



# Slavery On Long Island: The History That We Forget To Remember

By BRIANNE LEDDA & WILKO MARTINEZ-CACHERO & VAIDIK TRIVEDI & TAYLOR BEGLANE • JUL 8, 2020

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*Sylvester Manor on Shelter Island, the first of Long Island's plantations. Enslaved people were brought to Sylvester Manor in the mid-1600s.*

BRIANNE LEDDA / WSHU

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5:24

The arrival of the first enslaved people (<https://www.newsday.com/long-island/history/long-island-our-story-slavery-1.15532500>) in Suffolk County in 1654 marks only the beginning of a long, often intentionally ignored, chapter ([https://www.hofstra.edu/pdf/library/libspc\\_soli.pdf](https://www.hofstra.edu/pdf/library/libspc_soli.pdf)) in Long Island history.

Long Island was home to the largest population of enslaved people in the northern colonies. Nathaniel Sylvester brought Suffolk County's first enslaved people to Sylvester Manor on Shelter Island in 1654, starting the first of the few plantations on Long Island.

Now the manor is an educational farm where house tours are given. There are more than 10,000 documents (<https://www.sylvestermanor.org/our-partners>) that record life on the manor, but few focus on enslaved people. This is not uncommon.

"It has sort of been that history that was forgotten to be remembered, or they remembered to forget it," Donnamarie Barnes, curator and archivist at Sylvester Manor, said.



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*Sylvester Manor Curator Donnamarie Barnes (left) speaks to a visitor at an exhibition of artifacts found on the property.*

CREDIT BRIANNE LEDDA / WSHU

Many Long Island households included (<https://www.liherald.com/rockvillecentre/stories/how-slavery-changed-the-face-of-long-island,120342>) one or two enslaved people. By 1720, there was about one enslaved person for every ten settlers on Long Island — and by the 1730s, more people were enslaved on Long Island than anywhere else in the northern colonies.

“These people were part of the fabric of making this place in a way that we've never acknowledged before,” Barnes added.

Remnants of slavery on Long Island are hard to find. Documents are few, and many historically significant sites are neglected, if not gone. Steve Boerner, president of the Cedar Swamp Historical Society, looked for a graveyard with enslaved people in Brookville in November.

He spent about half an hour hacking through bushes, tripping over trees and wandering through a horse farm before he finally found the graveyard.

The graveyard was overgrown with brush, sprinkled with litter and carpeted with an ankle-deep layer of leaves. Many headstones were unreadable. Boerner is worried about its future.



"They bulldoze people's small cemeteries like this because they think no one's watching," he said.

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The "Slave Staircase" off the kitchen to the attic at Sylvester  
Manor. The names of some of the enslaved are on the steps.

CREDIT BRIANNE LEDDA / WSHU



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*Stony Brook students Brianne Ledda, Wilko Martinez-Cachero and Vaidik Trivedi in an abandoned graveyard in Brookville that holds the remains of enslaved Blacks.*

CREDIT STEVE BOERNER

East Hampton Star Editor David Rattray started The Plain Sight Project (<http://plainsightproject.org/learn-about-the-project>) to help uncover the often ignored history of slavery on Long Island. Rattray said that many people don't even know that slavery existed in East Hampton. The Plain Sight Project has already proved there were, in fact, more than 250 enslaved people.

"In the first century and a half here, basically every family of means in East Hampton had usually direct involvement, the slaver that is, they had one or two enslaved people in their household or farmstead," Rattray said.

A 1773 inventory for a Smithtown slaveholder valued enslaved people at prices ranging from seven to one hundred pounds. That's a little more than \$1,300 to \$19,000 today. Archivist Andrea Meyer pointed to another estate inventory that she said summed up the absurdity of the situation.

"Valued above the slaves in terms of monetary worth is cheese," she said. "They're like 184 pounds, whatever. And then on the next page, 50 pounds, dollars, whatever."

Though slavery in northern colonies differed from the southern colonies, it was still brutal. In New York, enslaved people couldn't bear arms or testify in court ([https://lihj.cc.stonybrook.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Race-Ethnicity-and-Class-on-Shelter-Island-1652-to-2013\\_-\\_Long-Island-History-Journal.pdf](https://lihj.cc.stonybrook.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Race-Ethnicity-and-Class-on-Shelter-Island-1652-to-2013_-_Long-Island-History-Journal.pdf)). They could not travel at night without a lantern, and it was illegal (<https://famous-trials.com/legacyftrials/negroplot/slavelaws.html>) for more than three enslaved people to meet. Enslaved people who broke the law could be subjected to whipping, or in some cases, death. Families were routinely broken up.

"The way I put it to people who say, well, the people in the North are kinder to their slaves than the South and I say, well, you know, how many lashes with a whip would it take for you to give up your child?" Rattray said.

Starting in 1799, New York passed a series of laws that would gradually grant enslaved people their freedom by 1827. Although that year is generally considered the official end to slavery in New York, in reality it didn't end. An 1830 census (<https://nyslavery.commons.gc.cuny.edu/dating-the-start-and-end-of-slavery-in-new-york/>) still listed 75 enslaved people in New York, and enslaved individuals could still be brought into the state.

The history of slavery on Long Island is so poorly preserved that even some descendants of slaveholders are unaware of their family's past. Russ L'HommeDieu, a descendant of the family that started Sylvester Manor, didn't know his family was involved with slavery until he was in his thirties, and he read a book describing plantation life at the manor.

"Holy crap. Like, this is a real thing," he said. "It was always easy to ignore. And then you read this book and you're like, little less easy to ignore."

L'HommeDieu is still questioning his family's legacy.

"We want to puff our chests out, be proud of those things, things that our ancestors accomplished, these people who were just bigger than life heroes history, and then we find out the rest of the story and we're like, maybe, maybe we won't remember that. Maybe we won't talk about that," he said.

Slavery was not just a "southern" thing. It played a central role on Long Island. Although historians and archivists are working to preserve and educate people about that history, it's us who have to choose to remember.

*This story was reported and written by Brianne Ledda, Wilko Martinez-Cachero, and Vaidik Trivedi, as part of a collaboration between the Stony Brook University School of Journalism and WSHU.*

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