own independent studies into slavery and emancipation, while taking classes from Yale scholars.

"We had projects ranging from 'The Good and the Greed of the Amistad Trial,' from an 11th-grader, to how Connecticut newspapers were complicit in the slave trade by running fictional runaway-slave advertisements," Kaiser said. "I have not had such a satisfying and rewarding experience in such a long time."

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