IN THE SHADOW OF SLAVERY

African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863

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INTRODUCTION

In 1991 in lower Manhattan, construction workers and archaeologists stumbled across an unexpected treasure. Two blocks from city hall, under twenty feet of asphalt, concrete, and rubble, lay the remains of the eighteenth-century "Negroes Burial Ground." Closed in 1790 and covered over by roads and buildings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the site turned out to be the largest such archaeological find in North America, containing the remains of as many as twenty thousand African Americans. The graves revealed to New Yorkers and the nation an aspect of history long hidden: the large numbers of enslaved African and African American men, women, and children who labored to create colonial Manhattan. The skeletons that archaeologists excavated displayed stresses associated with hard labor: bones fractured or out of alignment, made fragile through overwork, malnutrition, and disease. One child's skeleton exhibited injuries associated with carrying heavy burdens on his head. The graves also demonstrated the ways enslaved African Americans attempted both to hold on to African cultural traditions and to incorporate European traditions into their lives. Some graves contained cowrie shells; others, the remains of British and American military uniforms. The bodies faced west so that, following Christian belief of the time, the dead would arise on Judgment Day already facing Christ at his Second Coming; yet the cowrie shells were representative of the hope that the dead would return to Africa in the afterlife. Some graves were marked with a heart-shaped image—possibly an Ashanti image, signifying either *sankofa,* the need to remember the past and revere ancestors, or *akoma,* to have patience, to endure. The burial ground revealed the

centrality of daily slave labor to New York City's black population, but also African Americans' hopes for a life beyond slavery.[1]

The construction, destruction, and recovery of the Negroes Burial Ground, renamed the African Burial Ground in 1993, encapsulates the ways New York City's early black history has been forgotten, but also how this history may be recovered in unusual places. For many today, the quintessential images of New York City's black population come from twentieth-century Manhattan's Harlem. But the black movement to Harlem by the early twentieth century was only the continuation of a migration in which whites forced blacks northward up the island over two and a half centuries. The first free black settlements in the seventeenth century and the establishment of the African Burial Ground began this trend. With each movement of black people out of an area, new residents erased their history there, sometimes deliberately, other times incidentally. After the discovery of the African Burial Ground, archaeologists, historians, and citizens concerned with preserving New York's black history had to remain vigilant in the face of the forces of Manhattan real estate—initially, the construction of a new federal office building on the primary site, and later, the Con Edison company's disruption of an adjacent site. On both sites, construction workers using backhoes and mechanical diggers disinterred many graves, ignoring the bones they churned up in their eagerness to complete their tasks. Only with difficulty did a coalition of academics, politicians, and community activists convince the contractors responsible for these work orders of the importance of the site and the need to preserve and commemorate those buried there. By 2001, ten years after the discovery of the graves, archaeologists headed by scientific director Michael Blakey had recovered a meaningful sample of the graves for study at Howard University. An office established and headed by archaeologist Warren Barbour and ethnohistorian Sherrill Wilson in lower Manhattan's World Trade Center provided educational materials, workshops, and research updates to the general public on some of the earliest residents of Manhattan Island.[2]

In this book, I uncover the early history of enslaved and free Africans and African Americans in New York City between 1626 and 1863. To do so, I have relied not only on documents produced by black men and women, such as newspapers, literature, and organizational records, but also documents produced by whites that reveal, perhaps unintentionally, the contours of life for New York City's blacks from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. As we know, black men and women left few of their own sources. But the descriptions left by non-blacks, read and interpreted carefully, can provide a wealth of information. In arenas that whites ostensibly

created and controlled—courtrooms, almshouses, indeed, the very streets of the city—black people wielded admittedly limited but important influences of their own, to which whites were forced to respond and upon which they often commented. Much as the construction workers stumbled across black graves in twentieth-century lower Manhattan, the historian can stumble across black voices and actions in unexpected places in the records of old New York.

Hearing these voices and witnessing these actions reveals the importance of slavery, emancipation, and black freedom to the history of New York City. Although historians have thoroughly studied black enslavement and emancipation in the southern United States, comparable studies for northern locales are few. Before the completion of emancipation in 1827, New York City contained the largest urban slave population outside of the South. After 1827, New York City was home to one of the largest free black communities in the North. Although black people as a proportion of the total New York City population declined sharply during the antebellum period, from 11 percent in the 1790s to 1.5 percent by 1860, the black community continued to serve as an important economic, social, and cultural reference point in New York City life.[3]

Central to the story of slavery and freedom in New York City is the development of class relations and community among blacks. Rarely have historians of pre–Civil War blacks looked beyond the racial discrimination and hardships blacks suffered for signs of their attitudes about class relations and work. Historians studying the roots of class formation in the antebellum United States have only recently begun to explore the roles that the institution of slavery and racial identity played in defining class identity for blacks, whites, and other racial and ethnic groups in America.[4]

The latest works in labor history build on historian Herbert Gutman's model of class formation and identity in the United States. Gutman, drawing on the work of British labor historian E. P. Thompson, posited the existence of class identity and ideology not only on the job, but in the social and cultural expressions of workers and in their lived experience.[5] But this "new labor history" neglects the unique role that slavery and racism played for both whites and blacks in defining the American working class in the North as well as the South.[6] In particular, recent labor historians of New York City have neglected the importance of blacks and of racial politics to the construction and politics of the working class in that city. Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1789–1850* and Christine Stansell's *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* are, deservedly, among the most acclaimed studies on the

roots of the American working class in New York City. But slavery and emancipation in New York have no bearing on the class developments they describe. Black New Yorkers barely exist in these books. Both authors create a white hegemony more powerful than that which actually existed in the nineteenth century.[7] Using New York City as a case study, I demonstrate the ways northern slavery and emancipation, southern slavery, and racial identities influenced the construction of class and community for blacks and whites in the pre–Civil War United States.

By bringing the topic of class formation to the foreground in studying the antebellum free black community, this volume presents a more complex view of black community formation. In the 1920s and 1930s, the first professional black historians, such as Charles Wesley, Carter G. Woodson, Lorenzo Greene, and W. E. B. Du Bois, produced works that placed issues of class at the center of their understanding of African American history.[8] Although there has been a proliferation of works on the antebellum African American experience since the 1960s, many of these works have centered on southern slavery. Research on antebellum free blacks has focused on racial discrimination, community building, or the black elite.[9] The class analysis in such works, while present, is often subordinate to the examination of the formation of racial identity.[10] Further, these works do not examine the process of class development among blacks; they present a static picture of class relations, rather than a dynamic description of the growth of class divisions within the black community.

Although I am critical of the literature I cite above, my own work is heavily in debt to it. I draw on the theories and methodologies developed by historians of the African American and working-class experiences to explore black life in New York City. My book began as an attempt solely to study black working-class formation, but ultimately I drew on the best traditions in African American history by attempting to study that development in the context of dynamic community formation. I have looked to labor history for discussions of class formation that include economic, ideological, and cultural forces. My research strategy has been shaped by works in African American, labor, women's, and gender history. I view my work as part of a continuing and increasingly exciting discussion about the interplay of race and racism, class and gender in U.S. history.

I begin with the premise that the experiences of slavery and emancipation in colonial and early national New York City, and the ways New Yorkers interpreted those experiences, influenced the shape of labor relations there and the attitudes of blacks and whites toward black workers and their

labor. The existence of slavery in New York had an indelible effect on the political and economic institutions of the city. In the colonial period, slave labor was central to the growth of the city. By the time of the Revolutionary War, slaves symbolized the condition whites most feared for themselves as workers and citizens. A condition approximating black slavery was the worst possible outcome of the Revolutionary War with Britain. But colonists' fears and critiques of their own enslavement, rooted in republican ideology, did not lead them to emancipate their own slaves during the war.

In 1785, the founding of the New York Manumission Society by middle-class and elite white men in New York City signaled a new desire to end slavery, but it took nearly fifteen years for the New York State government to agree. New York's emancipation laws were defined to free slaves carefully and thus control and contain free blacks. This was only partly to control blacks as a labor class, for increasing numbers of European immigrants gradually displaced blacks in many of the occupations they had held as slaves. Rather, the desire among different classes of whites to control blacks was based on their fears that blacks, supposedly degraded by slavery, might influence urban and state politics, whether through formal practices such as voting or informal practices such as demonstrating in the streets. Through the provisions of the gradual emancipation laws and the 1821 suffrage law that disfranchised the majority of the black community, white New Yorkers selectively enforced republican virtues. By the end of the period of emancipation in 1827, whites had legally, economically, and socially designated black people as a separate, dependent, and unequal group within the New York City community.

Despite increasing restrictions, blacks during the emancipation era established an urban presence that built upon and then grew beyond practices begun under slavery. Before the War of 1812, blacks participated in public displays of politics and culture across evolving class lines. But the rise of a new racism against blacks after the War of 1812 led to increased pressure on blacks to move out of public space and, indeed, with the formation of the American Colonization Society, out of the United States all together. The roots of class distinctions in the black community lay partially in differing responses to racism. The seeds of a black middle class were planted as some black ministers, educators, and others looked to the New York Manumission Society for support. Their coalition with the Manumission Society led to conflict between black ministers and educators and black workers over public displays, education, and blacks' work habits and religiosity. Throughout the antebellum period, debates over methods to achieve freedom for

southern slaves and racial, social, economic, and political equality for all blacks both revealed and contributed to the evolution of class distinctions.

The rise of radical abolitionism marked another period in the evolution of class and racial identity in New York City. Between 1830 and 1840, blacks turned from the tactics and ideologies of the New York Manumission Society, whose members increasingly advocated colonization, to a coalition with white radical abolitionists. Free blacks were crucial to abolitionist whites' acceptance of the doctrine that black equality was central to the goal of immediate emancipation of southern slaves. Some blacks again turned to an ideology, in this case moral perfection, that highlighted evolving class distinctions within the black community. While some blacks, regardless of class background, subscribed to the moral and intellectual reforms promulgated by abolitionists, others protested against the privileging of middle-class, educated blacks and their tactics for racial improvement above more grass-roots political efforts that involved working-class blacks.

As abolitionists focused on moral improvement, other reformers took a more pragmatic approach to the problems of the black working class. A group of Quaker women, ideological and sometimes familial descendants of the leaders of the New York Manumission Society, formed several organizations to aid African Americans. The most prominent of these was the Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans, which established an orphanage for black children in 1836. By providing education, job training, and employment opportunities, the Quaker women gave working-class black children an alternate path of racial uplift from that advocated by the abolitionists. But the Quaker women did not simply reform black clients. Rather, black workers transformed the orphanage into an institution that addressed their own needs, and in the process changed the women's views of the possibilities for racial equality.

In the 1840s and 1850s, the breakup of the abolitionist coalition allowed the rise of a new group of black abolitionists who placed a greater value on labor than on moral perfection as a means for the improvement of black people. Black abolitionists distinguished between meaningful skilled labor and "degraded" occupations such as domestic service and waiting tables. Such distinctions grew out of an ideology about labor in the antebellum period, rooted in republican thought, which devalued personal service occupations as not providing workers with sufficient independence from employers.[11] Among blacks, such distinctions also grew out of the experience of slavery, in which domestic and other personal servants were more subject to the will of their masters than other workers and, at worst, were also subject

to sexual abuse. However, the majority of free black women and a large proportion of free black men continued to work in such occupations out of economic necessity. With noteworthy exceptions, most middle-class black abolitionists were unwilling to recognize the efforts these men and women made to retain their autonomy as they performed these jobs.

The occupations most criticized by black abolitionists could and did provide the basis for mutual respect between black and white workers and an alleviation, albeit temporary, of racial tensions. In 1853, for example, New York's black and white waiters joined together to ask for higher wages. Black waiters' pride in their work and their resulting belief that they deserved higher wages gained them the reluctant respect of their fellow white waiters. Black abolitionists responded by attempting to attract the black waiters into a rival race-based organization that emphasized the harmony of interest between employers and employees and encouraging black waiters to take pride in moral reform rather than manual labor. In another demonstration of the slowly growing class distinctions in the black community, most black waiters rejected this organization and pledged their support to the struggle for higher wages.

The 1853 waiters' strike was not the only instance of cooperation and contact between the black and white laboring poor. Black and white workers shared class-based neighborhoods throughout the antebellum period. They participated in social and cultural activities after work in interracial bars and dance halls and sometimes intermarried. After 1834, white journalists highlighted these relationships, creating a discourse of amalgamation that sexualized and criminalized black-white interactions in the public eye. White reformers in the 1850s appropriated and expanded on these negative characterizations, focusing on the Five Points district as the center of amalgamation, poverty, and crime in New York City.

By the beginning of the Civil War, the allure of the rich political, social, and cultural interactions that blacks could achieve in New York City had grown thin in the face of continuing poverty and increasing racism. After years of growth, New York's black population dropped precipitously between 1840 and the Civil War, from a high of over 16,000 in 1840 to about 12,500 in 1860.[12] The decrease in population was due partially to the massive influx of Irish immigrants, who competed with blacks for unskilled jobs. But it was also due to the increasing danger of kidnapping and southern enslavement that northern free blacks faced in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Blacks looked beyond the boundaries of New York City to the possibility of farming communities in upstate New York, the West, and Canada. Some also

embraced emigration to Liberia and the West Indies, in cooperation with the white-led American Colonization Society that had been rejected by blacks earlier in the century.

Despite the decrease in the black population, the rise of the Republican Party and its limited antislavery platform was threatening to proslavery New Yorkers and to those who opposed racial equality. Soon after the Civil War began, some white working-class New Yorkers turned their backs on the limited promise of racial cooperation and equality implied in the relationships between blacks and whites in the waiters' strike and in the Five Points. In one of the worst cases of racial violence in the nineteenth century, the Civil War Draft Riots of 1863, the antebellum period ended for blacks as it had begun soon after the War of 1812: with attempts to expunge blacks, this time by violent means, from New York's social, cultural, political, and economic life.

Four periods of black community, political activism, and class consciousness are discussed in this book: the period of slavery from 1626 to 1785; the growth of antislavery sentiment and gradual emancipation from 1785 to 1827, when blacks and whites struggled over how to define newly free blacks' economic, social, and cultural position in the New York community; the period of radical abolitionism, from 1830 through the Civil War, when blacks and some whites articulated new ideologies and tactics to address the issues of racial inequality; and finally, the period of disillusionment between 1840 and the Civil War Draft Riots, during which the enforcement of proslavery laws and racial violence pushed large numbers of blacks out of New York City.

Throughout these four periods, evolving class distinctions were evident within the black community. These distinctions were complicated by the struggle for racial equality and by the economic position of blacks. Among blacks, class was not determined only by distinctions between those who performed manual labor and those who held non–manual labor jobs, or between those who were financially stable and materially successful and those who were not. Educated blacks were often unable to sustain the lifestyle that allowed for a firm middle-class status. Further, even as blacks increasingly espoused class-based solutions to racial problems, they continued to claim racial unity. Compared to whites, cultural, political, and social markers became more important points of difference between the black middle class and the black working class than economic and occupational factors alone.

In pointing to the conflicts and compromises that black people struggled with in their communities, I seek to complicate the vision of community. Community is not a fixed entity, but a dynamic process in which individuals constantly struggle over definitions and goals. *In the Shadow of Slavery*

focuses on the ways in which increasingly during the antebellum period class distinctions among blacks affected arguments about black community, particularly as expressed through political activism against racism and slavery. In seeing community, class, and political activism as dynamic, entangled processes, remade according to the exigencies of the times and the needs of the people involved, we are able to better understand how a single African burial ground can hold cowrie shells and brass buttons, Christian crosses and West African *sankofa* and *akoma*. Hopefully, then, we can do greater justice to the complex and dynamic ways New York City contained diversity across and within racial groups.

CHAPTER ONE

Slavery in Colonial New York

On the fourth and fifth of July, 1827, New York City's African Americans took to the streets, marching in processions with banners and music. Many attended church services, offering prayers and songs of thanksgiving to God and speeches praising the state legislature and white reformers. Slavery, an institution virtually as old as European settlement on Manhattan Island, had finally ended in New York State. From the time of the Revolutionary War, New Yorkers had debated ending slavery, but it took almost fifty years for them to eradicate the institution completely. Repeated attempts to pass legislation ending slavery failed in the 1770s and 1780s. New York's first emancipation law, passed in 1799, freed no slaves and granted only partial freedom to the children of slaves: those born to slave mothers served lengthy indentures to their mothers' masters, until age twenty-five if female and twenty-eight if male. Finally, in 1817, Governor Daniel Tompkins convinced the New York State legislature to end slavery completely, but even then, the legislature took the longest time suggested by Tompkins—a decade.

Slavery's long demise—indeed, slavery's long history in New York—indicates the importance of black labor to the region between 1626 and 1827. As in the South, black slave labor was central to the day-to-day survival and the economic life of Europeans in the colonial North, and no part of the colonial North relied more heavily on slavery than Manhattan. Slave labor enabled the survival of the first European settlers in Dutch-governed New Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, the British sought to heighten white New Yorkers' reliance on slave labor and the slave trade in order to make Manhattan the chief North American slave port and economic center. As British New York became known as a center of slave

labor, few European laborers, free or indentured, chose to immigrate there. Under both the Dutch and the British, slaves performed vital agricultural tasks in the rural areas surrounding New York City. By the end of the seventeenth century, New York City had a larger black population than any other North American city. The ratio of slaves to whites in the total population was comparable to that in Maryland and Virginia. In the eighteenth century, only Charleston and New Orleans exceeded New York City in number of slaves.[1]

The system of racial slavery became the foundation of New Yorkers' definitions of race, class, and freedom far into the nineteenth century. As Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, and other historians have pointed out, the initial purpose of slavery was to secure a labor force—to "make class." But as white New Yorkers created a working class based on African slavery, they also developed racial justifications for the enslavement of Africans above all other groups of workers. Haltingly under the Dutch and more consistently under the British, Europeans defined blacks as the only group fit to be slaves amid a society with numerous racial and religious groups. The use of racial ideologies that defined blacks as inferior to other racial groups and thus deserving of enslavement condemned blacks to unequal status into the nineteenth century and beyond. Europeans did not always define the terms of racial inferiority consistently, but their reliance upon these justifications during the time of slavery meant that when blacks celebrated freedom in 1827, their struggle for equality in New York City had just begun.[2]

Enslavement dominated every facet of colonial black New Yorkers' lives—the work they did, their ability to form families, their religious practices, even how they defined themselves. But black men and women did not simply acquiesce to enslavement or to an inferior racial status. Throughout Dutch and British slavery, enslaved Africans demonstrated through their labor, their resistance to bondage, and their creation of families and communities that the racial stereotypes of inferiority promulgated by Europeans had no basis in reality. Black New Yorkers used Europeans' reliance on their labor, as well as their own knowledge of European ways, to ameliorate the conditions of slavery and to push for full freedom—through legal methods under the Dutch and, under the British, through violent resistance. Recognition of blacks' centrality to colonial New York's economic system and of blacks' continual pursuit of freedom gives the lie to Europeans' claims of African inferiority.

The first non–Native American settler on Manhattan Island, Jan Rodrigues, was of African and possibly Afro-European descent, a free man and sailor

from a Dutch vessel. In 1613, Rodrigues's shipmates dumped him on the island after a shipboard dispute. Rodrigues became fluent in Native American languages, and when European explorers and traders arrived at Manhattan Island in subsequent years, Rodrigues facilitated trade relations between them and Native Americans. Rodrigues eventually married into the Rockaway tribe.[3] Rodrigues's role in trade and his marriage into a Native American tribe began the commercial and cultural exchanges for which Manhattan Island would become famous.

By 1621, the Dutch West India Company had obtained exclusive rights to settle the colony of New Netherland, including Manhattan. The first European settlers on Manhattan Island were Walloons, an oft-persecuted Belgian minority who traveled to New Netherland under the auspices of the company, for Dutch citizens had little interest in leaving the economically prosperous Netherlands for the American frontier. The company hoped that the Walloon settlements would secure its hold on New Netherland against the British, who also claimed rights to the territory during the seventeenth century.[4]

In 1625, the first Walloon families settled on Manhattan Island under the directorship of Hollander William Kieft, who renamed the island New Amsterdam. Initially, the settlers lived in makeshift shelters—trenches seven feet deep, lined with timber, and roofed with turf or bark. Late that same year, a group of Dutch builders arrived with plans for more permanent structures: a fort with a marketplace, houses, a church, a hospital, and a school within its walls. Construction began soon after Pieter Minuit allegedly purchased Manhattan Island from local Native Americans in early 1626.[5] Following the acquisition, migrants from England, France, Norway, Germany, Ireland, and Denmark joined the Walloons on the island. Although New Netherland was a Dutch colony, non-Dutch settlers at New Amsterdam probably constituted as much as 50 percent of the population, leading one observer to state that Manhattan had "Too Great a Mixture of Nations." Another estimated that the island's settlers spoke eighteen different languages.[6]

But relative to other colonies, New Netherland had difficulty attracting European settlers until the 1650s. Dutch citizens could make a comfortable living in Holland and thus had no desire to travel to the American colonies. Also, the difficulties New Netherlanders faced in the first decades of settlement frightened away the Dutch as well as other Europeans who might have been attracted to the colony. From the 1620s through the 1640s, the New Netherland colony was on the defensive against the Native Americans and the British; settlers who arrived at the colony expecting to labor peacefully instead were forced to defend themselves in violent skirmishes, if not

outright wars. The settlers also struggled economically because of mismanagement by local directors general and the Dutch West India Company's monopoly on trade. Directors Verhulst and van Twiller conflicted with colonists over the labor owed to the company. The company had a generous land-grant and land-use policy, particularly for the five elite Dutch men to whom it granted patroonships—thousands of acres of land and extensive rights over the land's resources in return for attracting settlers to work the land. But the company restricted settlers' and patroons' earnings from the most profitable resource in the colony—fur—and limited the export of other goods from the colony. These restrictions, as well as taxes on exported goods, made it difficult for those granted land to profit from it. Out of five patroonships the company granted throughout the colony in the 1620s, only one, Rensselaerswyck, survived. Numerous settlers returned to Europe after a few difficult years, and some even filed suit against the company because of the hardships they experienced. In 1630, 300 colonists lived in New Netherland, of whom 270 were clustered at New Amsterdam—not enough to make the colony a profitable enterprise. By 1638, New Amsterdam held approximately 400 residents, but the city of Boston, founded four years after New Amsterdam, already contained 1,000. Not until 1640, when the Dutch government removed the Dutch West India Company's trade monopoly, did trade restrictions begin to ease in the colony; and not until the mid-1650s did the colony attract consistent numbers of European settlers. By 1664, the end of Dutch rule, European settlers at New Amsterdam numbered approximately 1,500.[7]

African slaves became the most stable element of the New Netherland working class and population. The Dutch West India Company's importation and employment of most of the colony's slave labor enabled the settlement and survival of the Europeans at New Amsterdam as well as the limited economic success the colony experienced. The first eleven African slaves were imported in 1626. The company, not individuals, owned these slaves, who provided labor for the building and upkeep of the colony's infrastructure. In addition to aiding in the construction of Fort Amsterdam, completed in 1635, slaves also built roads, cut timber and firewood, cleared land, and burned limestone and oyster shells to make the lime used in outhouses and in burying the dead. In 1625, in an attempt to diversify the colony's economy, the company established six "bouwerys," or farms, along the eastern and western shores of Manhattan Island, just north of the settlement. By 1626, company slaves worked these farms; the produce they grew fed the colony's inhabitants. Company-hired overseers watched the slaves during their laboring and leisure hours.[8]

Despite the colony's reliance on slave labor, the Dutch West India Company initially imported slaves into New Amsterdam haphazardly. The company was more concerned with attracting European colonists to New Netherland than with importing slaves, and it did not want to supply New Amsterdam's merchants with surplus slaves with which they might compete with the company in North American slave markets. Until about 1640, most European settlers, reluctant to commit to permanent settlement in the colony, worked as traders and had little need for long-term, year-round assistance from slave or free laborers. They tended to hire slaves from the company or from the few private slaveowners for short periods rather than buy them. Thus, the company directed most of its slave labor to the Dutch colonies of Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, and briefly, Brazil; slaves arrived at New Amsterdam irregularly and sometimes accidentally. For example, settlers in 1636 bought three slaves from a ship's captain from Providence Island colony. In 1642, a French privateer dropped off an unknown number of slaves at New Amsterdam. And in 1652, a Dutch privateer captured a Spanish ship and landed its cargo of forty-four slaves at the settlement.[9]

After Holland lost Brazil to the Portuguese in 1654, the Dutch West India Company began to ship slaves to New Amsterdam more consistently, in larger numbers, and directly from Africa in an effort to develop New Amsterdam into a major North American slave port. European colonists profited from the increased importation of slaves. On the bouwerys just outside of New Amsterdam and the farms of the Hudson Valley, landowners used slaves to clear the land, plant grain crops, and take care of livestock. These farms supplied grain and livestock to other Dutch colonies and to the Netherlands. In New Amsterdam, larger numbers of wealthy merchants, artisans, and business owners bought slaves and trained them to work in their businesses. Other merchants hoped to join in the profits of the slave trade and bought slaves in order to resell them to other New Netherland residents or to other colonies. One of the largest of these shipments came aboard the *Witte Paert* in 1655. When the ship docked in New Amsterdam, residents knew of its arrival because of the stench that arose from the holds, where slave traders had tightly packed three hundred African men and women and left them to travel across the Atlantic amid their own waste. By 1660, New Amsterdam was the most important slave port in North America.[10]

African slaves constituted the predominant part of New York City's colonial working class. Throughout the Dutch period, the colony attracted few European indentured servants, especially relative to other North American colonies. Thus, the colony relied heavily on slave labor. In New Netherland and other parts of the colonial Americas in the seventeenth century, colonial

governments were less concerned with defining racial difference under the law than ensuring the presence of a steady labor force. No European states formally regulated slavery in the North American colonies before the 1660s; Virginia established the first comprehensive slave codes between 1680 and 1682. Neither did colonies limit slavery to Africans—Europeans enslaved Native Americans when they could, although not other Europeans. In New Netherland, African slaves could testify in court and bring suit against whites; had the same trial rights as whites; could own property, excepting real estate or other slaves; and could work for wages. Slaves, white and black indentured servants, and free black and white workers in the seventeenth century held more rights and experiences in common in New Amsterdam, and indeed in North America, than would be true in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[11]

Nonetheless, during the 1600s African ancestry became increasingly important in defining the bound segment of the working class. Although trans-Atlantic travel during this time was difficult for everyone, only African captives and European criminals and prisoners of war arrived in the New World in chains, as slaves and indentured servants, respectively. The presence of relatively few European indentured servants, criminal or not, meant that few Europeans came to the New Netherland colony as bondpersons, especially after New Netherland became more involved in the slave trade after 1640. Masters had the same control over servants during their indentures as they had over slaves. Indentured servants could not marry until their indentures were complete; masters could sell indentured servants' time to new owners as they could sell slaves; and punishments of indentured servants were similar to those of slaves. Even the fact that Africans were enslaved for life sometimes made little difference in colonies where life expectancies were short and indentured servants might not survive their seven-year contracts. In Virginia and other colonies during the seventeenth century, indentured servants worked alongside slaves; similarities in their conditions led to cooperation between European and African bondpersons in ways ranging from running away together to intermarriage. But the fact that there were only small numbers of indentured servants in New Amsterdam exacerbated the differences between African and European laborers.[12]

Practically from the arrival of the first slaves, many European laborers in New Amsterdam, feeling the pressure of a tight labor market, actively sought to distinguish themselves from slave laborers and promote their status as free workers. Most had little incentive to identify with the colony's slaves. Because free laborers earned poor wages from the Dutch West India Company, by far New Amsterdam's largest employer, many worked more

than one job to survive, and even the schoolmaster took in washing. In the limited labor market, free skilled white workers particularly feared competition from slave laborers, for a slave could be purchased for the same amount as a free laborer's annual wages. This fear prompted white workers in 1628 to convince the company not to train slaves for skilled labor, as it did in other American colonies. By the 1650s, European settlers began to declare publicly that Africans were not as competent skilled laborers as Europeans. When the officers of the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam tried to encourage the New Amsterdam settlers to train slaves as skilled workers, Director General Stuyvesant replied that there were "no able negroes fit to learn a trade."[13] Under Dutch colonial rule, Europeans of all nations united to racialize jobs and skills in Manhattan, excluding enslaved and free blacks from lucrative occupations.

But criticisms of African labor did not alone support the development of the negative racial stereotypes that enabled Europeans to justify the enslavement of Africans. New Amsterdam's slaves' religious beliefs and their access to Christianity became another way to distinguish Africans from Europeans. For much of the period before the eighteenth century, non-Christian beliefs theoretically marked those whom Europeans could enslave. Initially, Europeans justified slavery as a way to bring "heathen" Africans to Christianity. Once Africans accepted Christianity, the stated purpose of slavery was supposedly fulfilled, and blacks should have been freed. But the increased dependency of Europeans on slave labor ultimately trumped religious beliefs for most slaveholders.[14]

Christian religious leaders through the seventeenth century debated the question of enslaving Christians, including converted Africans, although they did not actively oppose slavery. Ministers and members of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands and in the Americas felt an obligation to convert slaves. In 1638, Dominie Evardus Bogardus of New Amsterdam requested that a schoolmaster be sent to the colonies to educate young Dutch and blacks in Christianity. Annually from 1639 to 1655, between one and three black children were baptized in the Dutch Reformed Church. And Dutch Reformed ministers performed marriages for a significant number of enslaved and free blacks.

By 1655, however, the Dutch church had stopped converting slaves to Christianity. According to Dominie Henricus Selyns, the slaves were not truly "striving for piety and Christian virtues" and instead "wanted nothing else than to deliver their children from bodily slavery." The Dutch church baptized only one black person between 1656 and 1664. The church's refusal to baptize slaves closed one method of Africans' assimilation as free people

into the New Netherland community. Europeans depicted Africans as unable to be genuinely pious Christians and strengthened the religious foundation for preserving slavery. In doing so, they also strengthened a culturally based racial delineation between Africans and Europeans.[15]

The Dutch enslavement of Spanish prisoners of war underscored the increasing importance of race in perpetuating slavery under Dutch rule. In 1642 the French privateer *La Garce* arrived in New Amsterdam with a group of "Spanish Negroes" from a captured Spanish vessel. Despite the men's claims that they were free Spanish subjects, not Africans or slaves, the Dutch considered them slaves because of their swarthy skin and sold them.[16] By the end of Dutch rule in New Netherland, Europeans in the colony had established the racial differences between Africans and Europeans that allowed them to enslave Africans. Europeans rooted their creation of the colonial working class in seventeenth-century New Amsterdam in bound labor, particularly slavery, and increasingly defined only Africans as slaves.

Because Europeans in New Netherland in the 1600s established the relationship between racial difference and slavery gradually, the experiences of African slaves in New Amsterdam varied depending on the time of their arrival at the colony and their own prior knowledge and experiences. The first eleven slaves who arrived at New Amsterdam in 1626 have been termed "Atlantic Creoles" by historian Ira Berlin. Atlantic Creoles were men and women with cultural roots in both African and European cultures. Many spoke multiple languages, African and European, and were familiar with the customs of both worlds. Some were the descendants of African women and European men who had come to the coast of West Africa to trade in slaves and other commodities. Others were Africans who took on elements of European culture in order to better position themselves to take advantage of Africa's growing international trade in commodities and slaves. Atlantic Creoles lived in the coastal towns of Africa and in ports throughout the New World. Some traveled the seas with European explorers and traders. Many were able to use their knowledge to retain their freedom, but in other cases—perhaps with the first eleven New Amsterdam slaves—their extensive knowledge simply made them more valuable property.[17]

Of the first eleven slaves to arrive in New Amsterdam, the names of five denote a degree of mixed cultural ancestry or experience: Paul d'Angola, Simon Congo, Anthony Portuguese, John Francisco, and Gracia Angola. The last names d'Angola, Congo, and Angola indicate the birthplaces of these slaves on the west coast of Africa. For knowledgeable slave buyers, the names also suggested special skills or traits associated with Africans from those

regions. Europeans characterized Angolan and Congolese slaves as having docile and complacent natures and as possessing special abilities in the mechanical arts. In fact, savvy slave traders may have renamed these slaves to lure prospective buyers. The first names Paul, Simon, John, Anthony, and Gracia denote European, and perhaps Christian, acculturation. Catholicism brought by Portuguese traders had made inroads among Africans in coastal Angola and Congo. The last names Portuguese and Francisco also indicate some degree of European acculturation. Anthony Portuguese and John Francisco may have been of mixed Portuguese or Spanish and African ancestry, or they may simply have been owned by Portuguese or Spanish slave masters before their arrival in New Amsterdam.[18]

The presence in New Amsterdam of slaves with Portuguese or Spanish connections resulted from the Dutch West India Company's aggressive attempts to gain dominance in the slave trade between Africa and the New World. Soon after its founding in 1621, the company fought the Portuguese and Spanish on land and sea, attempting to gain control of Portuguese and Spanish holdings on both ends of the route. Thus, these first slaves may have been captured during skirmishes between the Dutch and Portuguese on the coast of West Africa or in Brazil, or between the Dutch and Spanish on the island of Curaçao. Or, the Dutch may have raided a Spanish ship in the Atlantic, capturing slaves, some of which may have ended up in New Amsterdam. Additionally, any number of the first eleven slaves in New Amsterdam may have been free people, either in Africa or as sailors on the high seas, before their transport to New Amsterdam.[19]

The names of the six other slaves who arrived in 1626 apparently reflect their experiences and identities in New Netherland: Big Manuel or Manuel Gerritsen; Little Manuel or Manuel Minuit; Manuel de Reus; Little Anthony; and Jan from Fort Orange. Europeans probably gave the nicknames Big Manuel, Little Manuel, Little Anthony, and Jan from Fort Orange to the slaves after their arrival in New Netherland to distinguish among repeated first names. Jan's attribution, "from Fort Orange," refers to the fact that the Dutch West India Company sent this slave to the original company settlement on the Hudson River for a time before bringing him to the island. Minuit, Gerritsen, and de Reus bore the last names of their European masters.[20]

That both the first and last names of these eleven slaves were European does not necessarily indicate the renaming of Africans by masters as was endemic to many slaveholding societies. Slaveholders during this time, and particularly the Dutch, did not have a great interest in renaming their slaves. In fact, the repetition of first names among the eleven demonstrates that

these slaves retained names of their own choosing, regardless of the confusion that identical names may have caused their masters and other Europeans in the settlement. These names also betoken the knowledge of multiple cultures that these particular Africans carried with them and perhaps their own awareness of the power that could come with such knowledge. The use of Spanish or Portuguese saints' names as first names indicates knowledge of Christianity, which may have soothed Europeans who would have been more fearful of "uncivilized" or "heathen" Africans. Indeed, throughout the seventeenth century, the Dutch West India Company and individual slave owners preferred "seasoned" or acculturated slaves to those directly from Africa.[21]

The trust the European settlers placed in these enslaved, acculturated men is demonstrated in the company's willingness to employ them in the defense of the colony. During New Netherland's most serious war against Native Americans, Director General Kieft's War in the 1640s, Kieft armed slaves with hatchets and pikes to help defend the Dutch settlements. Trusting slaves with the job of executing white criminals also demonstrated the colonists' confidence in individual Africans. In contrast to military service, however, duties as public executioners signified slaves' low status. In Holland, the job of executioner was considered so degraded that few were willing to do it; other criminals had to be forced to perform capital punishments. In the colonial context, slaves, who held the lowest status in the community and who could be most easily coerced, performed these duties. Jan of Fort Orange served in this capacity at Fort Orange before being brought to New Amsterdam. In New Amsterdam, a slave named Pieter administered punishments including whipping, maiming, and execution.[22]

Europeans' reliance upon and confidence in Africans, despite their belief that Africans were inferior, meant that slaves exercised rights and privileges that seem unusual from the perspective of nineteenth-century or even eighteenth-century slave systems. In addition to permitting slaves in New Netherland to own material goods and earn wages, the Dutch West India Company and the Dutch government allowed them to petition the government and to use the courts to settle disputes. In 1635, a group of slaves successfully petitioned the corporate headquarters of the Dutch West India Company in Holland for wages it believed the company owed them.[23] Their example may have inspired other blacks in New Amsterdam, slave and free, to pursue their rights in local courts. In 1639, two slaves, Pedro Negretto and Manuel de Reus, successfully sued Europeans for wages due. In 1643, Little Manuel sued Englishman John Seales. Manuel de Reus and Big Manuel testified that Seales had damaged Little Manuel's cow. The court fined Seales

twenty-five guilders plus court costs and ordered payment of damages to Little Manuel.[24]

The Dutch West India Company also promoted family life among its slaves. In 1628, the company imported the first black female slaves, three women allegedly purchased for "the comfort of the company's Negro men." The company initially housed the slaves together in makeshift barracks. As the slaves married and had children, the company allowed them to form separate households. But ultimately, the colony's preference for slave men was more important than its desire to create slave families. Between 1626 and 1664, the sex ratio among slaves was 131 males to 100 females, making it difficult for men and women to marry, if they so desired. Further, individual slave owners were less concerned than the company about creating a family life for slaves. Because most colonial slaveholders owned just one or two slaves, it was unlikely that a single slave would find a mate in his or her owner's household. Individual slave owners were also more likely to sell their slaves, which meant that slaves might live in several households over the course of their lives. Director General Peter Stuyvesant stated that a group of slaves brought to New Amsterdam in 1652 had within four years been "two, three, or more times re-sold, and [had] changed masters." Even if a slave found a mate outside his or her own household, distance between households and the instability of slave ownership made such arrangements fraught with difficulties.[25]

Some masters went out of their way to ensure the marital happiness of their slaves. In 1664, Peter Stuyvesant sold the husband of a New Amsterdam slave couple to Jeremias Van Rensselaer, the patroon of Rensselaerswyck near present-day Albany. Although concern for the slave couple did not prevent the sale, Stuyvesant did "urge" Van Rensselaer to purchase the wife also, which Van Rensselaer did. And despite its rules against slave baptism after 1655, the Dutch Reformed Church supported slave marriages, performing twenty-six from the early 1640s to 1664. Slaves also formed marriages independent of the church. Indeed, of the first six recorded marriages, performed in New Amsterdam's Dutch Reformed Church between 1641 and 1643, two of the newly married were already widowers and five, widows. Probably over one hundred children were born to slave and free black couples in New Amsterdam under Dutch rule. Of these, the Dutch church baptized sixty-one.[26]

Despite the initially unreliable nature of the slave trade and the eagerness of New Amsterdam merchants to sell slaves south, the black population in New Amsterdam increased alongside the white. By 1660, New Amsterdam had the largest population of urban slaves in North America. When

Dutch rule ended in 1664, 375 blacks, of whom 75 were free, constituted about 20 percent of the population of New Amsterdam. The proportion of blacks to whites in New Amsterdam was comparable to that in the southern colonies of Virginia and Maryland. Relative to the Chesapeake colonies, however, where the imbalance between the numbers of male and female slaves was even higher than in New Amsterdam and where masters segregated black males from females on plantations, slaves in New Amsterdam had greater opportunities to form families.[27]

The variety of rights and privileges enjoyed by African slaves in New Amsterdam—relatively kind masters, relatively good opportunities to form families, and access to courts and some forms of property—did not mitigate the fundamental facts of enslavement for Africans: involuntary, largely unpaid, lifelong servitude and ultimate lack of control over one's individual and family life. Despite the ways the Dutch system of slavery may have seemed mild in comparison to plantation regimes south of New Amsterdam, the fact that New Amsterdam's slaves attempted to gain their freedom throughout the period of Dutch rule indicates the hardships blacks experienced under slavery.

Between 1639 and 1655, slaves attempted to use the Dutch Reformed Church to gain their freedom. The church's initial support of slave baptisms and marriages, and slaves' knowledge that Europeans were conflicted about enslaving Christians, led some slaves to seek freedom by converting to Christianity. Petitions for freedom always emphasized the slave's Christianity. Probably the practice of catechizing and then converting slaves led a few masters to free their slaves.[28] But throughout the seventeenth century, the Dutch were careful not to equate conversion with freedom. In 1649, several white New Netherland residents petitioned the Dutch Estates General in Holland for the freedom of several Christian African children enslaved by the Dutch West India Company. The company admitted openly to having kept enslaved several black children whose parents were free Christians, "though it is contrary to the laws of every people that any one born to a free Christian mother should be a slave and be compelled to remain in servitude." Although the company eventually freed these children, company officials were careful to state that this was done to appease their parents, who had been loyal slaves before gaining their freedom, not because the children were Christians. The Dutch Church ceased baptism of slaves in 1655.[29]

Slaves' use of government and the law led to their greatest successes in achieving freedom in New Amsterdam. They employed their knowledge

of legal rights and procedures to petition for freedom. African slaves' knowledge of and belief in their rights probably came from several sources. Those who were Atlantic Creoles may have had exposure to European legal methods prior to their arrival in New Amsterdam. Just as important, however, slaves may have had a sense of their rights due to their African backgrounds. In Angola, whence many of New Amsterdam's blacks may have come, slaves could hold a variety of statuses and occupations, and many could look forward to freedom for themselves or their children as a reward for loyalty. They may have brought these expectations with them to the Americas. Finally, in New Amsterdam itself, for slaves who used the courts to protect their property rights, it was only a small step to use legal methods to pursue their own freedom.[30]

Thus, in 1644, slaves began bargaining for their freedom. In February of that year, the first eleven company slaves brought to New Amsterdam petitioned the colony's Director General, William Kieft, for their freedom and that of their families. A combination of factors made this an especially propitious time for their request. The Dutch were in the midst of Kieft's three-year war against the Native Americans. The costs of the war, combined with a severe winter, had prevented the colonists from utilizing slave labor efficiently. Further, the colonists believed they would have to rely on the loyalty of black slaves in upcoming battles. Rather than risk that these eleven slaves, and perhaps others, would join the Native Americans, the company offered the eleven what became known as "half-freedom." Kieft and the Council of New Netherland gave them certificates that "release[d] for the term of their natural lives, [the eleven] and their Wives from Slavery." The Dutch gave them land so that they could "earn their livelihood by agriculture." As a condition of their freedom, they had to labor for the company in times of need and pay an annual tribute in furs, produce, or wampum. If they failed to pay tribute or to labor for the company, they were subject to re-enslavement. Further, the condition of half-freedom could not be passed on to their children, who remained slaves.[31]

The company clearly benefited from this arrangement. Theoretically, New Netherland retained a loyal reserve labor force without responsibility for supporting them. The small amount of goods that the half-free blacks had to give the company guaranteed that they would continue to be productive laborers and would not burden the colony. And both the land grant and the retention of their children as slaves guaranteed that the half-free blacks would remain in the colony.[32] For blacks also, the benefits and limitations of half-freedom were clear. Overall, the requirements to give goods and

services to the company do not appear to have been onerous. Ownership of land was a vital element of freedom for anyone in colonial America, black or white. Land provided the foundation for subsistence for individuals and families and could be the basis for entry into the market and the production of greater wealth. In the case of the half-free blacks, the land grants also provided the basis for a relatively independent community. They lived together in families with their wives, if not always with their children. The land they held, near the Fresh Water Pond, was the first geographically designated black community in New York City (fig. 1). Other black men and women, freed by the company or by individual slave owners under similar arrangements, joined the original eleven near the Fresh Water Pond so that by 1664 there were at least thirty black landowners on Manhattan Island. Travelers noted the thriving group of blacks who resided "upon both sides of [the broad way] . . . where they have ground enough to live with their families." Although the original community eventually migrated away from the stricter racial regime of the British in the eighteenth century, Europeans and African Americans continually reinscribed the area, literally and figuratively, as a center of historical importance to blacks. During the 1741 slave conspiracy, the British executed slaves there for their participation in the plot. And by the Civil War, the land was the center of the Five Points, an interracial neighborhood of free blacks and Irish.[33]

But half-freedom contained two important limitations. These limits marked the difference between African and European bondpeople. Upon completion of their indentures, the colony gave whites land and *full* freedom. Their service to the colony was rooted in their new status as citizens and was not required in the same way as that of blacks. Although they could be reindentured, such circumstances occurred only as a result of debt, and usually to individuals. But half-free blacks' service was rooted in the obligation necessary for them to retain their freedom, not to prove their citizenship. If they did not serve the colony as required, they could be re-enslaved. Additionally, the children of half-free blacks legally remained slaves. The children of indentured whites who gained their freedom were not subject to automatic indenturing. Ironically, in their petition the eleven men requested freedom because of a desire to take better care of their families, claiming that "it [was] impossible for them to support their wives and children, as they have been accustomed to do, if they must continue in the Company's service."[34] Although Kieft and the council acknowledged the family ties of the men by freeing their wives, the company's right to enslave their children indicated white colonists' limits in respecting black families as they calculated their potential labor needs.

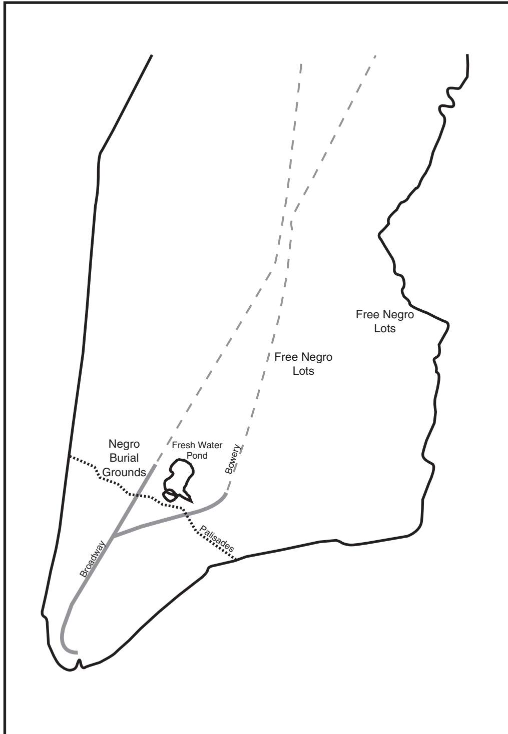

Fig. 1 The "Free Negro Lots" in seventeenth-century New Amsterdam. Map by Sarah Zingarelli.

Throughout the latter half of the seventeenth century, the half-free parents of slave children attempted to negotiate full freedom for them, through baptism, petitioning, and other methods. It is unclear how many of these children Europeans held as slaves, separated from their parents. In 1649, the Dutch West India Company claimed that only three children had been separated from their parents. The company also tried to place the children on the same legal footing as their parents, claiming that they were only "to serve the Company whenever it pleased" and were not subject to permanent enslavement. Whether or not this was the practice in New Netherland for other children remains unclear.[35]

What is clear is that black parents wanted greater control over their families and less ambiguous terms of freedom for themselves and their children. Thus, throughout Dutch rule, half-free blacks continued to petition for full freedom for themselves, their children, and others in New Amsterdam. Although more privileged than enslaved blacks, half-free blacks remained tied to the slave community through kinship and friendship. Half-free blacks sometimes adopted orphaned slave children and negotiated for

their freedom. In the early 1640s, Dorothe Angola adopted her godson, Anthony, after his half-free parents died. In 1661, Dorothe Angola's husband, Emmanuel Pietersen, petitioned the Director General and the Council of New Netherland to declare the boy free. Although the boy's parents had been half-free, the child was legally still a slave. Dorothe and Emmanuel wanted Anthony to be able to inherit their property, including land, upon their deaths. This was possible only if the child were declared half-free, which the company agreed to do.[36]

Even when unable to pass on their half-free status to their children, parents and guardians tried to give them the best opportunities available for a more comfortable life. Half-free black parents and guardians arranged apprenticeships for their children. Maria Portogys indentured her daughter to Maria Becker as a household servant. Susanna Robberts apprenticed her younger brother Jochim Robberts to Wolphert Webber. Although it is not clear what occupation Jochim was to learn, Webber was to pay him wages, board, and clothes and teach him to read and write. In these instances, black parents retained control over their children regardless of the legal limitations of half-freedom.[37]

Thus, under Dutch rule, enslaved and half-free black people negotiated with Euro-Americans for greater autonomy. The uneven Dutch attitude toward slavery in New Amsterdam and the knowledge of European and African ways that slaves brought to the colony enabled some blacks to successfully negotiate limited freedom before Dutch rule ended in 1664. Had the Dutch retained control of New Netherland, they probably would have increased their restrictions on the lives of slaves and free blacks, as happened in other North American colonies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. But in 1664, the British took over the colony of New Netherland, resolving the century-long struggle between the Dutch and British over ownership of the territory. The British government awarded the colony to the Duke of York, who renamed both New Netherland and New Amsterdam New York. In 1663, just before the British took over the colony, the Dutch granted unconditional emancipation to half-free blacks in the colony, who numbered about seventy-five. Their children were probably included in this number.[38]

With British rule, slavery in New York gained a new stringency, and free blacks, too, were affected by the new rulers' desire to control slaves. British colonists' concern with regulating slavery resulted from Britain's increasing involvement in the African slave trade. The Duke of York held a controlling interest in the Royal African Company, which sought to make the New York

colony a major market for slaves. Colonial officials encouraged the company's trade in New York by removing the property tax on slaves and imposing tariffs on imported slaves that favored African imports over those from other North American and Carribean colonies.[39]

While encouraging African slave imports, the British administration expended little effort to attract European free workers or indentured servants to the colony. As a result, few Europeans entered the New York labor market; rather, many attempted to establish independent farms or businesses. More Europeans went to Pennsylvania, which they perceived as having a better market for indentured servants and free laborers and, more important, better opportunities to own land. Thus, the British continued the reliance on African slave labor as the foundation of New York's colonial working class. Between 1698 and 1738, the slave population increased at a faster rate than did the white population in the colony. The value of slaves also rose with increased demand for their labor. In 1687, a healthy male slave sold for sixteen pounds; in 1700, forty pounds; and by 1720, sixty pounds. By 1760, healthy male slaves sold for one hundred pounds.[40]

In 1665, the Royal African Company's desire to increase the number of slaves in New York and its reliance on their labor led the British to create the colony's first laws regulating slavery. The creation of these laws paralleled developments in Virginia and other southern colonies, signifying the entrenchment of slavery throughout mainland North America. These laws also laid the groundwork for making slavery and African heritage synonymous, completely separating it from its previous religious justification in which, at least theoretically, any non-Christians could be enslaved. The British desire to legalize enslavement of Africans without regard to their status as Christians reflected the greater sense among the British that Africans were inferior. Most of the Africans that the British came into contact with in the slave trade were not acculturated in European ways, or became acculturated only as a result of enslavement, and then limitedly. British slave owners reinforced these ideas by largely refusing to convert blacks to Christianity, either in Africa or in the Americas, and by controlling and often limiting the degree of acculturation of slaves under their control. The experience of the Middle Passage itself—from the capture of Africans to their "storage" in slave "castles," or warehouses, on the African coast to the "tight packing" of slave cargoes en route to America—reinforced the British belief that Africans were lesser humans, subject to enslavement.[41]

New York's first laws stated that no Christians could be enslaved unless they had willingly sold themselves into slavery or had been captured in war.

Initially, Christian Native Americans and Africans were subject to the same law: they could be enslaved only as spoils of war. But increasingly the British placed Africans, Christian and non-Christian, in a class by themselves. By 1679, the provincial assembly, fearing retribution from the Native American tribes that lived in the colony, stated that no "native inhabitants" of the colony could be enslaved; Native Americans who had been enslaved outside the colony could be brought to the colony and remain slaves. But in 1706, the British excluded even this small number of Native Americans from slavery: the assembly passed a law stating that "Negroes only shall be slaves." The 1706 law also formally discounted religion in determining enslavement. The provincial assembly's law stated that "baptism shall not alter the condition of servitude of the Negro slave." This legally sundered the already tenuous connection between Christianity and freedom for African slaves. And in the same law, the British insured the hereditary nature of slavery by having children inherit their mothers' condition of slavery or freedom.[42]

Thus, by the first decade of the eighteenth century, the British had affirmed in law hereditary African slavery in the New York colony. But the economic role of slaves in the colony before mid-century was less clear. The Royal African Company and colony leaders wished to establish slaves as the leading labor force and to use New York as a major port for the shipment of slaves. But slave masters in New York City did not wish to buy large numbers of untrained or unseasoned slaves directly from Africa, as did slave masters in the southern colonies at this time. New York's economy grew slowly at the beginning of the eighteenth century and had no need for large numbers of unskilled laborers, slave or otherwise. Those colonists who did purchase slaves preferred small numbers of acculturated or skilled slaves, whom they could train for various businesses such as tailoring, carpentry, and sail making. Estate owners in rural areas of the colony who also might have bought unskilled slaves did not improve their acreage for agriculture on a large scale until later in the century.[43] Those estate owners who did wish to gain income from their land accepted European tenants, who worked the land in smaller plots or harvested timber or furs and paid fixed rents or portions of crops to the estate landlords. For example, Adolph Philipse, one of the largest slave owners in the colony, had eleven hundred European tenants on his ninety thousand acres of Hudson Valley land, but only twenty-three slaves.[44]

Thus, the Royal African Company's attempts to sell in Manhattan large cargoes of slaves directly from Africa at fixed prices, as it did in plantation areas, initially failed. Between 1664 and 1737, the company sold only 2,031 slaves there. By 1720, the New York colony contained only 5,740 slaves,

compared to 12,499 in Maryland and 26,550 in Virginia. Still, New York held the largest number of slaves in the North—its closest northern rival was New Jersey, with 2,385 slaves in 1720.[45] The Royal African Company then began importing the vast majority of New York's slaves (70 percent) from the West Indies, as payment from West Indian merchants for provisions they had purchased from New York merchants. These seasoned, acculturated, and perhaps semiskilled slaves were bought by merchants and skilled tradesmen in the city and by farmers on the outskirts. Between the 1720s and late 1730s, the number of slaves in Manhattan rose from under 1,400 to almost 1,600.[46]

After 1737, the Manhattan port experienced a large increase in trade, generating a need for unskilled labor. At the same time, wars in Europe hampered the flow of European immigrants. The importation of slaves escalated to meet the city's demand for unskilled labor. In the thirty-four-year period between 1737 and 1771, the Royal African Company imported 4,394 slaves into Manhattan—more than double the number of slaves imported during the previous seventy-three years. Additionally, the ratio of African to Caribbean slaves reversed after 1741: 70 percent of the imports were from Africa, 30 percent from the Caribbean. The number of slaves in the colony—just over 19,000—still lagged far behind the over 250,000 slaves in the Chesapeake region. But New York had far and away the most slaves of the northern colonies—New Jersey's population was only 8,220, while Pennsylvania and Connecticut had 5,561 and 5,698, respectively. And the New York colony held more slaves at this time than either Georgia or Louisiana.[47] By the mid-eighteenth century, New York held the largest number of slaves of any colony north of Maryland, and Manhattan held the third largest concentration of slaves in a North American city, after Charleston and New Orleans.[48]

Slaves brought to Manhattan reflected a variety of backgrounds. The Royal African Company imported slaves from the British Caribbean islands of Jamaica, Barbados, and Antigua. Dutch merchants continued to import some slaves from the Caribbean island of Curaçao. Slaves directly from Africa came from the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and the Congo. Most identifiable in the historical record from their participation in the 1712 slave revolt are members of the Akan-Asante and Popo nations, but members of the Moko, Ibo, Yoruba, Adra, Jon, and Ibibio nations also arrived in Manhattan.[49] Between the 1670s and 1690s, the Philipse and Van Horne clans, two of the New York colony's elite families, traded with pirates for slaves from Madagascar. Between 1715 and 1717, about four hundred additional slaves from East Africa also landed in New York, when the East India Company opened its East African slave trade to private traders. The

Philipses and Van Hornes were among these private traders, and they hoped to sell the East African slaves in the Caribbean. When they were unable to do so, the excess human cargo came to Manhattan.[50] Between the 1680s and 1750, when British privateers captured free Spanish subjects during wars between Britain and Spain, they assumed these subjects to be slaves because of their dark skin and sold them into slavery in Manhattan. It is unclear how many of these so-called Spanish Negroes the British enslaved in this way, but in 1740, the Spanish government's threats to treat English prisoners of war as slaves slowed the practice, and after 1750 there were no more such enslavements.[51]

Under Dutch rule, the Dutch West India Company owned most of the colony's slaves. In contrast, ownership of slaves in British New York spread widely among the white population. From the merchant elite to small businessmen, owning slaves was a profitable enterprise. Overall in Manhattan, 40 percent of European households owned slaves, averaging 2.4 slaves per household. The ward with the highest concentration of slave owners, Dock Ward—between the East River, Prince Street, and Broad Street—contained the wharves, warehouses, and homes of English and French merchants. Seventy percent of the households there held slaves, and the average number of slaves per household was 2.2. Fifty-four percent of Dock Ward slaves lived in households containing only one slave, many of whom were female domestics. The area with the smallest percentage of slave-owning households (less than 20 percent), was the North Ward, home to less-prosperous Europeans and isolated physically and financially from the growing market in African slaves along the docks and in the markets of lower Manhattan (fig. 2). In a pattern similar to that in Dock Ward, 45 percent of slaves in North Ward lived in single-slave households.[52]

Because of the wide distribution of slaves among Manhattan's households, slaves performed every type of labor that free whites did. Particularly before mid-century, Europeans employed slave men in skilled occupations such as carpentry, tailoring, blacksmithing, shoemaking, baking, and butchering. As the need for laborers to service ships and warehouses increased after mid-century, larger numbers of male slaves were employed on the docks. Slave women, usually no more than one per household, aided white women (free and indentured) with cooking, cleaning, and child care. In artisan households, slave women, like the white women of artisan families, assisted the men in their skilled tasks as necessary. In the rural hinterlands, slave men and women performed agricultural work but also learned skilled jobs. As self-contained units, farms depended on their male laborers to be

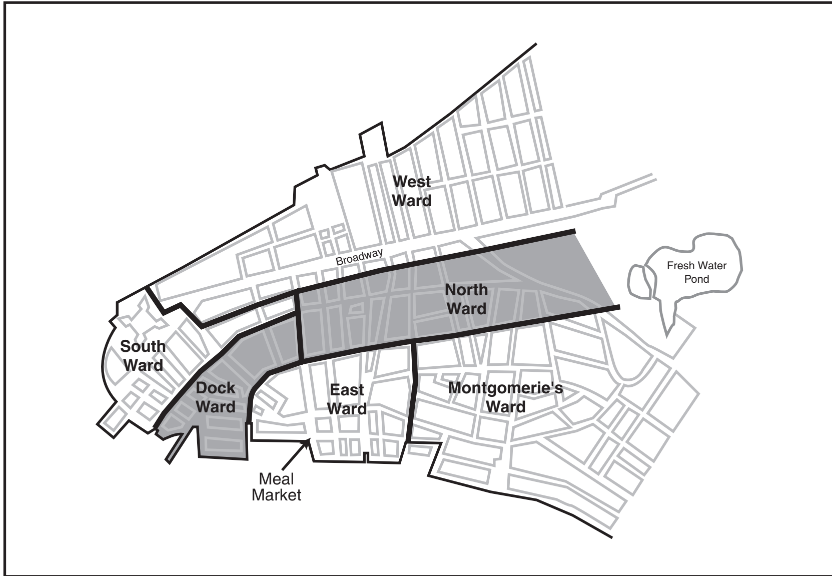

Fig. 2 Dock Ward had the highest concentration of slaves in British New York; North Ward, the lowest. Map by Sarah Zingarelli.

able to build or repair buildings, shoe horses, and perform other kinds of skilled labor necessary to operating an agricultural enterprise. Slave women might make clothing and even weave fabric. Thus, both rural and urban slaves had exposure to a variety of skilled and unskilled occupations.[53]

Slave masters in New York also devised another way to profit from their slaves: they hired them out for day labor on the docks of New York City, or to those who needed skilled labor for only a few days or weeks. By 1711, the Meal Market on the east side of Manhattan (see fig. 2) had become a daily fair for hiring slaves. Wealthier whites in Dock Ward sometimes held groups of slaves on consignment, gambling on the possibility that there would be a need for slave labor in the city or the colony from which they could benefit. While awaiting buyers, slaveholders hired out these consignment slaves for day labor, thus generating income even if a sale did not take place. In rural areas, too, masters hired out slaves to neighboring farms, or even to those needing labor in the city. Because of the types of labor usually needed, masters more often hired out slave men than slave women. Some slaves, such as Jack, owned by the Lloyd family of Long Island, lived in New York City practically as free men, hiring themselves out and returning part of their wages to their owners.[54]

As had been true under Dutch rule, white workers continued to worry about the effects of competition with slave labor. In 1686, the licensed porters of New York City complained that the employment of slaves in the markets cut into their laboring opportunities. Although New York City's local governing body, the Common Council, banned the use of slaves as porters for imported or exported goods, apparently few slave owners paid attention to the restriction. In 1691 the porters again complained that they were "so impoverished . . . they could not by their labours get a competency for the maintenance of themselves and families."[55] Skilled workers, too, feared competition from slaves. In 1737 and again in 1743, New York's coopers complained to the colonial government that "the pernicious custom of breeding slaves to trade" reduced "the honest and industrious tradesmen . . . to poverty for want of employ." They complained that New York City merchants used their slaves to build barrels for themselves and sometimes even competed with the coopers by selling the barrels to others. Although the lieutenant governor agreed with the skilled workers, they were unable to convince New York's Colonial Assembly to pass protective legislation favoring them over slave owners. Only cartmen successfully excluded blacks, slave and free, from their trade.[56]

The increased use of slave labor in the New York colony benefited slave owners at the expense of free white workers. The widespread use of slave labor was part of the reason that relatively few indentured servants chose Manhattan as a destination. Although exact numbers are unavailable for much of the colonial period, passenger lists of Europeans traveling from Europe and the Caribbean to the Americas reveal that few indentured servants listed Manhattan as their destination. Even the trade in convict servants appears to have favored the Chesapeake rather than Manhattan. New Yorkers at the time believed that the low numbers of indentured servants relative to other colonies was due to the presence of large numbers of slaves. In 1712, probably in response to fears inspired by the slave revolt that year, Governor Robert Hunter recommended to the colonial legislature "that some good law be passed, for putting slaves under a better regulation, and to encourage the importation of white servants." New York's colonial governor William Cosby said in 1734, "I see with concern that whilst the neighboring Provinces are filled with honest, useful and labourious white people, the truest riches and surest strength of a country, this Province seems regardless of . . . the disadvantages that attend the too great importation of negroes and convicts." The classification of blacks with convicts despite the fact that the colony held few, if any, convict laborers reveals the low repute in which some Europeans held slaves both with respect to their morals and as laborers. In

1757 Lieutenant Governor James De Lancey urged the colonial legislature to place a poll tax on slaves to discourage their purchase. Declining numbers of slaves would "naturally tend to introduce white servants, which will augment the strength of the country."[57] But the colony never enacted restrictions on the importation of slaves.

White New Yorkers' reliance on black labor profoundly affected the family and community lives of blacks. The wide distribution of slaves among white households meant that many Manhattan slaves lived in single-slave households, which limited their ability to form families. Black women in particular were bound to their masters' households, venturing out only to market. Black men had more mobility, traveling to and from work on the docks of Manhattan, but they did not necessarily meet black women on such journeys. In addition, in a departure from Dutch rule, and in striking contrast to nineteenth-century, southern slave masters, most Manhattan slave masters actively discouraged their slaves from marrying or having children. Urban slave owners living in limited spaces prized barren slave women and warned buyers of those women who seemed fecund. One owner offered his female slave for sale because "she breeds too fast for her owner to put up with such inconvenience." Another owner advertised his slave as better suited to the desires of New York's slave owners: "she has been married for several years without having a child." Because of the discouraging attitudes of slave masters, and perhaps also because of black women's unwillingness to bear children in such a difficult environment, the Manhattan slave community under British rule had a relatively low birthrate, despite the presence of large numbers of black women of childbearing age.[58]

New York's lawmakers also attempted to limit interactions among slaves in the city. Between 1681 and 1683, New York City's Common Council passed a series of laws restricting unsupervised activities among slaves and among slaves, whites, and free blacks. Laws prohibited slaves from leaving their masters' houses without permission, possessing weapons of any kind, and gathering in groups of four or more. The Common Council forbade whites and free blacks from entertaining slaves in their homes, selling them liquor, or taking goods or money from them. With this last restriction, lawmakers sought to prevent slaves from stealing items from their masters and others and selling them. In 1692, new laws mandated that slaves who made loud noises, played in the street on Sundays, or patronized bars receive twenty lashes, or their owners pay a fine of six shillings. In 1700, the city government reduced the number of slaves who could gather in groups to less than three and again reminded masters to control their slaves on Sundays.[59]

Through such regulations, New York lawmakers sought to control the

cultural, social, and political independence of slaves. In part, whites wished to preserve a cultural and economic distance between themselves and slaves. Throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, whites increasingly sought to differentiate clearly between slavery and freedom; workers in particular distinguished themselves from slave laborers.[60] That only small numbers of European indentured servants traveled to eighteenth-century New York exaggerated the distinction between enslaved blacks and free white laborers. Unlike Pennsylvania or Massachusetts, where large numbers of indentured servants composed a vital part of the working class, few European immigrants to New York experienced bondage and thus were less likely to identify with slaves. In this way, the labor system in eighteenth-century New York City resembled that of the southern colonies, which also experienced the arrival of a large number of slaves at the expense of European immigration.[61]

Distinctions between the few indentured Europeans in New York and slaves also increased in the eighteenth century. As Europeans survived their indentures in larger numbers, the similarities between their temporary bondage and blacks' permanent enslavement diminished. Colonial laws after 1712 exacerbated these differences by discouraging masters from freeing slaves and prohibiting blacks freed after 1712 from acquiring land. For blacks, the New York colony legally could not be a place of opportunity or upward mobility. These laws tied distinctions between black and white workers even more strongly to slavery and freedom, dependency and self-sufficiency. Slave masters saw these racial and status distinctions as a means to keep control over their slaves and thus encouraged the growing division between white and black workers. White workers saw such distinctions as preserving their own access to wage work and to land, at the expense of slaves and free blacks.[62]

Many New York City whites, particularly slave owners, held contradictory views of the degree of acculturation and dependence they wanted of their slaves. Slave owners at times sought to limit slaves' access to elements of European culture that might improve their status in the eyes of the community or improve their sense of self-worth, but these limitations clashed with the possibility that educating slaves could make them more useful and valuable. The struggle between the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and Manhattan slave masters over the religious education of slaves demonstrates this contradiction. The first SPG minister to slaves, Elias Neau, held the post from 1705 until his death in 1722. Neau established a school in which he instructed slaves in the tenets of Christianity and taught them to read and write, which was not illegal in Manhattan as it would become in

parts of the antebellum South. In fact, a few masters may have desired that their slaves learn such skills so that they could assist them in their business operations. The majority of slaves in SPG schools tended to be women; for wealthy slave owners, educating their female domestic servants became a mark of high status.[63]

But most slave masters believed that a religious education leading to the conversion of slaves at best distracted slaves from their work and at worst encouraged rebelliousness. Many slave masters were not very religious and saw little value in attending church themselves, much less sending their slaves to religious schools. Masters were also reluctant to release adult slaves from work to attend Neau's classes; most students in the schools were children too young to work. But masters' biggest fear was that education and conversion to Christianity would encourage slaves to seek freedom.[64]

In fact, a 1706 law stated explicitly that converting slaves to Christianity would not lead to freedom. Additionally, slaves were second-class citizens in the eighteenth-century Anglican church. Between 1707 and 1764, 869 slaves were baptized at Trinity Church, the main Anglican congregation in New York, but the church accepted only 19 of these as full members. Other Christian denominations in New York City had even less interest in educating and converting slaves than did the Anglicans. The Dutch Reformed Church, still present in the city despite being weakened by the British takeover, continued to disallow slave conversions. Quakers, many of whom were slave owners, did not proselytize generally and did not welcome their own slaves or other blacks into their churches.[65] But such realities did not appease the fears of slave owners. Throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, Christianity, despite its mobilization by slave owners on behalf of slavery, remained potentially revolutionary in the hands of slaves and their allies. The teaching that every soul was equal in the sight of God could lead some to claim racial equality on earth. Thus, those few adult slaves who tried to attend Neau's classes in defiance of their masters were threatened with sale out of the colony. The 1712 slave revolt further discredited Neau's efforts when two of the rebels were erroneously labeled his students. Subsequent SPG ministers had even less success than Neau in converting slaves.[66]

Although eighteenth-century slave masters often deemed Christianity too dangerous an influence on their slaves, they saw other elements of European culture as enhancing their slaves' value. Artisans were more likely to buy slaves with facility in European languages and teach them skilled crafts; New York's slaves spoke English, French, Dutch, and Spanish as well as African languages. Some slave masters encouraged the independence some slaves displayed in arranging for their own hiring-out contracts, although

such independence gave these slaves greater knowledge of their surroundings and opportunities to run away.[67]

Ultimately, masters could not completely control slaves' acceptance or rejection of European culture or the uses to which slaves put their knowledge. Slaves used both European and African cultural practices in ways that mitigated their enslavement and sometimes led to rebellion. The presence of Africans from multiple linguistic groups led slaves to adapt one or more European languages in combination with African languages to form a common language amongst themselves. Masters' lack of interest in exposing slaves to Christianity gave some slaves the space to continue to follow their African religious beliefs. Conjurers such as Peter the Doctor, a free black in Manhattan, and Doctor Harry from Nassau, Long Island, indicate the existence of African religious beliefs and practices. These beliefs were sustained in the eighteenth century not only by the continual influx of slaves from Africa, but also of slaves from the Caribbean, where African traditions were stronger than in the North American colonies.[68]

Like acculturation and education, the continued use of African names in British New York was a double-edged sword for masters and slaves. For the British, African names such as Ambo, Zibia, Yaff, Quam, Coffe or Cuffee, Cajoe, and Mingo underlined the cultural distinctions between Europeans and Africans and helped justify enslavement. Some African names, such as Sambo and Quaco, evolved in the European consciousness and pronunciation as derogatory. Historian Peter Wood has shown that in South Carolina the Hausa name Sambo evolved into a derogatory term for a black man, indicating laziness or stupidity. But among the Hausa, it was simply the name given to the second son of the family. Similarly, Quaco was a day name, given to men born on Wednesday, but some New York masters transformed it to Quack. Even some British names given to slaves could have been African in origin. While some masters transformed Quaco to Quack, others transformed it to Jack.[69] For slave masters, African names were derogatory, or meaningless, but for slaves, such names could be valuable links to their African past. Further, they were often the surface indications of deeper community connections among slaves in Manhattan—connections that, in the pressure cooker that was slavery, sometimes provided the unity necessary for rebellion.

Slave masters, more concerned with obtaining labor from their slaves than with making them firmly African or European, did allow slaves some leeway in self-expression. But the safety valve of manumission for good behavior did not exist in British New York, as it had under the Dutch. As

slavery became more restrictive under the British, slaves expressed their discontent through various forms of resistance during the eighteenth century. Tensions between masters and slaves cycled up and down as masters attempted to pacify their slaves without freeing them, and slaves, frustrated by these piecemeal methods, resisted and rebelled against their enslavement. Such resistance and rebellion led to greater restrictions, as well as brutal physical punishments, until masters again felt comfortable and safe enough to offer slaves limited autonomy.[70]

Under British rule, slaves stole more cash, clothing, and food from masters' households and ran away more frequently than they had under the Dutch. In defiance of the laws, slaves continued to gather in groups and after curfew, sometimes with the aid of lower-class whites who turned their homes into illegal taverns for slaves. Laboring whites also assisted slaves in selling stolen property.[71] Individual slaves sometimes openly defied white authority. On an August evening in 1696, the mayor of New York attempted to disperse a group of slaves. When he threatened to take them into custody, one of them, Prince, struck him in the face. The mayor quickly made Prince an example: The next day, the slave was stripped, tied to a cart, and dragged around the perimeter of the city. At each street corner, he received eleven lashes.[72]

More frightening to whites than such individual acts of resistance was the threat of slave revolt. In April 1712, a group of New York City slaves attempted an insurrection. At 2 A.M. on a Sunday morning, twenty-four slaves gathered, armed with guns, axes, knives, and other weapons. The group included at least two women, one who was the wife of one of the rebels and another who was pregnant. The rebels set fire to the outhouse of Peter Vantilborough, a baker who owned two of the slaves. Through the nineteenth century, arson was an important weapon of slave rebels throughout the Americas. Residents of closely built, wood-frame cities like New York feared the destructiveness of fire. Halting the flames depended on bucket brigades of water from nearby wells or rivers, and swift action. If the winds were against them, however, such brigades could not save neighborhoods, businesses, and even whole towns from going up in flames.[73]

When whites arrived to put out the Vantilborough fire, the slaves ambushed them. In all, the rebels killed nine whites and wounded seven. But New York's colonial militia and British troops quickly outnumbered the slave rebels. The slaves tried to flee the city, but many of them were new arrivals who were not familiar enough with the area to effect a successful escape. Additionally, the rebels were unable to convince other slaves to join them once

the rebellion was underway.[74] Realizing that they were to be captured, at least six rebels committed suicide. During the following investigation, colonial officials arrested seventy blacks, convicted twenty-six, and executed as many as twenty-one.[75]

The rebellion resulted from the presence of groups of African slaves in New York who had different expectations of slavery than did the British. These slaves may also have had different expectations than did the charter generations imported into Manhattan by the Dutch.[76] New Yorkers identified the majority of the rebels as Koromantine and Pawpaw Africans, part of the large groups of Africans who arrived in New York City between 1710 and 1712. Koromantine and Pawpaw Africans trained the men in their communities in the conduct of guerrilla warfare. These Africans' knowledge of slavery in Africa entailed more rights and privileges than accorded to slaves in British North America. In the Akan-Asante society from which these slaves came, slaves or their children could eventually be absorbed into the community as equals. Masters rewarded faithful slaves with the opportunity to inherit land and to work for themselves. Not every slave experienced such privileges, but the possibility of such rewards eased the condition of slavery there. Under slavery in British New York City, only a very few of the more acculturated slaves would have been eligible for any privileges. And for slaves generally, acculturated or not, there were fewer privileges in New York than in Africa. New York's slaves had little hope of escaping slavery or of being incorporated into the community as equals.[77]

African slaves' lack of privileges was not the only spark to rebellion. At least two "Spanish Negroes" who considered themselves unfairly enslaved also participated in the revolt. The British took "Hosey" (probably José) and John (probably Juan) from a captured Spanish privateer in 1706. Although the men protested that they were free Spanish citizens, their skin color led the British to dismiss their claims and sell them into slavery, just as the Dutch had done with the Spanish captives aboard the French privateer *La Garce* in 1642. For Hosey and John, the revolt was both revenge and a means to gain freedom.[78] Some acculturated black slaves also participated in the rebellion. They may have been inspired by the African and Spanish slaves or dismayed by the differences in rule between Dutch and British slave masters. At least one free black, Peter the Doctor, participated in the rebellion. A religious leader who used African practices, Peter the Doctor "gave [the slaves] a powder to rub on their Cloths" to "make them invulnerable." His participation indicates the continued presence of social, cultural, and political relationships between slaves and the dwindling free black population in Manhattan.[79]

In addition to executing numerous slaves, white New Yorkers responded to the rebellion by passing laws further limiting the activities of slaves and free blacks. The Common Council lengthened the curfew for slaves: no slave over the age of fourteen was to be on New York City streets after sunset without a lantern by which he or she could be clearly seen. Any slave breaking this law could be arrested by any white and lashed thirty-nine times. To encourage masters to enforce the law, the council fined masters of disobedient slaves and made them pay the costs of jail, court, and the public whipper.[80] New laws also made it more difficult for masters to manumit their slaves. Those wishing to free a slave had to pay a two-hundred-pound security—four to five times the price of an adult male slave, and five to six times that of an adult female slave. Ostensibly, this deposit prevented the newly freed slave from becoming dependent on the community for his or her livelihood. In fact, the law discouraged the growth of the free black community in New York.[81]

Although Peter the Doctor was the only free black brought to trial for participation in the rebellion, New York City whites linked the uprising to the example of liberty set by Manhattan's free blacks. Thus, the Common Council, in addition to limiting the number of slaves who could legally achieve freedom, took steps to limit the rights of free blacks and to limit interactions between free blacks and slaves. Slaves freed after 1712 could not own real estate. The laws penalized both free blacks and whites who entertained slaves or sold them alcohol but fined free blacks at twice the rate of whites. These restrictions, as well as the general suspicion whites held against free blacks, made New York City an increasingly hostile place for free blacks. As early as 1682, free blacks in New York City had expressed their displeasure with the British regime. When the Dutch attempted to recapture the island of Manhattan that year, some free black landowners declared their allegiance to the Dutch monarch. After Holland failed to repossess the city, a group of free blacks, including the DeVries and Manuels families, sold their land in New York and bought land outside the city, between Piermont, New York, and Harrington Park, New Jersey. Descendants of these families lived on the land through the eighteenth century. But black land-owning families who remained in New York City were not so fortunate. By 1738, Luycas Pieters, a descendant of a slave freed and given land by the Dutch, had lost his land and his freedom. He lived as an indentured servant, and his sick wife was forced to turn to the almshouse for assistance. By the time of the American Revolution, whites owned many of the "free Negro lots" blacks had obtained under Dutch rule in Manhattan.[82]

White colonists also scrutinized each other in searching for reasons behind the 1712 revolt. The government increased restrictions on white men and women who allied themselves with slaves and free blacks after 1712, fining whites who entertained slaves or sold them alcohol. Ministers, lawmakers, and others exhorted slave masters to gain greater control over their slaves. Some whites accused SPG school founder Elias Neau of aiding the insurrectionists. Although the courts never charged him with a crime, some whites attacked Neau as he walked about New York, and masters stopped sending their slaves to him for instruction.[83]

But as the horror of the insurrection faded from memory, slaves and masters again created a more lax slave regime than that dictated by the laws. Probably the small numbers of slaves in individual households created a feeling of trust alongside slave owners' dependency on slave labor. Some whites felt comfortable allowing their own slaves certain privileges, even as they criticized other slave owners for not maintaining control of their property. Skilled slaves in particular achieved greater autonomy by leveraging the need for their labor and their closeness to the artisan masters they worked beside every day. Despite slave codes against drinking alcohol, assembling without white supervision, and theft, masters allowed skilled slaves to indulge in these activities rather than risk having their valuable property run away. [84]

Blacks also ameliorated their enslavement by becoming active participants in their own sales. In a number of cases slaves prevented their own sales to new owners. Other slaves requested sales to certain owners in an effort to be closer to wives, children, or friends. Often slaves themselves sought out new owners, visiting potential masters and presenting their current owners with nearly completed sale arrangements. Masters granted such privileges as an incentive to loyalty, but some owners allowed even troublesome slaves these opportunities. Esther Burr, mother of Aaron Burr, wrote to a friend that "our Negroes are gone to seek a master. Really my dear I shall be thankful if I can get rid of them." Individual negotiations for limited autonomy tightened the bonds of slavery over all blacks. Few whites during this period ever freed their slaves for "good behavior," preferring to parcel out privileges in return for service.[85]

Blacks took advantage of other loopholes in the slave regime. When white residents celebrated holidays such as Irish St. Patrick's Day or various British royal holidays, slaves and free blacks used these opportunities to gather also. Pinkster in particular became by the late eighteenth century as much an African holiday as a European one, albeit with different meanings for each group, with both races joining together to celebrate. Pinkster began

as the Dutch Reformed Church's feast of Pentecost, the day on which Christ's apostles received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Although the Dutch Reformed Church refused to accept black converts, this religiously based holiday became one arena in which Dutch and African New Yorkers joined together. Initially, the festival's emphasis on experiential, ecstatic religion opened a path for nonliterate blacks to participate in Protestant religion. The loose and festive atmosphere, in which whites drank and celebrated, also allowed blacks to practice their own African musical and religious traditions under cover of the festival and with the tacit approval of their masters. Blacks played drums, fiddles, and rattles, traditional African instruments of celebration. Before the Revolutionary War, blacks and whites celebrated the festival largely outside of New York City, in rural areas to which the Dutch had fled following the British takeover. In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth, the festival was briefly popular in urban areas such as Albany and New York City. It also took on a more overtly political meaning as a "festival of misrule" in which blacks elected a man from their community governor for the day, with the power to adjudge disputes among whites and blacks. Often this "governor" was also a recognized political leader among blacks.[86]

Other holidays also served as a cover for blacks who wished to gather on their own, apart from whites. The most common "holiday" to serve this purpose was the weekly Sabbath. One New York City minister noted that while whites gathered in churches, "the Streets are full of Negroes who dance & divert themselves." Whites complained of this "profaning" of the Sabbath but were unable to control the actions of slaves without the help of masters, many of whom preferred to turn a blind eye to their slaves' activities during their leisure time.[87]

Slaves also gathered to bury their dead. Whites generally did not participate in the funerals of their slaves, although a few masters did bury their favorite slaves in the Anglican churchyard. Blacks themselves buried the vast majority of their dead in the "Negro burial ground" (fig. 3). Slaves gathered at the end of the day, after their work was done, to escort the body to the grave. Whites reported hearing drumming and chanting, no doubt African derived, at these independent ceremonies late into the night. By the 1720s, whites had become concerned about these unsupervised gatherings. The Common Council first ruled that funerals had to occur before sunset and then limited the number of mourners who could attend a slave's funeral to twelve, plus pallbearers and gravediggers.[88]

The easiest places for slaves to gather were the city's markets. As Graham Hodges has noted, West African slaves came from communities and cultures

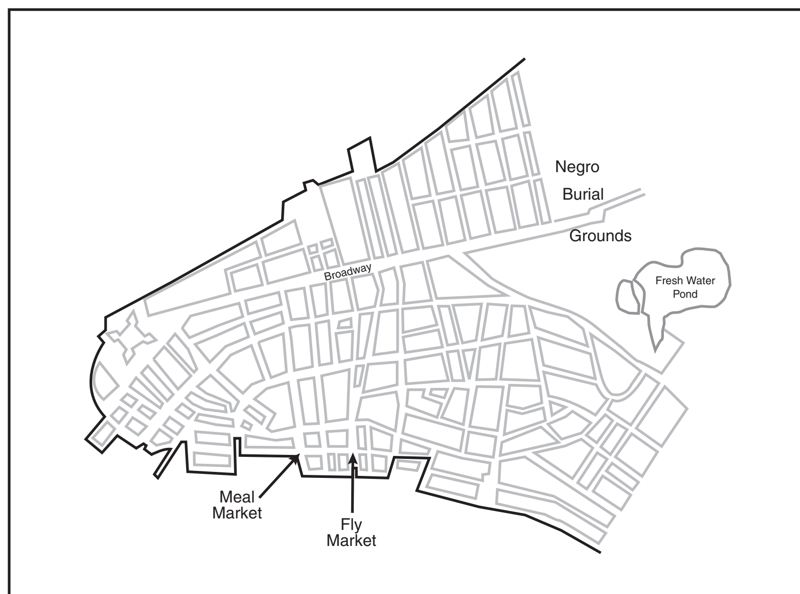

Fig. 3 Eighteenth-century New York City. Map by Sarah Zingarelli.

in which markets were important gathering places, and they brought these customs to New York. Slave women and men were able to combine errands for masters with socializing among themselves. Slaves from rural areas traveled to New York City markets to sell their masters' or their own produce. The city markets also provided cover for those slaves and whites who participated in the sale of stolen goods. Whites knew that slaves stole items from their masters and sold them in the city's markets and taverns, but many whites implicitly or explicitly encouraged the practice. Some had no problem buying from slaves, even when the goods appeared to have been stolen. Some masters may have ignored thefts from their own households, seeing it as a way to keep their slaves relatively happy. Other masters allowed or encouraged slaves to steal from others in return for a share of the proceeds. And of course, whites who served as fences for goods stolen by slaves had no reason to report the thefts.[89]

City laws dictated severe punishments for slaves who stole, including public whippings and death, but masters rarely allowed their slaves to be punished to the full extent of the law. Further, such punishments could strengthen bonds among slaves. In 1736, baker John Vaarck's slave Caesar, merchant John Auboyneau's slave Prince, and several others broke into a tavern and stole several barrels of gin, known as Geneva. Although they could

have been executed for the crime, the slaves were instead publicly whipped. After their trial and punishment, the slaves became known as the Geneva Club. New Yorkers named another group of slaves the Smith Fly Boys after their participation in the theft and sale of goods near the Fly Market (see fig. 3). The reluctance of whites to prosecute these slaves to the fullest extent of the law indicates their acceptance of such forms of day-to-day resistance as a necessary price for holding slaves.[90]

Slave owners tolerated relationships that evolved between blacks and whites of similar status. Slaves worked alongside and spent their leisure time with white workers. Together, slaves, indentured servants, soldiers, sailors, and other workers frequented New York City's markets, docks, black- and white-owned taverns, and "tippling houses," private homes where individuals sold alcohol without licenses. In these places, black and white workers shared news from within the city as well as from around the Atlantic World, forging common political views as well as social networks.[91]

In 1741, a major conspiracy erupted out of these interracial gatherings. A group of African slaves, Spanish Negroes, and Irish and Anglo workers pledged to burn New York and seize the city for themselves. The conspiracy demonstrated that slaves and free workers could reach across differences in race and status to share class grievances and mobilize to overturn New York City's economic hierarchy.[92] On March 18, a slave named Quaco set fire to Fort George (fig. 4), destroying one of the most important forts in British North America and the New York colony's political and military center and ammunition storehouse. For the next three weeks a series of fires in homes, warehouses, and stables set the closely built wood-frame city on edge. The continuing threat put pressure on the government to find the arsonists. Unlike the arson of the 1712 slave rebellion, no slaves had attacked whites attempting to put out the fires. But slowly, townspeople began to suspect that the fires had been set by slaves. After one fire, coal believed to have been used by the arsonist was traced to a nearby house, casting suspicion on the slave who lived there. More damning, a white woman overheard Quaco say to two fellow slaves, "Fire, Fire, Scorch, Scorch, A LITTLE, damn it, BY-AND-BY." Finally, whites saw another slave, Cuffee, fleeing from a fire that destroyed the storehouse of his master, Adolph Philipse. His suspicious actions led the townspeople who had gathered to put out the fire to cry, "The negroes are rising!" They seized Cuffee and then began to sweep the streets of black men, arresting and imprisoning over one hundred.[93]

A four-month investigation revealed that the arson attacks were part of an extensive plan among an interracial group from the lower classes that sought to achieve greater economic and political equality. The plot centered

Fig. 4 "A plan of the City and Environs of New York, 1742–4," by David Grim, showing (A) Fort George, which was burned during the 1741 slave revolt, and (B) Hughson's Tavern, where the arsonists allegedly conspired. Neg. no. 3046. © Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

in a tavern owned by the Hughsons, a white family. The tavern and its patrons became the symbolic center of racial and class disorder in the city. A difficult winter on top of a five-year economic depression had embittered the suffering lower classes against wealthier whites. The Hughsons were typical of whites who had moved to New York from rural areas, attracted by the excitement of the city and hoping to make their fortunes. Although John Hughson would have been comfortable on the farm his family owned in Westchester County, his wife Sarah desired the city. On arrival, John's labors as a leather worker could not alone pay their bills; thus he and Sarah opened the tavern and sold items pilfered by slaves in an effort to become property owners. At the center of the fencing ring and the conspiracy were the

slaves Caesar and Prince, prominent members of the Geneva Club. Both frequented the tavern, and John Hughson fenced small amounts of stolen goods for them. In addition, the Hughson's lodger, an Irishwoman named Margaret "Peggy" Kerry Sorubiero, was Caesar's girlfriend and was rumored to have had his child.[94]

The fencing ring at the Hughsons' tavern provided the organizational center for the interracial band of conspirators. Within the group, the rebels also organized along lines of race and status, joining the plot to avenge particular grievances. The thirty to thirty-five Irish men and women who participated in the plot may have felt like outsiders in New York's increasingly Anglicized society.[95] For the majority of slave rebels, the specific grievance was enslavement: the conspirators hoped to become free by their actions. Slaves also resented masters who took privileges away from them. Quaco allegedly burned Fort George because his master prevented him from visiting his wife, who was cook in the governor's house inside the fort. As in the 1712 plot, African and African American slaves depended on West African religious and military practices. The slave rebels, many from the Akan or Gold Coast region of West Africa, swore war oaths "by thunder and lightning" and relied on Doctor Harry, perhaps an Akan shaman, to supply them with poison in the event of failure.[96]

Another group of slaves accused of being part of the plot were Spanish Negroes whom a British ship had captured in the Caribbean and sold into slavery in New York in 1740. These enslaved Spaniards had repeatedly declared that they were "free subjects of the King of Spain" and thus were prisoners of war, not slaves. At trial, they insisted on being called by their full Spanish names and separated themselves from African slaves, arguing that as free men, any testimony by blacks against them was inadmissible. However, the court used the testimony of black slaves and of the indentured servant Mary Burton to convict the men. One was executed, and four were banished from the colony.[97]

Although the plot was interracial in its organization, some elite New Yorkers used the conspiracy and the trial as an opportunity to argue the dangers of the slave system to New York society. New York Supreme Court Judge Daniel Horsmanden (who presided over the trials in the absence of Chief Justice James DeLancey), along with the colony's lieutenant governor, George Clarke, believed that both slavery and blacks harmed New York. Horsmanden saw slaves as "enemies of their own household," unreliable residents in New York City and in the homes of whites. Clarke viewed the large number of blacks in New York, particularly black men, as a troublesome social problem. He sided with white male skilled workers who felt

threatened by competition from slave labor. New York, he stated, needed to be "replenished with white people." Both Horsmanden and Clarke saw the conspiracy and trials as an opportunity to convince white New Yorkers to rid the province of blacks, free and enslaved.[98]

In fact, the trials did rid the province of thirty slave men by execution, and over seventy slave men and women by expulsion from the colony.[99] But in general, New York's slave owners relied too heavily on slave labor to begin to end the system. Some tradesmen may have preferred to own slaves rather than hold indentured servants or apprentices who might later become their rivals in business.[100] Although some white workers may have feared competition with slave labor, it was easier for them to travel to another colony for work rather than try to fight the slave system in New York. Among those who stayed, some continued at times to ally themselves with slaves across lines of race and status. Others who remained in New York to seek their fortunes saw slave ownership as a sign of the prestige to which they aspired.[101]

Thus, rather than dismantle the slave system, New Yorkers again swung the pendulum of the law to restrict the activities of enslaved and free people. During the trials, ten tippling house owners were indicted and fined for entertaining blacks; after the trials, the Common Council passed stricter laws to regulate taverns and monitored curfews for blacks more closely.[102] The plot affected New York's blacks in a more serious way. The four-month period during which slaves accused each other of participation in the plot and the resulting death or deportation of over one hundred blacks damaged families and friendships among blacks. Slaveholders changed their patterns of slaveholding. Many were more reluctant to buy or hold on to male slaves. In 1737, there were slightly more males (52.2 percent) than females in the black population; in 1746, the first census after the conspiracy, the percentage of males had dropped to 46.6 percent. Adult women continued to form a larger percentage of the black population than men during the remainder of slavery's existence in New York, limiting blacks' ability to form families.[103]

The plot also influenced New York's slave merchants to import slaves directly from Africa. Slave masters believed that rebellious slaves from the West Indies had caused the 1741 revolt. Additionally, the increased demand for slaves in New York City in the second half of the eighteenth century could not be met by haphazard shipments from the West Indies. Between 1664 and 1737, just over 2,000 slaves were imported from Africa to New York City, and 70 percent of these were from the West Indies. But from 1737 to 1771, New Yorkers imported over twice as many slaves (4,394), 70 per-

cent of whom were from Africa. The proportion of blacks in New York City's population remained high at almost 20 percent.[104]

Despite masters' attempts to control slaves more closely and prevent rebellion, slaves continued to agitate for greater autonomy while enslaved and for freedom from slavery. Despite laws against their gathering, slaves still frequented taverns, markets, dance halls, and other places. They continued to steal and fence goods, and in rural areas, whites claimed that bands of black people terrorized farmers on isolated properties. The number of runaways increased through the 1770s, the vast majority of whom were young males. Both acculturated slaves and slaves newly arrived from Africa tried to leave masters in their search for freedom.[105]

Beginning in the 1740s, the Great Awakening, a time of religious revival, also led New York City whites and blacks to reconsider the morality of slavery. Methodists encouraged slaves to participate in relatively egalitarian religious ceremonies, ranging from mass rallies to private prayer and reflection. According to Methodist teachings, anyone could experience Christian conversion; neither white skin, nor literacy, nor wealth was necessary. Methodist minister Francis Asbury, who preached in New York City and surrounding rural areas in the early 1770s, fostered black religiosity and encouraged masters to free their slaves. Quakers, too, began to call upon their members to free their slaves, although they did not encourage black conversion. Slaves who participated in or heard about these more egalitarian religious activities held a greater belief not only in Christianity, but also in their own right to freedom.[106]

The Great Awakening alone would not free large numbers of slaves. The New York economy relied too heavily on slavery for whites to give up the system so easily. By the time of the Revolutionary War, black bondage was firmly entrenched in the city. Between 1703 and 1771, despite the two slave revolts, the slave population had doubled in New York. Masters freed few slaves, and whites had driven free black people from the city. However, the influence of the Great Awakening convinced New York City slaves, and a few whites, more strongly of blacks' rights to freedom. This belief would play a part in making the Revolution the next great opportunity for large numbers of slaves to pursue liberty.

CHAPTER THREE

Creating a Free Black Community in New York City during the Era of Emancipation

The gradual emancipation law of 1799 did not limit slaves' pursuit of freedom; rather, it appears to have prompted more slaves to run away from their masters and encouraged slave owners in New York City and in rural areas to enter into arrangements for manumission with their adult slaves. These newly free blacks moved into New York City, creating new cultural, social, and working lives and new forms of political activism. Free blacks moved into working-class neighborhoods and mingled in the walking city with white workers and elites. They established mutual relief societies and built churches and schools. They participated in electoral politics and in political rioting against slave owners and slave catchers. As they went about their labors in the city, black workers sang their wares to attract customers, just as white workers did. And during leisure hours, working-class blacks and whites mingled in the streets, dance halls, and grogshops of New York.

Before the War of 1812, creating access to public space united blacks across evolving class lines. Free and enslaved blacks celebrated holidays such as Emancipation Day, the ending of the international slave trade, and the founding of various mutual relief societies in public parades and ceremonies. By their very nature, such events involved a cross-section of the black community as participants and observers. Working-class blacks constructed oyster bars and dance halls for their amusement and profit, as well as contributing to the building of black institutions such as churches and schools. Although middle-class blacks may not have approved of all working-class leisure activities, they did not organize to prevent them.

The War of 1812 was a high point in black cross-class support of the various forms of the free black urban presence. Occurring in the midst of the

emancipation process, this war seemed to bring more opportunity for blacks to prove their worth than had the Revolutionary War. Although some blacks again heeded the calls of the British to find their freedom with them, many more pledged themselves to the new nation. With free black men fighting of their own volition for this young country, many blacks believed whites would finally recognize their worth as citizens. The passage of a new state law soon after the end of the war, which guaranteed emancipation in 1827 to all slaves born before July 4, 1799, seemed to signify that New York's blacks had indeed proven themselves worthy of full citizenship.

Although New York's 1799 gradual emancipation law freed no adult slaves and gave freedom to the children of slaves only after a lengthy indenture, slaves throughout New York State saw the law as a sign that whites recognized black people's rights to freedom. As they had during the colonial era, some adult slaves continued to bargain with their masters about where they would be sold. Other adult slaves successfully negotiated indenture contracts with their masters similar to those of the 1799 law or convinced their masters to accept a series of cash payments in return for their freedom. Although such practices depended on the flexibility of individual slave owners, they became more common after the passage of the 1799 law, hastening slavery's decline in the first decades of the nineteenth century ahead of the schedule laid out in the law.[1]

Many slaves in New York State took advantage of a new laxity among whites after enactment of the emancipation law and ran away to New York City, where the largest free black community in the North was forming. The presence of a large, active port gave New York City a heightened visibility among the Atlantic World community of blacks. Some slaves brought to New York City by slave masters escaping the Haitian revolution successfully sued for their freedom in the courts under a 1785 law that prohibited the importation of slaves. Fugitives from the southern states also sought out New York City, perhaps having heard of the growing black community there from free black sailors who socialized with slaves in southern ports. New York's Municipal Almshouse admission records show the significant numbers of blacks in New York born outside the city. Native New Yorkers constituted the largest single group of admitted blacks; others had come from the surrounding farm towns in New York State, on Long Island and Westchester; from other mid-Atlantic states; and from the eastern seaboard slave states of South Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia. A significant minority were born as far away as the West Indies, Bermuda, and Africa. A

few gave their birthplaces as "at sea," perhaps on some leg of the Middle Passage.[2]

Although some New York City whites continued to buy slaves in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the ratio of free blacks to slaves in New York City increased dramatically. In 1790, there was approximately one free black for every two slaves; by 1800, there were three free blacks for every two slaves, and by 1810, about seven free blacks for every slave. By 1810, the free black population in New York City stood at over 7,400, a seven-fold increase from 1790. As would be true for the rest of the era of emancipation, there were two black women for every black man in the city.[3]

As blacks left slavery, they sought to create urban homes and lives independent of slave owners. Those free blacks who were not live-in domestics avoided settling in areas near the eastern tip of Manhattan, where the majority of slaveholding whites lived. By 1800 they had established independent black households in the Fifth and Sixth Wards (fig. 5). Settling below Houston Street, from the Hudson River to the East River, newly free blacks rented and sometimes bought homes and established churches. By 1810, free black residences concentrated toward the western side of Manhattan, between the Hudson River and Bowery Road. Blacks in the Sixth Ward clustered around the misnamed Fresh Water Pond. In the Dutch colonial era, half-free blacks had owned lots near the pond, and under the British, the area held the Negroes Burial Ground. In the 1800s, the Sixth Ward and the Fresh Water Pond became class-defined areas in which Irish and German immigrant and Anglo-American workers as well as black laborers rented homes, but many New Yorkers continued to view the area as dominated by blacks. Wealthier New Yorkers avoided the area; its swampy land attracted malarial insects and leather tanners used the pond as a dumping site for the noisome by-products of their trade. Although the city had filled in the pond by the War of 1812, the area retained its reputation for offensive smells and diseases and was left to the poor. But for black people, it was an area in which they could settle in relative independence.[4]

Individual blacks also began purchasing property, either as residences or for business purposes. One of the most significant series of property purchases by blacks began in 1825. Andrew Williams, a twenty-five-year-old free black bootblack, bought from a white cartman named John Whitehead three lots of farmland between what is now Eighty-third and Eighty-eighth Streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues, in Central Park. After Williams's purchase, Epiphany Davis, a laborer and trustee of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, purchased twelve lots in the area. These purchases

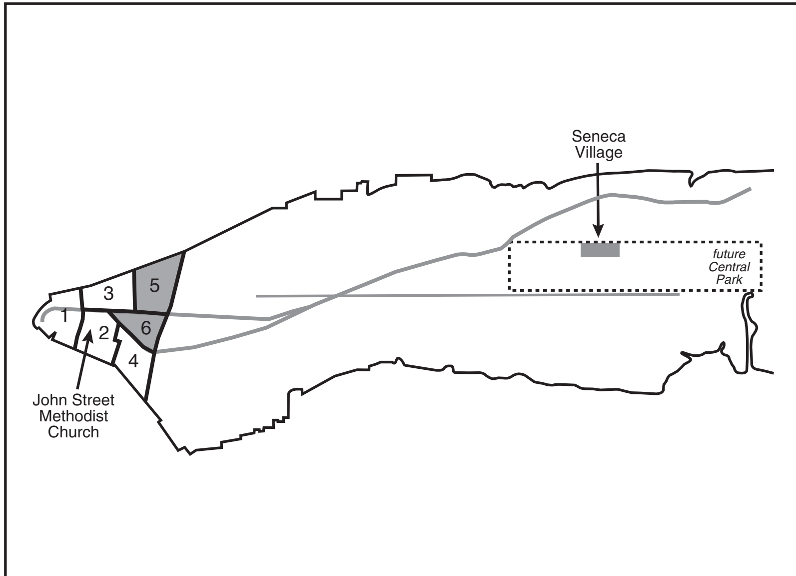

Fig. 5 Location of black neighborhoods as slavery ended. Map by Sarah Zingarelli.

inaugurated the Seneca Village community, the largest group of black landholdings in Manhattan (see fig. 5). Between 1825 and 1832, Whitehead sold at least twenty-four, and possibly all fifty, of his remaining land parcels to black families. From the 1830s through the mid-1850s, black workers made up the majority of the Seneca Village population. By 1840, Seneca Village was home to over one hundred people, and by 1855, to almost three hundred—largely black or Irish.[5]

Seneca Village was a unique case of residential stability for black workers in New York City. Although the vast majority of the black residents worked in service trades or as unskilled laborers, they had managed to purchase land. Seventy-five percent of the families taxed in 1840 were still there in 1855. The community was also home to A.M.E. Zion and African Union Church congregations and a school. Through such institutions, as well as ties of friendship and marriage, the community sustained itself for over twenty years.[6]

The concentration of free blacks in various New York City neighborhoods did not mean that they lived completely segregated lives. Rather, pre–Civil War free blacks in New York City lived in racially integrated, working-class neighborhoods. Whites did not see residential segregation as essential

to the maintenance of racial supremacy. And blacks by and large had neither the financial resources nor the inclination to form their own enclaves.[7] Black households were scattered among those of whites, with sometimes several black households per block. Many blacks occupied the cellars of buildings, with whites above. Cellar living was a legacy of New York City slavery, in which slaves usually occupied these dwellings. Damp, with bad ventilation and insufficient drainage, these residences encouraged the spread of deadly lung diseases and epidemics, illnesses that whites living above the cellars were less likely to suffer. During the 1820 epidemic known as the Bancker Street Fever, for example, in one section of the street, out of 48 blacks living in ten cellars, 33 became ill and 14 died, while the 120 whites living above them did not even get sick.[8]

Some free blacks first clustered around white institutions that were relatively friendly to them, and then around their own institutions. Between 1790 and 1810, large numbers of blacks settled near the John Street Methodist Church, a white congregation. In 1795, black members of that church split off to form their own congregation, which became the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. By 1810, the congregation had saved enough money to purchase property in the Fifth Ward. The site of the Zion Church on the corner of Leonard and Church Streets marked the center of another area where blacks settled, near their house of worship.[9]

Although blacks sought to form independent households in freedom, many were unable to afford single-family homes and so shared housing with non-family members. For some workers, residences were determined by their occupations. One-third of blacks between 1790 and 1810 lived with white families as domestics; the number of black live-in domestics fell gradually during the antebellum period. The spouses and children of live-in domestics saw them on scheduled days off and on holidays. A disproportionate number of working-class blacks of all occupations in antebellum New York City lived as boarders, renting single rooms in the homes of others or in larger residences designated as boarding houses. Half of black men and almost a third of black women in their twenties boarded in the homes of others, compared to approximately 20 percent of white men and 15 percent of white women. Single sailors in port lived in boarding houses near the docks. Although most black boarders lived with black families, some boarded with white families.[10]

As a last resort, and generally because of illness, some blacks moved temporarily into the Municipal Almshouse. Its segregated quarters for blacks were damp and dark, vastly inferior to those offered to whites. Throughout the antebellum years, black women and children far outnumbered black men

as almshouse residents. The majority of black family groups who came to the almshouse consisted of mothers who had fallen sick and were forced to bring their children with them. The almshouse was also a haven for women during childbirth. Black almshouse residents left as quickly as possible.[11]

The majority of New York City's newly free blacks in the early nineteenth century held jobs on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, reflecting the occupations slaves held as their bondage ended. As late as 1790, artisans were the most numerous slave owners in New York City and held the second-largest number of slaves. In artisan households, which combined workshops and residences, male slaves learned skills that could fit them for movement into skilled jobs as free laborers.[12] In the early years of emancipation, before the War of 1812, a few black males used the skills they learned under slavery to establish themselves as artisans in freedom. In 1800 forty-two, and in 1810 seventy-five free black male heads of households were listed in city directories as artisans, with jobs as carpenters, coopers, cabinetmakers, upholsterers, sailmakers, butchers, bakers, shoemakers, tailors, hairdressers, and tobacconists. Some black women worked as seamstresses and milliners. New York City's free blacks were twice as likely to possess skilled jobs as their contemporaries in Philadelphia.[13]

During the emancipation era, a few blacks ran businesses that provided a secure income. For example, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, blacks dominated the chimney sweeping trade (fig. 6). White workers had little interest in the work, either as master sweeps or as child apprentices. By the late 1810s there were 60 master sweeps, including at least one woman, and 150 sweeps who worked under them, the vast majority of whom were young male children. Chimney sweeping was steady work: laws passed by New York's Common Council in the 1790s made it mandatory that residents keep their chimneys swept in order to prevent fires in the city. Some master sweeps opened offices and were listed in city directories, a sign of their wealth and status; others simply walked the streets with their workers, crying "Sweep O!" to attract householders.[14]

Black New Yorkers also contributed to the burgeoning entertainment business of New York. Black-owned oyster cellars, restaurants, and dance halls were popular with black and white New Yorkers. On weekends, some black working-class New Yorkers transformed their rented apartments into oyster cellars and dance halls. Thomas Downing's Oyster Bar on Broad Street and Cato's Tavern just outside the city catered to New York's white political and economic elite and were among the best-known restaurants in antebellum New York. Downing's survived until the Civil War. Black entrepreneurs also opened pleasure gardens, outdoor cafés where patrons could socialize,

Fig. 6 This antismoking cartoon from the 1830s depicts a black bootblack and a black chimney sweep among the people found on antebellum New York City streets. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

drink cool drinks, and eat ice cream. Pleasure gardens were particularly popular during the summer months. Those who could afford to traveled to cooler rural areas during the hot weather, but the gardens gave those forced to remain in New York some relief from the heat and crowds of the city. However, this range of entertainment excluded middle-class and aspiring middle-class blacks. The elite restaurants or pleasure gardens run by blacks would not have survived had they offered interracial seating. The informal, sometimes interracial, and often temporary oyster cellars and dance halls of poorer working-class black New Yorkers would likely have been unappealing to those of middle-class or aspiring middle-class status.[15]

To provide entertainment for a wider range of black New Yorkers, retired ship steward William Brown opened New York's first pleasure garden for African Americans in 1820. Known by disparaging white New Yorkers as the "African Grove," Brown's pleasure garden offered blacks one of the few permanent recreation spots not affiliated with a church or mutual aid society.[16] Little is known about Brown's life before his arrival in New York. He may have been born in the Caribbean, though there is no indication as to whether

he was born slave or free. Brown retired to New York City in 1816, having traveled the Caribbean and Europe. He rented a house on Thomas Street, in present-day Greenwich Village, and opened the pleasure garden in its backyard. At the time, Thomas Street was on the outskirts of New York City. Because this area was not as heavily settled as lower Manhattan, property there rented cheaply.[17]

Complaints from white neighbors forced the closure of the garden in 1820, but Brown, not to be dissuaded from his quest to provide entertainment by and for black New Yorkers, opened a small theater in an upstairs apartment of the Thomas Street house in 1821, which survived until 1823. For the first year of its existence, the troupe, which Brown sometimes called the American Theater, performed Shakespeare and plays written by Euro-Americans. In mid-1822, Brown and the troupe produced "The Drama of King Shotaway," believed to be the first play written by an African American. Brown's theater closed in 1823 due to white hostility, but not before it had provided a valuable training ground for internationally renowned Shakespearian actors Ira Aldridge and William Hewlett.[18]

Despite the success of some black entrepreneurs, most blacks during and after the emancipation era found themselves in unskilled, low-paying jobs. Concomitant with the passage of New York's emancipation laws, European immigration and burgeoning industrialism changed the position of artisans and thus of blacks, slave and free, in the economy. Artisan slaveholding declined in the 1790s as the arrival of large numbers of European immigrants made it more cost-effective for artisans to hire cheaper wage labor than to own slaves or indentured servants and be responsible for their food and lodging.[19] At the same time, slaveholding among elites in New York City increased as they began to build elaborate homes that required greater upkeep. Slaves performed meaningful tasks in these new homes as part of the household economy, but they were also a form of what historian Shane White has called "conspicuous display," a sign of wealth. Whites did not view slaves' new tasks as central to the emerging industrial economy. Increasingly, slave women outnumbered slave men in New York City, feminizing the black labor force and perhaps causing further devaluation of black labor. Whites increasingly viewed the work black slaves performed, like white women's domestic work, as on the periphery of the industrializing economy.[20]

The compression of free black men and women into a limited range of occupations in antebellum New York was a legacy from slavery, particularly from the form that slavery took in New York City during its final decades.

The vast majority of free blacks in New York City at any one time in the antebellum period were, on the basis of occupation and income alone, part of the working class. However, whites excluded blacks from both the declining artisan trades and the burgeoning metropolitan industrial economy of New York City. Thus, the development of the black working class and of black class consciousness differed from that of whites.

Most free blacks, male and female, worked as domestic laborers beginning in 1800, in private homes, hotels, and boarding houses. Black men worked in other service occupations, such as waitering and barbering; and as casual laborers. Black women took in washing. Black men and women also worked as fruit and vegetable peddlers. Perhaps the most steady and highest-paying work available to black working-class men, and to a few women, was maritime work. Most black seamen obtained jobs as stewards or cooks on inland, coastal, or trans-Atlantic voyages; a few black women worked as chambermaids on steamboats. Although such jobs paid comparatively well, black maritime workers had to endure long separations from their families; additionally, their families ashore had to contend with long stretches of time between paychecks.[21]

The low- or irregularly paying occupations that most black adults held meant that children in families served as an important source of additional income. Boarding house and restaurant owners often hired children as helpers. A six-year-old black boy waited on Englishman Henry Bradshaw Fearon during tea at his boarding house. The child was part of a retinue of sixteen servants, of whom only one was white. The others were the servants of the boarding house, and the slaves of southern visitors to New York City.[22] Black child laborers also dominated chimney sweeping. Children, who were small enough to fit into chimneys to clean them, were especially needed. Chimney sweeping was steady, but dangerous, work. Sweeps were subject to broken bones, misshapen limbs, and "Chimney Sweeper's Cancer" and were sometimes mistreated by sweep masters.[23] Like other forms of child labor, sweeping limited the children's ability to gain an education.

Many of the jobs that black workers held were ones that white workers feared and despised. As slavery ended, blacks were no longer automatically accepted in the skilled workshops of employers who had formerly owned them, if indeed blacks wanted to hold such jobs. As one employer said of his former slave, "The laws set him free and he left me—now let the laws take care of him."[24] That blacks sought autonomy and that whites were bitter about black freedom led to blacks' exclusion from many skilled workshops. As free competitors with whites in the job market, free blacks were bound to lose out as white workers refused to work with them and

employers easily found wage laborers among the increasing numbers of European immigrants.

Black workers did not simply acquiesce to whites' understanding of their occupational roles. Rather, they claimed varying levels of autonomy in the occupations to which they were limited, negotiating with their employers for their own and their families' needs. The struggle for cultural and individual autonomy was most difficult for live-in domestic workers. Everyday tensions between live-in domestics and employers sometimes erupted dramatically into arson during the emancipation years, a carryover from methods of rebellion under slavery.[25] But most domestics mediated in less dramatic ways between their desire for autonomy and stability for themselves and their families and the labor needs of the families they served. Some live-in domestic servants managed to convince their employers to help them pay to board their young children with neighbors. A few, such as John Pintard's servant Hannah, were able to persuade their employers to allow their young children to live with them or to hire relatives or friends. When Hannah left her position, Pintard hired Tamar, a woman who had worked for him eight years previous and whom he trusted. Tamar capitalized on this trust and Pintard's need by insisting that Pintard hire her daughter Nancy as well, thus increasing the communal wages in her family. Other domestics may have received lesser benefits, such as leftover food or cast-off clothing. Such negotiations for the benefit of their families mitigated, to a degree, domestic servants' lack of autonomy.[26]

Black men and women also actively sought jobs that provided greater autonomy than domestic service. Washerwomen collected laundry at various households but washed the clothes in their own homes. Some washerwomen supplemented their income by taking in the children of domestic workers and other parents who worked outside the home, either on a daily or a long-term basis. Male and female fruit peddlers, ragpickers, cartmen, and day laborers also retained a relatively independent existence. The price of such independence, however, could be unreliable income that threatened economic independence.[27]

Although sailors' lives could result in long separations from families and less attention to communal ties and responsibilities, black sailors often retained strong connections to their land communities. Black sailors tended to be older than their white peers, and more black than white sailors supported wives and children with their earnings. Black men sometimes attained a greater degree of equality and freedom as sailors than they could on land. This sense of equality combined with relatively high and stable earnings to enable black sailors to provide well for their families when in port. One

sailor, a widower named William Smith, earned enough money to purchase "a lot of ground in Harlaem" and to pay the twelve dollars a month required for the board of his four children while he was at sea.[28]

The difficulties of sustaining family life on meager incomes meant that many of New York's black workers were part of networks of family, neighbors, and friends that provided emotional and material support. Such networks were particularly important for domestic servants and sailors with children. Domestic and maritime employment, the backbone of the black working class, could take parents from their own homes for months or even years at a time. Further, black working-class parents were subject to higher than average illness and mortality rates. Thus, black parents relied on paid and unpaid boarding situations to help take care of their children. Possibly half of black children between the ages of ten and fifteen lived away from their parents during the antebellum era. Although separation of families in this fashion was emotionally wrenching, the relationship between parents and those who boarded their children could be mutually advantageous. Such relationships may have reinforced cultural and community ties among blacks. By not placing their children in white-run institutions, such as the Colored Orphan Asylum (founded in 1836), or apprenticing them to chimney sweeps, parents had more flexibility to visit their children or to take them home if their employment situation changed. Boarding also created an alternative to domestic work for some black women. But boarding arangements were also subject to the whims of New York employers and to the high disease and mortality rates that plagued the black community. As unemployment, illness, or death befell their guardians, children were shunted from home to home. Families with whom children boarded sometimes forced them into wage work or begging to help pay for their keep, or sent them to the Municipal Almshouse.[29]

To prevent such misfortunes, blacks built on these informal networks to create more stable forms of institutional relief. Churches were the first of these institutions to provide material aid to working-class blacks. Between 1796 and 1826, New York City blacks founded four Methodist Episcopal, three Protestant Episcopal, and two Baptist congregations, as well as one Presbyterian (fig. 7). Black people formed separate congregations largely because established churches refused to admit blacks as equals. Black congregations largely followed the beliefs of white parent denominations in catering to blacks' spiritual needs. But in separate congregations, black churchgoers could focus more on the material needs of believers than white parishes would. These churches became central institutional structures through which money could be collected and food, clothing, and other necessities of

Fig. 7 Locations of six black churches in New York City, founded between 1796 and 1826, and the African Society for Mutual Relief Hall. Map by Sarah Zingarelli.

life bought and distributed. The ministers of the various churches often joined across denominational lines and with whites to participate in programs for the betterment of the black community.[30]

Black congregations also pooled resources to purchase property that served community needs. The African Society, the first known black religious organization in New York City, came together not only to provide a

place of worship, but also a place of burial. In 1795, the African Society petitioned New York City's Common Council for money to purchase land for a church and a cemetery. White developers were encroaching on the land containing the Negroes Burial Ground, which had existed from British colonial days. That same year, Peter Williams Sr. led a group of blacks out of the John Street Methodist Church; they formed the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1796. Williams's group joined with the African Society to purchase a lot at Church and Leonard Streets, on which they built the A.M.E. Zion church in 1801. In 1807, another group of New York City blacks formed the Abyssinian Baptist Church with the assistance of Reverend Thomas Paul, founder of the First African Baptist Church in Boston.[31]

After the War of 1812, black religious congregations and secular organizations continued to solidify their standing in the city through the purchase of property. Black Episcopalians from the Trinity Episcopal Church began meeting separately in 1809. In 1819, they were able to form St. Phillip's congregation and erect their first church building on Collect Street, with newly ordained deacon Peter Williams Jr. as their first pastor. Born in New Jersey, Williams grew up in New York, the son of ex-slave Peter Williams Sr., then a successful tobacconist and the sexton to the predominantly white John Street Methodist Church. Williams Jr. attended the African Free Schools and later studied under the Episcopal theologian John Henry Hobart. In 1826, Williams was ordained an Episcopal priest. He remained pastor of St. Phillip's and retained a high profile in New York's black community and the radical abolition movement until his death in 1840.[32]

Despite his son's high profile in the Episcopal church, Peter Williams Sr. remained active in both the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the white John Street Methodist congregation. Until 1820, Zion Church continued under the governance of the Methodist Episcopal denomination. An all-black board of trustees controlled the church's property and day-to-day operations, but a white minister, William Stillwell, oversaw the congregation. That year, amid controversy within white New York Methodist congregations over the distribution of church funds and the degree of control Methodist elders had over individual congregations, Stillwell led a group of disgruntled white congregants out of the Methodist denomination. Fearing that a new white minister might attempt to control them more tightly, the Zion congregation decided to withdraw from the Methodist denomination and form its own church. James Varick became Zion's first bishop, holding that post until his death in 1827. He was replaced by Christopher Rush, who held the position until 1872 and also became the first historian of the denomination.[33]

The Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church had separated from Zion in 1813 under the leadership of William Miller and Thomas Sipkins. The congregation purchased a meeting house on Elizabeth Street, which was destroyed by fire in 1827. For several years after that, the congregation met in various rented locations before an individual donated a permanent building to them. The Zion and Asbury Churches as well as Philadelphian Richard Allen's A.M.E. Bethel Church had a competitive relationship for much of the early 1800s. Allen had founded an independent congregation in Philadelphia in 1794 and by the early 1800s had a small following in New York as well, although this congregation initially did not have its own church. Allen established a separate black Methodist church in New York in 1820, under the leadership of former Zion and Asbury member William Lambert. Allen hoped to increase his influence in New York and eventually combine Zion and Asbury with the new Bethel Church. However, Allen antagonized both the Zion and Asbury Churches, who saw him as encroaching upon their territory. Additionally, Allen did not intend to break with the white Methodist establishment, which Zion and Asbury ultimately did. The three churches did not differ in their doctrines, however, and thus eventually established friendly relationships. Asbury, the weakest of the three, aligned itself with Bethel for a time in the early 1820s, and by 1843 had been absorbed by Zion.[34]

In 1821, Samuel Cornish organized New York's First Colored Presbyterian Church; the Presbyter of New York formally installed him as its pastor in 1824. Cornish emigrated to New York City in 1820 after a childhood spent in Delaware and an education in Presbyterian theology gained in Philadelphia. Cornish originally came to New York as a missionary under the auspices of the Presbyterian Missionary Society to serve in the Bancker Street area, where a number of free blacks were settling. The society expected Cornish to establish a mission church and hold Sunday services, Sunday school for adults and children, and weekday prayer meetings. He also visited black families in the area to ascertain their levels of religiosity and morality and to encourage them to join the church. Within a year, Cornish's mission efforts created enough support among blacks to establish the First Colored Presbyterian Church. By 1824, Cornish's congregation numbered several hundred, with about eighty who were full members of the church, and the Presbyter of New York appointed him pastor. Cornish also spearheaded the construction of a thirteen-thousand-dollar brick building for the new congregation. Cornish raised some of the costs through donations from whites, but the rest was held as debt, which ultimately led to the loss of the building by 1826. Unable to raise money to pull the church out of debt and suffering

from illness, Cornish resigned from the pastorate in 1828 and was replaced by his protégé, Theodore S. Wright. Not until 1831 was the congregation again able to purchase a church.[35]

Although educated black ministers and businessmen led these churches, the labor of black workers provided part of the material and financial basis for them. George Lyons, a whitewasher, "applied the first coat of paint on the first edifice" of St. Phillip's Protestant Episcopal Church in 1819.[36] Other "menial" workers saved enough money to purchase land for the A.M.E. Zion and African Union churches in Seneca Village.[37] The educated ministers who led these churches were often only a generation away from slavery and often continued to live economically precarious lives. Such common experiences among ministers and congregants no doubt influenced the social missions of these churches.

During and after the emancipation period New York's blacks also established numerous mutual aid societies. Many of these societies were linked to the newly founded black churches through leadership and ideology. These societies functioned as early forms of workers' compensation insurance for black workers. It is difficult to know how many of these societies existed in New York City during the antebellum period. Although a few left records in the form of acts of incorporation or constitutions, it is possible that many were never incorporated or existed only for a few years before disbanding. Philadelphia had sixteen male societies and twenty-seven female societies in 1830, and it is likely that there were at least as many in New York.[38]

With the exception of one, the African Marine Fund, all of these societies were segregated by sex. Founded to help members and their families in times of material need, the organizations also served to establish and reinforce community norms and values. The models for such societies had both African and Euro-American roots. In many West African societies, sex-segregated societies enforced community norms. Both the importation of slaves into New York in the mid-eighteenth century and the recent influx of slaves from the Haitian revolution may have reinforced these societal practices among New York's African Americans.[39]

The bylaws of these societies reveal the values important to some in the growing free black community. Blacks founded the first and longest-lived mutual aid society, the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, in 1808. Later organizations, such as the African Marine Fund, founded in 1810, and the New-York African Clarkson Association, founded in 1825, had guidelines similar to those of the Society for Mutual Relief. The Society for Mutual Relief was established to alleviate the economic difficulties of blacks and

out of a "desire to improve our condition," meaning the moral condition of blacks. Eight ministers were among the society's members, demonstrating its strong link to New York City's black churches. The society limited its membership to "free persons [who were invariably male] of moral character" between the ages of twenty-one and forty. The society charged its members an annual fee and twenty-five cents in dues per month. After one year of paying dues, a member became eligible for compensation. After ten days of proven illness that prevented him from work, the sick member and his family would receive two dollars a week from the society for as long as three months, after which the sum was reduced to twelve shillings a week for six months, and then a sum of money such as "his case considered with the state of the funds shall appear to [the society] to demand." Other organizations, such as the African Clarkson Association, devoted their funds totally to those left widowed and orphaned by the deaths of their members.[40]

Mutual aid societies founded by black women aided those working women with children whose husbands had died, were invalids, or had deserted them. For example, a washerwoman named Susannah Peterson was one of the two hundred members of the Benevolent Daughters of Zion. Her son drowned as he attempted to save the lives of three boys who had fallen through the ice on a frozen pond. Susannah's son had been a major support of the household, which included his three siblings, the five-year-old daughter of a friend of Susannah's who had died, whose father refused to provide support for the child, and Susannah's own invalid husband. Susannah had paid an entrance fee of one dollar as well as one shilling per month to the Benevolent Daughters of Zion. Now, in her time of need, she was entitled to an allowance of twelve shillings a week for six weeks; any amount after that time would be subject to the ability of the organization to pay.[41]

The membership of these mutual relief societies reveals several important points about evolving socioeconomic classes among blacks. The participation of relatively educated men, such as ministers, caterers, restaurateurs, and other small businessmen, indicates the precariousness of life for the nascent black middle class. At the same time, the multiplicity of mutual aid societies and the variety of their membership reveals competing views among blacks about the labor they were forced to perform. Job and business opportunities were limited, and blacks developed interpretations of the status of some occupations that differed from those of whites. But even during the emancipation era some blacks recognized that certain jobs and businesses were of less social value than others. For example, in comparing the list of known black master chimney sweeps with that of the New York African

Society for Mutual Relief, there is no overlap.[42] Perhaps the harsh conditions to which masters exposed sweeps' apprentices, and that the Manumission Society was highly critical of the sweeps, kept them out of black New Yorkers' charter mutual relief society, even though economically sweeps were among the better-paid black New Yorkers. The "better sphere of life" to which members of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief aspired included moral as well as economic goals. The presence of separate mutual aid societies, perhaps aimed at different segments of the black community according to occupation, such as the African Marine Fund, may have allowed some to separate their moral aspirations from their desire for care during illness or for a proper burial.

Of the churches and mutual aid societies, the New York African Society for Mutual Relief was most successful in acquiring and retaining property. The society bought its first lot of land on Orange Street in 1820. The lot already contained a boarding house, the rent from which paid for the mortgage. Behind the rental property, the society erected a meeting hall that it used for its own events and rented to other organizations. The society also acquired other rental properties, which throughout the antebellum period provided the organization with income beyond the dues collected from its members.[43]

The creation of religious, social, and economic institutions reflected the new independent public and political roles blacks moving from slavery to freedom created in New York City. The growth of black public celebrations and parades was another visible sign of this transition. By 1800, free blacks had turned from the slave celebrations of Pinkster, sanctioned by the white community, to a new tradition of black parades.[44] Public parades arose among whites in American cities during and after the Revolutionary War as a sign of citizenship. Aligning themselves with the evolving traditions of the new nation, free blacks challenged their exclusion and the absence of antislavery ideals in the new nation's definitions of freedom and citizenship.[45] From 1800 through 1830, New York's black inhabitants increasingly celebrated their important holidays with parades. Such processions usually revolved around black freedom and were highly ritualized, with elaborate costumes and banners. One year after the passage of the 1799 emancipation law, blacks paraded in the streets in celebration.[46] After its founding in 1808, the New York African Society for Mutual Relief celebrated its anniversary with elaborate processions "through Broadway, across the park and back to its hall, where the occasion terminated in an oration and grand dinner. The old banner 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?' was borne through the streets, pre-

ceded by the Grand Marshal Samuel Hardenburgh, a magnificent black man, mounted on horse back, with a drawn sword in his hand."[47] Through these all-male parades, blacks laid claim to their rights to political, and sometimes economic, equality. Riding on horseback, wearing military-style uniforms and carrying swords, the parading black men displayed their historic participation in the Revolutionary War. This history, and thus blacks' claim to political equality, was being taken away from them throughout the emancipation period by whites who refused to recognize them as full citiens. When the Wilberforce Philanthropic Society, a mutual aid organization named for the British antislavery activist William Wilberforce, carried its funds in parade "in a sky-blue box" with a gilt key, its membership was proudly and publicly proclaiming the ability of blacks to be economically independent and frugal on behalf of the black commonwealth—thus proving that blacks, too, could be independent equals in the larger society.[48] In these parades, black women and children cheered from the sidelines. Unlike Pinkster celebrations, in which women as well as men danced, parades expressed an increasingly common practice of equating black public citizenship with masculinity. Black men displayed their achievement of full manhood and thus the black community's rights to full citizenship through the parades' visual assertions of black men's ability to lead and protect the black community.[49]

Speeches given by community leaders following the parades reinforced the processions' visual themes. Although white newspapers rarely reported on these black parades or speeches, except to caricature them, blacks and their white allies reprinted the speeches that followed the parades, and sometimes the order of the procession and ceremonies themselves, thus preserving some of the sentiments of the celebrations.[50] On January 1, 1808, the day when the slave trade between the United States and Africa became illegal, Peter Williams Jr. gave "An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade" at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. He gave his speech amid hymns and prayers of thanksgiving, as well as sermons and other speeches delivered by black ministers and others. Probably because he had been a student at the African Free Schools, publisher and Manumission Society member Samuel Wood printed his oration. Williams's speech served to prove the value of the school as well as the potential of blacks as independent citizens.[51]

Like their white counterparts, black parades and celebrations also revealed the divisions in the black community. In 1809, for example, blacks held three separate celebrations to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade. On January 2 of that year, three men preached celebratory orations in three different venues. Two of the speeches, those of William Hamilton and

Joseph Sidney, were part of celebrations sponsored by mutual relief organizations. Hamilton's was sponsored by the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, and Sidney's, by the Wilberforce Philanthropic Society. The third speaker, Henry Sipkins, was part of the celebration sponsored by the A.M.E. Zion Church. Although Sidney expressed regret over the fact that there were three celebrations instead of one for such an important anniversary in the black community, none of the speakers directly addressed the division. Part of the reason for the division was that Joseph Sidney had planned an explicitly partisan speech supportive of the Federalists. Although Henry Sipkins's political affiliation is unknown, one of the leaders of the New York African Society, John Teasman, was active in the Democratic-Republican Party by 1807. White artisans opposed to black political equality dominated the Democratic-Republican Party. Teasman joined the organization to force debate on racial issues within it. Few if any other blacks followed Teasman into the party, but he remained popular in the community. Hamilton and Sipkins probably split from the original celebration in order to be able to express their divergent views freely, without directly confronting the well-liked Teasman.[52]

All three speeches reveal the optimism of blacks in this period. A carpenter, William Hamilton, speaking at the Universalist church, stated that not only had the international slave trade ended and gradual emancipation in New York State begun, but the condition of free blacks in the United States was "fast ameliorating." "Science has begun to bud with our race," he said. "Soon shall our tree of arts bear its full burthen of rich and nectarious [*sic*] fruit, soon shall that contumelious assertion of the proud be proved false . . . that Africans do not possess minds as ingenious as other men."[53] In praising the Manumission Society for establishing the African Free Schools, Henry Sipkins, speaking at the A.M.E. Zion church, noted that some blacks had already made "considerable attainments in literature, and become worthy members of civil society."[54]

Such speeches were also calls to action. A founding member of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, Hamilton had entitled his speech "Mutual Interest, Mutual Benefit, and Mutual Relief" and sought to encourage blacks to organize against poverty through mutual aid societies. The Society for Mutual Relief had only been in existence at this point for "three quarters of a year" but had already gained more members than previous such societies, he stated. Hamilton drew a careful line between mutual relief and dependency. Participation in the society's programs did not cause members to become "beggars to the society for relief in times of sickness"; rather,

each person in need would be given his or her proper due, as the society's duties described. The success of the Society for Mutual Relief could serve to reinforce in whites' minds the ability of blacks to be free and independent citizens.[55]

Of the three speeches delivered in honor of the anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, Joseph Sidney's speech before the Wilberforce Philanthropic Society was the least conciliatory to potential white listeners. Like Sipkins and Hamilton, Sidney urged his audience to express gratitude to the Manumission Society as well as "God . . . our kindest benefactor." But Sidney eschewed recounting the history of the African slave trade. Rather, he conceived that his "more immediate duty" was to speak to the complete abolition of slavery in the United States. Sidney called for gradual emancipation of southern slaves. "Immediate emancipation," he said, "is an event which we cannot reasonably expect; and, perhaps, ought not to desire." Southern slaves, "in a state of deplorable ignorance," "uneducated . . . and unacquainted with every thing except the plantations," were not ready for freedom. However, the example of the northern states demonstrated the safety of gradual emancipation.[56]

In the meantime, northern free blacks had the responsibility to bring about southern emancipation through wise use of the vote. Unlike the other two speakers, Sidney explicitly took on electoral politics by calling for blacks to support the Federalist Party. His support of the Federalists was based on two issues. Sidney tied the commercial success of the country to the leadership of Federalists, "the immortal Washington, the Father of his country. [Alexander] Hamilton, [John] Jay, [John] Adams . . . [Rufus] King . . . together with most of our old revolutionary officers and soldiers . . . attached themselves to this party." This group, a "distinguished band of patriots . . . gave to commerce every possible encouragement." "So long as Federalists remained in office," he stated, "so long this country enjoyed an uninterrupted state of increasing prosperity."[57]

But with the success of the Democratic-Republicans and the rise of Jefferson to the presidency in 1800, "the tide of prosperity soon ceased to flow, and all our goodly prospects vanished." The Democratic-Republican Party consisted of "a set of ambitious, designing and office-seeking men," who had emerged from their "native cave of filth and darkness." Among them, Sidney claimed, were "a number of abandoned printers, mostly foreigners." The Democratic-Republican Party and President Jefferson had also "bestowed high dignities on foreigners" by placing them in office in place of the "real patriots and statesmen" whom Washington had appointed.

Most important for Sidney, however, the Democratic-Republican Party was clearly linked to the southern slaveholding states. "The great hotbed of democracy is Virginia, and the other southern states. . . . And these are the very people who hold our African brethren in bondage." These people "are the enemies of our rights." Jefferson, "the great idol of democracy," continued to hold slaves; in contrast, Washington had freed his slaves (although Sidney neglected to mention that this did not occur until after Washington's death).[58]

In addition to voting, parades, and speeches, blacks displayed a more direct political presence through demonstrations and rioting against those who attempted to circumvent the emancipation laws. In August 1801, 250 blacks attempted to rescue twenty slaves whose owner, Madame Jeanne Mathusine Droibillan Volunbrun, had sold them south to Norfolk, Virginia. Although the Manumission Society had entered legal proceedings against Volunbrun, it dropped them out of fear that the release of the slaves would encourage further disorder and rioting. The slaves were sent south. In 1819, a crowd of blacks attempted unsuccessfully to rescue a Virginia runaway slave, Thomas Hartlett, from a slave catcher, John Hall. And in 1826, blacks waited outside city hall to hear the disposition of a case in which an entire family faced being returned to slavery. When the slave catcher won his case, blacks pelted him and police attempting to stop the riot with bricks, sticks, and stones.[59]

Newly free black men and women also made their mark in the streets during work and leisure hours. Chimney sweepers' cries in the early morning hours attracted customers. Throughout the day peddlers cried their wares, and in the early evenings black "tubmen," workers responsible for cleaning out the city's privies, sang bawdy songs to cheer them through the malodorous work.[60] During leisure hours, blacks shaped a burgeoning nightlife in dance halls and grogshops near Bancker Street. Working-class whites were onlookers and sometimes joined blacks in these activities, attempting to imitate the complicated dances performed by blacks on the docks and in the evolving interracial dance halls.[61]

The early emancipation era from 1800 to just after the War of 1812 was a time of optimism for black New Yorkers. The number of free blacks in New York City continued to increase as masters released their slaves from bondage ahead of the schedule laid out in the emancipation law. Blacks during this time displayed a conscious political activism as well as a social and cultural presence in the city. The new black public life, particularly the parades and celebrations that followed, was the basis of community for all blacks, who participated across class lines in feasts to honor the formation of the Society for Mutual Relief or the passage of emancipation laws. Other free blacks

were both regular church participants and frequenters of the dance halls and grogshops of Bancker Street.[62]

Reform-minded whites continued to assist blacks in attaining a foothold in New York City through education. The Manumission Society expanded its schools, and during this period, several groups of white women founded schools. In 1815, Quaker women founded the New-York African Clarkson Society, which opened a mission school for black women. And in 1817, the interdenominational Female Union Society for the Promotion of Sabbath Schools, run by Johanna Bethune (wife of revivalist Divie Bethune) and staffed almost wholly by white women, opened several Sabbath schools that taught men, women, and children to read and write. Although these schools were open to all, blacks took the greatest advantage of them; in many cases over 50 percent of the pupils in these schools were black.[63]

The War of 1812 presented opportunities for blacks despite the economic difficulties that resulted from the embargo on international trade. The federal government initially banned black men from military service but asked them to perform war-related manual labor, such as building fortifications in and around New York City. Now that most blacks in the city were free, such labor could be freely given, rather than compelled by masters. In August 1814, a "Citizen of Colour" encouraged his fellow black men to volunteer to work on fortifications in Harlem Heights and Brooklyn. Perhaps in reference to the actions of Loyalist blacks during the Revolutionary War, "Citizen of Colour" saw the participation of blacks as "an opportunity of shewing . . . that we are not traitors or enemies to our country." Participation in the war effort would also show gratitude toward the state of New York, which had "evinced a disposition to do us justice" and "discard[ed] that illiberal, misguided policy, which makes a difference of complexion a pretext for oppression." "[N]o man of colour, who is able to go, [should] stay at home," "Citizen of Colour" concluded.[64]

In response to this call, about a thousand black men, "patriotic sons of Africa" according to the *New York Evening Post*, accompanied by "a delightful band of music and appropriate flags," crossed over from Manhattan to Brooklyn Heights to work on the fortifications there, while others labored in Harlem.[65] In October, the federal government lifted the ban on black soldiers, and New York blacks formed two regiments. The opportunity for black men to serve during the war again held out the promise of full participatory citizenship for the community as a whole. Throughout the war, black men could serve on navy ships and on privateers. Of black U.S. naval men captured and sent to Dartmoor prison in England, the largest number were from New York State.[66] With such proof of their worthiness as citizens,

free blacks felt they had reason to hope for greater equality, and slaves, for full freedom.

Such hopes were seemingly validated in 1817, when the New York State legislature, at the urging of the Democratic-Republican Governor Daniel Tompkins, voted to emancipate all New York slaves by July 4, 1827. Tompkins argued that "most colored persons born previously to the 4th of July, 1799 . . . will have become of very little value to their owners. Indeed, many of them will by that time have become an expensive burden." Thus, manumitting these slaves would interfere with the property rights of slaveholders only "in a very small degree" and would still "be consistent with the humanity and justice of a free and prosperous people."[67] All slaves born before 1799 gained their freedom in 1827. The youngest slaves freed by the law would be twenty-eight years old, the same age as those males freed by the gradual emancipation law. These younger black people would still be able to work for a living. The oldest freed blacks, however, would be at the mercy of the community. Those children born to slave mothers between July 4, 1799, and March 31, 1817, would continue to serve as indentured servants under the terms of the old law. Those born to slave mothers after March 31, 1817, would be completely free at the age of twenty-one.[68] Thus, potentially, slave masters retained access to the labor of blacks as late as 1848, when the last black children, if born to slave women before July 4, 1827, would be free of indenture. Under this new law, slave parents might gain full freedom before their children.

Some families may have made choices like that of a slave woman named Isabella, who later became anti-slavery activist Sojourner Truth. Isabella had bargained with her master, John Dumont, to earn her freedom a year earlier than 1827 through extra labor on his farm in Ulster County. When Isabella injured her hand, Dumont withdrew the agreement. Isabella decided to work for Dumont for six months past the original date of July 4, 1826, and then leave, taking only her youngest child, the baby Sophia, with her. Her three other children remained with her husband Thomas on the land of her former slave master, bound to serve out their indentures. Had Isabella remained, Dumont might have given her and her family a cottage to live in, but her four children would still have been bound to serve Dumont until 1840 for the oldest, and 1847 for the youngest, and subject to resale to new masters much as slaves had been. Isabella chose to travel to the nearby Van Wagenen family, who opposed slavery; they bought her and Sophia from Dumont. Perhaps she hoped to negotiate freedom for all her family members, but she was only able to do so for one, Peter, and only after a protracted court battle. By 1828, for reasons that are unclear, Isabella had returned Sophia to the

Dumont household. Isabella and Peter found freedom in New York City, but they had left the rest of their family behind in Ulster County.[69] The emancipation law still privileged white slaveowners' needs or desires for slave labor over the freedom of black workers and the needs and desires of black families.