Internet project offers details of slavery in Connecticut

By Igor Ginzburg
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Chains, suffering and hard days of working in the fields of the South are some of the images readily evoked in thinking about the history of slavery in this nation. But what many state residents might not know is that Connecticut is part of the story of human bondage and at one point in its history - around the late 18th century — more than 5,000 people were held as slaves here.

To shed light on that story, the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale dedicates itself to uncovering stories and documents that are part of history. Seeing a chance to share stories about Connecticut history, the GLC developed a Web site, http://cm12.yale.edu/citizens_all/.

"The goal of the Web site is to encourage local historical inquiry," said Special Projects Coordinator Angela Keiser. Titled "Citizens All: African Americans in Connecticut," the Web site contains stories about slavery in communities such as New Haven, Greenwich, Redding, Hebron and Canterbury. It also is divided into different parts, such as slavery, freedom, reaction, education and finding history, that tell about historical events and locations and makes it clear that slavery not only existed in the Southern states but was part of a lucrative national and global system.

The Web site, a collaborative work of the GLC and the Center for Media and Instructional Innovation at Yale, also offers, under each category, a chance to view documents such as log books, wills, slave advertisements, letters and essays. Site visitors also can find educational activities.

"Angela had an idea ... to tell stories about Connecticut history so that the stories are acceptable to the target audience," said David Hirsch, a co-producer for CM12, and one of the Web designers who helped build the GLC site. "They (the audience) are made up of middle school and high school students, but also the general public."

The Web site, which was created as a teaching tool, grew out of GLC involvement with the UNESCO Transatlantic Slave Trade (TST) Education Project: Breaking the Silence. The project aims to provide teachers with accurate information about the slave trade that started about 500 years ago.

Hirsch said that while building the Web site, designers and producers wanted to show that the history of African Americans does not begin and end with the history of slavery, though slavery is "a crucial part of the story."

"It's really a partial history of what it means to be a citizen and also how local history in small town history relates to international stories," he said.

The site can be accessed at www.yale.edu/glc; click on Citizens All: African Americans in Connecticut, 1700-1850.