

IN CELEBRATION OF

# black

# HISTORY

# MONTH

## PRINCE KING: THE FIRST BLACK LANDOWNER IN MIDDLEBURY

In the Sheldon Museum Research Center, there is a map of Addison County that lists landowners in 1850s. As a graduate student, I spent a lot of time there and was inspecting the map to find who lived where my house is located, where the towns of Middlebury, Bristol and New Haven meet on the corner of Cobble Road and East Munger Street. The name "P. King" popped out from the map, and I typed it into the catalog. A few minutes later, I held a slim folder that contained the start of my research. Since then, I have pieced together the fascinating story of his life in Addison County.

Born around 1806 in New Lebanon, N.Y., King grew up without knowing either of his parents, living in the house of either John or Reuben King, brothers who were business owners and politicians in Columbia County, N.Y. Prince King appeared in Addison County in the late 1830s, working for Ira Mills, who owned a substantial sheep farm on the New Haven side of Munger Street. Mills became a friend and supporter of

King, helping him purchase a 70-acre farm on East Munger Street. Others helped King, too, including abolitionist lawyer ED Barber and neighbor Clark Cady.

Prince King was not involved in town activities, but most knew who he was, as he was mentioned in the The Middlebury Register sporadically. The July 6, 1875 issue contained a story about a local man named SR Mills who traveled by horseback through the "benighted corner" where Bristol, New Haven and Middlebury meet and was caught in a thunderstorm. His horse, Dobbin, came to a complete stop, and they stood frozen in the storm for an hour. The story then mentions that "On the same occasion, Mr. Prince King, was frightened out of his wits lest his house and barn were going down over his head. He was alive yesterday morning, however, and kinky as ever." Although the writer does not specifically say it, Mr. Mills was right outside Mr. King's door when this incident happened and decided to stay out on the road in a raging storm rather than ask for shelter in King's house.

From the 1840s through the 1870s, Prince King lived on his East Munger Street farm with his common-law wife, a white woman named Miranda McHurd. Her father, Ephraim, also lived with them at times. Both Prince and Miranda developed tuberculosis, which was rampant in the 1870s. Before Miranda died of it in 1877, they both had their wills drawn up in 1876. They each leave all of their belongings to the other, and they also named Miranda's sister, Emily, who lived in Crown Point, N.Y., as an heir. Both documents were witnessed by their neighbors and the executor was their closest neighbor, Charles Bain. Emily and her husband arrived at the homestead after Prince King died in November 1884 and packed up his few belongings to take back across the lake. When the estate was finally settled and

**From the Sheldon Museum Archives:** This is a three-part series addressing the presence of Black Americans in early Addison County. Last week we introduced the topic and shared relevant documents available at the Sheldon's archives; part two tells a fascinating story of Middlebury Black resident Prince King; the third and last essay will outline the Twilight Project and explain how Middlebury College students are using local archives to research difficult moments of local history.

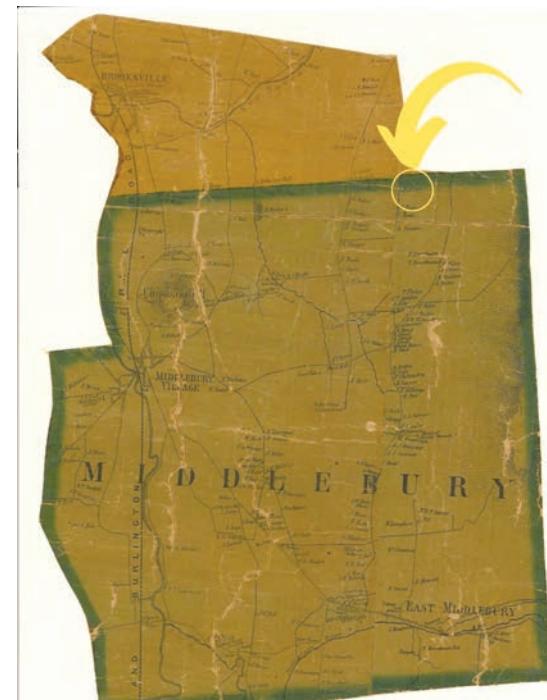


Fig 1: Addison County Map, 1857.

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the land sold, they received a check for \$962.22. King had the most basic items on his farm at the end of his life: a cow and calf, wagon, sawing mill, plow, harness, sled, saddle, miscellaneous tools, hay and straw, firewood, lumber, and grain.

Prince King and Miranda McHurd are buried next to each other in the Munger Street Cemetery.

A former archivist at the Henry Sheldon Museum told me that she had once seen Prince King's name in one of Henry's many scrapbooks. She said that Henry had written an anecdote about a conversation they had. Those scrapbooks, along with all the other collections held within the Research Center, contain multitudes of stories about lives that we know so little about.



Fig 3: Prince King and Miranda McHurd's gravestones in the Munger Street Cemetery, New Haven.

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—During the "mighty" thunder shower of last week Mr. S. R. Mills was caught in that dark and benighted corner of the earth where the three towns New Haven, Bristol and Middlebury join, and he had an experience not enjoyed every day. It was dark as Egypt. The lightning flashes illuminated the country around, rendering visible the rail-fences the fields of grain, and even the lightning bugs, but only for the moment, relapsing with awful suddenness into the terrible darkness again. Dobbin refused to budge and the gentleman sat it out with an umbrella over him. An hour later he arrived home but with his boots full of water. And now he don't believe in this cold water business any more. On the same occasion Mr. Prince King, of Nova Zembla, was frightened almost out of his wits lest his house and barn were going down over his head. He was alive yesterday morning, however, and kinky as ever.

Fig 2: July 6, 1875 Middlebury Register

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