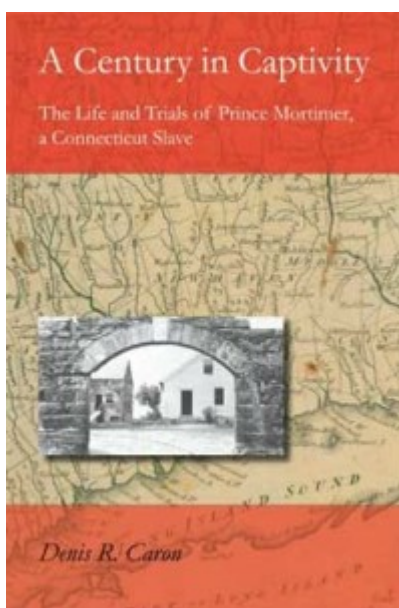
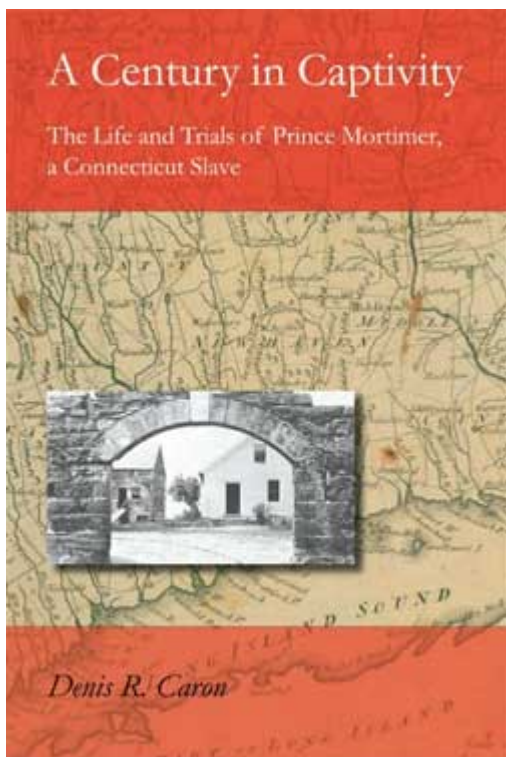


The Life of Prince Mortimer (in Brief)



Denis R. Caron, *A Century in Captivity: The Life and Trials of Prince Mortimer, a Connecticut Slave*

In his book, *A Century of Captivity*, Denis R. Caron relates the story of Prince Mortimer, a West African who lived an extraordinarily long life marked by bondage and imprisonment. Born in Guinea in the early eighteenth century, Mortimer was captured and sold into slavery as young boy. Transported to North America, Mortimer wound up in Middletown, Connecticut, a river port whose economic foundation rested on shipbuilding and maritime trade with England and

the British West Indies.

Little is known about Mortimer's first three decades in Middletown, but in the 1750s Mortimer was purchased by a wealthy Irish immigrant who had recently moved to the town to establish a rope-making business. Mortimer and several other male slaves were purchased and trained as spinners to work in their new owner's shop. Mortimer became an expert at his trade, a trade he would practice for the next four decades. During the American War of Independence, Mortimer aided the patriot cause, though it is unclear exactly in what capacity he served. Unlike many slaves in the North, Mortimer did not receive his freedom at the end of the conflict. Instead he returned to his old job. Apparently his owner did have some misgivings about slavery because he included provisions in his will that called for the manumission of all of his slaves upon his death. When the owner did die, however, the will was contested and the emancipatory provisions nullified. Though an old man by that point, Mortimer's life was still not finished nor was his journey. In 1811, under circumstances that remain unclear, Mortimer was convicted of trying to poison his subsequent owner and was sentenced to life in prison, where he remained until his death in 1834.

A book-length study of Prince Mortimer's life would be fascinating reading. This book by Denis R. Caron, as encapsulated by the title, purports to be about "A Century of Captivity," or more specifically "The Life and Trials of Prince Mortimer, a Connecticut Slave." In actuality, however, much of the book is only peripherally related to Mortimer's life. Trained as a lawyer, Caron focuses his attention on legal issues and the origins of Connecticut's prison system. An illustration of Caron's scanty coverage of Mortimer's life is that, according to the index, Mortimer only appears on thirty of the book's 160 pages. Caron relegates his examination of Mortimer's first seventy years in bondage to three paragraphs spread over the course of the book's second chapter, entitled "The Early Years." Caron then devotes an inordinate number of chapters to the last thirty years of Mortimer's life as an inmate in Connecticut's infamous Newgate prison and its successor, though the sources for his time incarcerated are slim. The lack of detail on Mortimer's life is unfortunate since he lived through a particularly tumultuous time in American history, one in which blacks in the North experienced profound changes.

The portions of the book that do deal with Mortimer's life as a slave suffer from several problems. Caron states at the beginning of the book that there are few studies of slavery in Connecticut and cites as the most important a study from 1933. Because of the paucity of primary sources related to Mortimer and because of the paucity of sources related to slavery in Connecticut in general, Caron often resorts to speculative terms such as "probably" and "most likely" when describing not only Mortimer's thoughts but his actions as well. In the process, Caron's speculation and his reliance on outdated literature lead him to significant interpretive errors. "Slaves," he maintains, "were generally considered members of the household. The relationship was similar to that of children whose care and protection was entrusted to the master" (15). In another instance, he asserts, "Documented histories of Connecticut slavery

suggest that Prince and others like him were not made to work any harder than their masters' families, who generally labored alongside their slaves in the fields. Prince would not have been denied the basic necessities of life—adequate food, appropriate clothing, and shelter from the elements” (13). Overall, Caron paints a portrait of slavery as a benign institution. Ample evidence in the secondary literature indicates that Caron's portrait of slavery is erroneous. While there may be little written on slavery in Connecticut, there is a growing literature on slavery in the North that contradicts many of his unsubstantiated assertions. Slavery in the North was far more complex than suggested by Caron's generalizations. Use of recent secondary literature on slavery in the North would have provided a fuller, more accurate, context for Mortimer's early years in bondage. If he had made use of these sources, Caron would have obviated his need to rely upon speculation and would have cut down on his interpretive errors.

Despite its flaws, this book provides a solid overview of penal reform and the prison system in Connecticut in the early nineteenth century. Caron also offers an interesting glimpse into the complexity of property law in nineteenth-century Connecticut that would appeal to individuals interested in early American legal history.

For those interested in the history of blacks and slavery in the North, a number of fine state and regional studies have been published in the past few decades. Some of these include Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill, 1999); Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, 1987); Jackson Turner Main, *Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut* (Princeton, N. J., 1985); and Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York, 1971). For an excellent comparative study of slavery in early North America, readers should consult Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, 1998).

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