



CAROL LOLLIS

Robert Romer of Amherst studies and teaches about the history of slavery in Deerfield. Here, he stands before the Ashley House, onetime home of a minister who owned slaves.

Research shift: physics to slavery

Retired Amherst professor shares study of area slavery

By PHYLLIS LEHRER
Staff Writer

AMHERST — Researcher Robert Romer admits his past ignorance about slavery in the Connecticut River Valley.

"I've lived here for most of my life and the subject was totally unknown," said Romer, of Spring Street, who retired after 46 years as an Amherst College physics professor.

That was 2½ years ago. Since then he has been educating himself, reading books, studying documents, newspapers, court records and visiting area libraries. He is sharing his knowledge by conducting school tours on his own and speaking to historical societies and anyone else interested. He is considering writing articles or a book based on his findings.

"I'd like people to know about

this important, but essentially unknown subject," Romer said. "It's like my science. It's intellectually interesting to investigate a topic which is an important part of our history, in this case almost unknown. It's like going into the lab and measure what no one else knows."

The interest was piqued when he served as a guide at Historic Deerfield. The Rev. Jonathan Ashley, a Deerfield minister, owned three African American slaves, he discovered.

"It really got to me. And most ministers at that time in Connecticut Valley owned slaves. It was not just an anomaly, it was pervasive," he said, citing 19 ministers from Amherst to Wilbraham gleaned from his research of the slavery in the area in the 18th century.

"Ministers had slaves and ministers wouldn't allow abolitionist

William Lloyd Garrison to speak in their churches," he said.

The research is a challenge because records are scarce. "Town histories give few lines, if any, to the existence of slavery. Any discussion of colonial life that doesn't mention slavery isn't complete," said Romer, who no longer guides at Deerfield.

Slaves only appear in formal church and court records if they were baptized or arrested. Informal records, such as letters, rarely mention slaves.

However, records of slaves are found in will inventories along with the horses and cows, he said.

Romer ends his school tours at the Deerfield cemetery. Romer said the slaves must have been buried there, yet there are no stones to mark their graves. If they had wooden ones they are long gone, he said.

From his research, Romer created a map of Deerfield, a snapshot of Main Street in 1753, showing the households where the slaves lived. A total of 21 slaves belonged to 12 different families. "That's a very significant fraction of the population, 7 percent in a community of 300," he said.

He said he focused on Deerfield because there are more surviving papers.

Romer said the study is significant because the institution of slavery played a dominant role in the history of the country. "We should know where it comes from, not just the south. They may not be our ancestors in the literal sense, but in a sense that they lived right here. I'm interested in what happened in our neighborhood."

Phyllis Lehrer can be reached at plehrer@gazettenet.com.

This article is a pretty good summary of the conversation I had with reporter Phyllis Lehrer. One unfortunate omission of some connecting words could easily give one a misunderstanding of the history. It was, of course, 18th century ministers who owned slaves and 19th century ministers who would not allow Garrison to speak in their churches. I am *accurately* quoted, however, as saying: "Any discussion of colonial life [in the Connecticut Valley] that doesn't mention slavery is incomplete!"