Enslavement to Freedom

1627 – 1827 – 2027

Celebrating Historic Black Anniversaries in New York

Enslavement to Freedom is a multi-year commemoration highlighting New York's unique history with the institution of slavery. In 2027, New York will recognize two significant Black history anniversaries: The 200th anniversary of the end of legal slavery on July 4/5, and the 400th anniversary of the arrival and enslavement of the first twenty-two African men enslaved in New York on August 29.

As stewards of fifteen historic sites with known connections to slavery and park lands that were once spaces of enslavement, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) honors these anniversaries by sharing this vital part of the state's story in multiple ways. These banners are part of a larger series of exhibits, programs, and events commemorating the contributions of the thousands of enslaved Africans and their descendants and the various ways wealth was gained by those who supported the transatlantic slave trade.

This commemoration is part of the Our Whole History initiative, a framework that seeks to expand the history that we share to better reflect the rich multicultural world that is New York's past and present. For more information on the entire Enslavement to Freedom initiative, please use the QR code below.

Scan this QR code for more information.

New York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

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POISONOUS SEEDS

The Dutch and the Institution of Slavery in New York

A Surinam Planter in his Morning Dress, William Blake, 1793. Princeton University Art Museum

From 1627 to 1664, Dutch businessmen laid the foundation for the institution of slavery in the colony that would become New York. The practice of enslaving people and exploiting their labor grew until it was present in all areas of colonial society. Even deeper, profit from the slave trade itself infiltrated all levels of the New York economy. The intertwining of human bondage with commercial profits connects directly to New York's dishonorable legacy, not just as a place of enslavement, but also as an exporter and economic center financing the slave trade.

Enslaved Man Digging Trenches, c. 1850. Rijksmuseum

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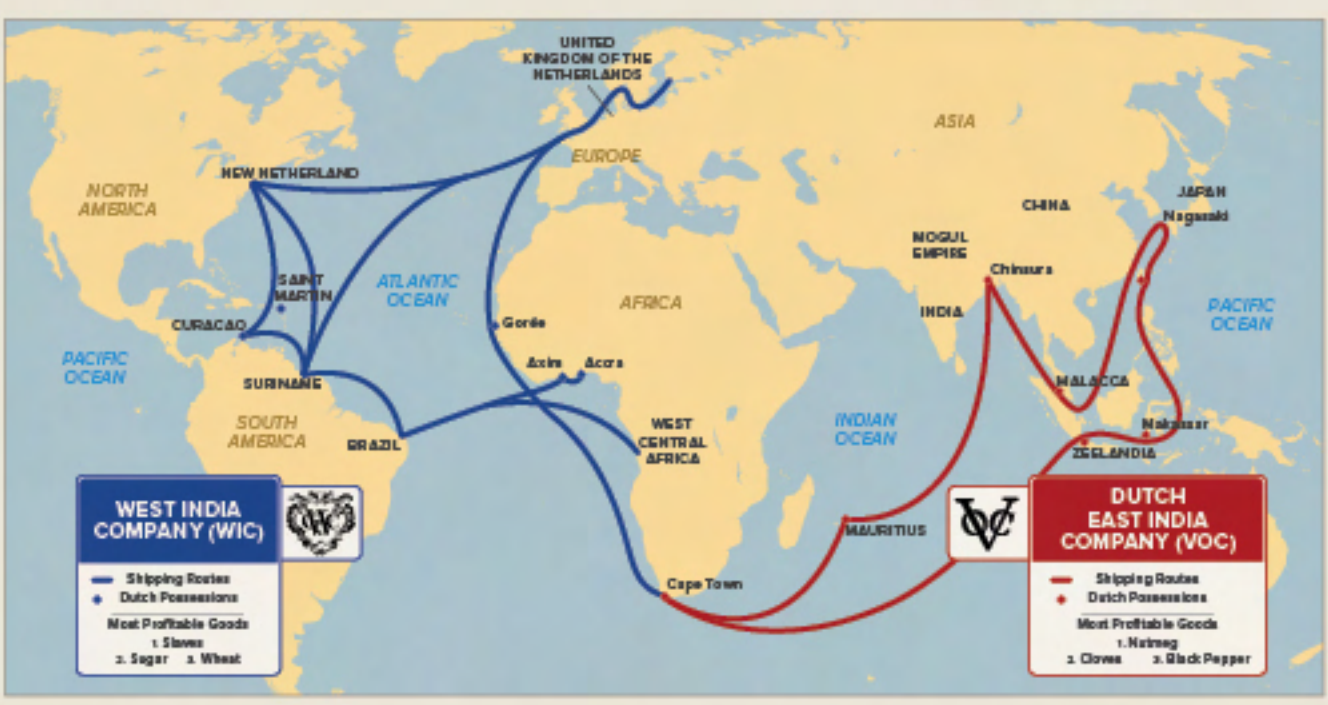
Sugar and Spice

The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild, Known as 'The Syndics,' Rembrandt van Rijn, 1662. Rijksmuseum

The Beginning of Corporations

Through most of the sixteenth century, the Dutch Republic's reach outside Europe was limited. War with Spain and Portugal cut Dutch traders off from access to markets selling hugely popular and profitable sugar and spices. In response, the Dutch Republic created state-sponsored trading companies to extend their reach across the globe. The West India Company (WIC) controlled all Dutch trading in the Atlantic, bringing private shipping ventures and privateers under one enterprise with one goal: profit.

Botanical engraving of Saccharum officinarum or sugarcane, Friedrich Ratzel, Volkerkunde, 1885. West Virginia University Library



From the outset, WIC stakeholders targeted the extremely profitable sugar trade initially dominated by Spain and Portugal's Brazilian sugar plantations. Their plan to become the world's supplier of sugar required the Dutch to engage directly with something they had not before: slavery. Slavery was illegal in the Netherlands, but the brutal work of the sugar plantations required huge amounts of labor—labor that White Europeans largely refused to do. In 1623, the WIC convened a committee to decide whether the company would engage in the slave trade, but only outside of the Netherlands. Their eventual decision to invest in slavery revealed an underlying tension between Dutch moral and legal ideas around enslavement and the WIC mandate to enrich their investors.

What is a privateer?

Privateers are privately owned ships commissioned by their government to attack the ships of an enemy country. Dutch privateers were vital to WIC operations. They targeted Portuguese and Spanish profit engines, stealing cargo from ships and weakening their control over trade. As payment, privateers were allowed to keep a part of the profits made from the sale of seized cargo.

Nederlandse schepen op de rede van Recife, Brazilië, Abraham Willaerts, 1640. Het Scheepvaartmuseum

View of New Amsterdam (detail), Johannes Vingboons, c. 1665. Dutch National Archives

New Netherland Colony

The Voyage of the *Bruynvisch*

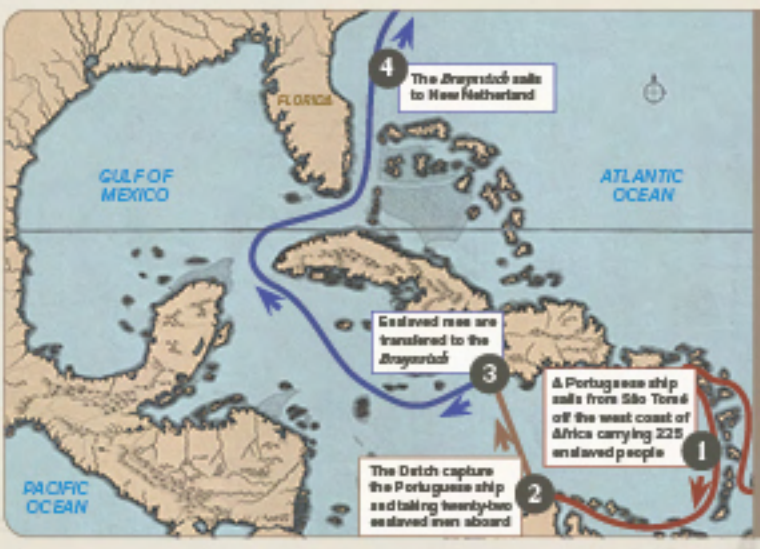
The growth of the New Netherland colony was slow in the early years following its founding in 1614. Conflict with Native communities over land and the instability of the fur trade added to a general reluctance to emmigrate from the comforts and rising wealth in the Netherlands.

The arrival of the first enslaved people to New Netherland was unplanned. The colony was at the far end of Dutch shipping routes, and its early economy lacked a cash crop that required a large standing labor force. The importation of enslaved labor was, at first, a low priority.

Banquet at the Crossbowmen's Guild in Celebration of the Treaty of Münster, Bartholomeus van der Helst, 1648. Rijksmuseum

In 1627, the *Bruynvisch*, a small ship part of a larger Dutch privateer flotilla, took on board twenty-two enslaved men acquired from among the cargo of a captured Portuguese ship in the Caribbean. The men were only some of the 225 African people on board the Portuguese ship but, with no Dutch system in place to import or sell large groups of enslaved people, the privateers had few options to profit off this kind of prize. They selected only the healthiest, most able-bodied men and planned to send them to a fledgling Dutch colony in Brazil.

Prevented from reaching Brazil by strong Caribbean currents and under pressure to pursue more Spanish treasure ships, the flotilla captains changed plans. Extra cargo in the form of enslaved people would only hinder their attack plans, so the *Bruynvisch* left the group, sailing up to New Netherland in hopes of selling the men there.



What happened to these men?

We know very little of the early lives of these men. They were likely from central Africa, perhaps Angola. Starting with their initial capture in Africa and again when Dutch privateers captured them, the men were evaluated like livestock, selected for their health and potential to perform manual labor. They were purchased by the WIC, and their forced labor was likely used to build the infrastructure of the colony: the construction of roads, buildings, and fortifications; the cultivation of crops and the care of livestock; and as defenders of the colony against Native attacks.

Landing of Van Riebeek at Cape of Good Hope in 1652, Charles Davidson Bell, c. 1850. National Library of South Africa

Growth and Investment

Crafting a Strategy

The Dutch West India Company's "Grand Design" targeted the two main aspects of the sugar trade: sugar plantations in Brazil and the slave trade on the west coast of Africa. In the decade following the voyage of the *Bruynvisch* to New Netherland, the Dutch captured large sections of Portuguese Brazil, multiple Portuguese slave castles in Africa, and islands in the Caribbean like Curaçao and Bonaire. Despite the Netherlands deeper involvement with the slave trade, relatively few enslaved people came to New Netherland in this time. Small numbers of people were transported among other cargo. The focus of the Dutch slave trade was on supplying the vast plantations in Brazil. But WIC leaders soon realized feeding thousands of enslaved people there presented a problem.

In New Netherland, WIC leaders began to see new markets for the use of enslaved people in the North American colonies. Small Dutch farms could be tasked with supplying the wheat the Dutch empire needed to feed enslaved people on sugar plantations, but farm labor was in short supply. Enslaved labor could be the answer to this problem. In addition to leading colonies in Curaçao, Bonaire, and Aruba, Petrus Stuyvesant was appointed Director-General of New Netherland in 1646. A grand Atlantic strategy began to take shape.

The capture of Pernambuco, Brazil (detail), Nicolaes Visscher, c. 1630. Wikimedia Commons

Meanwhile, private New Netherland merchants began to make connections to tobacco plantations in Virginia. In 1648, the WIC opened up direct slave trade in North America to non-Company investors, and merchants began to observe markets in Africa and America, assessing potential profit centers. The English Civil War disrupted British trade with its own colonies, and the Dutch-Anglo War made it harder for Virginia planters to sell their tobacco in Dutch markets. The two colonies began to see a mutually beneficial trade in tobacco and slaves, maneuvering around their own governments. Director Stuyvesant appointed negotiators to secure a slave supply trade agreement with the Virgina colony. This represented the Dutch colony's beginning as an exporter of enslaved people.

Did You Know?

Virginia planters were also motivated to import as many enslaved people as possible because of the English practice of awarding land based on "headrights." Enslaved people, despite being treated in almost every other way as sub-human, counted towards the fifty acres English colonists could receive for every immigrant they brought to the colony. Purchasing an enslaved person not only enriched their enslaver through their labor, but also increased their wealth through the acquisition of land.

W. Bradley's Best Virginia Tobacco Newarke, 1745-1865. New York Public Library

Building a Marketplace

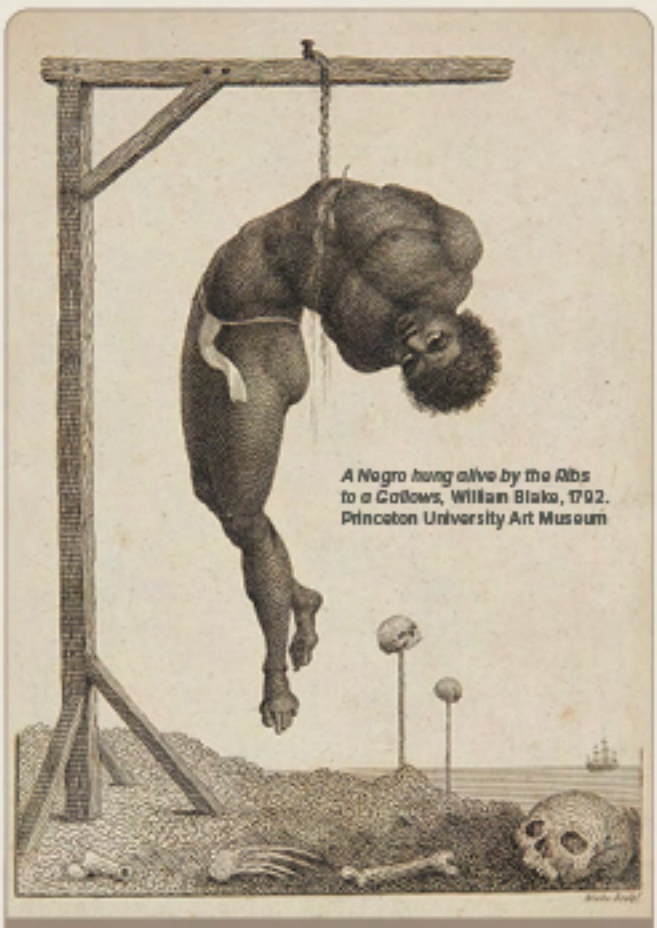
't Eylandt Curacao anno 1800, 1800. Library of Congress

The Voyage of the *White Horse*

In 1654, the Portuguese expelled the Dutch from Brazil and reclaimed their sugar plantations. With the loss of their land holdings, the Dutch no longer needed to supply their own plantations, and the WIC quickly changed the focus of their slave trading operation: supplying the Atlantic world with enslaved labor.

Dutch colonies suffered from chronically low immigration numbers, making it difficult to build colonial infrastructure. Through the slave trade, the Dutch were still able to profit from the sugar trade by supplying human captives, turning a much quicker profit. Curaçao, a Dutch-held island in the Caribbean, also controlled by New Netherland Director-General Petrus Stuyvesant, became the new hub of the Dutch slave trade. Enslaved people were brought from Dutch slaving operations on the African coast to Curaçao, where the newly enslaved were "seasoned" before being sold to Spanish and Portuguese merchants.

In 1654, New Netherland merchants petitioned the WIC for permission to bring enslaved people directly from Africa to the colony. The *Witte Paert [White Horse]* arrived in the New Amsterdam harbor in the summer of 1655. While the total number of enslaved people on board is not known, it is likely that at least fifty-five people were sold to Virginia planter Edmund Scarborough based on the number of headright acres he and his family applied for not long after the ship's arrival. The *White Horse* proved that private investors could be successful in the trade and that there was a market for supplying enslaved people to other North American colonies, especially colonies that focused on lucrative cash crops like tobacco.



A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows, William Blake, 1792. Princeton University Art Museum

What comprised the "seasoning" of an enslaved person?

Newly arrived captives to Curaçao were often held for a time to be prepared for sale. This preparation, called "seasoning," entailed acclimatizing to a new environment, learning new languages, and adjusting to the hard labor they would be forced to do after their sale. But seasoning also included violence and brutality. Men and women were whipped, beaten, and sometimes placed in solitary confinement. A person who survived this process could command a higher price when sold.

East River Waterfront, c. 1662, L.F. Tantillo, Courtesy of the artist

The Africans of the slave bark "Wildfire"—The slave deck of the bark "Wildfire," brought into Key West on April 30, 1860, 1860. Library of Congress

A Sign of Things to Come

The *Gideon*

After the arrival of the *White Horse*, there was a lull in shipments of enslaved people directly from Africa to New Netherland. The huge profit to be made supplying Spain's insatiable need for sugar labor meant little effort was made to reserve captives for the northern colonies. In 1659, a Dutch ship carrying 331 enslaved people arrived in Curaçao, but only five boys were sent further north to New Netherland. The children were meant to show New Netherland merchants what could come to them in time and to foster trade between the two colonies. In a move to entice Dutch traders, the Virginia House of Burgess voted to reduce import duties on Dutch goods if more enslaved were brought south. The WIC, however, was more interested in building up the labor force in New Netherland and supplying enslaved soldiers to fight the Dutch wars against the Munsee people.

Twee Afrikaanse jongetjes (detail), Cesina ter Borch, 1654. Rijksmuseum

In 1663, the WIC chartered a ship named the *Gideon* to bring a large shipment of enslaved people from Africa, through Curaçao, to New Netherland. Though the captain could bring as many captives as he could manage, the contract stipulated that 300 of that number must continue on from Curaçao to northern colonies. Individual Dutch men and women were allowed to invest in the voyage. The Company supplied the chains.

The 290 men and women who arrived on the *Gideon* in 1664 had been treated brutally on their long voyage, and many were weak and ill. The WIC colony leaders complained that some were in such a poor state that they would need to be sold at a loss or even not at all. The healthiest were sold quickly, and some were sent to the Dutch settlement of New Amstel on the Delaware River. Not long after the ship's arrival, New Amsterdam and New Amstel were attacked by the English. Company leaders surrendered the colony, and the unsold *Gideon* enslaved people were seized. Those who were sent to New Amstel were then sent to Maryland to work tobacco plantations. The specific fate of the rest of the unsold captives is unknown.

View of New Amsterdam, Johannes Vingboons, c. 1665. Dutch National Archives

The Lasting Impact

The Tax Collectors (detail), Quentin Massys, c. 1627. The Princely Collection

The Institution of Slavery

The New York colony's relationship to slavery was haphazard at the start, but the precedents set at the beginning shaped the next 200 years of enslavement and profit from the slave trade.

Small groups of men and women like those carried on the ***Bruynvisch*** were replaced by large shipments of enslaved people on dedicated slave ships. By the time of the first federal census in 1790, there were nearly as many people enslaved in New York as there were in Georgia. Their stories have been hidden and their voices largely unheard, but enslaved labor was present in all areas of New York life. Enslaved women typically farmed kitchen gardens, cooked and cleaned, sewed clothing for their enslavers, and raised their enslavers' children. Enslaved men farmed, built roads and buildings, worked on docks and ships, and learned other skilled trades, all to enrich the people who enslaved them. Through their forced labor, New York prospered.

The roots of the New York Stock Exchange can be traced to a group of businessmen who agreed to organize the trading of stocks in 1792, allowing enterprises, including slaving voyages, to efficiently raise capital. The group met at the Tontine Coffeehouse (seen here) located at 82 Wall Street until 1817.

The Tontine Coffeehouse, Wall & Water Streets, about 1797, Francis Guy, 1910. Library of Congress

It was the business of slavery, however, that was woven deepest into the fabric of the colony and, later, the state. The pursuit of company profits gave way to the pursuit of private profits. Individual investors, like those who invested in the ***Gideon*** and the ***White Horse***, continued to fund slaving voyages even after the slave trade was legally abolished and lawful slavery was ended in New York. Slave ships financed by New York merchants sold their cargo to southern plantations or West Indies slavers and brought their profits back home to New York, where that money was infused into a society subsidized by the enslavement of people.

Did You Know?

In the last decades of the illegal trade, 91% of known slaving voyages were carried out by ships made in the U.S., including in New York. And two out of every three slaving operations leaving from U.S. ports embarked from New York City. The profit from these voyages was so high that both the financial and personal risks of being caught were reckoned worth it. In 1862, one year into the Civil War, Nathaniel Gordon, a well-known slave trafficker from New York, was apprehended on his way to Cuba with 900 enslaved people onboard his ship. He was returned to New York City and hanged for his crime.

New York, from Brooklyn Heights, J.W. Hill, 1837. New York Public Library

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REDEFINING THE FAMILY

One Descendant's Journey Into History

Christiana Taylor Livingston Williams was born legally free in 1812 to an enslaved mother, Barbara, but New York law kept her in bondage, with the promise of freedom when she was twenty-five years old. Christiana's father was most likely her mother's enslaver, Philip Henry Livingston, making Christiana both a Livingston family member and Livingston property.

Freed, or manumitted, at age fifteen, Christiana built a life, family, and legacy for herself as a seamstress, humanitarian, and a survivor of a system of slavery that had left its mark on New York's people for 200 years. She also passed her story down to her descendants. As oral history, it remained within the family until 1996, when her great-great-great grandson Christopher Rabb shared it with the world.

Livingston Family Crest, 1778. *The Works of Jonathan Swift*

Christiana Williams Freeman, 1855. Library of Congress

Ten views in the island of Antigua: in which are represented the process of sugar making, and the employment of the Negroes, in the field, boiling-house and distillary (detail), William A.V. Clark, 1823. Yale Center for British Art

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Free or Not?

Manumission did not require enslavers to give their former property anything when they were freed. Without savings, a home, or access to additional education, many continued to do the same jobs they had done before. Christiana's granddaughter later remembered her as a seamstress, a skill she was likely forced to learn while in the service of her enslavers.

Portraits of two native women, one black and one light-skinned, Jamaica, William Berryman, 1808-1816. Library of Congress

A Complicated Path

Ending slavery in New York was complicated. Born in 1812, Christiana could expect the 1799 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery to free her at age twenty-five (twenty-eight for men), but a second law passed in 1817 dropped the age to twenty-one, and it freed most enslaved on July 4, 1827. Some seniors were deemed "unfit" to be freed and were bound to their enslavers for the rest of their lives.

Along the Underground Railroad

Christiana and her husband Amos helped many Black freedom seekers on their way to Canada via the Underground Railroad. This marker in Portland, Maine commemorates their work at their church, the Abyssinian Meeting House. They continued to give this support when they returned to New York in 1852.

When she was freed at fifteen, Christiana likely started with little more than the skills she had been forced to learn. In 1839, she married Amos Noë Freeman, an educator, minister, and abolitionist. Together they became part of a vital network of support for other African descendants, including protecting and guiding freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad. They began a family in New York City and spent eleven years in Portland, Maine. When they returned to New York, they purchased a house at 33 Fleet Street, Brooklyn, where they lived until their respective deaths in 1893 (Amos) and 1909 (Christiana).

Christiana and Amos had five children, three of whom survived to adulthood. Shown here are Adeline and Caroline.

Children of Christiana and Amos Freeman, c. 1855-60. Private collection

When the couple returned to New York, Christiana worked at or supported the Colored Orphan Asylum, which housed over 200 orphans during the late 1860s. The four-story orphanage was burned by White looters in July of 1863 and was rebuilt in the years that followed.

Colored Orphan Asylum, 1861-1880. New York Public Library

Barbara's Journey

During the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries the Livingston family invested in at least fifty-one sailing voyages that transported enslaved people. On these voyages, 5,682 people were embarked. Only 5,127 were disembarked. Some 555 people died on the voyages.

Slave Ship, Bernarda Bryson, c. 1930. Library of Congress

Binding New York to the Caribbean

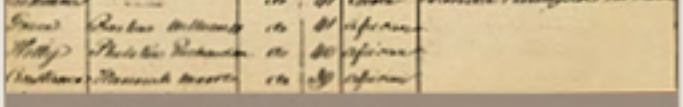
There were four Livingston plantations in Jamaica, and the family regularly shipped enslaved people to New York for sale, as gifts, or for their own purposes. Barbara was one of these. She was sent north by 1812, where her daughter Christiana Taylor Williams was born in New York City, the product of rape by one of her Livingston enslavers.

Despite being separated by over 1,500 miles, New York and the Caribbean islands were intimately connected by business and family. The Livingstons, like other wealthy New Yorkers, had reaped riches from the slave trade beginning in the seventeenth century. But everyday New Yorkers also depended on Caribbean plantations to purchase their wheat crops; they hungered for Caribbean sugar, and the free and enslaved people who sailed between the regions carried the memories of people and things they had experienced there.

Oral history suggests that Christiana was separated from her mother at an early age. Like unnumbered other children in bondage, she was to grow up on her own, under the eyes of her powerful enslavers.

Wheat was New York's major cash crop, and was sold primarily to the Caribbean and Brazil as early as the 1630s. Mills like this one dotted the landscape, with many of the millers being enslaved African men.

The mill and millpond at Philipsburg Manor, Sleepy Hollow, New York, 2006. Wikimedia Commons



Slave Register, St Mary's, Jamaica, 1817.

Documenting Slavery

Could this 1817 register from a Livingston plantation in St. Mary's, Jamaica, show Christiana's mother, Barbara Williams? While it postdates Christiana's 1812 birth in New York, the similar first name and rare use of a last name are striking. One of over 200 people enslaved on this plantation, "Barbar Williams" also had two grown daughters and a young grandson.

The slave trade to Jamaica had ended in 1807 after nearly two million enslaved people had been brought to the island to work in brutal conditions. A much smaller number were transported from there to New York. Slavery was abolished on the island in 1838.

Ten views in the island of Antigua: in which are represented the process of sugar making, and the employment of the Negroes, in the field, boiling-house and distillery (detail), William A.V. Clark, 1823. Yale Center for British Art

City Hotel, Broadway, New York City. Engraving, A. Dick, J. & G. Neale, Printer. 1831. Wikimedia Commons

Christiana

A Child of New York

Enslaved children began working as young as five years old, and it is likely that Christiana would have begun her training around that time.

Slavery was common in the state among wealthy, middling, and tenant families for 200 years (1627-1827). There were often just a handful in each household, sleeping in attics or basements. Unlike the vast slave holdings in the Caribbean, New York's enslaved faced greater isolation from one another and were almost constantly under the eyes of their enslavers.

In the 1790 census under "Slaves," Philip Henry's cousin at Clermont, Margaret Beekman Livingston, was listed as having fifteen people. Her son, Robert R. Livingston, had nine. They were the second largest enslavers in Columbia County, behind another Livingston cousin with forty. Still more people were enslaved by the tenant farmers on Livingston Manor and the estate at Clermont.

The Color of Race

Thousands of children resulted from enslavers forcing sex on their enslaved people. The children of enslaved mothers were also enslaved, meaning that fathers were at times enslaving their own children. Censuses of the nineteenth century are full of people marked "mulatto," the word used for a person with one Black parent and one White parent.

537. *The New Jersey Gazette* (Trenton), #180, June 6, 1781.

Three Pounds in Gold or Silver Reward. Ran Away on Sunday night last, the 27th of this instant, from the subscriber living in Newtown Bucks County Pennsylvania, a negro woman named Fann, a short thick wench, about 18 or 19 years of age, very black, thick lips; had on a short gown and petticoat made of linsey black and white stripes a large bundle of other cloths for herself and female child about three years old; it is expected she has been assisted by some negro or mulatto. Whoever takes up and secures said Negro wench and child, so that her master may have them again, shall receive the above reward paid by Samuel Yardley. May 29, 1781.

Runaway ad, Freedom to be Free

Many enslaved people found different ways to resist. While some fled their enslavers—like the woman Fann, who is named here—others helped friends or family in their attempts. They might provide food, shelter, or connections to paying jobs. Both refugee and helper could face severe punishment if caught. As is often the case, we do not know what happened to any of the three enslaved described in this ad.

A Black Woman, artist unknown, 19th century. ©The National Gallery, London

The Legacy

Above left:
Family historian, Mary Alice (Wheeler) McNeil, (1883-1959).
Courtesy of Chris Rabb

Above right:
Christopher Rabb with his maternal grandmother Madaline Wheeler Murphy, (1922-2007).
Courtesy of Chris Rabb

Moving Forward

Christiana spent the rest of her life separated from her Livingston relations, not just by a few physical miles, but by systematic oppression that continued even after the Civil War and the enactment of the Fourteenth Amendment.

After arduous genealogical research, Christopher Rabb located the 1909 death certificate of his ancestor, Christiana, which confirmed family lore that Philip Livingston and Barbara Williams were indeed her parents. In 1996, Christopher and his extended family were invited as the first Black Livingston descendants to the Livingston Family Reunion where he delivered an in-depth genealogical presentation connecting his family to the larger Livingston clan. Years later, DNA testing would prove the genetic connection between his Black family and White descendants of Philip Henry. The test showed how deeply the Livingstons and the rest of New York were tied to the system of slavery that pervaded America for 246 years.

Certificate and Record of Death, Christiana Freeman. Courtesy of Chris Rabb

Document of Proof

Christiana's Death Certificate confirms family history of connection to the Livingstons.

Christopher Rabb presenting at the Livingston Family Reunion, Clermont State Historic Site, 1996. Courtesy of Chris Rabb

Now the third oldest remaining Black church in the United States, the Abyssinian Meeting House where Amos preached in Portland, Maine, is undergoing restoration. Once stripped and divided up as tenements, it continues to stand as testament to the communities of freed Blacks that emerged in the nineteenth century.

Interior of the Abyssinian Meeting House, Gregory Rec, 2022. Portland Press Herald

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