

New York State and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance, 1827-1865

- Katz, W. (1997). *Black Legacy, A History of New York's African Americans*. New York: Atheneum Books, 61-86.
- New York State Freedom Trail Commission (2001). "The Freedom Quest in New York State," *Social Science Docket* (2001, Summer-Fall), 19-22.
- Singer, A. (2003, January-April). "19th Century New York City's Complicity With Slavery: The Case for Reparations," *The Negro Educational Review*, 54(1/2), 17-30.
- Singer, A. (2003, February 6-February 12, 2003). "NYC's Complicity with Slavery Supports Call for Reparations," *The Amsterdam News*, 94(6), 13.
- Singer, A. (2003, July 31 - August 6). "In United States and New York City history, it is hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys," *The Amsterdam News*, 94(31),13.
- Singer, A. (2003, September 11 – September 17). "City's First Archbishop an Apologist for Slavery," *The Amsterdam News*, 94(37), 13.

From 1827 until 1865, as the United States moved toward and was finally engulfed by civil war, New Yorkers were sharply divided in the battle over ending the enslavement of people of African ancestry. New York State was a leading center of opposition to slavery and was home to some of the best known and most militant abolitionists in the nation. Frederick Douglass published his abolitionist newspaper out of Rochester. Harriet Tubman, the leading conductor on the Underground Railroad, lived in Auburn. Sojourner Truth, a noted orator and campaigner for human rights was from Kingston. The Reverend Henry Highland Garnet, who headed a congregation in Troy, campaigned across the state calling for a violent overthrow of slavery. John Brown, who was supported by a number of New York abolitionists, had a farm in the "North Country." The Erie Canal was a major escape route on the Underground Railroad and New York's courts were often sympathetic to the rights of those seeking freedom.

The Fugitive Slave Act, passed by Congress in 1850, was a major rallying point in New York's opposition to slavery in the United States. The act mandated fines and jail sentences for people who refused to assist in the recapture of escaped slaves. In September, 1851, James Hamlet of New York City was arrested by a federal officer as an escaped slave and sent to Baltimore, Maryland. New York's Black community and their abolitionist supporters raised eight hundred dollars to purchase Hamlet's freedom. In October, Jerry McHenry, accused of being a fugitive slave, was rescued from a Syracuse courthouse by a large group that included Congressman Gerrit Smith and Reverend Samuel May. In 1860, Harriet Tubman led hundreds of protesters in Troy who demanded the release of an accused runaway who was threatened with being sent to the South.

At the same time, New York City's merchants and bankers were among the leading economic partners of the Southern planters and were major financial supporters of the illegal Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade from Africa to the Caribbean. Many of these merchants and bankers rose to social and political prominence and invested their profits in what would become major American corporations.

William Havemeyer, elected mayor of New York City in 1845 and 1848 and again in 1872, was a director of the Merchants' Exchange Bank, president of the Bank of North America, and a major investor in the Pennsylvania Coal Company, the Long Island Railroad and numerous insurance companies. Havemeyer launched his successful political and business careers from the family's sugar refining business. First based in Manhattan and then in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (where a street still bears the Havemeyer name), it later evolved into the American Sugar Company and Domino Sugar. The raw material that provided the initial profit for all of these ventures, sugar, was imported from the deep south and the Caribbean, especially Cuba, which in 1860 produced over a quarter of the world's sugar supply. In all of these places, sugar was produced by slave labor.

Moses Taylor was a sugar merchant with offices on South Street at the East River seaport, a finance capitalist and an industrialist, as well as a banker. He was a member of the New York City Chamber of Commerce and a major stockholder, board member or officer in firms that later merged with or developed into Citibank, Con Edison, Bethlehem Steel and ATT. Taylor earned a commission for brokering the sale of Cuban sugar in the port of New York, as well as additional fees for exchanging currency and negotiating the New York City Custom's House. He supervised the investment of profits by the sugar planters in United States banks, gas companies, railroads, and real estate, purchased and shipped supplies and machinery to Cuba, operated six of his own boats and numerous chartered vessels in the Cuban trade, repaired and equipped other boats with goods and provisions, provided sugar planters with financing to arrange for land purchases and the acquisition of a labor force, and even supervised the

planters' children when they came to New York City as students or to serve as apprentices for mercantile firms. As a result of his success in the sugar trade, Taylor became a member of the board of the City Bank in 1837, and served as its president from 1855 until his death. Taylor's personal resources and role as business agent for the leading exporter of Cuban sugar to the United States proved invaluable to the bank, helping it survive financial panics in 1837 and 1857 that bankrupted many of its competitors.

In memoirs published in 1864, Captain James Smith, a convicted slave trader, described New York as "the chief port in the world for the Slave Trade. It is the greatest place in the universe for it. Neither in Cuba, nor in the Brazils is it carried on so extensively. Ships that convey Slaves to the West Indies and South America are fitted out in New York. Now and then one sails from Boston and Philadelphia; but New York is our headquarters. . . I can go down to South Street, and go into a number of houses that help fit out ships for the business." The trade was so profitable that on one voyage, a ship that "cost \$13,000 to fit her out completely," delivered a human cargo worth "\$220,000" to Cuba.

New York-based insurance companies helped Southern slave owners protect their investment in slaves who were doing dangerous work. They included the Nautilus Insurance company, which later changed its name to New York Life. According to a history of the company, over a third of its initial policies were written on the lives of enslaved Africans with their "masters" as beneficiaries. Other companies involved in this business included banks that are now part of J.P. Morgan Chase and the American International Group.

Many major media companies in the New York area are descended from companies whose newspapers ran ads promoting slavery or the recapture of runaways in the pre-Civil War era. They include the Tribune company, which owns Long Island's *Newsday* and WPIX in New York City, and Gannett. Gannett, the publisher of *USA Today*, also owns the *Journal News* (Westchester), *The Ithaca Journal*, *Observer-Dispatch* (Utica), *Poughkeepsie Journal*, *Press & Sun-Bulletin* (Binghamton), *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, *Star-Gazette* (Elmira), and WGRZ-TV (Buffalo).

Leading New York politicians and religious leaders in this era were also divided over the issue of slavery. The anti-slavery Liberty Party, a precursor of the Republican Party, was largely based in New York, but so was the Nativist Party headed by Samuel Morse that opposed immigration and argued against the humanity of people of African ancestry. William Seward, a New York Governor and Senator and later a member of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet, actively opposed the extension of slavery to the west during the 1850s. Fernando Wood, as Mayor of New York City in 1861, called on the city to secede from the union along with the South. Later as a Congressman, he opposed the thirteenth amendment to the United States Constitution.

Roman Catholic Archbishop John Hughes was an apologist for slavery and slave owners while Congregationalist minister Henry Ward Beecher rallied members of his church in Brooklyn to oppose slavery. Archbishop Hughes traveled in Cuba and the American South where he was a guest on a number of plantations and witnessed the slave system first hand. In 1854, Hughes delivered a sermon at old St. Patrick's Cathedral where he cited passages from the Gospel according John to justify slavery, comparing the slave master to the father of a family. Hughes claimed to recognize that "slavery is an evil," but declared it was "not an absolute and unmitigated evil" because it brought Africans to Christianity. He believed that conditions for Africans were actually improved by enslavement.

The Reverend Beecher organized mock-slave auctions at his church to protest against the inhumanity of slavery and in a sermon in 1861 declared that "(w)e who dwell in the North are not without responsibility for this sin. . . . When our Constitution was adopted; . . . All the institutions were prepared for liberty, and all the public men were on the side of liberty." However, because of the "delinquency of the North," the nation's commitment to liberty was "sacrificed." He called the North's failure to preserve liberty "an astounding sin! It is an unparalleled guilt!"

Tension between abolitionists and anti-abolitionist forces in New York State were so great that there were several violent confrontations. A mob attacked an abolitionist meeting in New York City in 1834 and sacked homes and businesses. Efforts to prevent the recapture of escaped slaves led to physical confrontations in Buffalo, Syracuse and Troy. In his memoirs, William W. Brown graphically described efforts in 1836 by the African American community of Buffalo to free a family that had been seized in Canada by slave catchers and brought back to the United States. Perhaps the most violent upheaval took place during four days of rioting by White mobs in New York City in 1863 during protests against the military draft. A mob destroyed the city's orphanage for African American children and a number of free Blacks were caught, beaten and killed.

This section includes narrative accounts of their lives by Isabella Van Wagener (Sojourner Truth), the Reverend Thomas James, Solomon Northup, the Reverend James Pennington, Harriet Jacobs, the Reverend Samuel Ringgold Ward, James Banks, William W. Brown, Frederick Douglass, the Reverend Jermain Lougen, Joseph Dimock and William Cullen Bryant. Isabella Van Wagener (Sojourner Truth), the Reverend Thomas James, and Solomon Northup discuss conditions growing up, living and working in New York State as African Americans. Pennington and Jacobs discuss fear in the African American community of potential capture and being shipped to the south. The Reverend Samuel Ringgold Ward and James Banks describe escaping from slavery and arriving in new York. The excerpts from the narratives of Frederick Douglass, William W. Brown, and Jermain Loguen focus on the abolitionist movement, the Underground Railroad and resistance to the fugitive slave laws.

Joseph Dimock and William Cullen Bryant were White men who wrote about their visits to Cuban sugar plantations. Dimock, a New York City merchant, had family ties to Cuban planters. In *Impressions of Cuba in the Nineteenth Century*, he describes an 1859 visit to Cuba and provides details about conditions for enslaved Africans. Bryant was a poet, an editor of the *New York Evening Post*, and a founder of the Republican Party. In this excerpt from *Letters of a Traveller; Or, Notes of Things Seen in Europe and America* (1855), he describes a trip to Cuba he made in 1849. In one passage, Bryant describes slavery and the slave trade in Cuba. In the second passage, he describes the execution of an enslaved African accused of murdering his “master.”