

### History, Memory, and Politics Written in Stone: Early African American Grave Inscriptions

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In Memory of  
Boston Trowtrow  
Govener of ye Affri  
can Trib  
May 28 1772  
Aet 66

The inscription on Boston Trowtrow's gravemarker in Norwichtown, Connecticut is hard to read. Lichen has spread all over the surface of the stone and is likely to contribute to its eventual decay. While it lasts, however, this gravestone is a visible reminder of the early African American tradition of electing "Negro governors," leaders or public representatives of the black communities that appointed them. The Boston Trowtrow marker provides tangible proof of biography and history by commemorating a man whose very name links New England identity to West African descent.<sup>1</sup>

When looking at African American gravestones, we have to keep in mind that for several centuries, only privileged people could afford carved monuments meant to keep records of their lives. Ordinary Americans marked their graves with inexpensive, easily available materials such as wooden stakes or boards. Exposure to the sun, wind and rain eventually made the paint come off and caused the wood to decompose. Such markers served as graphic reminders of the transitory nature of life, but they did not provide lasting records. Fieldstones were more durable, but they carried little information and were easily removed by accident, particularly if the burial site was not maintained by neighbors or descendants.

On the other hand, we should not impose modern American concepts of memorialization on early African American burial grounds. The narrator of Lalita Tademy's family saga *Cane River* addresses this cultural discrepancy when the slave Philomene visits her children's grave: "There was only one grave, only one smooth, flat stone from the river that had been placed at the top of the mound to mark the spot. No names adorned the site anywhere. She would not have been able to read them if they had." (Tademy 165)<sup>2</sup> In the antebellum South, the idea of carved epitaphs for slaves was absurd, since African Americans were legally condemned to illiteracy. And yet some masters commissioned gravemarkers with inscriptions for slaves they felt especially attached to. Whether inspired by convention or genuine affection, the masters knew that they were leaving a record of their own generosity as well as of their gratitude for services rendered.

When given the opportunity, early African Americans had their own ways of marking burials and holding funerals. The latter tended to be heavily policed by white supervision and statutory restrictions, which were prompted by the fear of slave rebellions. In spite of those regulations, black slaves in the Americas managed to hold on to their distinctive burial customs. Their celebratory nature baffled most of the European visitors who left descriptions of the complicated choreography of the rituals they witnessed in the travel literature of the time.

Funerals often involved grave offerings, which were meant to supply the spirits of the deceased with sustenance and to prevent them from returning to haunt the living. The grave goods proper were placed in the grave at interment. Other gifts to the dead as well as selected personal belongings were laid on the surface. Since these objects marked gravesites in highly individual ways, letter-inscribed tombstones were not really necessary.

After slavery, blacks were still, by law or by custom, excluded from or segregated within most burial grounds of the United States. Segregation facilitated the preservation of distinctly African American ways of burying the dead and marking their graves. In coastal South Carolina, for example, impressive assemblages of objects on graves were noted in black cemeteries in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

In the comparatively smaller black communities of the North, creolized African customs of grave marking were less likely to survive than in the South. Burial sites were expected to be marked some way or other, and we may assume that African Americans appreciated carved gravestones as much as their European American neighbors did, although very few of them were able to purchase the costly monuments. Apart from the extraordinary cemeteries of Newport and Providence, Rhode Island there are few colonial burial grounds in the United States which contain more than a scattering of gravestones with detailed inscriptions for deceased African Americans. (Tashjian 163-96)

One gravestone that may serve to illustrate the precarious condition of the few remaining witnesses of lives past is the Quash Gomer marker in Wethersfield, Connecticut. Before the largest part of the sandstone surface flaked off, it said:

In [Memory of]  
Quas[h Gomer: a]  
Native [of Angola in]  
Africa[, brought from]  
there [in 1748, &]  
di[ed June 6<sup>th</sup> 1799,]  
A[ged 68 years.]

Now, all we are left with is a hint of African provenience. Compared to this fragmentary evidence, the memorials for François and for Tenor Abro, Quash Gomer's neighbors in the graveyard, have fared better, but chipped borders indicate that their silent presence in Wethersfield is doomed as well:

In Memory of  
FRANCOIS  
who was born in Africa,  
and died July 1st  
1816, aged about  
55 years.

In memory of  
Tenor Abro, who  
died April 5<sup>th</sup> 1795  
in the 25<sup>th</sup> year  
of his age.

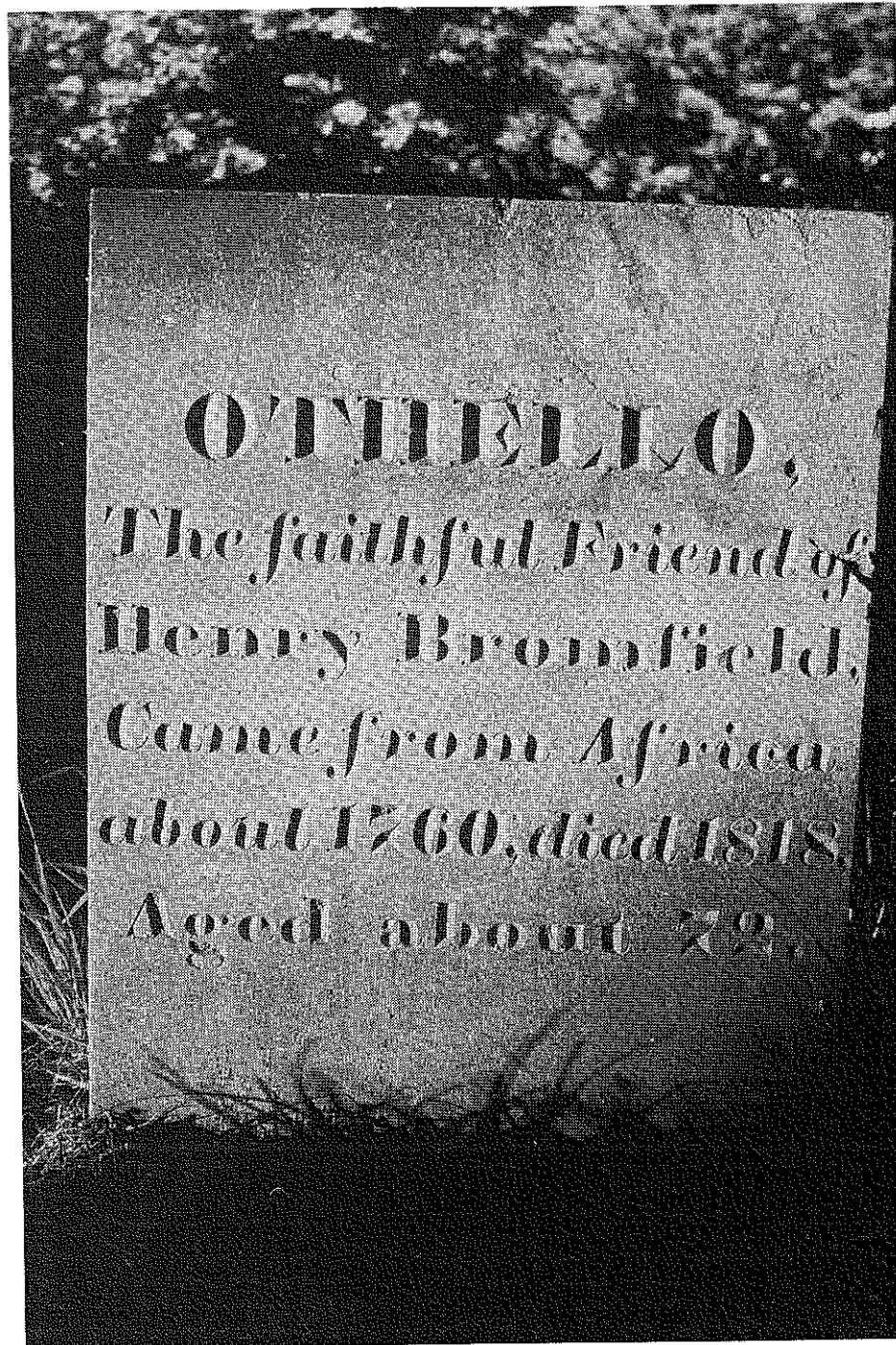
On the tombstone erected for Nero, a slave in Princeton, Massachusetts, the name of the interred has gone with the layers of slate that have broken off the upper right front of the marker. Historical records supply the missing information in this case, but one may wonder how many gravestones broke apart and disappeared into the ground before such evidence was collected or reconstructed.<sup>4</sup> The memorials of Nero's companions, African American slaves owned by the same individual, are in good condition:

Here lye[th the]  
body of [Nero a]  
Negro man Ser  
vant to the Honbl  
Moses Gill Esqr  
who died March  
1th 1776 aged 39 years

Im Memory of  
Flova a Negro wo  
(w)man Servan to the  
Honbl Moses Gill Esqr  
who died June 13<sup>th</sup>  
1778 aged 41 years

In Memory of  
Thomas a negro  
man servant to the  
Honbl Moses Gill  
Esqr who died  
Sepr 14<sup>th</sup> 1782  
aged 89 years





The John Jack stone in Concord, Massachusetts, which was put up in the Old Hill Burying Ground on the eve of the American Revolution, had broken into pieces by the third decade of the nineteenth century. Fortunately, it was replaced by a replica and has been well maintained ever since. Its epitaph first gained celebrity when a British officer copied it and sent it to England in 1775, where it was published in a London newspaper:

God wills us free, man wills us slaves.  
 I will as God wills Gods will be done.  
 Here lies the body of  
 JOHN JACK.  
 A native of Africa who died  
 March 1773, aged about 60 years.  
 Tho' born in a land of slavery,  
 He was born free.  
 Tho' he lived in a land of liberty,  
 He lived a slave  
 Till by his honest, tho' stolen labors,  
 He acquired the source of slavery  
 Which gave him his freedom,  
 Tho' not long before,  
 Death the great tyrant  
 Gave him his final emancipation,  
 And set him on a footing with kings.  
 Tho' a slave to vice,  
 He practiced these virtues  
 Without which kings are but slaves.

The first record we have of John Jack's life is dated 1754, when an inventory prepared upon the death of Benjamin Barron of Concord listed among other items

One Negro servant named Jack ..... £ 120:0:0  
 One Negro maid named Vilot, being of no vallue. (Tolman)

By 1761 Jack had bought his freedom as well as four acres of plow land from his late master's daughter. By cobbling shoes and working for farmers, Jack made enough money to buy more land and to build himself a house. In his will of December 1772, he left his real and personal estate, after funeral expenses, to "Violet, a negro woman, commonly called Violet Barnes, and now dwelling with Susanna Barron."

The lawyer who helped John Jack draw up his will also wrote his epitaph. As a staunch Tory, Daniel Bliss made himself rather unpopular in the early days of the American Revolution. His support for the British was so enthusiastic that he had to leave Concord in a hurry. His house on Walden Street was confiscated and sold at auction. In composing his client's epitaph, Bliss took the opportunity to point out the contradiction of America's striving for independence while denying fundamental rights of self-determination to its African American population.

Divine sanction of slavery, the most hypocritical of all reasons put forward to justify the enslavement of Africans, is repudiated in the very first line of the inscription. Bliss was a cynic known for his sarcastic comments about the revolutionary ambitions of his compatriots, and he did not find it hard to lay open the discrepancies between American rhetoric and reality. The antithetical structure of the epitaph, which is built on geographical, political,

social, and moral opposites, skillfully exposes the contradictory position of the advocates of American independence who tolerate slavery.

Somehow, however, in the outspoken condemnation of slavery and the implicit comment on the current political situation, the individual commemorated by the inscription is lost. The monument appears to have been erected to some degree at John Jack's expense, though perhaps with his consent, since it is dedicated to the causes of justice, freedom and equality. The epitaph is a powerful statement because it places Jack's life in the larger political context that defined his social position and limited his economic activities, in an ungodly and inhuman way. John Jack's biography is inseparable from history.

A few miles south of Concord, in Lincoln, is the grave of Sippio Brister, who was also known as Brister Freeman. Thoreau did not approve of the wording of this brief epitaph, which reduces a man to the color of his skin and the date of his death. The wry remarks he made about Brister's gravestone in *Walden*, which gave the marker a lasting home in the American literary canon (Thoreau 231-32), may have contributed to the preservation of the stone in what used to be the paupers' and strangers' lot of the cemetery<sup>5</sup>:

In memory of  
SIPPIO BRISTER  
*a man of Colour*  
who died  
November 1, 1820  
AEt. 64

An epitaph from North Attleboro, Massachusetts, which also addresses the issue of color, is different in tone and message. Not only Thoreau would have been tempted to wish it away. It is one of a number of monuments erected for African Americans by – presumably well-meaning – whites that qualify as public embarrassments in the graveyard:

In memory of  
CAESAR  
Here lies the best of slaves  
Now turning into dust;  
Caesar the Ethiopian craves  
A place among the just.  
His faithful soul has fled  
To realms of heavenly light,  
And by the blood that Jesus shed  
Is changed from Black to White.  
Jan. 15, he quitted the stage  
in the 77<sup>th</sup> year of his age.  
1780.

A less offensive pun on color is found on a gravestone in the black section of the North Burying Ground in Providence, Rhode Island, where two large, pointed markers featuring the same motif of urn and drapery on the tympanum form a pair:

To  
the memory  
of  
CHARLES  
HASKELL,  
man of colour.

In memory  
of  
Mrs. LUCY HASKELL  
Wife of  
Mr. Charles Haskell  
And daughter of

A soldier of the Revolution  
He died  
the 17<sup>th</sup> of December,  
1833,  
aged 73 years.  
He retained through life the character  
of a faithful, industrious and honest man.  
I.S. Tinley, Jr.

Pero and Phillis Brown.  
She died in May, 1812,  
aged 32 years.  
A professed disciple of Jesus Christ  
Who lived in the practice of his  
precepts  
And died in hope  
Of reaping the rewards of grace in  
his kingdom,  
where every *complexion* will unite  
in praising Him who has washed their robes  
and made them *white* in his own blood.

In Lucy Haskell's epitaph, the color white applies explicitly to the heavenly robes; implicitly it refers to the purity of the soul. Here, too, blood is the medium by which redemption is achieved. But let us note that in this version the procedure involves the menial work of washing clothes. Jesus Christ is associated with the lowly task of laundering so that Christians of every skin color will be free from sin. The inscription projects racial unity into a non-segregated hereafter. Placed next to her husband's tombstone, which mentions that he was a Revolutionary soldier, it is hard to believe that Lucy Haskell's epitaph did not invite reflections on the social realities of caste and class in the nineteenth century.

Just a few miles east of the North Burying Ground, across the bay in East Providence, is the Old Rehoboth Cemetery. One of the African Americans buried in this Colonial graveyard was a woman called Anna. Her tombstone evokes the myth of the "contented slave" and praises her ideal servile attitude in an unusually blunt manner.<sup>6</sup> Beneath the image of a winged cherub, which has unfortunately lost its face along with about one eighth of the stone, is the following inscription:

[Here] lies Interr'd ye  
[bod]y of ANNA  
[N]egro Servant to  
[Col. ] Jabez Bowen  
[who] died July 30<sup>th</sup>  
[17]68. Aged about  
80 Years.  
[I h]ad a good Master, I was a good Slave  
[Her]e I rest humbly asleep in my Grave.

A few yards away from Anna's final resting place, a simpler marker commemorates another "Negro Servant," the term preferred by most Northern slave owners:

In Memory of  
S H E R R E Y  
that true & Faithfull  
Negro Servant  
(of Mr. John Hunt)  
who Died July 31  
1702, Aged  
about 80 Years.

"Faithful" was a word frequently mentioned in the inscriptions masters ordered for their deceased slaves, or employers for their employees. It was still popular in the twentieth century:

OTHELLO,  
*The faithful Friend of*  
 Henry Bromfield.  
*Came from Africa*  
*about 1760, died 1818,*  
 Aged about 72.  
 (Harvard, Massachusetts)

CHARLES FENTON  
 HARRIS  
 BORN A SLAVE IN  
 VIRGINIA,  
 DIED IN NEW HAVEN  
 OCTOBER 4, 1902.  
 AGED 64 YEARS.  
 FOR THIRTY FOUR YEARS  
 A FAITHFUL SERVANT AND  
 FRIEND IN THE FAMILY OF  
 MORRIS TYLER AND  
 OF HIS SON.  
 (New Haven, Connecticut)

LUCY HOMER  
 DIED AUG. 22, 1910  
 AGED 74  
 DEAR MAMMY  
 For Forty Years a Faithful  
 Helper and Friend.  
 (New Haven, Connecticut)

Typically, the memory of black servants and nurses was tied to the white families they served rather than to their own families or to any churches, lodges, or other groups they might have belonged to. Stripped of their biological and cultural ties, the identities of African American domestics relied entirely on their white employers. Instead of genealogical information, many slave epitaphs provided property records:

Here lyes the Body  
 of CATO, Formerly Servt  
 of Mr JOB ALMY &  
 lately a Servt to Mr  
 SILAS COOK of  
 this TOWN. He  
 died May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1736  
 Aged about 40 Years.  
 (Newport, Rhode Island)

The readiness of an African American individual to defend or save white people's property was appreciated and publicized by the white community. The "faithful slave" willing to risk his or her life for the master's interest was a stock character in the literature about slavery. Such sacrificial behavior was also celebrated in epitaphs. From the white point of view it was definitely considered more glamorous than life-long toil in the fields or in the kitchen.

This tribute in stone is raised  
 by the citizens of Brunswick  
 to mark the resting place of  
 STEPHEN WRIGHT  
 who lost his life  
 in saving the property of  
 his white fellow citizens  
 in the great conflagration  
 in Brunswick Georgia  
 Nov. 16, 1884.  
 His was a deed of heroism  
 which the earthly historian  
 will leave unnoticed  
 But the records of heaven  
 will perpetuate.  
 (Brunswick, Georgia)

A bronze tablet in Retreat Burying Ground, now located on the Sea Island Golf Course, tells another story of faithful service:

NEPTUNE SMALL  
 SEPTEMBER 15, 1831  
 AUGUST 10, 1907

NEPTUNE BELONGED TO MR. AND MRS. THOMAS BUTLER KING OF RETREAT PLANTATION. WHEN THEIR SON CAPT. H.L.P. KING ENLISTED IN THE CONFEDERATE ARMY NEPTUNE ACCOMPANIED HIM AS HIS BODY SERVANT. CAPT. KING WAS KILLED IN THE BATTLE OF FREDERICKSBURG, VIRGINIA, DECEMBER 13, 1862. WHEN NIGHT FELL NEPTUNE WENT OUT ON THE BATTLEFIELD, FOUND THE BODY OF HIS MASTER AND BROUGHT IT HOME TO REST IN THE FAMILY BURYING GROUND AT CHRIST CHURCH, FREDERICA, ST. SIMONS ISLAND.

This marker is meant to commemorate Neptune Small, who is buried here. It also indicates the location of his former master's grave in a different cemetery. The inscription reports on Small's loyalty and heroism. It also reports on Captain King's loyalty to the South and his heroic death. The first sentence of the epitaph defines Small as property of the Kings. The last sentence directs the reader to the Kings' burial place. In the narrative part of the inscription, Neptune Small does not have a last name. If the top portion of the tablet ever gets lost, the casual passer-by will wonder for whom the monument was erected.

The inscription is not unusual in its manifest mission of projecting paternalism into eternity and of defining the life of an African American by his white employer's standards of usefulness. For obvious reasons, the gravemarkers commissioned by slaveholders concealed or euphemized the reality of dependence and oppression. Whether unwittingly or intentionally, they left a memorial to the masters or employers themselves, and to the beliefs they held. Given that gravestones are not usually chosen or designed by the people they commemorate but by survivors, they tend to tell as much about the latter as about the former.

With the following two sets of husband-and-wife monuments, I am not sure how large or small a part the subjects of the inscriptions had in composing them. As both husbands were eloquent and determined men who were used to being in control of their lives, I am inclined to believe in their agency to the very last moment of their existence. I hope that they and their wives did not leave their final words to the world to chance, but there is no evidence I know of which would support such a hypothesis.

Two adjacent sandstone markers in the First Church Cemetery of East Haddam, Connecticut, each showing on the tympanum a soul effigy wearing the crown of righteousness, read:

Sacred  
to the Memory of  
Marget Smith  
Relict of Venture  
Smith who died  
Dec the 17<sup>th</sup>  
AD 1809, in the  
79<sup>th</sup> year of her  
age

Sacred to the Memory  
of Venture Smith an  
African tho the son of a  
King he was kidnapped  
& sold as a slave but by  
his industry he acquired  
Money to purchase his  
Freedom, who Died Sept 19  
1805 in ye 77<sup>th</sup> year of his  
Age

The Venture Smith and the John Jack epitaphs have several themes in common: the reversal of fortune which turns a free African into an enslaved American, and the hard work that is required of the slave to regain his freedom. Smith's misfortune is rendered in the passive voice; the active voice is used to describe his economic activity. But whereas John Jack's life seems to be fitted into the rhetorical scaffold of a paradox, Venture Smith's gravestone tells a story. It is a narrative of dramatic changes leading up to what might be called a black version of the American success story. In comparison, Marget Smith's epitaph is conventional in identifying her as Venture's widow, thereby conferring respectability on her, rather than characterizing her in her own right.<sup>7</sup>

A pair of large markers with identical urn-and-willow motifs in Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire, marks the graves of another couple of former slaves.

Sacred  
to the memory of  
AMOS FORTUNE  
who was born free in  
Africa, a slave in America,  
he purchased liberty  
professed Christianity,  
lived reputably, &  
died hopefully,  
Nov. 17, 1801  
Aet 91

Sacred  
to the memory of  
VIOLATE,  
by sale the slave of  
AMOS FORTUNE, by Marri  
age his wife, by her  
fidelity his friend and  
solace, she died his widow  
Sept. 13, 1802,  
Aet 73

In 1770, at the age of sixty, Amos Fortune paid his owner the last installment toward his freedom. Eight years later he bought and married one Lydia Somerset. She died a few months later. On November 9, 1779 he bought Violet Baldwin. On November 10, they were married. Two years later they moved to Jaffrey, where Amos worked as a tanner, occasionally training apprentices. In 1789, he was received into full fellowship in the First Church of Christ. In 1796, he was one of the twenty-two charter members of the Jaffrey Social Library. His will,

dated October 3, 1801 specified the following: "Sixthly I order my executor after my decease and after the decease of the Said Violet my beloved wife that handsome grave Stones be erected to each of us if there is any estate left for that purpose."<sup>8</sup>

The condensed biographical statements which make up the two inscriptions are said to have been phrased by the Reverend Laban Ainsworth, friend and patron of Amos Fortune. What makes me question his authorship is the existence of a poem entitled "An Epitaph" that Ainsworth wrote in honor of his deceased friend. It opens with a pun on Fortune's name and makes use of stock phrases such as "Afric's sultry climes," and "snatch'd me from the fond embrace / Of my dear Mother and her sable race." The poem and the inscription on the tombstone may simply be two texts produced by the same author on different occasions and meant to serve different purposes. I would prefer to think that the Fortunes themselves decided on how they wanted to be remembered and what they saw as the essence of their lives.

Amos Fortune's epitaph also juxtaposes African freedom with American slavery, but it shows neither the detached cynicism of the John Jack stone nor the pride in financial success expressed by Venture Smith's. The epitaphs of both Amos and Violet declare their slave status before moving on, in a series of parallel structures, to their logical conclusion. The syntactic segments that sum up Amos Fortune's achievements consist of verbal phrases, which give the reader a sense of the active nature of his life. Violet's epitaph, on the other hand, lacks verbs except for "died" at the end. Her life is characterized by attributive phrases, which convey an impression of her being adjunctive to Amos. This effect is reinforced by the repetition of the possessive pronoun referring back to the man who bought and married her.

Whereas the husband's identity is determined by economic, religious, and civic activities, the wife's is defined by her relation to him. And yet she comes across as dignified and gracious in the moving inscription on her headstone. The Fortune epitaphs are not bitter. By responding to the strokes of misfortune and ironies of fate with perseverance, faith, and loyalty to each other, the Fortunes may have conquered them.

Two hundred years after Amos Fortune provided for "handsome grave Stones" in his will, we are fortunate in finding them in excellent condition due to the solid kind of stone the carver chose, the skill he put in his craft, and the efforts of the cemetery caretakers of Jaffrey Center, who prevented power mowers, vandals, and general neglect to take their toll on the markers. Sadly, the past three decades of machine mowing, air pollution and acid rain appear to have done more damage to colonial gravestones than the two preceding centuries of natural weathering. Thus we can see the stone witnesses to slavery and its contradictions, the chiseled testimonials of its victims and its vanquishers go to pieces right in front of our eyes. Having made it through two eventful centuries of African American history, they deserve to be treasured and cared for.

#### Endnotes

1 I first learned about Boston Trowtrow on March 25, 1986 in a magnificent lecture given by Robert Ferris Thompson at Yale University: "From West Africa to the Black Americas: The Black Atlantic Visual Tradition." The 1997 brochure *A Walking Tour of Old Norwichtown Burial Ground*, of which Ruth Shapleigh-Brown kindly gave me a copy, lists the Boston Trowtrow marker among its attractions.

2 Janice Windt, who introduced me to Tademy's Cane River, also took time off from her busy schedule to proofread this paper, for which I am deeply grateful.

3 Detailed descriptions of such gravesites are given by Samuel Miller Lawton in "The Religious Life of South Carolina Coastal and Sea Island Negroes," chapter VIII.

4 Tom and Brenda Malloy searched for and photographed the gravestones, gathered the information and reconstructed the biographies in their historical guide to black Massachusetts gravemarkers: "Slavery in Colonial Massachusetts As Seen Through Selected Gravestones." I would like to thank them for their hospitality in Massachusetts, where they gave me a tour and helped me take pictures of secluded gravesites.

5 Margaret and Warren Flint of Lincoln Center took time and trouble to lead me to Brister's grave. I am very grateful for their kindness and interest.

6 I reconstructed the inscription for Anna with the help of Marion Pearce Carter's self-published compilation *The Old Rehoboth Cemetery*. Lance Mayer took me to this cemetery and saw the gravestone before I did. For sharing the discovery and the excitement, I owe him a huge debt of gratitude.

7 The biography *A narrative of the life and adventures of Venture, a native of Africa but resident above sixty years in the United States of America Related by himself* was first published in New London in 1798. A convincing analysis of Smith's rhetoric strategies is Robert E. Desrochers Jr., "'Not Fade Away': The Narrative of Venture Smith, an African American in the Early Republic."

8 My biographical overview is based on F. Alexander Magoun, *Amos Fortune's Choice: The Story of a Negro Slave's Struggle for Self-Fulfillment* and on the vertical file on Amos Fortune kept in the Jaffrey Public Library. I am indebted to Scott Cunningham and the Jaffrey Civic Center for a copy of the poem "An Epitaph" by Laban Ainsworth.

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