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N.Y. Times Details English Chair Gregg Hecimovich's Work on Identifying Slave Author

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N.Y. Times Details English Chair Gregg Hecimovich's Work on Identifying Slave Author

Quick Facts

- The New York Times reported that Hecimovich, chair of the Department of English, has spent a decade scouring government documents, diaries and other private family documents to deduce that the author was Hannah Bond, a fugitive slave who escaped in 1857 from her N.C. owner, John Hill Wheeler.
- Hecimovich's upcoming book, tentatively called "The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts" is slated to be published in 2015. It is expected to contribute significantly to the study of slave narratives and 19th century transatlantic studies.



Gregg Hecimovich

ROCK HILL, S.C. – Winthrop University [English Professor Gregg Hecimovich's](#) detective work in identifying the author of the first novel written by an African-American woman is outlined in today's [New York Times](#).

The newspaper reported that Hecimovich, chair of the [Department of English](#), has spent a decade scouring government documents, diaries and other private family documents to deduce that the author was **Hannah Bond**, a fugitive slave who escaped in 1857 from her N.C. owner, **John Hill Wheeler**.

Some of the research that Hecimovich developed was done in conjunction with Winthrop undergraduate and graduate students in his classes.

His upcoming book, tentatively called "**The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts**" is slated to be published in 2015. It is expected to contribute significantly to the study of slave narratives and 19th century transatlantic studies.

Hecimovich's quest began after the 2001 announcement by celebrated Harvard scholar, Henry Louis Gates Jr., that Gates had discovered what is reported to be the first novel written by an African-American woman and an escaped slave, "[The Bondwoman's Narrative](#)" by Hannah Crafts. The book's publication in 2002 produced an instant **New York Times bestseller**, and has since become a lightning rod for debates about slave life, plantation culture, and the generic possibilities of both slave narratives and the novel.

Hecimovich, a Charlotte, N.C., native, related that he has obsessively researched the mystery surrounding the identity of the work's author who escaped from his home state. The slave to a family with an extensive library, Bond is believed to have educated herself. She escaped from the Wheeler plantation in eastern North Carolina in early May 1857 and made her way to central New York, Hecimovich said.

She took cover at the Craft farm, knowing that her owner was in pursuit. Hecimovich writes that Bond continued work on the novel and completed it the following year. She later settled in New Jersey where she became a school teacher.

Hecimovich has theories why Bond modeled her autobiographical tale, not primarily on the abolition literature of the 1850s, but on popular British novels, especially **Charles Dickens's "Bleak House"** (1852) using language borrowed from **19th-century Gothic novels**. He also proves that Wheeler's nephew, John Wheeler, assisted Bond with her escape by providing her with male's clothing.

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To work on this project, Hecimovich earned a **"We the People"** grant in 2004 from the **National Endowment for the Humanities**, a second grant from **The North Caroliniana Society** and a Winthrop research grant.

By combining a set of **methodological approaches** – historical research, forensic evidence, statistical and literary analyses – Hecimovich is able to draw a picture of **mixed racial history** of 19th century America.

At once a detective story, a literary chase, and a cultural history, the book Hecimovich is completing uncovers and recounts the lives of the **seven Wheeler-related slaves** who possessed the motive, means, and opportunity to write **"The Bondwoman's Narrative."** With the reader positioned as co-detective, the larger book project traces the lives of each potential author, as it uncovers the local and global contexts that produced Hannah Bond and her narrative.

From Nat Turner's rebellion and the "second middle passage" to the sexual conflicts faced by female slaves, from the activities of the Underground Railroad and African American community in the north, to John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theater – "The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts" discloses a powerful cultural history of slavery before the Civil War.

Hecimovich writes: "Crafts' life endures through her art, a voice rediscovered, unmasking and challenging the racial bigotry and greed that divide people and nations – then and now. As 'The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts' demonstrates, literature can still transcend the divisions of race, gender, class, and time to imagine and substantiate justice and freedom."

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