Old North: Recalling the Real Slaves of New York

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Body

One fine morning in 1720, George Clarke sent his agent off to the market in downtown Manhattan. At the top of his shopping list was a good field ***slave***.

Alas, the market offered spare pickings. There was a house ***slave***, too soft for fieldwork. Another, a strapping fellow, was overpriced. But the day was not lost. As Clarke's agent wrote in fine olde script, "I was able to find some garlic."

It's the workaday language of the unspeakable, and for almost two centuries it was the daily argot of ***New York***, arguably the ***slave*** capital of the ***New*** World. This wealthiest and most mercantile of American cities was constructed on the backs of African ***slaves***. The elegant old ***New-York*** Historical Society -- itself founded by a ***slave*** owner -- has lifted a curtain and mounted the first expansive exploration of slavery in ***New York*** City, running through March 5.

The distinct impression is of an Up-South city. When the Civil War loomed, ***New York***'s mayor suggested that business common sense dictated seceding and joining the Confederacy. "***New York***'s whole economy was built on the cotton industry," said Richard Rabinowitz, who curated the 9,000-square foot exhibition. "***New York*** was in every sense a ***slave*** city."

Slaves built the walls of Wall Street, the first city hall and Trinity Church. ***Slaves*** accounted for 20 percent of the population of Colonial ***New York***, compared with 6 percent in Philadelphia and 2 percent in Boston. Forty percent of ***New York*** households owned ***slaves***. ***Slaves*** dredged ponds, cleared Harlem woods and constructed Fraunces Tavern, which was owned by "Black Sam" Fraunces, a West Indian. George Washington, a slaveholder, bade farewell to his lieutenants at that tavern.

There were peculiarities to the ***slave*** experience in ***New York***. The great cost of tiny real estate plots meant the typical white ***New York*** family owned but a single ***slave***. Black women who bore children were not desired and were often sold to farms.

"More ***New*** Yorkers owned ***slaves*** than whites in the antebellum South," says Leslie Harris, a professor of history at Emory University, who edited a book on the exhibit. "We need to acknowledge that our history is much more complicated than a benighted racist South and a free North."

Nor was urbanized slavery necessarily more benign. Blacks in ***New York*** worked from dawn to well after dark. They could not own property and could not meet in groups of more than three. Any hint of defiance was met with unyielding violence. One reads of rebellious blacks burned, stretched on racks and run through.

This is a tale movingly told in an exhibition that shies from the didactic through innovative use of sound and subdued lighting, graphics, copious documents and splendid ***new*** maps and artwork. If few blacks left a written or visual record -- it's not until the 1790s that paintings begin to depict blacks -- the designers respond with what feels like judicious imaginative leaps.

There are yellowing ledger books of ***slave*** ships recording the "38 negroes lost in passage" and classified newspaper advertisements for "whole bodied negroe men" and an African runaway whose "hair or Wool is curled in locks in a very remarkable manner."

Round a corner into a room and the ear catches the rounded vowels of Akan, a language spoken along the west "Gold Coast" of Africa. Wander a few more feet and you come to a re-created well where ***slaves*** gathered to tote water for their owners' tea. These communal wells downtown became a crossroads. In this exhibit, you peer into the well and see the shimmering reflection of black ***slave*** women. You hear them asking after family sold up the Hudson River Valley, gossiping about boyfriends, laughing and whispering.

Two decades into the life of ***New*** Amsterdam, in the 1630s, when it was a tiny collection of wharves, forts, homes and businesses at the toe of Manhattan Island, it had 800 ***slaves***. These Africans arrived from Guinea and Angola and Madagascar, a transoceanic commerce that would send 80 Africans per day to the ***New*** World for 400 years.

The first ***slaves*** were akin to indentured servants. The city was a typical Dutch mosaic -- burghers, Jews, Flemish, Indonesians and blacks living at close quarters. ***Slaves*** could earn limited freedom, although if they wanted to buy a house they had to move "uptown" to lands not protected from Indians. Intermarriage was legal, if rare. "The racial stereotypes were not fixed yet; it was a frontier town, and it was possible for blacks to negotiate a half-freedom," Harris says. "Then the British took over and the vise tightens."

When British governors took charge in 1664, they realized that ***New York***, with its harbor and bred-in-the-bone entrepreneurial fever, could dominate the Colonial economy. Blacks became the town's sinew. Some ***slaves*** lived well enough, becoming stevedores and metalsmiths. But there's no mistaking bondage as less than bitter. The ***slave*** John Jea lived on a diet of boiled corn doused in sour buttermilk with a slice of dark bread and rancid lard. On a rare day, an owner might toss in salt beef and potatoes.

In 1991, contractors unearthed an African burial site in Lower Manhattan. The story pathologists found in those bones is related here. The early ***slaves*** had spinal fractures and severe deformations from hauling stones and other heavy loads over many years.

Revolt was common. In some cases, blacks conspired to slay their owners, sprinkling themselves with sacred powder in hopes of making themselves invisible. Some committed suicide rather than face recapture.

Many blacks saw little promise in the American Revolution. The British, no doubt cynically, offered blacks freedom in exchange for fighting on their side. The revolutionaries offered no deal at all. They gave 500 acres to any ***New York*** slaveholder who enrolled his ***slaves*** in George Washington's army.

Vermont was the first state to outlaw slavery, in 1777. Massachusetts did so in 1783. ***New York*** did not follow until 1827. Even after that, teams of white men -- known as black birders -- roamed the night streets, grabbing freed blacks and secretly shipping them south to again become enslaved. The mystery is that so little of this grim story is known. "As slavery ends, it's as though blacks and whites stop talking about it. . . . There was a lot of shame

involved," says Harris, who is African American. "We underestimate the good power that comes when people see their history fully represented for the first time."

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