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## Special Legacy of Amos Fortune : 18th-Century Ex-Slave Was Benefactor to Small Town

*Charles Hillinger's America*

**November 13, 1988** | CHARLES HILLINGER | Times Staff Writer

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JAFFREY, N.H. — He was brought to America from Africa against his will in 1725. He was 15 years old.

Unable to read, write or speak English, he was auctioned off as a slave on the Boston waterfront.

His masters called him Amos Fortune, a name that lives on today. When he died in 1801 at 91, Fortune became the town's first benefactor, leaving Jaffrey \$233 to be used for educational purposes and bequeathing Jaffrey Congregational Church \$100 to "purchase a handsome gift."

The latter, a pewter communion service, is now on exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, while the \$233—a tidy sum in those days—established the Amos Fortune Fund that continues to this day. Over the past 187 years, the fund has grown as interest accumulates at the local bank. Withdrawals have been made to award winners of speaking and writing contests at the local elementary and high schools.

Another of his legacies is the 42-year-old Amos Fortune Forum lecture series, sponsored by the fund and presented each summer at the Old Meeting House in Jaffrey Center.

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

Elizabeth Yates; Children's Author

*August 4, 2001*

CENTURY LEAGUE : Amos Needs Both Opportunities Before...

*January 10, 1991*

Gift Books, 1986 : Treats for Kids to See and Hear

*November 23, 1986*

The frame of the white-steepled meeting house, which features the 282nd bell cast by Paul Revere in its belfry, was raised April 19, 1775, the day of the Battle of Concord. The Old Meeting House was the Congregational Church in Fortune's time. As a black man, he was not permitted in the main sanctuary. He and other black members of the church viewed services from the balcony.

Many prominent New York and New England families maintain second homes in Jaffrey at the foot of Monadnock Mountain. To show their appreciation for the life style and serenity of this picture-post card community, each year seven distinguished summer residents speak at the Amos Fortune Forum without compensation.

"Amos Fortune would be delighted that his bequest has continued as long as it has, that it sponsors writing and speaking contests for children, that it sponsors the lecture series," said Jaffrey attorney Christopher V. Bean, treasurer of the Amos Fortune Fund since 1980.

"Public speaking," said Bean, "was one of Amos Fortune's favorite subjects."

Recently, 100 fifth- and sixth-graders from the nearby Merrimack School District were bused to the Old Burial Grounds in Jaffrey to read Fortune's epitaph on a weathered, blue slate tombstone:

*SACRED to the memory of Amos Fortune who was born free in Africa a slave in America he purchased liberty professed Christianity lived reputably & died hopefully Nov. 17, 1801 Ae 91* Elizabeth Yates, 83, met the Merrimack students in the graveyard. The author of 50 children's books, she lives on a 200-year-old farmhouse in nearby Peterborough and often drives here to talk with students about the town and Amos Fortune.

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"I meet the children out in the graveyard, at Amos Fortune's home and barn, or at the Jaffrey Library," Yates said. "They are so curious about Amos Fortune, about his wife, Violet, about their adopted daughter, Celyndia. They all want to know what happened to Celyndia after Amos and Violet died. No one knows."

Millions of U.S. schoolchildren first learn about Amos Fortune when they read Yates' classic story, "Amos Fortune, Free Man," which won the prestigious Newbery Medal in 1951 for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. Now in its 20th printing, it is available in most public libraries.

Amos Fortune lived in Boston for 15 years where his Quaker owners taught him English and provided him with an excellent education.

He was sold again in 1740, this time to Ichabod Richardson, a tanner from Woburn, Mass. Under his tutelage, Fortune became an outstanding tanner. He was 59 when he finally bought his freedom in 1769.

Ten years later he purchased a 51-year-old slave named Violet Baldwin. They married two years later and set out on horseback to start a new life in Jaffrey.

At 71, Fortune purchased 25 acres of land, built a house, barn and tanyard next to a brook and a currier's shop for dressing leather. Before long, his reputation as a tanner spread and he became a respected and well-liked member of the community. In their twilight years, Fortune and his wife adopted a young black girl named Celyndia.

Librarian Cynthia Hamilton also is curator of the Amos Fortune Collection housed in the 1896 Susan Bethiah Clay Library. The collection includes original documents pertaining to the former slave, his letters, compass and other items. Fortune was a founding member of the library.

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