

SLAVERY IN THE BRONX: MAPPING, ADVOCACY, AND GENEALOGY IN A DIGITAL PUBLIC HISTORY PROJECT

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Abstract

This short paper draws on the experience of the community-engaged learning course on Slavery in the Bronx at Manhattan College. This digital public history course began by learning about the unmarked slave burial grounds in both Drake Park, in Hunts Point, and in Van Cortlandt Park, a former wheat plantation, and the work done to date by fourth-grade students, their teachers, Van Cortlandt House Museum curators, and dedicated local historians. Manhattan College students worked to map the sites of slavery in today's Bronx, and conducted genealogical research to find descendants of those once enslaved in the Bronx. This paper discusses their progress to date, plans for another version of the class this fall, the legacies of slavery that are often forgotten in northern states, the ongoing injustices facing residents of the Kingsbridge and Hunts Point neighborhoods, and the chance for these acts of memorialization to provide a foundation for critiquing injustice, then and now.

Paper

New York City is a site of slavery. The year 2019 marks four hundred years since the first African men, women, and children were brought to Virginia and sold into slavery there. But everything about that anniversary is deceptive. Chattel slavery, the temporary enslavement of war prisoners, and discriminatory human caging had already been practiced in the lands that would become the United States, often against indigenous peoples (Reséndez 2017). African men and women had already been in what are now Florida, Texas and New Mexico, some as free members of conquering Spanish parties, and some enslaved (Berry 2019). And slavery was not a particularly southern phenomenon.

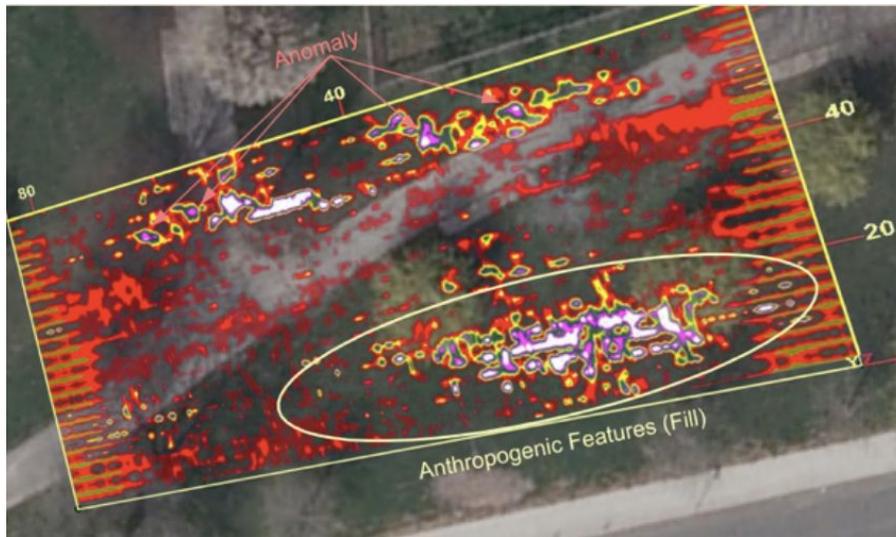
Like every city in colonial America, New Amsterdam/New York ran on slave labor, whether hauling at the ports, harvesting in the fields, tending to the household, or working in construction (Harris 2003). Sites of slave labor, and buildings constructed by enslaved people, persist and are celebrated as historic sites, but the labor of the enslaved rarely seems to be mentioned: enslaved Africans built the wall along what would become Wall Street; they worked on the construction of Trinity Church, and Fraunces Tavern, of now-historic houses in each borough and up the Hudson River, on practically every structure built in New York before the gradual emancipation law brought freedom to most in 1827 (Berlin and Harris 2005). These sites of slavery built and worked for two hundred years are generally unmapped and unremarked—despite the fact that, less than two centuries later, any close observer of the newspaper can tell you that sex trafficking, separating children from their parents, and detaining certain individuals because of

their racial characteristics are elements of slavery that are still quite alive today, in our own communities.

These realities generally surprise even educated New Yorkers today. The power of forces and excuses that are “silencing the past” are strong (Trouillot 1995). So, inspired by ongoing efforts to bring this local history to the surface, and to have students investigate ties between their universities and the history of slavery (see for example Wilder 2013; Georgetown Slavery Archive; University of Virginia President’s Commission on Slavery and the University; and Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice. 2006), in 2019 I inaugurated a community-engaged learning course on Slavery in the Bronx, to introduce students to historical research, the challenges and opportunities of public history, and the work of education and commemoration in our own Bronx communities. (The slaves held by Robert Watts, on his Rose Hill farm, offer a similar opportunity to those who attend Fordham University, now on his land. [The New York Slavery Records Index 2017])

Through the hard work of schoolteachers, museum professionals, and dedicated local amateurs, two of the unmarked graveyards of enslaved New Yorkers have been identified, in what are now Van Cortlandt Park and Drake Park, in Hunts Point (Hunts Point Slave Burial Ground Project 2010-2019 and Dembowski 2018). Combing through census records, bills of sale, baptism records, and other items, these experts have found that one-third of Kingsbridge residents were enslaved black people around the year 1700, and that many of those who were buried in Hunts Point had been held by the Hunts or their neighbors, the Leggetts, and cycled among their downtown Manhattan houses and their far-flung plantations and country houses, in what is now the Bronx, Westchester, and Queens.

These graveyards of the enslaved were forgotten—despite the fact that they about the graveyards of white Hunts and Leggetts, in Drake Park, and Van Cortlandts or their neighbors, the Tibbets family, in Kingsbridge. The white dead have headstones, with some names and dates still visible, inside a fence; the black dead are known only from ground-penetrating radar scans of hillsides otherwise without markers. Only old newspaper clippings and one photograph of the Hunts Point Slave Burial Ground can attest to what lies buried (Hunts Point Slave Burial Ground Project 2010-2019 and Dembowski 2019).



Hunts Point Burial Ground Project: ground-penetrating radar mapping

In the first run of my Slavery in the Bronx class, in spring 2019, our goal was to literally and figuratively put these sites on the map—to bring visibility and publicity to the existing efforts, and to do what we could to extend the efforts. The coincidental timing of the course site visits during Black History Month led to news coverage (Sowa and Hershkowitz 2019 and News12 The Bronx, 2019), and we met with the local community board and local middle-school students, in an effort to understand how best to memorialize the slave burial ground in Drake Park and still have the park serve its community, as well as how to integrate more information about the enslaved labor that kept the Van Cortlandt House running into tours there. Other efforts to digitize records of slavery in New York, runaway ads throughout the United States, and to educate the community created many possibilities for cross-fertilization (The New York Slavery Records Index 2017; FreedomontheMove 2019; Johnson 2019).

What we would do, specifically, would be to work to trace descendants of those who had been enslaved in the Bronx, ideally finding family ties to the unmarked burial grounds. And we also sought to map the sites of slave labor in today's Bronx. As a community-engaged learning course using a project-based learning model, the course was, through and through, an experiment—I was not sure what we would find, where, or when, because I wanted to have the students do the research themselves, even if it led nowhere (Kaechele 2019.).

Our most prominent success was in contacting a descendent of someone who had been enslaved in the Bronx: a member of the Clapp family, who were Siwanoy (Delaware-speaking) people enslaved in what is now the Bronx and Westchester before the year 1710, and whose descendants were living and working in Throggs Neck through the turn of the twentieth century (see for example Sweet 1898). Through racial-category searches of the census and Ancestry.com family trees, we were able to meet up with Carol Weber, and to learn about what records of her family she held, and what questions she had.

-The Clapp Family-

SCHEDULE I - Free Inhabitants in the County of Westchester in the State of New York
 enumerated by me, on the 1st day of Nov. 1850.

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Color	Profession, Occupation, or Trade	Place of Birth	Value of Real Estate	Value of Personal Estate	Value of Real Estate owned by others	Value of Personal Estate owned by others	Whether deaf and dumb	Whether blind	Whether insane
119	Sylvester Clapp	M	30	W	Farmer	New York	1000	100					
120	Mary Bowers	F	25	W		New York		50					

BAPTISMS.

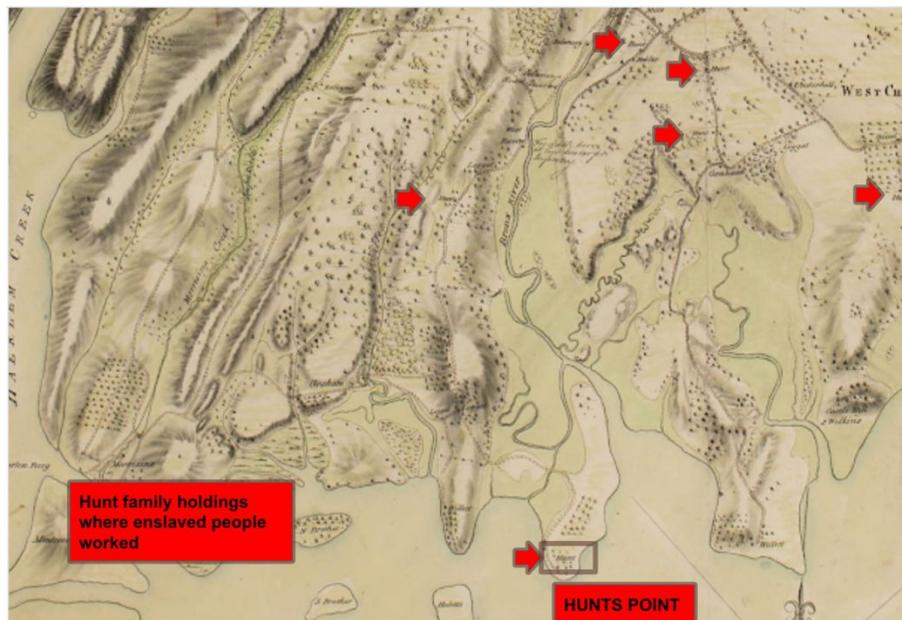
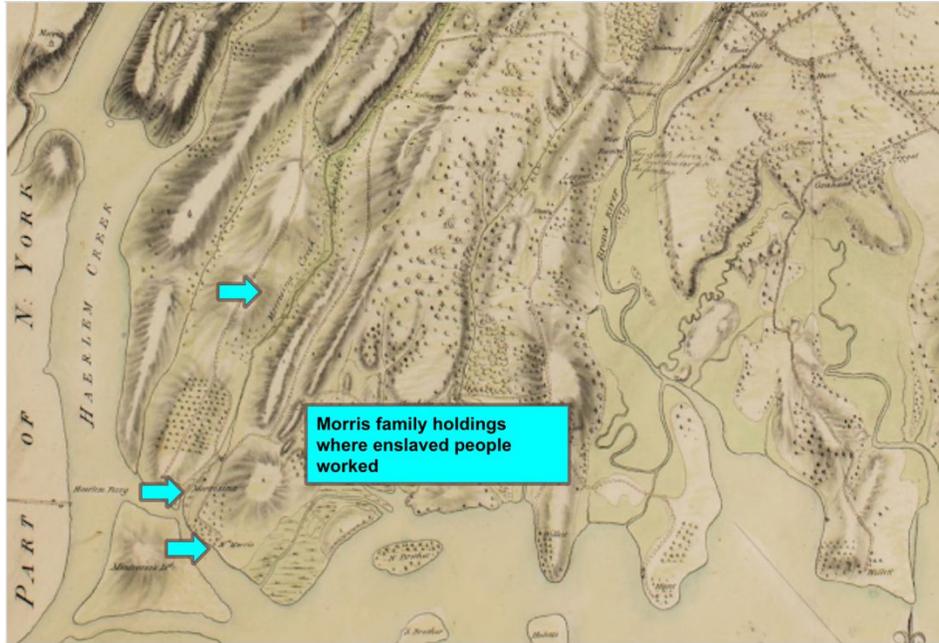
No.	Name	Parents	Signature of Minister
64	Sylvester Clapp Mary Bowers	Parents	
102	Sylvester Clapp Mary Bowers	Parents	Peter
114	Sylvester Clapp Mary Bowers	Parents	Peter
128	Sylvester Clapp Mary Bowers	Parents	
144	Sylvester Clapp Mary Clapp	Daniel Williams, Mary Clapp	Edw. B. N.
155	Sylvester Clapp Mary Bowers	Parents	Peter
165	Sylvester Clapp Mary Bowers	Daniel Williams, Mary Clapp	Edw. B. N.
172	Sylvester Clapp (color) Sarah		Peter
179	Rayard Clark Alta Benson Lawrence	Parents	G. D. J.
186	John Clark Clarissa Lyvone	Parents	G. D. J.

Clapp family Baptism Documents, gathered from the St. Peter's Episcopal Church in New York



Meeting with Carol Weber, descendent of the Clapp Family once enslaved in the Bronx

However, the lessons that students felt most deeply were about gaps, silences, and roadblocks—how hard it is to link census records to specific places; the frustrations that everyone except the head of household was just marked by a line, not a name, age, or “color”; that the names of those enslaved by the Van Cortlandts and the Hunts did not seem to lead to any living descendants we could find yet; that the processes of the NYC Parks Department has meant little to no progress on getting signs to mark and interpret these slave burial ground sites. Some of their mapping efforts also suffered from a late start.



Preliminary mapping of sites of slavery in the Bronx

This fall, I am teaching the course again, with a renewed focus on mapping the sites of slavery in the Bronx, and finding more descendants. Our most important tool in finding the sites of slavery has been to trace the lands of the slaveholders—finding the sites of their homes and fields, and then working in other records to learn what enslaved people did there, and where they lived. The most important tool in that effort is a 1781 reconnaissance map created by the British during the American Revolution (Skinner 1781). Marking the holdings of the Van Cortlandt, Hunt, Leggett, Willett, Tibbett, Morris, and other families, along with the location of American forts and features in the landscape such as stone walls and mills, the map offers a way to see the landscape as it was for the enslaved, and to try and match buildings and features to what remains, and to

what the census reveals. Tracing the network of properties owned by the Van Cortlandts, for example, can help mark the roads and places where enslaved people crisscrossed New York. And connecting our work to that of the Kingsbridge Historical Society, Van Cortlandt House Museum, and the thousands of schoolchildren who visit the museum every year will offer up a bit of visibility, and hopefully a chance for justice, by highlighting the importance of slavery in creating the roads, mill and millpond, and other aspects of the current Kingsbridge landscape.

We cannot undo the unjust labor relations and racial discrimination of the past. But we can be cognizant of how the advantages taken and the opportunities removed in the past still reverberate in the present. Marking the sites of slavery, discussing the power structures and profits that were gained through the theft of labor from others, celebrating cases of resistance and moments of liberation, being vigilant against acts of injustice in our own time—these are all ways to memorialize the injustices of the past, to map them in the landscape and to be aware of them. Though the information is incomplete, and we must do what we can to fill out the map, make the connections, and demonstrate how the injustices of slavery still shape New York City today.

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