

The Fourteenth State

Tales of Early Blacks in Vermont

Tyler Resch

Elise Guyette is a Vermont teacher, historian, and author driven by a mission to explore and preach diversity in this mostly white state. Her book “Discovering Black Vermont” treats a subject long neglected in Vermont history by focusing on a network of lives and accomplishments of early African-American citizens.

Published by the University of Vermont Press in 2010, her book describes with labor-intensive research the lives of seven black farm families in one corner of the Chittenden County town of Hinesburg during the century 1790 to 1890. These families lived successfully near what the author calls the Hill (always capitalized). Often the blacks fit smoothly into the white society, but always in the background loomed the specter of racism, sometimes subtle and sometimes not.

To apply a magnifying glass to the workings of a neighborhood some two hundred years ago the author used the genealogist’s sources such as vital records (birth, marriage, death), federal censuses, probate and tax records, newspapers, and gazetteers. She also tapped skillfully into an ingenious assortment of published essays and studies at national, regional, and state levels.

Guyette writes, “Expanding our traditional histories to include these rural farmers reminds us that our heroic past includes people of color who successfully negotiated a racialized society and passed their knowledge and skills for doing so on to the next generations. It also shows us how vulnerable their situations were.”

She first demonstrated her interest in 1986 by writing “Vermont: A Cultural Patchwork,” which looks at the history of the state through different lenses. The story begins with the native peoples (mostly Abenakis), then come the French and Dutch, who first settled before those of mostly British origin took over. Vermont develops from “Grants” to statehood and on through ups and downs of life that include the abolition and suffrage movements, the big flood of ’27 and on to environmental issues, and even some recipes.

Guyette’s thesis might be summarized in these words from her introduction: “People from different races and ethnic backgrounds add color and richness to our history. The hopes and dreams of thousands of people from different times and places are sewn into the fabric of our state.”

“Cultural Patchwork” was followed by her 1992 master’s thesis at UVM, “Black Lives and White Racism in Vermont 1760-1870.” Then came a paper at the Vermont Folklife Center in Middlebury called “Behind the White Veil: A History of Vermont’s Ethnic Groups.” It was a chapter in the publication “In Many Cultures, One People: A Multicultural Handbook about Vermont for Teachers” edited by Gregory Sharrow.

Guyette also wrote an article in *Vermont History* magazine in 1993 called “The Working Lives of African Vermonters in Census and Literature 1790-1870.”

Her interests in diverse ethnic groups began, she has written, when she discovered in the fourth grade that her own people, French-Canadian, Lebanese, and Irish, had been left out of her Vermont history text. And when she began teaching, the same little green textbook was given her to teach her first students. This reminded her of “the sting of being overlooked” and led to an adult life in pursuit of stories that were omitted from traditional histories.