

# Slavery in Southold

Slavery is a, “complex institution...Like all social institutions, slavery was as diverse as the human beings who took part in it. Lasting for more than two hundred years, involving millions of people, and adapting to hundreds of different circumstance, life under slavery was as varied as life under any other human condition.” [Marcus, 12]

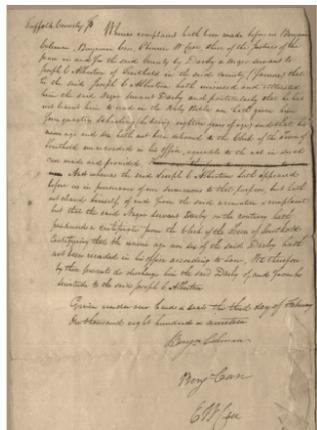
During the early colonial period in New York, few Europeans arrived as indentured servants to the Long Island area, as labor shortages grew and demands for cheap workers increased; settlers turned to using enslaved labor. This new steady work force was made up primarily to two groups, Africans and Native Americans. Within its boundaries, New York had the largest population of slaves of all the northeastern colonies. The 1686 census showed Southold had 27 slaves held by 12 people. [Mattituck Watchman, 1899].<sup>1</sup> Twelve years later Southold’s slave population grew to 41.<sup>2</sup>

The first Africans arrived on Long Island in 1626, when eleven Africans were sold to the Dutch colonial government in what is now Manhattan. At first the newly arrived Africans were viewed as employees of the colony, but as time went on their status was downgraded to slave. The Native American population was also targeted by the new colonists. When Natives were captured during a war, violent protest or if they ran afoul of the colonial legal system, a warrior and his family could be sentenced to a lifetime of slavery for criminal activities.



1689 Sale of Sarah, Indian girl  
Southold Town Records

Slaves of either race could be purchased either outright, or on credit. While there were no slave auction houses on Long Island, slaves could be purchased in New York City or from slave traders in the surrounding colonies. Most residents seeking to obtain a slave preferred to trade or purchase a slave from family members or neighbors. For those who couldn’t afford the expense of ownership, slaves were often leased or rented for short term jobs. In Southold, like most of Long Island, the few slaveholding households generally had only one or two slaves.



oversight did not  
Manumission, 1819. Southold  
Town Files

While many slaves worked only agricultural or household jobs, a number were also taught to be skilled artisans. Slaves lived and worked side by side with their owners, the owners family members, and hired free blacks or natives. Most slaves were, “... highly mobile and ... accustomed to little, immediate supervision. Moreover, Long Island slave enjoyed a greater amount of leisure or lay-by time when they could sell their labor or goods to colonists” [Moss, 156] “Particularly noticeable is the extent to which the white population left northern slaves to their own devices. Whites watched – indeed, it is only through their gaze that we know of these events – but lacks were in control.” [White, 20] The greater amount of leisure time and less

mitigate the harshness of enslavement. A number of slaves across

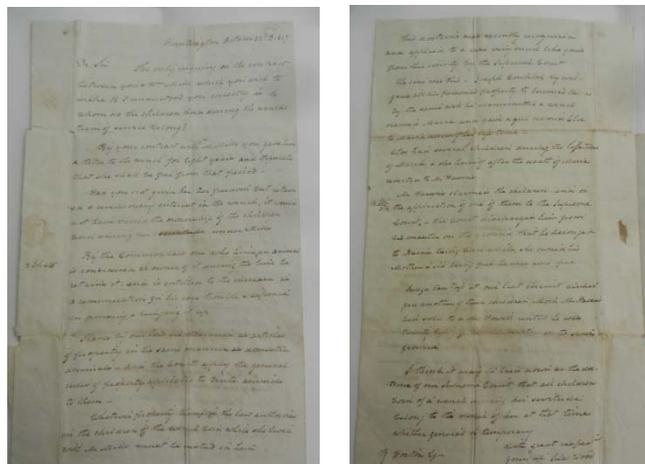
Long Island sought their freedom by fleeing to Native American reservations, the unsettled western frontier, hiding in New York City or one of the surrounding colonies, or when possible by running away to sea. The majority of successful escapees were men. [Moss, 178, 181] Occasionally a slave could be freed by court order if it was judged they suffered excessive cruelty or as in the case of Darby, a slave of Joseph C. Albertson was not provided with the education required by law to keep him from becoming a burden on society. [Southold Town Records]

While Long Islanders were not very worried about slave uprisings, rumors of slaves trying to overthrow their captors led to suspicion and prejudice. In 1741 a slave riot was quelled in New York City, “...eight long island slaves were accused of playing an integral role in the plot to burn down the city, murder its residents and establish a Catholic strong hold in the British mainland colonies.” [Moss 196] Of the slaves implicated in the rebellion, five of the accused were transported to the Caribbean, one was hung and the other two were hung and then burnt at the stake.

During the 1700s, slaves had some legal rights, while owners were allowed to punish slaves, the New York slave code prohibited abuse or punishments that could cause the death of a slave. However, slaves that were accused of crime were generally dealt with harshly, “...with neither property nor freedom to forfeit, all that was left to be taken was life or limb” [Kobrin 14] At the Court of Oyer and Terminer, held in Southold on November 24, 1746, a mustee slave named Jeaf was charged with a felony.<sup>3</sup> The grand jury after hearing testimony recommended that the case continue. That afternoon the court reconvened, a jury impaneled, and the case was heard, after an hour of debate Jeaf was found guilty. The court ordered him hung by the neck until dead, on the morning of December 10<sup>th</sup>.<sup>4</sup>

For those who were slave owners to offset the costs of feeding and clothing a slave many allowed their slaves to work for pay during their free time. Slaves could and did save up enough money to purchase freedom for themselves and their families. Venture, a slave, who lived on Fishers Island and then Connecticut, through hard work, bought not only his own freedom, but eventually his wife and three children. After being a slave himself, Venture also became a slaveholder purchasing and eventually freeing three other men. Richard Moss points out that, it was not unusual to purchase a slave and then free them after a set period of time. However it was also not unusual for owners to make the promise of freedom and then either renege, structure the manumission so the slave could never meet the terms, or sell the slave just before the agreement would take effect. [Moss 209, 216]

In 1817, the question of who was the legal owner of slave children, when the parents belonged to different owners was asked by Benjamin Horton of Silas Wood, a prominent Long Island lawyer. According to Wood, in New York, ownership of the



Letter between Silas Wood and Benjamin Horton regarding the ownership of slave children. October 22, 1817. from Southold Town Files

child was retained by the mother's owner. [Southold Town Records]. Since slaves were property they were sometimes used to settle debts, and were inheritable by the owner's heirs. In his will, Thomas Moore of Southold in 1767 gave each of his daughters, one of his slave's children as part of their inheritance.<sup>5</sup> In Mattituck, Deborah Reeves' will specified which daughter would get which slave in addition to her personal property in 1750. Cuff who was owned by John Gardiner of Southold, was given freedom on the condition that he behaved, the will's executors were instructed that if Cuff misbehaved or appeared to be "chargeable" that he be returned to servitude. All of Gardiner's other slaves were to be freed when they turned 30.<sup>6</sup>

For many slaves, bondage was not forever, a number of slaves were manumitted when they grew too old or sick to work. Augustus Griffin of Orient in 1799 mentions, "...*Jack, was an affrican, brought into this country about 55 years ago, all of which time, he has lived in bondage, except the last 5 or 6 years of his life. In these last years, his infirmities and age rendered him unable to do but little towards his maintenance...*"<sup>7</sup> [Wachsberger, 49] These slaves would then end up a burden on the local governments when they were put onto the poor rolls. *To stop this practice, the state required owners to provide two securities to help provide for the newly freed. By 1817 the law was modified to place an age limit on when the security was required. Young slaves were to be educated so they could support themselves when they were freed...Education was not a novel idea for early nineteenth century Afro-American Long Islanders. Earlier generations of island slaves and freedmen had been trained ...of various skilled occupations, and "in the knowledge and love of Christ."* In these two instances, their education was probably no different from those of other colonists. This was also true in the area of formal education, when slaves and their children attended classes during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries." [Moss, 272, 213-218]

Life for Black Long Islanders was restricted by law during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Unable to legally marry, records show that with their owner's blessings a number of slaves were married in the local churches. The same records also show most slaves were baptized Christians. New York law



Elymas Reeve House from Craven's History of Mattituck

forbid Blacks from owning property, although some became landowners when former masters gave them land to farm and live on. [Moss, 295]

Elymas Reeve of Cutchogue was the slave of James Wickham Reeve along with his father Reuben. Reuben was gifted by the Reeve family not only with their last name but was also

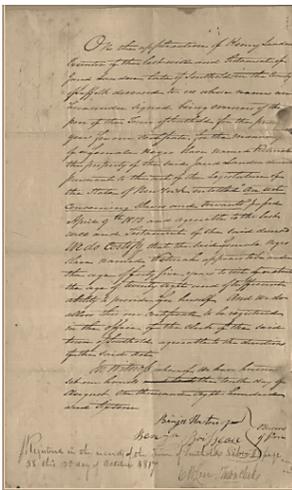


Elymas Reeve, from Craven's History of Mattituck

given 3 ½ acres and a house along what is today the Main Road. Elymas was freed in 1813 and in 1820 Elizabeth (Betty) Reeve, his former owner gave him an acre of land. By 1849, Elymas and his wife Hagar inherited Reuben's house and farm where the couple raised their family. The house stood on the south side of the road facing Maratooka Pond in Mattituck.<sup>8</sup> Henry Landon gave his former slaves Zipporah and Keturah the use of furniture and household textiles for use in their old age.[Marcus, 108]

In addition several groups were working to put an end to slavery in New York. The Society of Friends, better known as the Quakers, early in history were like many others in New York, owning and trading in slavery. When George Fox, their founder, visited the colonies, in 1672, he was dismayed by slavery, and spoke at meetings of the Friends across the northeast urging his fellow worshipers to actively work to limit the years a slave was held in bondage to thirty years. A friend of Fox’s William Edmundson advocated for the abolition of slavery. [Moss, 220-221] In 1771 at the Annual Meeting the Friends took action, deciding that no member could be in good standing if they held slaves. [Naylor & Ruettger, 31].

During the American Revolution, both the British and the American sides offered freedom to any slave that was willing to fight. *“In the spring of 1781, the colonial government enacted legislation to raise two regiments manned by slaves. Owners who delivered a male slave for enlistment would receive five hundred acres of land and the slave would receive his freedom after three years of service.”* [Moss 243] Black soldiers were not unusual, as early as 1693 the Common Council of New York ordered all black and Indian slaves not listed on the militia rolls to work on repairing fortifications. In 1760, Pomp of Southold with the permission of his owner Benjamin Sawyer was given a musket, ammunition and was sent to fight in New England. [Moss, 237]



Manumission of Keturah from the Landon family, 1816  
From Southold Town Files

*“The struggle to end slavery in New York had been longer and harder than that in any other northern state, and it had been sustained largely by ordinary black men and women.”* [White, 41] It took several tries before slavery ended in New York. In 1799, an act was passed that freed female slaves when they reached age 25 and males at age 28, but only if they were born after July 4, 1799.<sup>9</sup> It was planned that this gradual emancipation would “phase out” slavery – but it did not work. Some slave owners determined to get back the money of their original investment, began transporting and selling their slaves out of state shortly before the slave reached the “magic” year for their emancipation. Other unscrupulous individuals began kidnapping the newly freed slaves and selling them out of state. It became very difficult to differentiate between who was freed and who was not. To solve the problem New York went

back to the drawing board and declared that as of July 4, 1827, all slaves in New York State would be freed, no matter their age. The impact of the new law in Southold allowed the eleven remaining slaves in the town to join their 28 freed brethren. [Spafford , 63] The only caveat to the law was for visiting non-residents who brought their slaves to the area for a short period. In 1841 New York enacted legislation which put a stop to the practice of non-residents transporting their slaves back and forth between New York and nearby slave state to maintain their slave status.

*Emancipation certainly removed the fear of family separation by sale, and the many limitations on liberty of the slave laws. But for many, freedom changed little of the ways slaves lived and labored. Many slaves continued to work for their masters either under a form of indenture or tied to their owners by their indebtedness for basic goods and services.* [Bolton-Marcus, Research Project, 8] Freedom was a huge adjustment for the former slaves. Not only did they now have to provide themselves with basics of food, clothing and shelter, but prejudice followed

the newly freed slaves into every sector of their lives. Low-wage jobs, lack of opportunities to move up in the world by purchasing land or starting a business, kept many former slaves either tied to their former owners or to poorly paid farm or domestic jobs. Those who could afford to choose where to purchase a home often banded together and form all-black communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Arnold was the largest slave holder in 1686 with six slaves, John Conkling and John Pershall followed close behind each with 5 slaves. John Budd held three slaves and all other slave holders had one slave.

<sup>2</sup> In 1698, Suffolk County had 518 slaves residing in its borders. [Moss, 27].

<sup>3</sup> A mustee is a person of mixed Native American and African blood. In New York, a felony could be fraud, theft, robbery, burglary or manslaughter. Which of these crimes Jeaf was accused of is not mentioned in the court record.

<sup>4</sup> Trials of slaves, "...normally be without a jury- unless his master intervened, [and] requested a jury... Conviction for a capital offense meant the mandatory death sentence, the manner to be determined by the chief justice.[Kobrin, 16]

<sup>5</sup> The will is in East Hampton Free Library. [Marcus, 77]

<sup>6</sup> Copies of the wills are available in the Town Historian's office.

<sup>7</sup> Griffin goes on to say that friends of Jack, aka Jack Conklin or Longhouse Jack, had built him a small cottage that he and his aged wife Doll lived in.

<sup>8</sup> Elymas, his wife Hagar and their daughter Parthenia are all buried in the Old Cemetery in Cutchogue. His youngest son John B. Reeve graduated from Columbia University and from the Union Theological Seminary and was a college professor at Howard University and earned eventually a Doctorate in Divinity.

<sup>9</sup> These children had to be registered with the town and were considered free, but obligated to serve their "owners till their majority. An owner could elect to abandon the child to the local government. The town would then add them to the poor rolls and sell their services to the highest bidder. In return the bidder would provide the child with food, clothing, shelter and do as much work for the bidder as they could.

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