Chapter
18. Slavery in Dutch North America

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On May 29, 1664, twenty men, nine women, and one child were sold to the highest bidders at an auction in New Amsterdam. Two days earlier, they had arrived there along with eleven others who, according to Peter Stuyvesant, director-general of the New Netherland colony, were too old and weak to be sold. Their voyage to the Dutch colony in North America on a ship named *De Musch* had begun a month earlier in Curaçao. Among those auctioned off were a mother and child who were bought for 360 guilders by one Nicolas Verleth. Who was this woman? Where did she come from? How old was her child? And what became of them in New Netherland? We will probably never find the answers to these questions. Dutch documents from that time merely refer to them as "a negress with a child."[1]

Dutch slavery, the slave trade, and enslaved people had an immense influence on the development of New Netherland and, later on, New York and New Jersey. Enslaved Africans were brought to the Dutch colony only a few years after the first European families settled there in 1624. So clearly, slavery was introduced by the Dutch West India Company (WIC) at an early stage. It remained a visible presence in the region, in Dutch American communities too, even long after the WIC had ceded the territory to the English. In New York, slavery was not abolished until 1827. In New Jersey, where generations of descendants of Dutch colonists kept people in slavery, it happened only after many years of gradual emancipation; the process was not completed until the end of the Civil War in 1865.

Slavery in New Netherland

Recent research shows that enslaved Africans played an important role in the Dutch colonization of North America. To effectively colonize the area, the WIC needed people from a non-Indigenous population, but it was not always easy to attract European colonists for this purpose. Therefore, enslaved Africans were used to populate the land, and then to develop and defend it.

Map drawn by Nicolaas Visscher II with a view of New Amsterdam (Manhattan) in the foreground.

As enslaved laborers, they contributed to the building of the colony's infrastructure, the clearing of woodlands, and farming. They did some of their work in chains, sometimes side by side with prisoners. Enslaved Africans represented a certain capital value and were regularly rented out or sold. During the seventeenth century, an increasing number of individuals purchased enslaved people to put them to work in households, in workplaces, and on farms and plantations. Although they were forced to labor in many places, from Fort Casimir on the Delaware River to Huys de Hoop in what is now Connecticut, most enslaved people in the North American

colony resided in New Amsterdam, the settlement at the southern tip of Manhattan.

The WIC claimed an enormous area in North America, but in reality, it controlled only a small number of settlements. Most of the land remained in the hands of the original inhabitants. Relations with these Indigenous populations were often tense in the immediate surroundings of the Dutch settlements. That was especially so, of course, wherever settlers or the WIC tried to expand their area of control. Near Manhattan, the belligerence of New Netherland Director-General Willem Kieft led to open warfare with the Munsee-speaking Lenape population. Hundreds of settlers and Munsee were killed in that two-year-long conflict, which has gone down in history as Kieft's War. One of the most notorious and brutal attacks that the Dutch launched on the Munsee was the Pavonia Massacre (1643).

During Kieft's War, enslaved Africans were armed and deployed in battle. Some of them were given land north of New Amsterdam, in an area used as a buffer to protect the colony from Munsee attacks. Another example of the involvement of the enslaved occurred during a war against the Esopus people near what was then known as Wiltwijck, a settlement in the Hudson Valley. To protect the Dutch colonists, the WIC deployed these enslaved men. The Esopus men who were taken prisoner in that conflict were shipped to Curaçao to work for the Company "alongside the negros."[2]

Historians have mainly written about the enslaved men and women who worked for the WIC. Some of them earned conditional freedom, also known as half-freedom. They were often required to work for the Company on a regular basis, and in several cases, their children remained the property of the WIC. It is not surprising that these enslaved Africans have been highlighted in historiography; unlike others who were enslaved in the Dutch colony, their names appear in surviving documents. We find documentation, for instance, of Sijmon Congo, Manuel de Gerrit de Reus, Domingo van Angola, Cleijn Manuel, and Marijken van Angola. Manuel de Gerrit de Reus van Angola is even mentioned in several documents. Thus, we know that he was a member of the New Amsterdam Dutch Reformed Church and that his son Michiel was baptized there on March 16, 1642. He also appeared several times before the director-general and the council of New Amsterdam, the colony's executive and legislative body. In the council minutes from 1641, De Reus is named as one of nine suspects in the murder of Jan Premero, another man kept in slavery by the WIC. De Reus

was eventually found guilty of the murder, but miraculously survived his hanging, after which he was granted amnesty. Three years later, he and ten other enslaved men and their wives earned half-freedom. They were freed on two conditions: that they annually paid the WIC dues and that they assisted the Company whenever called upon. Their children (including any future offspring) would remain Company property.[3] The married couples were given land north of New Amsterdam, where a growing number of Black New Netherlanders settled.

From the names of the men and women who lived in this community, such as Paulo Angola, Reytory van Angola, Sijmon Congo, Pieter Santomee, and Antonij Portugies, it appears that a large number of them hailed from São Tomé, Congo, and Angola. The Iberian-Catholic first names also indicate that they came from areas strongly influenced by Portugal and the Roman Catholic Church, which was the case in a large part of western central Africa. Their Christian background may have led them to attend Dutch Reformed churches. However, they were a minority. Just like the mother and child sold to Nicolas Verleth in 1664, we know little about the enslaved people whose names do not appear in the documents.

According to the Slave Voyages database, about one thousand enslaved people were brought to New Netherland by means of the intercolonial and transatlantic slave trade between 1627 and 1664. They were often transported on ships like *De Musch*, which brought a range of cargo from the Caribbean to New Netherland. The only ships that were specifically used to bring people from Africa to North America were *'t Witte Paert* (1655) and the *Gideon* (1664). Enslaved men, women, and children were often held captive on these vessels for months in horrifying conditions. Many of them did not survive the voyage, and those who did disembark in New Netherland were often sick, malnourished, and traumatized. In New Netherland, these men, women, and children were put to work by the WIC or publicly auctioned off. Some of those who arrived in New Amsterdam on board the *Gideon* were taken to New Amstel, a colony in present-day Delaware controlled by the city of Amsterdam. In a number of cases, enslaved men, women, and children were sold off in the English colonies of Virginia and Maryland.

When the English took over New Netherland in 1664, their control of the territory was not (yet) permanent. In the Treaty of Breda (1667), the Dutch and the English agreed that England would retain this part of North America, while Suriname, previously an English colony that had been captured by the Dutch earlier that same year, would remain under Dutch

control. However, this agreement was broken when the Netherlands recaptured the North American colony in August 1673. It was then renamed New Orange, but it did not stay Dutch for long. Within a year, in the Treaty of Westminster (1674), the two sides agreed that the Netherlands could keep Suriname in return for a permanent surrender of the North American colony.

Developments after the Loss of New Netherland

After the Netherlands lost the colony to the English, the Dutch settlers and their descendants remained influential in the area. Many of them continued to enslave people, and in many cases, the enslaved spoke Dutch, prepared Dutch dishes, and celebrated Dutch holidays such as "Pinkster," a term derived from the Dutch word for Pentecost or Whitsuntide. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many enslaved New Yorkers celebrated this holiday in grand fashion.

Although the enslaved people in New York on average comprised less than 15 percent of the total population, there were places where their presence was greater. In 1790, enslaved people made up about 30 percent of the population in parts of Dutch-American Kings County, present-day Brooklyn. In those communities, nearly three-quarters of all households enslaved people. The Van Brunt family, for instance, were prominent slaveholders. According to the 1755 Census of Slaves, which was based on a count of adults only, Rutgert van Brunt Jr. enslaved six men and four women.[4] Dutch descendants in North America also often had connections with the Caribbean, and in some cases they owned plantations there.

The Dutch Reformed Church originally played an important role in many of these Dutch-American communities. However, in the eighteenth century, significantly fewer enslaved people attended these churches. Some documents suggest that this is partly due to opposition from white churchgoers who did not want to share "their" church with enslaved Black people. These opponents saw the people whom they enslaved as cursed and soulless, among other things. This was compounded by the fact that many preachers, such as Theodardus Polhelmus and Martinus Schoonmaker, were themselves enslavers.[5]

Slavery could only be sustained by means of violence, legislation, surveillance, and intimidation. Enslaved women, men, and children always fought for their freedom. Although they were not allowed to travel or trade without special permission, they regularly broke the many rules that were intended to restrict their activities. They found alternative ways of navigating the cities and the countryside. Often, they did this for temporary visits to family or friends, but they also sought to escape slavery more permanently, which is evident from the many advertisements enslavers placed in the hope of recovering enslaved people who self-liberated. But not all resistance to slavery was individual in nature. In 1712, for example, enslaved New Yorkers collectively stood up to the authorities. According to Governor Robert Hunter, the uprising began when a building was set on fire. When white New Yorkers came to see the fire, they were kept away by enslaved New Yorkers armed with axes, knives, pistols, and other weapons. Nine white people, including Dutch descendants, were killed during the uprising and others were injured. When the governor deployed a militia, the rebels fled to the woods north of the city. Several were arrested. Six committed suicide before they could be caught. Eventually, 21 enslaved New Yorkers were brutally executed in public. The outward display of cruelty was an attempt by the authorities to discourage any further resistance.

Photo of Sojourner Truth in 1864.

Probably the best known enslaved New Yorker was Sojourner Truth, also known as Isabella Baumfree (1797–1883). She was renowned for her work as an abolitionist and women's rights activist. Her speech during the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio became world famous. Truth was born at the end of the eighteenth century in a Dutch-American community in the Hudson Valley. She, her brother, and her parents were enslaved by the Hardenbergh family until the death of Charles Hardenbergh in 1806. At an auction, the then nine-year-old Truth, who only spoke Dutch at the time, was sold to an English-speaking family. Years later, she

recounted her experiences in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*, one of the few books that describe slavery in the Dutch-American communities from the perspective of the enslaved.[6] Her story shows that the descendants of Dutch settlers continued to enslave people well into the nineteenth century, when slavery was gradually abolished in New York.

Research on Dutch Slavery in North America

Although slavery was practiced for more than 200 years in New York and New Jersey, historians have written relatively little about this history. North American slavery was (and still is) seen as something that happened in the American South. Publications that do deal with slavery in New York tend to focus on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, paying little attention to the slavery that existed during the Dutch period. Joyce Goodfriend was one of the few historians who—in the 1970s—wrote extensively about the enslaved population of New Netherland.[7]

In the early twenty-first century, slavery in New York received much more attention in the United States, largely due to the 1991 discovery in Manhattan of what is now called the African Burial Ground. The finding sparked various publications about slavery, especially as it existed in New York City, and in 2004, the New York Historical Society opened the Slavery in New York exhibition, an eye-opening event for a public that was largely unaware of the local slavery history.[8]

In the meantime, much more has been written, particularly in the US, about Dutch slavery in New York and New Netherland. In the last ten years alone, historians Jeroen Dewulf, Nicole Maskiell, and I have written books about slavery in Dutch-American families and communities. In 2017, historians Dienke Hondius, Nancy Jouwe, Dineke Stam, and Jennifer Tosch authored a bilingual Dutch–English guidebook on the locations that played an important role in New York's Dutch slavery history.[9] There are several reasons why this topic is receiving more attention. One is certainly that a larger number of historians in the US now learn to read seventeenth-century Dutch. Another is that many of the New Netherland Project's documents have been translated and are increasingly available in digital form. Finally, such studies more frequently receive financial support from bodies such as the New Netherland Institute (NNI), the Netherland-American Foundation (NAF), the Gilder Lehrman Institute, and the Dutch consulate in New York.

Much more research is needed to gain a more complete picture of Dutch slavery in North America. Until recently, this history was mainly studied without comparing it to similar systems that occurred elsewhere. As a result, some historians made it seem as if slavery in New Netherland was unique. In recent years, studies have shown that that was not the case. Research has also revealed transatlantic connections integral to the Dutch practice of slavery. For instance, we now know that eighteenth-century descendants of Dutch colonists in North America often still had strong ties with other Dutch territories and that some of them possessed plantations in the Caribbean.

Research on other parts of what is now the United States has made clear that Indigenous peoples were also regularly enslaved. That happened in New York as well, but this is an area of research that has not yet been thoroughly explored (although "Indian slaves" are regularly mentioned in documents). Enslavement of Indigenous peoples appears to have been less common during the Dutch colonial period, but that does not mean it did not happen. To name one such occurrence, the WIC sent a group of Esopus into slavery in Curaçao.

More scholarship is needed in regard to the Dutch role in human trafficking within North America and between that continent and other areas. Further research can establish how important the Dutch slave trade with North America was for the Dutch and English colonies. It can also shed more light on the development of Curaçao into a "slave depot" during the period when it was governed by Peter Stuyvesant from his post in New Netherland. In addition, more publications should focus on the enslaved. Historians have shown in recent years that despite the scarcity of documents that reflect their perspectives, it is possible to offer a more complete view of their history.

New Netherland was an integral part of the seventeenth-century Dutch slave trade, and slavery was important for the development of the colony. Dutch descendants in this area remained prominent enslavers and slave traders well into the nineteenth century. It is essential that the Netherlands pay more attention to slavery in North America in the context of Dutch slavery worldwide.

Notes

1 New York State Archives (NYSA), Dutch colonial council minutes, "Names of purchasers," May 29, 1664, Inv. no. 10, 228.

2 NYSA, Dutch colonial council minutes, Court Proceedings, September 8, 1644, Inv. no. 4, 202; NYSA, Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York, "Journal of Esopus War" by Capt. Martin Cregier, Inv.13, trans. E. B. O'Callaghan and Berthold Fernow (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company 1853), 328, 330, 338, NYSA_A1810-78_V15_0085; NYSA, Dutch colonial administrative correspondence, Stuyvesant to the vice director of Curaçao, July 12, 1660, Inv. no. 13, 117, 10.

3 The New Amsterdam baptism lists are published in Francis Sypher, *Liber A of the Collegiate Churches of New York, part 2* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2015). For more on Manuel de Gerrit de Reus, see NYSA, Dutch colonial council minutes, Court Proceedings, January 17, 1641, Inv. no. 4, 83; NYSA, Dutch colonial council minutes, Sentence of Manuel de Gerrit de Reus, January 24, 1641, Inv. no. 4, 84; NYSA, Dutch colonial council minutes, January 24, 1641, Inv. no. 4, 85; NYSA, Dutch colonial council minutes, Minutes, February 25, 1644, Inv. no. 4, 183; A. J. Van Laer, trans. and ed., Council Minutes 1638–1649 (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1974), 213.

4 E. B. O'Callaghan, *Census of Slaves*, 1755 (New York: Weed, Parsons & Company, 1850), 859, 860.

5 Andrea C. Mosterman, "'I Thought They Were Worthy.' A Dutch Reformed Church Minister and His Congregation Debate African American Membership in the Church," *Early American Studies* 14, no. 3 (2016): 610–616; D. L. Noorlander, *Heaven's Wrath: The Protestant Reformation and the Dutch West India Company* (Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 170171; NYSA, Notice, August 20, 1800, Republican WatchTower; NYSA, Dutch colonial council minutes, "Names of purchasers," May 29, 1664, Inv. no. 10, 228.

6 Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York*, in 1828 (Boston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 1850).

7 Joyce Goodfriend, "Burghers and Blacks: The Evolution of a Slave Society at New Amsterdam," *New York History* 59, no. 2 (April 1978): 129–30; Joyce Goodfriend, "Black Families in New Netherland," in *A Beautiful and Fruitful Place*, ed. Nancy McClure Zeller (Albany: The New Netherland Project, 1991), 147–56; Joyce Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1644–1730* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

8 Thelma Wills Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City*, 1626–1863 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Ira Berlin and Leslie Harris, *Slavery in New York* (New York: The New Press, 2005). Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

9 Jeroen Dewulf, *The Pinkster King and the King of Kongo: The Forgotten History of America's Dutch-Owned Slaves* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017); Andrea C. Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement: A History of Slavery and Resistance in Dutch New York* (Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 2021); Nicole Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage: Slavery and the Creation of a Northern Gentry* (Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 2022); Dienke Hondius, Nancy Jouwe, Dineke Stam and Jennifer Tosch, *Geschiedenissen van Nederlands New York/Dutch New York Histories: Connecting African, Native American and Slavery Heritage* (Volendam: LM Publishers, 2017).

Abstract

The Dutch West India Company's colony in north-eastern Brazil (1630–1654) was the first non-Iberian slave society and plantation economy in the Americas. The conquest of Brazil led the Company to engage in the slave trade, and—in an attempt to control the slave market—to conquer Elmina in 1637 and Luanda in 1641. In Brazil, the Company was confronted for the first time with the practicalities of governing a New World plantation colony. The WIC had to deal with new questions relating to the legal rights of Indigenous inhabitants and slaves in a Dutch colonial context. After the loss of Brazil effectively bankrupted the WIC, the inhabitants of the colony dispersed to Dutch, French, and English colonies.

Keywords: Dutch Brazil; West India Company; slave trade; slavery; sugar; Indigenous Brazilians