

News from the



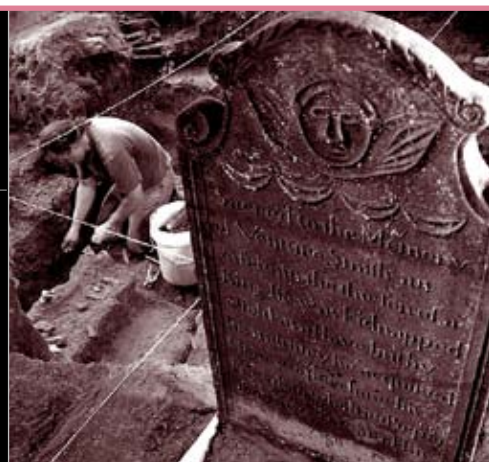
# CONNECTICUT STATE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY & CONNECTICUT ARCHAEOLOGY CENTER



University of Connecticut • Fall 2006

# UNCOVERING A LIFE

by Dr. Nicholas Bellantoni



Venture Smith, born Brotheer Frobus in 1729, was an enslaved African taken from his homeland while still a child. He was maintained as a captive in Connecticut during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and through his own enterprise and initiative he eventually secured his own freedom. Fortunately, Venture Smith dictated his life story to a local school teacher who published, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by Himself*, in 1798. From this narrative, we have a greater understanding of Venture Smith's life, through the recounting of his experiences of enslavement in Africa, his entry at Anomabu into the transatlantic

slave trade, his early life in the Americas, and his achievement and experiences of freedom. Most notable is his life at Haddam

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Neck, Connecticut, where ongoing archaeological investigations have yielded stone structures and historical artifacts associated with Venture Smith and his family.

As part of an ongoing project, “Documenting Venture Smith”, the State Office of Archaeology was asked about the feasibility of recovering skeletal remains from the burials of Venture Smith and his family for DNA extraction in order to perform a genetic analysis. DNA can be recovered from archaeological bone but the success rate for extraction is variable depending on the samples procured and the amount of cellular material preserved.

Archaeological methodologies were designed to enhance the recovery of human skeletal remains for DNA sequencing, Isotopic and Genetic analysis. The recovery of cultural materials associated with the burials and analysis of the spatial associations of artifacts from the burials can provide a basis for inferences about the mortuary practices and funeral technology of that time period.

The descendants of Venture Smith approved the research design and, coordinating with the Lyman Beecher Society and the Wilberforce Institute for Slavery and Emancipation, an archaeological research team was brought together for the project. Dr. Warren Perry of the Archaeology Laboratory for African and African Diaspora Studies at Central Connecticut State University co-directed the archaeological excavations into the burials of Venture Smith (d. 1805), his wife

Meg (d. 1809), his son Solomon (d.1843) and his granddaughter Eliza (d. 1902). Volunteers from the Friends of the Office of State Archaeology, under the field direction of David Cooke, assisted on the project as did students and staff from the Center



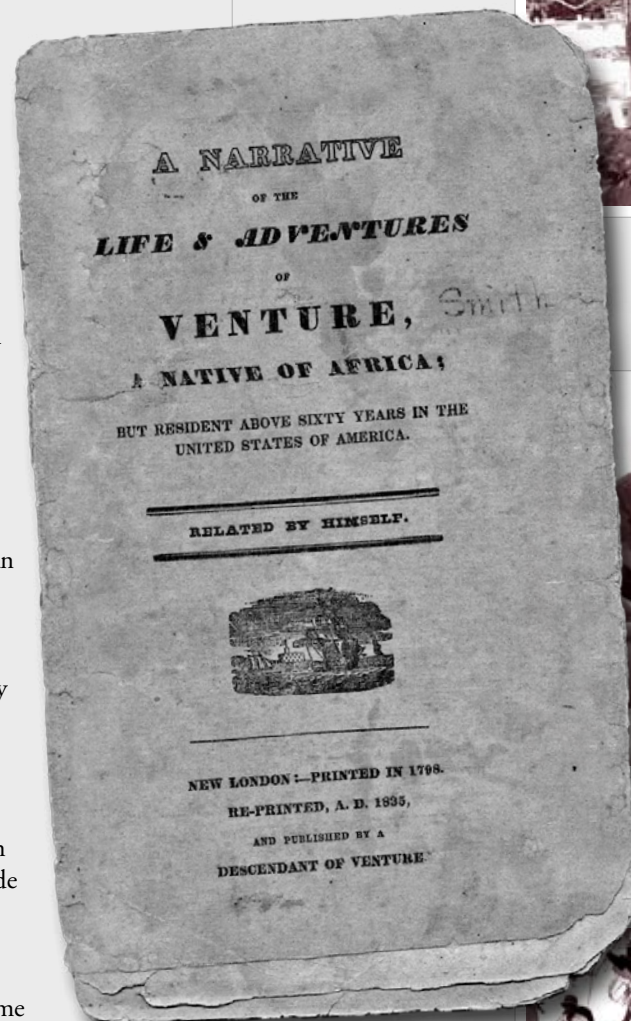
cemeteries were seldom used. Most settlers designated a small piece of their land for the burial of family members, other relatives, and sometimes friends. Very few burials in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century were marked by ornamental stone memorials, and rarer still were markers for the graves of Africans and African-Americans. Less prominent graves were often marked by natural fieldstones, wooden crosses, or no tombstone at all, making their locations difficult to detect. However, this project has the benefit of Venture Smith and his family being buried in a church cemetery with professionally engraved tombstones clearly delineating the graves in their own row.



Despite having a well-marked burial site, the soils at the First Church Cemetery are very acidic and unfortunately there was little preservation of organic remains. The archaeological research team was able to recover two small skeletal elements, lower arm bones, from Venture Smith's wife Meg. The elements have become known as “Meg's Gift”. Laboratory research on the skeletal elements is ongoing, with samples saved for future analyses when further technical advancements are made in genomic research.



Venture Smith was said to have been over six feet tall and weighed over 300 pounds. He died at 76 years of age and was buried at the First Church Cemetery in East Haddam. He was also said



*The investigation team was made up of experts from around the State and the country. Many of Venture Smith's relatives were actively involved and onsite during the dig. Photos by Chip Clark, Smithsonian*

for Applied Genetics & Technology and the Anthropology Department at UConn. During the early settlement of Connecticut, churches were few and built in town centers; consequently, church

## FROM THE DIRECTOR



aware of how the people in that room had seen this organization through victories and disappointments, easy decisions and difficult ones. Like parents, they provided guidance, support and, to round out the analogy, money. And it was a great feeling to stand together in

our own building, looking out at the future.

For the first time in the Museum's history, we will soon open our permanent exhibits and programming space in our own building. And as we explore the dynamic relationships between human culture and the environment through time, we will bring together our collections and interdisciplinary research conducted at UConn in a historical context to enable students, faculty and visitors to examine natural history from a variety of perspectives.

As we plan our spring re-opening, we are also looking forward to the next challenge in completing the long-term reconstruction plan. The plan includes desperately needed collections storage, an archaeology laboratory, and a library to house the OSA's 8,000-volume holdings.

We have learned a lot in 21 years, and with the support and determination of our steadfast members and friends, we will continue to turn challenges into opportunities, growing and building something we will all be proud of for many generations to come.

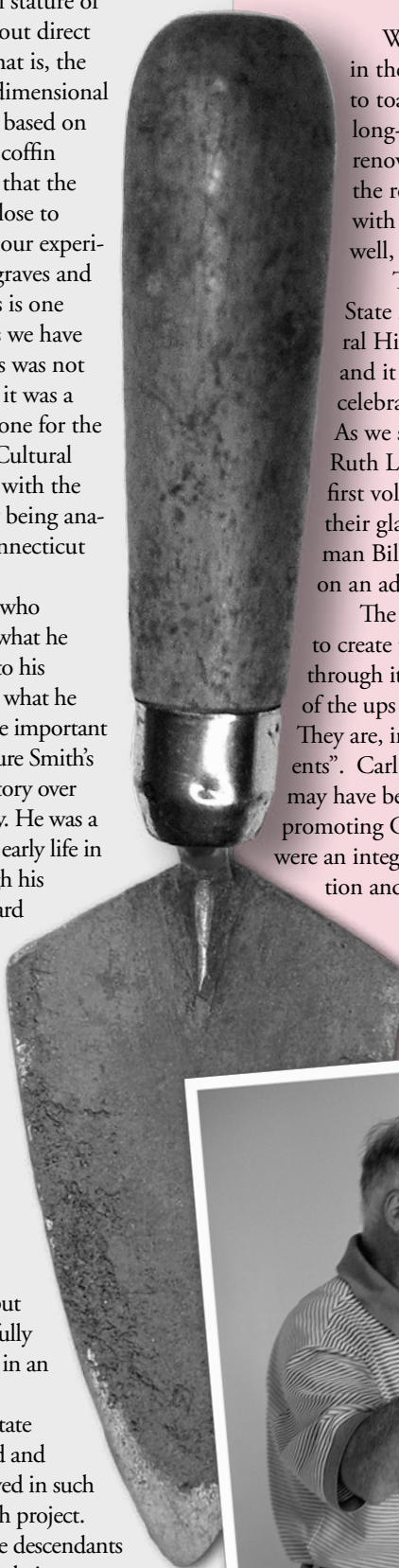
*Leanne Harty*

Leanne Harty

to be sickly and blind as he neared his death in 1805. Researchers were able to confirm the physical stature of Venture Smith without direct skeletal remains. That is, the recovery of a three-dimensional outline of his coffin based on the position of iron coffin nails, demonstrated that the coffin's length was close to seven feet. In all of our experiences with historic graves and coffin structure, this is one of the largest coffins we have ever excavated. This was not a poor man's coffin; it was a relatively expensive one for the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cultural materials associated with the burials are currently being analyzed at Central Connecticut State University.

Understanding who Venture Smith was, what he did, what he meant to his contemporaries, and what he means to us today are important research goals. Venture Smith's is truly a story of victory over tremendous adversity. He was a man who started his early life in captivity, and through his own initiative and hard work bought his own freedom as well as the freedom of his family and other captive Africans. He then went on to start a series of businesses, owning over 100 acres of land before he died. Buried in a church cemetery, Venture Smith was put to rest with a beautifully engraved tombstone in an expensive coffin.

The Office of State Archaeology is proud and honored to be involved in such an important research project. And, we thank all the descendants of Venture Smith for their support and trust.



When we gathered in the Museum lobby to toast the start of our long-awaited building renovation in August, the room was filled with anticipation and, well, relief.

The Connecticut State Museum of Natural History turns 21 this year, and it was fitting that the small celebration also included a cake. As we sang Happy Birthday to Ruth Ladd, one of the Museum's first volunteers, and folks raised their glasses with Board Chairman Bill Morlock, the cake took on an additional meaning.

The people gathered all helped to create this museum and see it through its first 21 years—with all of the ups and downs that entailed. They are, in many ways, like “parents”. Carl and Marian Rettenmeyer may have been in Washington DC promoting Carl's new video, but they were an integral part of every conversation and every reflection.

Passing around the old photo album and reminiscing about our growing pains, we were







Photography by Drew Hardy

October is **Archaeology Awareness Month** in Connecticut. This year the Museum and Archaeology Center partnered with the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism to design and print the annual AAW poster. Each year we pick a cultural theme and create what is essentially a visual timeline, exploring that theme in artifacts, over time. It is always an interesting exercise in how changes in our material culture reflect changes in our cultural values. Along with the poster we distribute a *Note to Educators*, which examines some of the ideas represented in the poster to make it a more useful tool for teachers. We have reprinted that article here to share what we have learned with you.

The word sport comes from the Latin *des-porto*, meaning to “carry away.” As fans or participants, millions of us look to be carried away from our everyday lives by the sports we love. But when viewed through the lens of history, sport no longer appears as just a diversion, sport reflects our changing identity as Americans.

Baggataway was played hundreds of years before the first Europeans arrived in the New World. Some claim that a French cleric, who witnessed the game in 1705, thought the hooked playing sticks looked like a bishop’s crosier and thus labeled it “la crosse.” It was an ironic choice, as the game named after a symbol of goodwill was called “the little brother of war” by the Cherokees. While lacrosse did seem to play a practical role in training and preparation for warfare, its deeper role was ceremonial, played with the objective of pleasing the Gods, securing fertility, causing rain, or curing sickness. Accounts from early European explorers document that the basic rules of the game were remarkably similar throughout North America, although teams could vary in size from tens to hundreds on a side, and playing fields varied from hundreds of feet to miles in length.

Sports got off to a slow start when the first Europeans arrived in the New World. The Puritans, who settled on the New England shores in the 1600s, were mainly peasants, servants and craftsmen, who brought with them a strong dislike for the pleasures of the English nobility. Early New England laws forbade sports of any type, as well as tavern games and dancing. The earliest known record of settlers participating

in sport was a doomed game of bowling in 1611, when Sir Thomas Dale, having just arrived on a relief ship from Europe to help the starving colonists, was so vexed by the sight of the game being played on the streets, that he threatened to have the players put into irons.

By the mid-17th century, new waves of immigrants were coming into the region—only a quarter of whom were church members. Sports slowly came out into the open. The new settlers were generally farmers, who lived on a schedule regulated by the seasons and patterns of daylight and moonlight. Sports were enjoyed informally and played on the folk game level. Games often started up spontaneously, and rules were often loose and revised on a whim.

With the rise of the Industrial Revolution, the next 150 years were a time of enormous population and economic growth in America. More people lived in larger population centers, and had more disposable income and leisure time than ever before. The expanding immigrant work force brought new cultural ideals to the country. People had time for sports and no longer felt guilt about playing. The social order and cultural infrastructure needed to give rise to the Industrial Revolution also expressed itself in the birth of team sports such as football, basketball and baseball. From boxing and cock fighting to tennis and croquet, people’s choice of sport became an expression of their social class. Most of the popular sports we recognize today—basketball, baseball, football, ice hockey, golf, tennis—were all founded in the last three decades of the 19th Century, corresponding directly with the development of the Industrial Revolution.

By the beginning of the 20th century, physical education was considered an important contributor to an individual’s moral and intellectual education and had become an integral part of the American educational system. Out of the old Puritan ideal that suffering should be endured for the cleansing effect it had on mind and body evolved a noble and transcendent quality to the physical rigors of sport. Sportsmanship became a measure of a person’s character, and intercollegiate athletics a vital component of a well-rounded education. The first intercollegiate competition in America was rowing (Yale started its first boat club in 1843). In January 1901, Athletics professor T.D. Knowles at Connecticut Agriculture College (the future UConn) agreed to form a team to test the popularity of a new game called basketball. C.A.C. defeated Willimantic High School 17-12 in its debut, much to the delight of the college students.

Today, more people watch and participate in athletics than at any time in history. With advancements in communications and transportation technologies, sports have become accessible to almost everyone. Corporations have tapped into the marketing potential of this phenomenon and turned it into a multi-billion dollar worldwide industry. We define our heroes from the world of professional athletics. Sport is no longer just a diversion; it has become an integral part of our culture, and a fascinating window on our modern society.

If you would like to receive a copy of this year’s Connecticut Archaeology Awareness Month poster call the Museum at 860-486-4460. If you would like to see samples of past posters, along with their respective *Notes to Educators*, visit [www.cac.uconn.edu/aaw.html](http://www.cac.uconn.edu/aaw.html).



## DR. LINDA STRAUSBAUGH

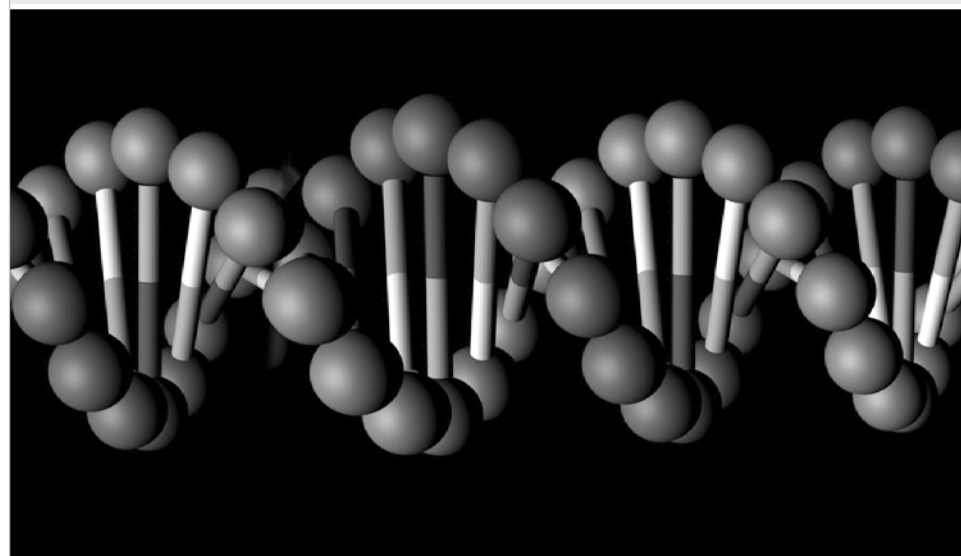
As an innovative educator, scientific researcher, and leader in the biotechnology community, Dr. Linda Strausbaugh has made significant contributions in the world of genetic research, pioneering its real world applications along the way. Dr. Strausbaugh is a professor of genetics and genomics in the Department of Molecular and Cell Biology at the University of Connecticut. She is also the founder and director of the University's Center for Applied Genetics and Technology, which includes the Laboratory for Non-Traditional DNA Typing (LNTDT). The focus of LNTDT is forensic genetics and it is known for its groundbreaking work in several emerging DNA research projects, with forward-looking applications to the analysis of biological evidence. Crime labs throughout the United States are incorporating the new research and technologies developed by the center. These technologies enable forensic investigations to collect and analyze a vast new array of biological evidence including plant materials and non-human biological samples, such as soil found at a crime scene.

Dr. Strausbaugh is also known as an exemplary educator and was honored in 1997 as a University Teaching Fellow. Teaching both graduate and undergraduate students, her class-filling popularity comes from a style of clearly presenting biology concepts to biology majors and non-majors alike. Her organization, empathy and charisma make her a successful instructor and motivator in a demanding subject area.

Dr. Strausbaugh also co-directs the Summer Faculty Workshop in Biodiversity and Forensic Genetics, providing visiting faculty with hands-on instruction that enables them to bring cutting-edge science back to their students, the next generation of innovative scientists.

Most recently, Dr. Strausbaugh has been involved with the "Documenting Venture Smith" project. Collaborating with the State Office of Archaeology, the descendants of Venture Smith, and researchers representing the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences, Dr. Strausbaugh brings new techniques of genetic testing and DNA analysis to help tell the story of this legendary figure.

Dr. Strausbaugh earned her Ph.D. at Wesleyan University and did her post-doctoral study at Johns Hopkins and University of Pennsylvania before joining the University of Connecticut in 1980. In 2006, Dr. Linda Strausbaugh was selected as a finalist for the Connecticut Technology Council's Women of Innovation Award Program. Also in 2006, the Professional Science Masters in Applied Genomics, which she directs, received a silver prize from the Connecticut Quality Innovations Award program.



**"Venture Smith and his contemporaries provide a unique framework for investigations that unite genetics, history, and the study of human rights. In fact, this model project will provide a roadmap for productive interactions between disparate disciplines in the context of American history and the genetic 'melting pot' that is America."**  
— Linda Strausbaugh

## STATE ARCHAEOLOGIST

## Within a Whirlwind of Change

Public information and media relations play key roles in museums work and, as many of you know, the retirement of long time CSMNH staff member Carol Davidge in 2005 left us with some very big shoes to fill.

David Colberg joined the staff in September amid a whirl of renovations, events and numerous high profile OSA activities, and our new Public Information and Marketing Coordinator hit the ground running.

With more than eight years managing outreach programs for the UConn Cooperative Extension System 4-H Program, and several years in public relations and marketing with organizations that include the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the Busch

The "Documenting Venture Smith" project, highlighted in this newsletter, involved the Office of State Archaeology in a most interesting and sensitive field operation. We were part of a multi-disciplinary team which included many prominent researchers from the University of Connecticut, Central Connecticut State University, University of Massachusetts, University of Tennessee, Smithsonian Institution, Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, Lyman Beecher Society, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Yale University. This impressive array of scholars also represented a number of different sciences: Anthropology, Archaeology, History, Applied Genetics, Physical Anthropology, Soil Science, and Forensic Studies.

This project emphasizes the broad and interdisciplinary scope of archaeology. For example, in our research into the human past, we archaeologists seek out the expert opinions and advice of geologists, soil-morphologists, botanists, zoologists, ecologists, geographers, geophysicists, metallurgists, nutritionists and ethnologists, as well as the other disciples listed in this summer's project.

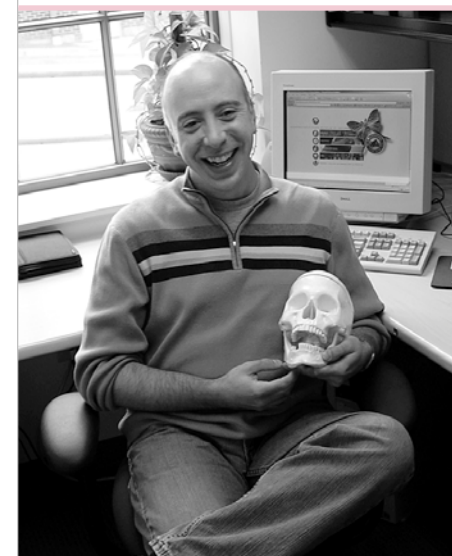


Humans, today as in the past, use cultural knowledge and technology to adapt to their environments. As a result, all phases of that interaction may be a source of study for the archaeologist. Archaeologists may be considered by some as the last of the "Renaissance" scientists; that is, we need to have a working knowl-

edge of a number of different scientific areas and in today's era of scientific specializations we also need to know whom to contact for expert advice and study to take our research to greater depths (no pun intended!).

In the end, no matter how many sciences are represented in our work, the most important ingredient will always remain the human component. This crucial component was regularly emphasized in the Venture Smith Project. The support and encouragement of the family members, descendants of Venture Smith, was an essential element in the success of the project and every bit as important as the scientists' contributions.

  
Nick Bellantoni, State Archaeologist



Gardens, Dave brings a unique and impressive combination of educational outreach and marketing experiences to the job. Having achieved national recognition for coordinating diverse 4-H programs, including a unique regional teen conference and a large-scale community action day, he knows our region and its communities well. Dave was quickly up to speed with current CSMNH & CAC activities and is already helping us move forward as we prepare for our spring grand opening.

Instantly likeable, this Connecticut native seems hard-wired for education, in or outside the office—from pursuing his graduate studies at UConn, traveling and exploring the world with his spouse, to mastering the latest technology gadget, Dave's great penchant for learning is obvious. His bright and inquiring mind will be a great asset to us as we continue to grow and move forward in the years ahead. Please join us in welcoming David Colberg!

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## VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers serve as exhibit attendants on Sunday afternoons. We wish to thank the following individuals for their service:

Dolle Fischer, Elmer Fischer, Bettejane Karnes, John Karnes, Ruth Ladd, Louise Lent, Lois Maloney, Polly Palmquist, Marian Rettenmeyer, Betty Savage, Virginia Stallman, Roxane Steinman, Anna Storrs, Peggy Taylor.

CONSTRUCTIONS IS UNDERWAY ON OUR NEW EXHIBIT HALL & CLASSROOMS!



## MEMBERSHIP

Standard membership benefits:

- Free admission to special events
- Reduced rates for workshops
- 15% discount at the UConn Co-op
- Early notification of programs
- Museum Newsletter

Standard Memberships

- ☐ Family (\$35)
- ☐ Individual (\$25)
- ☐ Student Individual (\$15)
- ☐ Senior Individual (\$15)
- ☐ Senior Couple (\$25)

Consider upgrading to an Owl Membership. These memberships provide special support for Museum programs. In addition to standard membership benefits, Owl Members receive guest passes, gifts, and more.

Owl Memberships

- ☐ Saw-whet Owl (\$65)
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- ☐ Barn Owl (\$500)

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