DIGGING INTO HISTORY:

Venture's bones are no more. Nor are there any teeth or personal artifacts that might have told us more about this legendary 19th-century slave whose grave was recently excavated in East Haddam. Time has turned them all to dust.

But we should not forget about the injunction filed by Nancy Burton of Redding, a Green Party candidate for attorney general who claimed that the excavation was disrespectful. In this case, the excavation was allowed to proceed to its logical, albeit empty-handed, completion. But for the record, and to help prevent similar attempts to stop forensic progress, I offer this advice:

Let such future gravesite investigations continue. The millions of American slave descendants stripped of their homelands and family ancestry have a right to know what the bones in graves can tell them about their collective past. They have a right to discover artifacts that can give us a sense about what the dead -- or those who loved them -- cared about.

Venture Smith was arguably the most astonishing slave of the 19th century. Born an African prince in the 1720s, he was kidnapped as a child, survived the Middle Passage and was bought and sold several times before purchasing his freedom in 1765. With his faithful wife, Meg, he supported a family of three sons and a daughter before dying at a ripe old age in East Haddam in 1805.

He had lived on Fishers Island, N.Y., and farmed in the Connecticut towns of Stonington and East Haddam. His fame rests on an autobiography narrated to Elisa Niles, a Revolutionary War veteran turned schoolteacher, and published in 1798.

A team from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Connecticut was prepared to tell us more.

Nick Bellantoni, the state archaeologist whose culturally sensitive forensic investigations are known nationally, wanted to measure Venture's bones to authenticate his legendary strength and stature. He is said to have looked like a tall football linebacker, to have possessed the endurance to swim across Long Island Sound and to have lifted a grown man from the ground by the flat of one hand. Such physical prowess can be established by measuring the proportions of bones.

Measuring the isotopes in Venture's teeth would have allowed us to reconstruct the diet that nourished such strength, as well as physical geography. As a child grows, his tooth enamel incorporates the geochemical signal of bedrock soils and the streams draining from them.

Linda D. Strausbaugh, a genetic scientist, knows forensic techniques that could pinpoint the fountainhead of Venture Smith's family lineage. To sequence Venture's genes would have established his tribal ancestry, and thereby his lost geography. Venture is said to have come from Guinea in West Africa. But where in Guinea, if at all? And from what tribe? And where was his wife from?

The historian Nancy Steenburg has sleuthed out Venture's early documentary record, principally from Fisher's Island and Stonington. With Margaret Van Patten of UConn's Avery Point campus, she established the location of Venture's original land purchase in Stonington. On this land may lie clues that survive the test of time, unlike his bodily remains.
To have halted the excavation would have denied these professionals the opportunity to do what the poetry of Marilyn Nelson -- state poet laureate and retired English professor -- has already done to help resurrect Venture. There was never a plan to disinter the bodies or to leave the graves untidy. All the team wanted was to find out if artifacts or human remains were present and, if so, to sample them before respectfully refilling the graves. They found nothing, but a precedent for other respectful digs has be set.

To halt such excavations out of respect for the dead would be an affront to the living who crave authenticated truths.