CUTTING THE SUGAR-CANE,
on Phelps Estate, Antigua.
Sugar was the first major plantation crop in the new world. The work was hazardous and grueling, and death rates for the enslaved workers were extremely high. Many New York slaves had worked on Caribbean sugar plantations, and dreaded being sent back.
Shipping Sugar
Willoughby Bay, Antigua
William Clark, 1723
Collection of the New-York Historical Society

Slaves boiled sugar cane until it produced granular sugar and molasses, and then made rum from the molasses. These products were shipped by sea in barrels. In Europe, demand for sugar products was high, and this created great fortunes for some.
Tea Caddy
Daniel Van Voorhis
Silver, ca. 1790
Collection of the New-York Historical Society

Tea was treated with respect in New York, even after the British were defeated. This silver caddy held loose tea, imported from the east. The key was not an unusual feature in household items from the slavery period, when white suspicion of slaves ran high.
Tobacco Box
Brass and copper, ca. 1770-1790
Collection of the New-York Historical Society

Tobacco was grown on slave plantations in the West Indies, Virginia, and Rhode Island. In New York, white tradesmen and skilled slaves sold tobacco, made clay pipes, and produced silver boxes like this one, embossed with symbols of Kings George II and III.
Commode Chair
Mahogany and textile, ca. 1760-1790
Collection of the New-York Historical Society

In the days before indoor toilets, wealthy New Yorkers relieved themselves in comfort and style, without a trip to an outhouse. It was the slaves’ job to collect pans of human waste every morning and carry them down to the river.
Baby Walker

Wood, ca. 17-18th centuries
Collection of the New-York Historical Society

The design of the baby walker has not changed much over the centuries. The task of tending to young children scooting around in a walker like this was often given to slave girls who were still children themselves.