

## Against All Odds: The African American Founding of Princeville, North Carolina

### Overview

In this series of activities, students will learn about Princeville, NC, the oldest town in the United States incorporated by African Americans. Students will learn about the challenges that faced newly freed enslaved people as they built lives on an unwanted piece of swamp land along the Tar River, which was eventually incorporated as the town of Princeville. Through reading and class discussion, students will explore how African Americans in Princeville, NC have faced overwhelming adversity since its inception, continuously exhibiting self-determination and survival in the face of slavery, prejudice, and numerous floods. Students will exhibit their understanding and respect of this under-taught piece of history through various creative writing, art, and drama activities.

### Grade

8

### Essential Questions

- What were circumstances like for freed slaves as the Civil War ended?
- Why did many freed slaves make their way to Freedom Hill?
- Why did some newly freed slaves choose to migrate north, while others chose to stay at Freedom Hill?
- What challenges did the black settlers face at Freedom Hill and as they worked to incorporate Princeville?
- What character traits and skills did Princeville founders possess in order to create a lasting settlement and town?
- Who was Turner Prince, Robert S. Taylor, William P. Mabson, and Abraham Wooten? In what ways did they affect Princeville?
- In what ways does Princeville represent self-determination and survival?
- Why did Princeville residents choose to rebuild rather than take a government buy-out after 1999's Hurricane Floyd?
- Why is it important for America to be educated about Princeville, NC?

### Materials

- Warm-Up Image, attached
- Nature/insect sounds (optional); free samples and files for purchase can be found via a simple internet search
- NC Crossroads Volume 4, Issue 3: *Reclaiming Sacred Ground - How Princeville is Recovering from the Flood of 1999*, by Victor E. Blue (teacher reference document), attached
  - Copy pages 4-5 of the document, "The Town That Survived White Supremacy," to provide to students for reading, attached
- Worksheet and Answer Key for "The Town that Survived White Supremacy", attached
- Art supplies (chart paper or art paper and markers)
- "Tonight, on the 6:00 News: The Accomplishments of Princeville," assignment attached
- Video camera for recording student newscasts (optional)
- Image of Freedom Hill historical marker, attached
- "A Historical Monument for Princeville," assignment sheet attached
- "Princeville Historical Monuments – Feedback Sheet," attached

### Additional Reference Materials for Teacher Use (optional):

- *This Side of the River – Self Determination and Survival in the Oldest Black Town in America*, a documentary production of the North Carolina Language and Life Project; <http://www.thissideoftheriver.org>. (Carolina K-12 has an alternative version of this lesson which includes instructions for integrating clips of the documentary and corresponding discussion questions with the activities in this file. To request a copy of this version of the lesson, contact [CarolinaK12@unc.edu](mailto:CarolinaK12@unc.edu).)

### Duration

- 2 60+ minute class periods
- The length of the lesson can vary depending on the depth of student discussion and the amount of class time provided for particular activities; teachers should use their discretion for time permitted based on their own schedule's flexibility. Teachers limited on time may choose to only complete some of the activities in order to reduce the days required.

### Student Preparation

- Students should have a basic knowledge of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, as well as the Jim Crow Era.
- While teaching about slavery in America brings up sensitive topics of race and violence, it is important for students to explore such "hard history" to ensure they understand the implications of our past, the impact on our present, and are empowered to address the challenges of the future. In order to study such topics effectively and safely, teachers must have established a safe classroom community with clear expectations of respect, open-mindedness, and civil conversation. See [Carolina K-12's "Activities" section of the Database of K-12 Resources](#) for ways to ensure a classroom environment conducive to the effective exploration of sensitive and controversial issues. Teachers should also consult Carolina K-12's ["Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom."](#)

### Procedure

#### Day 1

#### Sensory Warm Up: Settling the Tar River in 1865

1. As a warm-up, project (or copy and handout) the attached *Warm Up Image* and ask students to write down or discuss all of the thoughts that come to their mind while viewing the image and considering the questions posed to them. (If doing this as a class brainstorm/discussion, note student comments on chart paper.) To encourage maximum imagination, teachers can play a soundtrack of nature/insect sounds as students think (free downloads or inexpensive files for purchase can be found on the internet). Encourage students to think creatively by asking the following intermittently as they write or discuss, reminding them there is no right or wrong:
  - Take some time to observe this image. Imagine that it is early summer in the year 1865 and you are standing here, in the middle of this scene.
  - What do you see as you look around?
  - What do you feel standing here in early summer?
  - As you walk and look around, listen carefully. What do you hear?
  - What types of things might bother you or frighten you?
  - Now, consider that the only place in the world you can make a home is right here in this place you are standing. Remember the year is 1865. What would it take to settle this land?
  - Would it be easy or difficult to live here? Why?
  - What skills would it take to build a home here in 1865? What skills would it take to get food and water here?
  - How would someone provide for their family here?
  - What problems might you encounter as you cultivate a home in this place? What would it take to overcome these problems?
  - You can see that there is a river here. What benefits might the river offer settlers? What problems might the river create for us?

- What type of person would you have to be to not only build a home here, but survive and be prosperous in 1865?
2. If students have completed this warm up in writing, allow them to share their thoughts with classmates. Throughout the discussion, teachers should ensure students consider all of the challenges that settlers would face on land such as this (i.e. mosquitoes, extreme heat/humidity in the summer, wild animals, ticks, disease, thick underbrush, flooding, etc.) as well as focus on the attributes and skills people would need to build and survive here (intelligence, perseverance, hard work, strength, courage, motivation, passion, carpentry skills, self-starter, etc.)
  3. Tell students that in today's lesson, they are going to learn about a group of newly freed black people who had a substantial impact on North Carolina and the entire United States of America, starting back in 1865 when they settled in a difficult place just like the students imagined.
  4. Explain that at the end of the Civil War in 1865, a group of freed slaves settled along the **Tar River** in North Carolina. Against numerous odds, this strong and determined group created a home for themselves on an unwanted floodplain that became known as the city of **Princeville, NC**. Princeville, located in **Edgecombe County**, thus became the first town in the United States incorporated by African Americans. (Project the attached map showing the location of Princeville, NC so that students have a visual understanding of its location.)

#### Setting the Stage: Review of the 1860s

5. Tell students that before going any further, you want them to review what was taking place in the 1860s. (Since this material will be a review for your students, allow them to present as much of the material as possible, asking questions to prompt their explanations.) Project (or write on the board) the text from the **Thirteenth Amendment** as a starting point:
  - Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.
  - Section 2. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Discuss:

- What text is this? (*Thirteenth Amendment*) When was this text added to the Constitution?
  - *It was proposed in January of 1865 and ratified in December of 1865*
  - *Teachers may also want to review the **Emancipation Proclamation** at this point, reminding students how the Thirteenth Amendment surpassed that document and made the abolition of slavery permanent.*
- Summarize the Thirteenth Amendment in your own words.
  - *Ensure students understand that it prohibits slavery and involuntary servitude except when it is part of a sentence when someone has been convicted of a crime. This is true throughout the United States and in any place the United States controls.*
  - *Remind students that less than a year after ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, Congress used its newly conferred power to pass the **Civil Rights Act of 1866**, giving black citizens "the same right in every state...to make and enforce contracts, to sue, be parties, ...to inherit, purchase, sell, and convey real and personal property; and to the full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property as is enjoyed by white citizens." However, Southern states still limited the rights of African Americans by establishing Jim Crow laws. Teachers may also want to share the fact that the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the **Civil Rights Act of 1875** were declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. It was not until the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**—almost a hundred years later—that African Americans received true Federal protection of their Civil Rights! If time permits, further review/discuss the **Fourteenth Amendment** and the **Fifteenth Amendment**, which were also ratified during **Reconstruction**.]*

- Once the Thirteenth Amendment was passed, were those who were enslaved immediately viewed as equal and given full rights? Was everything immediately perfect for them?
  - *Remind students of the struggles freed slaves faced, such as a lack of resources and fair opportunities, poverty, and starvation, even with aid organizations such as the **Freedmen's Bureau**; legal restrictions such as **black codes** and **Jim Crow laws** continued to restrict the rights and opportunities for blacks; unfair institutions such as **sharecropping** were often used to take advantage of black labor. Not to mention, freedom left most slaves with little to no resources. Many lacked access to basic needs, including food, shelter, clothing, etc. Freedmen did not even receive voting rights until the enactment of the **Congressional Reconstruction in 1867**, and even after this legislation their voting rights were severely restricted by local Jim Crow laws. While there were a few government agencies and groups (such as missionary services) set up to assist freed slaves, such as the Freedmen's Bureau, there were not nearly enough services, leaving most freed slaves to be completely self-sustaining.*

### From Slavery to Freedom Hill

6. Explain to students that as slavery ended in 1865, freedmen here in North Carolina and across the south faced many challenges. Introduce students to the following information about **Freedom Hill**, later to be known and incorporated as **Princeville**:
  - “By the end of the Civil War, much like what was happening throughout the South, increasing numbers of escaped slaves began to congregate and seek refuge at a Union army camp located on the swampy lowlands just south of the Confederate town of **Tarboro** on the opposite side of the **Tar River**. In the spring of 1865, Union soldiers went to a knoll near this camp to announce that the Confederacy had surrendered and that the slaves of the area were now “freedmen.” To commemorate this event, the freed slaves named that spot of land, and later their village of freed-slave refugees, **Freedom Hill** (Mobley 1994)...However, having overcome tragic odds by surviving slavery, the freed slaves of Tarboro and the Edgecombe county area faced the immediate challenges of surviving poverty and homelessness on their own. Those who chose to stay on the Freedom Hill camp found themselves struggling to make a home on barely habitable, unfarmable and unwanted land that often flooded. Outbreaks of tuberculosis, dysentery, typhoid, malaria and other illnesses related to the stagnant water of the land added to the challenges of survival (Coles 1981). In those first few months of homeless freedom...the **Freedmen's Bureau** did provide initial supplies of food, clothing, medical supplies and transportation to the Freedom Hill squatters. However, in contrast to other documented settlements like Roanoke Island and James City, Princeville received very little in terms of any other form of government assistance. The Bureau's minimal role ended entirely in 1869, leaving the Freedom Hill refugees to fend completely for themselves (Mobley 1994: 342-343).”  
*Source: The Development of African American English in the Oldest Black Town in America: Plural –s Absence in Princeville, North Carolina by Ryan Rowe.*
7. Discuss:
  - What do you imagine would have been most difficult for a person who was enslaved?
  - What do you imagine that moment that the Union troops informed slaves that they were now free would have been like? If you were enslaved, how do you imagine you would have felt in that moment?
  - Once freedom was granted, we know that life wasn't automatically perfect for former slaves. What do you think would have been most difficult for former slaves upon receiving their freedom?
  - Why do you think slaves made their way to the Union army camp located near Tarboro? What do you think they were seeking? (*food, shelter, protection, etc. from the Union army*)
8. Redirect students' attention to the warm up they completed and all the challenges they noted in settling a place like the one represented in the warm up image. Point out that even with so many very real and very difficult challenges, freed slaves chose to remain at Freedom Hill, NC, even after the Union army left.  
 Discuss:

- Why do you think freed blacks chose to stay at Freedom Hill, NC, even when life would be incredibly difficult here and government assistance was not offered?
- What do you predict will happen at Freedom Hill, now that the freed people have been left on their own to survive? Explain.

### **Reading Assignment #1**

9. Tell students they are going to find out what became of the brave and dedicated people left “to fend completely for themselves” in the wake of freedom. Hand out the attached reading, “The Town That Defied White Supremacy”, taken from NC Crossroads Volume 4, Issue 3: *Reclaiming Sacred Ground: How Princeville is Recovering from the Flood of 1999*, by Victor E. Blue, as well as the corresponding worksheet of questions. Instruct students to read the first page of the article either individually, with a reading partner, or in literature circles, and then discuss and answer the first page of the corresponding worksheet. Once students have completed the assignment, allow them to report their answers back to the class and further discuss. *(The second page of the article and the corresponding questions will be used in the next class period; teachers should instruct students to keep the materials in a safe place, or may want to collect the materials to ensure students have them for the next day’s lesson.)*
10. After discussing the reading, label a piece of chart paper at the front of the room with the title, “Challenges.” Ask students to consider everything they have learned thus far about the people who settled Freedom Hill/Princeville, particularly in regards to the difficulties and challenges they faced. Encourage students to consider every detail, great and small, that was stacked against the freed slaves that made their way to Freedom Hill. Give students a few silent moments to think about this then ask them to share their thoughts, writing them on the chart paper. (Encourage students to make inferences outside the basic answers provided in the reading.) Examples of student answers at this point may include:

#### **Challenges**

May be unhealthy and weak, etc. having just left life as a slave  
 Little to no assistance from government  
 Dangerous, unhealthy conditions  
 Poverty  
 Homelessness  
 No clothes or shoes  
 Malnutrition/starvation  
 Missing family members  
 Only unfarmable, uninhabitable land available  
 Stagnant water  
 Flooding  
 Disease  
 Wild animals, insects (snakes, mosquitoes, etc.)  
 No tools, supplies, building materials  
 Whites who still believe in a system of slavery and fear black freedom  
 People ready to take advantage  
 Apprehension, fear, worry  
 First time being independent/free

11. Keep the list posted and visible and tell students that they may add to it at any time. If students seem to be missing particular challenges, teachers should ask questions that lead them to the desired answer.

### **Designing a Magazine Cover on the Founding/Incorporation of Princeville**

12. As a culmination to the day, divide students into groups of 3-4 and project and explain the following assignment (while group work is recommended, this activity can also be completed individually):

- You are a design team for a popular news magazine in 1885. You have been asked to design a cover about the founding and incorporation of Princeville, NC. Your magazine cover must contain a drawn image, as well as appropriate words or phrases to capture the interest of readers. Think about words and images that capture the complex and profound story of Princeville and its founders. You will have until the end of class to work with your group to design the cover. Begin by brainstorming your ideas on scratch paper, then use the chart paper and art supplies provided to complete your final product. Once all designs are complete, they will be posted around the room for viewing and comments.

**13.** After explaining the assignment, answer any questions students may have and review class expectations for group work. Give each group a piece of art paper (flip chart paper works well) and markers. Let students know how much time they have to complete the assignment, and write the ending time on the board (starting with 15 minutes of work time is recommended; if all groups are working diligently and need additional time, teachers can add on to the end time as needed). Circulate around the room to ensure groups are on the right track, offering assistance when needed.

**14.** After all groups have finished, allow students to share and view one another's magazine covers. The following are recommendations for facilitating student sharing:

- Option 1: Each team should choose one member to stand next to the cover design to answer questions from other students as they rotate around the room, observing the various designs. Explain to students that they will circulate around the room in a "carousel" style, viewing all the cover designs and asking questions if they have any. Remind students of classroom expectations for moving around the room and respectfully viewing classmates' work. Midway through the viewing, let the students who were stationed near their poster switch with another student from their group so they can also see the work of other groups. *(If students completed the activity as individuals, simply allow them to circulate around the room viewing one another's work. It is recommended that note any questions on a piece of paper; teachers should allow them time to ask questions and make comments once all students have returned to their seats.)* Once all students are seated, debrief the activity:
  - Of the magazine covers (and other than your own!), which did you find most compelling, striking, and/or interesting and why?
  - What do these covers teach us about Princeville and the determined people who founded it?
  - Do you have any questions for any of the designers?
- Option 2: Remind students of expectations for respectfully viewing and commenting on each other's work. Then, have each group first hold up their cover design so that all students can see it. Ask the audience to respond to the questions:
  - What do you see here?
  - What strikes you about this piece?
  - What message do you think the artist is trying to convey?

After allowing for initial audience reactions, allow each group to present what their vision was for the cover and why they made the choices they made. After each group explains their cover, allow students to ask questions. *(If students completed this assignment as individuals, this option is not recommended unless ample class time is available.)*

*\*Upon completion, consider posting student work in a public place, such as the hall or library.*

**15.** As closure to the lesson, project (or write on the board) the following and instruct students to respond in journal writing:

- "To be absolute owners of the soil, to be allowed to build upon their own land, however humble, in which they should enjoy the sacred privilege of a home, was more than they had ever dared to pray for." *Horace James, Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina, 1865*
- What message is Mr. James trying to convey regarding the founding of Princeville?

## Day 2

### The Town that Defied White Supremacy - Reading Assignment #2

16. As a warm-up, allow volunteers to share their reactions to the question posed at the end of the last class.
17. Instruct students to return to the article *The Town That Defied White Supremacy*, by Victor E. Blue, as well as the corresponding worksheet of questions. Instruct students to read the second page of the article, either individually, with a reading partner, or in literature circles, and to then discuss and answer the second page of the corresponding worksheet. Once students have completed the assignment, allow them to report their answers back to the class and further discuss.
18. Focus students on the final question of the worksheet regarding education in Princeville:
  - Considering that Princeville was founded by freed slaves, what is monumental about the establishment of a school there in 1883, as well as half of Princeville's adult residents being able to read by 1910?
19. Ask students to consider what additional challenges they learned about in the reading, adding them to the class list.
  - *Answers may include: white mobs, government action and inaction; segregation/Jim Crow laws; Plessy v. Ferguson - "separate but equal"; poll taxes; literacy tests; Intimidation of black voters; black ballots altered or discarded; black representatives pushed out of US government; attempt to revoke Princeville's charter; propaganda -i.e. Tarboro Southerner*
20. At this point, the list of challenges should be quite extensive. Ask students to take note of this and review the list. **It is important to assist students in making the connection that even in the face of multiple challenges and against numerous odds, the town of Princeville was settled, founded, and successful.**
21. Label another piece of chart paper "Accomplishments." Tell students to list all of the accomplishments made in Princeville, from the freed slaves that founded it to now. Encourage students to note all accomplishments, great and small. Remind students that many accomplishments that might otherwise seem simple, for those in Princeville would have been monumental. Examples of student answers may include:

#### Accomplishments

Surviving slavery  
Remaining in NC rather than moving North  
Settling Freedom Hill  
Clearing the land  
Building houses  
Sustaining themselves; self-determination  
Making "something" out of "nothing"  
Incorporating Princeville  
Persevering  
Sticking together  
Maintaining their charter when whites tried to revoke it in 1903  
Defying white supremacy (slavery, black codes, Jim Crow, etc.)  
Starting businesses  
Opening schools; ensuring a literate population  
Voting in local elections  
Took control of own lives, fortunes, and futures  
Did not give up  
First incorporated, self-governed, all Black town in the nation!

### Culminating Activity Options: Celebrating Princeville

#### 22. Option 1: Tonight on the 6 PM News!

- Divide students into groups of 4-5 and hand out the attached assignment in which students prepare a newscast with the goal of informing viewers about Princeville, NC. Go over the attached sheet with students in detail, ensuring they understand what is expected. Teachers should point out that, although there was no TV when Princeville was founded, they are being allowed to produce a newscast as a means of educating others about Princeville. On this note, teachers should also give students a sense of what type of “creative license” is allowed. (For example, although Turner Prince passed away, can students still pretend to “go back in time” and interview him?)
- Let students know how much time they will have to work on this assignment, and when the newscasts will be presented to class (either at the end of class or the following day, depending on timing.) Students should be given at least 20 minutes of class time to put something together; however, teachers can also provide additional time for the creation of more elaborate presentations. Review expectations for group work then allow students to get started.
- Once all groups are ready to present (either at the end of class or on the following day of class,) review class expectations for being a respectful audience member. Also, instruct students to draw the following chart on a piece of notebook paper:

What I liked/What I learned	Questions I Still Have

- Students should create a row in the chart for each newscast presented. As students watch each newscast, they should take notes on the chart regarding what they liked about each presentation and what they learned from the newscast. Students should also note any questions they have.
- After each newscast, allow students to offer positive feedback to the group. Discuss any inconsistencies in information that come up in any performance (for example, if any stereotypes are represented, or if any misinformation is evident in a presentation, use this as a teachable moment through discussion.)

#### 23. Option 2: Design a Historical Marker for Freedom Hill

- Provide students with the attached “Design A Historical Monument for Princeville” assignment sheet. Ask students to consider any historical sites they have visited, either on fieldtrips or perhaps on family vacations. Ask students to consider what they feel makes a good historical monument. Note some of their thoughts and ideas on the board. Go over the details of the assignment with the class. Teachers can use their discretion whether to have students complete this individually or in groups. Teachers should also use their discretion regarding how much class time and homework time is provided for completion of the activity. Have students write in the due date on their assignment sheet.
- After explaining the assignment, to assist students in brainstorming ideas for their monument, have them review the class lists of “Challenges” and “Accomplishments.”
- It is recommended that teachers reserve the library or other large space on the due date of the project; this will give students more room to set up their work and move around to view one another’s monuments. Teachers may also want to give students the option of setting up their monuments outside, particularly if they are designed to be in nature. On the due date, once students have set up their monuments, it is recommended that each student be given a copy of the attached *Princeville Historical Monuments – Feedback Sheet*. For viewing, instruct students to travel around the space to view each monument and fill out a row on the feedback chart for each piece (teachers may want to place a number



by each monument so that students can keep their notes organized easier.) Once all students have had ample time to view all of the monuments, have students share their positive thoughts for each piece, noting particularly what they learned from it and what they liked about it.

24. As a closing question to either activity, ask students to respond to the following (either in writing or discussion):

- What do you most admire about the founders of Princeville and why?

#### Optional Extension Discussion: Hurricane Floyd, 1999

25. Ask students to raise their hand if they already knew about Princeville before these last days of lessons. Chances are, most of the class will not raise their hand. Explain to students that in 1999, much of North Carolina and America finally heard a bit about Princeville as it found itself the center of many media reports. Tell students that the reports were much different than the newscasts they just finished performing. The 1999 reports highlighted a **natural disaster**. Point to the word “flood” noted on the list of challenges students created, and explain that throughout history Princeville has experienced several floods, the worst of which was during Hurricane Floyd in 1999. With all Princeville had to face and overcome, Mother Nature also presented a great challenge. Share the following with students (afterwards, have students note additional accomplishments and challenges they heard and add them to the on-going class lists):

- “After a major flood in 1958, town officials approached the Army Corps of Engineers with a proposal to build a dam. A three-mile long, four million dollar earthen levee along the south bank of the Tar River was finally completed in 1967. The dike could accommodate 37 feet of water; since flood waters had never exceeded 33 feet, people felt safe at last from the Tar.

Life was still difficult after the construction of the levee, but living conditions were modernized. In the 1970s, Princeville got water and sewer systems and paved all the roads in town. Throughout the '70s and '80s, the town annexed several surrounding areas in an effort to increase revenue. By the 1990s, Princeville was still a tiny community of about 2,100 residents, but it appeared stable. Just before the 1999 flood, the town was home to 37 businesses, including auto mechanic and body shops, beauty parlors, barber shops, a lawyer's office, truck stops, a restaurant, and car dealers. Town officials were trying to secure a post office and bank.” (Source: NC Crossroads Volume 4, Issue 3: *Reclaiming Sacred Ground - How Princeville is Recovering from the Flood of 1999*, by Victor E. Blue)

“Unfortunately, the 300-year levee broke under a 500-year flood caused by Hurricanes Dennis and Floyd in 1999, wiping out the town completely under 10-15 feet of water (Blue 2000).” (Source: *The Development of African American English in the Oldest Black Town in America: Plural –s Absence in Princeville, North Carolina* by Ryan Rowe.)

26. Once again, focus students on the fact that unfortunately, for much of the state and the country, what little is known about Princeville revolves around its difficulty during Hurricane Floyd. Read aloud pages 1-3 of *Reclaiming Sacred Ground - How Princeville is Recovering from the Flood of 1999*, by Victor E. Blue, and discuss this issue further with students:

- What does the author mean when he says that southern land is “sacred ground” for many African Americans?
- Why do you think NCCU's history department felt it was important to begin collecting oral histories from Princeville residents?
- The author notes that the college students were confused as to why there were no ornate monuments or signs commemorating Princeville's rich past, particularly since the nearby town of Tarboro was full of monuments. In your opinion, why does the town lack such markers?
- What story does the town and cemetery of Princeville tell us?
- Many of you admitted that you did not know much (if anything) about Princeville until we began these lessons in class. Why is there such “public ignorance of the community's very existence?”

- Why do you think it took Hurricane Floyd for people around the state and country to pay attention to Princeville?

27. In a brief “think-pair-share” activity, tell students to partner up to discuss and prepare and answer to the following question:

- Victor E. Blue stated, “But what do people really ‘see’ about a place when everything they know about it has been filtered through media coverage of a disaster? A focus on the flooding is important, but it might give a distorted sense of what the town is about. Without an understanding of Princeville’s history, those outside the community might wonder: **Why rebuild? What’s so special about this place?**” Given everything you have learned about Princeville, how would you answer someone who asked these questions?
- Once students have had 5-6 minutes to discuss, have pairs report back to class with their thoughts.

### Resurrection

28. Explain to students that Hurricane Floyd was a Category 2 storm that made landfall in Cape Fear, N.C. on Sept. 16, 1999 – days after another storm dropped up to 16 inches of rain across the eastern part of the state. The additional 12 to 20 inches of rain from Floyd overflowed riverbanks, causing floodwaters to cover roads and inundate entire communities. The flooding in Princeville damaged or destroyed more than 700 homes. With the town in ruin, Princeville residents were faced with a major decision: rebuild the town’s dike or accept an offer from FEMA to buy out the entire town. On November 22, 1999, the Princeville town council voted three to two in favor of rebuilding.

- Why do you think Princeville residents voted against the buy-out and chose to return to their homes?
- Optional: Play the short newscast from 2009 that details the progress of the town’s rebuilding and the opening of the Princeville history museum: <http://www.wral.com/news/local/story/6037817/>.
- Ask students to note the positive attributes of Princeville and Princeville’s residents, past and present, based on what they have learned.

## Warm Up Image



Source: [http://www.moonzstuff.com/images/image\\_carolinaswamp.jpg](http://www.moonzstuff.com/images/image_carolinaswamp.jpg)

\*Teachers are encouraged to play nature/insect sounds while students participate in the sensory warm up

## Location of Princeville, NC



Source: *The Development of African American English in the Oldest Black Town in America: Plural –s Absence in Princeville, North Carolina* by Ryan Rowe; <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/theses/available/etd-04292005-170449/unrestricted/etd.pdf>

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## The Town That Defied White Supremacy

1. Why do you think the author refers to Freedom Hill as “an experiment in self determination”?
2. Life in Freedom Hill was not easy. Yet, freed slaves chose to settle Freedom Hill rather than return to work for their former masters, as Union officials encouraged them to do. Why do you think they made this decision?
3. What did Freedom Hill symbolize to freed blacks?
4. What were the results of freedom for freed slaves? For plantation owners?
5. Imagine you are a newly freed person in 1865. What types of things would you be excited about? What types of things would you be worried about?
6. What types of skills and professions did Freedom Hill residents offer?
7. Freedom Hill received a charter and was officially incorporated as a town (Princeville) in 1885. Why is this an event that should be remembered and celebrated?
8. In what ways did Princeville benefit the surrounding areas, including white residents in Tarboro?
9. After slavery ended, much of white society strove to continue to limit the rights of African Americans. What were some of the ways white supremacy was evident?

10. Of the examples listed in the article, as well as other examples discussed in class, which law or action do you find most unfair and why?
11. What was the US government's response to white terrorism against blacks?
12. Imagine that you are an African American living in the 1890s, a time when the government, the courts, and many citizens you encounter each day treat you unfairly and attempt to take away your rights because of your race. How do you think this would feel? What effect do you imagine this would have on you?
13. With much of the white South working to limit the rights of blacks, in what ways did blacks strive to maintain their rights in eastern North Carolina?
14. If you could go back in time and offer George H. White words of encouragement, what would you say to him?
15. While originally Tarboro's white residents supported the incorporation of Princeville, this tolerance changed over the years. Why did some white residents in Tarboro want to have Princeville's charter revoked in 1903?
16. What made Princeville "a unique community"?
17. Considering that Princeville was founded by freed slaves, what is monumental about the establishment of a school there in 1883, and half of Princeville's adult residents being able to read by 1910?

## The Town That Defied White Supremacy ~ ANSWER KEY

- 1. Why do you think the author refers to Freedom Hill as “an experiment in self determination”?** *Answers will vary, but should address the fact that once enslaved people were freed, they were completely on their own. They were provided little to no resources or assistance and were tasked with making a life for themselves from scratch, in the midst of many white southerners who favored slave labor and/or who did not believe blacks should have the same rights and opportunities as white society. Freedom Hill was thus an experiment in self determination as freed slaves worked together, relying on their strength, determination, and perseverance, to create a home and life completely of their own.*
- 2. Life in Freedom Hill was not easy. Yet, freed slaves chose to settle Freedom Hill rather than return to work for their former masters, as Union officials encouraged them to do. Why do you think they made this decision?** *Answers will vary, but should address the fact that these freed people were determined to live their own life, regardless of how much work it took or how much adversity they faced; they refused to return to their former lives where they were mistreated and devalued as human beings.*
- 3. What did Freedom Hill symbolize to freed blacks?** *It represented the freedom and opportunity to “define their own independent future”; answers may also vary based on student inferences and interpretation*
- 4. What were the results of freedom for freed slaves? For plantation owners?** *While slaves were extremely poor and lacked resources (homes, food, clothing, etc.), they were presented with the opportunity to start their own self-directed lives, reconnect with family members, control their own labor, vote, hold political office, and serve as free laborers. Plantation owners however were at a loss of free and forced labor, having to rightfully now figure out how to get the work on their plantations done.*
- 5. Imagine you are a newly freed person in 1865. What types of things would you be excited about? What types of things would you be worried about?** *Answers will vary; for example: I would be excited about starting a real life, outside of the cruelty I experienced as a slave; living in a home that was my very own; living a life in which I was not beaten or forced to work; I would be excited about finally receiving the rights that every human being should be entitled to. I would be worried about how to get started; how to find food and feed my family; how to find a place to build a house and how to get the supplies to do so...*
- 6. What types of skills and professions did Freedom Hill residents offer?** *Answers may include: Day laborers, laundresses, washerwomen, carpenters, blacksmiths, grocers, seamstresses, masons;*
- 7. Freedom Hill received a charter and was officially incorporated as a town (Princeville) in 1885. Why is this an event that should be remembered and celebrated?** *Answers will vary, but should highlight the fact that Princeville was started by a group of people who had virtually nothing; these newly freed people used their determination and perseverance to build a home when everything was stacked against them; this is an amazing accomplishment that should be honored and remembered always*
- 8. In what ways did Princeville benefit the surrounding areas, including white residents in Tarboro?** *Princeville residents provided needed labor for local fertilizer plants, textile mills, and lumber industries*
- 9. After slavery ended, much of white society strove to continue to limit the rights of African Americans. What were some of the ways white supremacy was evident?** *White mobs overtaking local governments and terrorizing towns; lack of government action against such terrorism; Jim Crow laws (such as segregation in public places) passed and upheld; US Supreme Court legalized “separate but equal”; literacy tests; poll taxes; attacks and threats against black voters; altered or discarded black ballots; black representatives pushed out of US government; attempt to revoke Princeville’s charter*
- 10. Of the examples listed in the article, as well as other examples discussed in class, which law or action do you find most unfair and why?** *Answers will vary*
- 11. What was the US government’s response to white terrorism against blacks?** *The government seemed to condone white supremacy by refusing to protect the rights of African Americans (in action) and supporting Jim Crow laws*
- 12. Imagine that you are an African American living in the 1890s...** *Answers will vary*
- 13. With much of the white South working to limit the rights of blacks, in what ways did blacks strive to maintain their rights in eastern North Carolina?** *Answers may include: Blacks formed towns where they could govern themselves; Princeville successfully battled a campaign to have their charter revoked; Princeville established schools and businesses*

- 14. If you could go back in time and offer George H. White words of encouragement, what would you say to him?** *Answers will vary, but should illustrate the understanding that White was NC's last black representative in the US Congress, who was pushed out of office by a white electorate*
- 15. Why did some white residents in Tarboro want to have Princeville's charter revoked?** *White residents feared the idea of a prosperous and self-governed black town; white supremacists used articles in the Southerner to urge Tarboro residents to demand Princeville's annexation and uphold white "law and order"*
- 16. What made Princeville "a unique community"?** *Answers will vary, but should address how Princeville was unique in that it was a self-created and governed black town, where African Americans voted, government themselves, and created an oasis in which they could exercise their deserved rights, even though all around them white supremacy worked to deter those rights*
- 17. Considering that Princeville was founded by freed slaves, what is monumental about the establishment of a school there in 1883, and half of Princeville's adult residents being able to read by 1910?** *Slave codes and black codes had always deemed the education and literacy of blacks illegal, yet Princeville worked against these odds to make education a priority*



## Tonight, on the 6:00 News: The Accomplishments of Princeville!

Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

You are a team of reporters for the most popular news station in North Carolina. You have been given an assignment to create a **3-5 minute newscast** that will inform viewers on what you feel is most important for society to know regarding Princeville. Your newscast must include challenges, accomplishments, and your commentary on what is most important to know about this town (past and present). Be creative in how you present your newscast, but ensure the facts that you share are accurate.

Questions to consider:

- Will you broadcast from the station, on location, or a mixture of both?
- What information is most important to share? Who will share this information? (News anchor; interviewees such as historians, Princeville residents, or descendants of the founders; “archived footage”, etc.)
- Will your newscast provide a general overview, or will it focus on one particular challenge and accomplishment (i.e., the 1903 attempt to revoke Princeville’s charter, coupled with the town’s successful battle against this racist campaign)?
- How will you make your newscast creative, accurate, interesting, and educational?
- What props will you need? (background, news desk, chairs, costumes, music, etc.)
- What role will each of you serve in this process? What will each of you contribute? (Every group member must participate equally!)
- How will you make your newscast stand out among the rest? How will you honor Princeville and make your viewers understand its importance?

Brainstorm ideas, then create a draft of your newscast. It is important to rehearse your final product, as you will be presenting your newscast to class. While you are not required to memorize your script, your newscast must come across as rehearsed and organized.

**Notes:**

Freedom Hill Historical Marker



Source: <http://img.groundspeak.com/waymarking/display/3311dc6f-e970-45ae-8487-eea9bd73340e.jpg>

## ASSIGNMENT: A Historical Monument for Princeville

Victor Blue stated that “While the nearby town of Tarboro is full of monuments, few physical signs reveal Princeville’s rich past. A small, plain historical marker - commemorating only the town’s founders and its incorporation date - sits at the main intersection of the town, but few motorists have or take the opportunity to read it if the light is green.”

**You have been hired to design and create a historical monument appropriate for Princeville. You must decide what your monument will look like, what form and shape it will take, where it will be located, and what it will share with visitors regarding Princeville.**

**Assume that people who visit your monument do not know anything about Princeville:**

- How will you design a monument to educate them on this town’s past and present, as well as the spirit of the citizens who have made it what it is?
- How will your monument encompass and illustrate some of the themes (freedom, survival, self-determination, perseverance, overcoming adversity, etc.) and accomplishments of this town and its people, past and present?
- What is the goal of your monument? Do you want visitors to your monument to be inspired, educated, interested, motivated to do something, etc? What will it take for your monument to accomplish your goal?

**You may use any creative medium (or combination of mediums) you choose to design your monument. The monument can be literal or abstract, simple or complex. Examples may include (but are NOT limited to):**

- art work
- mural(s)
- statues
- plaques, written descriptions, quotes from residents, or other text displayed
- structures or buildings
- symbolic or abstract shapes
- inclusion of music or voice over’s (i.e. you push a button and narration plays)
- performance art that takes place live at the monument on a particular schedule,
- a television screen that plays a particular performance clip or narration
- PICTURE YOUR OWN CREATIVE IDEAS HERE!

**Consider the following as you brainstorm and plan your historical monument:**

- What is the purpose of your monument? Consider goals such as to commemorate, educate, honor, and promote.)
- Where will the monument be located and why? (If it’s going to be in Princeville, where exactly? If it will be elsewhere in the state or nation, where and why? The choice is yours, but be specific! Include the ideal location in your written description.)
- Once you have decided what the purpose of your monument is and what you hope it will pass on to visitors, determine what it must include to successfully share your vision and reach your goals.

You must complete a model of your monument to bring to class. Your model may be represented on paper or in 3-D (i.e. using supplies such as clay, wire, cardboard, etc.). It can be life-size, or a small-scale representation of what the monument would actually be. If performance, music, or some other type of creative piece is included as part of your monument, you should be prepared to present this to class (if you will require special equipment for this, such as a CD player or VCR, let your teacher know ahead of time!) You must also prepare a written description in which you explain the purpose of your monument, describe what it represents, as well as where its permanent location would be.

You must bring all pieces of your monument to class on \_\_\_\_\_ **(due date)**. You will set up your monuments on this day, after which the class will tour all of the different monuments. Be careful that whatever you create or plan can be brought to school easily and understood by others.

**Most importantly, BE CREATIVE and HAVE FUN!**

**Questions & Notes:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Princeville Historical Monuments – Feedback Sheet

Title, Number, or Description of Monument	My interpretation of the monument	What I liked/learned Questions I have

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## RECLAIMING SACRED GROUND:

*How Princeville is  
Recovering from  
the Flood of 1999*

by Victor E. Blue

Before Hurricane Floyd, the rest of the state and the nation knew little about Princeville and its legacy. The drama of the flood changed that; everybody seems to be asking about the old black town now.

Cemeteries always have stories to tell. They speak the names of ancestors and rescue the past from obscurity. Black folk—especially those in the rural South—seem to cherish these sacred places; they not only reconnect people with their pasts, but they also bond residents with the land. And for many African Americans in the South, that land is sacred ground, because our ancestors worked the soil in slavery and in freedom.

But what lessons could be learned from the community of the dead in Princeville? The historic town in Edgecombe County is still recovering from the devastating flood of 1999. Residents are slowly returning to their homes but, to a group of about 50 drowsy-eyed college students on a Sunday morning late this summer, the town's oldest cemetery appeared to be forgotten. Tall grasses blocked the tombstones from the view of passers-by on the road. Some grave markers had fallen like dominoes. And the threat of being cut by briars or bitten by snakes loomed large.

The students—and a few professors—were part of a research team from North



Courtesy of Dr. Freddie Parker

Carolina Central University in Durham that visited Princeville one year after the flood. NCCU's history department just began a multi-year project to collect oral histories in Princeville and to assist the town's preservation efforts. The first stage of the project led us to the old cemetery. Grass had to be mowed, leaves and debris needed to be raked, and trash had to be collected. Most of the students knew hardly anything about the historic town save what they gleaned from media reports. Although

they knew that this was one of the oldest towns established by blacks in the country, they did not seem to realize that the community was founded by ex-slaves after the Civil War. For some reason, it was difficult for them to make the connection to that period. If this place was so important to history, then why was the cemetery in such disarray? Where were the ornate monuments and bold signs commemorating that dignified past? This day spent in the cemetery forced them to consider what conditions might have been like during slavery and at the moment of emancipation.

But I couldn't blame the students for their naivete, nor could I answer all of their questions. Until recently I had been almost as unaware as they. Before the flood, I had assumed that Princeville, like so many of the small communities that dot the state's thoroughfares, was a typical one-stoplight town. While the nearby town of Tarboro is full of monuments, few physical signs reveal Princeville's rich past. A small, plain historical marker—commemorating only the town's founders and its incorporation date—sits at the main intersection of the town, but few motorists have or take the opportunity to read it if the light is green.

The town—and the cemetery—tell a story of black determination. In the hazy, first days of freedom, former slaves like Turner Prince labored to create a sacred, living place for themselves and their progeny. Some of their descendants have remained in this space for generations—defying periodic floods, the threat of white supremacy, and public ignorance of



Courtesy of the N.C. Division of Archives and History





the community's very existence—because it reminds them of this past.

Princeville residents were forced to rethink their future last year after Hurricane Floyd when the Tar River breached a high levee, reached a record 43-foot crest, and submerged the town for nearly two weeks. The flood also threatened to obscure the town's past; more than 200 coffins floated away from their resting places. With floodwaters still high,

boat crews corralled the caskets and tied them to trees or anything else solid. Local volunteers helped identify remains in an emergency morgue as federal mortuary teams scrambled to rebury the dead.

Before Hurricane Floyd, the rest of the state and the nation knew little about Princeville and its legacy. The drama of the flood changed that; everybody seems to be asking about the old black town now. During the past year, for example, Princeville has probably received more national and local media attention than it had in its previous 114 years as a municipality. From their televisions, radios, and newspapers, people around the state and even across the country began to form a picture of Princeville. But what do people really “see” about a place when everything they know about it has been filtered through media coverage of a disaster? A focus on the flooding is important, but it might give a distorted sense of what the town is about. Without an understanding of Princeville's history, those outside the community might wonder: Why rebuild? What's so special about this place?



Courtesy of Dr. Freddie Parker



North Carolina  
in 1895.



## The Town That Defied White Supremacy

Princeville was incorporated in 1885, but its history as an independent black community predates that. At the end of the Civil War, Union troops occupied the Tarboro area. By that time many slaves had fled the nearby plantations and come to the military zone in search of a new life in freedom. In 1865 some of these refugees settled in the swampy flood plain across the Tar River south of Tarboro, on the property of local white planters John Lloyd and Lafayette Dancy. There

the refugees laid the foundation for an experiment in black self-determination: Freedom Hill.

Union officials encouraged former slaves to return to the plantations and work for their old masters, but freedom offered more than that. The refugees sought the chance to control their own fortunes. The Freedom Hill location symbolized that opportunity: from the

citadel overlooking the Tar, the Union army had announced its victory and the former slaves' newly-recognized freedom. Here was the opportunity for black men and women to define their own independent future.

Edgecombe County, like many areas throughout the South, was experiencing tremendous social upheaval after the Civil War. In 1860 just over 10,000 slaves, almost 60 percent of the total population, lived in the county. Most worked on tobacco farms and plantations. What would happen to them if they were freed? Who would cultivate the tobacco? Who would labor for the white landowners in their fields, homes and businesses if slavery was abolished? These were questions that the freed slaves and their former masters had to answer together. Most newly emancipated slaves were extremely poor and without food or clothing. However, the freed people realized that freedom was an opportunity for them to reconnect with family members from whom they had been separated during slavery. Freedom also meant controlling one's own labor. And for black men, freedom would eventually mean the right to vote and hold political office.

The separate black community of Freedom Hill, located at the core of one of the state's largest slaveholding regions, also made social sense in the early stages of segregation and Jim Crow. Few whites wanted free black men and women to live among them, yet Freedom Hill supplied Tarboro and surrounding areas with a removed but dependable supply of laborers, sharecroppers, servants, and artisans. The community's 1880 population totaled 379 people. The largest number of residents, 55, were day laborers, laundresses and washerwomen. The community was also home to eight carpenters, seven blacksmiths, four grocers, three seamstresses and three brick masons. One of the carpenters, ex-slave Turner Prince, had lived in Freedom Hill since its founding; residents renamed the community in honor of him when it was incorporated in 1885. Princeville workers also capitalized on Tarboro's growth at the turn of the century. Many found laboring jobs in the new fertilizer plant, textile mills and lumber industries across the Tar.

Courtesy of the N.C. Division of Archives and History



It was, however, a bitter, violent time. Waves of white supremacy and economic depression threatened to swallow black communities throughout the South. White mobs drove black political and economic leaders and their allies from Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898. A mob of 10,000 whites torched entire black districts in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921. Such acts of racist terrorism were not unique during this period. Government actions—or inaction—seemed to condone this reign of terror. Laws banished African Americans to "colored-only" sections in railroad cars, restaurants, theaters and other public places. In 1896 the United States Supreme Court legalized the "separate but equal" doctrine with its decision in the case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

But in several eastern counties of North Carolina, black residents were a majority, and in many of these locations, blacks exercised their political strength by electing black men to office. Princeville and Edgecombe County voters had elected eleven black men to the state legislature to serve fifteen terms from 1877 to 1890. Edgecombe County was part of the Second Congressional District, the famous "Black Second," which sent to Congress two black representatives: James E. O'Hara of New Bern, from 1883 to 1887; and Henry Plummer Cheatham of Vance County, from 1889 to 1893.

However, with the emergence of the white supremacist movement in the state, black voters and office holders were gradually excluded from the political process by legal or illegal methods. Literacy tests and poll taxes excluded poor and illiterate blacks from voting. Black voters were attacked or threatened by opposing whites; black ballots were altered or discarded altogether. George H. White, North Carolina's last black representative in the U.S. Congress during this period, was removed from office in 1901 by a white electorate.

No white mob ever attacked or razed Princeville, but the town successfully battled a racist campaign to have its charter revoked in 1903. Some white Tarboro residents must have considered what a black town meant—a place where blacks governed themselves, owned businesses, and operated schools—to the idea of white supremacy. The Tarboro *Southerner*, the local newspaper controlled by white supremacists, urged Tarboro to annex Princeville because blacks were deemed unruly, beyond white "law and order."

Princeville, indeed, was a unique community. Although white supremacists had effectively ended black political participation at the federal and state level, black men continued to vote in municipal elections. Princeville established a public primary school in 1883 with black principals educated at northern institutions like Oberlin and Yale. By 1910 Princeville's population had increased to 636, half of its adult residents could read and write, and the town contained a growing number of black merchants and artisans. In 1912 the primary school added a high school curriculum. Several Baptist and Methodist congregations also built churches in the first two decades of the twentieth century.



Courtesy of the N.C. Division of Archives and History

## The Water This Time

Flooding, like the threat of white supremacy, has plagued Princeville since its settlement. Major floods occurred two years after the community's founding and again in 1919, 1924, 1928, 1940 and 1958. Time after time, residents evacuated, came back and



Courtesy of the N.C. Division of Archives and History

rebuilt. But some apparently tired of this periodic disruption of their lives. Between 1910 and 1923, the town's population dwindled from 636 to 300. This coincided with a nationwide exodus of blacks out of the South; spurred by southern racism and perceived northern opportunities, many left for places like New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. That trend continued until the 1950s. After a major flood in 1958, town officials approached

the Army Corps of Engineers with a proposal to build a dam. A three-mile long, four million dollar earthen levee along the south bank of the Tar River was finally completed in 1967. The dike could accommodate 37 feet of water; since flood waters had never exceeded 33 feet, people felt safe at last from the Tar.

Life was still difficult after the construction of the levee, but living conditions were modernized. In the 1970s, Princeville got water and sewer systems and paved all the roads in town. Throughout the '70s and '80s, the town annexed several surrounding areas in an effort to increase revenue. By the 1990s, Princeville was still a tiny community of about 2,100 residents, but it appeared stable. Just before the 1999 flood, the town was home to 37 businesses, including auto mechanic and body shops, beauty parlors, barber shops, a lawyer's office, truck stops, a restaurant, and car dealers. Town officials were trying to secure a post office and bank. The town was also trying to acquire ownership of the cemetery; the lots are now owned by individuals, many of whom have moved away and don't often visit.

Princeville's town hall, originally built as a schoolhouse in the 1920s, was badly damaged by the recent flood, and past floods destroyed many other older structures. In stark contrast to Princeville is nearby Tarboro, with its 45-block historic district of Victorian homes and Queen Anne cottages. Princeville, for much of its history, has been so concerned about survival that historic preservation has been almost impossible. Maybe the recent spotlight on Princeville will encourage the public (and potential funders) that the town is worth preserving.

Back in the cemetery, the dead are still silent. But signs of life are everywhere in Princeville, especially in the churches. A small, white wooden church—hushed when we arrived that early Sunday morning—sits opposite the cemetery across Highway 258. While our team from NCCU was busy trying to restore voices in the community of the dead, the congregation was rejoicing. The joyful noises they made drifted over the road, an appropriate soundtrack for our meager efforts. Exactly one year had passed since the immense flood. The resilient, historic little town had survived, and residents were giving praise to their Creator for guiding them through the last 115 years.



Courtesy of the N.C. Division of Archives and History

## Turner Prince (1843-1912)

African Americans in the Tarboro region, like their white neighbors and masters, closely followed the arrival of Union Army troops in 1865. For slaveholders in the region, the presence of troops signaled the end of a way of life built upon white supremacy and black subordination. But the local enslaved population welcomed the soldiers as harbingers of freedom. When the troops established their outpost on the south bank of the Tar River just across from Tarboro, hordes of former slaves inundated the military camp in search of rations, clothing



*Courtesy of the N.C. Division of Archives and History*

and protection. They called their little settlement in the swampy lowlands Freedom Hill. With few resources, the freed people began to construct simple huts and shanties from boards and logs. Because the community was located in an area prone to flooding, the land was relatively cheap. A few former slaves were able to purchase small lots from white landowners. Others simply claimed the land as their own since it was virtually uninhabited.

Turner Prince, born a slave in 1843, was probably among those fleeing to freedom behind Union lines. Little is known about his early years, except that he was a member of the last generation to grow to adulthood in slavery. Before the Civil War, Edgecombe County was one of the largest slaveholding regions in North Carolina, and most slaves worked on farms or small plantations that produced tobacco. Some slaves learned skilled trades and became proficient as blacksmiths, brick masons, barbers and dressmakers. Freedpeople used these skills after slavery to secure a living for themselves and their families. In 1873 Turner Prince bought a half-acre lot from Mary Shaw, a local white woman, for 150 dollars. He used his training as a carpenter to construct a modest home for himself, his wife, Sarah, and their children: Ephraim, Sarah and Cora.

Turner would eventually become one of the most respected men in the fledgling community of Freedom Hill and probably oversaw the construction of a number of the village's dwellings and buildings. When community leaders decided to incorporate the village as a town in 1885, they chose to name it Princeville for Turner Prince; he served as a commissioner for a number of years.

The former slave epitomized the community's struggle from enslavement to self-sufficiency. He would eventually go on to build a four-room tenant house (probably used as a boarding house) and a carpenter shop on his property. He also owned property along the road from Tarboro, where he built a workshop. At his death in 1912, Prince's estate was valued at 700 dollars, a considerable amount for a man who lived in freedom for only 47 years.

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North Carolina Humanities Council  
Weaving Cultures and Communities

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Princeville officials want to ensure that the town's historic legacy will survive and even grow as they embark on the path of rebuilding. They are working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to develop a museum.