

Lucy Terry (c.1730–1821)

A longtime New England resident of African descent, Lucy Terry achieved literary fame only after her death, when her poem “Bars Fight” was published in Josiah Gilbert Holland’s *History of Western Massachusetts* in 1855. Prior to its publication, the poem had been preserved orally by Deerfield, Massachusetts, residents in their memory of the 1746 Abenaki Indian attack. Born in Africa but sold into slavery as an infant, Terry was purchased in Bristol, Rhode Island, by Ensign Ebenezer Wells of Deerfield, whose church she joined in 1744. Twelve years later, she married a free black man named Abijah Prince, a veteran of the French and Indian War who purchased her freedom. Granted his own freedom because of his military service, Prince owned three parcels of land in northern Massachusetts and Vermont. In 1760, the Princes settled in Guilford, Vermont, where their six children were born; a son, Cesar Prince, fought in the Revolutionary War. In addition to properties in Northfield and Guilford (the latter left to Prince by his former employer, Deacon Samuel Field), Abijah Prince owned 100 acres in Sunderland, Vermont, a town he helped found.

Over the next 50 years, Lucy Terry gained a reputation as a skilled orator. She was also a vigilant protector of her family’s interests in the predominantly white region. In 1785, after a group of white neighbors attacked the Princes’ property in Guilford, Lucy Terry and her husband appealed to Vermont’s governor for help; he ruled that the town’s selectmen must protect

the Princes from attack. Her three-hour argument before the State Supreme Court on behalf of a disputed land claim earned Terry praise from the leading white attorneys of the state during the 1790s. She died in 1821, more than three decades before her poem was published. “Bars Fight” is the first poem written by a woman of African descent in what would become the United States.

Further reading

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- Cima, Gay Gibson. *Early American Women Critics: Performance, Religion, Race*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Ch. 2.
- De Lancey, Frenzella E. “Teaching Four African American Female Poets in Context: Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley, Frances E.W. Harper, and Sonia Sanchez.” *Teaching African American Women’s Writing*. Ed. Gina Wisker. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 75–86.
- Gerzina, Gretchen Holbrook. *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and Into Legend*. New York: Amistad/HarperCollins, 2008.
- Harris, Sharon M. *Executing Race: Early American Women’s Narratives of Race, Society, and the Law*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005. Ch. 6.
- Langley, April C.E. *The Black Aesthetic Unbound: Theorizing the Dilemma of Eighteenth-Century African American Literature*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008. Ch. 4.

Bars¹ Fight

August, 'twas the twenty-fifth,
Seventeen hundred forty-six,
The Indians did in ambush lay,
Some very valiant² men to slay,

The names of whom I'll not leave out:
Samuel Allen like a hero fout,³
And though he was so brave and bold,
His face no more shall we behold.

Eleazor Hawks was killed outright,
Before he had time to fight –
Before he did the Indians see,
Was shot and killed immediately.

Oliver Armsden he was slain,
Which caused his friends much grief and pain.
Simeon Arsdén they found dead
Not many rods⁴ distant from his head.

Adonijah Gillet, we do hear,
Did lose his life which was so dear.
John Sadler fled across the water,
And thus escaped the dreadful slaughter.

Eunice Allen see the Indians coming,
And hopes to save herself by running;
And had not her petticoats stopped her,
The awful creatures had not caught her,

Nor tommy hawked her on the head,
And left her on the ground for dead.
Young Samuel Allen, Oh, lack-a-day!
Was taken and carried to Canada.

1746

1855

Notes

¹ Bars meadows.

² Original reads: valient [ed.].

³ fout fought.

⁴ rod unit of measurement.