One terrible day in about 1736, a young boy’s life was changed forever. The boy was named Broteer. He lived in Dakandarra in West Africa (probably in the area today called Ghana.) His father was a leader of his village.

On that day, his village was attacked. His father was killed. Broteer was taken and sold into slavery. He was about six or seven years old. An American slave trader bought Broteer for four gallons of rum and a piece of calico cloth.

We know his story because many years later he published it in a remarkable book.

Broteer was given a new name: Venture. He was put on a ship for the long voyage to America. While on board, he got sick with smallpox, but unlike most who got that disease, he survived.

When he arrived in America, he was sold to a white man from Rhode Island named George Mumford. Though just a boy, Venture had to work hard. He was not paid for his work. He was considered his master’s property, like a cow or a plow. He worked with about a
dozen other enslaved people. They worked on a large farm that raised sheep and dairy cows.

Venture grew to be a young man. He married Meg. Meg was also enslaved. Venture tried to run away to freedom. But Mumford put a notice in the newspaper. The notice described Venture as “a very tall fellow” with “thick square shoulders.” Venture was caught.

Venture and Meg had a daughter named Hannah. As the daughter of enslaved people, Hannah was enslaved, too. Mumford sold Venture to Thomas Stanton. His new master lived in Stonington, Connecticut. Venture was separated from his family. Slave owners often separated enslaved families. This was cruel.

A year later Stanton purchased Meg. Venture was reunited with his wife, but Hannah was still owned by Mumford. He and Meg had two more children, named Solomon and Cuff.

One day, Venture got in the middle of an argument between Meg and Stanton’s wife. Stanton beat Venture. He stole the money Venture and Meg has saved to buy their freedom. Venture complained to the local authorities. But they did not help him.

A few years later Venture was sold away from his family again. Captain Oliver Smith, a Stonington merchant, bought him. Smith allowed Venture to work at other jobs for pay. Venture could keep some of the money he earned but had to give some to his master. Venture wanted to
earn enough money to buy his freedom. He wanted to buy his family's freedom too.

In 1765, Venture reached his goal. He purchased his freedom and then his family’s freedom. He took Oliver Smith’s last name as his own.

Venture worked harder than ever. He worked as a sailor on a whaling ship. He worked as a fisherman. He cut wood. In 1770, Venture bought 26 acres of land next to Thomas Stanton’s land. He sold this land in 1775 and bought a piece of land in Haddam Neck. Within a few years, he had bought more than 100 acres. He brought his family together. He was a farmer, fisherman, and trader along the Connecticut River and the east end of Long Island.

Venture was proud of his success. But he was also bitter about the injustice he and his family endured. Venture fought against slavery until he died in 1805. He purchased freedom for other enslaved people in Connecticut. He told his life story in *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa*, which was published in 1798. It was nearly 20 more years before Connecticut began to slowly free its enslaved people with the Gradual Emancipation Act in 1784.

In his book he wrote:

...But amidst all my griefs and pains, I have many consolations: Meg, the wife of my youth, whom I married for love and bought with my money, is still alive. My freedom is a privilege which nothing else can equal. Notwithstanding all the losses I have suffered by fire, by the injustice of knaves, by cruelty of my own countrymen whom I have assisted and redeemed from bondage, I am now possessed of more than one hundred acres of land, and three habitable dwelling
houses. It gives me joy to think that I have and that I deserve so good a character, especially for truth and integrity.

Venture Smith left an important historical record. Today his life is celebrated in East Haddam at the annual Venture Smith Day in September. An archaeological dig rediscovered the location of his first piece of property in what is now the State of Connecticut Barn Island Wildlife Management Area. His grave is on the Connecticut Freedom Trail.

This essay is based on “Venture Smith, from Slavery to Freedom” by John Wood Sweet, African American Connecticut Explored (Wesleyan University Press, 2014) and “Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa” by Gene Leach, Connecticut Explored, Winter 2012/2013.