

# White New Yorkers in Slave Times

## Slavery Comes to New York

One day in the 1620s, a Dutch ship captured a Portuguese or Spanish vessel that carried a number of African crew members. This was not as unusual as it may sound. Africans sometimes worked on European ships, and Europeans sometimes seized each other's vessels. The crews of captured ships were usually killed, abandoned, or sold to plantations in the West Indies or South America. The Dutch brought the Africans on this particular ship to New Amsterdam instead, to serve as slaves to the Dutch West India Company. Groot Manuel de Gerrit and Dorothy Creole's husband, Paulo Angola, were among them.

What made the Dutch do this? Their main reason was practical. New Amsterdam was still a wilderness outpost, and the Dutch West India Company wanted a thriving port. There were not enough colonists to do the work of clearing the land, constructing houses, and planting crops. The Company tried to persuade more Dutch people to come to the colony, but few were interested. It tried to make nearby Indians work in New Amsterdam, but these local people could and often did run off and return to their villages. Bringing the captured African seamen to New Amsterdam seemed to solve these problems. The Africans could be forced to work, and they could not escape and go home.

This idea did not come out of the blue. Cultures had been enslaving their enemies since ancient times. The word *slavery* comes from the Slavic people of eastern Europe, who were often conquered and enslaved during the Middle Ages. The use of African slaves began in the 1400s, when Europeans began buying prisoners of war from African kings. By the time Groot Manuel was kidnapped two centuries later, Europeans were used to the idea of African slaves.

Another factor made slavery seem acceptable, almost normal. The world in the 1600s was not sharply divided between people who were free and people who were not. There were many people in Europe and the colonies who were not really free: indentured servants under contract for several years; apprentices who were bound to a tradesman while they learned a skill; tenants farming land owned by a landlord. Slavery was certainly seen as an extreme form of un-freedom, but the contrast between slave and free did not seem as stark then as it does to us today.

## New Yorkers Who Owned Slaves

For much of the Dutch colonial period, the slaves were owned directly by the Dutch West India Company, and they worked for the colony itself. They were the city's first public works department. They built Fort Amsterdam, where Battery Park is now. They cut the road that became Broadway. They built the wall for which Wall Street is named. Without their work, the colony of New Amsterdam might not have survived.

But soon, individual Dutch families started to own slaves, and this pattern continued into the British colonial period. Sometimes these owners were wealthy. Philip Livingston, owner of the African runaway in *Life Stories*, belonged to one of New York's richest families. He owned a townhouse on Duke Street, a country house in Brooklyn, and property in Albany. He was a graduate of Yale College, a merchant, a politician, a highly respect-

ed member of white New York society, and a future signer of the Declaration of Independence. He was also the son of one of the major slave traders in the colony, a slave owner himself, and involved in the sugar trade that helped to both fuel and feed the demand for slaves.

New York became the major slave-holding city in the northern colonies because so many whites owned slaves. Some were wealthy, like Livingston. Most, though, were more like Rebeccah Morehouse, the owner of the runaway, Pegg. Morehouse was not as rich as Livingston, but she was not poor either. She lived near the ship yards, a busy neighborhood of hard-working people. Chances are, she was a cook, seamstress, or laundress, or she may have run a shop that was connected to the shipping traffic. She may have needed Pegg to help her with her work and her house. Morehouse was probably single or widowed, and since the runaway notice makes no mention of Pegg's abilities with children, it seems possible that Pegg and Rebeccah Morehouse lived in the house alone. In New York City, there were many, many people like Morehouse who owned one or two slaves. This broad spread through the population is why New York became a major slaveholding city.

During the 1700s, 40% of all the households in New York owned slaves. That is a very high number, but it also means that over half of the city's households did *not* own slaves. Even they were involved in the slave economy, though. Almost anything that people bought in New York – cheese, tobacco, cloth, rum, sugar, butter – was grown or made by enslaved labor, and often it was brought to the city on ships owned by slave traders. The entire economy was built on a large, unpaid labor force that kept stores well-stocked and prices fairly low. Slavery was an inescapable fact of life in New York, whether you owned slaves or not.

## Slavery Becomes “Essential”

Slavery was an institution in New York City, much more so than in other northern cities. It was widespread, deeply entrenched, and supported by a network of laws, customs, and attitudes. It fit in with the way white Europeans generally thought about the world during the 17th and 18th centuries. They believed people were born to a certain role and place in life, whether they were white or black, male or female, rich or poor. They saw this as the natural order of things, as God's plan. They believed that white Christians, especially white Christian men, were meant to be in control and lead the world toward greater progress. In New York, a city always focused on business and trade, this view of the world combined with another: the conviction that slave labor was essential to the prosperity of individuals, families, and the city as a whole.

In slavery, as in any institution, people showed a range of behavior. At one extreme were slave owners who beat their slaves mercilessly. At the other were owners who, maybe for their own benefit, educated their slaves or used punishment sparingly. Far more typically, white people who owned slaves worked them hard, used physical punishment, separated family members from each other, and denied them rights that whites could take for granted. For many people, this was the definition of a good master because it reinforced the natural order of the world. Slavery dehumanized blacks and dehumanized whites, though in very different ways.

Institutions take on a life of their own, and they do not change easily or quickly. Something big has to happen to cause people to think and feel differently, and then start to act differently. In the case of slavery, “something big” was the earthshaking new idea that people were born equal, that they all had a natural right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

## Slavery Ends in New York

The ideas behind the American Revolution were fundamentally at odds with slavery. It was hard for colonists to accuse King George of treating them as slaves without thinking of the rights of the real slaves all around them. It was hard for them to claim that all men were created equal, and overlook the extreme inequality of slaves. It was hard for black people to hear whites demanding freedom, and not demand it for themselves. Slowly, more slowly than in other northern colonies, white New Yorkers started to think slavery was wrong and should be ended. Protestant Churches in the city began to oppose slavery for the first time. Quakers and Methodists voted to exclude slave owners from their New York congregations.

Anti-slavery feelings entered public life, too. In 1785, the New York Manumission Society was formed by some of the city's most prominent men, including Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. The Society wanted the new state legislature to pass an abolition law, and they wanted individual slave owners to manumit, or free, their slaves voluntarily. While they waited for these major changes to happen, the Society provided legal help to black people who had been kidnapped, like Mary and her companions on the *Creole*. They also began the African Free School, hired white teachers like Serena Baldwin's, and paid the expenses of every child who attended. They did this even while many of them continued to own slaves.

The Revolution did not change everyone's mind. In the South, the plantation economy was so dependent on slaves that whites were not ready to end slavery. In northern cities, poor European immigrants were starting to arrive, and they were willing to work for low wages. During the 1780s and 1790s, however, slave labor still played a role in New York City's economy. As a result, there were many white New Yorkers who wanted to maintain slavery, while others argued for abolition. The legislation that brought slavery to a close in New York State was a compromise between these two. Slavery would end, but it would end very, very slowly. New York passed two laws, in 1799 and 1817, that together delayed the end of slavery in the state until July 4, 1827. Some other northern states adopted a system of Gradual Emancipation as well.

The laws set the legal timetable for abolition in the state, but in practice the power started to shift in the early 1800s. With the end of slavery in sight, enslaved blacks began to agitate and bargain for immediate freedom. Owners began to grant it, sometimes because they were afraid the slaves might turn on them, sometimes out of a sense of justice, and sometimes out of a mix of the two. When Jubilation Day arrived on July 4, 1827, most New York slaves had already been freed.