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Slavery in New York New York Historical Society

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New Exhibit:
Slavery in New York
New York Historical Society


In October 2005, the New York Historical Society (N-YHS) will open a landmark exhibition on slavery and its impact on the people, landscape, institutions and economy of New York, and the nation. The extraordinary multi-media exhibit, Slavery in New York, will reveal history most New Yorkers are unaware of.

"It's time for a broader understanding of slavery's meaning to this city's past and present," says Dr. Louise Mirrer, N-YHS President and CEO. "The exhibit will promote public awareness of an issue whose legacy is still felt in this country."

Slavery was a key institution in the development of New York, from its formative years as a Dutch and British colony to the early days of the United States. New Yorkers traded in slaves, distributed slaves, insured slave ships and owned slaves. At one time, 40 percent of New York City's households owned slaves. At the time of the Revolution there were more slaves in New York than in any other city except Charleston, South Carolina.

The exhibit will show that while the slave trade provided great wealth for the city, New York was, from the start, also a center for efforts to abolish slavery. Slavery in New York will also tell the story of how the black population began to plant its cultural roots, producing a rich legacy of poetry, art, music and literature in the face of adversity while at the same time, actively resisting injustice.

N-YHS will cover this important topic with an 18-month initiative comprised of two major exhibitions as well as scheduled lectures, walking tours and concerts. Slavery in New York will draw upon N-YHS's robust collection of paintings, newspapers, ledger books of slave voyages, ads for runaways, silver, furniture and other objects made by enslaved people, manuscripts of the first abolition society, and the earliest paintings of black New Yorkers as well as treasures from other institutions, to present a multi-media, immersive exhibition experience. This exhibit will offer a window into the lives of enslaved New Yorkers and spark new dialogue among scholars here and abroad. N-YHS has recruited an advisory team of eminent scholars, including Sven Beckert (Harvard), David Blight (Yale), Eric Foner (Columbia), Henry Louis Gates (Harvard), Leslie Harris (Emory), James Horton (George Washington University), Steve Mintz (University of Houston) and Ira Berlin (University of Maryland).
"This history is important not only to the local community but to the world as well," says James Horton, the chief historian of *Slavery in New York*. "By having the exhibit at the N-YHS, it will draw a wide international audience."

"No cultural organization in the United States, or anywhere else, for that matter, has turned its attention to the subject of slavery as intensively as the N-YHS will over the course of these eighteen months," says *Slavery in New York* curator Richard Rabinowitz, founder of American History Workshop.

Exhibition planning and design firm Krent/Parrett/Carney is creating a highly interactive exhibition -- with an emphasis on education -- that makes accessible the recently uncovered scholarly historic research and arduous detective work that has given us a new look at an amazing journey of 200 years of Slavery in New York.

To augment the exhibit, the N-YHS is collaborating the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture on public programs and education initiatives. Interactive instructional materials for K-12 students have been developed, teacher workshops have been planned and educator-led tours will be available for students of all ages, thus ensuring an impact lasting long after the exhibit is closed and objects returned to their cases.

The companion book to *Slavery in New York*, edited by Ira Berlin, Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland, and Leslie Harris, Associate Professor of History and African American Studies at Emory University, will be published to coincide with the exhibit.

About the New York Historical Society: Since 1804, the New York Historical Society has served as a collective memory of New York, accumulating vast collections in American painting, sculpture, books, manuscripts, decorative arts, architectural drawings, photographs, prints and ephemera. The mission of the newly revitalized Historical Society is to use these collections to help New Yorkers understand the complex and diverse past behind the world we know today.