August 17, 2017

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, PLEASE

21st ANNUAL VENTURE SMITH DAY FESTIVITIES TO BE HELD ON SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 9th FROM 1 P.M. – 4 P.M.

Photo by Keke Keukelaar

Keynote speaker, Russell Shorto, author of the best seller "The Island at the Center of the World," about the Dutch founding of Manhattan, will talk about "Venture Smith and American Freedom" at the 21th annual Venture Smith Day on Saturday, September 9th from 1 pm to 4 pm in the cemetery at the First Church of Christ, 499 Town Street (RT. 151), in East Haddam, Connecticut. His newest book, "Revolution Song: A Story of American Freedom," which weaves together the lives of Venture Smith, George Washington and four other early Americans, will be released November 7th. Shorto believes the revolutionary period, through which Venture Smith lived, is more relevant now than ever. Shorto has won numerous awards for his writing, and his books have been published in 14 languages.

EAST HADDAM, CT - The 21th annual Venture Smith Day Festivities will be held on Saturday, September 9th from 1 pm to 4 pm in the cemetery at the First Church of Christ, 499 Town Street (RT. 151), East Haddam, Connecticut where he is buried (1729-1805). Son of an African king, Venture Smith became the first black man to document his capture from Africa and life as an American slave and successful black freeman in Connecticut. Well known and respected, Venture Smith spent the majority of his freedom years in East Haddam and Haddam Neck, Connecticut. His grave is one of the original sites on the Connecticut Freedom Trail.

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Dr. Karl P. Stofko, East Haddam's Municipal Historian and Venture Smith family genealogist since the 1970s, will talk about "Charles Holt, the Forgotten Publisher of Venture Smith's 1998 Narrative." Venture Smith's family genealogy and artifacts and crafts from Ghana and other regions of Africa will be on display. A town proclamation will be presented and wreath-laying ceremony by the descendants of Venture Smith and the annual Venture family reunion photograph will take place in the cemetery by Venture's grave.

The ladies of "Sisters In Stitches Joined by the Cloth" of eastern Massachusetts will return this year with their magnificent African American quilts on display. The recent discovery of the Starks family, descendants of Venture's granddaughter Cynthia Smith Matson, was added to Venture Smith's family genealogy and will be on display. In addition, a restored original copy Venture Smith's 1798

narrative will be on exhibit at the event. A facsimile of this booklet will be on sale for $5.00.

Adults and children who are interested in learning more about Connecticut history in the 1700 and 1800s are encouraged to attend. Please bring lawn chairs or blanket. In case of inclement weather the celebration will move into the parish house of First Church.

There will be plenty of time to renew old friendships, talk with speakers, and Venture's descendants and enjoy light refreshments in the Parish Hall next to the cemetery.

Questions please call (860) 873-9375. To review the original Venture Smith autobiography go to www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture2/menu.html

A Brief Biography of Venture Smith

Born around 1729, Venture Smith's African birth name was Broteer, and he was the eldest son of King Saungm Furro of the tribe of Dukandarra in Guinea, West Africa. He was captured about 1736 when he was seven years old and was sold for "4 gallons of rum and some calico" at Anamabo on Africa's Gold Coast to Robinson Mumford, the steward of a Rhode Island slave ship. Broteer was renamed Venture because he was purchased by Mumford's own private venture. Venture grew up as a slave on Fishers Island, New York, which was being leased by the Mumford family at that time.

Around 1750 he married Meg, another Mumford slave, and they had four children. After a failed escape attempt in 1754, Venture was sold to Thomas Stanton of Stonington Point, Connecticut. In 1760, he was purchased for the last time by Oliver Smith, of Stonington. Smith allowed Venture to purchase his freedom in 1765 and in return Venture took the name Smith as his surname.

Venture then lived and worked on Long Island to raise money to purchase the freedom of his wife and children. During these years he cut wood, farmed, fished, and spent seven months on a whaling voyage. In 1774, Venture sold all his land on Long Island and in Stonington and moved his family to East Haddam.

He then began purchasing land on Haddam Neck along the Salmon River Cove from Abel Bingham and others. His farm grew into 134 acres with three houses; twenty boats, canoes and sailing vessels; two fishing businesses and a commercial orchard. His entrepreneurial ventures included river trafficking, lumberjacking, carpentry and farming. All this he accomplished without the ability to either read or write.

In 1798, Venture dictated his autobiography to teacher Elisha Niles, which was then published in pamphlet form by Charles Holt, editor of the New London Bee weekly newspaper. It has been reprinted many times. It is the only slave narrative of the 18th century that recounts life in Africa. His life story has been an inspiration to many over the years. Venture died on September 19, 1805, at age 77 as a highly respected man by all in the Haddams. His wife, two sons, Cuff and Solomon, and several grandchildren survived him. Several of his descendants still live in Connecticut.

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