

Life Stories

Profiles of Black New Yorkers During Slavery and Emancipation

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About *Life Stories*

All the subjects of these profiles were real people who appeared at least once in the public record — in documents like runaway notices, advertisements for slave sales, or legal papers. All through the period of slavery in New York, from the 1620s to the 1820s, these records were nearly always written from the perspective of the white men and women who owned, traded, and made regulations for enslaved people. Only in the 1790s do the first documents and the first memoirs of life in slavery authored by black New Yorkers appear.

For *Life Stories*, the records were reconsidered from the perspective of the black person being written about. They are not fictions, since no details were invented. They are not biographies, since they so often focus on a single moment in a life. Instead, they use historical information to help us re-imagine enslaved and free blacks at the center of their own stories.

Life Stories aims to portray slavery not as an abstract system but as an interaction of human beings. It tries to put a human face on the enslaved and on the enslavers. Of course, the actual faces of most of these people were never recorded. There are photographs of Sojourner Truth, and historic images of John Jea, Catherine Ferguson, John Russwurm, and Peter Williams, Jr., but we do not know what the others looked like. If historic portraits did not exist, the drawings that appear with the profiles were based on some of the earliest available photographs of black people in the middle of the 19th century. They should further help readers, especially children, understand that slavery and emancipation happened to real people not fundamentally different from us.

Groot Manuel de Gerrit



Manuel was a sailor on a Spanish or Portuguese ship in the 1620s. West Africans sometimes worked on European ships, and they sometimes had European names like Manuel. One day, Manuel's ship was captured by the Dutch. These captures were a hazard of life at sea. Crew members were killed, abandoned, or forced to work on the new ship. Sometimes they were sold as slaves to plantations in the Caribbean or Brazil. Manuel and the other crew men on his ship had a different fate. They were brought to Manhattan Island as slaves.

The colony of New Amsterdam was only two or three years old then, just a small struggling settlement at the tip of Manhattan. It was *too* small and struggling to please the Dutch West India Company, which wanted a busy and profitable trading site here. Before this could happen, Manhattan had to be cleared of trees. Buildings had to be constructed, and roads cut. There were not enough white colonists to do all this work, so Manuel and other Africans were brought to New Amsterdam. Manuel was given the common Dutch name de Gerrit and he was called *groot*, which means big.

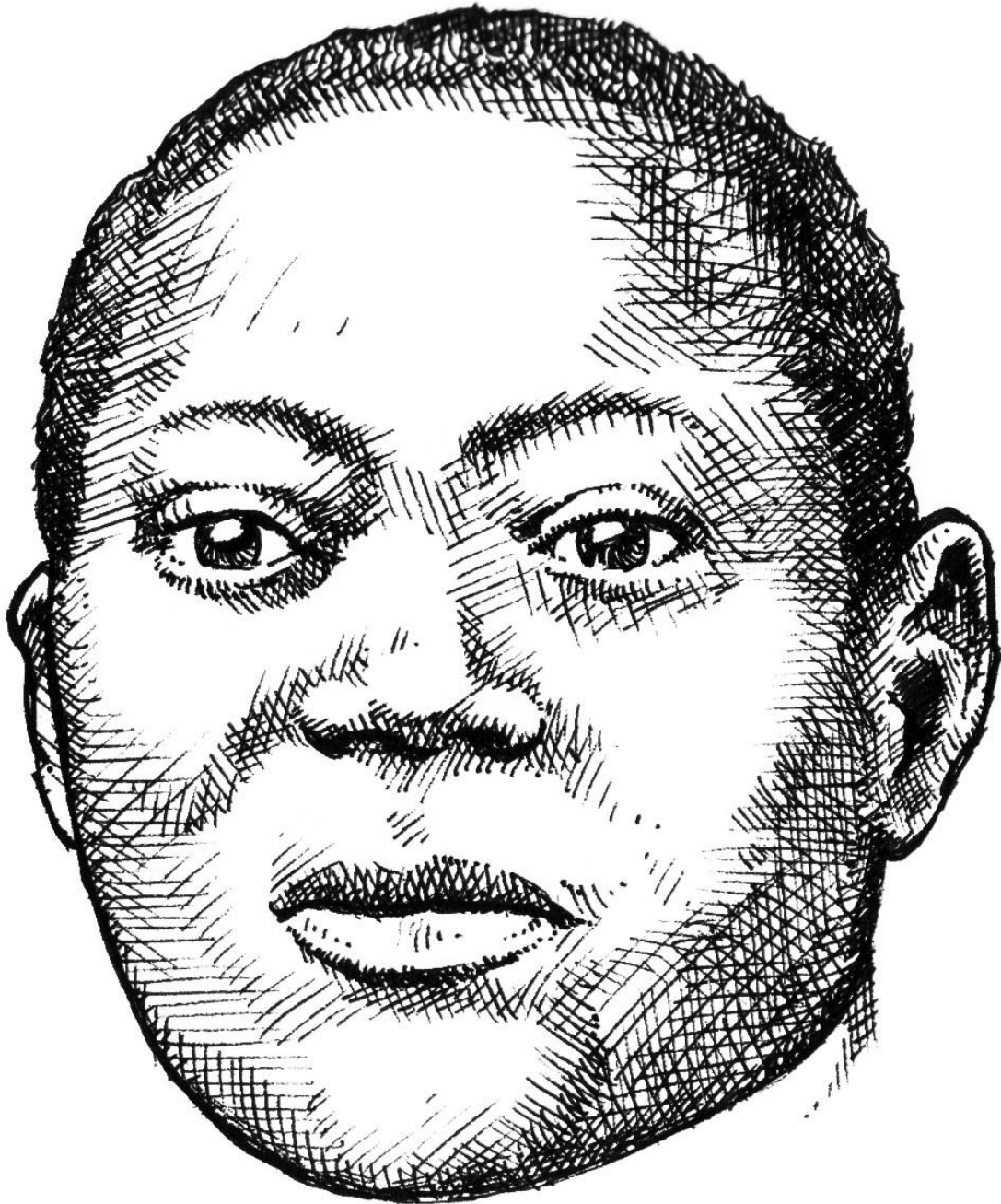
Groot Manuel and the other slaves were not allowed to leave the colony. They did backbreaking work, often chained together: sawing, hauling, plowing, carrying, and building. One wall they helped build is gone now, but the location is remembered as Wall Street. The slaves were responsible for getting New Amsterdam on its feet. They helped defend the settlement against Indian raids, too. Without them, it is hard to imagine how the colony would have survived.

As hard as the slaves worked, they were sometimes given time off. One day in 1641, Groot Manuel and some of the others went to a tavern. A fight broke out and a slave named Jan Premero was killed. The colony's leaders decided to punish one person, rather than lose several slaves. They picked Groot Manuel and sentenced him to hang, but the noose around his neck broke, maybe because he was so *groot*. The leaders tried another rope. That one broke, too. They gave up and let Groot Manuel live.

The Company knew how valuable the slaves were, and so did the slaves themselves. In 1644, Groot Manuel and several other long-time slaves petitioned the Dutch West India Company's director, Willem Kieft, for their freedom. He granted it, saying that they had been promised freedom for a long time, and could not take care of their families if they remained slaves. He freed the men's wives as well. He gave the families plots of land north of town in an area that became known as the Land of the Blacks. Kieft did this partly to create a buffer zone to protect New Amsterdam from an English or Indian attack.

The blacks were called free, but they were not as free as the white people who lived in New Amsterdam. They had to pay a tax every year, or donate some of their crops at the market, and be ready to serve the colony again if they were needed. Maybe worst of all, their children remained slaves. Historians later called this "half freedom." However, the blacks were no longer enslaved. Nearly 20 years after he was stolen from his ship, Groot Manuel was a man who owned property and had some say over his life. He could keep the small amount of money he earned, beyond what he owed to the colony. He could live in a community with other black people, away from white families. His farm covered much of what is now Washington Square Park.

Sources: Richard Dickenson, "Abstracts of Early Black Manhattanites," *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 116 (April, June 1985): 100-104, 168-173.



Groot Manuel de Gerrit

Dorothy Creole



Dorothy Creole was one of the first black women in New Amsterdam. She was African, but she came from a world where West Africans and Europeans had been trading for two centuries and their cultures had mixed. She may have spoken Spanish or Portuguese, in addition to her African language. The word “creole” was often applied to people from this mixed world.

Dorothy and other African women were brought to the colony because male slaves needed wives, and Dutch women needed help keeping house. In those days, keeping house meant more than what we call housework today. Family survival depended on the work of women: cooking, growing a garden, preserving food, watching children, making warm clothes for winter, keeping the house and laundry clean, and taking care of people who were injured or sick. White women and black women may all have worked at these tasks, but female slaves almost surely did the hardest, riskiest, and dirtiest jobs.

Dorothy married Paulo Angola, one of the first male slaves brought to New Amsterdam. Paulo’s last name was the most common surname among the slaves. It signaled that he had come from Angola, on the southwestern African coast. One day in 1643, after she had been in the colony for several years, Dorothy went to the Dutch Reformed Church to serve as godmother for a black baby named Antonio. When the boy’s parents died a short time later, Dorothy and Paulo adopted him. Later, after Paulo died, Dorothy continued raising Antonio with her new husband. This is one of the first times when the public records show New Amsterdam’s black people stepping in to take care of each other, though it was common.

When Antonio was still a baby, a Dutch sea captain named Jan de Fries came to New Amsterdam to help fight the Indians. Visiting sea captains were often given special treatment, and this may be why Dorothy and Paulo became the Captain’s slaves for a time. They were still owned by the Dutch West India Company, as they had been for more than 15 years. For Paulo and a group of other slaves, this was long enough. They decided to petition the Company for their freedom. Surprising as it may seem today, they won. The Company’s director, Willem Kieft, freed the men and their wives. Blacks were not given complete liberty, however. Former slaves had to pay a yearly tax, and their children remained slaves; historians now call this “half freedom.”

Kieft also gave the former slaves farms in an area north of town that became known as the Land of the Blacks. He may have wished to acknowledge their years of work, but he also wanted a buffer zone of blacks between New Amsterdam and any attackers from the north. The freed slaves were not being treated as if they were white. However, they were no longer slaves either, and they were land owners living in a black community. Blacks who were still slaves could look at Dorothy and Paulo and take hope. There was a way out of slavery.

From New Amsterdam’s earliest years, enslaved people were black and free people were white, but the lines between the two were not as sharply drawn as they became later. There were cases of Dutch and African people marrying each other in the Dutch Reformed Church. Captain de Fries had a son, named John, with a black or mixed-race woman. After the captain died, Dorothy and Paulo, two former slaves, were put in charge of young John de Fries’s money and property. Dorothy may have helped to raise him as well, as she raised Antonio.

Sources: Richard Dickenson, “Abstracts of Early Black Manhattanites,” *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 116 (April, June 1985): 100-104, 168-173. David Steven Cohen, *The Ramapo Mountain People* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1974), 26-31.



Dorothy Creole

Solomon Peters



Solomon Peters and his wife Maria belonged to the first generation of blacks born in Manhattan. Their fathers were both brought to New Amsterdam by the Dutch. They probably grew up speaking Dutch and maybe Portuguese, Spanish, or African languages they learned at home. Their fathers were given the limited freedom, called half-freedom, offered by the Dutch, but Solomon and Maria spent their childhoods as slaves, because that was the Dutch rule. When they were grown, some of these enslaved children sued the Dutch West India Company for their freedom, and won. This may be how Solomon and Maria came to be free blacks during the British colonial period.

They lived on a farm in the Land of the Blacks, a tract where the Dutch had given property to freed slaves. This free black settlement, the first in New York, was located where Washington Square is today. At the time it was considered well north of town, because New York City was still small and concentrated around the tip of Manhattan. The black residents farmed, sold their produce, and managed to get by, but they were not rich. It is not clear if somehow Solomon and Maria Peters had more money than their neighbors, but on November 30, 1694, Solomon did something unusual: he wrote a will. He was probably middle-aged by then, but he noted that he was “in perfect health.”

Solomon Peters gave directions for what would happen to his property when he died. His house and farm buildings, his lands, and his household goods would go to Maria. If she died, these belongings would go to the couple’s four daughters. He left his iron tools, his farming equipment, and his guns, swords, and pistols to his four sons. In addition, he left £4 to his oldest son, and 18 shillings each to the remaining three boys. (£ is the symbol for a British pound. Twenty shillings equals £1.) This will, and the items mentioned, provides a glimpse into Solomon and Maria’s life and family, and into what properties they had accumulated after many years of hard work.

The date of Solomon Peters’ death is not known. By 1716, Maria was a widow, and she was living in very difficult times for free blacks. After the slaves revolted in 1712, the British passed harsh new laws to restrain free blacks. It was hard for them to find work, and to make ends meet. Maria was probably quite old by then, and she decided to sell her farm. Free blacks did not have the money to purchase property, so the buyer was a white man named Horne. All around her, other free black landowners were facing similar problems and selling their land to whites. By the late 1720s, there were no black families in the Land of the Blacks, and the place faded into history.

Sources: Peters’ will is in the *Abstracts of Wills...* in Collections of N-YHS, 2:293. “The Freedmen of New Amsterdam,” *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society* 4 (Fall 1983), 148-9.



Solomon Peters

Hooglandt's Robin



When New York was a British colony, there were many things that enslaved blacks could not do. They could not leave their masters' houses without a pass. They could not get together with more than three or four other blacks. However, they could become Christians. In fact, there was a law that encouraged this.

In the early 1700s, Robin became one of many slaves who spent Wednesday and Friday afternoons in Elias Neau's house to learn about Christianity. They sat on benches in an attic room, listened to Neau's sermons, prayed, and sang hymns. Many of the slaves had just arrived from West Africa, and Neau was French. No one spoke English well, but somehow they made it work.

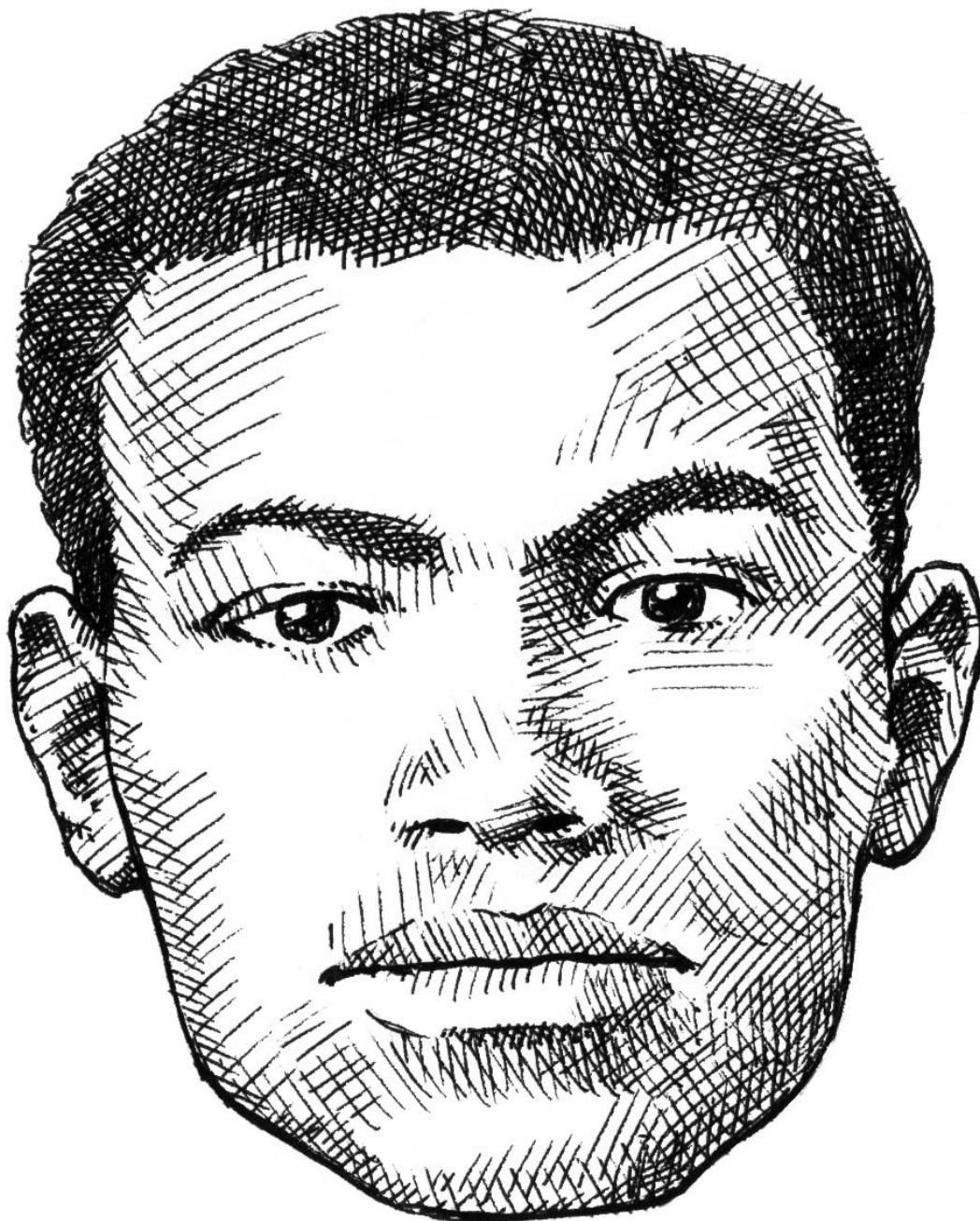
The slaves probably had several reasons for going. They may have found Christianity appealing. They may have trusted Neau, who treated them warmly even though he was a slave owner himself. They may have used the catechism books to learn how to read. Many slaves hoped that being baptized would bring them freedom. Europeans argued about whether it should or should not, and never completely agreed, so slaves kept hoping.

Robin asked his owner, Adrian Hooglandt, for permission to be baptized. Hooglandt said no. Robin asked again after a new law said that a slave did not become free by converting to Christianity. He was willing to accept that becoming Christian would not bring him freedom. Hooglandt still said no.

On an April night in 1712, Adrian Hooglandt was killed, along with several other whites. A group of slaves had torched a building and then attacked the whites who came to put out the fire. It was a carefully planned attack, and the British response was quick. Seventy suspected rebels were jailed, and some 40 were charged. Robin was the only one accused of killing his own master. Because Robin had studied Christianity, some whites blamed Neau for encouraging the blacks to rebel. Neau's school almost had to close.

Most of the 18 slaves who were convicted were hanged or burned at the stake. Robin's fate was more gruesome. He was hanged in chains to die slowly. A minister visited him before he died and urged him to confess. Robin refused. He admitted he knew about the conspiracy, but said he was innocent of his owner's death. The minister seemed to believe him.

Sources: "Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals, Etc., 1713," *Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1880* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1881), 339-363; Kenneth Scott, "The Slave Insurrection in New York in 1712," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 45 (1962): 43-74; "Slaves and Free Blacks Named in the 1712 Revolt," in Berlin and Harris, eds., *Slavery in New York*.



Hooglandt's Robin

Regnier's Mars



On a spring night in 1712, after the moon set, two slaves set fire to a building on the property of baker Peter Vantilborough. They then ran to a nearby orchard and joined other slaves who were waiting quietly in the darkness. There were more than 20 of them, and they were all holding guns, knives, or hatchets. When neighbors noticed the fire and came running to put it out, the slaves attacked and killed nine white people. The governor sent troops to capture blacks thought to be involved. Six slaves committed suicide rather than be taken. Thirty-nine others were charged with the crimes. Mars was one of several blacks charged with killing Adrian Beekman.

This was the first big uprising of slaves in New York. Most of the blacks belonged to the Coromantee or Pawpaw people of West Africa. Most had only been in New York City for a year or two. They were just beginning to understand what it meant to be a slave here. In West Africa, a slave could eventually become absorbed into the owner's family. When these Africans learned that in New York they would always be slaves, they started planning their rebellion.

The trials began within days, and most were quick. Some people were tried, found guilty, and executed in a single day. Mars's owner, Jacob Regnier, testified at his trial. He may have spoken in Mars's favor, because Mars was found not guilty. The Attorney General had an old feud with Regnier, and decided to try Mars again for killing Beekman. Mars was found not guilty at the second trial, too, but the Attorney General was not finished. He ordered a third trial of Mars, and charged him with a different murder. This time, Mars was found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. It was June 7, 1712.

Then Royal Governor Hunter stepped in. He thought the Attorney General was using Mars just to get back at his old enemy, Regnier. The governor issued a reprieve for Mars, and wrote to England for an official pardon. Mars had to wait in jail until the pardon arrived in October, but then his case was finally settled. He was not hanged, and he was returned to Regnier as his slave.

Sources: "Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals, Etc., 1713," *Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1880* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1881), 339-363; Kenneth Scott, "The Slave Insurrection in New York in 1712," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 45 (1962).



Regnier's Mars

Richard Gerret



On January 24, 1720, a boy named Richard Gerret became an indentured servant to the widow Agnes May. Richard signed the indenture contract while his mother, a free black woman named Frances Gerret, served as one of the witnesses.

In those days, both in America and in Europe, children did not spend their time learning how to read and write. Unless they were rich, they spent it working, whether they were white or free blacks. Very often, they worked as indentured servants, starting as young as seven years old. This was not the same as being a slave. The work itself was not much different, but slavery was permanent. Servants were indentured to their employer for a fixed period of time, and then they were free. Richard's term was 14 years. In exchange, employers provided food, clothing, and a place to live and learn some skills the servants could use later to find work. It could be a good bargain that worked for both sides, but sometimes servants remained very poor long after their contracts ended.

His employer may have been poor herself, maybe too poor to buy a slave. Agnes May's husband, William, had died without writing a will. She may have needed Richard to help with the house, or with whatever work she did to earn money. Without a man in the house, Richard had no way to learn a man's trade that he could practice when he was free. His mother would have recognized this, but if she did not have the resources to raise Richard herself, she had no choice.

Gerret was an old Dutch name and very common in the colony, though the spelling of it could vary. Some of the earliest blacks in Manhattan had been given the name when they arrived as slaves. If Richard was their descendant, he may have grown up hearing stories about his ancestors. He may have heard that the Dutch had given long-time slaves their freedom and farms in the Land of the Blacks, north of the village. The stories would have sounded strange and wonderful to Richard, because his New York was bigger, busier, and it was British. The Land of the Blacks was mostly owned by white people now, and the lives of free black people had become much harder.

After the 1712 revolt, just eight years earlier, the British colonial authorities were worried that slaves would rebel again. They wanted a world in which all free people were white and all blacks were enslaved. They did not trust free blacks because they could not easily control them. Among the strict new laws that were passed after the revolt, one made it very expensive for slaves to become free. This had the effect the British wanted: by the time Richard finished his period of service in 1734, there were very few free blacks in New York. There were, however, many, many slaves, and a good number of them had learned skills and trades. New York slave holders leased these well-trained slaves by the day or longer at the Meal Market on the east side. Skilled slaves were so numerous that white people had little reason to hire a free black like Richard, even if he had somehow learned a trade. If they did hire him, they had no reason to pay him well.

Sources: *Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1893* (New York, 1909), 227. *Indentures of Apprentices, October 21, 1718 to August 7, 1727*, in the collection of the New-York Historical Society.



Richard Gerret

John Fortune



On the early 1720s, a free black man named John Fortune bought a slave woman named Marya and her son, Robin. Later, John and Marya were married, but John already thought of Marya as his wife, and Robin was probably his son. He and Marya also had a daughter named Elizabeth, and John may have purchased her as well.

A free black man buying slaves would have been surprising at any time, but it was especially so after the slave revolt of 1712. The British had passed new laws that made it much harder for free blacks to earn a living in New York. Many jobs were closed to them. Most could never earn the money to buy their enslaved families or friends.

John Fortune was a cooper, a man who made wooden barrels. Just about everything was stored in wooden barrels then—cider, flour, grain, salted meat and fish. Coopers made washtubs, too, and buckets, and butter churns. The work took practice and skill. The wooden pieces had to be heated and bent, scooped out with a special knife, and then fitted together tightly so there were no leaks. A good cooper could stay busy and make good money. Somehow, even with the strict new laws controlling free blacks, John Fortune was able to save the £40 he needed to buy Marya and Robin.

And even more surprising, he found a way to secure Marya's freedom. He did this even though the British did not want free blacks in New York. They had passed a new law that made it very expensive to free a slave. An owner needed to pay £200 when a slave was freed, and then pay £20 a year, every year, for each slave. Despite this, Marya Fortune was listed as a free black on September 2, 1723, when she and John signed an indenture contract for Elizabeth. The girl had turned nine on the first of March, and would serve a term of nine years.

John and Maria made a good contract for their child. The employer was a single woman named Elizabeth Sharpas, the well-off daughter of the Town Clerk of New York. Sharpas agreed to the usual requirements of employers in indenture contracts: she would provide Elizabeth Fortune with food, clothing, and housing, and teach her the "art and skill of housewifery." But she would also make sure that Elizabeth learned to read English. At the end of the contract, she would give her one good new suit, made of wool and linen, over and above her usual clothes. For her part, Elizabeth Fortune promised to serve well and faithfully, and not to marry before her term was complete. She moved in to Elizabeth Sharpas's house the same day the contract was signed.

Sources: Harry Beller Yoshpe, "Record of Slave Manumissions in New York during the Colonial and Early National Period," *Journal of Negro History* 26 (1941), 82. *Indentures of Apprentices, October 21, 1718 to August 7, 1727*, in the collection of the New-York Historical Society.



John Fortune

McLennan's Female Slave



On September 30, 1734, a man named John McLennan placed an ad in a New York City newspaper, offering “a young negro woman” for sale. McLennan and the slave lived at the upper end of Beaver Street, near the Royal Bowling Green. He did not give the slave’s name. He said she was about 20 years old, and could do all sorts of household work. McLennan may have been exaggerating, because he wanted a good price for the slave.

In some households, slave women did not cook, but the ad said this woman could cook roasted or boiled food “pretty well.” That probably included most of the dishes the family ate — potatoes and vegetables, roast chicken or pork, stews made of beef or lamb. She was also called a good dairy-woman. This meant she milked the cows and churned the butter and made the cheese. Bread making was her job as well. She made the dough, kneaded it, and shaped the loaves. She kept the fire at the right temperature so the bread would bake but not burn.

In those days cloth was made at home, and it took a long time. McLennan said this young woman was very good at carding and spinning. That meant she could comb the tangled raw wool or linen until all the strands were going in the same direction. Then she could take the fibers to the spinning wheel and spin them together into long threads. Later, a weaver would make the threads into cloth.

This unnamed slave knew how to make soap from wood ashes and fat. She was good at washing the family’s sheets, tablecloths, handkerchiefs, shirts, and underwear. If there was a baby in the family, she washed the diapers, too. She did this all by hand, in big tubs of sudsy hot water. Some items she starched so they would be stiff and stay cleaner. She ironed almost everything.

She had other good qualities, according to McLennan’s ad. She did not drink rum or smoke tobacco. She was strong and healthy. She had already had smallpox, so she would not come down with this dangerous disease again. McLennan wanted buyers to know that this was a mild and quiet person, someone who did many jobs well and without complaint. Of course, he had no way to know what this quiet woman was thinking.

Sources: Ad in *The New York Weekly Journal*, 30 September 1734; Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Jane C. Nylander, *Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993).



McLennan's Female Slave

Burk's Sarah (a story of 1741)



On March 18, 1741, the fort at the tip of Manhattan caught fire in high winds and burned down. Without the rain that came later, nearby buildings would have burned as well. In succeeding weeks, a house and a warehouse caught fire. New York was a town of wooden buildings, and people were used to fire. They could not help but wonder, though: why so many all of a sudden? Was someone setting the fires on purpose? Then someone found hot coals under a haystack, just waiting to catch. A woman heard two slaves talking and laughing about setting fires. Someone saw a black man racing away from a burning building. The slaves are setting the fires! There had been slave revolts in other colonies recently, and white people had been murdered there. The New York authorities held an investigation and a servant-girl named Mary Burton began to tell stories of a great slave conspiracy to burn down the town and kill all the white men. Seventy blacks and 20 whites were arrested and charged. They were pressed to confess and blame

others. After the first few were hanged, more people confessed, possibly hoping to escape punishment. For three months, it seemed that every black person in New York might be called to testify. The trials went on and on.

Sarah was the only black woman charged in the 1741 plot. She was owned by a widow named Mrs. Burk. Early in the trials, a witness said he saw Sarah at the big meeting at Hughson's Tavern, where the plot was said to have been planned. He said she was the only woman there, and that she and another slave were given the job of burning down the Meal Market, the waterfront building where slaves were hired out by their owners for daily work.

When her time came to testify, Sarah said she knew nothing about a plot. The judge said there was evidence against her, and the only way she could save her life was to tell what had happened. By then, two slaves had been executed, along with the white tavern-keeper John Hughson and his wife. Sarah knew the judge was serious, and she began to talk. She said she had been at the meeting at Hughson's. She named other slaves who had been there, too. She said big knives were sharpened during the meeting.

Then she changed some of her testimony. She said some of the blacks she named had left the meeting before the plot was discussed and were not guilty. Later, Daniel Horsmanden, one of the judges, wrote a book about the case. He said Sarah was more trouble than any of the other witnesses. He said when she began to testify she "threw herself into most violent agitations [and] foamed at the mouth." He called her "one of the oddest animals amongst the black confederates... a creature of an outrageous spirit."

After her testimony, Sarah went back to jail. Fourteen more people were executed while she waited a month to learn if she would live or die. Then she was brought to court again. Because she had helped build the case against people thought to be involved in the plot, the judge said she was one of 43 blacks who would be pardoned and sent into slavery in Hispaniola, the island where the countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic are today. No one knows what happened to her after that.

Historians still are not sure if the big slave plot was real, or if the authorities were panicked by the fires and over-reacted. Some things are certain, though: buildings did burn down; New York's slaves were enraged and vengeful; whites were nervous and suspicious; and punishment was quick and bloody. All in all, 30 black people and four whites were executed. More than 70 other people were deported to labor in the West Indies, where the work was much harder and death rates were high. Slaves dreaded being sent there.

Sources: Daniel Horsmanden, *Journal of the Proceedings ... [1744]*, reprinted as *The New York Conspiracy*, ed. Thomas J. Davis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); Thomas J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The "Great Negro Plot" in Colonial New York* (New York: Free Press, 1985).



Burk's Sarah

Ward's Will (a story of 1741)



On March 18, 1741, the fort at the tip of Manhattan caught fire in high winds and burned down. Without the rain that came later, nearby buildings would have burned as well. In succeeding weeks, a house and a warehouse caught fire. New York was a town of wooden buildings, and people were used to fire. They could not help but wonder, though: why so many all of a sudden? Was someone setting the fires on purpose? Then someone found hot coals under a haystack, just waiting to catch. A woman heard two slaves talking and laughing about setting fires. Someone saw a black man racing away from a burning building. The slaves are setting the fires! There had been slave revolts in other colonies recently, and white people had been murdered there. The New York authorities held an investigation and a servant-girl named Mary Burton began to tell stories of a great slave conspiracy to burn down the town and kill all the white men. Seventy blacks and 20 whites were arrested and charged. They were pressed to confess and blame

others. After the first few were hanged, more people confessed, possibly hoping to escape punishment. For three months, it seemed that every black person in New York might be called to testify. The trials went on and on.

Many witnesses testified against Ward's Will. Some said he was present in the taverns when the talk turned to burning down the town and sharpening knives. One said that Will had tried to pull him into the conspiracy. Another said Will refused to help put out one of the fires. A slave named Jack said he heard Will complain because Mr. Van Horne, Will's wife's owner, would not allow him to visit her. Jack said Will kept getting angrier as he talked, and said he would show Van Horne a trick or two. According to Jack, Will said the blacks in New York were all cowards and had no hearts. He said that the slaves in Antigua, the Caribbean island where he had come from, had more courage to stand up to whites.

A white witness named John Williams said he had been suspicious of Will. Williams was a baker who lived on Duke Street next to Will's owner, the clock-maker Anthony Ward. During one of the fires, Williams held a loaded gun and made Will sit on the stoop where he could see him.

Many slaves confessed to taking part in the conspiracy, but not Will. He knew that confession might save his life. He had confessed in Antigua after an uprising there, and escaped execution, but he thought other blacks would kill him if he confessed now. He did not say anything until he was taken to the stake to be burned. Then he tried to save his life. He talked all about the plot. He said a British soldier at the fort had helped slaves sell stolen goods. He named others he said were involved. He prayed for mercy.

The judge considered Will one of the leaders of the revolt. He knew about Will's role in the two uprisings in Antigua and St. John's. He wanted to make an example of Will, and stop him from "further mischief." Will was burned at the stake on July 4, 1741.

Historians still are not sure if the big slave plot was real, or if the authorities were panicked by the fires and over-reacted. Some things are certain, though: buildings did burn down; New York's slaves were enraged and vengeful; whites were nervous and suspicious; and punishment was quick and bloody. All in all, 30 black people and four whites were executed. More than 70 other people were deported to labor in the West Indies, where the work was much harder and death rates were high. Slaves dreaded being sent there.

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Ward's Will

Wyncoop's London (a story of 1741)



On March 18, 1741, the fort at the tip of Manhattan caught fire in high winds and burned down. Without the rain that came later, nearby buildings would have burned as well. In succeeding weeks, a house and a warehouse caught fire. New York was a town of wooden buildings, and people were used to fire. They could not help but wonder, though: why so many all of a sudden? Was someone setting the fires on purpose? Then someone found hot coals under a haystack, just waiting to catch. A woman heard two slaves talking and laughing about setting fires. Someone saw a black man racing away from a burning building. The slaves are setting the fires! There had been slave revolts in other colonies recently, and white people had been murdered there. The New York authorities held an investigation and a servant-girl named Mary Burton began to tell stories of a great slave conspiracy to burn down the town and kill all the white men. Seventy blacks and 20 whites were arrested and charged. They were pressed to confess and blame

others. After the first few were hanged, more people confessed, possibly hoping to escape punishment. For three months, it seemed that every black person in New York might be called to testify. The trials went on and on.

London was the slave of a rich silversmith named Benjamin Wyncoop. Several witnesses said London was part of the plot. A slave named Warwick said he once heard London swear he would kill his master and mistress. He said London asked him to steal money so they could buy weapons. A white witness said that he had seen London bring a silver spoon to Hughson's Tavern to be hammered down. It sounded as if London had stolen the spoon from Wyncoop and was selling it to raise money for the revolt. Two other slaves said London was at a big meeting at Hughson's Tavern when blacks and whites planned together to burn the town.

By the time London testified, many slaves had been executed. Some were hanged, and some were burned at the stake. The judges said that the only way slaves could save themselves was to confess, and London did. He said that the tavern-owner, John Hughson, had been the leader of the plot. He said slaves planned to set fire to their owners' houses, and then kill them as they tried to escape the flames. His testimony was used against two other slaves.

After he testified, London waited in jail, wondering if he would be executed. Three weeks after his testimony, and about three months after the burning of the fort, London was brought to the court again. He found out that he was one of many slaves who would be pardoned and sent away from New York. London and several others were transported as slaves to the island of Hispaniola, where the countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic are today. No one knows what happened to him next.

Historians still are not sure if the big slave plot was real, or if the authorities were panicked by the fires and over-reacted. Some things are certain, though: buildings did burn down; New York's slaves were enraged and vengeful; whites were nervous and suspicious; and punishment was quick and bloody. All in all, 30 black people and four whites were executed. More than 70 other people were deported to labor in the West Indies, where the work was much harder and death rates were high. Slaves dreaded being sent there.

Sources: Daniel Horsmanden, *Journal of the Proceedings ... [1744]*, reprinted as *The New York Conspiracy*, ed. Thomas J. Davis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); Thomas J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The "Great Negro Plot" in Colonial New York* (New York: Free Press, 1985).



Wyncoop's London

Livingston's African Runaway



On November 6, 1752, Philip Livingston placed a notice in *The New-York Gazette*. He wanted readers to know that his new slave had run away. Many owners placed newspaper ads like this because many slaves ran away, but this black man was unusual. He had just arrived from Africa, and did not yet have a slave name. Livingston said that the runaway's hair was curled in "a very remarkable manner." Maybe this was an African hairstyle, and maybe he came from a different part of Africa from most slaves. Livingston thought his unusual hair would help people identify the man.

In the decade since the 1741 revolt, New York slave owners had tried to buy most of their slaves directly from Africa. They believed newly arrived Africans would be easier to handle, more frightened and isolated, and less likely to rebel, than slaves who had been in the colonies for awhile. Livingston's runaway had just arrived in New York, and had not yet learned English or Dutch. He spoke only his own African language. There were many African-born slaves in New York and they spoke many different languages, depending on where they had been born. If this runaway tried to ask other blacks for help, he might not have been understood, though his meaning would certainly have been clear.

The African had been gone for a week when the notice appeared. Livingston thought he was hiding in the woods in Harlem, which was still dense forest then. The runaway could have found streams to drink from and animals to trap. If he was looking for a way off Manhattan Island, there was a small bridge at Spuyten Duyvil. He could have tried to steal a boat and cross the river at night under cover of darkness. It was November, and much too cold to swim to the Bronx.

No one knows what happened to this runaway. He was brave and independent, and the notice said he was strong, but Livingston set a high reward for his return. Because of this, many people were probably in the Harlem woods, trying to catch a black man with remarkable curls. That is what Livingston hoped for, and it is why he placed the notice.

Philip Livingston, the runaway's owner, was a rich merchant and ship owner. His father was involved in the slave trade, and Philip owned many slaves himself. Over the next 25 years, though, this slave owner would become involved in the American Revolution. He was one of the people who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Many white people at the time lived with contradictions like this.

Sources: Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., "*Pretends to be Free*": *Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland, 1994), 44 (# 101).



Livingston's African Runaway

Charles Roberts



Charles Roberts was a man of many skills. He could read and write. He played the fiddle. He knew arithmetic and could keep account books. Maybe most importantly, he knew how to operate the printing presses that belonged to John Holt. He was Holt's indentured servant, and he had three years left on his contract. Roberts wanted his freedom sooner. He played his fiddle to make money so he could pay Holt for his remaining time.

Some people said that Holt was not an honest man. They said he lied, drank, and refused to pay his debts. When Holt blamed Charles Roberts and a slave named George for a robbery, not everyone believed him. Charles Roberts and George were put in jail anyway. They ran away, but they were caught and brought back to stand trial. Roberts was found guilty. He was beaten, and his length of service was changed from three years to 40. He was about 30 then. He would be John Holt's servant until he was an old man, if he lived that long. It was like being a slave.

On April 12, 1762, Charles Roberts ran away again. It was about the time his original contract would have ended. Holt was furious. He placed a very long notice in *Parker's New-York Gazette*. He described Roberts in great detail. He said Roberts was a Mulatto, meaning a light-skinned black. He listed his height, his age, the fact that he had had smallpox, and that he played the fiddle. He described all the clothes Roberts had with him. There was a chocolate-colored cloth coat, a light blue-grey summer coat, a straw-colored waistcoat edged with silver cord, and many other items. Holt said he liked to "dress very neat and genteel, and generally wears a wig."

Holt's notice called Roberts cunning and said he was not to be trusted. It said he was a criminal, maybe involved in recent robberies. Holt offered a very big reward, £5, and said people should be careful of Roberts, whom he called an artful villain. John Holt was desperate to get Roberts back. People said he could not run his printing business without him.

The notice did not work. Roberts was never heard from again. He may have used his many skills to make a new life somewhere else.

Source: David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004). Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., "Pretends to be Free": *Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland, 1994), 91 (# 201).



Charles Roberts

Morehouse's Pegg



Pegg and her owner, Rebecca Morehouse, lived close to the shipyards on the East River, near where the Brooklyn Bridge is today. This waterfront area was full of shops and tradesmen. Morehouse may have made money sewing, cooking, or washing for ships' crews, and Pegg may have helped her.

Pegg was born in Oyster Bay, Long Island, so she spoke English well. She had been living in New York City for many years when she ran away on December 12, 1764. At that time, there were more female slaves in Manhattan than male. Enslaved women did not run away as often as men, maybe because they had fewer chances. Typical runaways were young men from farms and small towns. If they were lucky, they made it to New York, pretended to be free, and disappeared into the busy life of the city. Pegg was an unusual runaway: a 40-year-old woman who lived in Manhattan. The

notice gives no clue why Pegg ran, but the typical reason was to join family members who had been sold to a distant owner.

New York City slaves who decided to run had a special problem: they could not stay in the city because they might be recognized and turned in for the reward. Leaving the city without being caught was not easy, but Pegg lived at the waterfront, where she had watched many ships come and go. She may have been waiting for just the right moment to climb aboard and offer to cook in exchange for passage to another place. She had to be careful which ship she picked, and where it was going. Otherwise, there was a chance she would be sold again at the end of her trip. It might be worth the gamble, though, because sometimes ship captains said yes.

Rebecca Morehouse worried about this. When she placed the runaway ad the day after Pegg vanished, she added the common warning: "All masters of vessels and others are forwarn'd not to entertain or carry her away as they will answer it at their peril." She also worried that Pegg might escape to the countryside, so she offered a reward of one dollar if Pegg was captured in the city and three dollars if she was taken out of town. To make the runaway easier to identify, Morehouse noted that Pegg had a crooked middle finger on her left hand, and that she had run off wearing a short red cloak, a white cap, and men's shoes. Pegg also had a calico dress and other clothes with her, a sign that she had planned her escape. She knew she would need a change of clothes because people would be looking for the red cloak and white cap.

Rebecca Morehouse wanted Pegg back, and the notice in *The New-York Gazette* shows why. Pegg was tall, slim, and straight, so she probably did not have arthritis, which can make people crippled and unable to work hard. She had already had smallpox, so she would not come down with this disease again. The notice said that Pegg was sensible, cunning, and artful, which probably meant she was smart and had good common sense. She could wash, iron, and cook.

Pegg may have escaped. Even if she was caught and beaten, she had the satisfaction of knowing she caused her owner some trouble. She also cost her some money, because slaves who had run away were worth less the next time they were sold.

Source: Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., *"Pretends to be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland, 1994), 127 (# 274).



Morehouse's Pegg

Colonel Tye



When he was a slave in New Jersey, he was called Titus. He was 22 when the American Revolution began in the spring of 1775. A few months later, the British promised freedom in Virginia to any black person who fought on their side. Titus ran away the next day, one of hundreds of blacks from many places who went to fight for the British. His owner placed an ad in a Pennsylvania paper, offering a reward to anyone who returned Titus to him. No one caught this runaway, though. He joined the British army and called himself Colonel Tye. With this name, he became famous.

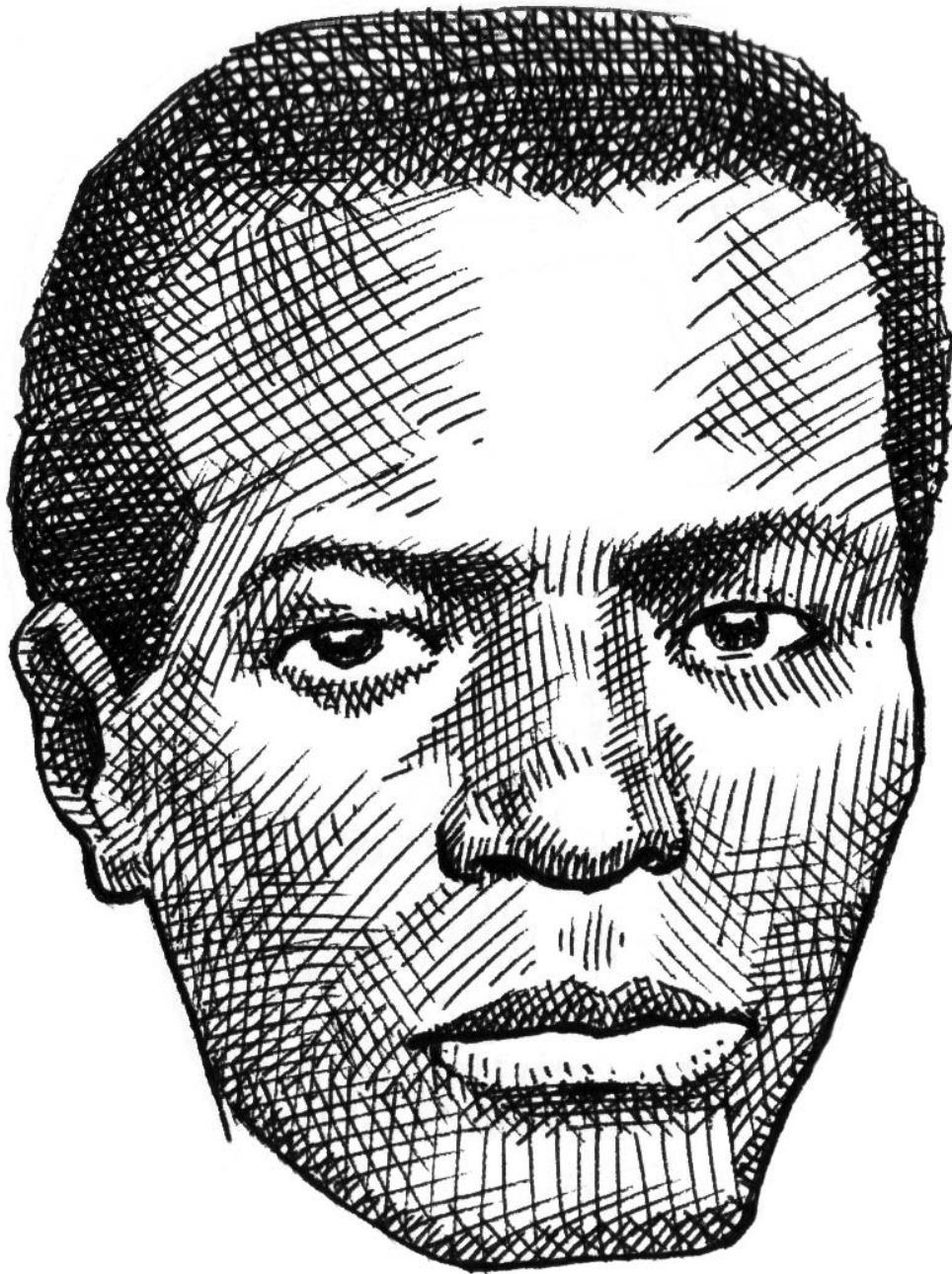
Some black people fought with the Patriots, but others thought that a British victory would be better for blacks. After the British promised freedom to runaway slaves who joined the British side, many blacks escaped and arrived in New York City, the British headquarters. Twenty-four of the best black soldiers belonged to the Black Brigade. Colonel Tye was their commander.

Colonel Tye led his men on raids in New Jersey where he had been a slave. They captured Patriot soldiers and destroyed houses and barns. Because Tye knew the area well, the men could hide in swamps and riverbanks and strike suddenly. These raids terrified the local Patriots, but slaves heard about Colonel Tye's attacks and felt encouraged. Many more fled to the British. By 1779 there were 3,000 black people in New York City, maybe more. They had come from all over the country. Some black men became soldiers and lived in one of the city's Negro Barracks. Others, along with women and children, lived in tents in a partly burned out neighborhood called Canvas Town.

New York suffered a hard, cold winter in 1779. Food and fuel were scarce. Colonel Tye's Black Brigade joined with the Queen's Rangers, a small unit of white soldiers, and together they raided the Patriot areas of New Jersey. They brought fuel, livestock, and other supplies back to New York City. They also guarded the ferry landings along the North River, later called the Hudson. The ferries regularly brought more escaped slaves across from New Jersey.

Colonel Tye continued fighting until September of 1780, when he was shot in the wrist during a surprise attack. The injury was not serious, but a fatal infection set in and he died. He was considered a fine and brave soldier by the British, and even by some of his Patriot enemies.

Sources: Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., *"Pretends to be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland, 1994), 185 (# 394); <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p52.html>, accessed 5/4/05.



Colonel Tye

Peggy Gwynn



During the American Revolution, the British were in control of New York City. When they offered freedom to any slave who would fight against the Patriots, many black people ran away from their owners and came to New York City to fight for the King. The men became soldiers or laborers in the British army. Women like Peggy Gwynn were cooks or laundresses. There were slaves and freed blacks on the Patriot side, too.

Life was not easy. New York City was often under attack. There was not always enough food. Many of the blacks lived in makeshift tents in a burned-out neighborhood, but they were freer than they had ever been. They were paid for their work. They could go to a tavern with friends, dance, and listen to fiddle music. If they met someone and fell in love, they could even be married in Trinity Church. This may be where Peggy Gwynn married her husband, who was fighting for the British.

After the British lost the war, their commander, Sir Guy Carleton, was determined to honor the British promise of freedom to the blacks. He would give them papers that granted their freedom, and he would transport them away from America for good. Slave owners around the country were furious. They were on the winning side, after all, and they were about to lose what they saw as their property. George Washington himself came to argue with Carleton about the slaves. Carleton compromised, and said he would only free blacks who could prove they had been in New York City before the first peace treaty on November 30, 1782. This may have been a very important date for Peggy Gwynn.

The freed blacks began leaving in the spring of 1783, most bound for Nova Scotia. At some point during the next weeks, Peggy Gwynn sent a request to General Carleton. She asked for permission to go with her husband when he sailed. She said he was in the artillery. She said she had come to New York with the King's Troops, but she did not say when. Peggy Gwynn also pointed out a problem. A certain Mr. Crammon wanted to detain her and deprive her of the liberty she had enjoyed. Peggy and her husband begged Carleton for help.

Crammon may have believed he rightly owned Peggy Gwynn, and he may have come to New York to argue his case. Many slave owners did this. He may have petitioned Carleton, and claimed that Peggy had come to New York *after* the critical date, November 30, 1782. Whatever arguments Carleton heard, he did not grant Peggy's wish. She was turned over to Crammon and a life in slavery. Her husband sailed without her.

Source: British Headquarters Papers, Manuscript and Archives Division, New York Public Library, item no. 9656.



Peggy Gwynn

Deborah Squash



When Deborah was a girl, she was a slave on a big plantation in Virginia. Her owner was none other than General George Washington. She may have worked in the house or in the fields, but either way, she worked hard. The General thought everyone, male and female, slave and free, should work as hard and as long as his or her strength would allow.

Slaves often ran away from Washington's plantations. Some were caught in a few days. Deborah was one of the ones who managed to escape. She was 16 when she ran away. It was 1779, and the General was leading the Patriot army in the Revolutionary War. When she ran, Deborah probably looked for the General's enemies to protect her. The British had offered freedom to black people who would help them. Many slaves ran away from their owners to fight for the King.

Four years later, Deborah was among the more than 3,000 blacks in New York City, headquarters of the British army. She was married by then. She and her husband, Harvey Squash, were both about 20 years old. They were both strong and healthy, and they were both still caught in slavery. Deborah remained the legal property of George Washington, and her husband was still a slave. He belonged to a man named Lynch, who had bought him from a British officer.

Deborah and her husband prayed for a British victory, and freedom. The British lost, though. General Washington and other slaveholders were on the winning side, and they wanted their "property" back. The British said no. Their general, Sir Guy Carleton, insisted on keeping the promise he made to blacks who had joined the British cause. He wanted to give each black person an official certificate of freedom. He also wanted to help them escape to other countries so they wouldn't become slaves again.

In May of 1783, General Washington asked for a meeting with General Carleton. They met as gentlemen. In a quiet voice, Washington asked Carleton to return everything that belonged to the American victors, "including the Negroes." Carleton answered that he meant to honor his promise, and that some of the blacks had already left New York harbor. *Already left?* Washington was shocked. He would be even more shocked later, when he learned that Deborah Squash was on one of those first ships, and long gone. She and her husband were bound for the town of Port Roseway in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Sources: British Headquarters Papers, Manuscript and Archives Division, New York Public Library, item no. 10247 ("Book of Negroes"), pp. 23-24; Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).



Deborah Squash

Boston King



Boston King was one of the first of New York's slaves or former slaves who wrote a book about his experiences. He said writing his memoir was not "an agreeable task," but he did it in order to thank God for delivering him from his oppressor. It is one of the first and most important accounts of slavery by a former slave.

King began with the story of his birth around 1760, a few miles from Charleston, South Carolina. He was only six when he was put to work, waiting on his master. By the age of nine, he was minding cattle. At 16, he was apprenticed to a carpenter who was cruel to him. This was about the time the Revolutionary War began. One day he escaped his master and ran away to Charleston, which the British controlled by spring of 1780. He was welcomed by them, and began to feel a measure of freedom he had never known before. He fought for the British army, and made his way to New

York City, which was the British stronghold. He married a woman named Violet, and they were both in New York when the British lost the war.

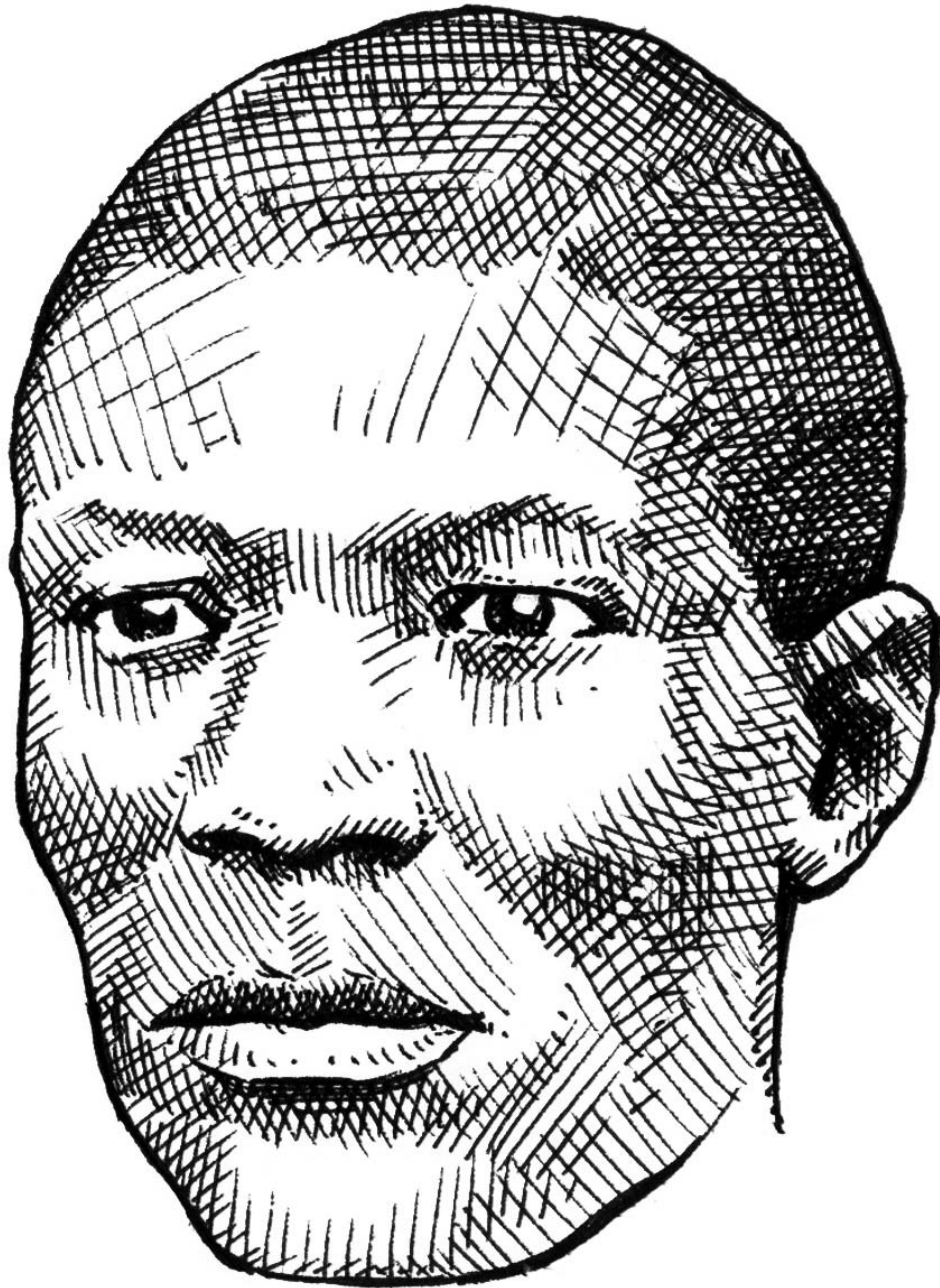
More than 3,000 blacks had fled to New York City to help the British. They were called Black Loyalists. They did not expect a Patriot victory, and when it came they did not know what it would mean for them. A rumor spread that they would be returned to slavery. They saw old masters come up from Virginia, North Carolina, and other areas, and seize their former slaves right on the streets of New York. Slave catchers dragged people out of bed and carried them away. Boston King wrote that the blacks in New York City were filled with "inexpressible anguish and terror....For some days, we lost our appetite for food, and sleep departed from our eyes."

But the British did as they had promised. They gave certificates of freedom to blacks who had fought for them during the war, and took them by ship to countries where they could live free. Boston King was one of many blacks aboard ships headed for Nova Scotia, in Canada. After all the years of slavery, Nova Scotia must have sounded like paradise.

For the first three years, the British gave the relocated black people in Nova Scotia provisions to carry them through until their farms were established. The land, however, was too hard and rocky for farming. When the provisions stopped coming, people became desperate. Some of them sold their clothes and blankets for flour. Many died. Boston King was saved from starvation when a man asked him to make a wooden chest, and paid him with Indian corn. Then the man hired him for other carpentry work, so King and his family had enough to eat. His faith helped him, too. He had joined the Methodist church and become a preacher.

But life in Nova Scotia was too difficult. In January of 1792, Boston King and his wife joined about 1,200 other blacks and sailed for the British colony of Sierra Leone in West Africa. He worked there as a teacher and minister, and he published the story of his remarkable life in 1798.

Sources: King's *Memoirs* downloaded at <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/blackloyalists/documents/diaries/king-memoirs.htm>, accessed 5/4/05; his autobiography can be downloaded at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p60.html>, accessed 5/4/05.



Boston King

John Jea



The question of whether Christian baptism would mean freedom for black people was never entirely resolved. Dating back to Dutch times, many slaveholders felt a Christian obligation to convert slaves. Some also thought it was wrong to enslave a fellow Christian. The Dutch and British both tried to settle the question with laws ruling that Christian converts could remain enslaved, but some white people still had doubts. Even after the American Revolution, enslaved blacks continued to hope and believe that baptism would bring them freedom, and sometimes it did. After John Jea was baptized, his owner freed him reluctantly, because he felt he had to. That does not mean that the conversions to Christianity were insincere. John Jea was a deeply religious man who later became a well-known minister in America and in Europe. He published *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher* in England around 1811. His retelling of his early years provides some of the few known details about the daily lives of enslaved people in New York.

I... was born in the town of Old Callabar, in Africa, in the year 1773. My father's name was Hambleton Robert Jea, my mother's name Margaret Jea; they were of poor, but industrious parents. At two years and a half old, I and my father, mother, brothers, and sisters, were stolen, and conveyed to North America, and sold for slaves; we were then sent to New York, the man who purchased us was very cruel, and used us in a manner, almost too shocking to relate;...he gave us a very little food or raiment [clothing], scarcely enough to satisfy us in any measure whatever; our food was what is called Indian corn pounded or bruised and boiled with water...and about a quart of sour butter-milk poured on it; for one person two quarts of this mixture, and about three ounces of dark bread, per day, the bread was darker than that usually allowed to convicts, and greased over with very indifferent hog's lard; at other times when he was better pleased, he would allow us about half-a-pound of beef for a week, and about half-a-gallon of potatoes; but that was very seldom the case, and yet we esteemed ourselves better used than many of our neighbours.

Our labour was extremely hard, being obliged to work in the summer from about two o'clock in the morning, till about ten or eleven o'clock at night, and in the winter from four in the morning, till ten at night. The horses usually rested about five hours in the day, while we were at work; thus did the beasts enjoy greater privileges than we did. We dared not murmur, for if we did we were corrected with a weapon an inch and-a-half thick, and that without mercy, striking us in the most tender parts, and if we complained of this usage, they then took four large poles, placed them in the ground, tied us up to them, and flogged us in a manner too dreadful to behold....

Source: *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher*; Compiled and Written by Himself; available at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jeajohn/jeajohn.html>, accessed 6/24/05.



John Jea

Jupiter Hammon



Jupiter Hammon was born a slave on Long Island in 1711. His owner was a rich merchant named Henry Lloyd. As Hammon grew up, he was trained as a clerk and bookkeeper and taught to read and write. Lloyd hired a Harvard graduate and a British missionary to teach him, so he could help with the Lloyd family business. Hammon was hardly the only black person in New York who could read and write, but he was much more educated than most.

Hammon converted to Methodism in the 1730s, and he began writing religious poetry. He often wrote about his belief that in God's eyes, all people were equal. It was through his poems that he fought against slavery. In 1773 he published a book of poetry, one of the very first blacks to do so in America.

The years after the Revolution were a tense time. Many people, black and white, wondered if the principles of freedom and equality would mean the end of slavery. Hammon's position sounds surprising today. He said that whether slavery was right or wrong, it was the duty of slaves to obey their masters. If a master was really cruel, a slave should serve him well and convince him to be kinder.

In 1787, Hammon wrote "An Address to the Negroes of the State of New York." He spoke directly against slavery. He urged young African Americans to pursue freedom, but he warned that spiritual salvation mattered more. For himself, he said he did not want to be free. He was 76 years old, and he would not know how to take care of himself if he were free. He had also not had a typical slave's life. "My lot has been so much better than most slaves have had. I suppose I have had more advantages and privileges than most of you."

Hammon did want young people to be free, though. "Liberty is a great thing, and worth seeking for." He also wanted them to behave in a disciplined, Christian way. He thought sin was a kind of slavery in itself. He advised young blacks to avoid anger and bitterness, to put their faith in God, and to act in a way that no one could criticize. This remained his position until he died some years later, still enslaved to the Lloyd family.

Sources: "Jupiter Hammon," in Berlin and Harris, eds., *Slavery in New York* (New York: New Press, 2005; forthcoming); American National Biography, s.v. "Hammon, Jupiter."



Jupiter Hammon

Mary



On the summer of 1817, Mary was an eight-year-old black girl on a ship in New York harbor. She was about to be taken to the South and sold into slavery. Just a few days earlier, she had been living in Poughkeepsie, a city about 70 miles north of New York. She was an indentured servant, which meant she would work for a white family for a certain number of years. This was a way that many people, black and white, spent their youth. They would be taken care of, maybe learn a skill, and be free at the age of 21. Mary's parents may have been free blacks themselves. Their last name is unknown.

In June of 1817, three white men went to Poughkeepsie and bought six black people. The men had already been to Albany, further north, and bought two blacks there. Most of the blacks were around 20 years old, but there were three children. Mary was the youngest. They were brought down the Hudson River by boat, and taken aboard the schooner *Creole* in New York harbor. It was against the law to take New York blacks to the South and sell them into slavery, but that was about to happen to Mary and the other blacks on board. If she stayed in New York, Mary would be free when she turned 21. In the South, she would be enslaved her whole life.

Fortunately, Samuel Kelley lived in Poughkeepsie, and he had been watching. He was a member of the New York Manumission Society, a group of wealthy and powerful white people who helped blacks fight for their rights under the law. When he saw three white men buying slaves and heading toward New York, he became suspicious. He hurried to Manhattan and asked for a special meeting of the Manumission Society and told them what he knew. The next day, the Society hired a group of officers to go on board the *Creole*. When they did, they found Mary and the others and brought them off the ship.

The three men were charged with kidnapping, tried, and found guilty. One died before he could be sentenced. One was fined \$25. The remaining man was sent to the city penitentiary for three years at hard labor. This sentence was a warning to anyone who might think of capturing or buying New York blacks and selling them in the South.

Mary and the other blacks were given their freedom by the court. She could go back to Poughkeepsie and find her parents. Until then, she may have stayed with Catherine Ferguson for a while. Ferguson was a black woman who lived as a baker and opened her home to children who needed help.

Sources: New York Manumission Society Papers, Ms., New-York Historical Society Library, Minutes, Vol. 10, p. 333; Vol. 11, pp. 1, 7, 11.



Mary

Catherine Ferguson



Catherine Ferguson was born around the time of the American Revolution. She and her mother were enslaved to a man who lived on Water Street in New York City. Catherine was very young when her mother was sold. She never forgot the pain of losing her. It was one reason why she later worked so hard to help young children, especially poor children.

When Catherine was about 14, she became a Christian. At about the same time, a white woman bought her for \$200 and set her free. Catherine paid half the amount back, though it must have been difficult for her to raise this much money.

Catherine Ferguson made a living by baking cakes for weddings and parties. She was famous for her wonderful cakes, but she cared most about her membership in the Presbyterian Church, and poor children. At one time, she had had a husband and two children, but they apparently died young. Most of her life she lived as a single woman.

She began a Sunday school that may have been the first one in Manhattan. She brought in poor children, taught them religion, and made sure they had enough to eat. She used her own cake money for this. Over the course of her life, she raised or took care of 48 children, 20 of them white. Sometimes she did her charity work with white people, and sometimes she worked alone. White people respected her generosity and faith, and this gave her the freedom to do the work so important to her. After she died of cholera in 1854, her obituary was written by a well-known white businessman and anti-slavery activist. He called her a saint. It was hard not to admire a loving, Christian woman who baked delicious cakes and spent her life teaching and taking care of needy children.

Sources: Lewis Tappan's obituary of Catherine Ferguson is at <http://www.amherst.edu/~aardoc/Ferguson.html>, accessed 5/4/05.



Catherine Ferguson

Rose Butler



Rose Butler was born in Westchester County in 1799. According to the first Gradual Emancipation law, black girls born to slave mothers in or after 1799 would be servants until they were 25, and black boys until they were 28. Then they would be free. This was not the same as being a slave, because it was not permanent. It was not quite the same as being an indentured servant either, because blacks were given no choice in the matter.

In reality, though, whites and blacks knew that the end of slavery was in sight. During Rose Butler's childhood, blacks began to bargain with their owners and win release. As a result, there were more and more free blacks in New York. Rose Butler was not one of them. Instead, her contract was sold to a series of buyers. She was 16 when she came to the home of William Morris in New York City. Four years later, she set the Morris house on fire and her trial caught the attention of white New York. A white minister named John Stanford interviewed her and wrote a pamphlet about her.

According to Stanford, Rose said she had begun to steal when she was very young. She started small, taking thread and silk from a store owned by her master. When she wasn't caught, she stole again, and she still wasn't caught. By the time she was living with the Morrises, she was taking anything she wanted. Once she took \$300 in silver coins. She made no effort to hide the money she had. She would buy presents for her family and take her friends on steamboat rides. She would spend money at Corlear's Hook, the area of New York City where black and white, slave and free, held wild parties that respectable residents found scandalous.

Rose Butler said she set the Morris house on fire in order to get even with Mrs. Morris, with whom she had had many conflicts. For the first time, she was caught. Two white men had helped her set the fire, but she never identified them. She alone was tried for arson and found guilty. On July 9, 1819, she was led through the streets of New York to the gallows. While several thousand people watched, she was hanged.

Everybody was talking about Rose Butler. Some white people thought all blacks were like her – immoral, and out of control. Many were very nervous about what would happen in 1827, when slavery would come to an end. These fears were fanned by Stanford's pamphlet, which portrayed Rose Butler as part of a large network of disorderly poor people, black and white, who lived outside the rules of white society.

Sources: "The Rose Butler Case," in Berlin and Harris, eds., *Slavery in New York* (New York: New Press, 2005; forthcoming); Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 111-116.



Rose Butler

Jack DeVoo



Jack lived on Long Island but he came to New York City often. He was the slave of a butcher named Frederick DeVoo, who owned a 20-acre farm in Williamsburg, now part of Brooklyn. On holidays, owners sometimes gave slaves time off. For Pinkster, the biggest black holiday of all, they might get three days to themselves. That is when Jack and other Long Islanders liked to go across the East River to the big Catherine Market, near the Catherine Slip. People came there to buy and sell vegetables, meat, and fresh fish. Sometimes the butchers would ask blacks to come and dance a jig, or what was called a “break down.” They wanted to attract a crowd who might buy some meat. After a while, Catherine Market became known for its dancers.

The dancing took the form of a contest. A wide board about 6 feet long was put on the ground. The dancers had to stay on the board as they danced.

They kept time by slapping their hands against their thighs. The moving feet and slapping hands were like drums keeping a beat. At the end, dancers passed the hat to collect money, the way people in New York streets and parks still do. New Yorkers voted for the best dancer with their money, and Jack was often the winner.

Jack’s owner thought very highly of him. He considered him smart and faithful. As slavery was soon to end in New York, DeVoo bought Jack a new suit and made him an offer. “Jack, if you go home with me, you shall never want; but if you leave me now, my home shall never more know you.” In other words, it was now or never.

Jack replied that he wanted to stay in the city, and that’s what he did. He spent his days at the Market, looking for work. It may not have been the life Jack was hoping for. The whites who watched him dance were sometimes laughing at him, not appreciating his skill. He could hardly make enough money to live. Some of the people at the Market worried about him and asked DeVoo to take him back. DeVoo refused. “The laws set him free and he left me,” he said, “now let the laws take care of him.”

Sources: Thomas DeVoe, *The Market Book...* (New York, 1862), pp. 341-345; reprinted in Paul A. Gilje and Howard B. Rock, eds., *Keepers of the Revolution: New Yorkers at Work in the Early Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 224-228.



Jack DeVoo

Serena Baldwin



Serena Baldwin was sitting in a city in Haiti, writing a letter. “Dear Teacher,” she began. “With pleasure I hasten to inform you of our safe arrival in St. Domingo.” It was September 29, 1824. Serena was about 14. Her teacher, Eliza J. Cox, was back in New York City, teaching other students.

During the period of slavery in New York, most black people were not taught to read and write. There had always been a few masters who educated their male slaves, but not women or girls. The American Revolution had begun to change people’s thinking. After the war, some prominent whites formed the New York Manumission Society in order to provide legal help for blacks and to push the legislature for laws that would end slavery. They knew that black boys and girls would need an education. When the Episcopal Church opened the African Free School, the New York Manumission Society paid the expenses so every child could attend for free.

Serena attended the girls’ department. In 1824, the year Serena finished her studies, there were about 150 girls and 350 boys in the African Free School. The girls learned to read and write, as well as to sew and knit. They made shirts, samplers, suspenders, and many other items. At graduation, their work was exhibited for the public. People came to admire the items on display and hear the students’ speeches. Many of these students later became important leaders of the black community.

Serena was writing to thank Miss Cox for what she had taught her. She promised to follow all her teacher’s advice, and she would have the opportunity soon. Serena and some other girls from the African Free School had gone to Haiti to become teachers themselves. Haiti was a new, independent country, run by black people. The slaves had rebelled there, just as the American Patriots had. In her letter, Serena wrote: “Among your good wishes, you wish I may live to enjoy freedom. Dear Teacher, if ever there was a country where liberty dwells, it is here. It is a blessing enjoyed alike by all men, without respect to fortune or colour – it cannot be otherwise, as our motto is ‘Liberty and Equality.’”

Serena went on to proudly describe the farm where she lived with her parents and brothers. They had 12 acres of land, a cottage, fruit trees, chickens, and two cows. She seemed very excited about what lay ahead for her and her new country.

Source: Abigail Mott, comp., *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour* (New York: M. Day, 1826), s.v. “African Schools in New York City”; available at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/mott26/mott26.html>, accessed 5/4/05.



Serena Baldwin

William Hewlett



William Hewlett was a black man and a famous stage performer, an actor and singer who knew how to keep an audience entertained. He performed at the African Grove Theater, which was started by William Brown, a black man from the West Indies. All of the actors and actresses were black. The audience was drawn from the increasing number of free blacks who could afford a theater ticket. For some performances, there were blacks and whites in the audience, separated by a curtain. Hewlett played the lead in many productions, from serious plays by Shakespeare to comedy skits and musicals. He was considered the Theater's star. There was a time in the 1820s when every New Yorker knew his name.

Some whites were not happy about the African Grove Theater. When William Brown tried to move it to a white neighborhood, white gangs attacked. They damaged the building and beat the actors and Brown. The police came, but instead of arresting the whites, they put the *actors* in jail. They let them go only when they promised not to do more Shakespeare. There was a white theater in the new neighborhood that probably didn't want competition. It was not the last time the African Grove Theater would be attacked by whites. Brown had to close it down a few years later.

William Hewlett went on to a solo career. He performed in Europe and in New York, but in America there was competition from a new form of theater called minstrel. In these performances, white actors would wear make up and pretend to be black people. Minstrel shows became popular because white people found them funny. Fewer people came to watch a real black man on the stage, and Hewlett's career ended. His last performance was in 1831.

Sources: George A. Thompson, Jr., *A Documentary History of the African Theatre* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998); Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).



William Hewlett

William Hamilton



In 1817, a law was passed that would end slavery in New York as of July 4, 1827. It seemed far away at first, and blacks were angry that freedom would not come sooner. However, they also used the time to continue an important process they started a few years earlier: building black organizations and laying the groundwork for an independent black community.

William Hamilton was a free black man who worked as a house carpenter during the early 1800s. He was part of a new black middle class in New York City. He believed blacks should help other blacks, so he helped start an organization called the New York African Society for Mutual Relief. The members were skilled workers and ministers who contributed money to help each other during sickness or other times of need.

Hamilton was very hopeful about the future for black people. He believed that white people would see that blacks were as clever, as smart, and as good as anyone. However, he thought that black people had to show the best possible behavior, to act in a way no whites could criticize. He was worried about what would happen otherwise. He was especially worried about July 4, 1827, the day that New York slavery would come to an end. In previous years, the Fourth of July was a day when young white men drank too much and attacked black people. Many blacks feared the attacks would be worse on such a historic day. Hamilton and other black church members thought the celebrations should take place in churches. He wanted ministers and black leaders to speak about civil rights and the need to abolish slavery in the South. He thought a quiet, thoughtful event would show white people that blacks were serious and smart and qualified to live free. He also thought it would be safer.

Other black people wanted a big parade and celebration, with music and dancing. They thought that blacks should show the world how happy they were that slavery was over in New York. They did not like the idea of keeping the celebrating quietly indoors.

In the end, there were two events. The first, on July 4, 1827, was held in the churches, and Rev. Hamilton was one of the speakers. The following day, there was a long and noisy procession through the streets of New York City, led by black men on horseback. Hundreds turned out to watch, and the day passed without violence.

Sources: Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).



William Hamilton

John Russwurm



John Russwurm was born in Jamaica in 1799, the son of a Jamaican woman and a white merchant. When he was a boy, his father sent him to Canada to be educated. As a teenager, he went to live with his father and his white stepmother. His father died soon after, but Russwurm remained close to his stepmother all his life.

In his twenties, John Russwurm graduated from Bowdoin College in Maine. He was one of the first nonwhite college graduates in this country. Then he moved to New York City. He had lived with whites for most of his life, but now he devoted his energies to the concerns of black people. He taught at the African Free School. In 1827 he and Samuel Eli Cornish began publishing *Freedom's Journal*. This was the first black newspaper in the United States, and it was also read in Canada, England, and Haiti.

The first months of *Freedom's Journal* were exciting, but tense. Slavery was about to end in New York State and blacks did not agree about how to honor the day or what to do after freedom came. They even disagreed about whether to stay in America or leave. Some white people had formed an organization called the American Colonization Society, which was supported by many prominent whites. They believed black people should go to Africa to live, even if they had been born in America. Most American blacks did not like the idea. They thought it was just a way for white people to be rid of blacks.

John Russwurm opposed colonization too, in the beginning. After the abolition of slavery in New York, however, he stopped believing that America was a place where black people could better themselves. He did not think they would ever be treated as the equals of whites. By late 1828, he decided to leave. His decision was controversial in the black community, but Russwurm sailed for Liberia, a colony in West Africa that had been set up for former American slaves. Later he became the governor of the Maryland colony in Liberia. He never lived in America again.

Sources: *American National Biography*, s.v. "Russwurm, John."



John Russworm

Peter Williams, Jr.



Peter Williams, Jr. was born in Brunswick, New Jersey around 1780. His mother was a black indentured servant from St. Kitts. His father supported the Patriot side during the American Revolution. Later Peter said that his father had filled him with love for the American government.

Peter Williams, Jr., was well educated. He was taught at the African Free School and by private teachers. Later, like his father, he made his living by selling tobacco. He was one of the growing number of free blacks in New York City after 1800. Many, like Williams, were reformers who worked hard for political rights for black people and for the end of slavery. He was a member of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, a black group that helped its members financially and worked for black freedom.

On January 1, 1808, the United States ended its role in the international slave trade. This marked the last time that Africans would be legally imported to this country as slaves. Peter Williams delivered a speech at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to celebrate the day. He reminded listeners that Africans had been regularly kidnapped into slavery for hundreds of years. He thanked God for hearing the cries of Africa, and he thanked white people who had helped to end America's role in the slave trade. Like his father, he believed in the promise of the American Revolution: All men are created equal. He knew there were whites who opposed blacks' rights, but he believed that blacks would triumph if they behaved honorably and respected the country's laws.

Williams' speech was published a few days after it was delivered. In a note, Williams noted that "some people doubt my being the author," so he asked four prominent white men to certify that they had seen the manuscript for the speech, written in Williams' own hand.

Like many other black leaders in these years, Williams was deeply religious, and a minister. He became the head of a small black Episcopalian congregation, and helped raise enough money for a church. The first St. Philip's African Church was built downtown on Collect Street, now called Center Street. Later the congregation moved to 134th Street in Harlem.

Sources: *American National Biography*, s.v. "Williams, Peter"; Peter Williams, Jr., *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; Delivered in the African Church, in the City of New York, January 1, 1808* (New York: Samuel Wood, 1808).



Peter Williams, Jr.

Belinda Lucas



On 1826, a white Quaker named Abigail Mott published a book of biographies and stories about black people. She wanted to show the deep religious beliefs of the people she profiled and to reassure whites that former slaves would behave as good Christians. In the spring of 1825, Mott went to Belinda Lucas's house on Chrystie Street and talked to her. They sat together in Belinda's room on the first floor. There was a bed in the room, with a nice coverlet. The room also had a mirror, an armchair, a carpet on the floor, and other furniture. Because Mott wrote down Belinda's words, and because Belinda had lived a long life, this profile is one of the few first-person narratives of a black woman who lived in New York during slave times.

Belinda began her story with an early memory. *When I was a small child in Africa, being one day at play in the woods, some people came along. One of whom caught me, and throwing me over his shoulder, ran away with me.*

After he had got some distance, he put me down and whipped me to make me run. When we came to the water, they put me into the ship, and carried me to Antigua. Soon after, the captain of a vessel from New-York taking a liking to me, bought me and brought me here. I was then so little that I sometimes slept at my mistress's feet.

Belinda was sold several times, married twice, and had a child who died young. Her last owner was a lawyer named Livingston. *When I was about forty years old, I bought my freedom for twenty pounds. Not long after I married my last husband I paid for his freedom, and we went to Charleston. After living there about seven years, he died. And knowing I had many friends and acquaintance in New-York, I came back. I brought a hundred dollars with me, which I put into the church stock. From that I have received seven dollars every year, and with it I buy my winter firewood.*

Belinda was a determined and hard-working woman. *By working early and late, besides my day's work, I earned money and got a life-lease on this spot of ground. I built this house, and in this room I have lived many years. The upper part I rent.... I have been asked many times to sell it, but I think it is much better for me to stay quietly here than to be moving about. And besides, I let Mr. _____ have fifty dollars, and when he failed, I lost it. And the bad folks have several times taken money out of my chest. And I was afraid if I did sell, I should lose that also, and then I should be very bad off.*

She was not sure how old she was, but thought she might be close to 100. Still, she liked living alone. *If I have somebody with me, they will want other company, and that will make more noise than I like. I love to be still, then I can think. And when I am sick, the people upstairs are kind to me, and do what little I want done.*

Belinda learned to spell a little when she was a child, but she did not know how to read until she went to the Clarkson School, which taught adult black women. Now she could read her Bible. Speaking of her reading, she said: *I met with a bad accident lately. I dropped my spectacles in the fire, and it spoiled them. When I can get into the Bowery to Mr. _____'s [store] I can get another pair. But nobody can get them for me, they would not know how to suit my eyes. And then I always pay cash for what I get. I have found it the best way. In all my life long there has never [been] any body had the scratch of a pen against me.*

Source: Abigail Mott, comp., *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour* (New York: M. Day, 1826); available at <http://doc-south.unc.edu/neh/mott26/mott26.html>, accessed 5/4/05.



Belinda Lucas

Peter Van Wagener



Peter was born on the Dumont farm about 90 miles north of New York City. His parents, Thomas and Isabella, were both slaves. He had three sisters, but he was the only boy in the family. In late fall of 1826, when Peter was about five, his mother left to work on a nearby farm. A few weeks later, Peter was sold to one of his owner's relatives. Then he was sold to Solomon Gedney, another member of his owner's family.

Solomon Gedney then gave Peter as a wedding gift to a man named Fowler, whose bride, Eliza, was also a Dumont relative. The Fowlers took Peter to their plantation in Alabama. Fowler beat Peter severely. Sometimes Eliza Fowler would find Peter hiding after a beating, and put ointment on his wounds. Many masters were cruel, but Fowler was unusually brutal. He was later arrested for beating Eliza to death.

Peter had been in Alabama a few weeks before his mother learned he was gone. She went to the Dumonts and asked for her son to be returned. The family laughed. Isabella decided to fight in court, a courageous and unusual move. She had the law on her side, because New York blacks could not be taken south and enslaved. Solomon Gedney knew this and was afraid he would be fined and maybe sent to jail.

Peter did not know that his mother was trying to help him. One day when he had been in Alabama for around a year, suffering Fowler's beatings, Solomon Gedney came to the plantation and took Peter on the long journey back to New York. He brought him to a courthouse where people started asking the boy about his mother.

Peter was scared and did not understand what was happening. He said he didn't have a mother who lived in New York, and asked to stay with his "kind master." When his mother was brought to the court, he screamed at the sight of her. Eventually, he calmed down and said she did look the way his mother used to look. He was given his freedom by the court, and went home with Isabella. Later, when she saw the welts and bruises that covered his body, she said, "Oh my God! Pete, how *did* you bear it?"

Slavery in New York State had just ended, and Peter's mother decided to move with her son to New York City, where they used the name Van Wagener, after the family who had bought and freed Isabella. Slavery had left many scars on Peter and he had a difficult time growing up in the city. He couldn't hold a job. He stole and gambled. When he was 18, a minister urged him to go on a whaling voyage and straighten himself out. He agreed. While he was at sea, he wrote five letters home to his mother, each time asking her to write him back, to remember him, and to forgive him. He never received any letters from her, though she may have tried to write.

By this time, Isabella was middle-aged and a devout Christian. She put her time as a slave behind her and began a new stage of her life. In 1843, she changed her name to Sojourner Truth, left New York City, and began her fierce public battle against slavery, the battle that would make her lastingly famous. Her final letter from Peter had been dated September 19, 1841. She never heard from him again.

Sources: Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Olive Gilbert, ed., *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (Boston: 1850); available at <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/truth/1850/1850-16.html>, accessed 5/13/05.



Peter Van Wagener

Sojourner Truth



Sojourner Truth's name is one of the most famous in American history, but this woman began her life as a slave named Isabella. She was born around 1797 in Ulster County, about 90 miles north of New York City. This was an area where many Dutch people still lived and followed the old customs, and Isabella grew up speaking Dutch. When she was about 12, she was sold to the family of John Dumont. Some three years later, her owner chose a husband for Isabella, an older Dumont slave named Thomas.

Her relationship with the Dumonts was long and complicated. She was treated harshly by her owner and his wife, but she looked up to John Dumont. She had a low opinion of herself, but she thought he was strong and important. Slavery often made black people think poorly of themselves and highly of their white masters.

In 1826, Isabella took her youngest child, an infant, and moved to a nearby farm. She believed she was free, that Dumont had promised to free her a full year before slavery was due to end in New York State. Dumont disagreed, but Isabella remained with the Van Wageners, a family who opposed slavery and paid Dumont for Isabella's freedom.

Then came one of Isabella's darkest hours. She learned that her only son, five-year-old Peter, had been sold or given to Dumont family members and was now on a plantation in Alabama. After 1817, it was illegal to sell a New York slave to the south, so Isabella did a rare thing: she sued in court for Peter's return. She spent a frantic year winning Peter's release, and many more trying to help him recover from the terror and abuse he suffered.

In 1828, Isabella and Peter moved to New York City. Slavery was over in the state, but black people still faced many difficulties. Isabella worked as a maid for a white family, doing the same household chores she had done as a slave. Black children like Peter were not accepted in the new public schools. Isabella and her son were not permitted to go on the streetcar. She was a pious woman who took comfort in God and preaching, but she was getting angry.

In 1843, she followed her religious convictions and her anti-slavery passions. She left New York to begin the life for which she is now famous. She gave herself a strong new name, Sojourner Truth, and she began speaking in public, an almost unheard-of activity for women. She argued for an end to slavery in the South and for the rights of women. She was a powerful presence, almost six feet tall, very dark-skinned, with a deep speaking voice. Her English was fluent by then, but the lingering sound of her original Dutch made her voice even more compelling. Sojourner Truth spoke forcefully and tirelessly, year after year, and people paid attention.

Sources: Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Olive Gilbert, ed., *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (Boston: 1850); available at <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/truth/1850/1850-16.html>, accessed 5/13/05



Sojourner Truth