

# LUCY TERRY PRINCE:

## Forgotten Heroine



When Lucy Terry Prince was only a few years old, she was kidnapped by **slavers** and taken from her home in Africa. She **survived** a hard voyage across the Atlantic Ocean chained below deck in a slave ship with hundreds of other terrified Africans. In New England, this young black girl was sold to a white family who settled in Massachusetts. She was their slave.

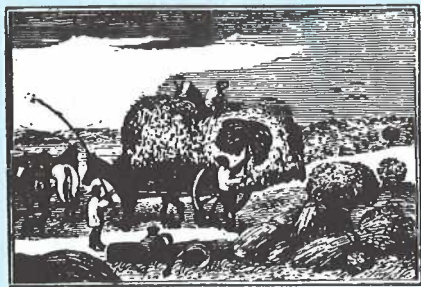
In 1756, she married Abijah Prince, a freed slave, who bought her freedom. They moved to Guilford in southern Vermont. 'Bijiah, as he was called, was one of the original settlers of Guilford. Together Lucy and Bijiah raised a family and worked their land like thousands of other early Vermonters. They felled trees, built a house, cleared fields, and planted crops. But they suffered **difficulties** that other settlers did not.

A neighbor who wanted their land made life hard for them. Sometimes their cows were driven away or their fences pulled down. Once their haystacks were set on fire. When the town did nothing to help them, Lucy took her case to the Governor's Council, the highest **authority** in the state, and won.

Another time, her son wanted to go to Williams College in Massachusetts, but was turned down

Young people sometimes met at her house to read poems and tell stories. Picture by David Stone Martin from *Black Woman*.

because he was black. Lucy defended him before the leaders of the college. All people were equal, she said, and all should have the right to go to school. She spoke for three hours and used words from the Bible about equality and brotherhood to help her argument. The college still said no. Soon after, Abijah died.



At age sixty-six, Lucy moved to Sunderland where she found herself defending her family's rights again. This time the battle was against two of Vermont's best lawyers.

## The Best Lawyer in Vermont

In the Windsor courthouse on May 5, 1797, the United States circuit court was in session. In those days the judge traveled from county to county to hold court.

The crowd grew quiet as Judge Samuel Chase entered the room. He was well-known for bullying **defendants**.

The case that day was between Eli Brownson and Lucy Terry Prince. Brownson was **suing** Lucy Terry Prince in court. He said that her farm really belonged to him.

At this time, settlers were crowding into Vermont. Land, once plentiful and cheap, was now expensive. There were many **disputes** about land ownership.

When Lucy learned that she would have to go to court, she called on her friend Isaac Tichenor. He was a well-known lawyer and politician who would one

day become governor of Vermont. He gave her advice about what to say.

Judge Chase told Eli Brownson's lawyers, Stephen Bradley and Royall Tyler, to begin. Brownson had been smart to hire them. They were **experienced** lawyers and dressed in fancy clothes that impressed people.

Bradley and Tyler named the different owners of the land over the years. They spoke with **confidence** and used important-sounding words. They said that Mr. Brownson had bought the land from the state. The state had taken it from a Loyalist, a man who sided with the British during the Revolutionary War.



Royall Tyler was a politician, playwright, and one of the smartest lawyers in Vermont.

### VOCABULARY

**slaver** - one who captures and sells people as slaves

**survive** - barely live through

**difficulty** - hardship

**authority** - person or group with power

**defendant** - person on trial

**sue** - put on trial

**dispute** - argument

**experienced** - skilled

**confidence** - trust in yourself





Bradley and Tyler made it seem as if the Prince family did not truly own its land.

Next, Judge Chase asked to hear Lucy's side. People were surprised when Lucy stood to speak for herself. It was not considered proper for women to act as lawyers in those days. Also, because Lucy was black and had never gone to school, many people felt that she had no right to give her **opinions**.

She did not make a fancy speech. She just told her side of the matter in a clear way. Carefully, she explained the history of her land title. She said that Bradley and Tyler were wrong and that she did own her farm. As proof, she held up the Sunderland town charter. It proved that Abijah was among the first settlers in the town. The name "Abijah Prince" was written there plain as day. She knew she was speaking the truth, but would the jury believe her? Or would the fine clothes and grand manners of Bradley and Tyler fool them?

She watched the twelve men in the jury leave to discuss the matter in private. When they returned, Judge Chase asked for their verdict. "Your Honor, we find the defendant, Lucy Terry Prince, not guilty. We further order Eli Brownson to pay Lucy Terry Prince twenty dollars for her **expenses** during the trial."

Isaac Tichenor shook Lucy's hand. Even Judge Chase was smiling. He rapped his gavel to silence the crowd. Then he said something people in the room would long remember. "Mrs. Prince," he said, "you have presented a better case than I have ever heard from a lawyer in Vermont."

Lucy Terry Prince lived to be ninety-one. It is said that even in her last years she rode horseback over the Green Mountains to Guilford to visit Abijah's grave.



## VOCABULARY

**opinion** - belief  
**expense** - cost