

VERMONT HISTORY

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BOOK REVIEWS



Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved out of Slavery and into Legend.

By Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina (New York: Amistad, 2008, pp. 256, \$24.95).

This outstanding book has two stories to tell. First, and foremost, it is the riveting account of a remarkable African-American New England family, whose history until now has been veiled in myth and legend. Second, it is a recounting of the challenges Gerzina (a professor of English at Dartmouth College) and her husband, Anthony—who acted as her research assistant—faced while uncovering the lives of Lucy and Abijah Prince, who were among the early settlers of Guilford, Vermont.

Of the two, Lucy Prince is the more familiar name to students of Vermont's early history. Considered by many as the first American black woman poet, she is best known as the author of "The Bars Fight," an account in verse of a 1746 Indian attack on the town of Deerfield, Massachusetts, where Lucy had been a slave. But this feisty woman is also remembered for her eloquent public defense of her family's rights as landowners in the newly established state of Vermont.

Many versions of Lucy Prince's story have come down to us. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, published accounts began appearing that relied heavily on myth and tradition. More recently, David Proper,

in his book, *Lucy Terry Prince: Singer of History* (1997), began the separation of myth from fact.

But *Mr. and Mrs. Prince* is the first thorough exploration of the story of the Prince family. Gerzina and her husband spent seven years combing a wide variety of sources, from letters, newspapers, and account books to tax, court, and church records, all written in “crabbed or scrawling” handwriting, which had to be deciphered—including the abbreviated Latin medical records of a doctor frequently consulted by the Princes (pp. 102, 104).

If many of the details of the Prince legend handed down through the generations were wrong, the Lucy of that legend remains in Gerzina’s hands the same magnetic, eloquent woman with a gift for words. Most revealing is what the author has uncovered about Abijah. Traditionally described as a respected, hard-working man, Bijah, as he was called, emerges here as a thoroughgoing entrepreneur, who, as Gerzina puts it, longed for the same basic things all men of his time wanted: “property, family, independence” (p. 32).

In addition to telling the story of the Princes, Gerzina also provides her readers with a clearer picture than we’ve been shown before of early African-American society in western New England, pointing out that black history, especially in the North, is not separate from white history but found within it. In Deerfield, for example, where Lucy belonged to a prominent white family until she was freed sometime after her marriage to Bijah in 1756, slaves were part of the white communities in which they lived. They went to church with white people (although they sat in separate pews), and their children were free to attend the local schools. None of this, however, implies that northern slavery was a benign institution. The high suicide rate among black slaves in towns like Deerfield easily disputes that notion (p. 44).

By contrast, free blacks enjoyed all the rights of citizenship, including access to the judicial system, and it is of this right that Bijah—in his capacity as a landowner in Guilford—took full advantage. Soon after he and Lucy and their six children left Deerfield in 1775 to live on the fertile Guilford acres Bijah had purchased with hard labor, a white neighbor began harassing the Princes, hoping to drive them off their land. But, as Gerzina points out, Bijah was remarkably skillful in navigating “the white-controlled world despite a hostile neighbor who resented his presence” (p. 151). At the same time “all the representatives of the law whom the Princes encountered . . . took their right to equal protection under the law seriously.” In the end, their neighbor “had no choice but to accept the situation” (p. 160).

For the most part, Gerzina discovered, it was Bijah, not Lucy, who

confronted the Guilford authorities with complaints of harassment. But as the provocations grew more violent, threatening the family's very livelihood, it became necessary to ask for protection from the state. In June 1785, it was Lucy, long recognized for her fluency of speech, who petitioned the governor and council in person for redress of grievances. Her words had their desired effect and the state's leaders recommended that the town of Guilford take measures to protect the Prince family.

While *Mr. and Mrs. Prince* is much richer and more complex than earlier accounts of the legendary African-American woman and her family, its author is not a historian, and the reader might wish for a fuller rendition of the Vermont context. Also, the geography can sometimes be confusing: The town of Jericho is not near Vergennes and Middlebury (p. 190). These quibbles aside, not only does this book tell us more about Lucy and Bijah Prince than we've known before, but, like all good biographies, this remarkably full account of one black family succeeds in giving us a better understanding of the broader picture: what life was like for both slaves and free blacks in eighteenth-century New England.

DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

Deborah P. Clifford is the author of The Passion of Abby Hemenway: Memory, Spirit and the Making of History (Vermont Historical Society, 2001). Most recently, she is the co-author with Nicholas Clifford of "The Troubled Roar of the Waters": Vermont in Flood and Recovery, 1928–1931 (University Press of New England, 2007). Ms. Clifford died in July 2008.

The Sea Captain's Wife: A True Story of Love, Race and War in the Nineteenth Century

By Martha Hodes (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006, pp. 384, \$15.95).

The town of Morristown is included in an exciting recent study of nineteenth-century America all because a woman named Eunice Stone spent much of 1866 with family in Vermont. *The Sea Captain's Wife*, by New York University historian Martha Hodes, tells the story of Eunice Robinson Stone Connolly, a Massachusetts-born woman plagued throughout most of her life by poverty and disappointment. Eunice arrived in Morristown a war widow after her first husband (a fellow New Englander) was killed while enlisted with the Confederate Army during the Civil War. William Stone's death left Eunice a widowed mother of two without any resources or a home of her own. Like so many other

women in her situation, Eunice had no option but to rely on the support of family and friends. Melissa and Moses Rankin—her deceased husband’s sister and brother-in-law—quite willingly offered what they could, so Eunice traveled from Massachusetts to their home in Morristown (and briefly to Cabot) to grieve and, we can assume, to mull over her options. Three years after her stay in Vermont, Eunice made the startlingly unconventional decision to marry a man of mixed race, a “colored” sea captain from Grand Cayman Island. Although his race marked Smiley Connolly as inferior by white American standards, he was far wealthier than Eunice or her family, and by joining him on the island, Eunice Connolly finally found a stable and comfortable home. Two daughters were born of that happy second marriage, but Eunice’s contentment came to a tragic end when the entire family was lost at sea during a hurricane in 1877. Just where, when, and how Eunice met Smiley Connolly remains a mystery and is the great unanswered question of Hodes’ story.

Eunice’s poverty—and her consistent effort to escape it—marked her life in New England and likely had much to do with her first husband’s eventual decision to fight for the South. In most ways, Eunice’s life was average, defined by experiences common to poor New Englanders in a region undergoing industrialization. She worked in the textile mills in Manchester, New Hampshire, and married a man who shared her desire for a better life. Home for the family consisted of a series of rentals, as her husband tried his hand at several kinds of work without finding one that offered greater stability for his family. Relatives had found work in Mobile, Alabama, and so Eunice and her family joined them there, finding that Mobile offered work for her husband and, it seems, a culture and economy that he found worthy of defending. Eunice left the South just after the start of the war, homesick for her family in New England and uncomfortable with the foreign culture of Mobile. She was seven months pregnant and unchaperoned when she and her young son, Clarence, made the trip north. Back in New England, Eunice gave birth to a daughter and eventually found herself a grieving and often sick widow living with relatives and earning money as a domestic when her health allowed.

An archived collection of 500 surviving family letters provided the primary source for recreating Eunice’s fascinating life. But there are gaps in the letters and like any such collection, they do not come close to revealing everything about Eunice’s story. In her quest for answers about an average woman who eventually crossed the color line—how did Eunice meet Smiley, how did she conceptualize race, what did she think of the slavery she witnessed in the South?—Hodes crossed her own historiographic line, traveling to the various places Eunice called home and being willing to use oral history and genealogy to make sense of Eunice’s

life. Such willingness to take her research outside the archives is somewhat unusual in traditional academic circles. In particular, Hodes's efforts to track down and ask questions of Eunice's and Smiley's heirs—an activity more commonly associated with non-academic history—suggests something about her confidence in and dedication to the research project. Hodes's effort to connect with Eunice's physical world took her from the old mill towns of New England to the Caribbean and Alabama, and in many of those places she was able to pinpoint spaces associated with Eunice: her mother's rental house, the tiny bungalow in Mobile that Eunice had briefly called home, and the likely spot on Grand Cayman where Smiley had built a large frame house for his new bride. But even as Hodes visited houses and stood on street corners that Eunice had known, she found few places that Eunice would have immediately recognized; widened roads, corner gas stations, and fast food restaurants successfully blurred Hodes's view of those same places as they had appeared during the nineteenth century. She traveled the path of Eunice's life but Eunice nevertheless proved elusive.

Hodes came closest to getting a feel for Eunice at the rural crossroads of Morrystown Corners. The built environment of the rural crossroads has changed little since Eunice and her four-year-old daughter Clara arrived at the Rankin's house over 140 years ago. The small house still stands, its white and green clapboard exterior relatively unchanged, and Hodes was able to visit with the current owner and view the interior space, which has undergone significant renovations. She ran her eyes over walls that had known Eunice's gaze, but even that experience failed to produce a sense of Eunice. Today Morrystown Corners is a small residential area of mostly nineteenth-century houses clustered together on small lots; in the mid-nineteenth century, Morrystown Corners had been more diversified, the domestic dwellings joined by small industrial structures like Moses Rankin's blacksmith shop and the crossroads storefront that housed the post office. That store building still stands, currently undergoing renovations but otherwise a building that Eunice likely would recognize, the weathered clapboards of its vernacular Greek Revival exterior making it possible to imagine Eunice as she walked through the cold winter weather to mail letters to family in southern New England. Did letters to or from Smiley Connolly pass through that post office? If Eunice already knew Smiley Connolly by the time of her stay in Vermont—and Hodes presents that as one likely scenario—the two probably would have exchanged letters during the winter of 1866. That theory proves an exciting one, lending the rural crossroads that Eunice had described as a "little out of the way place" a special allure for Hodes and for her Vermont readers in particular (171).

It was cold and snowy during the part of Eunice's stay in Morristown that she mentioned in surviving letters and we do not know how often she left the Rankins' home or the extent of her involvement with the Morristown community. Eunice was a Universalist and most certainly attended services at the local Universalist church in the village two miles away. Hodes cites the ten-dollar gift given by the women of the church as a gesture of assistance intended both for Eunice and for the Rankins, who had taken on a financial burden when they welcomed Eunice and Clara into their home. Through Eunice we learn not only about the kindness and generosity of the Rankins but also a bit about the neighborhood. In one letter, Eunice described the elderly neighbor woman who boiled the winter slush from her yard into tea water, writing of that particular habit, "Melissa and I think we shall not take tea with her until the snow drift is gone" (173). The humor with which Eunice related that incident suggests that her stay in Vermont was punctuated by moments of lightheartedness. At other times, though, Eunice seemed trapped by her sadness and grief, as she declined to join a social sugaring party in the Morristown woods for fear that the event would be too much for her to bear. The Rankins were good to Eunice but it seems fair to conclude that she was contented but probably not particularly happy while in Morristown.

Hodes has received high praise for her study of Eunice Richardson Stone Connolly, and deservedly so. *The Sea Captain's Wife* is a fantastic book and Hodes is a great storyteller. At least one reviewer has criticized her for becoming too involved in Eunice's life story—much of the book's final chapter details the relationships that Hodes formed with surviving family members whom she encountered during her research—but that criticism seems unfair. Like other historians, Hodes clearly cares about the people she has studied. If anything, that interest in Eunice and her family is contagious, and the reader is left with other unanswered questions. Missing from Eunice's archived letters is a strong sense of her role as a parent, and I was left to wonder not only about the daily care of young Clara as her widowed mother grieved, but especially about the elder child Clarence, so often left in the care of others as his mother struggled to get by. Although a story about family, *The Sea Captain's Wife* is really a love story about the unlikely and not entirely accepted union between a working-class white woman from New England and a more affluent man of color from the Caribbean.

Smiley Connolly is clearly the Prince Charming of Hodes's story, not only rescuing Eunice from a life of poverty and despair but steadfastly kind, attentive, and loving toward Eunice and her children. Hodes makes light of Smiley's first marriage—a union that possibly overlapped his re-

lationship with Eunice—as she does the existence of an illegitimate, or “outside,” infant son, a baby not much older than Eunice’s own children with Smiley and one conceived, we are encouraged to imagine, while Smiley was actively courting Eunice. We will never know how Eunice felt about Smiley’s complicated past, details of which she left out of her letters to family; but it seems safe to assume that marriage to Smiley required her not only to negotiate her way across the color line but also to rework her definition of the middle-class respectability she had craved all her life.

JILL MUDGETT

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Beyond Depot Square

By Thomas C. Davis (Barre, Vt.: Thomas C. Davis, 2006, pp. 138, paper, \$15.95).

In his second book of memoirs (the first, *Out from Depot Square*, was published in 2001), Tom Davis has provided his perspective of growing up in and around Barre during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. It is a reminiscence that will appeal mostly to those who recognize the Barre residents of whom he speaks—some who made brief appearances on the Vermont scene; some who have had a lasting impact. These portraits are punctuated with italicized vignettes of Barre’s earliest settlers and growth.

Of special interest is Mr. Davis’s recollections of the private life of his father, former Republican governor of Vermont, Deane C. Davis. Even before the environment was a “hot button” political issue, Gov. Davis championed responsible development in Vermont by promoting and implementing Act 250, which stopped the beginnings of the rape of the Vermont landscape in the early 1970s while our neighboring states to the south saw Levittowns and strip malls pollute their former pastoral scenery. On the other side of the political spectrum, Mr. Davis recalls Cornelius O. “Kio” Granai, the late Barre lawyer and father of one of Mr. Davis’s boyhood friends, Ed Granai, himself a well-known political figure who unsuccessfully ran as a Democratic candidate for governor. Kio, with whom I had the qualified pleasure of co-counseling cases in the twilight of his career, is described by Mr. Davis as opposed to

chain stores and the death penalty, and a champion of working-class of Vermonters.

Mr. Davis grew up in what can be considered the upper middle to upper class of Barre. The Davis family was part of the “Aiken wing” of the Republican Party, the more socially conscious portion of the Party. Their association with Jews, “Negroes,” and unwed mothers separated them from the more socially conservative members of the community. However, even the more liberal wing of the Republican Party in the 1930s and ’40s was not prepared to accept the social programs of the Roosevelt administration. The author recalls that his father’s discussions about topics other than family matters concerned the advantages of the free enterprise system and the disadvantages of President Roosevelt’s New Deal and social programs. The poor and disadvantaged, Deane Davis argued, could be better served if people were more like his mother, who helped such people before the advent of FDR’s social programs.

From my perspective of both living and working in Barre for much of my adult life, Mr. Davis was wearing rose-colored glasses when he painted the idyllic picture of the compatibility among the various ethnic groups while growing up in Barre. Although the violence had subsided from the shooting of the legendary granite sculptor Elia Corti, in a clash between the Socialist immigrants from northern Europe and the Anarchists from the countries along the Mediterranean, before the author’s birth, feelings still ran strong against Barre’s French Canadians during the author’s boyhood. That animosity was created by the importation of French Canadians from neighboring Québec to serve as “scabbers” to fill the jobs of the striking granite workers and break the strikes in the early twentieth century.

The vignettes of Barre history that the author intersperses between his recollections and minibiographies cease far before the rise of the granite industry, which has made Barre, in the words of its own tourism promotion, “The Granite Center of the World.” If Mr. Davis continues with his series of his own recollections together with the history of Barre, he will find himself having to deal with the “labor/management controversy” (p. 23), which is all he says about the turbulence arising out of working conditions in the granite sheds that made granite big business in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century central Vermont.

By the time that Mr. Davis was growing up, a tuberculosis/silicosis epidemic was raging among the Barre area’s granite workers caused by the inhalation of granite dust resulting from the deplorable working conditions in the granite sheds and quarries. While I was teamed up with Kio Granai, trying cases with him in literally every court in the northern part of Vermont, virtually no day passed without him recalling the atrocious

effects of the granite dust on the men he knew who had worked in the granite industry, barely able to walk the few hundred yards to board the trolley, or dying decades ahead of their times.

This “labor/management controversy” ultimately resulted in the declaration of martial law in Barre with the Vermont National Guard patrolling the city’s streets armed with machine guns to intimidate the striking granite workers. If Mr. Davis continues his writing, and finally gets to this turbulent period of Barre’s history, it will be interesting to see how this author who grew up in a Republican household but became part of the state’s Democratic gubernatorial administrations deals with this battle, which was pivotal in Vermont’s very own class warfare.

CHARLES S. MARTIN

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A Love Affair with Vermont Weather: A Selection of “Weatherwise” Columns Published in The Herald of Randolph

By Miriam Herwig. Edited by Kevin P. Doering (Rutland, Vt.: Sharp & Co. Printers, 2007, pp. xi, 82, paper, \$16.00).

I was greatly pleased to review this love affair because I carried on a similar one in Northfield, Vermont, for twenty years as a Cooperative Observer for the National Weather Service just a few miles north of where “Mim” Herwig kept her eye on the weather in Randolph Center. There’s just no question about it: Our Vermont weather patterns are totally fascinating with their quirky twists and turns. Never a dull moment.

Mim wrote 1,250 columns from 1978 to 2003 for the newspaper, *Herald of Randolph*, and Kevin Doering has kept “Weatherwise” going since 2003. The book is a selection from her columns arranged chronologically by the months of the year. While most of the writing is chosen directly from Mim’s own words, the editor has added much background information and numerous footnotes to elaborate and explain the text, so it does appear that Doering is more of a co-author than simply the editor.

This is the sort of book that’s best read in snatches rather than from cover to cover. Avid weather watchers will appreciate the large margins on all pages where they can scribble in their own notes and observations. The book is printed in an attractive typeface on good-quality heavy-stock

paper and is illustrated with paintings and photographs. Nancy Stone's paintings provide an authentic vision of the unique qualities of our Vermont weather and the photographs, mostly by Doering, add a touch of the rural charm of Randolph Center, where all this action took place.

Mim's writing imparts an impressionistic character to her observations. Consider this from October 1980: "The remnants of fall foliage lie like a faded paisley shawl draped over the shoulders of the hills" (p. 64). Or from May 1980, "Buckeyes are opening green leafy fingers to the sky, swamp maples are decorated with red lace and poplars and willows dot the landscape with their bright yellow-greens. Forsythias, which usually bloom only below the snow line because of our severe winters, are putting on a special golden glow" (p. 29). Words like these certainly describe a love affair with Vermont weather. On the other hand, we have from January 1982, "Winter has become our mutual foe—to be conquered by heat at home and skill on the road. Filigrees of frost adorn our windows and smoke curls up from our battle stations. Let the faint-hearted flee—we will continue to resist the elements." Mim calls our attention in 1994 to the "Winter Haters Club" with these words: "It has been rumored that the subversive group called Winter Haters Anonymous has reformed in the vicinity of Randolph Center. The group first formed in 1979, a landmark winter, but recent mild excuses for the season caused the organization to atrophy. Now the winter of 1993–94 has re-energized the worthy group. Sworn to eternal vengeance against the forces of evil which block driveways with snow and cause tempers to boil, members have vowed to publicly burn postcards or any communications from erstwhile friends frolicking in such balmy climates as Florida, California or worse yet, Hawaii. . . . As the wind howls around the eaves, the winter haters howl around the fireplace, raising glasses to the early end of winter. . . . The motto, like the fraternity oath, is unprintable" (p. 5).

Mim calls the reader's attention to unusual atmospheric phenomena such as "sun dogs" or "parhelia." These are sometimes seen, especially in winter, near sunrise or sunset, as a rainbow effect on either side of the sun. They are caused by the refraction of sunlight through a myriad of tiny snow crystals high in the atmosphere. Some weather watchers claim that sun dogs are the precursor of a storm.

As I have suggested in the above excerpts from Mim's writing, this book is not a catalog of climatological observations with temperature, precipitation, and wind speed numbers all ranked in boxes. For that information one will have to turn to the National Weather Service databases. Mim and Kevin Doering are to be commended for their work in preserving these delightful nuggets of our sometimes exasperating, but never boring Vermont weather.

The book is available at the Vermont Historical Society, and a few Vermont bookstores; it can also be ordered directly from Kevin P. Doering, P.O. Box 97, Randolph Center, VT 05061; \$20.00 postpaid.

WILLIAM E. OSGOOD

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Barn Building: The Golden Age of Barn Construction

By Jon Radojkovic (Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 2007, pp. 192, \$35.00).

This recent work by Ontario photographer and barn preservation advocate, Jon Radojkovic, easily fits into the coffee-table book genre. Its wide page format, eye-catching glossy cover, and magnificent color photographs printed on coated stock, all reinforce this positive impression of a book that could be prominently displayed in one's home or be well received as a gift.

Although not intended as scholarly research work, the text clearly shows that the author has acquired a broad understanding of historic barn types through his extensive travel in search of historic barns in rural northeastern North America. The narrative is mainly a first-person account of these various discoveries, enriched with information provided through conversations with barn owners and others encountered during this pursuit.

The chapters are generally organized by barn type, following a chronological sequence that runs from the 1600s to the mid-twentieth century. Within these chapters, characteristic construction techniques are discussed and illustrated with line drawings and photographs of hundreds of eye-catching barns and their distinctive features.

Nearly half of the photographs are reproduced on full pages, giving the book an informal and accessible feel. One can open the book at virtually any point and be drawn in by Radojkovic's wonderful color images. By casually leafing through the pages it almost seems as if one were driving down a winding rural road that leads to amazing barns around every bend.

Vermonters may find a special connection with this book, as dozens of picturesque Vermont barns are included in this magical journey. In fact, there seem to be more photos from Vermont than from anywhere else. Maybe this should not come as a surprise, but rather as an indication of

how Vermont's remarkable resource of surviving historic farm buildings can help contribute to our understanding of the rural heritage of North America.

Perhaps most refreshing is how this book so comfortably embraces the cultural heritage of the farming region that extends from Ontario to Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Québec. Examples include English barns in New York, Ontario, Québec, Pennsylvania, and Vermont; Amish bank barns in Ontario and Ohio; and round barns in Michigan, Ohio, Québec, and Ontario. Some of the most intriguing examples, however, are the many polygonal barns scattered across this broad region, including the amazing 1882 Walbridge barn with its twelve red gables radiating from a center core, located just north of the Vermont line in Mystic, Québec.

By moving beyond the typical confines of national parochialism, this work offers tangible proof of the common threads that have long connected the hopes and heritage of those who have worked the land. This book also provides a wonderful inspiration to explore the back roads of this trans-border region in search of the many treasures—both architectural and cultural—that await discovery.

THOMAS D. VISSER

Thomas D. Visser directs the graduate program in historic preservation in the department of history at the University of Vermont and is the author of Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings (1997).