

# New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance

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In opinion essays in *The New York Times*, Brent Staples (Staples, 2000: IV, 18:1) and Eric Foner (Foner, 2000) challenged historians and teachers to rethink the way we think about and teach about slavery in the United States, especially slavery and the Northern states. According to Foner, “(o)n the eve of the Civil War, the economic value of slaves in the United States was \$3 billion in 1860 currency [approximately \$60 billion today], more than the combined value of all the factories, railroads and banks in the country. Much of the North’s economic prosperity derived from what Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, called ‘the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil.’”

Staples, a *Times* editor, described how New York City’s ties with slavery go back deep into its colonial past. The Dutch, who built New Amsterdam, “recruited settlers with an advertisement that promised to provide them with slaves who ‘would accomplish more work for their masters, at less expense than [white] farm servants, who must be bribed to go thither by a great deal of money and promises.’” Enslaved Africans helped build Trinity Church, the streets of the early city and a wooden fortification located where Wall Street is today.

The “New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance” curriculum guide opens with an examination of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and then follows the history of New York State from the original Dutch settlement at the beginning of the seventeenth century through the end of the American Civil War. It focuses on the position and contributions of people of African ancestry in New York during this period and on the roles played by the citizens of New York in both maintaining and challenging the slave system. The curriculum guide is designed to be part of the New York State human rights curriculum, to help students achieve New York State social studies standards, and to facilitate document-based instruction that prepares students to be historians, social scientists and critical thinkers. Major document collections consulted include Aptheker, 1973; Donnan, 1969; Katz, 1995; and O’Callaghan, 1856. It is organized chronologically and modeled on the state’s Great Irish Famine curriculum guide (New York State Education Department, 2001). While the opening sections focus on the downstate area, other regions of the state are included as European settlers spread north and west.

## 1. Historical Background for the “New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance” Curriculum Guide

The voyage of Christopher Columbus from Spain to the Caribbean in 1492 set in motion forces that transformed the world. As the nations of Western Europe competed for trade and colonies, they used the labor of enslaved Africans, the indigenous population of the Western Hemisphere and indentured Europeans, the resources and land of the Americas, and trade with East Asia, to amass a level and concentration of wealth previously unknown in the world. The investment of this wealth in building the physical infrastructure of European nations, in military might, in new world plantations, in creating commercial and banking networks, and later in new technologies and industries, was an essential element in the nascent industrial revolution in Great Britain and eventually led to European global domination (Williams, 1944; Blackburn, 1997: 572-573).

A major factor in the global transformation was the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which was dominated in

different periods by Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, England and North Americans from the United States. Between 1600 and the 1860s, the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade provided between nine and eleven million (records are incomplete and estimates vary) enslaved African workers who produced valuable cash crops, principally sugar, but also tobacco, indigo, rice and later cotton, on new world plantations. This vast forced migration changed the demographic and cultural patterns of the world and provided the profits that financed industrial capitalism. For background on the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade see Blackburn, 1997; Braudel, 1982; Klein, 1999; Thomas, 1997; Walvin, 1999; and Williams, 1944.

For most of their first 200 years of history (1624-1824), the territories that would become New York City and New York State were lightly populated and on the margins of these changes. While enslaved Africans were a major portion of the population (between one-fifth and one-third in some counties) and workforce in the “downstate” area (Long Island, New York City and the Hudson River Valley), the growth of

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the slave system in New York was restricted by the failure to develop a major commercial cash crop for export. For background on Africans in New York see Gellman & Quigley, 2003; Hodges, 1999; Katz, 1997; McManus, 1966; Singer, 2003a, b, c, d.

Gradually during this era, the New York region (both city and state) grew in importance. The population of what would be New York State increased from 19,000 people in 1700, to 200,000 in 1780, and to over 1.3 million in 1820. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, New York City was a major economic, political and social leader in the new North American nation, the United States of America, and in the global system previously dominated by Western European countries. Even though a gradual emancipation act was passed in 1799 and New Yorkers celebrated the end of slavery in the state in 1827, the port of New York continued as the financial center of the illegal trans-Atlantic Slave Trade up until the 1860s. For an overview of New York history see Burrows & Wallace, 1999; Klein, 2003. For a focus on commerce see Albion, 1961; Foner, P., 1941.

### Complicity's Deep Roots

New York's complicity with slavery had deep roots and involved prominent individuals. For example, the October 2, 1738 issue of *The New York Weekly Journal* included an advertisement calling for the recapture of a runaway fleeing from his Dutchess County "master." He was described as "a copper colored Negro fellow named Jack, aged about 30 years, speaks nothing but English and reads English." A reward of "forty shillings and all reasonable charges" was to be given to whomever "takes up said run away and secures him so his master" or gives notice of him to John Peter Zenger (Hodges & Brown, 1994, 30). Zenger, whom the history text books honor as an early champion of freedom of the press, financed this commitment to "freedom" through complicity with slavery.

In 18th century colonial New York, several well-known families, including the Van Courtlandts, the Schuylers, the van Hornes, the Phillipses and the Livingstons were involved in the slave trade. It is estimated that between one-quarter and one-third of New York City's approximately four hundred merchants participated. Philip Livingston, second lord of the Livingston manor in Dutchess County, conducted extensive trade with the West Indies, including importing enslaved Africans, and was

probably the merchant most involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Besides being a landed aristocrat and a slave trader, Livingston was also a benefactor of Yale University, a New York City alderman, a representative at the 1754 Colonial Convention at Albany, a delegate to the Continental Congress, and a signer of the United States Declaration of Independence. Numerous places in the Hudson Valley still bear his family name and former family homes and estates are state and national historic sites.

Philip Livingston was one of the delegates from New York to sign the Declaration of Independence. Others, Francis Lewis, William Floyd and Lewis Morris, also enslaved Africans. Robert Livingston, one of Philip's sons and his business partner in the slave trade, served on committees drafting the Declaration of Independence and the first New York State constitution.

### 19th Century Sugar and Cotton Merchants

Eric Foner argues that "(a)ccounts of the city's rise to commercial prominence in the 19th century rightly point to the Erie Canal's role in opening access to produce from the West, but they don't talk about the equal importance to the city's prosperity of its control over the South's cotton trade. Because of this connection, New York merchants and bankers were consistently pro-slavery, pressing during the 1840's and 1850's for one concession to the South after another in order to maintain their lucrative access to cotton."

The city's merchant, political and religious elites were inextricably tied into the international system of exploitation of unfree labor for profit. Some indirectly profited from the agricultural commodities, especially sugar and cotton, produced by an enslaved work force. During the 1850s, *The New York Times* regularly published updates on the Cuban sugar market for New York City merchants and bankers in reports issued by a special correspondent that were delivered by steam ship. A front page article in *The New York Times* on November 15, 1852 explained the workings of the Cuban sugar industry, which paid investors two and a half times the normal interest rate on loans and which found it more profitable to smuggle in newly enslaved Africans than to allow for the internal reproduction of its work force.

William Havemeyer, elected mayor of New York City in 1845 and 1848 and again in 1872, was a prominent business leader, director of the Merchants'

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Exchange Bank, president of the Bank of North America, and a major investor in the Pennsylvania Coal Company, the Long Island Railroad and numerous insurance companies. Havemeyer launched his successful political and business careers from the family's sugar refining business. First based in Manhattan and then in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (where a street still bears the Havemeyer name), it later evolved into the American Sugar Company and Domino Sugar. The raw material that provided the initial profit for all of these ventures, sugar, was imported from the deep south and the Caribbean, especially Cuba, which in 1860 produced over a quarter of the world's sugar supply. In all of these places, sugar was produced by slave labor (*New York Daily Tribune*, December 1, 1874).

Moses Taylor, a sugar merchant with offices on South Street at the East River seaport, a finance capitalist and an industrialist, as well as a banker, was another leading member of New York City's financial community. He was a member of the New York City Chamber of Commerce and a major stockholder, board member or officer in firms that later merged with or developed into Citibank, Con Edison, Bethlehem Steel and ATT. Taylor earned commissions for brokering the sale of Cuban sugar in the port of New York, as well as additional fees for exchanging currency and negotiating the New York City Custom's House. He supervised the investment of profits by the sugar planters in United States banks, gas companies, railroads, and real estate, purchased and shipped supplies and machinery to Cuba, operated six of his own boats and numerous chartered vessels in the Cuban trade, repaired and equipped other boats with goods and provisions, provided sugar planters with financing to arrange for land purchases and the acquisition of a labor force, and even supervised the planters' children when they came to New York City as students or to serve as apprentices for mercantile firms.

As a result of his success in the sugar trade, Taylor became a member of the board of the City Bank in 1837, and served as its president from 1855 until his death in 1882. In the nineteenth century City Bank, a predecessor of today's Citibank, primarily issued short term credits to locally based merchants to facilitate the import-export trade. Taylor's personal resources and role as business agent for the leading exporter of Cuban sugar to the United States proved invaluable to the bank, helping it survive financial panics in 1837

and 1857 that bankrupted many of its competitors (Hodas, 1976; *The New York Times*, 1882).

The financing and operation of the Southern cotton trade and its ties with New York City merchants was detailed in an 1852 report to Congress (Albion, 1961, 97). Cotton production in the South was a major source of profit and employment for shipping, banking, insurance and textile industries that were based in New York and other Northern cities. According to first annual report of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York in 1859, even when the Europe-bound cotton trade was not shipped through the port of New York, New York City merchants and bankers often financed the exchange (Albion, 1961, 116). As a result of their financing of the cotton trade, Southern planters owed Northern merchants and bankers an estimated \$200 million dollars at the outbreak of the Civil War.

### New York's Merchant Elite

The attitude of New York's merchant elite towards slavery was captured in a passage from the journal of Samuel J. May that describes an incident at a meeting of the American Antislavery Society in May, 1835. According to May's account, "I was sitting upon the platform of the Houston Street Presbyterian Church in New York, when I was surprised to see a gentleman enter and take his seat who, I knew, was a partner in one of the most prominent mercantile houses in the city. He had not been seated long before he beckoned me to meet him at the door. I did so. 'Please walk out with me, sir' said he, 'I have something of great importance to communicate.' When we had reached the sidewalk he said, with considerable emotion and emphasis, 'Mr. May, we are not such fools as not to know that slavery is a great evil, a great wrong. But it was consented to by the founders of our Republic. It was provided for in the Constitution of our Union. A great portion of the property of the Southerners is invested under its sanction; and the business of the North, as well as the South, has become adjusted to it. There are millions upon millions of dollars due from Southerners to the merchants and mechanics of this city alone, the payment of which would be jeopardized by any rupture between the North and the South. We cannot afford, sir, to let you and your associates succeed in your endeavor to overthrow slavery. It is not a matter of principle with us. It is a matter of business necessity. We cannot afford to let you succeed. And I have called you out to let you know, and to let your fellow-laborers know, that we do not

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mean to allow you to succeed. We mean, sir,' said he, with increased emphasis - 'we mean, sir, to put you Abolitionists down - by fair means if we can, by foul means if we must'" (Katz, 1995: 172).

### 19th Century Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

Some of New York City's merchants and bankers profited directly by financing and participating in the illegal Atlantic Slave trade. They were generally able to avoid arrest and prosecution under laws defining slave trading as piracy (punishable by death) through a legal technicality that limited the jurisdiction of American courts to United States citizens. Between 1837 and 1860, 74 cases were tried but there were few convictions and punishment tended to be minimal. In 1856, a New York City deputy Marshall declared that the business of out-fitting slavers had never been pursued "with greater energy than at the present. . . It is seldom that one or more vessels cannot be designated at the wharves, respecting which there is evidence that she is either in or has been concerned in the traffic [to Cuba]." The men who smuggled enslaved Africans referred to themselves as "blackbirders" and their illegal human cargo as "black ivory." The British counsel claimed that out of 170 known slave trading expeditions for the Cuba slave market between 1859 and 1862, 74 were believed to have sailed from New York City (Ellis, 1966: 287).

In memoirs published in 1864, Captain James Smith, a convicted slave trader, claimed that in 1859 eighty-five ships capable of carrying between thirty and sixty thousand enslaved Africans were outfitted in the port of New York to serve the slave markets of Cuba. Smith described New York as "the chief port in the world for the Slave Trade. It is the greatest place in the universe for it. Neither in Cuba nor in the Brazils is it carried on so extensively. Ships that convey Slaves to the West Indies and South America are fitted out in New York. Now and then one sails from Boston and Philadelphia; but New York is our headquarters. . . I can go down to South Street, and go into a number of houses that help fit out ships for the business." The trade was so profitable that on one voyage, a ship that "cost \$13,000 to fit her out completely," delivered a human cargo worth "\$220,000" to Cuba (Katz, 1995: 30-31).

### Political Support for the Slave System

The leading booster of New York City's economic ties with the slave South was probably Fernando Wood. As a Congressman in the 1840s, Wood was a

strong supporter of slavery and the South and he continued his support when he became Mayor of New York City in the 1850s. On January 8, 1861, *The New York Times* published the transcript of Mayor Wood's annual report to the city's Common Council. In this message, Wood spoke about the city's options as the United States federal union appeared to be dissolving. He called on the city to declare its own independence to better facilitate continued trade with the slave South (Mushkat, 1990; *The New York Times*, 1861).

Wood's sentiments were supported by the *New York Herald* and the *Journal of Commerce*. The *Herald* published a statement by department store magnet Alexander Stewart charging that "the refusal at Washington to concede costs us millions daily." The *Journal of Commerce* warned President-elect Lincoln that "[t]here are a million and a half mouths to be fed daily in this city and its dependencies; and they will not consent to be starved by any man's policies." Towards the end of the war, Wood returned to Congress where he continued to champion the Southern cause and opposed the "anti-Slavery Amendment," the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, as a violation of private property rights (Singer, 2003a).

Other leading individuals and institutions bear responsibility for New York's complicity with slavery and the slave trade. Samuel F. B. Morse, a well-known artist and inventor, founder and the first president of the National Academy of Design, and professor at New York University, was twice a candidate for mayor of New York City as an active opponent of immigration to the United States. Morse was also a defender of slavery and wrote that it was a positive good that should be extended throughout the country. His career is commemorated by a statue in New York City's Central Park (Morse, 1863). Another Central Park statue honors Dr. J. Marion Sims, a pioneering gynecologist from South Carolina and founder of the Woman's Hospital of the State of New York, who developed a procedure to assist women injured during childbirth by experimenting, without anesthesia, on enslaved African American women (*The New York Times*, 2003: F,7).

A leading New York apologist for slavery was the city's Roman Catholic Archbishop, John Hughes. In 1853 and 1854, Hughes traveled in Cuba and the American South where he was a guest on a number of plantations and witnessed the slave system first hand. In May, 1854, Hughes delivered a sermon at old St. Patrick's Cathedral (in what is now Soho), where he

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discussed his experiences during this trip. In his sermon, Hughes cited passages from the Gospel according to John to justify slavery, comparing the slave master to the father of a family. Hughes claimed to recognize that “slavery is an evil,” but declared it was “not an absolute and unmitigated evil” because it brought Africans to Christianity. In his column in the *Metropolitan Record*, he wrote: “We of course believe that no genuine Christian – no decent man – would be engaged in this kind of business: still, we cannot discover the crime, even of the slaver, in snatching them from the butcheries of their native land” (Singer, 2003)

### **Opposition to Equal Rights**

Other New Yorkers actively fought against full citizenship rights for African Americans even after they were emancipated. At an 1821 New York State Constitutional Convention, John Ross of Genesee County, Erastus Root of Delaware County, Samuel Young of Saratoga County and Chief Justice of the New York State Supreme Court Ambrose Spencer, representing Albany, supported a resolution that free African Americans, already barred from serving in the militia, be denied the right to vote (Gellman & Quigley, 2003: 105-110, 114-117, 125-126, 131-134). In 1834, riots broke out in New York City and pro-abolitionist churches and businesses and African American institutions, including the African school house on Orange Street, were damaged. The *Journal of Commerce*, founded by Samuel F.B. Morse, condemned the rioters, but blamed the riots on the “incendiarism” and “indiscrete zeal” of the abolitionist (Burrows & Wallace, 1999, 556-559). Even movements identified with the struggle to prevent the extension of slavery into new western territories, such as the “Barnburner” Democrats of upstate New York, often espoused racist ideas (Foner, E. : 1970: 267).

### **Civil War Era Draft Riots**

One of the most disturbing events in the history of the United States and New York State was the Civil War Draft Riot in New York City in 1863. The Draft Riot was the largest urban upheaval of the nineteenth century in the United States. For four days, White mobs roamed through Manhattan in defiance of the police and a small garrison of federal troops. More than one hundred people, mostly African Americans, were killed during the riot and an estimated twelve hundred people were injured (Katz, 87-96).

The Draft Riot was in response to an unpopular military conscription law passed by Congress and signed by President Abraham Lincoln in May, 1863. The new law allowed the affluent to avoid military service by providing substitutes or by paying \$300. Many of the first draftees in New York were slated to be Irish immigrants who were too poor to pay this tax.

New York City was ripe for an explosion when the draft lottery began on Saturday, July 11. Blacks and White immigrant workers were often pitted against each other in competition for low paying jobs. “Copperhead” newspapers and politicians, including former Mayor Fernando Wood and Governor Horatio Seymour, contributed to the tension in the city by stirring up anti-war sentiment. The last straw was the release of the casualty lists from the Battle of Gettysburg that same weekend.

On Monday, July 13, a mass protest against the draft in New York City was transformed into a riot that attacked government building and the pro-war press, and eventually turned on the city’s African American population. From newspaper accounts, it appears that the rioters, most of whom were probably Irish immigrants, turned on the City’s Black population after police had opened fire on protesters killing and wounding many people. They destroyed the city’s orphanage for Black children, attacked and lynched African Americans caught on the streets, and threatened employers who hired Black workers.

Hundreds of African American refugees from the rioting escaped to Weeksville and other largely Black settlements in Brooklyn. On the fourth day of the riot, federal troops from the Union army at Gettysburg arrived in the city and finally restored peace.

### **Campaign for Abolition and Citizenship Rights**

At the same time that some prominent New Yorkers were deeply enmeshed in the slave system, others, both Blacks and Whites, challenged and tried to overturn it. In the 1770s, Gouverneur Morris helped draft the first New York State constitution and proposed a motion, which was defeated, to abolish slavery in New York. Morris later represented Pennsylvania at the Federal Constitutional Convention, where he opposed constitutional protection for slavery, the slave trade and the three-fifths compromise (<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/B/morris/morris.htm>).

Soon after the Revolutionary War, the New York Manumission Society, under the leadership of John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, helped purchase freedom for enslaved Africans and in 1787 it established an African

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Free School to provide instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic. The Society also organized boycotts of merchants and newspapers that supported slavery and won a series of unlawful enslavement cases, defending the freedom of Black New Yorkers who were threatened with being sent to the south as slaves (New York State Freedom Trail Commission, 2001: 22).

Aaron Burr, a leading Jeffersonian Republican in New York, was a unyielding opponent of slavery who argued that Whites and Blacks were created equal and that women and men should have the same political rights. In 1785, Burr introduced an unsuccessful bill in the state legislature to immediately end slavery in New York. Despite this failure, he campaigned for the next fourteen years against New York's slave-owning landlords and farmers, and artisans who feared job competition from freed Blacks. Ultimately, Burr was a major anti-slavery ally of Governor Jay when the New York legislature agreed to gradual emancipation in 1799 (Brady, 2001; Kennedy, R., 2000). Thomas Emmet, who arrived in the United States from Ireland in 1804, practiced law and became Attorney General of New York State. In one of his first cases, he was hired by the Society of Friends to defend several "runaway slaves" from a neighboring state who were captured in New York.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, many New Yorkers played prominent roles in the broad alliance that coalesced into the American abolitionist movement. Lewis and Arthur Tappan, New York City merchants, were founders and officers of the American Anti-Slavery Society. At their urging, New York's leading abolitionists formed a committee to aid in the defense of the Africans on the *Amistad*. Lewis Tappan was largely responsible for their sympathetic portrayal as dignified human beings in the press (*Social Science Docket*, 2001: 24). The first annual convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society was held in New York City in 1834. By 1837, there were 274 local anti-slavery societies across the state (Kraditor, 1967:6).

In the 1840s and 1850s, New Yorkers opposed slavery, especially its extension into the western territories, as members of the major political parties and of minor, specifically anti-slavery, parties. Within the New York State Democratic party, a "Barnburner" faction under the leadership of former President Martin Van Buren, attempted to challenge the hold of pro-slavery Southern Democrats on the national political party (Foner, E., 1970: 152-153). New York State Governor (1839-1843) and United States Senator (1843-1861) William H. Seward, a Whig, was one of

the most outspoken anti-slavery politicians of the period. An opponent of the Fugitive Slave Act, he defended runaway slaves in court and helped the Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman by hiding fugitive slaves in his Auburn, New York home. Chester Arthur, who later became President of the United States (1881-1885), was a leading New York opponent of slavery and racial discrimination. As a lawyer, Arthur helped secure a court decision that enslaved Africans brought into New York while in transit between slave states were free. He also successfully fought to desegregate New York City street cars. William Seward and Chester Arthur, founding members of the Republican Party, were both graduates of Union College in Schenectady, which was a hotbed for abolitionist activity.

In April, 1840, anti-slavery forces from around the country gathered in Albany where they formed the Liberty Party and nominated candidates for president and vice-president of the United States. A major force in this group was Gerrit Smith of Utica, a philanthropist, social reformer and later a Congressman. Smith used his family's fortune to establish communities for formerly enslaved Africans, including one in North Elba, New York. He was also a financial supporter of John Brown's campaign against the extension of slavery into Kansas and was implicated in Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry (<http://libwww.syr.edu>). In 1848, members of the Liberty, Democratic and Whig parties held a convention in Buffalo where they founded the Free Soil Party, a precursor of the Republican Party, that demanded that the new western territories be reserved for "free soil," "free labor" and "free men."

Segments of the New York press also played an active role in the battle to end slavery in the United States. Leading abolitionist newspapers included the *North Star*, published by Frederick Douglass in Rochester, and the *Albany Evening Journal*, edited by Thurlow Weed. William Cullen Bryant, a poet, editor of the *New York Evening Post*, and a founder of the Republican Party, was a staunch defender of the free speech rights of abolitionists and his poem, "The African Chief," attacked the inhumanity of slavery and the slave trade. Horace Greeley, the founder and editor of the *New York Tribune*, took a strong moral position favoring the abolition of slavery. In an open letter to President Lincoln, Greeley complained about the Union army's unwillingness to free slaves in captured territory and criticized Lincoln for failing to make slavery the dominant issue of the war,

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compromising moral principles for political motives (*Social Science Docket*, 2001: 47, 25).

Among the state's anti-slavery religious leaders was the Reverend Henry Highland Garnet, an African American who was himself a former slave. In an 1843 speech at an abolitionist conference in Buffalo, New York, Garnet called upon slaves in the South to rise up in revolt. "Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been, you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. Rather die freemen than live to be slaves. Remember that you are four millions!" (Aptheker, 1973:226-233).

Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, the brother of author Harriet Beecher Stowe, was a leading opponent of slavery. Beecher raised money in his Brooklyn church to purchase the freedom of slaves in symbolic protests against the institution. In a sermon delivered in January, 1861, in the midst of the nation's secession crisis, Beecher declared that "(w)e who dwell in the North are not without responsibility for this sin. . . . When our Constitution was adopted; . . . All the institutions were prepared for liberty, and all the public men were on the side of liberty." However, because of the "delinquency of the North," the nation's commitment to liberty was "sacrificed." He calls the North's failure to preserve liberty "an astounding sin! It is an unparalleled guilt!" (*The New York Times*, 2000, B11).

## The Erie Canal, the "Burned Over" District and the Underground Railroad

Because of commerce and the availability of work on the Erie Canal, Buffalo (10), Albany (13), Rochester (18), Troy (24), Syracuse (30) and Utica (35) were each counted amongst the largest urban areas in the United States at the time of the Civil War. Many of the leading opponents of slavery in New York State and the United States lived in these upstate cities and in smaller towns on the canal system, which was a major route on the Underground Railroad's "freedom trail" to Canada. In addition, in the 1830s, the "burned-over" district, stretching between Troy and Buffalo, was the center of an evangelical religious revival that was strongly committed to social reform and opposition to slavery (Foner, E, 1970: 109; Sernett, 2002

Besides people already mentioned in this essay, anti-slavery activists from this region of New York included William W. Brown, a free African American, who organized the African American population of Buffalo to resist slave catchers; the Reverend Thomas James, an escaped slave who settled in Rochester; Jermain Loguen, station master of the local underground railroad depot in Syracuse; Sojourner Truth (Hurley and Kingston) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Johnstown and Seneca Falls), who were also leading advocates of women's rights; and Solomon Northup, whose memoir recounted his experience as a free African American from Saratoga Springs who was kidnapped and sold into slavery in the South. Harriet Tubman (Auburn) and John Brown (North Elba) were also proud to call upstate New York their home.

### Note about Sources

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes the African American "slave narrative" as a unique achievement in literature. As part of the campaign to abolish slavery, hundreds of ex-slaves and runaways told their personal accounts as lectures and in autobiographical narratives. Their stories provide eloquent testimony against their captors and the inhuman institution, and bear witness to the urge of every slave to be both free and literate. Over one hundred book length narratives were written before the end of the Civil War. By the 1940s, over six thousand former slaves had told their stories of human bondage through interviews, essays and books. Many of these stories are available on the internet at [docsouth.unc.edu](http://docsouth.unc.edu) and [newdeal.feri.org/asn](http://newdeal.feri.org/asn). This curriculum guide provides material from many that touch on the history of New York State.

There are a number of issues that should be discussed with students before reading the narratives. Many of them are hundreds of pages long. To be useful in class they need to be edited by teachers and transformed into activity sheets. Students should be aware they are only examining edited fragments of much longer documents.

Before reading narratives, students should also discuss the language in these sources. Many of the authors were highly religious and continually referred to their religious beliefs, particularly their belief that a higher power had or would intervene in their lives. Other narratives use language which was intended to be demeaning at the

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time and is considered offensive today.

Questions have been raised about the reliability and authenticity of some of the narratives. They were often written or dictated long after the events took place. In addition, many were transcribed and published by abolitionists who wanted to highlight the horrors of slavery as part of political campaigns to end slavery and the slave trade.

## 2. Teaching About Slavery

In October, 1994, in an effort to fulfill its responsibilities as a major public historical resource and provide a more accurate portrait of the American past, Colonial Williamsburg conducted a “mock” slave auction. It was intended “to educate visitors about a brutal yet important part of black American history” (*The New York Times*, 1994a; 1994b).

According to park spokesperson Christy Coleman, who directed the project and participated in the reenactment as a pregnant slave sold to pay her “master’s” debts, “this is a very, very sensitive and emotional issue. But it is also very real history.” Ms. Coleman felt that “only by open display and discussion could people understand the degradation and humiliation that blacks felt as chattel” (1994a).

Critics, mobilized by the Virginia chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, protested that the auction trivialized slavery by depicting scenes “too painful to revive in any form” (1994a).” A small group of demonstrators stood witness at the reenactment. Later, one of the demonstrators, who initially charged Colonial Williamsburg with turning Black history into a “sideshow,” changed his mind. He explained that as a result of witnessing the “mock” auction, he felt “(p)ain had a face. Indignity had a body. Suffering had tears” (1994b).

The controversy surrounding the “mock” auction at Colonial Williamsburg is a reflection of a larger debate taking place in classrooms across the United States where social studies teachers consider ways to help students understand the impact of slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade on American society and the human beings who were its victims. There are both historical issues and pedagogical questions involved in these debates. Historians continue to argue over the nature of chattel slavery itself (for a recent synthesis published by the American Historical Association, see Foner, E., *Slavery, the Civil War & Reconstruction*), the treatment of enslaved people, and the long term impact of slavery on American society. There are disputes over the reliability of sources like slave narratives, which were often ghost-written and usually published by abolitionist organizations. Secondary school teachers have to decide whether to assign literature like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or show films like *Amistad* and *Glory* to provide students with historical background. There are also disagreements about the accuracy, sensitivity, and efficacy of teaching approaches like role playing and historical reenactments, especially given continuing racial segregation and ethnic tension in classrooms, schools, and communities.

I am a white male and an ethnic Jew. For most of my career, I taught in schools where the majority or plurality of students were African American. Usually the remaining students were either of Caribbean ancestry or Latino/a. I often found slavery was one of the most difficult topics to address as students and I were all uncomfortable. Over the years, a number of African American students raised that they resented continually learning about slavery and how their people were oppressed. These challenges forced me to reconsider how I felt as a teenager learning about the history of my own people, especially the devastation that I felt because Eastern European Jews, including my relatives, had died in the gas chambers of Nazi Germany. Knowledge of oppression did not satisfy me then. I felt humiliated and I wanted to scream out, “Why didn’t we fight back?” What finally helped me come to terms with the Holocaust was reading about Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto and the creation and defense of the State of Israel. I realize that the key for my coming to terms with the 20th century history of Jews was recognition of human resistance.

In response to my students and the connections they helped me understand about my own life, I shifted the focus on African American history in my classroom from emphasizing the burdens of oppression to exploring the history of people’s struggles for justice. Among other things, this meant that studying about the horror of slavery and the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade always had to be combined with examining the way people fought to establish their humanity.

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As a teacher, I have also learned that no activity or exhibit by itself substitutes for the context created by a teacher and the relationship that exists in the classroom among students and between students and their teacher. A lesson, a museum visit or a classroom activity may seem like a good idea in the abstract, but this does not mean it will achieve its intended goals with a particular group of students. For a lesson to be meaningful it has to take into account who the students are in the class, what they already know, and how they will react. This package reproduces primary source documents from different historical era. Because of this, Africans Americans are referred to as “Negroes,” “colored” and “Black,” and by derogatory terms. We recommend that teachers discuss the use of language with their classes.

### **3. Ten Understandings about Slavery in New York and the Americas** (Singer, 2003e: 166).

Ten main ideas or understandings about the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas are integrated throughout the “New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance” curriculum guide.

1. West Africans were experienced agricultural workers whose labor was used to exploit the resources of the American continents. Profits generated by African slavery and the African slave trade made possible the commercial and industrial revolutions in Europe and the United States.
2. European societies, like other societies in this era, accepted hierarchy, injustice, and exploitation as a normal condition of human life. Color and religious differences, the ease of identification and geographic isolation from their homelands made it easier to enslave Africans in the Americas rather than other groups. Europeans justified this slavery by denying the humanity of the African.
3. Although slavery existed in many times and cultures throughout human history, slavery in the British Americas, including the United States, developed into a fundamentally different institution from slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world, in Africa and even in many parts of Latin America in the same era (Smedley, 1999). There was no reciprocal obligation by the elite to the enslaved. Enslavement was a permanent hereditary status. There was an impassable racial barrier that denied the fundamental humanity of the enslaved. In the Americas, slavery was practiced on a scale unheard of in previous human history.
4. Democracy and community among White, male, Christian property holders in the early American republic rested on the exploitation of other groups, especially the enslavement of the African. The founders of the United States were aware of the hypocrisy of owning slaves. Slavery was intentionally not addressed in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.
5. Africans in the Americas resisted slavery in many different ways. They built families, communities, and religious institutions that asserted their humanity. Many escaped to the North or West and Canada. Others joined local Native people to form independent “Maroon” communities. In the United States, enslaved Africans developed an emancipatory Christianity based on the story of Exodus and laced it with African symbols. In Haiti and Brazil, there were major successful slave rebellions. With an estimated 180,000 African Americans soldiers in the Union army, the American Civil War can be viewed, from their perspective, as an African-American liberation struggle.
6. White and African-American abolitionists struggled for decades against slavery. Most White abolitionists based their beliefs on their Protestant religion. Uncle Tom’s Cabin was the “Common Sense” of the antislavery crusade because it presented the humanity of the enslaved African.
7. While Christian religious beliefs were used to challenge slavery, they were also used to justify it. Defenders of slavery, particularly in the south, used Biblical citations to defend the “peculiar institution.”
8. Slavery in the United States was a national, rather than a southern, institution. There was limited slavery in the north until 1840. Prosperity in the North, New York State, and especially New York City, rested on the slave trade and the processing of and trade in slave produced raw materials.
9. The Civil War was not initially fought by the North to free Africans; it was fought to save the union. It ended legal bondage, but not the racist ideas that supported the system.
10. Social, political and economic inequality in the United States today and across the globe has roots in the social, political and economic inequality produced by slavery and the slave trade.

#### 4. Ten Curriculum Goals for “New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance” Curriculum Guide

Among the goals of this document-based curriculum guide is to engage students as historians as they sift through primary source materials on the history of New York State’s involvement with slavery and the slave trade and struggles for their abolition. It is designed to help students begin to understand the complexity of United States and New York State history. The ten major themes from New York State history imbedded in the curriculum guide include:

1. Slavery, until its abolition in New York State in the beginning of the 19th century, the trans-Atlantic slave trade even after it was declared illegal in 1808, the financing of slave plantations in the South and the Caribbean, the shipping of slave-produced products, and the manufacture of goods using the commodities of slavery were integral to the prosperity of New Netherland, the British colony of New York and New York State.
2. Many New Yorkers implicated in the slave system were politically influential and economically powerful and shaped the policies of the state and nation. A number of prominent individuals and the founders of the state and national governments were participants in and profited from the slave system.
3. In order to preserve the union and protect their own profits from products produced by enslaved workers, many New York and national leaders who opposed the expansion of slavery into the West were willing to compromise with Southern slave owners and to support the slave system in the South even after the outbreak of the American Civil War.
4. Despite the Declaration of Independence’s promise of human equality, there were ideological inconsistencies in the early nation.. Many leading New Yorkers, including some White opponents of slavery, believed in the racial inferiority of African Americans, opposed full political rights for African Americans and endorsed their recolonization in Africa. Some of the most radical abolitionists in New York State who accepted Black equality were unwilling to support equal rights for women. Significantly, Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony were major allies in the struggles for rights for both African Americans and women.
5. The slave system and racism contributed to an endemic fear of uprisings by New York’s African population during the colonial era. Rumors of potential rebellion led to “witch hunts.” Africans who fought for their freedom in the colonial era were summarily tried and executed. Suspects were tortured until they confessed to “crimes” and implicated others. Minor infractions of the slave code were severely punished. On a number of occasions in the history of New York, violent mobs attacked African Americans and White abolitionists.
6. At the same time, New York State offered a safe haven to many Africans who escaped from slavery and a place where free African Americans could organize politically with White allies to end the slave system and achieve full citizenship. New Yorkers, both Black and White, were active participants and national leaders in political campaigns to end slavery and to resist the oppression of Black people.
7. African Americans in New York resisted slavery through active and passive means. They resisted slavery by running away to freedom, organizing their own cultural and religious institutions, building families and communities, openly or surreptitiously disobeying slaveowners, and through open revolt.
8. Resistance to slavery was often violent. Enslaved Africans in New York openly rebelled against slavery during the colonial era. Many supported the British against forces fighting for American independence in an effort to achieve their own emancipation. Leading New York State abolitionists, both Black and White, violated the law and physically prevented the recapture of runaway slaves. Some New York abolitionists were supporters of John Brown’s military campaigns against the slave system and were implicated in his armed assault on a federal weapon’s arsenal in 1859.
9. The histories of many parts of New York State were influenced by slavery and the slave trade and the struggles to end them. Because of the pattern of settlement in the 17th and 18th centuries, slavery in New York State was concentrated on Long Island, in New York City and its surrounds, and in the Hudson River Valley up through Albany. In the 19th century, the port of New York functioned as a major international center for financing the slave trade and the trade in goods produced by slave labor.
10. New York State was a major center for abolitionist and anti-abolitionist movements and publications. Because of their proximity to Canada, work opportunities, and religious and other social movements, regions of New York State and cities located along the route of the Erie Canal played major roles on the underground railroad and in anti-slavery agitation during the nineteenth century. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, the

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availability of land in the North country made it a safe haven for free Blacks and escaped slaves who sought a place where they could build families and communities.

### 5. New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance Curriculum and the New York State Learning Standards

The “New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance” curriculum guide supports the 1997 New York State legislative mandate to include human rights education in 4-12 social studies instruction. According to this mandate, the major topics to be explored should include the Great Irish Famine and the right to food, the European Holocaust and the right to survival and Slavery and the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the right to freedom. This curriculum guide is also designed specifically to encourage the exploration of key concepts and develop critical skills outlined in the New York State Learning Standards for Social Studies.

#### **History of the United States and New York:**

Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.

The study of slavery in New York, the involvement of New Yorkers in the trans-Atlantic Slave trade, and of the role of New Yorkers in the struggle to abolish slavery a) contribute to student understanding of the development of American culture, its diversity and multicultural context. It will examine the ways people are unified by many values, practices and traditions; b) illustrate the connections and interactions of people and events across time; and c) involve learning about the important roles and contributions of individuals and groups in United States and New York State history. Studying the African American experience in New York and comparing it to the experiences of other groups will help students to better understand the problems confronting, and the achievements of, ethnic minorities throughout United States history. For example, students can compare the experiences of African Americans with other New Yorkers in the colonial era and during the new nation and the struggle for the abolition of slavery and for full citizenship for Blacks with the difficulties faced by immigrants and women.

**World History:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

The study of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and New York’s role and of the colonization and western expansion of settlement will a) contribute to student understanding of world cultures and civilizations, including an analysis of important ideas, social and cultural values, beliefs and traditions; b) facilitate an

examination of the human condition, the connections and interactions of people across time and space, and the ways different people view the same event or issue from a variety of perspectives; c) help students understand timeframes and periodizations, make it possible to examine themes across time and within cultures, and focus on important turning points in world history; d) involve learning about the important roles and contributions of individuals and groups to world history and civilizations. In addition, the use of primary source historical documents, charts, graphs, literature, art and music and a focus on historical complexity and multiple perspectives will enhance skills of historical analysis including the ability to investigate differing and competing interpretations of the theories of history, hypothesize about why interpretations change over time, explain the importance of historical evidence, and understand the concepts of change and continuity over time. For example, students will examine the role played by New Netherland and New York in European imperial ventures and the contributions of enslaved Africans to their growth.

**Geography:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live -- local, national and global -- including the distribution of people, places and environments over the earth's surface.

The study of the global migration of people and products, especially the trans-Atlantic Slave trade and commerce in the products of the labor of enslaved Africans, and an examination of the relationship between demography, geography, resources, and historical events will a) illustrate the essential elements in geographic analysis: understanding the world in spatial terms, places and regions, physical settings (including natural resources), human systems,

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environment and society and the use of geography; and b) enhance the ability of students to ask and answer geographic questions; analyze theories of geography and acquire, organize and analyze geographic information. For example, students will discover how the state's location on the Erie Canal and near Canada helped New York to become an important center for abolitionist activity and a route on the Underground railroad.

**Economics:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources, how major decision-making units function in the U.S. and other national economies, and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and non-market mechanisms.

The study of the economic history of New York, including development during the colonial era and commerce and industry during the nineteenth century will a) contribute to student understanding of major economic concepts and systems, the principles of economic decision making and the interdependence of economies and economic systems throughout the world; and b) enhance the ability of students to make informed and well-reasoned economic decisions in daily and national life. For example, students will analyze the impact of its involvement in the financing of and trade in slave produced products on the economic development of New York City.

**Civics, Citizenship and Government:** Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the necessity for establishing governments; the governmental system of the U.S. and other nations; the U.S. Constitution; the basic civic values of American constitutional democracy; and the roles, rights and responsibilities of citizenship, including avenues of participation.

The study of the history of the struggle to end slavery in New York and the United States will a) contribute to student understanding of civics, citizenship and government, and basic civic values (such as justice, honesty, self-discipline, due process, equality, majority rule with respect for minority rights, and respect for self, others and property); b) involve learning about political systems, the purposes of government, and civic life, and the differing assumptions held by people across time and place regarding power, authority, governance, and law; and

c) enhance the ability of students to probe ideas and assumptions, ask and answer analytical questions, take a skeptical attitude toward questionable arguments, evaluate evidence, formulate rational conclusions and develop and refine participatory skills. For example, students will develop an understanding of the importance of active citizens in a democratic society as they study about the struggle by both Black and White New Yorkers to abolish slavery and achieve equal rights for African Americans.

The “New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance” curriculum guide is also designed to support student mastery of the Learning Standards for the English Language Arts and student mastery of the Learning Standards for the Arts.

**Language for Information and Understanding:** Students will read, write, listen and speak for information and understanding. As listeners and readers, students will collect data, facts and ideas; discover relationships, concepts and generalizations, and use knowledge generated from oral, written and electronically produced texts. As speakers and writers, they will use oral and written language to acquire, interpret, apply and transmit information.

Students’ study of “New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance” will involve research projects and presentations; they will work individually and collectively to gather evidence from a variety of sources, to evaluate primary source documents, to discover relationships and to develop concepts and generalizations about the materials. Students will write persuasively about topics using their research to support their arguments, developing appropriate rhetorical structures and presenting their information and interpretation clearly, concisely and comprehensibly.

**Language for Literary Response and Expression:** Students will read, write and speak for literary response and expression. Students will read and listen to oral, written and electronically produced texts and performances. They will draw on their own experiences to develop an understanding of the diverse social, historical and cultural dimensions that the texts and performances represent. As speakers and writers, students will use oral and written language for self-expression and artistic creation.

Students can respond to the literature of the “New York and Slavery” making reference to the literary

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elements in the text and connections with their personal knowledge and experience. Students will consider “slave narratives” literature and write about the texts in terms of the different cultural settings pointing out similarities and differences. Students will write their own responses to the “slave narratives”: Stories, poems, plays and literary essays; they will also produce books of stories and poems about “New York and Slavery” for younger children.

### **Language for Critical Analysis and Evaluation:**

Students will read, write, listen and speak for critical analysis and evaluation. As listeners and readers, students will analyze experiences, ideas, information and issues presented by others using a variety of established criteria. As speakers and writers, they will present, in oral and written language and from a variety of perspectives, their opinions and judgments about experiences, ideas, information and issues.

Students will develop essays, position papers, speeches and debates about “New York and Slavery” in the context of the wider challenges of struggling to expand human freedom. They will analyze issues, ideas, texts and experiences and support their positions with well developed arguments that make effective use of details and supporting evidence.

**Language for Social Interaction:** Students will read, write, listen and speak for social interaction.

Students will use oral and written language for effective social communication with a wide variety of people. As readers and listeners, they will use their social communications with others to enrich their understanding of people and their views.

Students will use effective speech to interact with classroom community members. They can participate in electronic discussion groups and e-mail exchanges. Students can develop the *persona* of an enslaved African or a participant in the struggles over slavery and write a series of letters to

**Creating, Performing and Participating in the Arts:** Students will create and compose original work in their media: dance, music, theatre and visual arts. Student musicians will compose original works and perform musical works composed by others. Student actors will create and perform theatrical pieces, as well as perform in dramatic works composed by others. Students of the visual arts will make works of art that explore different kinds of subject matter, topics, themes and metaphors.

Activities and projects in the “New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance Curriculum” provide opportunities for students to perform monologues which express the experiences of enslaved Africans and participants in the struggles over slavery and to develop an idea for a work of art that would be a memorial to the victims of slavery.

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### Documenting African American Life

- William L. Katz has published numerous books documenting African American life in the United States and New York State. Most of these books are intended for use as texts or resources in middle school and high school classrooms. The following books by William L. Katz are available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).
- Black Legacy: A History of New York's African Americans*, (hardcover) 1997. Examines the history of African Americans in New York City from Dutch settlement up to the present. Includes a rich collection of pictures. Intended for middle-level and high school students.
- Eyewitness: A Living Documentary of the African American Contribution to American History*, (paper) 1995. Combines a narrative of African American history with primary source documents from the era of European colonization of the Americas up to the present. Excellent for high school use.
- Flight from the Devil: Six Slave Narratives*, (paper) 1996. Narratives by five African American men and one woman who escaped from slavery. Includes Linda Brent, William Wells Brown, James Pennington, Lunsford Lane, Jacob Stroyer and Moses Grandy.
- Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*, (paper) 1997. Explores the history of Black Indians, people of dual African and native ancestry. Intended for upper elementary and middle-level students.
- Black People Who Made the Old West*, (paper) 1993. Tells the story of thirty-five African Americans who helped shape life from colonial times to the post-Civil War west.
- Black Pioneers: An Untold Story*, (hardcover) 1999. Examines the history of African American pioneers in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. Intended for middle-level and high school students.
- The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States*, (paper) 1996. A resource guide for teacher. Traces the history of African Americans in the American west from Lewis and Clark to the dawn of the twentieth century.
- Black Women of the Old West*, (hardcover) 1995. Uncovers the hidden history of Black women in the west. Includes 100 photos and clippings. Intended for upper elementary and middle-level students.
- Breaking the Chains: African-American Slave Resistance*, (paper) 1998. Challenges the myth that African Americans accepted slavery. Intended for upper elementary and middle-level students.