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Knickerbocker Backlash: New York's Most Conservative Slave Owners of Dutch Descent and Their Opposition to Abolition

Brak, Bastiaan

Citation

Brak, B. (2025). *Knickerbocker Backlash: New York's Most Conservative Slave Owners of Dutch Descent and Their Opposition to Abolition*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Knickerbocker Backlash:

New York's Most Conservative Slave Owners of Dutch Descent
and Their Opposition To Abolition

By Bastiaan R. Brak

Master Thesis



**Universiteit
Leiden**
The Netherlands

MA North American Studies

Leiden University

The Netherlands

June 2025

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Dedicated to My Mother

Introduction

In 1990, associate professor of anthropology at the State University of New York at New Paltz, Joseph Diamond, discovered a peculiar cemetery on a nineteenth century map of Kingston, a small town in the middle of the Hudson Valley. By then, this untouched piece of land in rural New York had almost been turned into a parking lot. Gratefully, before these destructive construction plans could come to fruition, neighboring property owner Andrew Kirschner found a priceless discovery while out searching for a sewer pipe. He had found human remains buried in an old graveyard that had been there since at least 1750. After decades of deliberation, advocates of Joseph Diamond purchased the Harambee property in 2019. As a result, over the last five summers, students of SUNY have been excavating the historical site. Remarkably, these archeology majors have found the remains of 27 people, and almost all of them showed signs of African DNA. Furthermore, researchers have found archival evidence that the bulk of these people buried were enslaved in their lifetimes. Even though most graves were unmarked, some names and stories have now come to light. Most notably, a 41 year old man named Ceazar Smith, another man simply identified as Sam, and a 16-year-old girl named Deyon have been uncovered. The work is, however, still undergoing. Since the initial excavations in 2019, supporters have founded *Harambee Kingston*, a non-profit community organization that has raised money to teach people about this unique and overlooked part of New York State history. Student Maddy Thomas plainly described the unilateral goal of this research.

“I don’t like it when people feel upset or forgotten. And that is what’s happened here. So we’ve got to fix it.”¹

What Maddy Thomas is alluding to here, is that a significant part of New York history has either been forgotten or glossed over. Prominent historians on the matter like Ira Berlin and Leslie Harris have described this kind of neglect and cover-up in their book, *Slavery in New York*. According to them, “the ubiquity of slavery in New York’s history can be measured by the depth and persistence of state’s and city’s leaders in matters respecting

¹ Michael Hill, “In Upstate New York, a Cemetery for People Who Were Enslaved is Reclaimed”, *PBS News* (Aug 30, 2024). <https://www.pbs.org/>, accessed June 4, 2025.

enslavement, emancipation, and allied structures of race”.² Historian Andrea Mosterman wrote in her book *Spaces of Enslavement* that “the larger implications of slavery in New York society have often been underestimated”.³ There are, however, some relatively recent positive notes. In 2005, the New-York Historical Society opened multiple exhibitions to the public that showcased the role slavery played in New York City’s history.⁴ A couple of years later, the Democratically controlled New York State Assembly introduced an emblematic notion or verdict “acknowledging that the institution of slavery was an appalling tragedy”, as they formally apologized for the state’s part in the injustice.⁵ Nevertheless, these endeavors have mostly focussed on slavery in the city of New York. Even though the State of New York has also supposedly highlighted its own role, modern teachings and historiography still overlook the impact of slavery in the rural parts of the Hudson Valley. This is quite peculiar, seeing that the history of Upstate New York has been considerably unique.

One of the most prominent distinctions between the city and the country has been the lasting presence of Dutch heritage in the Hudson Valley. Places like Kingston, New Paltz, Albany, Cooperstown, Catskill and Schenectady were shaped by Dutch settlers and farmers that have been there since the seventeenth century. Dutch New Yorkers, although smaller in numbers, have left their considerable imprint on North America. Even years after the English takeover, Dutch culture and tradition remained a standard in the region, according to Historians Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie. They stated that “even though the ratio of ethnically Dutch men and women shrank compared to the overall population, these men and women emphasized their Dutch ways more emphatically in the eighteenth century than their forebears had done”.⁶ And arguably, according to contemporary sources, the most prominent manner in which these New Yorkers “emphasized their Dutch ways” was to be highly adamant in protecting their institution of slavery.

Regardless of the fact that Dutch New Yorkers’ cultural distinctness slowly infused with the other white ethnic groups of the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, they still demonstrated a distinct type of slavery. According to historian Michael Douma, this

² Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris, “Introduction. Uncovering, Discovering, and Recovering: Digging in New York’s Slave Past Beyond the African Burial Ground”, in: eds., Ira Berlin and Leslie Maria Harris, *Slavery in New York* (New York: The New Press, 2005): 1-27, 4.

³ Andrea C. Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement: A History of Slavery and Resistance in Dutch New York* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021), 11.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Alan J. Singer, *New York and Slavery. Time to Teach the Truth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 2.

⁶ Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, *Realm Between Empires. The Second Dutch Atlantic, 1680-1815* (Leiden: Leiden University Press and Cornell University Press, 2018), 12.

explicit practice “was amongst the largest non-English-speaking forms of slavery in American history”.⁷ For hundreds of years, the settled families of Dutch descent owned slaves in their own distinct domestic spheres. These households taught enslaved Africans the Dutch language and put them to work in their private domiciles or on their farmsteads. With a paternalistic mindset, these slaveholding dynasties regarded these humans in bondage as part of their own family structure. But in reality, enslaved workers served as the economic backbone of these agricultural societies. So when New Yorkers of predominantly English descent tried to take away these people’s use of slavery in the later decades of the eighteenth century, “the Dutch” were offended on multiple fronts. First of all, government intervention in their property rights insulted their distinct rural and traditional Dutch culture. Second, possible emancipation might break up the supposed familial ties with their enslaved “relatives”. And third, most importantly, the threat of manumission endangered their livelihood. In their eyes, they had every reason to protect their investments into human bondage.

The everlasting interconnection between Upstate New Yorkers of Dutch descent and their use of slavery could be seen throughout American history. However, the importance that rural Dutch slave-owners upheld in the institution can especially be seen in the later stages of its legality. By the late eighteenth century, most urban New Yorkers wanted to get rid of the institution. The Dutch slaveholding countryside, however, fought a desperate political, public, and legal battle in order to protect their form of human bondage for as long as humanly possible. And repeatedly, these rural conservatives were actually quite fortunate in their reactionary endeavors. But what measures did these Dutch New Yorkers take, and how were they immensely successful in these kinds of actions? In other words: how did rural Dutch New Yorkers contribute to delaying state abolition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century? This particular study will find answers to these questions especially because important aspects of this subject have either been overlooked, or have only come to light in recent years.

⁷ Michael J. Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York: A Cultural, Economic, and Demographic History, 1700-1827* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 1.

In the late nineteenth century, historians described Dutch slavery in New York in a peculiar manner. Overwhelmed with either nostalgia or pride of their own Dutch heritage, early historians made sure to either ignore, trivialize, or whitewash the impact of Dutch North American slavery. For example, Edwin Morgan's article in the *Papers on Historic New York*, did state how the Dutch introduced the slave trade in North America, but nothing more is written on the subject.⁸ Like Morgan, other writers at the time also described an insignificant role of the Dutch in North America as a whole. Others, like proud New Yorker of Dutch heritage, Stephen Ostrander, highlighted the history of his ancestors, but furthermore depreciated the weight of Dutch slavery in New York.

“The picturesqueness of the population was accentuated by the presence of a growing number of negro slaves which a Dutch vessel had been first to bring to America. But, ... slavery was never welcomed as an institution in this region, and never gained a firm foothold.”⁹

While some late nineteenth century historians completely negated northern slavery, as it supposedly “never gained a firm foothold”, others went so far to even justify it. In 1897, Norman Wood acknowledged that slavery was introduced by the “Hollanders”, but played it down by stating that “the kind-hearted Dutch treated their Negro slaves with such humanity”.¹⁰ According to him, within this “mild system”, enslaved people “were correspondingly happy”.¹¹ As in many other publications at the time, contemporary contempt against the British made these American historians favor the legacy of the more “kind-hearted Dutch” over the supposed villainous English Crown. Wood stated that “there is not found in all history a greater contrast than is presented by the treatment accorded these slaves by the humane Dutch, and that of their English conquerors”.¹² Regardless, some contemporary historians did criticize the slave-holding Dutch colony of New Netherland. Years before Wood, writer William Blake disapproved of a seventeenth century Dutch policy in which some hard-working enslaved workers were retired, all the while their children

⁸ Edwin V. Morgan, “Slavery in New York” in: Maud Wilder Goodwin, Alice Carrington Royce, Ruth Putnam, and Eva Palmer Brownell, *Half Moon Series: Papers on Historic New York. Second Series* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1898): 1-31, 3-6.

⁹ Stephen M. Ostrander and ed: Alexander Black, *A History of the City of Brooklyn and Kings County. Vol I* (Brooklyn: Published by Subscription, 1894), 84.

¹⁰ Norman B. Wood, *The White side of the Black Subject. Enlarged and Brought to Date. A Vindication of the Afro-American Race* (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1897), 85.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem.

remained in bondage. Blake described this distinct law as “inexplicable and highly displeasing to the Dutch commonalty”.¹³

The majority of nineteenth century historiography on Dutch Slavery in New York however, confined their analysis to merely the colonial period. Even though they did compare the fate of enslaved people under both Dutch and English rule, they did not extend their research further than seventeenth century colonial politics. Like most Americans at the time, they wanted to distance themselves from the issue of slavery. Furthermore, the few that in fact tackled slavery in New York State, either professed it with nostalgia of a simpler time at best, or dismissed it as a minor vice at worst. Especially amongst historians with a Dutch background, they defended their ancestors’ form of domestic slavery, whitewashing it as “milder” than anywhere else in the United States. Nevertheless, as historians began to handle more controversial and painful subjects of American history after WWII, more in-depth research came to light about the true role of Dutch New Yorkers in prolonging slavery well beyond the seventeenth century.

One of the most influential books on the subject is Arthur Zilversmit’s 1969 book, *The First Emancipation*. Unlike his predecessors, Zilversmit provided a more comprehensive inquiry into the role of northern slave owners in halting manumission legislation. As he more precisely researched primary sources, he discovered how eighteenth century abolitionists in New York became extremely frustrated with a certain politically conservative and slaveholding constituency. And interestingly, these anti-slavery advocates clearly identified their opposition in certain speeches and journals. By analyzing these kinds of primary sources, Zilversmit discovered “that most of the opposition to abolition came from the Dutch settlers of the Hudson River region”.¹⁴

Zilvermit’s peers also acknowledged the presence of this slaveholding countryside. David Ellis noted that “in 1790, over eleven thousand Negroes (some free) lived in rural areas, where the Dutch farmers in particular utilized their labor”.¹⁵ Ellis, however, perpetuated certain ideas about abolition in New York that later historians would find problematic, and in some cases even mythical. Principally, he stated that “slavery gradually lost ground because New Yorkers found free labor more efficient, reliable, and flexible”.¹⁶

¹³ William O. Blake, *The History of Slavery and the Slave Trade: Ancient and Modern. The Forms of Slavery That Prevailed in Ancient Nations, Particularly in Greece and Rome. The African Slave Trade and the Political History of Slavery in the United States* (Columbus: H. Miller, 1860), 372.

¹⁴ Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 182.

¹⁵ David M. Ellis, *A History of New York State. A Revision of a Short History of New York State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 186.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 87.

Another argument of Ellis was that the practice lost its foothold because “people found it generally cheaper to hire free laborers than to maintain slaves”.¹⁷ To put it bluntly, modern historians have agreed that this notion of slave-owners voluntarily letting go of their human property is inconceivable and incorrect.

In the last couple of years, modern historians have provided the latest resurgence of enthusiasm in the subject of Dutch slavery in New York. As this forgotten and distorted part of American history is still quite unknown, these historians stand at the forefront of bound-breaking discourse. Predominantly, both Dutch and American historians like Shane White, Jeroen DeWulf, Michael Groth, Andrea Mosterman and Michael Douma have dominated research in the history of enslaved New Yorkers and their Dutch owners. Frankly, all authors have aided this thesis in one way or another, but some books have helped more than others. First of all, Shane White’s work, like *Somewhat More Independent*, predominantly displayed the demise of slavery in New York City. Profoundly, White provided an interesting new outlook on the role of African Americans in their own emancipation. Notwithstanding the fact that this thesis is about rural New York, *Somewhat More Independent* did provide a helpful comparison between the city and the state. Additionally, DeWulf’s and Groth’s work contributed tremendously in both contextualizing and giving agency to the unique communities of black people that grew up in Dutch New York. Nevertheless, these books lacked relevance to this specific research. On the contrary, the two books that were both the most influential and essential were Mosterman’s *Spaces of Enslavement*, and Douma’s *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*.

In the 2022 book, *Spaces of Enslavement*, Mosterman provided a tremendous back-story to the lives and fates of enslaved African Americans in rural New York. In defiance of nineteenth and twentieth century literature, Mosterman discredited the false idea that Dutch American slavery was “milder”. On this subject she wrote that “when it concerned enslavers’ efforts to control spaces, the system of slavery in Dutch New York much resembled that of southern communities”.¹⁸ Furthermore, Mosterman’s clear interpretation of primary sources aided this research in understanding the lengths and depths Dutch New Yorkers went to in order to keep slavery. Michael Douma’s most recent book, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, even moreso explained all encompassing aspects of the uncompromising nature of these slave owners. Plainly put, Douma argued that without this culturally distinct and economically powerful group, slavery in New York would have been

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 104.

abolished years if not decades before it actually happened. In both of the books, both Mosterman and Douma challenged the previously held notions that Dutch slavery in New York was inconsequential and that it was supposedly milder than other forms of slavery.

Even though this thesis owes a tremendous amount of gratitude towards these two incredible books, this research went along a slightly different path. First of all, there exist a few discrepancies with the time period in question. Mainly, while both Mosterman's and Douma's research predominantly concentrated on the colonial period and the eighteenth century, this thesis has mostly revolved around a slightly later era. This research has aimed its attention to the decades spanning from the 1790s, to as far as even the 1830s, a time period that both Douma's and Mosterman's books did not consider as much. Second, *Spaces of Enslavement* in particular tackled somewhat different lines of questioning. For example, Mosterman wrote about the domestic sphere and the impact of Dutch Reformed churches on the lives of enslaved New Yorkers. For organizational reasons, I have chosen to leave this consequential part of Dutch American history out. Third, Douma's 2024 book provided a completely different investigative approach than is present in this thesis. While he has largely dedicated his academic career to the intricacies of economic history, I personally do not hold the same expertise. This reality, alongside an inclination to differentiate myself from Douma's research, has resulted in me using a different historiographical path. Instead of using financial data and reviewing the issue with an economic lens, this thesis has predominantly concentrated on the lasting impact of Dutch slaveholders in New York's state politics and public law.

And in order to make sense of this impact, different kinds of sources had to be obtained and deconstructed. Most sources in this thesis review both private and public opinions on the implication of abolitionist politics and law. And for the most part, a large number of these kinds of accounts have only been uncovered and digitized recently. For example, this research has interpreted the speeches of representatives, the voices of both proponents and opponents of abolition in the media, the accounts of outsiders in travel logs, the discretions of lawmakers in political bodies, and the rulings of judges in specific court cases. All of these primary sources are connected to the delay of emancipation, both directly and indirectly. First, political speeches have shown the extent that representatives went to in order to protect the rights of slave-owners. Second, discussions in the media at the time highlighted the immense convoluted political situation that was both caused and escalated by the issue of abolition. Third, journals of travellers gave an outside perspective of rural Dutch conservatism. Fourth, the overly complicated stipulations of state laws presented means for

Dutch-descent slave owners to find bureaucratic loopholes that kept them profiting off of slavery. And finally, court cases provided answers as to how slave-owners both either kept people in bondage illegally, or still profited from their prior enslavement.

However, admittedly, the voice of the Dutch slaveholding voting bloc themselves has not been exceptionally present in this research. There is nevertheless a reason for this exclusion. Such as, according to contemporary historians, the constituency in question was not very vocal at the time. Micheal Douma even proclaimed that these proslavery Dutchmen “left no paper trail to rival that of the antislavery advocates”.¹⁹ Astoundingly, they essentially kept to themselves in their rural communities, letting their conservative representatives speak for them. However, these Dutch-descent families did remark on their genuine views of slavery in their personal correspondence. Even so, these family letters and journals have been locked away from public access either out of privacy or shame.

Despite the existence of this small discrepancy, I do not regard the lack of personal correspondence of slave-owners in this research to be a giant absence. As slavery was the norm in this period, and the pseudo-aristocratic Dutch families of the Hudson Valley held significant political and economic power, their opinions were represented enough in the public eye. Moreover, in my humble opinion, modern historiography on slavery should in fact try to give a voice to the voiceless. That is why this precise research has tried, to the best of its ability, to highlight black New Yorkers’ own agency in emancipation. In reality though, as historical data on this matter is limited, the main actors studied here remain rural New Yorkers of Dutch descent. Exploration of this appropriate group can, however, still be bound-breaking because it can expose a darker side of their history. Namely a significant part of their legacy that most prominent Dutch-American families still hide to this day.

Even though sources found for this research were applied interchangeably, the three specific chapters each highlight a different approach. First of all, the initial chapter centers on contextualizing the aforementioned distinct form of Dutch slavery in the northeast of North America, by explaining its origins and intricacies. To be more precise, this first chapter spans from the moment enslaved Africans were brought over to the colony of New Netherland, to the end of the American Revolutionary War. As this period is mostly filled with large-scale societal changes, this part provides an insight into colonial and governmental sources. Second, the following chapter mostly serves as a description of the turbulent political playing field of the 1790s. By restricting this chapter to a single decade, I was able to deconstruct the

¹⁹ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 175.

political debates around abolition that plagued New York at the time. And what seems most relevant is that most politicians were aware of a rural conservative constituency of Dutch descent. A group of people that, for personal and economic reasons, both tried to dismantle and intensify the debate on manumission. As this chapter is limited to state politics, it predominantly serves as a concoction of speeches, newspapers, correspondence between representatives, and debates within the state legislation itself. Finally, the third chapter of this study explains the societal impact of abolitionist policies signed into law at the turn of the nineteenth century. And, more importantly, this chapter highlights how this legislature failed in practice as rural slave-owners of Dutch descent either bypassed the law, or benefited from its weaknesses. As a result, this chapter goes beyond politics and analyzes the reality of fragile anti-slavery legislation. By interpreting individual court cases, evidence in this chapter demonstrates how actual emancipation was delayed for decades. Therefore, deep into the nineteenth century, large numbers of black New Yorkers that were still living in traditional Dutch farmsteads along the Hudson River remained stuck in servitude.

Chapter I

“Every Dutch Farmer Who Was Able to Purchase, Had More or Less Slaves”

Dutch Slavery in New Netherland and New York Before the Abolitionist Movement

When Sojourner Truth’s *Narrative* was published in 1850, it sent shockwaves throughout the northern states of America. The average white northerner had viewed slavery as something inherently southern. However, here was the earth-shattering account of a “northern slave”. A personal story of a woman who grew up in a very different environment than the South, but with the identifiable hardships and the same yearn for freedom that any other enslaved African American had at the time. Throughout her life, she remembered the multiple traumatic accounts of her owners whipping her as punishment. In this *Narrative*, Sojourner Truth was quoted to have said; “And now, ..., when I hear ‘em tell of whipping women on the bare flesh, it makes my flesh crawl, and my very hair rise on my head! ... What is this way of treating human beings?”²⁰ Truth, originally named Isabelle Hardenbergh, was owned by a man named Johannes Hardenbergh. The Hardenbergh family had established themselves in Ulster County many years prior. They were ancestrally and culturally Dutch. Being of considerable wealth, its patriarch Johannes, had become a major political figure in New York’s colonial assembly and was even conscripted to be a colonel in the Revolutionary Army.²¹

Both Sojourner Truth’s harrowing experiences and the Hardenberghs traditions of domestic slavery serve as clear examples of what this chapter will focus on. Before the arrival of the New York Manumission Society at the end of the eighteenth century, even the concept of rural New York without the supplying workforce of enslaved labor was unthinkable. Unlike other parts of North America like New England, New York always had an extensive and ingrained institution of slavery, dating back to the years under Dutch rule. Early Dutch

²⁰ Olive Gilbert, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Theodore Dwight Weld, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828: With a Portrait* (Boston: Printed for the Author, 1850), 26-27. <https://go.gale.com/>, accessed April 4, 2025.

²¹ Carleton Mabey and Susan Mabey Newhouse, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 1-2.

settlers formed a landowning elite class that had entrenched themselves along the Hudson River. Throughout this contextualizing first chapter, historical evidence will determine how Dutch slavery in America in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was constructed, expanded, and retained. To clarify, this chapter differentiates between multiple kinds of primary sources. For the most part, archival records like Dutch colonial decrees, English colonial correspondence, and Revolutionary-era council journals are highlighted here. Furthermore, questions about the nature of northeastern slavery will be answered through these kinds of sources, as it was arguably equally as inhumane as its southern counterpart. In other words, the next passages can give us an insight into how through multiple regime changes and wars, the tradition of slavery still remained a fundamental part of New York's Dutch communities.

1.1 New Netherland and the Arrival of the First Enslaved Africans

On 13 January, 1627, a small vessel left the island of Texel just off the coast of Holland, bound for the Caribbean. Even though this ship, the *Bruynvisch*, had not played a major role in the Atlantic world, it would later become an important catalyst for the intertwined history of New York. While at war with the Iberian fleet, the Dutch overseas empire expanded towards the New World. Furthermore, capitalism had established itself in the Netherlands and had made the Republic affluent in the course of the seventeenth century. Moreover, the subsequent exploitation of overseas colonies had to contribute towards this growing mercantile economy. Anyhow, the *Bruynvisch* joined the convoy of other vessels from the seafaring province of *Zeeland* soon after it left Europe. As it turned out, these Dutch raiders had taken a Portuguese ship from Sao Tome, alongside confiscating 225 enslaved people.²² The Dutchmen transferred them all to their own ships and headed west. After a short stop in Havana, where the *Bruynvisch* appropriated a large number of these captive slaves, the Dutch vessel sternly headed north. Further north than any other ship carrying enslaved passengers had ever gone. Sailing along the Florida coast, the *Bruynvisch* eventually reached its destination, the newly established colony of *New Netherland*.²³ Regardless of the fact that this

²² Nicole Saffold Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage: Slavery and the Creation of a Northern Gentry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022), 123.

²³ Johannes De Laet, *Jaarlijk Verhael Van de Verrichtingen Der Geoctroyeerde West-Indische Compagnie: Zeder Haer Begin, Tot het Eynde van 't Jaer Sesthien-Hondert Ses-en-Dertich, Begrepen in Derthien Boecken, Ende met Verscheyden Koperen Platen Verciert* (Leiden, 1644), 102. <https://archive.org/>, accessed March 27, 2025.

voyage played a minor role in the Dutch Atlantic empire at the time, the *Bruynvisch* set a wheel in motion that would change the region forever.

Even so, the *Bruynvisch* came a little late to the party. Both the Dutch sailors and the enslaved Africans were not the first ones of their kind to embark on the North American continent. A couple of years prior, in 1620, Dutch slave traders established a minor detour in the early Trans-Atlantic slave trade, when they became the first to bring slaves to Virginia.²⁴ However, this part of the East Coast had already been established by English traders. So, as a result, the Dutch looked north. By order of the West India Company, Dutch and other European voyagers began to claim indigenous lands on the island of Manhattan in 1624. The first establishment of Dutch rule would be called Fort Amsterdam, with the surrounding lands christened as New Netherland. As the colony grew in size, it began to play a minor but vital role in both the Atlantic and colonial world. With the outpost serving as a way station for the West India Company's mercantile empire, came the inevitable introduction of the slave economy. Only three years after the establishment of the colony, the *Bruynvisch* introduced the American northeast to the first Africans the land had ever seen. From now on, the institution of slavery would gain a proper foothold in America's northern region.²⁵

These first Africans were instantly put to work. In the first decades of colonial rule in New Netherland, the West India company remained the sole employer of the enslaved population. Enslaved company workers were put in charge of building public infrastructure. These laborers had to clear the land, establish farmsteads, build roads, and fortify the new colony.²⁶ In the following decades, slaves owned by the West India Company continued to build and reinforce the settler's colonial wishes. Expansion along the Hudson river was imminent. In order to populate newly acquired lands previously owned by American Indians, the West India Company created extra incentives for possible settlers. Any prominent Dutchman could obtain land in the Hudson Valley, granted by the Company, only if this so-called "patroon" would in turn bring over more European migrants. Black enslaved workers would in turn be provided for these landowners.²⁷ A 1630 decree went as follows, "The West India Company shall allot to each Patroon twelve black men and women out of the

²⁴ Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America: Containing its Natural history, and a Circumstantial Account of Its Plantations and Agriculture in General. Vol. I.* Translated into English by John Reinhold Forster (London: William Eyres, 1770), 395. <https://archive.org/>, accessed March 27, 2025.

²⁵ Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*, 15.

²⁶ Christopher Moore, "A World of Possibilities: Slavery and Freedom in Dutch New Amsterdam" in: eds. Ira Berlin and Leslie Maria Harris, *Slavery in New York* (New York: The New Press, 2005): 29-57, 31.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 37.

prizes in which Negroes shall be found, for the advancement of the Colonies in New Netherland.”²⁸

Initially, this revolutionary policy of granting lands and forced laborers boosted the colony’s expansion. Civil ownership of real estate and enslaved labor was not only allowed but encouraged. Moreover, this privatization subsequently introduced a landowning and slaveholding Dutch elite in the area. Wealthy Dutch and other European families that had made a fortune in the Atlantic world, moved to New Netherland. These new settlers would set familial ties that helped establish the rural slave-owning elite. Families like the Van Hornes, Van Rensselaers, and Livingstons, would dictate local politics for centuries to come. These dynasties would intermarry in order to hold on to their socio-economic control over the region. New Netherland’s approach to land grants and “patroonship” would only increase in the following decades, eventually reaching all the way north to Fort Orange, modern day Albany. These great ancestral Dutch families would become the predominant slave owners of the Hudson Valley.²⁹

For the time being though, the main employer of enslaved people remained to be the West India Company. With the arrival of more European migrants new villages had to be built. In the 1650s, the village of New Haerlem was established with the work of enslaved laborers. Infrastructure was vital to this newly acquired outpost, so local authorities were instructed “to construct, with the company's Negroes, a good wagon road from this place [Fort Amsterdam] to the village aforesaid”.³⁰ New Haerlem would eventually become the New York neighborhood of Harlem. With the Atlantic world developing into a more precarious state of affairs, Fort Amsterdam itself needed more fortification. Correspondingly, the enslaved workforce was yet again called into action. However, local residents began to question the Company’s use of enslaved labor. For instance, council member De Deckere remarked that the Company should divide the labor force more equally amongst the colony’s white population. According to him, it was simply not “honorable for the Company to have the name and burden of so many Negroes”. Furthermore, De Deckere assessed on how the West India Company is “incompetent” and “frugal” with this limited workforce.³¹ Interestingly, Director-General Peter Stuyvesant’s personal estate, simply named the

²⁸ Hugh Hastings, *Ecclesiastical Records: State of New York. Vol I* (Albany: James Lyon, 1901), 79. <https://archive.org/>, accessed March 27, 2025.

²⁹ Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*, 16.

³⁰ Charles T. Gehring, *Laws & Writs of Appeal: 1647-1663* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 98-100. <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/>, accessed March 27, 2025.

³¹ Charles T. Gehring and Janny Venema, *Council Minutes 1656-1658. Vol. VIII* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018), 525-528. <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/>, accessed March 27, 2025.

Bouwery, employed more than forty enslaved men and women alone.³² Perhaps, De Deckere had somewhat of a point in his assessment.

In addition to De Deckere, other colonists remarked on the bad treatment of company-owned slaves and the corporations' lack of motivation towards converting them to Christianity.³³ This ensemble of criticism from the local population caused another shift in New Netherland slavery. The West India Company began to lease out the more superfluous members of their enslaved workforce to local settlers and their families.³⁴ In 1651, Cornelis van Tienhoven requested permission to purchase an estate that belonged to the West India Company. Along with the proposed farmlands, the estate included "a stallion and a negro".³⁵ Nonetheless, these exchanges began to cause serious issues. The privatization of slavery created concerns for the status quo. Another director of the Company, Paulus Timmerman, voiced his grievances when he wrote that he was "surprised to learn that altogether too many of these Negroes are employed in private service".³⁶ Due to these kinds of "patroonship" programs the nature of slavery started to change. As geopolitical tensions began to rise between European powers, enslaved lives in New Netherland began to transform. In conjunction with performing hard labor for the Company and working the fields, enslaved people would work for private households and learn specialized skills. As the turbulent decades of the 1660s and 1670s approached, New Netherland slaves were living with more duality, change, and uncertainty than ever before.³⁷

³² Hugh Hastings, *Ecclesiastical Records*, 489.

³³ *Ibidem*, 254-260 and 266-267.

³⁴ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 24.

³⁵ Charles T. Gehring, *Correspondence: 1647-1653*, 122-123.

³⁶ Charles T. Gehring, *Correspondence: 1654-1658*, 106.

³⁷ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 25-26.

1.2 New Netherland Becomes New York

As The Dutch Republic was preparing for a second war with England for the hegemony over the seven seas, it became obvious enough to many New Netherlanders that their distant outpost may be in jeopardy. The colony desperately needed more workers to fortify their position in the Atlantic world. Due to the shortage of incoming Europeans, Director-General Peter Stuyvesant had authorized the first direct slave voyage from the African Coast to the colony in 1654.³⁸ The *Witte Paert* arrived in the New Amsterdam harbor with no less than 300 slaves on board.³⁹ These Africans would instantly find themselves stuck in a place that was at the advent of a colonial power play. In the summer of 1664, as the English fleet approached the New Amsterdam harbor, Stuyvesant ordered all “company negroes” to fortify Fort Amsterdam.⁴⁰ As it turned out, New Netherland was under the possible attack of an English invasion. Weeks before, the slave ship the *Gideon*, had shortly arrived with the much-needed workforce of 290 additional Africans in bondage.⁴¹ With the influx of these forced laborers, Stuyvesant felt confident enough to engage the English in a possible siege. The Director-General was, however, persuaded by his constituents to move in the opposite direction. Bloodshed was avoided and the colony was peacefully handed over to the English Crown on the eight of September.⁴²

Consequently, the local population of New Netherland was deeply “sorrowful” of the events that had taken place. The colony had been established by corporate settlers under the banner of an independent Republic. But within a matter of weeks, this company-owned enterprise had become the subject of an English King. New Amsterdam and New Netherland would be re-christened to New York, in honor of the brother of the King, the Duke of York.⁴³ Even though new rulership had made the lives of Dutch colonists more dubious as of late, the lives of the enslaved became even more unsure. Those especially anxious of their future were the ones whose sole owner had been the Dutch West India Company. Even former slaves that had freed themselves by utilizing the loophole-filled bureaucracy of Company rule, were

³⁸ Berthold Fernow, *Documents Relating to the History of the Early Colonial Settlements Principally on Long Island, With a Map of Its Western Part Made in 1666* (Albany, 1883), 209. <https://archive.org/>, accessed April 1, 2025.

³⁹ Moore, “A World of Possibilities”, 51.

⁴⁰ Berthold Fernow, *Translation of Deeds and Conveyances of the City of New Amsterdam, 1659-1664* (New York, 1897), 106. <https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/>, accessed March 30, 2025.

⁴¹ Moore, “A World of Possibilities”, 50.

⁴² Ibidem, 51.

⁴³ Fernow, *Translation of Deeds*, 114-115.

afraid of their position in English colonial society. Some freedmen were even scared of being re-enslaved.⁴⁴ Questions about the legal and societal status of this minority would remain unanswered within the next decades. On the other hand, the subsequent turbulent years would show how the English catered to the Dutch ruling class, all the while reinforcing the system of slavery.

The established Dutch elite, however, still had to be persuaded. Across the province of New York, non-Anglophone farmers let their questionable loyalty towards their new overlords known. Dutch families in rural places like, for example, Long Island, were not quite susceptible to change, especially not if it was imposed upon by foreigners. Recently incumbent governor of New York, Richard Nicolls, assured the rights of all colonists in his 1665 *Letter to the Inhabitants of Long Island*. Here, Nicolls inspired the local population to show “neighborly love” and “Christian charity” towards the new authority. More importantly though, the new governor promised that certain “civil liberties” would not be infringed.⁴⁵ And for many of these Dutch Long Islanders, the right to own slaves would be *the* “civil liberty” in question. Although the Dutch briefly retook the colony for a year in 1674, English colonial rule returned the following year. This time, the Crown was determined to impose law and order in the unruly province of New York. Through both political and economic policy, the decisions made by English officials would eventually help characterize New York slavery for the next hundred years.⁴⁶

First of all, the English continued Stuyvesant’s legacy of importing large quantities of enslaved people, as the desperate need for a stable workforce remained. Governor Edmund Andros claimed that New York had “but few Servants ... but very few Slaves” and that they were “much wanted” over there.⁴⁷ In 1676, the English barrister, Sir John Werden wrote to the collector of the New York government about the urgency of manpower. He wrote that the colony should “give all encouragement to any inhabitants that will come with their families and goods, of whatever kind or country they be, from any of the other plantations, to dwell

⁴⁴ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 47.

⁴⁵ “Letter from Richard Nicolls to the Inhabitants of Long Island (March 1665)”. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/>, accessed March 30, 2025.

⁴⁶ Peter R. Christoph, Florence A. Christoph, and Sir Edmund Andros, *The Andros Papers: Files of the Provincial Secretary of New York During the Administration of Governor Sir Edmund Andros, 1674-1676*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), xvii. <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/>, accessed March 27, 2025.

⁴⁷ Peter R. Christoph, Florence A. Christoph, and Sir Edmund Andros, *The Andros Papers: Files of the Provincial Secretary of New York During the Administration of Governor Sir Edmund Andros, 1674-1680* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 490-494. <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/>, accessed April 2, 2025.

with you at New Yorke”.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Werden proclaimed the importance of forced migration when he wrote that the English did “not oppose ye introducing Slaves into New Yorke from any place”.⁴⁹ This encouragement by the colonial government led to a slight growth of enslaved labor in the province of New York. Governor Edmund Andros even stated that plantations had increased and that “some few slaves are sometimes brought from Barbados” and sold for the relatively high price of “thirty or thirty-five pounds”.⁵⁰

With this increase of enslaved labor came legal disputes between the English authority in New York City and the Dutch farmers further inland. Throughout the first decades of the English takeover, court cases over the ownership of enslaved people became commonplace. In 1679, a certain Col. Lewis Morris, claimed that the Dutch government had illegally sold two of his slaves to a colonist called Lewis Du Bois in Esopus during the brief reconquest of the region by the Dutch. The two slaves, called Antony and Susana, presumably escaped from Esopus and were eventually re-confiscated by the English Colonel. Lewis Morris demanded to the local court that these two people should be given back to him. The jury eventually found the confiscation by Morris to be lawful, and Du Bois permanently lost his ownership rights. Antony and Susana, however, remained in bondage.⁵¹ To the dismay of the local non-Anglophone farmowners, the courts were often in favor of the new English settlers.

⁴⁸ Edmund O’Callaghan, *Documents Relative to The Colonial History of the State of New York: Procured in Holland, England, and France. Vol III* (Albany, 1853), 245. <https://archive.org/>, accessed April 2, 2025.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, 246.

⁵⁰ Christoph, *The Andros Papers: 1674-1680*, 494.

⁵¹ Peter R. Christoph, Florence A. Christoph, and Edmund Sir Andros, *The Andros Papers: Files of the Provincial Secretary of New York During the Administration of Governor Sir Edmund Andros, 1679-1680*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 201-203. <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/>, accessed March 27, 2025.

1.3 The Expansion of the Elite Anglo-Dutch Slave Society in Rural New York

Although individual disputes between two culturally different parties continued, the European colonial elite mostly aided each other. As English slave traders completely took over the North Atlantic market in the eighteenth century, slave merchants sold amounts of enslaved Africans never seen before. Between 1700 and 1774, the British imported between 6,800 and 7,400 enslaved people into the New York Harbor.⁵² Through a mutually beneficial relationship of supply and demand, the Dutch rural upper class and the Anglophone urban bourgeoisie endured and prospered in a colonial slave society. Historian Nicole Maskiell described this marriage by stating that “the networks became more Anglo-Dutch than Dutch in identity, and their approach to the control of the enslaved reflected this shift”.⁵³ Peter Kalm, travelling in New York in the 1740s, noticed this upperclass Anglo-Dutch cooperation.

“The Dutch inhabitants were allowed either to continue where they were, and, under the protection of the English to enjoy all their former privileges, or to leave the country. Many chose to stay, and from them the Dutchmen are descended, who now live in the province of New York, and who possess the greatest and best estates in that province.”⁵⁴

This alliance within the upper echelon of society proved to be useful in the eventful eighteenth century. Colonial society would expand and transform in this long century. Even though the city of New York, a regional trading hub, received the biggest population boom, the outer parts of the province also saw an influx of newcomers. European and New England migrants settled in rural places like Staten Island, Long Island, and the Hudson Valley. Along with this influx of white settlers came a development in private slave ownership.⁵⁵ The expansion of both settler colonialism and domestic slavery further inland can be seen in runaway slave ads of the time. From New York Harbor to as far as Schenectady and Albany, slave owners requested the return of their runaway slaves. In some cases, Dutch New Yorkers even demanded the recovery of entire families.⁵⁶

⁵² Jill Lepore, “The Tightening Vise: Slavery and Freedom in British New York”, in: eds., Ira Berlin and Leslie Maria Harris, *Slavery in New York* (New York: The New Press, 2005): 57-91, 61.

⁵³ Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*, 69.

⁵⁴ Peter Kalm, *Travels Into North America: Containing its Natural History, and a Circumstantial Account of its Plantations and Agriculture in General. Vol. II. Translated into English by John Reinhold Forster* (London: William Eyres, 1770), 262-263. <https://archive.org/>, accessed March 30, 2025.

⁵⁵ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 53-56.

⁵⁶ Christoph, *The Andros Papers: 1679-1680*, 140-142.

Ulster county, located between New York City and Albany, served as a prime example of this amplification of domestic slavery in the Hudson Valley. Before the arrival of English slave traders, the enslaved population of Ulster County was relatively low. But by 1723, enslaved New Yorkers made up no less than nineteen per cent of the total population. And this percentage would even grow more substantial in the next decades.⁵⁷ Ownership of slaves was however not completely monopolized like in the days of the Dutch West India Company. In the 1755 *Census of Slaves*, most of the slaveholding citizens of Ulster County consisted of private households that owned between one and five domestic workers. Furthermore, these kinds of families predominantly had Dutch names like Wynkoop, Ploegh, and Van Gaasbeek.⁵⁸ As the eighteenth century progressed, it became more apparent to New Yorkers that slavery became both a private and rural practice. Established farmers and Anglophone newcomers reinforced private ownership of slaves, something that was introduced more than half a century ago. Individual households, mostly of Dutch descent, owned slaves in order to support their farmsteads. Historian Michael Douma even went so far as to state that “the true center of Dutch slavery in eighteenth-century New York ... was the Hudson Valley”.⁵⁹

Domestic slavery became increasingly normalized as the eighteenth century progressed. Because of the hegemony of the British in the North Atlantic slave trade, the prices of commodified people on the New York market became much more affordable. Every household could own an enslaved worker to plow their fields or set their table. The institution of slavery would be practically democratized in the rural parts of New York.⁶⁰ Especially further along the Hudson River, in places like Albany and New Paltz, contemporary travelers noted how even the less fortunate families of these towns and villages owned slaves. Scotswoman Anne Grant, reminisced on her travels through the Upper Hudson Valley in the middle of the eighteenth century in her book, *Memoirs of an American Lady*. Grant wrote that even the poorer members of Albany’s community, “perhaps could only afford to have one negro woman, whose children as they grew up, became to their master a source of plenty and ease”.⁶¹ This passage highlights how owning an enslaved woman was seen as a long term family investment. This phenomenon was not only remarkable in Albany, but also in

⁵⁷ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 54.

⁵⁸ Edmund O’Callaghan, *The Documentary History of the State of New York* (Albany, 1850), 64-65. <https://archive.org/>, accessed April 2, 2025.

⁵⁹ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 24.

⁶⁰ Shane White, “Slavery in New York State in the Early Republic”, in: *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 14:2 (December 1995): 1-29, 1-2.

⁶¹ Anne Grant, *Memoirs of an American Lady: With Sketches of Manners and Scenery in America as They Existed Previous to the Revolution* (New York, 1809), 53. <https://archive.org/>, accessed April 2, 2025.

primarily Dutch and German New Paltz. The travelling French Duke de La Rochefoucault-Liancourt, noticed how “each of these families, in some instances even the poorest” owned “one or two negroes”.⁶²

Albeit that the slave economy became more domesticated and democratized, being a slave owner still remained an elitist position. The wealthiest families that had entrenched themselves in the Hudson Valley tended to also be ones who owned the most slaves. As a result, The political elite and the slaveholding elite of New York society could be described as one and the same.⁶³ Even though Anne Grant wrote about poorer slave owners, she was a house guest at the Philip Schuyler mansion during her travels.⁶⁴ Schuyler, a prominent political figure at the time, was also a major slave-owner. At one of his estates in Albany County, the *First Census of the United States* counted no less than thirteen enslaved workers. Abraham Ten Broeck, another major landlord of the area, owned twelve.⁶⁵ In comparison to the large-scale plantations of the South these numbers may look small. Nevertheless, Schuyler and Ten Broeck’s estates were actually much more impressive within the context of northern slavery. Within this unique system, the enslaved people of Dutch New York were not simply working plantations for the commercial gain of a single crop. Northern slaves were in reality valuable multi-skilled workers. Furthermore, as economic inequality grew and the aforementioned established families became wealthier, owning slaves became even more of a luxury and a status symbol.⁶⁶

⁶² Francois Alexandre Frederic La Rochefoucault-Liancourt, *Travels Through the United States of North America: The Country of the Iroquois and Upper Canada in the years 1795, 1796, 1797; With an Authentic Account of Lower Canada. Vol. II* (London, 1799), 239-240. <https://go.gale.com/>, accessed April 3, 2025.

⁶³ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 32-33.

⁶⁴ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 85-86.

⁶⁵ “Heads of Families, At the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790, New York”, *Bureau of the Census Library* (Washington, 1908), 12-13. <https://www2.census.gov/>, accessed April 4, 2025.

⁶⁶ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 85-86.

1.4 The Nature of Dutch Household Slavery

When the Scottish poet Anne Grant was visiting the Schuyler mansion in Albany, she revealed her views on the nature of domestic slavery in New York. According to her, Dutch families were considerably more amicable towards their slaves. She noted, “I have nowhere met with instances of friendship more tender and generous than that which here subsisted between the slaves and their masters and mistresses.”⁶⁷ She went on to note that this “friendship” was formed in childhood, when enslaved children were given as “gifts of domestics to the younger members of the family”.⁶⁸ Not only did Grant characterize the familial bonds between master and slave, she also understood there to be some kind of authority amongst the elder enslaved members of the household. According to her, black mothers had some say when it came to the fate of their children. Grant wrote that black infants “were never sold without consulting their mother, who, if expert and sagacious, had a great deal to say in the family”.⁶⁹ This interpretation of Dutch New York slavery as a gentler kind of institution would remain a staple in the North for years to come. This idyllic subversion of history would eventually be labeled as the “mild thesis” by contemporary historians. Even today, the idea that northern slavery was “mild” and “more gentle” than its southern equivalent, remains extremely controversial.⁷⁰

For modern historians, Anne Grant’s views of northern slavery can be quite easily discredited. For example, Myra Young Armstead noted that Grant herself had lived in the British West Indies for years. Due to the extremely brutal conditions of Caribbean slavery she witnessed, it is quite understandable for Grant to view domestic servitude in Dutch New York as more compassionate.⁷¹ Regardless, northern slavery was not necessarily less brutal than its southern counterpart. New York’s slaveholding families certainly used the threat of physical punishment to keep their enslaved people in check.⁷² Other contemporary northerners even specified how Dutch New Yorkers in particular were quite fierce towards their slaves. Elkanah Watson, a New Englander that moved to Albany in the eighteenth century, was quoted to have said “that the greatest punishment for negros then held in slavery in New

⁶⁷ Grant, *Memoirs of an American Lady*, 27.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, 28.

⁶⁹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰ Shane White, “Slavery in New York State in the Early Republic”, 10.

⁷¹ Myra Young Armstead, *Memory and Enslavement: Schuyler House, Old Saratoga, and the Saratoga Patent in History, Historical Practice, and Historical Imagination* (Saratoga: The National Park Service, 2023), 98-99.

⁷² Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 50-51 and 176.

England was to threaten to sell them among the Dutch in Albany”.⁷³ Moreover, there are examples that show the brutality of Dutch slave owners. Some years after abolition in New York, a certain lawyer reminisced on a case of cruelty he witnessed in Catskill, Greene County. At one point he worked for Jacob Van Orden, a prominent attorney that served as the main “legal adviser of all the Dutch farmers in all the region”, who himself owned a young black man named *Tite* or Titus. Titus eventually fell very ill, something that caused Van Orden to become increasingly frustrated. The attorney was quoted to have even yelled to his servant “if you die I’ll whip you within an inch of your life!”.⁷⁴

In addition to accounts of punishment and cruelty, Anne Grant’s opinion on enslaved people’s authority and freedom of movement in rural households can also be questioned. Notably, Grant’s account of enslaved women having a say about the fate of their children is unfounded. Despite how many contemporaries believed enslaved people to be part of New York’s rural families, black New Yorkers’ own families were often separated from this equation.⁷⁵ An example of children being separated from their mothers can be found in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. Sojourner was “far from knowing the exact number of her brothers and sisters; she being the youngest, save one, and all older than herself having been sold before her remembrance”.⁷⁶ On this occasion, Sojourner Truth’s mother did not have a say in the sale of her own children. Furthermore, despite the notion of a more moderate form of slavery, black people often ran away from their predicament due to harm or neglect. Anne Grant’s host, Philip Schuyler even had one of his own enslaved farmworkers escape bondage. Schuyler held out an ad in the local newspaper, demanding the return of a certain *Harre*, while describing him as having “large feet, and walking something lame, having had his toes frozen”.⁷⁷

Even though numerous other voices displayed the same views as Anne Grant in their accounts, others strongly disagreed with her idyllic version of history. William Strickland, while travelling through New York in the latter part of the eighteenth century, described the great Dutch families and their slaves. To be frank, Strickland did hold back on his disdain for New Yorkers of Dutch descent, mostly labelling them as uneducated, lazy, and generally opposed to any kind of development. To Strickland, the fact that they owned slaves was

⁷³ David M. Ellis, “Yankee-Dutch Confrontation in the Albany Area”, in: *The New England Quarterly* 45:2 (June 1972): 262-270, 268.

⁷⁴ James D. Pickney, and Thurlow Weed, *Reminiscences of Catskill. Local Sketches* (Castkill, 1868), 59-60. <https://archive.org/>, accessed April 4, 2025.

⁷⁵ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 98-99.

⁷⁶ Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 15.

⁷⁷ Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 97.

simply a byproduct of their idleness. He wrote that throughout the province “a fat Dutchman and his fat wife, and two or three clumsy sons and daughters may frequently be seen thus driven and jolted by a not less fat negroe Slave”.⁷⁸ Strickland went on to clarify his views on rural Dutch slavery.

“Many of the old Dutch farmers in this country, have 20 or 30 slaves about their house. To their care and management every thing is left; the oldest farmer manages the lands, directs the cultivation of it and without consulting him the master can do nothing; he is in fact in general more intelligent of the two; and so as the master can but exist in the enjoyment of contentment and ease, he is content to become the slave of this slave; nothing can exceed the state of indolence and ignorance in which these Dutchmen are describe to live.”⁷⁹

Additionally, contemporary black voices also criticised the idealized view of Americans of Dutch descent supposedly being more tolerant and sympathetic. In his *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, Samuel Ringgold Ward described his view on Dutch Americans and their position towards black people, both free and in bondage. Ward stated that “the lowest of all the early settlers of America were the Dutch”.⁸⁰ He went on by proclaiming that “these very same Dutch, as you find them now in the States of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, out-American all Americans ... in their maltreatment of the free Negro”.⁸¹ While describing a prominent Dutch New Yorker named Gerrit Smith, Ward also criticized his family background. According to Ward, this individual “belonged by wealth and position to the very first circles of the old Dutch aristocracy”, who had “distinguished themselves as much for their ill nature towards Negroes as for anything else”.⁸²

⁷⁸ William Strickland, *Journal of a Tour in the United States of America: 1794-1795* (New York: The New York Historical Society, 1971), 74. <https://archive.org/>, accessed April 9, 2025.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, 162.

⁸⁰ Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, & England* (Toronto, 1855): 40. <https://gale.com/>, accessed April 9, 2025.

⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁸² Ibidem, 55.

1.5 New York Slavery in the Revolutionary Period

While many citizens of the thirteen colonies were becoming increasingly discontent with English rule, the Anglo-Dutch farmers of New York were still hesitant to believe that their old-fashioned way of life could be altered by political turmoil. However, the rebellion and subsequent retaliation that occurred in American cities, eventually spread into the countryside. When the British Royal Navy occupied the New York harbor from 1776 to 1783, it became clear that the burden of the Revolution in New York had fallen on its rural areas.⁸³ As the American War for Independence became increasingly sectional and divisive, Dutch New Yorkers had to choose a side. Most of them, still infuriated by pre-war colonial intrusion into their societal power, decided to rebel against the British.⁸⁴ Arguably the most important example of these kinds of Dutch New Yorkers was militia-commander Philip Schuyler. Schuyler was adamant in his “crusade” against the loyalists and would eventually reach the top of the Revolutionary army. Due to his efforts at the Battle of Saratoga, Schuyler would later be regarded as one of the founding fathers of America.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, not unlike his Virginian counterparts, Schuyler was a slave owner that ironically had no problems calling Britain’s colonial pursuits a form of servitude. According to Schuyler, white Americans even had to be “rescued from slavery”.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, it is more useful to look at how the Revolutionary War impacted the actual enslaved people of America. When the New York harbor was under attack, just like a hundred years prior, one third of black men were called upon to fortify the city.⁸⁷ And like in 1664, this increased fortification was yet again in vain. As a result of the occupation, not only did the Revolution spread into the homes of white New Yorkers in the Hudson Valley, it also directly affected the enslaved members of their household. As Dutch Revolutionaries went off to battle, they brought their servants with them as personal companions. Disputes between individuals and the state militia over ownership of the services of these men would occur almost instantaneously. Colonel Charles De Witt, of New York’s state militia, argued that “a negro slave was not to be considered as belonging to the militia”, as it is part of a soldier’s

⁸³ Joseph S. Tiedemann and Eugene R. Fingerhut, *The Other New York: The American Revolution beyond New York City, 1763-1787* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 10.

⁸⁵ Armstead, *Memory and Enslavement*, 1.

⁸⁶ “Journals of the Provincial Congress, Provincial Convention, Committee of Safety and Council of Safety of the State of New York: 1775-1775-1777. Vol I.” (Albany: New York Legislature, 1842), 67. <https://archive.org/>, accessed April 9, 2025.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 361.

personal belongings.⁸⁸ As the individual property of these members of the militia, they predominantly performed menial tasks like postal work.⁸⁹ However, as conditions became increasingly desperate, both free and enslaved people eventually became a vital part of both armies. Especially further inland, manpower was badly needed. For example, in 1777, all the way in Ticonderoga, way past Albany, the local commander of the garrison noted how “at least one-third of the troops now on the ground were composed of negroes, Indians and children”.⁹⁰

Back in the Hudson Valley, a little further away from the front, enslaved people were still primarily used as domestic servants. However, as the war was approaching their doorsteps, New Yorkers became afraid of losing their possessions. Patriots were fearful of “slaves who probably may already have been tampered with” by the enemy, who could supposedly encourage others to revolt.⁹¹ In response to this, the state militia of New York began to seize the property of any person that was even remotely affiliated with the loyalists.⁹² Naturally, enslaved people were part of these personal estates, leading them also to be captured by the Militia. As Dutch members of society were the largest slave owners, some began to question their position in the War. The divisive nature of the conflict began to infiltrate rural New York. Support for the Patriotic cause changed overtime and in some cases even dwindled overnight.⁹³

As a result, numerous Dutch loyalists lost their property to Patriots. In one instance, sectional lines even divided families. In 1777, after the Revolutionary army suffered numerous losses, Catherine Clopper found out her father had defected to occupied New York City, leaving his wife, children, and estate behind. After it was confirmed that Cornelius Clopper had “gone to the enemy”, the Patriot armies decided to seize his farm.⁹⁴ In the desperate attempt to “preserve her property”, daughter Catharine Clopper filed a petition to the Continental Congress that stated “that a young negro slave and a negro girl therein named” were “her own and not her father’s property”.⁹⁵ As their enslaved servants were

⁸⁸ Ibidem, 944.

⁸⁹ “Journals of the Provincial Congress, Provincial Convention, Committee of Safety and Council of Safety of the State of New York: 1775-1775-1777. Vol II.” (Albany: New York Legislature, 1842), 82 and 322. <https://archive.org/>, accessed April 9, 2025.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, 430.

⁹¹ “Journals of the Provincial Congress. Vol I”, 686. and Tiedeman, *The Other New York*. 24.

⁹² “Journals of the Provincial Congress. Vol. II”, 416.

⁹³ Tiedeman, *The Other New York*, 24-25.

⁹⁴ “Journals of the Provincial Congress. Vol I”, 855.

⁹⁵ Ibidem, 869.

“necessary for the comfortable subsistence and accommodation of the said Catharine Clopper and her mother”, the Americans sided with these women.

Other examples, however, had much more violent outcomes. The Revolutionary War drove straight through Dutch communities and put neighbors against each other. Loyalists helped to destroy the homesteads of their rebel neighbors, and vice versa.⁹⁶ And enslaved people found themselves stuck in the middle of this violence. In one instance, rebel Colonel Fisher, originally named *Visscher*, discovered that his home in Schoharie County had been invaded by about twenty men. After watching his farm burned down and his brother murdered, a barely conscious Fisher noticed that his neighbor’s slave Tom had come to his aid. Tom, being the first on the scene, went to get water for the badly wounded man. When Tom asked another neighbor, Joseph Clement as to what they should do to help, Clement answered back in Dutch. He bluntly yelled “*Laat de vervlukten rabble starven!*”, or “Let the cursed rebel die!”.⁹⁷ Regardless, Colonel Fisher eventually survived the war and gave the enslaved man that helped him a “valuable horse” after the fighting was done.⁹⁸

Despite the efforts of both loyalist and British forces, American patriots reigned victorious. New York City’s British occupation ceased and hostilities were ended. As the province of New York became the State of New York, it became clear that it needed to rebuild its economy. Even though the rural parts were hit hard by its localized sectionalist infighting, its agricultural production was needed for its cities. The Dutch farming families that had survived the war, now found themselves at the main stage of state politics.⁹⁹ And in this newly created power vacuum, the slaveholding class of New York sought out every opportunity to keep their servants in bondage. Even though the Provincial Congress had already “recommended to the future Legislatures of the State of New York, to take the most effectual measures” to abolish slavery, the institution continued on.¹⁰⁰ This proposition was instantaneously denied by Dutch rural counties. Albany county, for example, the home of Philip Schuyler, strongly voted against.¹⁰¹ Despite the efforts of urban abolitionists, the debates on slavery would become a staple of New York politics for decades to come.

⁹⁶ Tiedeman, *The Other New York*, 35.

⁹⁷ Jephtha R. Simms, *History of Schoharie County, and Border Wars of New York* (Albany, 1845), 349-352. <https://archive.org/>, accessed April 9, 2025.

⁹⁸ Ibidem.

⁹⁹ Tiedeman, *The Other New York*, 24-25.

¹⁰⁰ “Journals of the Provincial Congress. Vol I”, 887.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, 900.

Although many Americans in northern states at the time both wanted and believed in a demise of slavery, the institution showed no signs of slowing down. Slavery had played a fundamental role in rural New York's society for more than a hundred years. From the West India Company to the State of New York, domestic servitude survived and prospered. Amongst the great Dutch families of New York, the personal affiliation with the institution of slavery was stronger than ever at the start of the 1790s. This inherent link between these communities and slavery was backed up by *The First Census of the United States*. Despite the fact that Dutch families only consisted of a mere 16.1 percent of the whole white population, they owned approximately 39,2 percent of all enslaved people in the whole state.¹⁰² This relationship between people of Dutch descent and slavery would eventually be incorporated into the political debates of the 1790s, both used as a defense for and against abolition.

¹⁰² "Heads of Families, At the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790, New York", 275 and 123. And Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 28-29.

Chapter II

“To Rob Every Dutchmen of the Property He Possesses Most Dear to His Heart”

The Politically Turbulent 1790s, John Jay, Gradual Abolition, and the Rural Dutch Counteroffensive

Shortly after being elected governor of New York, John Jay wrote to the first President of the United States, George Washington. On 14 December 1795, Jay briefed him on the difficulties he faced with his newly acquired position. The United States was, at the time, still a fresh and inexperienced republic. In other words, it was a dubious political space in which local power-hungry elites and charlatans tried their best to stop any kind of democratic reform. Even though he remained relatively confident in the voting public, Jay explained the impending dangers of reactionary politics and factionalism. Especially as the intensifiers of this problem became more inconspicuous over time. Jay wrote on these concerns in his letter to President Washington.

“Some allowances are to be made for zeal; but all my accounts agree in representing the public mind as becoming more and more composed, and that certain virulent publications have caused great and general indignation, even among many who had been misled into intemperate proceedings, and had given too much countenance to factious leaders. The latter, however, persevere with great activity, though with less noise and clamour. These are political evils, which, in all ages, have grown out of such a state of things, as naturally as certain physical combinations produce whirlwinds and meteors.”¹⁰³

As American democracy was still in its infancy, nobody was entirely certain of what it would mean for localized politics. Just as the Revolutionary War was coming to an end, regional elites quickly understood that both the British and the Continental armies left a power vacuum behind. Especially in New York, a state with a prominent and relatively mature history, its pseudo-aristocratic families strongly believed that their privileges and property rights would be protected by the new government. New York, however, was

¹⁰³ William Jay, *The Life of John Jay: With Selections From his Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers. Vol II* (New York: J & Harper, 1833), 260. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 12, 2025.

changing and modernizing. With the influx of both American newcomers and foreign immigrants into New York City's harbor, the rural elite saw their political power flash before their eyes. Furthermore, the political differences between overwhelmingly Dutch farmers and these cosmopolitan "others" could be seen in the divisive debates on the question of slavery. New York's polarization on the possibility of abolition eventually trickled over into state politics, where advocates and antagonists played a decisive battle.

As opposed to the previous chapter, which served more as a contextualization, this chapter is characterized by its analysis of state-wide politics. By clarifying the convoluted political conditions of the turbulent 1790s, and by connecting numerous accounts from contemporary political actors, the following passages will try to answer the question why the formal adoption of any kind of manumission legislation came so late. In other words: how was abolition rejected so many times in New York's political bodies before it was eventually successful, and why did anti-slavery lawmakers compromise by making it gradual in nature? In order to explain these contentions, four interconnecting phenomena are deconstructed. First, New York's rural-urban divide will be explained. Here, early government sources are used in connection to political histories written some decades after the fact. Second, abolitionists' first efforts at ending slavery in the state are explained. For this part, primary source analysis mostly entails the personal correspondence of the anti-slavery camps biggest campaigners. Third, these anti-slavery advocates' conservative, slaveholding, and culturally Dutch opposition is established. In order to identify this reactionary constituency, travel logs and political commentaries are displayed within these passages. And finally, the compromise between these two political adversaries is analyzed. Yet again, this section can be differentiated by the fact that it exhibits official debates and speeches in the state legislature.

2.1 The Political Split Between the City and Upstate New York, and Its Effect on the Issue of Slavery

As the eighteenth century came to a close, the divisions between New Yorkers became more pronounced, accentuated, and polarized. The political actors of this newly democratized state divided themselves up amongst both physical and intangible lines. In this new political landscape, a voters' place of residency and ethnic heritage could play a decisive role. And one of the most prominent issues that ran parallel to this kind of political demarcation was the debate on slavery. To put it bluntly, if a New Yorker lived outside of the city, owned a farm, and was of Dutch origin, it was highly likely that this individual had no immediate grievances with the institution of slavery. On the other hand, if every distinction was the opposite, the person was more than likely a supporter of (gradual) abolition.

This phenomenon of state-wide polarization affecting the issue of slavery was already prevalent during the Revolution. In the aforementioned 1777 proposition of the New York Provincial Congress, a clear division could be seen between the voting counties. Mr. Morris, the temporary Governor, had at first recommended that "in future ages, every human being who breathes the air of this State, shall enjoy the privileges of a freeman".¹⁰⁴ He, however, found discontent and disapproval of this slightly vague proposal almost immediately. In an act of political maneuvering, Morris quickly emphasized that the burden of abolishing slavery was meant to be left to further generations. His proposition would not become a bill that demanded general manumission, but an endorsement to actually delay it by decades. Morris wrote that it "would be highly inexpedient to proceed to the liberating of slaves within this State", due to the "present situation thereof".¹⁰⁵

Probably, Morris had referred to the fact that New York was in a state of war. According to him, these circumstances left the slavery question too demanding. But could Mr. Morris have meant something else when he mentioned this 'present situation'? This member of Congress could also have alluded to a political deadlock within the state that killed any possible abolition bill. Two days after Morris' proposition, the counties' representatives in the House voted on this postponement of the manumission question. Interestingly, rural counties like Albany, Dutchess, Orange, and Westchester voted in favor of procrastinating. The only one that voted against it was New York County. Correspondingly,

¹⁰⁴ "Journals of the Provincial Congress. Vol I", 887.

¹⁰⁵ "Journals of the Provincial Congress. Vol I", 889.

Morris' motion of postponement was accepted, with 24 votes for and 8 against.¹⁰⁶ This kind of split between rural and urban representatives would help to delay and destroy any sort of debate on the matter of slavery and its possible abandonment until the 1790s.¹⁰⁷

The rural counties that voted in favor of postponement were mostly agricultural societies in which a majority of the non-Anglophone population identified themselves as having Dutch heritage. Furthermore, these counties' large-scale Dutch landowners owned a disproportionate number of enslaved workers.¹⁰⁸ Even so, the political landscape of the time was changing. In the final decade of the eighteenth century, state elections would be decided by both location and population. At the time, the entire state counted no less than 36,017 property-owning men that were allowed to vote.¹⁰⁹ And only one single county would count more than twenty percent of the entire voting population.

Of the more than 36,000 voters, 7,272 of them lived in New York City.¹¹⁰ Due to this discrepancy, Rural New Yorkers were afraid of a politically dominant New York County that could, theoretically in a direct democracy, obtain one fifth of the state's political power. Nevertheless, New York State, not unlike the federal government, would never have a direct form of representation. In order to appease the provincial counties, New York state decided to divide itself into three separate voting districts for the Senate. The southern district consisted of counties like New York and Kings, while the eastern and western districts subsided over the more peripheral counties.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, a little after the political partition of the state, a new law passed that annexed the culturally similar counties of Albany and Saratoga to the eastern district.¹¹² By doing this, predominant Dutch counties from Dutchess to Albany could unite under the same banner and provide a definite stronghold against the mostly urban southern voting district. A cosmopolitan voting bloc that could, theoretically, try to bring the end of slavery.

Alongside this growing political opposition between the City and Upstate New York, came an increasingly divided attitude towards the issue of slavery. A major development seen in post-war New York City was the massive influx of immigrants. New Englanders, many of

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁷ Patrick Rael, "The Long Death of Slavery", in: eds., Ira Berlin and Leslie Maria Harris, *Slavery in New York* (New York: The New Press, 2005): 111-147, 114.

¹⁰⁸ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 24.

¹⁰⁹ Jabez D. Hammond, *The History of Political Parties in the State of New-York: From the Ratification of the Federal Constitution to December, 1840. Vol. I* (Cooperstown: H. & E. Phinney, 1844), 98. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 7, 2025.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹¹ Ibidem.

¹¹² Ibidem, 99.

them pacifist Quakers, arrived in the southern voting district of NYC in droves. These migrants would not only bring their religious beliefs, but also their views on slavery. Soon, the city became a hotbed for anti-slavery sentiment.¹¹³ As a result, the practical implications of slavery in the city became increasingly frowned upon. An Irish traveler noted the relative lack of enslaved people he counted in New York City, especially compared to other American cities he had seen. Isaac Weld wrote that in 1790, out of the more than forty thousand residents of the city, there were only 2,180 officially enslaved.¹¹⁴ Other sources also convey this decline in the 1790s. At the start of the decade, there were 890 slave owners in NYC, while in 1800 there were only a mere 300.¹¹⁵

Plainly put, this decline was partly due to the politicization of the slavery issue. For the Anglophone urban elite, being a supporter of manumission almost became fashionable.¹¹⁶ In popular media like magazines and journals, tales of brutality in southern slave states filled the front pages.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, editors also did not shy away from reporting on abuse in their home state. In June 1791, *The New York Magazine*, recited an instance of “inhuman treatment to a negro slave” in the “interior parts of this state”.¹¹⁸ A specific northern slave owner by the name of Mr. A—, was described as a brutal slave owner, as “his chief employment was inventing punishment for his unfortunate dependents”.¹¹⁹ One of his slaves, called Mingo, mainly got the worst of these beatings. His owner “would himself tie Mingo ... and after having beaten him till the blood followed every stroke of the whip, he would retire, leaving the wretch weltering in his gore”.¹²⁰ Retroactively, this kind of sensationalist and propagandist reporting worked. Editorials like *The New York Magazine* became increasingly popular while making cosmopolitan New Yorkers feel better about themselves for their own progressive views.¹²¹ Nevertheless, little action was taken to abolish the institution of slavery in New York. Until the arrival of a crucial political figure in the Empire State’s early history.

¹¹³ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 174 and 178.

¹¹⁴ Isaac Weld, *Reizen Door de Staaten van Noord-Amerika, en de Provintien van Opper- en Neder-Canada: In de Jaaren 1795, 1796 en 1797. Vol III* (The Hague: J. C. Leeuwenstijn, 1801), 364. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 8, 2025.

¹¹⁵ Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens, GA: The University Of Georgia Press, 2014), 30-32.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem, 60.

¹¹⁸ Antonetta, “Inhuman Treatment to a Negro, For the New York Magazine” in *The New York Magazine: Or Literary Repository* 2:6 (June 1791): 338-339, 338. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 8, 2025.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ Ibidem, 339.

¹²¹ White, *Somewhat More Independent*, 66.

2.2 John Jay, the New York Manumission Society, and the First Gradual Abolition Proposals

While the rural Dutch slave owners of the interior solidified their political prowess, and the progressive urban elite applauded themselves for their pro-manumission rhetoric, New Yorks' practice of slavery showed no signs of going away. Even though human bondage was fading out in urban parts of the state, there was no doubt that the use of enslaved farm work was still economically viable.¹²² The peculiar institution just would not disappear if left untouched. Many New Yorkers knew this to be a fact. So, in order to actually obtain some kind of official end to the institution, some New Yorkers decided to take the matter into their own hands.

One of the most prominent anti-slavery advocates of the 1790s was John Jay. Jay, a successful attorney and native of New York, would eventually become one of the most important figures in both the history of the city and the state.¹²³ By the end of the nineteenth century, Jay's stance on the matter of human bondage had already been outspoken for decades. During the Revolutionary War, Jay had criticized the British crown for supposedly being an "advocate for slavery and oppression".¹²⁴ Jay remained a staunch abolitionist even after the War, seeing the peculiar institution as a burden on western society as a whole. The New Yorker was a religious man that was convinced that slavery was inherently sinful. In 1776, Jay even stated that "Divine Providence" did "not permit this Western world to be involved in the horrors of slavery".¹²⁵ A year later, Jay immediately wrote to Morris to confirm his grievances to the politically dormant Governor. He went on to note that there "should ... have been ... a clause against the continuation of domestic slavery".¹²⁶

Jay's abolitionist beliefs began to materialize alongside his impending political career. In other words, he used his abolitionist position as a stepping stone for his introduction into public office. In 1785, after finishing his diplomatic roles overseas, Jay returned to New York where he instantly joined the New York Manumission Society. After one meeting, he became the de facto leader of this activist organization. As slavery was the societal norm, the Society was truly radical for its time. According to the NYMS' constitution, it was "the duty of every man not merely to be compassionate to those who suffer injustice, but to endeavor to obtain a

¹²² Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 178.

¹²³ Rael, "The Long Death of Slavery", 115.

¹²⁴ John Jay, and Henry P. Johnston ed., *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay, 1763-1781. Vol I* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1890), 18. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 8, 2025.

¹²⁵ Ibidem, 118.

¹²⁶ Ibidem, 136.

reparation”.¹²⁷ Furthermore, it stated that “no diversity of condition or complexion can make any difference in these fundamental rights and duties of men”.¹²⁸ Through the 1780s and 90s, the NYMS would stand at the forefront of the northern political manumission movement. Like their president, members of the Society were mostly Quakers of Anglo-Saxon descent, and originated from the city. Major figures like Alexander Hamilton and Noah Webster joined the NYMS.¹²⁹ Interestingly, only a handful of members noted in the *List of the Members of the New York Manumission Society* could be identified as anything other than Anglophone, and almost none of them were Dutch.¹³⁰

New York State politics, however, proved to be an extremely difficult climate for any activist group to navigate and prosper in. Promising to free all the slaves in the state served as a major challenge. Even before the NYMS took over as leaders in the movement, a Quaker coalition led by Ephraim Paine introduced an elaborate abolition bill.¹³¹ However, a hostile motion by an Ulster County representative killed the proposition before it even survived the State Assembly.¹³² Seemingly, a bill called *An Act Declaring the Freedom of the Persons Therein Mentioned* was too controversial.¹³³ Moderates found it both too vague and too broad, while pro-slavery representatives despised its mere existence. From now on, these kinds of propositions were coined by the likes of *An Act For the Gradual Abolition of Slavery Within this State*.¹³⁴ For political reasons, manumission proposals had to turn to a gradual end of slavery.

Likewise, John Jay, arguably a political realist, saw gradual abolition as the only possible way forward. But why? Jay had long been a proponent of steadily ending slavery through sensible legislation. Back in 1780, while writing to the attorney general of New York, he praised Pennsylvania’s approval of this sort of abolition bill, calling it “an excellent law”.¹³⁵ The president of the NYMS later commented on his moderate views.

¹²⁷ New-York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting Such of Them as Have Been, or May Be Liberated, *Constitution* (New York: Hopkins, 1796), 1-2. <https://go-gale-com//>, accessed May 11, 2025.

¹²⁸ NYMS, *Constitution*, 2.

¹²⁹ David N. Gellman, *Liberty’s Chain: Slavery, Abolition, and the Jay Family of New York* (Ithaca, and London: Cornell University Press, 2022), 62-68.

¹³⁰ Isaac T. Hopper, “A List of the Members of the New York Manumission Society” (New York, 1827), 1-27. <https://digitalcollections.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/>, accessed May 11, 2025.

¹³¹ “Journal of the Senate of the State of New York, Eighth Session, Second Meeting” (Albany, January 24 1785), 108. <https://go-gale-com/>, accessed May 12, 2025.

¹³² Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation*, 148.

¹³³ “Journal of the Senate”, 108.

¹³⁴ Ibidem.

¹³⁵ Jay and Johnston, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay*, 406-407.

“As to my sentiments and conduct relative to the abolition of slavery, the fact is this: In my opinion every man, of every colour and description, has a natural right to freedom, and I shall ever acknowledge myself to be an advocate for the manumission of slaves, in such a way as may be consistent with the justice due to them, with the justice due to their masters, and with the regard due to the actual state of society. These considerations unite in convincing me that the abolition of slavery must necessarily be gradual”.¹³⁶

As it turned out, the abolition of slavery had to “necessarily be gradual” because it was seen as a logical compromise between the camp who wanted enslaved people to be emancipated, and those who still owned them. The apparent reason for this procrastination of freedom was that retaliatory violence would be avoided. But predominantly, these kinds of propositions were made to appease vocally discontent slave owners. Furthermore, the State would have more time to compensate the slave owners for their loss of property. At the time, gradual abolition was deemed an enticing solution, as its success in places like Pennsylvania and Cuba were displayed in local newspapers.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, it would still be inherently controversial and unpopular. One contemporary New York politician claimed that “it would be just as illegal to deprive masters of their property in twenty years as it would be to do so immediately”.¹³⁸ Consequently, the opposition’s outspoken character would soon be easily identified. For example, in 1790, another major gradual abolition bill was proposed. A certain Mr. Schoonmaker, however, “made a motion that the said bill should be rejected”. In accordance with this Mr. Schoonmaker, the proposal never saw the light of day.¹³⁹

John Jay and his supporters would however not be deterred, as they continued to push their anti-slavery agenda. Notwithstanding, Jay’s political ambitions would eventually get the best of him. In 1789, John Jay left his leadership position at the NYMS, as he wished to further pursue his political career.¹⁴⁰ Both in 1792 and 1795, John Jay ran for the governorship of New York.¹⁴¹ As he was broadening his political appeal, he soon found out that his public image would forever be associated with his stance on human bondage. This connotation with abolitionism served as a sizable problem. As an abolitionist politician, trying to win over the Dutch, rural, and slave-owning constituency would serve as a significant obstacle.

¹³⁶ Jay, *The Life of John Jay*, 285.

¹³⁷ “Philadelphia, July 22”, *The Albany Register* (Albany: August 2, 1790). <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 12, 2025.

¹³⁸ Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation*, 146.

¹³⁹ “Journal of the House of Assembly of the State of New-York. The Second Meeting of the Thirteenth Session” (Albany, January 21 1790), 12-13. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 12, 2025.

¹⁴⁰ Gellman, *Liberty’s Chain*, 70-71.

¹⁴¹ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 177.

2.3 The Dutch Counteroffensive Against Abolition, and the Argument of Property Rights

After losing the 1792 gubernatorial elections, John Jay knew there was something wrong with his political strategy.¹⁴² Even though he garnered large support in urban places like New York City, Hudson, and Kinderhook, he failed to gain the backing of one particular constituency. Namely, the New York farmers of Dutch descent that disproportionately owned slaves. For years now, his anti-slavery record had alienated these influential voters so much that a friend of his urged him to calm his rhetoric. In this polarized political climate, he was now labeled as a radical abolitionist.

“The Part you have taken in the society for emancipating slaves is exaggerated, and painted in lively colours to your disadvantage. It is said that it is your desire to rob every Dutchmen of the property he possesses most dear to his heart, his slaves; that you are not satisfied with doing that, but wish to further to oblige their masters to educate the children of those slaves in the best manner, even if unable to educate their own children.”¹⁴³

Jay responded by denying these radical connotations. With kinder words towards slave owners, and the ensuing demise of Governor George Clinton’s political career, John Jay set a straight course for the governorship in the elections of 1795. He would eventually win these elections and become the new governor of New York in part by publicly disassociating himself with profound anti-slaveholding sentiment.¹⁴⁴ However, now in office, John Jay was not deterred from his pro-manumission views privately. He simply had to act more secretive. As his son William Jay later stated, his father remained determined to pass gradual abolitionist legislation.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, just like in his election campaigns, he would stumble upon the same opposition that had been trying to halter his career for decades. The politically conservative and culturally Dutch voting bloc. Even so, some modern historians like Patrick Rael are under the impression that John Jay and his followers operated without proper resistance. Rael adhered to the notion that “the tide of Revolutionary-era thinking slowly turned in black New Yorkers’ favor”.¹⁴⁶ On the contrary, even if this idea of a philosophical shift towards abandoning slavery might have been prevalent in the city, the conservative Dutch countryside showed no signs of turning “in black New Yorkers’ favor”. Frankly, their

¹⁴² Ibidem.

¹⁴³ Jay, *The Life of John Jay*, 285.

¹⁴⁴ Ibidem, 286-289.

¹⁴⁵ Hammond, *The History of Political Parties in the State of New-York*, 99.

¹⁴⁶ Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery”, 118.

contemporary notoriety demonstrated their traditional views towards the plight of African Americans.

By the time the United States had gained its independence, New Yorkers of Dutch descent had gained a peculiar reputation. To put it mildly, they were seen as archaic, stingy, inhospitable, and persistently conservative. While travelling through North America, Englishman Andrew Burnaby wrote about the demographic make-up of New Yorkers. Burnaby noted that “more than half of them are Dutch”.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, he went on by stating that “they are, therefore, habitually frugal, industrious, and parsimonious.”¹⁴⁸ As if it was a natural fact that this ethnic group can be described as “frugal”, simply because they were Dutch. Burnaby also described Dutch women as “more reserved” than their Anglo-American counterparts.¹⁴⁹ The aforementioned French Duke De La Rochefoucault-Liancourt additionally commented on this particular nature of the New York Dutch. He wrote that “these people” were “not hasty to change old habits for new” as they lived in these parts “in the same manner now as they did a hundred years since.”¹⁵⁰ In January 1797, Isaac Weld wrote on his experiences with Dutch Long Islanders when he stated that these inhabitants had “inherited their forefathers’ coldness, restrictiveness, and self-indulgence.”¹⁵¹ Furthermore, they were inherently afraid of any outsiders. After reciting these kinds of negative connotations, Weld did state that most of these Dutchmen were “very good farmers” that owned “vast farmlands”.¹⁵² In addition to owning land, Weld noted that Dutch Long Islanders owned people. He stated that of the estimated 37.000 Long Islanders, 5.000 of them were enslaved.¹⁵³

Alongside their supposed cultural conservativeness, the anti-abolitionist Dutch voting faction also had other considerations. As mentioned by Jay’s pen pal, a rural slave-owner was not likely to depart with the “property that he possesses most dear to his heart”.¹⁵⁴ After the Revolution, established families had solidified their views on property rights. As a result, they invested tremendous amounts of capital in their enslaved workers. And they would use any argument possible to protect their investment.¹⁵⁵ While abolitionists applied a certain

¹⁴⁷ Andrew Burnaby, and Rufus Rockwell ed.: *Burnaby’s Travels Through North America: Reprinted From the Third Edition of 1798* (New York: A. Wessels Company, 1904), 117. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 13, 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁰ De La Rochefoucault-Liancourt, *Travels Through the United States of North America*, 216.

¹⁵¹ Weld, *Reizen Door de Staaten van Noord-Amerika*, 279.

¹⁵² Ibidem, 280.

¹⁵³ Ibidem, 280-281.

¹⁵⁴ Jay, *The Life of John Jay*, 285.

¹⁵⁵ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery*, 178.

human rights philosophy, established slaveholders decided to falter to a claim of property rights.¹⁵⁶ Needless to say, they were steadfast in their argument. The French abolitionist Jacques-Pierre Brissot De Warville noted his account of this sense of protectiveness amongst Americans of Dutch descent. He stated that the Dutch were a “people less disposed than any other to part with their property”.¹⁵⁷ In addition, Englishman Timothy Dwight remarked on “the reluctance with which the Dutch farmers” agreed “to any alteration in the state of their possessions”.¹⁵⁸

This argument of property rights combined with a cautious and indifferent view towards any kind of progressivism, eventually spilled over into state politics. As the 1790s progressed, anti-manumission resistance against the proposals of John Jay’s government intensified. John Murray Jr., a member of the New York Manumission Society, described this convoluted political landscape.

“I have to lament the many obstacles & embarrassments, which the Advocates for Freedom in this State, have to encounter with, and none perhaps of a more potent nature than the circumstance of a great body of Dutch, who hold Slaves in this government, & seem, as it were startled, & in arms, whenever a proposition comes forward touching that People, so that we have but little hope to for from our Legislature at this time, as I expect a large proportion of the Assembly, is constituted of Dutch Men.”¹⁵⁹

As this Dutch constituency’s power grew, they arrived at a new strategy. As their argument for property rights began to lose its clear political purpose, they began to dissect and disbar the nitty-gritty of every proposed manumission bill. In January 1796, the State Assembly had brought in another attempt to end the institution. Initially, the proposed bill was quite successful, as it was “carried in the affirmative” by the Assembly’s representatives.¹⁶⁰ The proposal had, however, fallen upon a major hurdle. After weeks of debating, a certain clause was added to the bill. It read as follows: “Resolved, that it is unjust and unconstitutional to deprive any citizen or citizens of this State of their property for public purposes without making them a reasonable compensation for the same, and that such compensation should be made at the expense of the State.”¹⁶¹ After this political oversight by

¹⁵⁶ Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery”, 117.

¹⁵⁷ Jacques-Pierre Brissot De Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America. Performed in 1788. Translated From the French* (London: J. S. Jordan, 1792), 274-275. <https://go.gale.com/>, accessed May 13, 2025.

¹⁵⁸ Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New York. Vol IV* (London: William Baynes and Son, and Ogle, Duncan & Co., 1823), 167. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 13, 2025.

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation*, 160.

¹⁶⁰ John Childs, “Journal of the Assembly, of the State of New-York. At Their Nineteenth Session, Begun and Held at the City-Hall” (New York, January 18, 1796), 27. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 13, 2025.

¹⁶¹ Ibidem, 51.

the committee, the bill did not survive the Senate.¹⁶² In May of that year a certain Mr. Phinney summarized why he believed the bill suffered this political defeat. He wrote that “the Legislature could not equitably deprive the owners of the slaves of their property in them, without compensation.”¹⁶³

In the next few years, debates around property rights and compensation would cause tremendous frustrations in pro-manumission camps. Clearly, strategies of their opposition caused emancipation legislation to be delayed by several years. And, to summarize, this was all due to the complications they had with savvy conservative politicians that were disproportionately of Dutch descent. Some decades later, legislator and John Jay affiliate, Erastus Root reflected on the tremendous difficulties he faced in the 1790s.

“The law of God is paramount, and our slave laws are void. The slaveholders at that time were chiefly Dutch. They raved and swore by *dunder and blixen* that we were robbing them of their property. We told them they had none, and could hold none in human flesh, ... and we passed the law”¹⁶⁴

2.4 The Cost of a Successful Abolition Bill

As the year 1797 approached, the emancipatory political agenda in New York seemed bleak. Despite them making multiple concessions and tweaks to the proposed legislature, the anti-abolitionist camp still used cunning political tactics to stop them in their tracks. Even though this third proposition passed the State Assembly, it once again failed to be ratified in the Senate.¹⁶⁵ This time, the opposition filibustered long enough for it to be discarded. William Jay, the son of John, described this legislative deadlock in his book *The Life of John Jay*.

“In January the Legislature again assembled, and a bill was brought into the Senate for the gradual abolition of slavery. The opposition to this bill was less open than that which it had experienced in the other House the preceding winter, but it was not perhaps less insidious. Its consideration was postponed from time to time by a hostile majority, till the session expired without a vote being taken on its merits.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Ibidem, 64.

¹⁶³ “For the Otsego Herald”, *The Otsego Herald / Western Advertiser* (Cooperstown, May 11, 1796), 2. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 13 2025.

¹⁶⁴ Hammond, *The History of Political Parties in the State of New-York*, 582.

¹⁶⁵ “Legislature of New York. Thursday Jan. 19.”, *The Otsego Herald / Western Advertiser* (Cooperstown, February 6, 1797), 2. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 14, 2025.

¹⁶⁶ Jay, *The Life of John Jay*, 396.

Nevertheless, John Jay and his constituents would find a way to triumph over this formidable “hostile majority”. 1798 would prove to be the abolitionists’ lucky year. As the hostile opposition ran out of Machiavellian schemes to stop drafts in their political infancy, a more solid bill had been proposed by Jay’s government. Against all odds, it survived the first round, passing the Assembly in February.¹⁶⁷ Interestingly, of the 35 representatives that voted against the bill, 9 last names were easily identified as Dutch. A lot more than in the affirmative camp. In other words, more New York representatives of Dutch descent were against manumission than any other non-Anglophone ethnic group.¹⁶⁸

This time around, the bill survived these politicians with Dutch heritage. Nevertheless, its adamant opposition made one last attempt at killing it, despite it already being voted in. Representatives like Philip Schuyler and a certain Mr. Verplank made a final motion to reject the said bill. They were, however, subsequently rejected.¹⁶⁹ The Dutch conservatives were finally outflanked and outplayed in the State Assembly. In previous attempts, the cautious and docile nature of the State Senate had ruined any plans of getting rid of human bondage. Passing manumission remained a tremendous difficulty. Months after the 1798 bill passed the Assembly, the law miraculously survived the Senate with a majority of ten.¹⁷⁰ It prevailed even though it had endured “a very lengthy and animated debate”.¹⁷¹ After years of political maneuvering, this fourth attempt at general abolition would be the final one.¹⁷² Years prior, at his inauguration, governor Jay had promised to introduce a successful gradual abolition bill before his tenure was over. Finally, the governor had come through on his promise. His son described his father’s joy on this matter by stating that “probably no measure of his administration afforded him such unfeigned pleasure”.¹⁷³

Strictly speaking, the abolition bill’s success came at a cost. With every attempt in the state legislature, the “hostile” opposition had carved away parts of the bill that, in their eyes, negatively affected their slave-owning constituency. In order to withstand their persistent political adversaries, the proponents of this bill had to compromise. After careful deliberation, emancipation in New York would come at an agreed price. Freedom for

¹⁶⁷ “Legislature of New-York. From Albany, April 2.”, *The Commercial Advertiser* (New York, April 6, 1798): 3. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 14, 2025.

¹⁶⁸ “Journal of the Assembly, of the State of New-York. At Their Twenty-First Session, Began and Held at the City of Albany.” (Albany, February 7, 1798), 112. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 14, 2025.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 262-263.

¹⁷⁰ Jay, *The Life of John Jay*, 408.

¹⁷¹ “Troy, March 19.”, *The Northern Budget* (Troy, March 19, 1799), 3. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 14, 2025.

¹⁷² Jay, *The Life of John Jay*, 408.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*.

enslaved people would come gradually and conditionally, with only the soon-to-be formal slaveholders to be provided with financial reparations.¹⁷⁴ Starting in 1799, any slave-owner that reported their human property to the local county, would be “entitled to receive twelve and half cents for each slave so recorded”, as it was “paid out of the county treasury”.¹⁷⁵ Regardless, this meager expense meant little, and for the next several decades, enslaved New Yorkers and their children would still be bound by the institution of slavery. Through extremely convoluted regulation, enslaved African Americans would remain in the ownership of their masters. And, predominantly, New York slave-owners of Dutch ancestry would hold on to their enslaved farmhands and kitchen aides the longest.¹⁷⁶

All things considered, the gradual abolition bill came just before an impending political storm. Thomas Jefferson’s win in the national election would cause a shift in local politics. Jefferson’s Anti-Federalist philosophy had spread throughout New York, causing rural slave-owners that had obstructed the manumission acts to regain their political confidence.¹⁷⁷ As a result, property rights would eventually win over human rights. In defense of advocates like John Jay though, they successfully set abolitionist legislature in motion despite efforts by the savvy conservative Dutch constituency. Without this particular faction, emancipation for New Yorkers in bondage would have come much quicker and more direct. Most likely, slavery would have been disbanded like it had been years earlier in states like Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts.¹⁷⁸ General manumission in New York would however be slow, gradual, and filled with bureaucratic loopholes. By endlessly compromising with pro-slavery “factional leaders”, John Jay and his fellow supporters of abolition had weakened their cause, leaving New York’s enslaved population completely uncertain about their future. Ironically, by 1800, Governor Jay himself still owned domestic slaves in his large New York City estate.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁴ Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery”, 122.

¹⁷⁵ “Journal of the Assembly, of the State of New-York.”, 266.

¹⁷⁶ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 32.

¹⁷⁷ John L. Brooke, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson From the Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Williamsburg: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 262 and 286-287.

¹⁷⁸ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 175.

¹⁷⁹ White, *Somewhat More Independent*, 74.

Chapter III

*“It Is For These Unfortunates, On Whom The Law Now Sheds No
Cheering Ray of Hope.”*

The Practical Failure of Abolition and Dutch New York’s Last Stand in the
Nineteenth Century

On 25 February 1644, Director-General of New-Netherland, Wim Kieft, ruled over an unprecedented request made by nine hardened enslaved workers of the West India Company. They had appealed to the local colonial authority “to hereafter be dismissed from service” as they demanded “to obtain freedom”, because they had served the Company faithfully for so many years.¹⁸⁰ Apparently, the WIC had “promised them freedom for a considerable time”.¹⁸¹ In spite of their small chance of success, director Kieft agreed with them, stating that these “Negros and their wives” would now be “dismissed from service for the rest of their lives”. On paper, these people had obtained their freedom. Reality would, however, feel very different. These former slaves were only able to emancipate themselves as long as they coughed up “thirty *schepels* of corn, peas or beans, alongside a fat pig worth twenty *guilders*” each year.¹⁸² Crucially though, another condition was directly transmitted onto the children of enslaved parents. Even though the parents might have achieved emancipation, “their children, both already born and unborn” remained “obliged to serve the West India Company as slaves”.¹⁸³

Regardless of the fact that this particular case occurred 155 years before any tangible abolitionist laws in the state were proposed, it did highlight two major realities that this kind of conditional emancipation pertained to. Other historians like Ira Berlin have phrased this phenomenon in New York’s history as *half freedom*.¹⁸⁴ Recently manumitted New Yorkers were entirely burdened with the financial cost of emancipation, while slave owners tried their best to keep their children in bondage. Just like in 1644, obtaining freedom in the nineteenth

¹⁸⁰ A. J. F. Van Laer, *Original New York Colonial Manuscripts. Vol. IV* (Albany: New York State Archives), 255. <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/>, accessed June 1, 2025.

¹⁸¹ Ibidem.

¹⁸² Ibidem, 256.

¹⁸³ Ibidem, 257.

¹⁸⁴ Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* (Cambridge, UK and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 35-36.

century was inherently limited and circumstantial. As a result, this chapter argues that gradual abolition in New York State, due to its vulnerable legislation and its appeasement to slave owners, is to blame for this kind of provisional freedom. Furthermore, the next passages highlight the overtly present role of Dutch New Yorkers in keeping general abolition slow, restrictive, and unsettled. So, this chapter asks the question: how did Dutch New York's slave owners keep people in bondage despite slavery becoming illegal? In contrast to previous chapters, this part focuses less on large-scale political matters, and more so on the legality of freedom. As emancipation turned increasingly convoluted, research has to dive deep into both state law and civil legal disputes. In other words, primary source analysis will refer to specific government bills, newspapers' impression of this legislation, and individual court cases.

3.1 Faulty Legislation, Difficult Manumission, and the Prolonging of the Slave Trade

Primarily, the 1799 Abolition Bill had been weakened and faulty from its inception. Lawmakers had made the process of emancipation easier on paper, but not in practice due to their compromises with slaveholders.¹⁸⁵ General abolition would in actuality come into effect decades later. Theoretically, the 1799 law guaranteed that “any child born of a slave within this state after the fourth day of July next shall be deemed and adjudged to be born free”.¹⁸⁶ Curiously though, one cannot shy away from the choice of words like “deemed” and “adjudged”. Seemingly, this law did not give children of slaves born after July 4, 1799, an inalienable right to emancipation. The bill only granted that these children would obtain the privilege of being *perceived* as free. Furthermore, the statute provided a specific condition after this “guarantee”, stating that: “Provided nevertheless, that such child shall be the servant of the legal proprietor of his or her mother until such servant, if a male, shall arrive at the age of twenty-eight years, and if a female, at the age of twenty-five years.”¹⁸⁷ By providing this “small” detail, lawmakers provided the institution of slavery with a possible future that could last for decades.

¹⁸⁵ Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery”, 133.

¹⁸⁶ “Laws of the State of New-York. Passed at the Twenty-Second Session, Second Meeting, of the Legislature, Begun and Held at the City of Albany, the Second of January, 1799.” (Albany: Loring Andrews, 1799), 721. <https://go-gale-com//>, accessed May 22, 2025.

¹⁸⁷ Ibidem. and “The Bill For the Gradual Abolition of Slavery”, *The Northern Budget* (Troy, March 19, 1799), 3. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 22, 2025.

In addition to further prolonging the burden of slavery onto newborns, the 1799 law introduced multiple scrutinous and bureaucratic steps that had to be taken in order to apply for manumission. A newborn child, whose mother was enslaved, could only be seen as free if the slaveholder reported it to the local authorities “within nine months after” the child’s birth.¹⁸⁸ Safe to say, a conflict of interest, alongside a strenuous time constraint, made applying for emancipation extremely difficult. Furthermore, small details like the dates on birth certificates and manumission licenses were open to being falsified, obstructed, or withheld. In 1815, A man called Getman promised his enslaved worker Tom that if they could collect the sum of 200 dollars, Tom, along with his wife and child, would be manumitted under the present law. Provided, however, that Tom himself would come up with 75 dollars of the total amount. Tom succeeded in saving 75 dollars, after which he handed it to mr. Getman. The slave-owner went out to report a “formal manumission of the three slaves” to the local authorities and supposedly suffered through all the bureaucratic steps.¹⁸⁹ Getman, however, “kept the slaves, and all the papers, for more than two years afterwards”, and “received the fruits of their labour” for this substantial period. Despite the fact that all measures were taken in freeing this African American family, the concurrent laws stated that “until the certificate of manumission passed out of the master’s hands, the negroes were slaves”.¹⁹⁰

Subsequent legislation would only make matters worse. A mere three years after the *Gradual Abolition Act*, new slave codes were introduced in the State of New York. The 1801 law, *An Act Concerning Slaves and Servants*, furthermore guaranteed the property rights of slaveholders. It stated that “every negro, mulatto, or mestee within this state, who is now a slave for life, shall continue such, unless such slave shall be manumitted according to law”.¹⁹¹ Nevertheless, the slave trade were actually severely damaged by the new codes. For instance, the selling of enslaved workers in the State was made illegal in the fifth article of the bill.¹⁹² While it expanded the 1788 law that outlawed the international slave trade, the 1801 bill additionally restricted the domestic market. Any out of state person that smuggled an enslaved worker with the explicit goal of selling it in New York, was “deemed guilty of a

¹⁸⁸ “Laws of the State of New-York”, 721-722.

¹⁸⁹ “Johnson’s Reports. Vol. XIX.” in: *United States Law Journal* 1:2 (September, 1822), 178-179.
<https://archive.org/>, accessed May 23, 2025.

¹⁹⁰ “Johnson’s Reports. Digest of Vol. XIX.” in: *United States Law Journal* 1:4 (April, 1823): 485-488, 486.
<https://archive.org/>, accessed May 23, 2025.

¹⁹¹ “Laws Relative to Slaves and the Slave-Trade” (New York: Samuel Stansbury, 1806), 5. <https://go.gale.com/>, accessed May 23, 2025.

¹⁹² *Ibidem*, 10.

public offence”, and forced to “forfeit the sum of two hundred and fifty dollars”.¹⁹³ As a result, the commodified persons in question would theoretically be “entitled” to freedom, as they now had “a right not to be sold”.¹⁹⁴

This law seemed to deter the domestic sale of enslaved people, but in reality it would only show its unenforceable nature. Just as New Yorkers in bondage were “deemed” to be free according to the law, slave traders were also “adjudged” to be guilty of a crime. In the following years, slave merchants evaded law enforcement and avoided punishment. A 1817 court case, *Skinner v. Fleet*, noted how a “slave ran away from his master, who was an inhabitant of the state of Connecticut, and came to New-York, where he was taken and sold by his master to a person in New-York”.¹⁹⁵ Even though this sale surely occurred across state lines, “the sale was valid under the act of 1801”.¹⁹⁶ Apparently, under the present statutes of the 1799 and 1801 laws, “the slave was not entitled to his freedom”.¹⁹⁷

The open slave market also did not escape public life. With small tweaks to rhetoric, slave advertisements could still be spotted in major newspapers. In 1802, the *New York Evening Post* displayed an ad for the “ten years service of a healthy, active, handsome Negro man, aged about eighteen years”. Even though this individual for sale was being sold at 22 Vandewater Street in New York City, the ad noted that he “was brought up in the country”.¹⁹⁸ Interestingly, the word slave is not used as the ad described his employment only as a temporary “service”.¹⁹⁹ On the contrary though, contemporary observers of these kinds of advertisements understood that the “servants” in question were actually slaves. As late as 1818, British traveler John M. Duncan remarked on the small, but still existing presence of slave ads in New York.

“Another and a greater abomination, in the newspapers, are the advertisements of Slaves for Sale. These are not indeed frequent in New York papers, although occasionally to be seen.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹³ Ibidem, 10-11.

¹⁹⁴ Jacob D. Wheeler, *A Practical Treatise on the Law of Slavery Being a Compilation of All the Decisions Made on That Subject in the Several Courts of the United States and State Courts. With Copious Notes and References to the Statutes and Other Authorities, Systematically Arranged*. (New York: Allan Pollock Jr., and New Orleans: Benjamin Levy, 1837), 881. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 23, 2025.

¹⁹⁵ Ibidem, 278.

¹⁹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁷ Ibidem, 279.

¹⁹⁸ *New-York Evening Post* (New York, September 22, 1802), 3. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 23, 2025.

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰⁰ John M. Duncan, *Travels Through Part of the United States and Canada in 1818 and 1819. Vol II* (Glasgow; Glasgow University Press, 1823), 251. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 23, 2025.

3.2 The Future of New York's Enslaved Youth and the Promise of 1817

As mentioned in the previous passage, concurrent legislation kept black children in bondage for the next possible decades. In some cases, enslaved children were even kept in bondage until the age of 28. The law was equipped with so many loopholes and detailed exemptions that a New York slaveholder could hold on to their enslaved property for years to come. Simply put, if a child of an enslaved mother was either born before July 4, 1799 or never announced to the local authority, the infant could theoretically remain in servitude for the rest of his or her life.²⁰¹

Some slaveholders were nevertheless inclined to manumit infants either out of economic necessity or even sympathy. In article 10 of the 1801 Slave Codes it stated that a “person entitled to the service of any child ... may ... within one year after its birth, elect to abandon such right”.²⁰² Local authorities, however, did not want to be responsible for these orphaned children, causing article 10 to later be disbanded. As of now, there would be no possible option for slave-owners to free these children. Every slave owner was now barred “from abandoning” any enslaved child, until they reached “the age of twenty one years, and if a female ... the age of eighteen years”.²⁰³ Consequently, at the start of the nineteenth century, every slaveholder in the state was required by law to keep children enslaved for the foreseeable future.

This prolonging of child slavery, however, did ruffle some feathers amongst familiar anti-slavery advocates. Supporters of the *Abolition Bill* were enraged by these kinds of alterations and conditions to the law. They seemed especially aware of the fact that their job was not wholly finished. Representatives of the NYMS reminded lawmakers that “a just and liberal policy” required “that the offspring of those persons held in bondage should be placed” on “an equal footing with other children”.²⁰⁴ They went on to say that enslaved New Yorkers’ “condition, and especially the condition of their children” was “ought to be further ameliorated”.²⁰⁵ According to them, laws also needed to require that “they shall be taught to read before the age of 18 if male, and 16 if female”.²⁰⁶

²⁰¹ Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery”, 133.

²⁰² “Laws of the United States, the State of New York, and New Jersey, Relative to Slaves and the Slave-Trade.” (New York: Collins & Co., 1811), 10. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 23, 2025.

²⁰³ Ibidem, 18-19.

²⁰⁴ “Thursday, January 2. To The Citizens of the State of New-York”, *New-York Evening Post* (New York, January 2, 1817), 2. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 23, 2025.

²⁰⁵ Ibidem.

²⁰⁶ “Legislature of New-York. House of Assembly, Friday, February 21.”, *The Geneva Gazette* (Geneva, March 18, 1812), 2. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 23, 2025.

As the 1810s progressed, the NYMS became even more vocal about their position on the issue of child slavery. Children were the ones “on whom the law” showed “no cheering ray of hope”.²⁰⁷ In December 1816, President of the NYMS Cadwallader Colden described his grievances with the legal limbo African American children found themselves in.

“Who then are slaves? None that are under seventeen years of age. The youngest have probably, in most instances, compensated for the rifling expenses of their unproductive childhood.”²⁰⁸

The president of the NYMS went on to acknowledge the difficulties black families faced in New York. In most cases, the complicated nature of abolition policy had caused there to be multiple legal statuses within African American households. To put it bluntly, some of their relatives were free, while others remained in bondage. Colden stated that a lot of “these unfortunates” who were still enslaved, had “brothers and sisters, or children, or grand-children” that were free.²⁰⁹

Gradual abolition had, according to the NYMS, caused a convoluted legal situation that showed no signs of solving itself for the foreseeable future. The thousands of black adults and children still in bondage needed a fixed date of emancipation.²¹⁰ As white New Yorkers gained more sympathetic views towards the plight of enslaved children, their representatives spurred into action. On January 28, 1817, Governor DeWitt Clinton, “sent a message to the legislature recommending the entire abolition of slavery in the State of New-York to take place on the fourth day of July, 1827”.²¹¹ Emphatically, the “final abolition of slaves in this state” now had a set time window.²¹² Simply put, New Yorkers wanted to move on from the issue and the 1817 proposition would serve as “the last general act on the subject”.²¹³ Even though countless enslaved people undoubtedly sighed at the thought of lawful emancipation, they knew they had to be sceptical of promises that the law supposedly gave them. Even though Independence Day, 1827 was announced, numerous black New Yorkers were kept enslaved for years to come.

²⁰⁷ *New-York Evening Post* (New York, January 2, 1817), 2.

²⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

²¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹¹ Hammond, *The History of Political Parties in the State of New-York*, 432.

²¹² *New-York Evening Post* (New York, January 2, 1817), 2.

²¹³ “Abolition of Slavery”, *Republican Monitor* (Cazenovia, July 11, 1827), 4.
<https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 26, 2025.

3.3 Dutch-speaking Runaways, The Long-awaited Demise of Slavery, and Total Abolition

Even though general abolition was to be promised in 1827, private lives of black New Yorkers in the first decades of the 1800s were still marked by the brutality of slavery. In these turbulent decades, these people endured violence while trying and sometimes even succeeding in emancipation. As was the case in the 1809 prosecution of Amos Broad. This particular slaveholder was accused of beating a servant mother named Betty and her little three-year-old daughter Sarah on numerous occasions. One of Broad's "various acts of cruelty" was that of pouring hot boiling water on both mother and child.²¹⁴ Many witnesses believed that Amos Broad was "to be sentenced to be hanged".²¹⁵ However, the judge took "into consideration" that enslaved mother and child were manumitted by the Broad family after the arrest.²¹⁶ Subsequently, the judge lowered Broad's expected sentence to sixty days in prison and demanded him to pay a fine of 500 dollars. This kind of criminal brutality was, however, not unique. A contemporary source noted that even though these crimes were "often committed", they "seldom reached the ears of a tribunal of justice" because the enslaved victims' "unhappy condition" halted "them from making their complaint on oath".²¹⁷ As it turned out, black people's testimonies were deemed as inadmissible in court.

As enslaved New Yorkers seemed to have no legal rights, they knew they had to find other ways to escape bondage and cruelty. Despite the fact that abolition was promised in the immediate future, a lot of African Americans felt that they could not afford to wait that long. They chose to run away. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, runaway slave ads remained visible in New York newspapers. An interesting phenomenon, due to the fact that slavery's legality had become increasingly questionable. And moreover, a significant amount of these runaway slave ads were made by New Yorkers of Dutch descent. All along the lower and upper Hudson Valley they demanded the return of runaways that predominantly spoke both English and Dutch. Historian Michael Douma even went as far to state that the "number of Dutch-speaking runaways peaked ... in the decade 1800-1809".²¹⁸

²¹⁴ "The Trial of Amos Broad and His Wife, On Three Several Indictments for Assaulting and Beating Betty, a Slave, and Her Little Female Child Sarah, Aged Three Years." (New York: Henry C. Southwick, 1809), 30. <https://go.gale.com/>, accessed May 26, 2025.

²¹⁵ Ibidem, 29.

²¹⁶ Ibidem, 30.

²¹⁷ Ibidem, 31.

²¹⁸ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 134.

For example, in 1806, a certain Long Islander named Gerrit Van Den Veer advocated for the return of a man named “Frank or Francis”, who spoke “both low Dutch and English”.²¹⁹ In June of that year, Abraham Van Neste out of Montgomery County put out an ad to retrieve a man named *Pedro* who additionally spoke “low Dutch and English”.²²⁰ In both of these cases, the slaveholders in question were both from rural areas and promised the unremarkable reward of twenty dollars for the return of their property. Likewise, a few years later in Rensselaer County, another slave-owner promised to pay a twenty-dollar reward for the return of a man named Joe, who also spoke “Low Dutch”.²²¹

As the first decade turned into the second one, and more abolitionist legislation was promised, the practical realities of slavery still enticed black New Yorkers to run away. As the years progressed and the Dutch language continuously faded away, clear mentions of bilingual runaways became less pronounced. Even so, lineages of Dutch ancestry could still be found. Notably, aforementioned historian Michael Douma did not remark on the phenomenon of Dutch surnames becoming anglicized over time. By the nineteenth century, New Yorkers of Dutch descent had altered their names in order to integrate more easily. This process of anglicization can also be seen amongst slave owners. In 1812, a man called Charles ran away from his master William Dutcher out of TarryTown, Westchester County.²²² The name ‘Dutcher’ was most likely an anglicized version of the Dutch word *Duijster*, or *Duister*.

As the years progressed, rewards for runaways became symbolically low. This change was mostly caused by the fact that runaway slaves were less likely to be returned to their owners.²²³ In 1814, Phillip Waggoner asked for the return of his “apprentice” Robert for the emblematic low reward of six cents.²²⁴ Like the surname Dutcher, Waggoner was altered from its origins, probably originating from the Dutch word *Wagenaar*. As these symbolically low rewards suggested, most white New Yorkers had given up on the return of their human property. Most of the state began to abandon the idea that the institution of slavery was

²¹⁹ “Stop the Runaway”, *The New-York Evening Post* (New York, April 17, 1806), 3. nyshistoricnewspapers.org, accessed May 26 2025.

²²⁰ “Twenty Dollars Reward”, *Catskill Recorder* (Catskill, June 8, 1806), 3. nyshistoricnewspapers.org, accessed May 26 2025.

²²¹ “Twenty Dollars Reward”, *Lansingburgh Gazette* (Troy, January 3, 1809), 3. nyshistoricnewspapers.org, accessed May 26 2025.

²²² “20 Dollars Reward”, *The New-York Evening Post* (New York, December 3, 1812), 7. nyshistoricnewspapers.org, accessed May 26 2025.

²²³ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 137.

²²⁴ “Six Cents Reward!”, *Ontario Repository* (Canandaigua, June 21, 1814), 3. nyshistoricnewspapers.org, accessed May 26 2025.

salvageable or sustainable in the immediate future. And even more so, the subsequent years furthered their suspicion that slavery was on its way out.

As the long-awaited year of 1827 arrived, the debate around emancipation had turned into something indistinguishable. Northern whites were now more concerned with criticizing the villainous southern slave states. The fact that more than 10,000 people were still waiting for their liberation in a northern state like New York, was a detail that did not particularly strengthen their arguments against the south.²²⁵ Thankfully to many white New Yorkers though, slavery was soon to be completely absent from both politics and the public's view. Accordingly, mainstream white newspapers provided little coverage on Independence Day, 1827. To black New Yorkers though, this day served as a monumental state of affairs. German Duke Karl Berhard remarked on celebrations he had seen in the streets of New York City, recalling that "scarcely any but black faces were to be seen in Broadway".²²⁶ Additionally, the *Freeman's Journal*, a black-owned newspaper, described the meaningfulness of the event.

"The emancipation of the black population by the extinction of slavery must be viewed as an event of no ordinary magnitude in the annals of New-York, and will hereafter occupy a proud place upon the page of History that records the acts of a great republic and of an enlightened liberal age."²²⁷

Another newspaper confirmed its general belief that slavery was to be a thing of the past. Truly, public opinion adhered to the sense that "after the fourth day of July next ... slavery will be unknown to the laws of our state".²²⁸ The *Republican Monitor* even claimed that slave-owners had voluntarily and lawfully freed enslaved New Yorkers after 1827, and that technical loopholes to keep children enslaved had been "generally neglected".²²⁹ Reality however showed how far some "former" slaveholders were willing to go in order to keep profiting from the now banned institution.

²²⁵ Rael, "The Long Death of Slavery", 139.

²²⁶ Karl Bernhard, *Travels Through North America. Vol I* (Philadelphia: Carley, Leah & Carey, 1828), 132. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 27, 2025.

²²⁷ *Greene County Republican* (Catskill, July 4, 1827), 1. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 27, 2025.

²²⁸ "Abolition of Slavery", *Republican Monitor* (Cazenovia, July 11, 1827), 4. <https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>, accessed May 27, 2025.

²²⁹ *Ibidem*.

3.4 The Aftermath of Manumission and Dutch New Yorkers' Last Stand in the Court System

As slavery became “unknown to the laws” of the Empire State, some African Americans felt confident enough to try their luck in the legal system. In 1826, a black man named Ackeston filed a lawsuit against his former owner that would go all the way to the State Supreme Court. Ackeston was born in 1798, just a year shy of the initial emancipatory birth date, and so was required by law to remain a “servant till he was 28”.²³⁰ His owner was part of the Livingston family, one of the wealthiest and powerful families of New York. The Livingstons were descendents of a Scottish preacher that settled and intermarried in Holland, and whose children left for the colony of New Netherland.²³¹ As late as 1819, the descendent of this old-time dynasty had bought Ackeston from another man. The court understood his position to be that of “a slave” or a “servant” as he was sold for the remarkable price of 200 dollars.²³² Interestingly though, the domestic slave trade within New York’s borders had been practically outlawed by then. Ackeston, while undoubtedly aware of the illegality of his sale, had become “dissatisfied” with his predicament and had asked another New Yorker to purchase and free him.²³³

Now a free man, Ackeston had sued Livingston because he believed he was owed compensation for his work. According to the former slave, contemporary laws demonstrated that he “was, in fact, a freeman” at the time of his “employment” to Livingston.²³⁴ Subsequently, the defense counsel “moved for a nonsuit, on the ground that there was no contract to pay wages, and none could be implied, between the parties”.²³⁵ But Livingston’s “motion was overruled”.²³⁶ The initial failure of this appeal served as a small victory for Ackeston, but he would soon be devastatingly disappointed by the Courts’ final verdict. The Judge came to “an understanding that no compensation should be given” to the former slave, simply because Ackeston’s work was done “with his knowledge and approbation”.²³⁷ This

²³⁰ Esek Cowen, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court; and in the Court for the Trial of Impeachments and the Correction of Errors, of the State of New York. Vol V* (New York: Banks & Brothers, 1864), 532. <https://static.case.law/>, accessed May 27, 2025.

²³¹ Frederic De Peyster, *A Biographical Sketch of Robert R. Livingston: Read Before the N.Y. Historical Society, October 3, 1876* (New York: New York Historical Society Publishing, 1876), 1-12. <https://heinonline.org/>, accessed May 7, 2025.

²³² Cowen, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court*, 531.

²³³ *Ibidem*.

²³⁴ *Ibidem*.

²³⁵ *Ibidem*.

²³⁶ *Ibidem*.

²³⁷ *Ibidem*.

particular court case demonstrates to us that the contemporary law remained on the side of the former slave owners, in spite of the fact that their conduct had been illegal for years.

Even though it seems rational to compensate formerly enslaved workers for their free services, white New Yorkers at the time believed that it should be the complete opposite. In most cases of forceful manumission, New York's last slaveholders were seeking reimbursement from the state for both their loss of revenue, and for the care of the formerly enslaved. Unfortunately for the owners though, the aforementioned slave codes of 1801 ordained that they had to tend to the needs of "retirees" that were "above the age of fifty years".²³⁸ Even though the government wanted these former slaves accounted for, the state was convinced that slave owners in particular, and not local overseers of the poor, should have to pay for this kind of social security. Thus, the state's last and final slave owners became increasingly anxious about this proposed arrangement. Afraid of the financial burden older slaves might become in future years, white New Yorkers began manumitting them just before they turned fifty. Aforementioned chairman of the NYMS, Cadwallader Colden described the inherent issue with this phenomenon when he acknowledged that these "frequent manumissions" were "made less from humanity" and more from financial "interest".²³⁹

Amongst the state's last anxious slave owners were the New Yorkers of Dutch ancestry. As these kinds of slave owners were the most conservative they held onto their enslaved property the longest.²⁴⁰ William Ingraham Kip, a New Yorker proud of his Dutch heritage, wrote with nostalgia about the country of his youth in his 1872 book, *The Olden Time in New York*. He remarked on his early experiences with African Americans in "service". He stated that his "father owned slaves for domestic servants", and that he "well remembers, when visiting the place of a relative on the Hudson River, seeing the number of slaves about the house".²⁴¹ As Kip himself was born in 1811, the time period he alluded to would have most likely been the 1820s.²⁴² Kip noted that as "the system [of slavery] was just going out; it had lost its interesting features, and the slaves, still remaining at these old places, had become a source of care and anxiety for their owners".²⁴³

²³⁸ "Laws Relative to Slaves and the Slave-Trade", 6.

²³⁹ *New-York Evening Post* (New York, January 2, 1817), 2.

²⁴⁰ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 32.

²⁴¹ William I. Kip, *The Olden Time In New York. By a Member of the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons), 28. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 28, 2025.

²⁴² *Ibidem*, 1.

²⁴³ *Ibidem*, 28.

As the nineteenth century progressed, and the system gradually lost its foothold in society, it became clear that the financial burden of emancipation would not lie at the hands of former slave owners. Like in many other northern states, former slaves were stuck with the economic implications and realities of obtaining freedom.²⁴⁴ And even if northern slave owners were able to keep the bulk of the profits from years of free labor, they still demanded compensation for their supposed losses.²⁴⁵ Interestingly, in accordance with their stigma amongst outsiders, Dutch New Yorkers remained devoutly frugal when it concerned their property rights. Both before and after Independence Day, 1827, New Yorkers with Dutch surnames sued each other for financial “crimes” that were committed years prior. These court cases, some of which spanned across decades, mostly revolved around compensation for past services of enslaved people.

In the early 1820s, a plaintiff simply called Oothout sued one of his business associates in order to “recover damages”, for the “deceit in the sale of a negro wench”.²⁴⁶ This case eventually even reached the State Supreme Court in 1822. At the time of the sale, back in 1814, the defendant had claimed that “the wench” was “good and sound” as he “did not mention that she had any defect or disease”.²⁴⁷ Subsequently, Oothout bought the enslaved woman for the price of 140 dollars. Subsequently, the new owner quickly found out that this “servant” was “subject to lethargic fits, and was of no value”.²⁴⁸ While the plaintiff sought out compensation for this “fraud”, the defense lawyer made a final argument. Prominent attorney Levi Beardsley defended his client by stating that the plaintiff was aware of the woman’s deteriorating health at the time of the sale. Regardless, the plaintiff won the case. Despite the fact that slavery was on its legal way out, Oothout received the compensation of “162 dollars and 72 cents” from the defendant. While these slave owners dabbled over reimbursement, the court case records revealed nothing about the fate of the enslaved women in question.²⁴⁹

Besides suing other slave owners, Dutch New Yorkers were sometimes even inclined to indict their own family members over profits made from slavery. Even well after general emancipation in 1827. A civil case in Rensselaer County demonstrated to what extent wealthy families were willing to go in order to “recover the value” of their human property.

²⁴⁴ Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, “Philanthropy at Bargain Prices. Notes on the Economics of Gradual Emancipation”, in: *The Journal of Legal Studies* 3:2 (June 1974): 377-401, 378-379.

²⁴⁵ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 180.

²⁴⁶ William Johnson, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Judicature; and in the Court for the Trial of Impeachments and the Correction of Errors in the State of New York* (Albany: E. F. Backus, 1823): 277-280, 277. <https://books.google.com/nl/>, accessed May 28, 2025.

²⁴⁷ Ibidem.

²⁴⁸ Ibidem.

²⁴⁹ Ibidem, 278-279.

In 1829, Harpert Van Deusen, jr. was sued by his half-sister Nancy Van Epps and her husband Evert for the reimbursement of the services of a “female slave named Ann”. This particular family dispute would last decades and span multiple generations. According to Nancy, her aunt Maritie Witbeck had “bequeathed” her the service of a slave girl named Ann when she died in 1787.²⁵⁰ As Nancy was only 14 years old at the time, her father Harpert Van Deusen, sr. obtained “the benefit of the infant’s property”.²⁵¹ This ownership did not last for long though, as Ann died at “the early age of 24 or 25”.²⁵² Even so, according to the concurrent laws, her father “had no right ... to receive the services of the slave”.²⁵³ Throughout the rest of his life, father Harpert promised his daughter he would reimburse her for this supposed embezzlement. However, he died in 1827 before he could ever make a payment.²⁵⁴ Even though she received a significant inheritance from her father, Nancy Van Epps and her husband were still not deterred from suing their family members for the supposed “assets” of a deceased servant girl.²⁵⁵ Despite it being years after the death of Ann and the illegalization of slavery, Mrs. Van Epps was still willing to squeeze any last possible value out of slavery. The court, however, disagreed with Nancy. Primarily, with the case spanning so many years, the judge felt that this bill had to be “dismissed” as it had reached the statute of limitations. He also stated that “further litigation in this matter would only subject the complainants to a useless and unnecessary expense”.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁰ Charles Edwards, *Reports of Chancery Cases Decided In the First Circuit of the State of New-York. Vol IV* (New York: Gould, Banks & Co., 1837): 64-77, 65. <https://static.case.law/>, accessed May 28, 2025.

²⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 71.

²⁵² *Ibidem*,

²⁵³ *Ibidem*.

²⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 65.

²⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 76.

²⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 77.

3.5 Remaining in Bondage in Every Sense but Name

As Dutch slave owners were making a desperate last attempt to keep enslaved people as practically unpaid servants, abolitionist northerners were congratulating themselves for a job well done. As the 1830s progressed, the issue of slavery turned national and these Yankees padded themselves on the back for their altruistic endeavors in their home state. Contrary to the southern slave states, progressivism had won a peaceful battle. William Jay, the aforementioned son of former Governor and NYMS president John Jay, described the apparent success of gradual abolition in 1835.

“In New York, the white population so greatly exceeded the black, that no jealousy was entertained of the free negroes, and no inconvenience experienced in uniting free and slave labor.”²⁵⁷

To the defense of Jay, the law also displayed the possibility of “uniting free and slave labor”. In the eyes of manumission advocates, one could be proud that emancipation had been realized in a civilized and lawful manner. Furthermore, new *Revised Statutes* provided New Yorkers with the reassurance that slavery was now officially abandoned. Its eleventh article clearly stated the annulment of slave sales and contracts.

“Every indenture, bond, or contract, for personal service ... hereafter be made, or entered into, by any person, who has been held or possessed as a slave ..., shall be utterly void; and all such contracts, made by any person who has been held as a slave within this state, shall also be void”.²⁵⁸

As white abolitionist northerners saw the future with rose tinted glasses, their African American counterparts remained well aware of their reality. Regardless of the fact that slave contracts might have been outlawed on paper, real conditions of black New Yorkers did not dramatically change in the following years. Still, white New Yorkers remained afraid of what a “jealous” black underclass might do after being freed. Questions arose about how and what freed persons could contribute to society after their emancipation. On July 4, 1827, the local newspaper, the *Greene County Republican*, wondered what the fate of freed men and women

²⁵⁷ “The Anti-Slavery Record. Vol. I, For 1835.” (New York: R. G. Williams, 1835), 56. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 30, 2025.

²⁵⁸ “Selections from Revised Statutes of the State of New York. Containing All the Laws of the State Relative to Slaves, and the Law Relative to the Offence of Kidnapping; Which Several Laws Commenced and Took Effect January 1, 1830. Together with Extracts from the Laws of the United States, Respecting Slaves.” (New York: Vanderpool & Cole, 1830), 6. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 30, 2025.

would become. As there was no clear plan for emancipated slaves, this newspaper argued that it was “very important, if possible, to prevent” African Americans “from flocking into our large cities where there” was “but little for them to do”.²⁵⁹ Consequently, the rural slaveholding communities of Dutch descent made sure that their newly emancipated servants remained in the countryside.

Due to the efforts of their “former” slave owners, a large number of African Americans decided to stay and work in the countryside. As their rural Dutch American owners wanted “to retain them in their service or in the cultivation of their lands”, they began to promise fair wages and labor contracts.²⁶⁰ And seemingly, these kinds of “arrangements” were deemed as “mutually beneficial” by contemporary sources.²⁶¹ Even so, later evidence showed that the societal status of freed persons did not change much within these agricultural communities. In actuality, only their denunciation was altered. Domestic slaves became known as “servants”, enslaved farm workers were coined simply as “field hands”, and children in bondage would now be named “apprentices”. Furthermore, in some cases, infants born before 1827 remained in “apprenticeship” until 1848.²⁶²

In the overwhelmingly Dutch American countryside, slavery was still prevalent in everything but name. Even though black New Yorkers obtained a growing sense of independence and better leverage in negotiations, they commonly found themselves in a similar predicament as their ancestors.²⁶³ For instance, in the *Genealogical Compilation* of the Hardenbergh family, it stated that a certain Joanna Hardenbergh was married “using the old marriage ceremony of the Dutch Reformed Church”.²⁶⁴ This family registry, however, also stated that Joanna and her husband “were accompanied by a negro servant, Margaret Staats, who remained in the family until 1868”.²⁶⁵ Even so, legal emancipation did provide African Americans with more agency and freedom of movement than ever before. Rosanna Vosburgh, born into slavery within the prominent Vosburgh family of Rensselaerswyck, heard of the prospects of emancipation and left her ancestral home to find work in Albany. Around 1821, Rosanna found work as a domestic servant for Thomas Olcott, at the Ten Broeck mansion. For the rest of her life, she worked as a servant of the Olcott family until her death

²⁵⁹ *Greene County Republican* (Catskill, July 4, 1827), 1.

²⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

²⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

²⁶² Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery”, 133-134.

²⁶³ Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*, 153-156.

²⁶⁴ Myrtle Hardenbergh-Miller, *The Hardenbergh Family; a Genealogical Compilation* (New York: The American Historical Company, 1958), 124. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 30, 2025.

²⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

in 1884. Her gravestone simply reads that Rosanna Vosburgh was “for 63 years a faithful colored servant in the family of Thomas W. Olcott”.²⁶⁶

In the subsequent decades of the nineteenth century, women like Margaret Staats and Rosanna Vosburgh were still everywhere to be seen in New York. And regardless of the fact that these women obtained legal freedom, they undoubtedly witnessed unspeakable forms of prejudice and segregation in their lifetimes. Even though white New Yorkers still judged the southern slave states for their sins, they treated their only recently manumitted slaves as second-class citizens. Numerous contemporary sources report how white New Yorkers really regarded their black counterparts. One English observer gave an example of the hypocrisy he witnessed.

“That although New York is a free state, it is only on parchment, the Black and Coloured Americans being practically and politically slaves; thus showing that the laws of the mind are, after all, infinitely more strong and more effective than those of the statute book.”²⁶⁷

Rural Dutch New Yorkers did not particularly have more tolerant sentiments. When a Dutch preacher visited the countryside in 1827, he was baffled by the segregation he witnessed even amongst the lower classes. He wrote that he was “astounded to see that people in the northern provinces of the United States”, a place where it was “entirely unnecessary”, subjected “the blacks and the coloureds to complete contempt”.²⁶⁸ The preacher then went on to give multiple examples of this kind of “contempt”. He stated that a “white farmhand or servant girl would not even share a table with the Negroes of Mulattos”, and that the two races sat “in their own respective benches” in church.²⁶⁹

As the years progressed, the age-old legacies of slavery, servitude, and prejudice had marked the lives of the individuals that grew up in the Empire State’s culturally distinct countryside. In 1852, the aforementioned lawyer Levi Beardsley reminisced on his childhood in Cooperstown, Otsego County. He recalled that as a boy, he often got into altercations with

²⁶⁶ “Rosanna Vosburgh (1800-1884) [Section 53 Lot 12]”, *Albany Rural Cemetery Explorer*. <https://www.albany.edu/>, accessed May 30, 2025.

²⁶⁷ Zachary Macaulay, *Negro Slavery: Or a View of Some of the More Prominent Feature of that State of Society, As It Exists in the United States of America and in the Colonies of the West Indies, Especially in Jamaica* (London: R. Taylor, 1823), 19-20. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 30, 2025.

²⁶⁸ “Eene Zomerreis in Noord-Amerika” in: *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* 1 (Amsterdam, NL: G. S. Leeneman Van Der Kroe & J. W. IJntema, 1827): 622 - 628, 626. <https://www.dbnl.org/>, accessed May 30, 2025.

²⁶⁹ Ibidem.

a certain group of “Dutch boys”. Levi stated that these Dutch boys “were very much inclined to flog the ‘Yankees’, as they called us”.²⁷⁰ Even though the Dutch and English youth did not get along, they did unanimously bully one particular boy for his appearance. As Beardsley described, “a negro who used to go to school was frequently duped and made the laughing stock”. On one occasion, they “made him believe he could fly, and persuaded him to jump from the highest part of a shed, some fourteen feet to the frozen ground”. Ike, the black boy’s name, nearly broke his neck due to the fall. Interestingly, Levi Beardsley proudly described other instances, trivializing the bullying as nothing more than “boyish pranks”.²⁷¹ Although these “youthful indiscretions” were harmless according to Beardsley, nothing more has been written on Ike’s fate.²⁷² Levi Beardsley and his fellow friends later became respectable lawyers, politicians, and businessmen in the County and the State.²⁷³ All the while, Ike’s fate remains a complete and utter mystery.

²⁷⁰ Levi Beardsley, *Reminiscences. Personal and Other Incidents; Early Settlement of Otsego County; Notices and Anecdotes of Public Men; Judicial, Legal And Legislative Matters; Field Sports; Dissertations and Discussions* (New York: Charles Vinten, 1852), 69. <https://archive.org/>, accessed May 30, 2025.

²⁷¹ Ibidem.

²⁷² Ibidem, 70.

²⁷³ Ibidem.

Conclusion

Although modern New Yorkers may regard themselves as some of the most liberal and tolerant citizens of the United States, the Empire State's complex and somewhat painful history of slavery tells us that we cannot escape the inhumane foundations the country as a whole was founded upon. Historical revisionism and a serious lack of education on the matter has caused both nineteenth and twenty-first century cosmopolitan New Yorkers to share the same incomplete truth. Namely, that the issue of slavery was only visible in the South. This phenomenon can be attributed to the lasting memory and impact of the Civil War that has made us nowadays still regard the history of slavery in a simplistic and dualistic manner.

In other words, current Americans still believe that the northern states were inherently anti-slavery, while southerners were the only ones that fought to the bitter end to keep the institution alive. In the end, the Union won the war, which meant that northerners were able to rewrite themselves as the heroes who saved the nation and freed the slaves. Even though this narrative is partly true of course, history shows us that reality is often more nuanced. As a matter of fact, southerners were not the only ones willing to go above and beyond to keep humans in bondage. Mere decades before the Civil War, not unlike their southern counterparts, New York slave owners were holding on to slavery. After all, even though these northerners used a less violent form of resistance, they still waged war against abolition just the same.

And as concluded in the previous chapters, the Empire State's most prominent slavery defenders were of Dutch descent. However, this research has not only tried to answer if New York's conservative and rural slave owners were predominately Dutch, but more so why and how they tried so hard to keep slavery. Through private, public, legal, and legislative sources, it is safe to say we have found answers to these kinds of questions. And even though Dutch New Yorkers were naturally reserved in displaying their attitude towards slavery in public, they showed their true colors in other ways.

First of all, the initial chapter highlighted how this community's traditionalized form of slavery was established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As large European families settled in the colony of New Netherland, corporate interests and real estate opportunities caused these first colonists to introduce human bondage into the area. Even

though bringing in forced labor was not necessarily unique at the time, Dutch-American slavery did become quite distinctive in nature. As the use of slavery expanded, the addition of multiple enslaved servants and farmhands to the domestic sphere increasingly became the status quo. As a result, throughout multiple colonial administrations, the elite families of the province kept their domesticated use of slavery alive and well. Even though this use of enslaved labor in actuality predominately served as a financial investment and status symbol, New Yorkers of Dutch descent presented their use of it as more benign, traditional, familial, and vital to their agricultural communities than any other system of slavery. Aforementioned evidence, however, exhibited a different reality. As tensions in the Americas began to rise in the eighteenth century, domestic life for enslaved people in Dutch communities remained marked by both violence and resistance. Brutal punishments were not infrequent, and many afflicted by this violence decided to run away from their Dutch slave masters.

Nonetheless, as the United States was established after the Revolution, and debates around the continuation of slavery became common, New York's slave society began to entrench itself into politics. Progressively, New Yorkers of Dutch descent justified their use of slavery as something deep-rooted in their culturally distinct communities and voting districts. Dutch New Yorkers' identity became inherently associated with their ideological beliefs like conservatism and the preservation of slavery. This connection between Dutch New Yorkers and slavery would in turn become palpable in state politics. And as rural New York obtained more say in state affairs, New York City's abolitionist movement obtained an easily identifiable foe. As John Jay and other members of the New York Manumission Society often proclaimed, reactionary opposition came by the hands of Dutch slave-owning farmers. As a result, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, this particular voting bloc successfully obstructed any kind of abolitionist legislation for years. And when it finally did come in 1799 in the form of the *Gradual Abolition Act*, anti-slavery policy had been so weakened by years of debates, campaigns, filibusters, and revisions that freedom for all New Yorkers was still out of reach for decades to come.

Furthermore, as the third chapter established, the realities of emancipation for enslaved New Yorkers were not as hopeful as white abolitionists had made it out to be. Obtaining freedom in New York in the early nineteenth century completely depended upon the specific conditions and details of convoluted state laws. Moreover, as the circumstances by which an enslaved person could be freed were entirely controlled by either slave owners themselves or other white authorities, numerous appeals of manumissions were simply delayed, burdened, or flat-out refused. So, even though general abolition was to be promised

in the upcoming years, many black New Yorkers still tried to take matters into their own hands. And as the conservative Dutch tended to keep humans in bondage the longest, many of their Dutch-speaking slaves decided to run away. Regardless, the intrinsic nature of domestic servitude, fragile emancipatory legislation, and the lasting impact of circumstantial freedom all contributed to rural Dutch New York keeping black New Yorkers in a state of second-class citizenship. Even though slavery became illegal in 1827, “former” slave masters of Dutch descent profited off of slavery for years after its nullification by cunningly utilizing loopholes in the legal system. And as a result, the relationship between human bondage and rural Dutch New York remains an undeniable aspect of New York’s legacy that cannot be ignored.

In conclusion, as the three chapters have demonstrated, three major factors have resulted in rural Dutch New Yorkers helping and succeeding in keeping slavery afloat. First, the deep-rooted colonial and early American background of domesticated slavery caused a tremendously conservative slave-owning constituency. Second, this rural anti-abolitionist Dutch voting bloc gridlocked oncoming emancipatory laws by utilizing their political and economic influence. And third, as they realized that the continuation of legal slavery had become too unrealistic, Dutch New Yorkers enforced every rule in the book in order to keep taking advantage of it. By interchangeably applying these three factors, this thesis has helped to shed light on the role of the New York Dutch, an often forgotten social group, within New York slavery, an even more neglected part of American history.

Nevertheless, just as the Civil War cannot merely be described as a conflict between pro- and anti-slavery forces, some nuance has to be afforded to this specific topic. For instance, like Andrea Mosterman has stated, not all New Yorkers of Dutch descent were either slaveholders or in favor of keeping the institution alive. On the contrary, some Dutch surnames can even be found within the member’s list of the New York Manumission Society. Additionally, not all abolitionists referred to previously can be proclaimed as a true ally of the African American community. Some, like John Jay himself, even capitalized off of black servitude for years. And most retrospectively, even though this entire research has pitted the supposed anti-slavery Anglophone New Yorkers against the Dutch pro-slavery camp, the two groups did not differentiate much in the grand scheme of things. Primarily, as Nicole Maskiell has explained in her previous works, numerous Dutch and English families merged as their elite position in society outweighed their cultural differences. Furthermore, even though pro- and anti-slavery politicians may have disagreed ideologically, they were all still part of the same upper-class. Quite frequently actually, some of these elite members of

society were business associates and even friends. For these New Yorkers, heated debates around slavery were simply political in nature and nothing more. Their privileged position excluded them from the realities of human bondage.

For other New Yorkers though, slavery and the issue of emancipation was something that could not escape daily life. While politicians in Albany interchanged political arguments in their long meetings, black New Yorkers ran away to escape harsh punishment or negotiated their own enslavement for the possible freedom of their children. And here lies the truth of the matter. In order to gain a more broad sense of the history of slavery and emancipation in New York, more sources have to be ascertained that can highlight African American agency. Undoubtedly though, aspects like these were not fully integrated in this research due to its investigative and logistical limitations. Therefore, further exploration on this subject is absolutely necessary. Even though I myself have stumbled upon a great lack of reliable sources on this matter, recently reinvigorated interest in this subject by historians like Andrea Mosterman and Michael Douma have assured me that more thorough research can, and will be done.

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