

Slavery and the Slave Trade in British New York, 1664-1783

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The Dutch New Netherland colony came under British control in 1664. Part of the colony and a major settlement were renamed New York in honor of James II, the Duke of York. James was a major shareholder of the Royal African Company, which held a royal monopoly on the British slave trade. With the British in power, slave trading vessels were granted port privileges and warehouse priorities and a slave market was established on Wall Street near the East River docks.

Under British rule, the status of enslaved Africans was codified and their lives became increasingly more regulated. In 1665, a law confirmed that slavery was a legal institution. In 1677, a New York court stated that any person of color brought to trial was presumed to be a slave unless proven otherwise. In 1682, New York officials granted masters the power of life-and-death over their slaves. In 1684, a city ordinance prohibited more than four Africans and Native Americans from meeting together and Africans and Native Americans from possessing guns. In 1702, a curfew was imposed on enslaved men and women over the age of fourteen and New York's first comprehensive slave code was adopted, It equated slave status with being African. In 1706, a New York court ruled that conversion to Christianity did not change the legal status of enslaved Africans and a 1720 law required people color to carry lanterns after dark.

In the 18th century, the slave trade became a cornerstone of New York's commercial prosperity. Between 1700 and 1722, over 5,000 enslaved Africans entered the colony. About two-thirds arrived directly from Africa and the other third from British colonies in the Caribbean and the South. To regularize the trade in slaves, New York City officials established a Wall Street slave market in 1711.

In 1698, when the population of the New York colony was approximately 18,000 people, roughly 2,000 people, or 12%, were enslaved Africans. From 1730 to 1750 more Africans arrived in New York than Europeans. By 1746, one in five people in New York City were of African descent and fifteen percent of the non-native population of the entire colony. The largest concentration of people of African descent were in Kings County (28%), Ulster County (21%), and New York County (20%). At the time of the American Revolution, Albany and Westchester Counties had the largest Black populations in the colony, one in five White New York City households owned at least one slave, one third of the residents of Kings County (now Brooklyn) was African American, and the populations of Kings, Queens, and Richmond Counties had a greater percentage of enslaved Africans than did the British colony of South Carolina.

Philipsburg Manor and Morrisania in Westchester County and the Livingston properties in Dutchess County were among the largest slaveholdings in the north during the 18th century. There was also a large slaveholding on Sylvester Manor plantation on Shelter Island. Along the Mohawk River, a large farm owned by Sir William Johnson held perhaps as many as forty people in bondage.

People of African ancestry in the New York colony contributed to its cultural development. They adapted a Dutch Pentecostal holiday, "Pinkster," and transformed it into an African American celebration. Pinkster was celebrated over the course of several days during the autumn months and activities included harvest festivals and rites of passage ceremonies. African Americans also participated in traditional religious practices. In 1704, Elias Neau, a White Protestant missionary, began offering education and religious instruction to the New York colony's African population. In 1711, Governor Robert Hunter issued a Proclamation ordering masters to permit enslaved Africans to participate. Trinity Church endorsed Neau's efforts and he continued teaching until his death in 1722. In 1737, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts extended Neau's work and opened missionary schools in New Rochelle and Newburgh.

Escape by enslaved Africans and potential rebellion were major concerns for the European population during the British colonial era. A 1705 law established that any enslaved person belonging to inhabitants of the city and county of Albany, who was found more than forty miles north of the town of Saratoga, would be treated as a criminal and subject to execution. Because of fear that escaped slaves would flee to Canada and join forces with the colony's French enemies, the law was reenacted in 1715 and 1745. From the 1730s on, ads requesting the capture and return of runaways were common in local newspapers. During the American Revolutionary War, many enslaved Africans gained freedom by escaping to the British lines or joining British military regiments.

Fear of potential uprisings by enslaved Africans led to violent retaliation and oppressive legislation. In 1708, enslaved Africans and native Americans on Long Island attacked and killed seven Whites. Four people were accused and executed. In 1712, a group of over twenty enslaved Africans set fire to a building on Maiden Lane in Manhattan and ambushed Whites who tried to put out the blaze. Eight White men were killed in this abortive rebellion. In response, thirteen Black men were hanged, one was starved to death, four were burned alive at the stake, and another broken on the wheel. In upstate New York, enslaved Africans were accused of plots to burn Schenectady in 1761 and Kingston in 1775.

The most massive retaliation was for a rebellion that never took place and may never have been planned. In 1741, Britain faced war with Spain and White New Yorkers prepared for a possible Spanish invasion. Many feared the invasion would lead to a slave rebellion. The burglary of a merchant's home in New York City in February fed rumors of a slave revolt supported by White indentured servants. After a series of suspicious fires in March, over one hundred Black and White suspects were imprisoned. Four Whites and eighteen African Americans were hanged for their supposed role in the plot, fourteen people were burned alive, and seventy others were sold to plantations in the West Indies. Most of the accused initially denied that there was a plot, though many confessed when tortured or when offered the possibility of exile instead of execution.