

Reclaiming Hidden History

Students Create a Slavery Walking Tour in Manhattan

BY MICHAEL PEZONE AND ALAN SINGER

A GROUP OF MORE THAN 60 high school students chanted, “Time to tell the truth, our local history, New York was a land of slavery!” and “Resist! Resist! Resist! Time to be free! Resist! Resist! Resist! No more slavery!” as they marched around New York City’s financial district. At each of 11 stops they hung up posters detailing New York City’s complicity with slavery and stories of heroic resistance and they handed out hundreds of fliers to tourists, workers, and students on school trips.

According to Shiyanne Moore, a senior at Law, Government and Community Service Magnet High School in Cambria Heights, Queens, and a trip organizer, “I learned the truth about our city’s past from this project. I also learned the more noise you make the more things can change. Permanent historical markers about slavery could inspire people to fight for change. I am proud that I was involved in helping to create the African American Slavery Trail.”



Pallbearers carry a coffin containing the remains of free and enslaved African Americans during a reburial ceremony in October 2003. Construction workers discovered the remains in 1991 when excavating a site for a new building in Manhattan.

AFP/Getty Images

Shouting was especially spirited at the downtown offices of Citibank, because one of the bank's founders helped finance the illegal trans-Atlantic slave trade from 1830 to 1860. Kerry-Ann Rowe, another high school senior, told assembled students, "New York City's role in the African slave trade has been erased from history. This trip gives us a chance to write it back in."

Evidently the students had an impact. A reporter from *Newsday*, one of New York's major daily newspapers, accompanied them on the walk and wrote a feature story on the project that included photographs of their posters. They also had an impact in other ways. The director of public safety for the Downtown Alliance, a nonprofit group that advocates for businesses in the New York financial district, sent one of the tour guides an email that read, "It is not legal to place these posters on traffic poles, light poles, or pedestrian poles. We, the Alliance, are removing the posters and have them at the office of public safety located at 104 Washington Street, NYC."

When the class met to evaluate the trip, students engaged in a provocative discussion about the ways in which corporate interests dominate public spaces. They wanted to know "How can the voices of the 'little people' be heard?" The students were outraged by the actions of the Downtown Alliance. "Who gave the Downtown Alliance the authority to touch our signs?" asked Jennifer Caroccio. "We put back some of the pieces of history that the people in power would rather stay hidden."

The students believed the Downtown Alliance violated their freedom of speech by taking down the posters. The class decided to contact the reporter from *Newsday* and see if she could help them make their grievances public. The following Friday, *Newsday* ran another feature story, this time focusing on civil liberties issues. The story was picked up by a local ABC television affiliate that sent a crew to the school to interview students.

The television news story brought the history of slavery in New York to a much broader audience. The broadcast journalist also went to a number of the lower Manhattan sites visited by the students.

But the story did not end there. The *New York Post*, a right-wing tabloid, published an editorial denouncing the high school students for illegally hanging up "home-made signs" on public property: lamp posts. It sarcastically suggested that the name of their school be changed to the "High School for Ignorance and Law-Breaking." Once again students met, and with the help of their teachers, they drafted a response. Although the *Post* refused to publish their letter, students disseminated it widely on the internet. Students explained that the "field trip was not designed or intended as an act of civil disobedience" and apologized "if any city ordinance was violated." However, they did not "believe anyone should be faulted for making an incorrect assumption about the law concerning the hanging of temporary posters. Any resident or visitor to the city sees posters hanging

all over. Last election cycle, [New York City] Mayor Michael Bloomberg had campaign posters hanging all around the city. We believe the law is used selectively as a device to censor unwanted messages."

They explained that they are "committed to working within the law to get permanent historical markers erected commemorating the history of slavery in downtown Manhattan," and planned "to meet, and hopefully to work with, the Downtown Alliance and any other interested parties in a productive manner."

The bulk of their letter focused on the "hostility and name-calling" in the editorial which they found "counterproductive" and insulting. "It was inappropriate for the *New York Post* to mock the students and the school. The students at Law, Government and Community Service Magnet High School are African American, Caribbean, and Hispanic. We question whether your editorial would have had a similar mocking tone if the

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students were from a suburban school.” They also accused the newspaper of irresponsible journalism, saying the editorial mischaracterized a statement by one of the students.

In the following weeks, a committee met with the Downtown Alliance to secure its cooperation in a campaign for permanent historical markers. Students plan another walking tour of the slavery sites. Teams of students from Law, Government and Community Service Magnet School will station themselves at the historical sites in lower Manhattan. Some students will hold up posters and act as tour guides, and others will escort middle and high school classes from other schools as they visit the sites. They plan to hold the tour in May because Africans accused of plotting a slave rebellion in lower Manhattan were publicly executed in May 1741.

New York and Slavery

The project developed out of discussions of the conflict over slavery in the early years of the settlement of the British North American colonies in Michael Pezone’s 12th-grade Advanced Placement government class at Law, Government and Community Service Magnet High. Students were especially knowledgeable about the history of enslavement in New York City and its merchants’ involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade because many had taken Pezone’s African American History elective course where they helped field-test lessons from the curriculum guide *New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance* (<http://www.nyscss.org/>).

The students were able to plan one field trip and decided they wanted to take a walking tour of slavery-related sites in Lower Manhattan. The difficulty was that other than the colonial-era African American Burial Ground, which was uncovered during excavations for a federal office building in 1991, these sites, and slavery in New York in general, have been erased from historical memory.

There is not even a historical marker at the South Street Seaport in the financial district of Manhattan where enslaved Africans were traded in the 17th and 18th centuries, and where illegal slaving expeditions were planned and financed until the time of the American Civil War.

New York City has 85 museums listed on a popular website for tourists (<http://www.ny.com/>). They celebrate art, science, culture, and history, including the histories of numerous ethnic groups. But there is not one museum or permanent exhibit on slavery in New York City. There is plenty of material and a high demand for this type of museum.

The New York Historical Society has sponsored two special shows on the history of slavery in New York City that have drawn thousands of visitors, including tens of thousands of secondary school students. Students met with Alan Singer of Hofstra University, editor of the curriculum guide, and many realized that the problem was largely political rather than historical or educational. Students decided on a bit of guerrilla theater that would combine

the study of history with political action. Students mapped out the walking tour and designed poster-sized placards including information about the “Slave Market” on Wall Street, the bank that financed the slave trade, the meetinghouse where “blackbirders” (slave traders) planned their voyages, and black insurrections in 1712 and 1741.

The students wrote a press release, invited local politicians and students from other schools to join them, and then visited the sites and posted their own historical markers. Two local council members expressed interest and have remained in contact with the teachers, although they were unable to attend. However, 20 students from a high school in another part of the city whose teacher had received an invitation via email joined the Law, Government students. Two other classes that were visiting lower

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Manhattan on field trips also joined the group for part of the tour.

The students expressed amazement at what they learned during the project. In her evaluation, Naadira Nemley wrote, “It is hard to believe that Citibank comes from a bank that helped to finance the slave trade or that Wall Street was once a slave market. I am African American and I never knew about this history. Learning about the African American Free School in 1787 really helps me to appreciate the opportunity I have to learn in school. Taking part in this political action made me feel like a young activist. Now that they have taken down our posters, I understand that I took part in one of the steps to change New York.”

Celeste Rimple wrote, “I never realized how many locations and businesses were directly connected to slavery and the slave trade. It is disappointing that there are no permanent markers in the downtown area. It is disrespectful to the people who were enslaved and the people who fought against slavery. My topic was the Amistad defense committee. They worked hard to end slavery but their office was destroyed by a pro-slavery mob right here in New York City.”

In their class letter to the *Post*, students expressed a new understanding of both education and social struggle. They wrote, “We are proud to have engaged in an activity that has helped to educate many New Yorkers about a crucial part of the city’s history. We believe that students should be actively engaged as citizens, and we are happy to say that our teachers and our school encourage us to do so.” ■

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This article was previously published in *Rethinking Schools* magazine. To order back issues of the magazine or to subscribe, visit www.rethinkingschools.org or call 800-669-4192.

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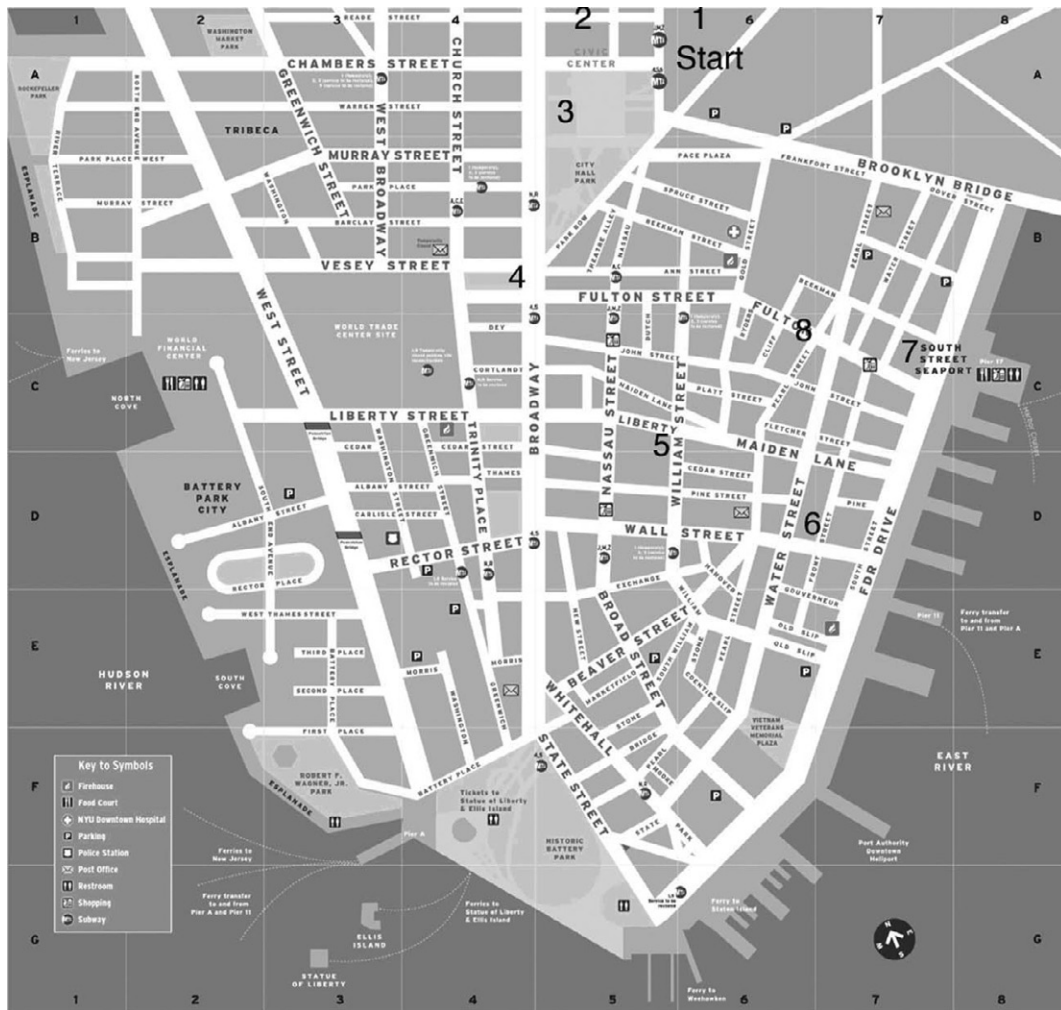
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New York and Slavery

African American Heritage Trail Markers



1. **1741 Execution of Enslaved Africans** (Foley Square). The site where enslaved Africans, free blacks and white supporters accused of plotting the 1741 Slave Conspiracy were executed. White New Yorkers, afraid of another slave revolt, responded to rumors and unexplained fires with the arrest of 146 enslaved Africans, the execution of 35 blacks and four whites, and the transport to other colonies of 70 enslaved people. Historians continue to doubt whether a slave conspiracy ever existed.
2. **African Burial Ground.** The African Burial Ground is a five- or six-acre cemetery that was used between the late 1600s and 1796 and originally contained 10,000 to 20,000 burials.

Despite the harsh treatment these African people experienced in colonial America, the 427 bodies recovered from the site were buried with great care and love. They were wrapped in linen shrouds and methodically positioned in well-built cedar or pine coffins that sometimes contained beads or other treasured objects.

3. **New York City Hall.** William Havemeyer, elected mayor of New York City in 1845, 1848, and 1872, launched his political career from the family's sugar refining business. The sugar was produced in the South and Cuba by enslaved African labor. Fernando Wood, as Mayor of New York City in 1861, called on the city to secede from the Union along with the South.

As a Congressman, he opposed the 13th amendment to the United States Constitution.

4. **St. Paul's Chapel** (Broadway between Vesey and Fulton). St. Paul's Chapel, built between 1764 and 1794, is the oldest church building in New York City. Enslaved Africans helped build the church but had to pray in a separate section and could not be buried in the cemetery. **Hughson's Tavern** (Liberty Street and Trinity Place). Hughson's Tavern is where enslaved Africans, free blacks, and white supporters are supposed to have plotted the 1741 Slave Conspiracy.
5. **1712 Slave Rebellion** (Maiden Lane near Broadway). In 1712, a group of more than 20 enslaved Africans set fire to a building on Maiden Lane in Manhattan and ambushed whites who tried to put out the blaze. Eight white men were killed in this abortive rebellion. In response, 13 black men were hanged, one was starved to death, four were burned alive at the stake, and another broken on the wheel.
6. **Wall Street Slave Market** (Wall and Water Streets). A market for the sale and hire of enslaved Africans and Indians was established here at the Meal (Grain) Market in 1711 by the New York Common Council. **Amistad Defense Committee** (122 Pearl Street near Hanover Street). Offices of silk merchants Lewis and Arthur Tappan, abolitionists who organized the defense committee to free enslaved Africans on the *Amistad*. The Tappans were among the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society in December 1833. In 1834, it was attacked by a pro-slavery mob. **Financier of the Slave Trade** (55 South Street). Moses Taylor was a sugar merchant and banker with offices at 55 South Street. Taylor became a member of the board of the City Bank in 1837, and served as its president from 1855 until his death in 1882. Taylor's personal resources and role as business agent for the leading exporter of Cuban sugar to the United States was invaluable to the growth of the institution now known as Citibank.
7. **Slave Traders' Meeting Place** (Fulton and South Streets). The men who smuggled enslaved

Africans referred to themselves as "blackbirders" and their illegal human cargo as "black ivory." Their favorite New York City meeting place was Sweet's Restaurant at the corner of Fulton and South streets.

8. **Abolitionist Meeting House** (118 William Street between Fulton and John). Site of a boarding house operated by Asenath Hatch Nicholson, an ardent abolitionist. Starting in 1835, abolitionists met here to plan campaigns to end slavery. **African Free School** (William and Beekman Streets). The first African Free School was established at 245 William Street in 1787 by the New York Manumission Society. Forty boys and girls were taught in a single room. It was destroyed in 1814 and replaced by a new building on William Street near Duane.

Other Important Manhattan Sites

- **David Ruggles' Home** (36 Lispendard Street, one block south of Canal Street at the corner of Church Street). In 1838, Ruggles harbored a fugitive slave here named Frederick Washington Bailey who later became known as Frederick Douglass.
- **Land of the Blacks** (Washington Square Park). In 1644, 11 enslaved African men petitioned the local government and obtained their freedom in exchange for the promise to pay an annual tax in produce. They each received the title to land on the outskirts of the colony where they would be a buffer against attack from native forces. Black farmers soon owned a two-mile-long strip of land from what is now Canal Street to 34th Street in Manhattan. This is the site of the farm of Anthony Portugies.
- **Seneca Village** (Central Park). Seneca Village was Manhattan's first prominent community of African American property owners. From 1825 to 1857, it was located between 82nd and 89th Streets at Seventh and Eighth Avenues in what is now a section of Central Park.

Resources and Background

Since 1996, the New York State Human Rights curriculum is supposed to include guidelines and material for teaching about the European Holocaust, the Great Irish Famine, and slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. A curriculum on the Great Irish Famine was completed and distributed by the state in 2001. A number of Holocaust curricula have been developed by museums, local school districts, and nonprofit agencies (e.g., Facing History and Ourselves). But an official curriculum for teaching about slavery and the Atlantic slave trade was never developed because of political conflict. The state Department of Education envisioned a slavery and the Atlantic slave trade curriculum as a celebration of “New York’s Freedom Trail” and its role on the underground railway and as a base of operations for abolitionists. Many historians, especially those from the African American community, wanted students to take a much more critical look at the state’s role in promoting and profiting from human bondage. While many prominent individuals from New York State were important abolitionists and the state did offer safe haven to some escaped slaves, slavery existed in New York until 1827. Of greater historical importance is the state’s economic and political complicity with the Southern and Caribbean “slavocracy,” and the continuing involvement of its merchant and banking elite with the illegal Atlantic slave trade up until the Civil War. Slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, rather than just being a Southern institution, were integral parts of the national and global economy in the 18th and 19th centuries and produced much of the capital that financed the industrial revolution in Europe and the United States.

The *New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance* curriculum guide used in Michael Pezone’s African American history class opens with an examination of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and follows

the history of New York State from the original Dutch settlement at the beginning of the 17th century through the end of the Civil War. It focuses on the positions and contributions of people of African ancestry in New York during this period and on the roles played by the citizens of New York in both maintaining and challenging the slave system. The curriculum guide was developed independently with support from the “Gateway to the City” Teaching American History Grant, a partnership of the Hofstra University School of Education and Allied Human Services, the New York City Department of Education, and the Brooklyn Historical Society. More than 80 classroom teachers in the New York metropolitan area participated in researching, developing, and field-testing lessons. In November 2005, the *New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance* curriculum guide received a National Council for the Social Studies program of excellence award. The entire guide is available at the website of the New York State Council for the Social Studies (<http://www.nyscss.org/>). The curriculum guide was edited by Dr. Alan Singer and Mary Carter of the Hofstra University School of Education and Allied Human Services.

Other Resources Used for Creating the New York and Slavery African American Heritage Trail Markers:

Slavery in New York by Ira Berlin and Leslie Harris
(New Press, 2005)

Slavery and the Making of America by James and Lois Horton (Oxford, 2005)

Black Legacy: A History of New York’s African Americans by William Loren Katz,
(Atheneum, 1997)