

## Introduction

In 1750, New York had the fifth largest slave population in the thirteen American colonies. In 1770, there were more enslaved persons in New York than in the province of Georgia, and in 1790, New York City had more slaves than any other city in the nation besides Charleston. These kinds of comparisons help us to see that slavery in the latter-day “free state” of New York was more than a historical curiosity, but a central part of its history. New York was by far the largest slaveholding state in the North, and slavery lasted longer there than in any other Northern state except New Jersey. Unlike plantation owners in the South, slaveholders in New York tended, with few exceptions, to own only a handful of bonded laborers. Slaveholding was widespread, not just in New York City but also in the fields of Long Island and on the farmlands of the Hudson Valley. Because slaves were frequently traded and rented out to neighbors, the number of New Yorkers holding slaves and using slave labor was greater than statistics would suggest.

Slavery in New York was peculiar not only because of its size and duration but also because of the substantial role the Dutch played in shaping the institution. Slavery in New Netherland began in the 1620s, soon after the first enslaved persons had arrived in Virginia. In 1664, the English took over New Netherland, and historians of New York have been apt to talk about “the Dutch period” and “the English period” as if political control of the colony completely shaped its cultural environment, as if, overnight, Dutchmen became Englishmen, and Dutch slavery became English slavery.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Recent books have successfully challenged this divide and stress social and cultural continuity among New York slaveholding practices in this period. Anne-Claire Fauquez, *De la Nouvelle-Néerlande à New York: La Naissance d'une société esclavagiste (1624–1712)* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2021); Andrea Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement: A History of Slavery and Resistance in Dutch New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021); and Nicole Saffold Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage: Slavery and the Creation of a Northern Gentry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

But the Dutch in New York persisted as a cultural group long past 1664. In fact, in 1700, roughly half of the province's population was still Dutch. While the population of New York City gradually turned to the English language, Dutch speakers controlled large parts of Brooklyn, most of Staten Island, and much of the Hudson Valley throughout the eighteenth century. And even in the nineteenth century, many New York slaves spoke Dutch and lived in cultural communities where Dutch religion, culture, and ideas predominated.<sup>2</sup> Until the very end of slavery in the state, Dutch-descent New Yorkers remained overrepresented among slaveholders, especially in the rural areas, where families held slaves for generations.

*The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York* points to the important influence of the Dutch and Dutch-descent Americans in developing and maintaining slavery in the state. It argues, in short, that to understand the history of slavery in New York, we need to recognize it as more Dutch, more profitable, more rural, and more enduring than has been previously recognized. It argues, further, that the Dutch played an outsized role in New York's slave economy and in the resistance to abolitionism and emancipation. Dutch attitudes about the utility and morality of slavery presented a major roadblock in attempts to end slavery in the state via gradual abolition. The profit accruing to Dutch farmers, particularly from the cultivation of wheat, demonstrated that slavery was profitable and compatible with the needs of New York farmers. Although Dutch New Yorkers were sometimes married to Anglo-Americans, and although there was significant trade and cultural interaction between Dutch-descent New Yorkers and their English-speaking neighbors, there was still a distinct Dutch type of slavery in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New York that is demonstrable culturally, economically, and demographically. This was among the largest non-English-speaking forms of slavery in American history. For most of the eighteenth century, there were more Dutch-speaking slaves in New York alone (not even counting an additional 40 percent more Dutch-speaking slaves in New Jersey) than there were French-speaking slaves in Louisiana, and while this latter population certainly grew in the nineteenth century, its ultimate size has not been established.<sup>3</sup> In the two decades following the start of the Haitian

<sup>2</sup> And yet, many studies on slavery in the North ignore the Dutch altogether; for example, one of the pioneering works on slavery in the North: Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Demographic data on the Louisiana creoles is not nearly as robust as it is for New York's enslaved population. The population of Louisiana, of course, was not captured in the national censuses of

Revolution in 1791, thousands of French-speaking slaveholders moved to the United States with their slaves.

Slavery was engrained in the culture of Dutch New York. In many ways, Dutch slaveholding patterns in New York resembled those of their Anglo neighbors, and many Dutch families and Dutch-speaking slaves lived in a mixed, bilingual Dutch–English environment. Yet Dutch slavery had its distinguishing elements. The Dutch saw slaveholding as an economic investment for the family. Slave holdings were divisible property that could be bequeathed to children. Dutch children were often presented with their own slave, in attempts to create a lifelong bond between child and slave. Language, religion, and patterns of the calendar year, coinciding with farming seasons and holidays, shaped the social grouping of Dutch slaves. From Brooklyn, Dutch slaves traveled in groups to Manhattan to sell oysters and farm products grown on their own initiative. In the Hudson Valley, Dutch slaves were famous for knowing the routes to and from villages, and for maintaining farms and carting slaveholders to and from church and other assemblies, and for operating Hudson River ferries. In contrast to the urban, mostly English-speaking slaves of New York City, Dutch slaves were rural laborers who knew how to sow, reap, and mill grain, and to tend horses and cattle. They were not all members of the Dutch Reformed Church, but they were generally acquainted with that form of Protestantism.

Dutch New York slaveholding culture resisted the political and legal changes that ultimately brought about the end of slavery in the state in 1827. After 1799, children of slaves remained bound in service despite their status as legally freed. In many cases, Dutch-descent New Yorkers legally bought, sold, and owned these children well past slavery's legal demise. Dutch slaveholders also kept their enslaved persons longer and

1790 or 1800, as the United States did not acquire Louisiana as a territory until 1803. The population of slaves in Louisiana in 1810 was 34,660, but how many spoke French is unclear. Gwendolyn Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1995) gives a total of 2,680 creole slaves in Louisiana by 1741. The total number of blacks in French settlements in Louisiana in 1746 was 4,730. The black population in New Orleans and environments in 1785 was 10,420. Thomas N. Ingersoll suggests that perhaps 65 percent of these slaves were creoles. Thomas N. Ingersoll, "The Slave Trade and the Ethnic Diversity of Louisiana's Slave Community," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 37:2 (Spring 1996), 133–161. Din gives an estimate of 3,500 slaves in Louisiana in 1731 and 4,730 in 1746, with about 6,000 "at the end of the French period." Most of these, he argues, were the result of natural increase, not imports, suggesting then that many would have learned French or Spanish. Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763–1803* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1999), 5.

condemned the practice less than did English New Yorkers and most others in the North. In Dutch New York, slavery died an agonizingly slow death.

An anonymous reviewer of one of my articles in a peer-reviewed journal explicitly voiced a concern that the use of the term “Dutch” was “problematic” for late eighteenth-century New York, and said that “to call these people ‘Dutch’ because of their heritage is as if we would call black Americans ‘Africans.’” “This is not acceptable,” they added. I respectfully but adamantly disagree. A significant aim of this book is to convince readers that there were a distinct people in New York who identified as Dutch, who spoke Dutch, and who held slaves who spoke Dutch. It is appropriate to call the Dutch-speaking descendants of seventeenth-century New Netherland “the Dutch” because that is what they called themselves and indeed that is what others called them as well.

Naturally, in time, the New York Dutch became a different people from their ancestors and cousins in the Netherlands. The New York Dutch invented their own traditions, used American words, and developed their own stories and ways of looking at the world. Although there were some regional differences, the New York Dutch were well connected with the New Jersey Dutch, whom Peter O. Wacker calls “a distinct cultural group by 1790.”<sup>4</sup> The Dutch in this region, as Wacker notes, were not all from Holland, but were of “Flemish, Huguenot, Walloon, German, Scandinavian, Polish, and even Hungarian and Italian origin.”<sup>5</sup> Historian Dirk Mouw relates that there were even families among them with non-Dutch surnames like the Zabriskies who explicitly thought of themselves as Dutch, even as they distanced themselves from inhabitants of the Netherlands. When new immigrants from the Netherlands arrived in New Jersey in the nineteenth century, Everett Zabriskie “distinguished himself from the immigrants and their descendants” by calling them “damned Frisians” and insisting that he and his family were truly Dutch.<sup>6</sup> Netherlands historian Willem Frijhoff reminds us that Dutch

<sup>4</sup> Peter O. Wacker, *Land and People: A Cultural Geography of Preindustrial New Jersey: Origins and Settlement Patterns* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1975), 162.

<sup>5</sup> Wacker, *Land and People*, 164. These people “came to live among Dutch settlers and they stated to speak Dutch and often become culturally Dutch” writes Eric Nooter, *Between Heaven and Earth: Church and Society in Pre-Revolutionary Flatbush, Long Island* (PhD dissertation, Vrij Universiteit, 1994), 40. A study of the European origins of the New Netherlanders showing these mixed backgrounds is David Steven Cohen, “How Dutch Were the Dutch of New Netherland?” *New York History* 62:1 (January 1981), 43–60.

<sup>6</sup> Dirk Mouw, *Moederkerk and Vaderland: Religion and Ethnic Identity in the Middle Colonies, 1690–1772* (PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, 2009), 3.

culture in the mid Atlantic was “not a faithful copy of Dutch culture in the Netherlands,” but that a different kind of Dutch ethnic culture was “invented” and coalesced after the Leisler rebellion of 1691, while various forms of “ethnic memory . . . exploded in the nineteenth century.”<sup>7</sup> Historians Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie have expressed a similar and even stronger view about the “emergence of a self-conscious Dutch identity at odds with mainstream English values” in colonial New York and New Jersey. Klooster and Oostindie explain that “[e]ven though the ratio of ethnically Dutch men and women shrank compared to the overall population, these men and women emphasized their Dutch ways more emphatically in the eighteenth century than their forbears had done.”<sup>8</sup>

To the Yankees and Yorkers of the early nineteenth century, Dutch knickerbockers were a distinct people, with their own religion, language, architecture, furniture, folklore, ghostlore, festivals, and farming patterns.<sup>9</sup> These New York Dutch also had their own unique H-framed barns, jambless fireplaces in their houses, and cabinet beds. Dutch wagons built in New York were constructed in a manner different from the Yankee ones.<sup>10</sup> There were Dutch almanacs printed in significant numbers in New York through to the American Revolution. In religious worldview, even in their mannerisms, New York Dutch were a distinct cultural group in the process of mixing with Anglo New Yorkers and becoming Americans.

A recent set of books by Jeroen Dewulf, Anne-Claire Fauquez, Andrea Mosterman, and Nicole Maskiell have revived interest in Dutch slavery in New York and have drawn the contours of the social history of Dutch New York slaveholders primarily in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but the authors disagree about whether to call these people

<sup>7</sup> Willem Frijhoff, “Dutchness in Fact and Fiction,” in Joyce D. Goodfried, Benjamin Schmid, and Annette Stott, eds., *Going Dutch: The Dutch Presence in America, 1609–2009* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 327–358.

<sup>8</sup> Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, *Realm between Empires: The Second Dutch Atlantic, 1680–1815* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 11–12.

<sup>9</sup> Roderic Blackburn, “Transforming Old World Dutch Culture in a New World Environment: Processes of Material Adaptation,” in Roderic Blackburn and Nancy Kelly, eds., *New World Dutch Studies: Dutch Arts and Culture in Colonial America, 1609–1776* (Albany, NY: Albany Institute of History and Art, 1987), 95–106. Judith Richardson, “The Ghosting of the Hudson Valley Dutch,” in *Going Dutch*, Goodfriend, et al. editors (2008); Clifford W. Zink, “Dutch Framed Houses in New York and New Jersey,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 22:4 (1987), 265–294.

<sup>10</sup> An English traveler in 1818 said these were “of a simple construction, the body is like a long shallow box, the sides straight, and about a foot high; they are worked by a pole and pair of light hardy horses.” John Palmer, *Journal of travels in the United States of North America, and in Lower Canada, performed in the year 1817* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1818), 240.

Dutch, Dutch-Americans, or Anglo-Dutch. In a review of these recent works, I explained that

the term “Dutch Americans” did not become popular until the twentieth century, and then it was most commonly applied to the new waves of Dutch immigrants in the United States, and not typically to the descendants of the Dutch of New York. From the seventeenth century to the nineteenth, the Dutch in New York and New Jersey generally called themselves “Dutch” or were occasionally labeled “Hollanders” but they neither called themselves nor were they called “Dutch Americans.”

The term Anglo-Dutch also seems out of place. “Historically, ‘Anglo-Dutch’ has been a descriptor of the four wars fought between the Dutch and the English, or it served as an adjective for joint ventures between the English and the Dutch.” “Anglo-Dutch” was not a term used by anyone in eighteenth-century New York to describe themselves.<sup>11</sup> David Steven Cohen supported the term “Afro-Dutch” for the Dutch-speaking slaves of New York and New Jersey.<sup>12</sup> But this term did not stick, and may have been too general, or confused with other “black Dutch” in Suriname or South Africa, for example.

Historical knowledge proceeds in stages, and no work of this kind could be possible without the insights of earlier historians. Yet it is clear that some major obstacles have prevented historians from telling the history of Dutch slavery in New York in more than an incomplete and superficial way.<sup>13</sup> One major problem has been in locating sources. Our well-known and oft-repeated national histories are frequently pasted together from the official printed records of the government, from well-known microfilm collections, and from papers cataloged and available in accessible archives. But sources on the history of slaves in Dutch New York are difficult to

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Douma, “Taking Control of Slavery in Dutch New York,” *Journal of Early American History* 12: 2–3 (Dec. 2022) 279–288. Review of Fauquez, *De la Nouvelle-Néerlande à New York*; Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*; and Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*. They were called Dutch and identified as Dutch, sometimes as “Low Dutch” to distinguish them from their German or “High Dutch” Palatine neighbors who also settled in the Hudson Valley. The term “colonial Dutch” applies to some degree, except that of course it was not used in the eighteenth century, has generally been a term of significance in architecture, and does not apply to the Dutch in the United States after the American Revolution.

<sup>12</sup> David Steven Cohen, *Folk Legacies Revisited* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> The closest to a general account is Vivienne Kruger, *Born to Run: The New York Slave Family from 1626 to 1827* (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1985). While extensive, and marshaling an impressing amount of data, it lacks analysis and overview, and is far from consistently readable. Graham Russell Hodges’s history of African Americans in New York and New Jersey is the most up-to-date synthesis, replacing in a number of ways earlier work by Edgar McManus. Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

locate, and especially so outside of the papers of elites, that is, from archival documents not from families named Livingston, Philipse, or Rensselaer.

It is natural for historians to follow the paper trail where the sources are most plentiful, but such an approach can lead them to focus inordinately on certain topics like the 1712 and 1741 slave revolts, or the nineteenth-century white abolitionist movement in New York, when these events and processes form only a small part of the full story of slavery in the state. Relevant documents for the study of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Dutch New York slavery have not been brought together in one convenient collection as are many of the papers of seventeenth-century New Netherland. Records of Dutch slaves must be hunted down in dozens of state, regional, and local archives. Some of these records are in Dutch, and have not been dutifully cataloged, for lack of archivists who understand their contents. The organization and accessibility of archival documents in New York is far from ideal.

There has also been a problem of preserving and reproducing data. In preparing this book, I contacted about five or six historians who had compiled and used quantitative data in their studies of slaves in New York and New Jersey. Nearly everyone I contacted responded in kind, but none, save Middlesex College history professor Timothy Hack, were able to provide me the raw data they used in their studies. Many noted the loss of data after publishing their work. Another exception, whom I did not contact, was Harvard historian Jill Lepore, who conveniently posted the data for her book on the 1741 New York City slave revolt for download on the Harvard dataverse.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, and in this spirit, I have published the data for Chapter 3 and 4 in digital format at the *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation*.<sup>15</sup>

Most problematic of all for the study of New York Dutch slavery is that there is little we can learn from the Dutch-speaking slaves themselves. Few, if any, could write, and even if some could, their writings have not survived, so we cannot read them in their own words. Linguists have attempted to piece together the New York “Negro Dutch” tongue from

<sup>14</sup> Replication data for Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (2011), <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=hdl:1902.1/16862>, Harvard Dataverse, V2, accessed December 12, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Michael J. Douma, “Dutch-Speaking Runaway Slaves in Early American Newspaper Advertisements, 1730–1825,” *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 3:2 (2022), 38–44, <https://jsdp.enslaved.org/fullDataArticle/volume3-issue2-dutch-speaking-runaway-slaves/>, accessed March 17, 2024. Data for Chapter 3 has been published as Michael J. Douma, “Prices of Enslaved Persons in New York and New Jersey,” *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 4: 5 (2023): 67–75, <https://doi.org/10.25971/n839-9r79>, accessed March 17, 2024.



whatever scraps can be found, but there is little to go on, other than a few lines recorded in court cases and some observations of travelers passing through the Hudson Valley, filtered through English-speaking ears.<sup>16</sup>

Slavery in New York died out just as the country saw a tremendous growth of newspapers and other printed media in a period often called the Market Revolution. Then, in the antebellum years, a deluge of printed abolitionist materials across the country focused on Southern slavery and positioned New York as one of the free states, oftentimes obscuring its slaveholding past.

Instead of producing a mere chronicle of government records, personal letters, and descriptions of encounters with Dutch slaves and slaveholders, *The Slow Death of Slavery* makes a serious attempt to get at the crucial numbers, particularly the demographic and economic data of the story. Sometimes simple-sounding historical questions are the most difficult to answer, yet they can be essential for the story. For example, suppose one wants to know how many Dutch-speaking slaves there were in New York. Before a peer-reviewed article I wrote on the topic in 2022, only the vaguest guesses at this number had been proffered.<sup>17</sup> In my article, I presented demographic evidence that in the eighteenth century alone there were between 22,000 and 30,000 Dutch-speaking slaves in New York – that is, up to 40 percent of New York's slaves spoke at least basic Dutch. Thousands more Dutch-speaking slaves could be found in northern New Jersey, with others scattered in New England. Some New York Dutch moved with their slaves to Bucks County, PA, Berkeley County, VA, and even to Kentucky.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Here, I allude to the frequent references to the *Itinerarium* of Dr. Alexander Hamilton and to the published travel remarks of Peter Kalm, both of which are difficult to interpret, say very little regarding the Dutch language, yet are cited frequently on this topic. There is frequent confusion over the term “Negro Dutch,” as it applies separately to a now extinct language in the Danish West Indies, and sometimes to Africans in Dutch Suriname or Dutch South Africa.

<sup>17</sup> Michael J. Douma, “Estimating the Size of the Dutch-Speaking Slave Population of New York in the 18th Century,” *Journal of Early American History* 11:2 (2022), 3–35.

<sup>18</sup> The Van Meter family moved from Ulster County to Somerset County in New Jersey's Raritan Valley around 1700, and then in the 1730s and 1740s, they pushed further South into the Northern Neck of Virginia, where they became large landholders on the frontier and, for generations, large slaveholders as well. Dutch slaveholders looking for land to farm pushed out of New Jersey into Bucks County, Pennsylvania, then to Shepherdstown, Virginia, and finally to Kentucky, where, in the 1780s, a “low Dutch Company” was established. The settlers there retained the name “low Dutch” to distinguish them from Pennsylvania Germans. Among this migration were several slaveholders. One example was Garret Terhune, who drowned in 1821. His inventory in Mercer County lists four enslaved persons, three horses, a scythe, and a cradle, among other items. Carrie E. Allen, *A Record of the Family of Isaac Van Nuys (or Vannice) or Harrodsburg, Kentucky, Son of Isaac Van Nuys of Millstone, New Jersey* (Unknown publisher, 1916), 39. This presaged migration out of the Hudson Valley to the western reaches of New York State.



Although it is perhaps counterintuitive, the number of Dutch-speaking slaves in New York likely increased throughout the eighteenth century. This owes partly to the steady increase of the slave population in the state, but also to the surprising stability of the Dutch language, and to widespread bilingualism and trilingualism. The persistence of the Dutch language in the United States in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century has always been a problem for those who wish for clear dates of its demise, or for clear geographical bounds of its spread. The Dutch language in New York and New Jersey was gradually replaced by English in the eighteenth century, but it held on in many places, with a generation of children still learning the language as a mother tongue as late as the 1780s and 1790s. Both blacks and whites in New York continued to speak Dutch in some places until the mid nineteenth century, when a new wave of Dutch immigrants arrived.

Numbers are important in history and historians ought to embrace quantitative data, even when dealing with sensitive topics like slavery. It is my view that we best honor people in the past, and best recognize historical wrongs, by being honest about historical data and approaching it directly. By incorporating the economic debates on American slavery, *The Slow Death of Slavery* engages with and revives the cliometric tradition that first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The insights from this literature have not been brought to bear on the study of Northern slavery in any way, even as new waves of historians investigate the economics of antebellum slavery in the South. Economic studies of Southern slavery are common and contentious, and there is potentially much at stake in offering a new kind of American slavery for economic historians to prod and dissect.<sup>19</sup>

Particularly, there is the age-old question of slavery's profitability – never for the slave, who obviously was imperiled by an immoral system – but for particular slaveholders, and for slave societies more generally. Unfortunately, economic data for eighteenth-century New York is sparse. As far as I know, there are no comprehensive output figures or export tallies from its colonial era. There are no account books listing slave production totals on a New York farm. Besides, New York's slave economy was diverse, so we cannot measure productivity of slave labor in this case as historians have done for slave colonies that focused on single products like cotton,

<sup>19</sup> A classic study by Arthur Zilversmit makes a few economic arguments about slavery in the North, but has little data to back them up. Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

sugar, or tobacco. We need other ways to measure slavery's economic impact, including studying slave prices over time and population changes.

One mistake about the economics of slavery is particularly recurrent in the history of New York. Namely, historians have repeated a view that the Dutch in New Netherland and the colonial New Yorkers imported slaves because there was a shortage of labor in the colony.<sup>20</sup> On the surface, this may appear to be plausible. It also echoes the views of elite New Yorkers of the period, who frequently complained of the shortage of workers. The shortage of labor trope was at least as old as 1726, when Cadwallader Colden wrote:

It is true that it were better for the Country if there were no Negroes in it, and that all could be carried on by Freemen, who have a greater Interest in promoting the Good of a Country, and who strengthen it more than any Number of Slaves can do: But the Want of Hands and the Dearness of the Wages of hired Servants, makes Slaves at this Time necessary; and seeing they are necessary, nothing that is necessary is to be discouraged.<sup>21</sup>

As Colden recognized, the chief limiting factor in the North American colonial economy was labor. Naturally, powerful landowners, patricians, and colonial administrators wanted more people to do work for them. But what does it mean to have a shortage of labor at the colony level? Does it mean that labor prices are exceptionally high, or that colonial administrators, functioning as mercantilists, simply want a larger population and a more developed economy? Furthermore, all colonies were typically short of workers, but only some turned to slaves to solve the problem.

<sup>20</sup> At times, this appears as a normative statement, almost an excuse for why they had slaves, as if they could do no other and had no choice. But considered only as a descriptive statement, it still has plenty of support in the historiography. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998), 178. Berlin argues that disruption of the flow of indenture servants, particularly because of war, and especially during the Seven Years' War, created higher demand for slaves. But, in fact the years of the greatest number of slave imports to New York were before the Seven Years' War. Michael E. Groth echoes this idea that there was a "chronic shortage of labor" in colonial New York that led producers in the Hudson Valley to turn to slaves instead of indentured servants. Michael E. Groth, *Slavery and Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 4–5.

<sup>21</sup> Cadwallader Colden, *The Interest of the County, in Laying Duties, or a Discourse, shewing how Duties on some Sorts of Merchandize may make the Province of New-York richer than it would be without them* (New York: J. Peter Zenger, 1726). This pamphlet was also published in New York City in Dutch as *Het Voordel Van Het Land in de Oplegginge van Tollen: Of Een Redeneering, aanwysende, hoe Tollen op eenige Koopmanschappen de Provincie van Nieuw-York konnen Ryker maken, als de sal zyn sonder de selve* (New York: J. Peter Zenger, 1726).

A shortage of something requires that there is a demand for that thing, and there is always demand for labor or goods at a low enough price. It is therefore not strictly true that New Yorkers sought slaves because they could not find free laborers; it is rather that they could not get free laborers *at a certain price*, and that instead of offering sufficient incentives to free laborers to come to the colony, they preferred to take on slaves at some, perhaps lower, price instead.<sup>22</sup> It is crucial to recognize that slaveholding in New York, like elsewhere, depended on rational calculation and (im)moral choice.

The historian Edgar McManus added to the confusion when he wrote “[t]he rapid progress of the economy [of New York] after 1640 created a demand for slaves that was usually greater than the supply.”<sup>23</sup> But it would be better to write that the quantity supplied was unable to meet the quantity demanded, at going prices, because prices were too low. McManus again misses out on the crucial role of prices when he writes: “So intense was the competition for slaves that neither the company [the West India Company] nor private traders could fill the demand.”<sup>24</sup> This is a strange statement indeed. If the competition for slaves was so intense, then buyers would have driven up the price of slaves. At a certain price, it would have been profitable for Virginian slave owners to sell slaves to New Yorkers, or for other slave traders in the Caribbean and in Africa to step in to fill the demand. But since demand, reflected in prices, was never that high, the flow of enslaved persons to New York was never as great as it was to Virginia or the Caribbean. McManus should have written that the company and the private traders chose not to fulfill the demand for slaves at the prices New Yorkers were willing to pay. The crux of the matter is that for hundreds of years, New Yorkers often found it profitable and preferable to invest in slave labor instead of free labor. This was a deliberate moral and financial choice, not a strict consequence of labor conditions at the time.

<sup>22</sup> There are many potential reasons why New York in particular had difficulty recruiting free laborers from Europe, but a full investigation of this would take us too far afield. Factors may have included the lack of good land not claimed as manorial estates, the threat of French or Indian attack, or the better reputation of the soil, climate, and society of other colonies.

<sup>23</sup> Edgar McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 8. This language also appears in A. J. Myers-Williams, *Longhammering: Essays on the Forging of an African American Presence in the Hudson River Valley to the Early Twentieth Century* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994), 20. Myers-Williams writes: “Unwilling to invest in the cost of bringing servants to New Netherlands [sic], whose supply by no means ever equaled the demand, the Dutch as early as 1629 found it cheaper and more convenient to import African slaves.”

<sup>24</sup> McManus, *Black Bondage*, 10.

In the process of telling the story of New York Dutch slavery, this book challenges and seeks to overturn many other key assumptions about the history of slavery in New York, namely:

- (1) That slavery in New York was primarily an urban phenomenon.
- (2) That slavery in New York was generally unprofitable.
- (3) That the growth of New York's slave population was driven mostly by imported slaves and not by domestic growth.
- (4) That New Yorkers routinely discouraged enslaved women from having children, and that they often tried to sell enslaved women who bore too many children.
- (5) That there was always an increasing control over New York slaves over time.
- (6) That tens of thousands of New York slaves were sold South in the period of New York's emancipation.
- (7) That there were 10,000 slaves freed in New York in 1827.
- (8) That there were still some slaves held in New York State, according to the 1830 and 1840 censuses.

This book deals with each of these and other questionable assumptions in turn. It contends that slavery in New York was primarily rural, that it was profitable, and that the slave population grew mainly on account of its own domestic growth. It will show that New York's slaves were controlled, bullied, and punished severely, but many were also given a surprising latitude to move around on their own, especially after the American Revolution, when New York's slaves gradually gained legal freedoms and negotiated, through their own initiative, more room to operate.

Largely because of the resistance from the Dutch, gradual emancipation in New York took decades. To understand how this happened, *The Slow Death of Slavery* synthesizes economic history with demographic data, a combined method that the historian Laird W. Bergad has fruitfully employed in the study of slavery in Brazil and Cuba. He concluded that demographic and economic analysis "provide an essential empirical framework for understanding how the institution of slavery was transformed through time." He states further that "[w]ithout knowledge of the most elementary and constantly changing demographic realities of slavery . . . it is absolutely impossible to understand the dynamics of the slave experience without a great deal of, shall we say, imagination and speculation."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Laird W. Bergad, *Slavery and the Demographic and Economic History of Minas Gerais, Brazil, 1720–1888* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xxv.

Similarly, I contend that economic and demographic analysis, now largely missing in the histories of slavery in New York, and of slavery in the North more generally, is essential for drawing the contours of this system of labor.

*The Slow Death of Slavery* therefore reorients the story of New York slavery to consider demographic and economic factors, while emphasizing the sizable and significant role of the Dutch. The earliest histories of slavery in the North were largely institutional histories, focusing on the state laws about slavery and the political work of the antislavery movement, which is now quite well known. The professional history of slavery in New York began with books by Edgar McManus, who laid out a useful, general history of the topic, even if his pioneering work was more a chronicle than an analysis.<sup>26</sup>

Following McManus was a stream of dissertations on slavery written by students at New York universities.<sup>27</sup> These dissertations tended to look at slavery in particular counties or cities in New York, but they were often derivative and uncritical and most remain unpublished. The best general histories of slavery in New York give little attention to the Dutch or simply restate the views of earlier secondary sources when discussing the Dutch. Focused on urban history and city archives, historians have spent significant time studying slavery in New York City, while neglecting slavery elsewhere in the state.<sup>28</sup>

More recently, the focus has turned towards social history, and even more so to the investigation of categories of race and citizenship. This literature is of mixed quality, generally strong on social history but absent any economic arguments, and often resembling collections of strung-together anecdotes.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Edgar McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1966); and McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*.

<sup>27</sup> Examples include: Richard Shannon Moss, *Slavery on Long Island: Its Rise and Decline during the Seventeenth through Nineteenth Centuries* (PhD dissertation, St. John's University, 1985); John William McLaughlin, *Dutch Rural New York: Community, Economy, and Family in Colonial Flatbush* (Columbia University Dissertation, 1981); Richard E. Bond, *Ebb and Flow: Free Blacks and Urban Slavery in Eighteenth-Century New York* (PhD dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Eric W. Plaag, "New York's 1741 Slave Conspiracy in a Climate of Fear and Anxiety," *New York History* 84:3 (Summer 2003), 275–299. Leslie Alexander, *African or American? Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784–1861* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Lorenzo Johnson Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942). General overviews of Northern slavery continue in this tradition and largely repeat the same ideas. For example, James Horton and Lois Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997);

*The Slow Death of Slavery* has seven chapters. Chapter 1 establishes the context and extent of Dutch culture in New York to demonstrate that Dutch slavery in New York was distinct and extensive. This chapter provides a demographic argument for the importance of Dutch slaves in the history of New York slavery.<sup>30</sup>

Chapter 2 is a history of the connection between wheat cultivation and the spread of slavery in areas of Dutch control, focusing primarily on King's County (Brooklyn) and the Hudson Valley. This chapter pushes back against the "staple interpretation" of slavery, the idea that slavery flourished when and where it did primarily because of the advantages of geography and soil that allowed for cash crops such as tobacco and cotton. Historians have failed to explain why farmers who grew wheat would prefer slaves over short-term hired hands. I argue that New York's slave-owning farmers found slaves to be economically valuable in helping to solve the "peak-labor problem" – the difficulty of finding extra laborers during the busy wheat-harvesting season in August. By ensuring a ready supply of enslaved laborers at hand, a wheat farmer could be more confident in planting more wheat, knowing that he would have sufficient labor to harvest it. From the first Dutch settlement in the 1620s, until roughly 1820, eastern New York was a grain-producing region that focused first and foremost on raising wheat. In these years it was also a society of slaveholders.

Chapter 3 is an analysis of slave price data for New York, and the Northern states more generally. More than two decades ago, the historian Bernard Bailyn noted that numbers cannot answer all historical questions. But he said "[n]umbers, simple quantities, matter . . . The accurate recording of them, he wrote, corrects false assumptions, establishes realistic parameters, and sets some of the basic terms of comprehension."<sup>31</sup> For many, slave prices are a morally fraught subject. How could we value

Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730–1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016). William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Jared Ross Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England* (Amherst, MA: Bright Leaf, 2019); Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> This chapter is based, in part, on my previously published article, Douma, "Estimating the Size of the Dutch-Speaking Slave Population."

<sup>31</sup> Bernard Bailyn, "Considering the Slave Trade: History and Memory," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 58:1, New Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade (January 2001), 245–252.

human beings in such ways? How can we treat them as numbers? It is my contention that historians who study slave prices are not, as a rule, treating enslaved persons in such ways. They are, instead, trying to understand how others in the past assigned values to enslaved persons. This is a crucial distinction. To understand history, especially the sensitive history of immoral subjects, we must not avoid using any tools at our disposal.

My study of slave prices establishes that the Dutch had economic incentives to continue holding slaves. In other words, slavery in Dutch New York was not just a cultural choice, but was reinforced by economic considerations. From archival sources and published secondary sources, I have compiled a unique dataset of prices for over 3,350 slaves bought, sold, assessed for value, or advertised for sale in New York and New Jersey. This data has been coded by sex, age, county, price, and type of record, among other categories. It is as far as I know the only slave price database for slaves in the Northern states yet assembled. Regression analysis allows us to compute the average price of Northern slaves over time, the relative price difference between male and female slaves, the price trend relative to known prices in the American South, and other variables such as the price differential between New York City slaves and slaves in other counties in the state. Slave prices in New York and New Jersey appear relatively stable over time, but declined in the nineteenth century. The analysis shows that slaveholders in Dutch New York were motivated by profit, and they sought strength and youth when purchasing slaves.

Chapter 4 is an extensive study of runaway slave advertisements that mention that a slave speaks Dutch.<sup>32</sup> For this chapter, I have compiled a database of 487 enslaved persons, coded by year of flight, name, age, Dutch language ability, name of master, county, and original source. I demonstrate that runaway slave advertisements in New York City and environs plateaued in the period 1760–1800 but peaked later in the Hudson Valley, with exceptional growth in the 1790s and 1800s. The data provide evidence for the persistence of the Dutch language in New York and New Jersey and contribute to a picture of Dutch-speaking slaves presenting a sharp economic challenge to the institution of slavery. By the 1790s, Dutch-speaking slaves were running away at a rate of at least 1 per 500 per year. While this might not seem like much, this was an exceptional rate of runaway activity, higher than what was seen in any slave state

<sup>32</sup> This chapter was previously published in an earlier version as: Michael J. Douma, “Dutch-Speaking Runaway Slaves in New York and New Jersey,” *New York History* 102:2 (Winter 2021–2022), 38–58.



(except Delaware) at any time in the nineteenth century. For Dutch slave owners, this meant a significant loss of capital and, moreover, a risk on their remaining slave capital. Runaway slaves tended to be prime working-age males, and the loss of the best field workers frustrated New York Dutch farmers. The pressure of runaway activity also lowered the value of retained slaves and made New York slavery more costly in general. Runaways put pressure on slaveholders to manumit their slaves, extracting the most labor possible from them before agreeing to let them go.

Chapter 5 addresses a major demographic puzzle concerning thousands of New York slaves who seem to have gone missing in the transition from slavery to freedom, and the chapter questions how and if slaves were sold South. One of the best historians of New York City, Shane White, has concluded that “it is difficult to work out the extent to which New York blacks were kidnapped or sold illegally to the South” and stated further that “it is impossible to even guess how many blacks were affected.”<sup>33</sup> The keys to solving this puzzle include estimates of common death rates, census undercounting, changing gender ratios in the New York black population, and, most importantly, a proper interpretation of the 1799 emancipation law and its effects on how the children of slaves were counted in the census. Given an extensive analysis of census data, with various demographic techniques for understanding how populations change over time, I conclude that many New York slaves (between 1,000 and 5,000) were sold South, but not likely as many as some previous historians have suggested. A disproportionate number of these sold slaves came from Long Island and Manhattan.

The transition from slavery to freedom occurred at dramatically different rates in different parts of the state. The reason for this seems to be partially cultural; that Dutch-descent slaveholders were more reluctant to free their slaves than others were. But the answer is also in part economic, as rural areas in the Hudson Valley found slavery was still profitable, but slaves in urban areas were in less demand.

Chapter 6 is a history of emancipation in New York that stresses the combined importance of economic and legal pressures on slavery in areas of Dutch control. The gradual legal freedoms slaves gained after the Revolution served as a foot in the door towards eventual emancipation. When slaves were routinely given the ability to choose new masters, to seek work on their own, and to make money on their own (with some

<sup>33</sup> Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 224, fn. 33.

remuneration to the slave owners), they made a crucial first step into a world of freedom. Voluntary slave manumission and self-purchase emancipations were the result of a process of negotiating the terms of slavery's demise one person at a time. This dispersed, on-the-ground struggle was shaped by statutory law, as others have recognized, but, arguably, it was the common law that truly demonstrated and determined New Yorkers' changing attitudes about slaveholding. Courtroom decisions about interpreting the states' laws on slavery guaranteed that the freedoms won through slaves' negotiations with their enslavers would be protected by the courts.

Chapters 4–6 try to focus on the enslaved persons themselves, to argue that their actions, and not merely the actions of white abolitionists, were crucial in bringing slavery in New York to an end. This reflects my belief that historians have focused too often on the wrong people, on the well-known characters like Sojourner Truth, Alexander Hamilton, or the elite Hudson Valley patrician families. James C. Scott notes that “[t]he rare, heroic, and foredoomed gestures of a Nat Turner or a John Brown are simply not the places to look for the struggle between slaves and their owners. One must look rather at the constant, grinding conflict over work, food, autonomy, ritual – at everyday forms of resistance.”<sup>34</sup> As much as possible, the history of Dutch slavery in New York needs to consider the everyday, common, on-the-ground actions of slaves and slaveholders. This perspective makes the enslaved agents, rather than objects of emancipation.

Chapter 7 provides a conclusion to this story, focusing in part on the “mild thesis,” the idea that slavery in Dutch New York was less harsh than slavery elsewhere. While the mild thesis formerly had a powerful and persuasive influence in the historiography, historians in recent years have rejected it, while highlighting the violent aspects of slavery in New York. This chapter is the first to explain why the mild thesis came about and why arguments about it are more complicated than historians have recognized. Slavery in New York was violent, particularly in the early and mid eighteenth century. But when the histories of the state's involvement in slavery were written in the nineteenth century, the memory of slavery's worst elements had faded.

Situating this story within the national narrative about slavery, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York* argues that slavery remained

<sup>34</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), xvi.

economically viable in New York until its very end, and that it held on longest in areas of Dutch control. It argues, furthermore, if slavery had not been snuffed out by political decree, it would have spread west, with the construction of the Erie Canal, out of Dutch cultural pockets in the Hudson Valley and into western New York and states beyond, all linked to national and international markets. Slaves in New Netherland served the West India Company by building forts, but also by harvesting wheat. Slaves in New York were still cutting, threshing, and sifting wheat in the nineteenth century.

Some recent works on American slavery refer always to “enslaved persons” and never to slaves. One of the claims here is that using the term “slave” denies personhood or suggests that slavery is a metaphysical condition, the essence of someone’s being. But in American history, slaves were routinely defined as persons, and enslavement was their condition, their status, not their being. Bailey’s *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* of 1763 defined a slave as “a Person in the absolute Power of a Master.” Webster’s dictionary of 1828 defined a slave as “a person who is wholly subject to the will of another.” And Article 1, Section II of the US Constitution, the “three-fifths cause,” has been consistently interpreted to mean that slaves were part of the phrase “all other persons.”<sup>35</sup> By not calling these persons “slaves,” historians run the risk of diminishing the terrible conditions they faced.

In some places I use the presentist and sometimes anachronistic term “enslaved person” as a near synonym for slave, but I less commonly use the term “enslaver” for the more traditional “slaveholder” or “master.” To my ears, an “enslaver” sounds like the person who makes another a slave, not one who keeps them in that condition, for example, a slaveholder. In the history of New York, and across the country, there were instances of people who inherited slaves and kept them somewhat reluctantly because of the social, political, and financial costs of manumission. In New York, slaveholders were routinely responsible for maintaining elderly slaves who could no longer work. Such persons can hardly be called “enslavers.” Using new language also runs the risk of linguistic complexity and distancing ourselves from the sources, from the history. For example, I use the term “runaway slave” instead of some alternative like “formerly enslaved person” because the former term is what the sources use and because it is clearly understood today, even if it unfairly treats a person as a slave first, or even

<sup>35</sup> In addition, the third section of the fourth article declares that “no person held to service of labor.”

as a “fugitive slave” for committing no injury to others, no crime except to seek their own freedom.<sup>36</sup>

It is my hope that this book will provide a useful foundation, both in subject matter and in method, for further studies of Northern slave populations.

<sup>36</sup> The discussion about the proper terms in Dutch is grammatically more complicated. See Michiel van Kempen, “On the use of Dutch ‘slaaf’ and ‘totslaagemaakte,’” <https://werkgroepcaraibischeletteren.nl/on-the-use-of-dutch-slaaf-and-totslaafgemaakte/>, accessed July 8, 2023.