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TOP STORY

Exploring the business of selling enslaved people

Rogers High School students hear a talk on exploring the business of selling enslaved people.

By Sean Flynn | Staff writer Feb 8, 2018 Updated Feb 8, 2018



Sean Flynn | Daily News photo

Christine Mitchell gave lectures about the business of slavery to about 230 students at Rogers High School on Wednesday.

NEWPORT — Christine Mitchell, a historic interpreter at the Old Slave Mart Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, has spent years researching the business of selling enslaved African-Americans and Africans that was conducted for more than 200 years before the Civil War.

During four presentations she made to about 230 students at Rogers High School on Wednesday morning, she displayed newspapers and posters from the 1800s that advertised slave sales and auctions.

The most powerful part of the presentation for many of the students was an audio recording of an interview conducted with Fountain Hughes, who was born into slavery in 1848 and freed at the end of the Civil War in 1865. He was 101 years old when the interview was conducted in 1949.

* **ALSO** Panel explores memorializing slavery in America

“If I thought I’d ever be a slave again, I’d take a gun and just end it all right away,” the students heard Hughes say. “You wasn’t no more than a dog to some of them in them days. You wasn’t treated as good as they treat dogs now.”

“If they wanted you to cut tobacco all night long, you did it,” Hughes said. “If you were tired, you were afraid to say it. ... I could say a whole lot I don’t like to say. And I won’t say a whole lot more.”

The whole experience was eye-opening for the students.

“People have to feel this history emotionally,” said Alize Duarte, a senior. “We don’t really cover that aspect in history class. I’ve heard a lot about Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman, but not a lot about the lives of the slaves. For example, I didn’t know they sold newborn babies.”

“People have to understand how all this happened and what people went through,” said Jianna Peno, a senior. “If buyers didn’t have all the money up front to buy slaves, they could take out a mortgage. One 14-year-old boy cost the equivalent of about \$40,000 in today’s dollars.”

Mitchell displayed a historical inventory of slaves with the prices listed. She used an online calculator to arrive at what the prices would be in today’s currency.

Duarte and Peno are researching the slave market and the connections between Charleston and Newport for their senior project. Victoria Johnson, a former Rogers High School principal, helped arrange for Mitchell to come to Newport and asked students to write down what struck them the most from the recorded interview or from the presentation.

“I remember him saying how he had to sleep on the floor because they didn’t have enough beds,” said Allaria Trombley, a sophomore.

* **ALSO:** Newport resident to lecture on 'Legacies of slavery and freedom'

Hughes told how the enslaved boys did not have beds until after they were freed. After being released from their master, Hughes relates how he and his brother had nowhere to go. They crept into a livery stable to sleep until their mother hired them out to a farm for \$1 a month.

"If I had lived then, I would have left to get as far away as possible," said Love Turnage, a sophomore. "But he didn't know where to go."

In the 1860 U.S. Census, more than 4 million people were identified as "slaves." By the time they were freed five years later, there could have been as many as 4.5 million slaves, Mitchell said.

She said she usually avoids the term "slaves," preferring to call them "enslaved" men, women and children.

Even after the slaves were told they were "free," they often went back to plantations to work as hired farm hands or domestic help, Mitchell said. Their lives initially were regulated by "Black Codes" that were legislated in the southern states, she said. These codes later evolved into the Jim Crow laws.

"Some women cost more than men," said Chloe Simmons, a sophomore, talking about what she remembered most from the presentation.

Mitchell had said those high prices were received for women who were considered "breeders."

On display was a historical mortgage that a buyer took on July 10, 1854, for \$1,481 for six slaves known as "Handy, Sophy, Uriah, Diana, Josiah and Rose."

This history is not so far in the past, Mitchell said. Her grandparents had known former slaves, she said.

There were many connections between Rhode Island and Charleston, she explained to the students.

Slave traders from Rhode Island sent ships to Africa to transport slaves to the Americas. Some of the slaves were paid for with rum distilled in Rhode Island. The ships delivered slaves to the slave markets in the South and then loaded up with cotton to supply the textile mills in New England.

"Charleston, Rhode Island and Africa were a triangle," Mitchell said.

Nathaniel Russell moved from Bristol to Charleston in 1765 and bought and sold enslaved people, Mitchell said. His beautiful brick historic home in Charleston is now open for public tours, she said.

During the evening on Wednesday, Mitchell gave a lecture at Channing Memorial Church entitled, "The Business of Slavery: Evidence of Control, Power, and Wealth."

Mitchell's presentations and lecture were sponsored by the Learning Center at Channing Memorial Church and the Newport Middle Passage Port Marker Project in recognition of Black History Month.

Flynn@NewportRI.com

Sean Flynn