



For Immediate Release

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PRESS RELEASE

Historic Deerfield Unveils Memorials Honoring Enslaved Persons with Witness Stone Project

(Deerfield, M.A.) – As part of Historic Deerfield’s ongoing commitment to broadening visitor knowledge and experience, [Historic Deerfield](#), in partnership with [The Witness Stones Project](#)™, has unveiled 19 memorial plaques at 12 locations along the museum’s mile-long street. The plaques honor enslaved persons who once lived in the historic homes and sites that make up the Historic Deerfield Museum.

The Witness Stones Project™ is an educational initiative whose mission is to restore the history and honor the humanity of the enslaved individuals who helped build our communities. Massachusetts is now the second New England state to participate in the Witness Stones Project.

John Davis, Historic Deerfield President, says, “We are very pleased to be part of the Witness Stones Project, which has enabled us to share a more complete picture of Deerfield’s history. As the first site in Massachusetts to join this initiative, we hope that our participation will not only highlight the lives and contributions of enslaved individuals, but will also encourage others in our community to get involved with the project.”

Dennis Culliton, Executive Director, Witness Stones Project, Inc., explains that the larger Witness Stone project started in 2017 while he was working as a teacher. “A book that I picked up in the gift shop at Historic Deerfield nearly 10 years ago gave me the idea to explore the history of enslaved people,” said Culliton. “This is a project that we have been working on for quite some time, so it’s truly inspiring to see this come to fruition.”

Historically, The Witness Stones Project works with schools to do research and then deliver the curriculum to students after research is complete. In this partnership with Historic Deerfield, it will be the first time that the host will deliver the curriculum as an open air museum. “It was a new and wonderful experience working with an educational institution such as Historic Deerfield, which has already done so much research to help make this project possible,” said Culliton.

“I am thrilled with the collaboration between Historic Deerfield and the Witness Stones Project,” said Patricia Wilson Pheanious, Chair of the Board of Directors for The Witness Stones Project. “Each of the 19 memorials represent, not just the recovery of a lost life, but an acknowledgement: This life mattered! A person was here enslaved. Their life and contribution is important, worth wondering and learning about. Each stone represents an untold story. The profound impact of revealing these stories allows us to connect to the past, have context for the present, and create a better informed future. I believe a faithful telling of history will do exactly that.”

Wilson Pheanious continues, “That’s what it did for me. It was through the Witness Stone Project that I learned of my family’s enslavement in 1727 New England, and the role they played through the generations founding, building, and protecting this country. Primary documents; sales and inventory, census, town, church and military records; biographical memoirs—all gave context to the path my father’s family fought from enslavement through seven generations. These triumphs were lost years of American history that I hadn’t imagined—and certainly never learned about in school.”

The Witness Stones Project, Inc. is a Connecticut-based organization with a unique approach to memorializing enslaved individuals. Inspired by the *Stolpersteine* project in Germany, commemorating victims of the Holocaust, the Witness Stones Project works to restore the history and honor the humanity of the enslaved individuals who helped build our communities.

Over a third of the households on Deerfield’s mile-long street included at least one enslaved person by the mid-18th century. Much of the surviving archival evidence is housed at the Memorial Libraries in Deerfield and was shared as early as 1893 in an article written by Deerfield’s 19th-century town historian George Sheldon. This evidence has enabled staff of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Historic Deerfield, and other dedicated researchers, to recover and share information about the presence and lives of Deerfield’s enslaved residents.

A Witness Stones memorial is a 4” x 4” bronze plaque identifying the enslaved person. The installation of Witness Stones memorials on sites currently owned by Historic Deerfield where enslaved men, women, and children lived and worked is an essential element in the Museum’s ongoing initiative to share this history with visitors and local residents alike. The memorials are installed close to the sidewalks, ensuring that people walking there will be able see them and be inspired to learn more about the enslaved persons.

Information about the individuals memorialized will be available in different formats. Long-term plans include developing a mobile app and an online database. Historic Deerfield is also working with the Witness Stones Project to offer teachers professional development in addition to public programs, including a day-long conference and museum education experiences incorporating essential themes of slavery.

“Understanding the America that my ancestors inhabited, meant piecing together multiple, interconnected puzzles— key pieces lost in time. Once you learn where to look and how to read between the lines, you can find human triumph inside of cruel historical fact,” said Wilson Pheanious. “Such knowledge gave me a sense of “ownership” and “legitimacy” in this country that I hadn’t known was missing. Finding these truths was like turning on a light. I want to make that awareness, balance, self-worth, and inclusion available to every single child and person who wants to learn. Through the Witness Stones Program’s unique curriculum, teacher support and community engagement strategies, truth can vindicate lost history and build a more complete appreciation of this country’s origins, challenges and unique strengths.”

To learn more about The Witness Stones Project™, visit <https://witnessstonesproject.org/>.

To learn more about Historic Deerfield, visit <https://www.historic-deerfield.org/>.

About Historic Deerfield. Historic Deerfield is a museum of early American life situated in an authentic 18th-century New England village in the Connecticut River Valley of Massachusetts. Its historic houses and world-famous collection of early American decorative arts open doors to new perspectives that inspire people to seek a deeper understanding of themselves, their communities, and the world.

About The Witness Stones Project. Through research, education, and civic engagement the Witness Stones Project restores the history and honors the humanity and contributions of enslaved individuals who helped build our communities. The project started in 2017 in an 8th grade classroom in Connecticut and was inspired by the memorialization of Jews in Berlin through the Stolpersteine Project. Since then, twenty schools, and over 10,000 students have engaged in the Witness Stones curriculum, learning about the history of slavery in the North. They use the Five Themes of Slavery as a lens to analyze and extract biographical information about the Africans and African Americans who were so much a part of colonial New England.