



New Amsterdam History Center Virtual New Amsterdam 3D Model

American History Workshop Doc. 541.DJM.2

Appendix II, Part B: A Historical Background Summary:

“Justice for the Enslaved?”

Dennis J. Maika, July 2010

Developed in conjunction with the demonstration 7th-grade curriculum, produced by Mikki Shaw and Mirla Morrison, under contract to American History Workshop

Seeing slavery anew

There are several things that most Americans are surprised to learn about slavery. First, slavery was a vital component of Northern society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For most Americans, images of enslaved people in the South before the Civil War come more easily to mind. New Yorkers are especially astonished to learn that approximately 15% of New York City's population up to the time of the American Revolution were enslaved Africans. Second, slavery's institutional structure took decades to evolve into the closed, rigid system that is typically envisioned. In New Amsterdam's early years, few if any legal codes defined slavery, thus allowing considerable flexibility in the ways in the social, economic, and political status of the enslaved. Third, slavery based on race was not a foregone conclusion. In seventeenth-century Manhattan, free Africans often lived side by side with enslaved Africans. Native Americans, a diverse ethnic group of Africans, and many Europeans were all bound to labor as indentured servants. These features of early New Amsterdam slavery are critical to an accurate understanding of the 1641 episode involving Manuel de Gerrit de Reus.

Slavery and the evolution of the colony

Slavery's gradual evolution in Manhattan began with the arrival of the first company slaves in 1626. Members of the earliest enslaved cohort, numbering approximately eleven, were most likely African sailors on Portuguese and Spanish vessels captured by the Dutch and taken as war captives. Recognizing their inability to quickly attract a sufficient number of free workers to New Netherland, the Dutch West India Company (WIC) soon came to rely on slave labor. In the next decade, as the company entered the slave trade, the ethnic mixture of New Amsterdam's enslaved population included people from the Guinea coast, the West Indies, Brazil, and the Spanish colonies. By the 1640s, this diverse group of enslaved people worked on company farms or boweries and performed both skilled and unskilled labor for "public projects" like building and repairing the fort, clearing land, creating and maintaining roads, and burning lime. As more local residents came to own slaves in the 1650s, the variety of their occupations grew to include porters, household servants, and skilled occupations like miller, mason, and carpenter. After the English take-over in 1664, an increase in the slave trade produced a corresponding rise in the number of enslaved Africans in New Amsterdam. By the late seventeenth century, the city's enslaved population had probably doubled; in the eighteenth century, only Charleston and New Orleans would have more slaves than New York. Furthermore, a higher proportion of households here contained slaves, though the number in each dwelling was small. In the city, slaveholders might own from one to four slaves, rarely more.

The Ambiguous Status of Seventeenth-Century Slaves

As the enslaved population was growing, so too was a free African community developing in New Amsterdam. The first of these individuals was Jan Rodrigues, a mixed-race man from Santo Domingo who arrived in the Hudson Valley in 1613; He was a free man, employed by Thijss Mossell, a Dutch merchant. By the 1640s, some free blacks owned farms north of the Fresh Water Pond and on the East River. In the next decade, other free blacks were living within the city wall as well as outside. By 1660, estimates are that of the 1,500 residents of New Amsterdam, there were 375 free and 75 enslaved Africans. Free black men mixed with white society working as smithies, tavern keepers, laborers, as well as farmers. White, black, slave, indentured, free often worked side by side sharing a common space.

Given the fluidity of social contact, the regulations that governed the enslaved in Dutch New Amsterdam were flexible; in spite of specific limitations, special

Appendix II, Part B: A Historical Background Summary:***"Justice for the Enslaved?"*****Dennis J. Maika, American History Workshop, July 2010**

privileges and opportunities were allowed. When not laboring for the WIC, company slaves were permitted hire themselves out for wages. Slaves were also allowed to own moveable property and participate in the local court by giving testimony, suing, and being sued. Some belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church where they were married and had their children baptized. And it was not uncommon for slaves to request their freedom and to be freed for their faithful service.

In 1644, the company's first eleven slaves petitioned for their freedom. They justified their request by pointing to their many years of service to the WIC. They needed wages, they said, to help support their wives and children. They reminded the directors, additionally, that they had helped defend the colony against the local natives (Kieft's War, 1641-1644). The company responded with what has come to be known as "half freedom." The petitioners each received their freedom to work as farmers and were granted their own land, most of which was adjacent to the Bowery Road near the Collect (Fresh Water) Pond. In return, they were required to pay the WIC an annual quitrent of 30 guilders (in produce and one fat hog) and work for the company for wages when needed. Their wives would also be free but their children would remain as slaves. Over the next two decades, many of these children were freed either by purchase or in response to other petitions and took their place in the free black community on Manhattan.

The Tightening Vise: Slavery in English New York

It was under English jurisdiction in the late seventeenth century that more restrictions against slaves began to appear. By 1712, after a slave rebellion in New York City, the New York provincial assembly ended the institutional ambiguity of slavery. Restrictive legislation defined sharp limits for the enslaved, set specific punishments for transgressions, and made it more difficult to manumit (grant freedom to) them.

This stiffening of institutional slavery in the early eighteenth century suggests that increased numbers generated the racialization of slavery. But perceptions of Africans as different from whites, and therefore justifying separate status, began earlier. This trend can be seen in the slavery debate that took place in New Amsterdam's Dutch Reformed Church, specifically over the question of whether or not slaves could be church members. The ideas of a prominent Dutch Reformed clergyman in Holland, Godefridus Udemans, best illustrates this struggle. In a popular book, Udemans supported the enslavement of people who were either

Appendix II, Part B: A Historical Background Summary:***“Justice for the Enslaved?”*****Dennis J. Maika, American History Workshop, July 2010**

Turks or heathens, who had been taken captive in a just war, or had been purchased for a fair price. At the same time, Udemans encouraged slave owners to work towards converting their slaves to Christianity by educating them in the Reformed catechism.

Considering the Case of Manuel de Gerrit de Reus

These same issues guided the debate in New Amsterdam. Initially, the Dutch Reformed Church supported efforts to educate the enslaved. In 1638, for example, minister Everardus Bogardus requested a schoolmaster to serve both the white and black population. As previously stated, enslaved Africans were baptized and married according to the Reformed rite but by the 1660s, these practices were being discouraged. This new direction came from the Reformed church in Holland, where the Classis of Amsterdam, the church's ruling body, discouraged slave baptisms, advising the church in Curaçao in 1661 that they should permit slave baptisms only in their parents had been converted and understood the Reformed catechism. That same mentality soon made its way to New Amsterdam. In 1664, minister Henricus Selyns sought to deny slave baptisms, informing the Amsterdam Classis that efforts to teach the catechism to slaves were unsuccessful and that slaves wanted to have their children baptized only to save them from bondage. Thus, as Dutch jurisdiction over New Amsterdam was drawing to a close, enslaved African members of the Reformed church community were clearly being segregated from white church members.

The episode involving Manuel de Gerrit de Reus thus took place at a time when the institution of slavery was just beginning, when the status for those who were enslaved was not as restrictive as typical stereotypes suggest, and when it was really possible to achieve emancipation in one's lifetime. Racial lines had still not been firmly drawn. Also important was that Manuel de Gerrit de Reus was one of the original eleven slaves acquired by the WIC. He would be among those to receive "half freedom" in 1644.

It is in this context that we can evaluate the workings of justice in his case.

For Further Reading:

Berlin, Ira and Leslie Harris, ed. *Slavery In New York*. New York: The New Press, 2005.

Appendix II, Part B: A Historical Background Summary:

"Justice for the Enslaved?"

Dennis J. Maika, American History Workshop, July 2010

Goodfriend, Joyce D. *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Harris, Leslie M. *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, Chapter One.

Hodges, Graham Russell. *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

McManus, Edgar J. *A History of Negro Slavery in New York*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1966.