

Fact Sheet

The Dutch Period

- New Netherland was the territory granted to the Dutch West India Company in 1621 by the government of Holland. It stretched from Manhattan to Albany along both sides of the Hudson, then called the North River. New Amsterdam was the main settlement in the colony and was located at the tip of Manhattan Island. In 1655, New Netherland gained territory along the Delaware River.
- The first slaves arrived in New Amsterdam around 1627. Some sources say that they came as a distinct group of 11 men, but recent scholarship suggests a less precise beginning. By comparison, the first “20 and odd” blacks arrived in Jamestown Colony in Virginia in 1619 and were then sold into slavery.
- Many of the early slaves had Spanish or Portuguese names and may have been Christians. Later slaves came from areas of Africa where many people were Muslim.
- By the late 1630s, there were 100 enslaved men and women in New Amsterdam, amounting to one-third of the population. Other northern colonies held slaves, too, but there were many more in New Amsterdam.
- In the early years of New Amsterdam, the enslaved worked for the Dutch West India Company, not for individual residents of the colony.
- Without slave labor, New Amsterdam might not have survived. Slaves sawed down trees, turned the soil so it could be farmed, built roads, and constructed important buildings. Wall Street today runs along what was once the wall of the fort, built by slaves.
- Africans in New Netherland and New Amsterdam wore Dutch clothing, learned the Dutch language, and adopted the Dutch Pentecost holiday of Pinkster as their own.
- The Dutch West India Company began to grant partial freedom, referred to by historians as half-freedom, in the 1640s. These former slaves owed a tax to the Company; white colonists did not. They also had to work for the colony whenever they were needed, and their children were automatically slaves. However, these blacks no longer lived the life of the enslaved. They were able to farm their own lands, sell their produce, and keep the profits beyond what they owed in tax. They also created the first black community in Manhattan, on farms granted them in the Land of the Blacks, located where Washington Square is now.

The British Period

- Dutch and English were both spoken by New Yorkers, black and white, through most of the 18th century. African languages were also spoken, and they were probably not understood by most whites.
- The colonies used the British currency system, in which 12 pence (d.) = 1 shilling (s.) and 20 shillings = 1 pound (£). The value was not consistent, however, from England to the colonies or from one colony to another.

- Spanish and Portuguese coins were in wide circulation as well, thanks to the extensive trade between Europe and the new world. The Spanish *dollar*, or *peso*, was a silver coin also known as a piece-of-eight. Through the mid-1700s in New York, a dollar was worth about 8s.
- In 1762, a white man hired to repair the dock charged 8s and 6d for his own labor, and 6s and 6d for his slave's. *The New-York Gazette* for December 13, 1764 noted that a bushel of wheat cost 5s, a barrel of West India rum was 4s, and a barrel of pork was 70s, or £3 10s.
- For most of the 1700s, the price of slaves did not change much. A healthy young male cost around £50 and a female around £45. Those over 40 or in poor health cost less. Owners sometimes “freed” – abandoned – old slaves who were no longer useful.
- Slavery expanded under the British, and there were more slaves in New York than in any American city other than Charleston, South Carolina. Both cities were major slave-trading ports, but Charleston was surrounded by rice plantations with large populations of enslaved laborers. There were only a few large plantations in New York, situated along the Hudson River north of New York City.
- Throughout the period of slavery in New York, and for many years after, the city included only the island of Manhattan. The five boroughs were added to New York City in 1898.
- The British were far harsher toward slaves than the Dutch had been. They eliminated most of the pathways to freedom and passed laws that greatly limited what enslaved people could do, whom they could gather with, and when and how they could be out on the streets. Many of these laws were rewritten often, suggesting that they did not work well.
- Despite the rules, the city offered opportunities to enslaved people that rural areas did not. They found ways to mingle with other slaves, free blacks, and working class whites.
- Unlike slaves in the South and in rural parts of the North, New York City slaves did not live in quarters with large numbers of other black people, but in the kitchens or back rooms of their owners' houses. Many white people owned just one or two slaves, so sometimes a slave was the only black person in the house.
- In the South, slaves most often worked either as servants in the house, or in the fields. In New York City, enslaved men often learned a skill, and worked as silversmiths, carpenters, coopers, or other tradesmen. A few were taught to read and write. Most enslaved women worked as domestic servants and were illiterate.
- New York's first slave uprising took place in New York City in 1712. The British response was to write even harsher rules.
- In 1741, many enslaved people, and some white people as well, were charged with planning an uprising, and executed or deported. It was not clear then if there really had been a large, organized plot, and it is not clear today.
- During the American Revolution, New York City remained in British hands. After the British promised freedom to any black person who fought for the King, the city became a refuge for thousands of escaped slaves. The British lost the war, but they kept their promise and helped more than 3,000 former slaves leave for Nova Scotia.

The United States Period

- The attitudes of whites began to change. Even white people who did not believe that blacks were their equals began to feel that the core principles of the American Revolution – freedom, equality, individual rights – were at odds with slavery. The change in thinking came very gradually. White people did not necessarily see a contradiction when the New York Manumission Society worked to protect the legal rights of black people, even as many of its members continued to own slaves.
- During the Constitutional Convention, southern states wanted the number of congressional representatives of each state to be based on the state’s entire population, including slaves. A compromise, offered by an anti-slavery northerner, was that three-fifths of the slaves would be counted. New York State had so many slaves that it nearly qualified for an additional congressman under this rule.
- Several states passed Gradual Emancipation laws, which were designed to bring about the end of slavery at a slow pace acceptable to whites. New York State’s first Gradual Emancipation law passed in 1799. It granted freedom to children born after July 4, 1799, but required them to be servants to their mother’s owners until they were 28 years old if they were male, and 25 if they were female.
- By 1800, slavery had all but disappeared in Boston and Philadelphia. In New York City, it was still strong, but eroding. Increasingly, free blacks and poor European immigrants did the work formerly done by slaves.
- A second Gradual Emancipation law was passed by New York State in 1817. It restated the delayed freedom clauses in the 1799 law and set July 4, 1827 as the date when any slave born before 1799 would be free. In one last effort to retain the labor of vigorous young black people, this law required children born to enslaved mothers between 1817 and July 4, 1827 to remain servants until they were 21. This clause could have extended the period of black unfreedom to 1848, but the great majority of slaves were freed by 1827.
- Slavery ended more rapidly in New York City than in the surrounding area. By 1820, 95% of black people in New York City were free, but in Kings County, half the black population remained enslaved. In the city, blacks became more assertive, and more willing to challenge white authority, as the end of slavery approached. Many whites freed their slaves voluntarily during these years, out of a combination of fear and principle.