

## Black History Month

### Lucy Terry Prince

We often associate slavery with the South, but it should be noted that in 1641 Massachusetts became the first colony to legalize slavery. In 1652 RI passed laws that restricted slavery and forbade slavery for more than 10 years; however merchants in RI were growing rich from their flourishing slave trade.

Lucy Terry Prince was kidnapped as a small child and brought to Bristol RI. When she was four years old Ebenezer Wells, a tavern owner from Deerfield, purchased her. The Wells were childless, and Lucy may have been more integrated into their household than most “servants for life,” as New Englanders preferred to call their slaves. There are records of her baptism in 1735 and she joined the church nine years later.

Deerfield came under assault from the Abenakis Native Americans in August, 1746. At 21, Lucy already had a reputation as a gifted storyteller. She composed a poem call “The Bars Fight” about the dramatic events of that day. Though literate, scholars have speculated that she may not have written the poem down but told and re-told the story drawing on the African tradition of oral narrative. The earliest print version found is from a lecture given in 1819.

Sometime around 1750 Abijah Prince, an enterprising former slave moved to Deerfield. He and Lucy married in May, 1756 and moved onto land owned by the Wells family. At some point Lucy gained her freedom which assured the freedom of her six children. Two of their sons would serve in the American Revolution.

By 1785 the family left Deerfield and was living on its own land in Guilford VT, land that they struggled to keep after Abijah died in 1794. Lucy died in 1821 at the age of 97. She was an important enough figure that the Rev. Lemuel Haynes, the first black to be ordained in the Congregation Church, spoke at her funeral. Also a lengthy obituary, which was usually short for women or non-existent for a black person, appeared in both VT and Deerfield.

Adapted from **The Struggle for Freedom: The History of African Americans in Western Massachusetts** published by The Republican, 2013.

1. Did it surprise you that MA was the first colony to legalize slavery or that New England had a robust slave trade?
2. Visit the website:  
<https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/timeline/>  
Follow the time line beginning in 1641. Watch for how Christians and Christianity intersect with slavery.
3. Why do you think New Englanders preferred to call their slaves “servants for life”?
4. Imagine yourself or your child as a four-year old being captured, transported to a new world, and sold as property at a slave market. If you then learned about God through Christianity what would be important to you?

## Reflection