

The New Paltz Register of Slaves
(1799-1825)

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Introduction

Founded in 1677 by a small group of French Huguenots, the settlement of New Paltz emerged during the next two hundred years as an “isolated, conservative, tightly-knit farming community” whose unique history has been much celebrated and studied in recent times (Martin, p. 208). Often overlooked is the fact that African slaves provided the town of New Paltz with an abundant supply of labor for use in the farms, mills, and homes during the town’s first 150 years. The institution of slavery thus provided the Huguenots and their descendants with much of the labor upon which to build their communities, prosperity, and longevity.

The historical record of slavery in New Paltz begins in 1674, three years before its founding, when Louis DuBois, purchased two African slaves at a public auction held in Kingston, then called Esopus (Christoph, pp. 207-209). The two slaves ran away from DuBois the following spring and were picked up elsewhere in the colony by a man named Lewis Morris of Barbados. From 1675 to 1680, Morris and DuBois engaged in a lengthy custody battle for the two slaves, with Morris claiming that the two slaves were kidnapped from his plantation in Barbados and sold illegally to DuBois. The final outcome of this case is unknown and no further mention of Anthony or Susan is made in any of the three wills made by DuBois.

Despite DuBois’ difficult experience, more slaves were brought to New Paltz to support the settlement’s growth. The Deyo family bought slaves in 1680 and 1694. Catherine DuBois, widow of Louis DuBois and since remarried to schoolmaster Jean Cottin, baptized a slave girl named Rachel in 1703 and later set forth the conditions for her manumission in her will dated 1712. It is uncertain whether the executors actually carried out the manumission (Heidgerd, W. *ADCD*, pp. 6-14). Throughout the next 125 years, references to slaves continually appear in the historical records of the settlement. In 1703, there were 9 slaves out of a total of 130 residents of the town (O’Callaghan, p.

966). By 1755, as in the rest of the state, slavery was a very well-established part of the New Paltz community: the census from that year lists 28 slaveholders, who collectively owned 78 slaves over the age of 14 years with the large majority of slaveholders (82%) owning between one and four slaves (O'Callaghan, p. 849). The largest slaveowners were Solomon DuBois and Abraham Hardenbergh, each of whom owned seven. The overall population of New Paltz grew rapidly to 2,309 in 1790, when there were 77 slaveholders owning a total of 302 slaves, or 13% of the population. Thirty-eight households now owned 1 to 3 slaves, and 25 households owned 4 to 6. Eleven households now held between 7 and 14, with the largest slaveholders coming from well-established third and fourth generation French and Dutch families such as Hasbrouck, DuBois, Freer, Wynkoop and Vandermark.

Before discussing more specific aspects about slavery in New Paltz, it is important to understand a major difference between slavery in early New York as compared slavery in the plantation-era South, which unlike Northern slavery, has long been well-documented and understood. Through the examination of local documents such as census, legislative and court records, wills, account books, receipts, inventories, and correspondence, it is possible to uncover some of the stories of the individuals who bore so much of the economy of early New Paltz upon their backs; from the records, one can gain some understanding of the harsh and restrictive characteristics that defined the lives of slaves in relation to the comparatively easy and unrestricted lives of their owners. The occasional and fragmentary nature of the records, however, necessitates placing such evidence within the larger historical context of slavery in early New York. According to the groundbreaking dissertation on the slave family in New York by historian Vivienne Kruger:

The central feature of New York and northern slavery was that most slaveholdings were small and contained only from one to five slaves. Because of the small size of the holdings, slave family members were usually owned by separate masters and forced to live apart...Slavery created artificial black demographic conditions in New York: a small overall black population, low black population density, unbalanced adult sex ratios, and a random rather than familial distribution of slaves into white households. (Kruger, abstract)

This concept is vital to understanding the nature of slavery in New Paltz. Slaves did not work in plantation gangs or live in community with other black slaves. The slaves would have had much less contact with other Africans, but would have been largely integrated into the white community, albeit clearly as inferior and vulnerable members. Large gatherings of slaves were prohibited by the white slaveowners, who feared the possibility of rebellion and violence. As a result, slaves lived and worked more closely with their masters in the North than in the South.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the institution of slavery was governed by a series of laws passed by the Colonial assemblies and later by the New York State Legislature. A brief overview of these laws shows the development and eventual dissolution of slavery within the state. Slavery began in New York with very little regulation at all, with only a handful of laws passed during the 17th century. Most historians generally agree that under Dutch rule, slavery was a loosely defined institution. Under the Dutch, “Freed negroes were not legally discriminated against – no racial legislation existed to restrict their freedom to own property, intermarry with whites, or own white or indentured servants... While not as legally prohibitive as slavery would later become under the English, by 1664 the use of slave labor in New Netherland had achieved local importance and acceptance and was deeply entrenched” (Kruger, p. 42).

However, slavery became more legislated and more restrictive after the English won the colony in the 1660’s. Beginning in about 1702 and continuing until mid-century, the state legislature under English rule passed a series of laws that restricted all activities of the slave population, mostly out of fear of violent reprisals such as the 1712 slave rebellion in New York City and the widespread problem of runaways. These laws placed severe restrictions on slave movements, rights of property ownership, use of alcohol, and assembly, and mandated extremely harsh punishments for slaves found guilty of transgressing these laws. Slaves found guilty of such crimes often faced severe corporal punishments that would be viewed as “cruel and unusual” today. Historian A. J. Williams-Myers explains that the intent behind these harsh conditions was to create a

“hearty, obedient, docile, but dependable labor force and to make the African stand in fear.” (Williams-Myers, *Long Hammering*, p. 45). However, these laws also gave the slaves a degree of legal protections against some forms of mistreatment by slaveowners, such as mutilation and dismemberment. The regulation of slavery continued to tighten until about 1773, when a new series of laws began to show a new attitude towards the institution. Acts passed in 1773, 1775, 1784, 1785, and 1788 each provided slaves with a little more freedom than before, and together led directly to the Manumission Act of 1799, which finally set forth the process for the gradual abolition of slavery in the state.

This act freed all children born to slave women after July 4, 1799. Male children were to become free at the age of twenty-eight, and females at the age of twenty-five. The slaveholders were required to register all children born to their slave women with the town clerk under penalty of a fine and immediate freedom for the child. When properly registered, the children were to legally become the indentured servants of the slaveowner until they reached the statutory age. This meant that in some cases, children of slaves were held in servitude long after their parents were set free. For example, a male child who was born in 1820 to parents born before July 5, 1799 would still be required to serve his master until as late as 1848, even though the parents would have been freed in 1827. The owner, however, could and often did waive his claim to them, as well as his responsibility for their support, by assigning them to the local overseers of the poor. (McManus, pp. 174-175.)

Following the 1799 Act were several other acts regarding the amelioration of slavery and its consequences. In 1801, the legislature passed an act that restricted travel in order to discourage slaveholders from selling their slaves in Southern states before their slaves were to become free in New York. This issue was brought up again in 1810 and even later in 1819. Another act passed in 1802 placed restrictions on slaves’ rights to purchase liquors. The legislature passed several acts dealing with the regulation and education of children of slaves who became paupers. (Northrup, p. 299.) But this series of laws was nothing more than the last gasp of the dying institution, and the freed slaves then had to

solve the problem of supporting themselves and gaining full acceptance in a difficult and often unyielding new environment.

Description of the Register of Slaves

The Register of Slaves (1799-1825) was kept by the Town Clerk of New Paltz as a requirement of the New York State Manumission Act of 1799. In keeping the slave register, the town clerk recorded the births of children born to slaves owned by the town's inhabitants. Each entry includes the owner's name, the slave's name, sex, and date of birth. In addition, located in the final pages of the book is an entry entitled the "Record of Disbandments", which list the dates that the slave owners freed, or "abandoned" individual slave children in accordance with the 1799 act. Thus, this portion of the register is of particular interest to researchers, since not only does it provide the names of the owners and their slaves, but also the date in which certain slaves gained their freedom, and whether or not this was done before the official deadline.

The Register of Slaves is an important document for tracking the transition of black Americans from slavery to freedom in New Paltz, but the information it provides is repetitive and quantitative rather than qualitative. The Register does not contain anecdotal information, nor does it give us insight into the daily lives of the slaves, their origins, their feelings, or even the attitudes of the free white community about the institution they supported for over a century. The Register thus serves the researcher as a reference point to study slavery in New Paltz, but cannot be considered the only or even the best source for this purpose. In addition, other documents such as census records, legislative records, court records, wills, inventories, account books, receipts, newspapers, and letters are essential to the search to gain a fuller understanding of the African American experience in this one Mid-Hudson Valley community.

The original register is stored with the New Paltz Town Records held at the Huguenot Historical Society and is accessible to researchers by appointment. In formatting the text of the transcription, the authors decided to adhere completely to the format of the original document in terms of spacing, pagination, and spelling.

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