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# *Making Museums*

## Eavesdropping at the Well: Interpretive Media in the *Slavery in New York* Exhibition

RICHARD RABINOWITZ

**Abstract:** Tracing the history of northern slavery in a narrative exhibition at the New-York Historical Society required overcoming the silence of archival and museum collections. Despite the centrality of slavery to the colonial city, the first two centuries of black lives left few traces. In the archival record, African voices were unheard and never registered. A careful deployment of interpretive media—display techniques, audio-visual programs, graphic annotations, commissioned art objects, and architectural design—aimed to bring visitors physically and emotionally ever closer to the experience of New York blacks, while staying rooted in primary sources. The sequence of media elements thus itself paralleled the historical narrative.

**Key words:** narrative exhibition, silent archives, storyscape, empathic identification, interpretive design

### *Preface*

MY GOALS FOR THIS ESSAY ARE TWOFOLD. In Part One, I reconstruct as accurately as I can the process of choosing the appropriate interpretive media in the narrative exhibition *Slavery in New York*, which was mounted at the New-York Historical Society in 2005-2006. I aim to explore the wide range of tools available, the consequences for historical interpretation of each choice of

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media, and the vital importance of having historians—and not just designers and media producers—at the center of these creative decisions.

In Part Two, I want to explore how these kinds of media can begin to overcome the fundamental problem of interpreting the lives of enslaved people and others about whom the archival record is painfully silent. Museum exhibitions, I contend, can be a method of historical discovery as well as dissemination. By their breadth of source materials, their effort to provide effective teaching to heterogeneous audiences, and their panoply of presentational methods, exhibitions can delve more deeply into the situations of historical characters than research monographs alone.

*Slavery in New York* was the largest exhibition in the two hundred-year-long history of N-YHS. It attracted an audience of over 175,000 visitors in its four-month run, including some 25,000 New York City schoolchildren. The exhibition built upon interpretive and research work produced by N-YHS staff in the preceding seven years.<sup>1</sup> With the arrival of Dr. Louise Mirrer as its new president, N-YHS placed greater urgency and devoted greater resources to the exhibition development.

After its run at the historical society, a smaller version of the exhibition—without original materials—was produced and mounted at libraries and museums across the United States and put on display for almost ten years in the Luce Center at N-YHS.<sup>2</sup>

## PART ONE: CREATING AN INTERPRETIVE PLAN

### *The Inescapability of Interpretive Media*

Museums are artful places, in more ways than one. They feed the fantasy of seeing the work of art, the historical document, or the scientific specimen directly and immediately, but that is only a fantasy. Museums are highly mediated places. Picture frames, exhibit cases, floor and wall treatments, juxtapositions and sequences, lighting, and a thousand other interventions (the exhibition “toolbox”) shape the conditions of how visitors encounter and make meanings in museum galleries. Visitors themselves bring the most potent mediating devices—their own experiences, expectations, and habits of mind, not to say the circumstances of the visit and the social interactions they have with companions. (Only eight per cent of museum visitors come solo.)

1. For a survey of these projects, see Kathleen Hulser, “Exhibiting Slavery at the New-York Historical Society,” in Ana Lucia Araujo, ed., *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 232-51. This collection of essays is an important contribution to the global memorialization of slavery and the slave trade.

2. See the website: <http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org>

I have never been persuaded that there is a sharp line separating the “object” itself from the interpretive and physical interventions made by curators and designers.<sup>3</sup> Museum objects are sticky things. We bring them into exhibitions because meanings adhere to them. Historical documents are by themselves whole anthologies of stories—of their creation, reception, use, preservation, restoration, and exhibition. There are worlds of human experience in every one.

I recall musing once that objects were still, frozen, immutable—and that museums of history were consequently impossible self-contradictions. How could history, the observation of time’s passing, be represented in a museum of immutable things? But now I think that objects, even when they sit quietly in environmentally controlled cases, are always in motion. There are no objects without words about them. And of course, it is the words in a museum—spoken, printed, heard, read—that make objects move in time. They turn mute objects into stories. Stories of bygone times, stories of discovery and presentation in our own day, stories appropriated and made meaningful by visitors. The words constantly evolve, altering the objects forever.

My job as a curator is to arrange these objects . . . no, I mean these stories, so that they move visitors to invent stories for themselves. The art of the gallery is to furnish the imagination with the makings of good stories—human characters, human actions, human places, human rules, and human tools—so that visitors can feel themselves dramatizing the past. I do my art so that you can do yours. This is the task of interpretation. Or, rather, the *adventure* of interpretation—because it is always a voyage into the open ocean of human history.

Among the 550-plus projects of American History Workshop [AHW] over its long career, few have required as much inventive use of interpretive media as *Slavery in New York*, produced for the New-York Historical Society in 2004-2005. The challenge stemmed from a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the history of slavery in British North America and the early American republic. On the one hand, the institution of slavery was essential to the development of all the British colonies, from Barbados north to Nova Scotia. As our exhibition’s chief historian, Professor James Oliver Horton of George Washington University, remarked, “Slavery was not a side-show. It was the

3. Some art museum professionals, art historians, and cultural studies scholars disagree and disparage history museum exhibitions for obscuring opportunities for visitors to see art and artifacts “directly,” “face-to-face,” without the “interference” of interpretive efforts. As an example, see Bettina M. Carbonell, “The Syntax of Objects and the Representation of History: Speaking of *Slavery In New York*,” *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 47 (May 2009): 122-37. Of course, many scholars and connoisseurs come to exhibitions having studied these art-objects for years; they may return for several visits; they may read the catalogue, consult the museum’s collection data-base, or read other scholarly works. In no sense is their attention to the art-object truly “unmediated.” Further, as the field of art history has become more interested recently in the contemporaneous practice and economics of art-making (i.e., market forces, the role of dealers, the division of labor in workshops and studios, and such), the boundaries between art-objects and historical artifacts have been blurred and interpretive information beyond “the work in itself” is more acceptable.

main event.” We all know that about tobacco-plantation Virginia and rice-rich South Carolina, but New York and Massachusetts? Yes, the economic basis of these northern colonies, and to a large measure of the states that they became after 1776, was trade in slave-produced staple crops, supplies for plantation agriculture in the South and the West Indies, and trafficking in slaves themselves. Furs and timber were valuable, but these places would have not been very viable enterprises for two centuries without the massive forced migration of twelve million Africans to labor on plantations in the Americas.

And yet—and here’s the contradiction: the material evidence of African presence in early New York is slight. As Ira Berlin, professor of history at Maryland and coeditor of the scholarly volume that would accompany the exhibition,<sup>4</sup> said, “We had nothing.” The N-YHS staff had worked hard for several years to come up with a list of relevant objects. The shopping cart was pretty much empty. Few objects associated with Africans in local collections could be linked to New York, and few of the archeological fragments discovered had any obvious relationship to slavery or enslaved people.<sup>5</sup> A slaveholder’s diary, like that of Mary Boykin Chesnut, has yet to be discovered for the colonial period in the North. Not a single image of a black New Yorker survives from before 1796, fully 170 years after the first enslaved Africans were brought to New Amsterdam. The excavations in the 1990s of the African Burial Ground behind City Hall, which had reawakened public awareness of the scale and significance of slavery in the city, had turned up only a few ornaments adorning the remains.<sup>6</sup> That was pretty much it.

Of course, the archival record provided lots of evidence about slavery in New York. As I will show, the buying and selling of slaves, the legal regimen underpinning the institution in New York, and records of the “misdeeds” of the enslaved, pop up in private and public records everywhere. But all of them, without exception, are expressed in the voices and with the perspectives of Europeans and European Americans. How could we learn to eavesdrop on blacks in colonial New York?

Could this meager assemblage of resources constitute an exhibition that powerfully expressed the centrality of slavery to the history of New York, and also vividly represent the way the world looked to the enslaved?<sup>7</sup> Could the

4. Ira Berlin and Leslie Harris, eds., *Slavery in New York* (New York: New Press, 2005).

5. In a garret of the Lott House in Flatlands, now part of Brooklyn, archeologists found corncobs, a cloth pouch tied with hemp string, half the pelvis of a sheep or goat, and an oyster shell—perhaps implements in a religious observance of some kind. See H. Arthur Bankoff et al., “Remembering Africa Under the Eaves,” *Archeology Archive* 54, no. 3 (May/June 2001), accessed at <http://archive.archaeology.org/0105/abstracts/lott.html>.

6. Study of the skeletal remains at the burial ground revealed the severe stresses of malnutrition and overwork, and occasionally of violent treatment. That every single body was laid in the ground in the same orientation suggested that some hitherto unknown society had silently taken charge of burials. A guide to the archeological reports is at <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/249941>.

7. Saidiya Hartman’s point is useful: “[the] intent is not to ‘give voice’ to the slave, rather to imagine what cannot be verified.” Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12 (2), 9.

special qualities of a historical exhibition actually contribute to our understanding of the intertwined histories of African people and the emerging metropolis of New York?

### ***From Themes to Narratives***

The past forty years have witnessed an explosion in the scholarly study of slavery in America, and the history of slavery in New York had attracted considerable interest since the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup> For their *Slavery in New York* book, Ira Berlin and Leslie Harris, a history professor at Emory, had brought together a compendium of fine essays. And Steven Mintz of the University of Houston, one of our consulting scholars, had no problem quickly and brilliantly compiling a list of ten basic themes for an exhibition that would trace slavery in New York from the early Dutch days through the American Civil War. (This document is posted online at <http://www.publichistorycommons.org/eavesdropping-at-the-well/>)

But Mintz's list of themes was not an exhibition outline. We had set out to create a narrative exhibition. A conventional library or art museum show, by contrast, arranges its books, or documents, or works of art, one after another, in a continuous row. Often each is adjacent to a long text label. By contrast, a narrative exhibition clusters its documents and artifacts as elements of a single storyline, as would the scenes in a novel or feature film.

Many of the historical ideas on Mintz's list themselves depend upon considerable knowledge of American and Atlantic history. Like many good teachers, he aimed to demolish common misconceptions—that slavery was historically and geographically limited to the antebellum South, that it was often mild and beneficent, that the North was inclined to anti-slavery from its beginnings, and so on. Proving negatives, disabusing myths, we judged, would not do much to help visitors understand—within the duration of a single visit—what Northern slavery actually was. Most important, Mintz's theme statements—like most scholarly arguments—use abstractions as the subjects of almost every sentence. “Slavery,” “New York City,” “the economy,” “the Revolution,” “resistance,” or “political battles.” Our goal was to bring the human actor forward, in all his or her individuality and particularity, not to tell stories with which the audience could never identify.

After many years in this field, I have come to believe that exhibitions do not effectively teach complex historical ideas. If a show's objects and documents

8. Joyce D. Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Graham Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Thelma Wills Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

thrill you, they do more than illustrate historical concepts. And when the “stuff” fails to delight (often the case in a history show, after all), the whole exhibition can feel like a “book on the wall,” leaving visitors disengaged. Our exhibition would try to communicate historical ideas like those in academic monographs or college lectures, but it would have fundamentally different experiential and pedagogical qualities.<sup>9</sup>

Contrast the list of suggested themes with two AHW “bubble diagrams,” dated November 9 (available online at <http://www.publichistorycommons.org/eavesdropping-at-the-well/>) and December 6, 2004 (see page 15). In the first, I imagined a sequence of three super-galleries, each interpreting a large chunk of the history of Africans in New York. At each era, visitors would be invited to visualize and to imagine slavery as a dramatic face-off between the Europeans’ slave regime and the slaves’ power to resist and retain some autonomy even in slavery. Reflecting Berlin’s influence, I saw the *work* of the enslaved person as the key determinant in shaping the rules imposed by owners and traders, on the one hand, and shaping the modes of resistance available to the enslaved, on the other. This would allow visitors to see slavery (and racism) as an ongoing “push and pull” between real human beings, a negotiation that involved systems of law, economics, culture, and religion.

Intuitively, I knew that the historical society’s treatment of slavery in New York would work better—narratively, pedagogically, institutionally, and in terms of collections—if we could divide the subject into two exhibitions. Telling the whole history from 1626 to 1865 in one gulp would likely suggest a simplistic tale of how Slavery gave way to Freedom. The contours of the history would be lost in such a telling. Surprise is necessary to learning, so it made more sense to end the first exhibition in 1827, when slavery was abolished in New York and the North and South became more sharply defined.

The two slavery exhibitions could each spin a compelling yarn. The first peered through the historical veil over enslaved Africans and witnessed their emergence into freestanding, self-sustaining emancipated men and women. In the second, the ferocious courage of despised men and women confronted New York’s entrenched political and financial toadying to slaveholding interests. Each would be stronger than the two welded together. Institutionally, splitting the subject occupied the historical society’s main galleries for two full fall-winter seasons and compounded its investments in curriculum development, educational programming, advertising, promotion, and public information. And, while the first exhibition showcased N-YHS’s ownership of rare and unique pieces of early New York-iana, the second capitalized on rich collections of popularly distributed cultural artifacts like political cartoons and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*-related tchotchkes.

9. For a more detailed exploration of the construction of exhibition narratives, see Richard Rabinowitz, “Curating History’s Silences: the *Revolution* Exhibition,” in Thomas Bender, Laurent Dubois, and Richard Rabinowitz, eds., *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn* (New York: New-York Historical Society and D Giles, Ltd., 2011), 247-68.

An exhibition organized around themes often assigns one space to “covering” one time-period. By contrast, a narrative exhibition like ours focuses each gallery on a particular story exemplifying and dramatizing that era. The narrative employs a variety of literary devices—characterization, flashbacks, contrasts in tone, questions posed and resolved, foreshadowing, and “sideshadowing” (what was happening at the same moment)—to propel the visitors’ movement through the story.

We want visitors to stay on the story-path as they move forward, so we try to avoid the sharp starts and stops that come from disconnected items on a theme list. Each new theme, we know, often requires gaining their attention all over again. Of course, attentiveness in the course of visiting a gallery—unlike sitting in a movie theater or reading a book by oneself—is often intermittent. Visitors move forward by inertia, but they repeatedly need to refocus. Sometimes they miss chunks of the show because other people get in the way; it’s more convenient to scoot around such obstacles. Eyes (or more correctly, brains) grow tired of looking at objects from the same perspective.<sup>10</sup> Weary feet and mental fatigue draw people toward the Exit sign.

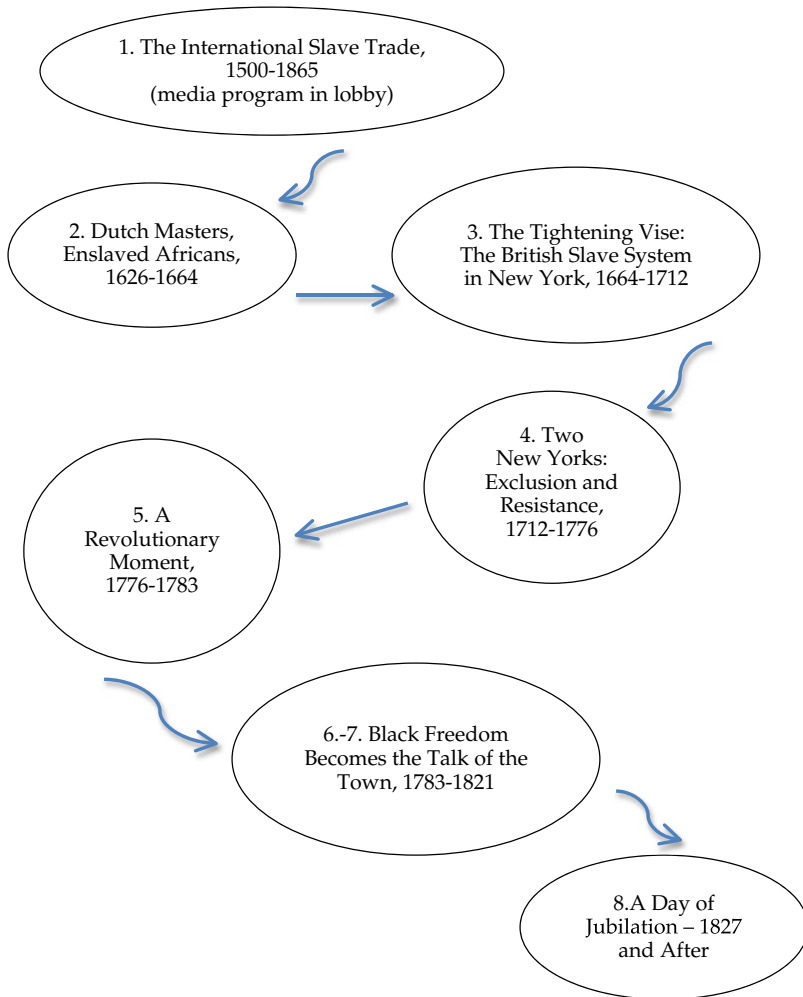
The driving impulse of our story telling in *Slavery in New York* was “breaking the silence.” The exhibition would, in effect, represent “a coming into their own public voice” of black New Yorkers. First, our visitors would glimpse these people only from a distance, as parts of an Atlantic economic system. They seem to be figures from a remote and inaccessible past. Gradually, gently, we would bring visitors closer to the lives of the enslaved, transforming them from objects to subjects. Then we would follow these black New Yorkers, the first generation born in freedom, as they achieved visibility and voice, with all its dangers, in the early nineteenth century. We would conclude by celebrating their New York emancipation day in 1827. By that time, we hoped that visitors would recognize them as fellow-citizens, deserving of our empathy.

### ***From Narratives to Experiences***

As the document on the following page shows, we had by early December developed a clear idea of the beginning, middle, and end of the story we wanted to tell. But how would we actually tell the story? This is the process of interpretive design. It starts with understanding the physical space of the building and its sequence of distinct areas. This blank volume then gets translated in our minds into a series of densely inhabited spaces. (I’ve always thought of this as akin to the “blocking diagrams” I drew as a stage director in college.) Each area has a threshold, a preferred pathway, and an exit into the next. That pathway has a shape—narrow or wide. Each room has a specific

10. Stephen Bitgood, “When Is ‘Museum Fatigue’ Not Fatigue?,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 52 (April 2009): 193–202.





Proposed storyline by AHW, December 5, 2004.

palette of colors. Some areas are lighted intensively and others left relatively dark. More subtly, we imagine a sound track for each area—ambient or connotative, with music or speech, or pregnantly silent.

In each room we would arrange original and reproduced documents, two- and three-dimensional. We would put some in cases, and the casework would be consistent through the whole show, either steel or wood, with expanses of Plexiglas and provisions for environmental control and security. Other objects may be housed in spaces that suggest historical environments. Text panels are planned to communicate major ideas and explain individual documents. The graphic style may be modernist (usually with a sans-serif font), implying that we have a clinical interest in the past. Or it may be “period,” laced with historical

tinctures. Additionally, there will be many other sorts of interpretive media—as we have noted them earlier in this essay, everything from picture frames to computer-interactive games.

Nothing should be left to chance. The physical and aesthetic setting often shapes experience as much as a visitor's personal "baggage" and interests. Visitors define their roles from the cues they pick up in the environment. The space "tells" visitors whether they are to be insiders or outsiders, "mocasin-shod" re-enactors retracing the steps of historical characters or "white-jacketed" researchers examining them from afar, whether they are facilitators of their children's learning or seekers after private wisdom. Much of what gets communicated has little to do with historical themes or human dramas, but is signaled aesthetically, subliminally, through the atmospherics of the exhibition.<sup>11</sup> The more striking and distinctive the setting, the more it becomes associated with the ideas being conveyed. Often this is the surest pathway to a memorable visitor experience.

In all these ways, *Slavery in New York* would be more than a disquisition on historical themes. We aimed to encourage these museumgoers to identify with enslaved people and then follow their passage to liberty. We laid out a journey for the visitors, starting in oceanic brightness, swathed in local verdancy, descending into murderous and fearful darkness, seizing tiny moments of light, lifting themselves up amid revolutionary chaos, and then assuming a role in the public space, at the civic rostrum, to contend for full equality and freedom.

### ***Working with the designers***

To pull all this together we needed a design partner. By the end of November, we were ready. We wanted a firm with a strong commitment to museum learning and lots of experience with complex historical subjects. Each candidate firm received a brief that posited the importance of the show to N-YHS, the general public, and such key audiences as the local African American public and New York City school groups. With that went a clear statement of the exhibition themes, its basic storyline, and our experiential goals—what the exhibition would say, how it would form a powerful story, and how we wanted visitors to appreciate it.

Many exhibition curators stop short of AHW's ambition in this regard, compiling the thematic framework and supplying the checklist, and then surrendering the narrative and experiential goal-setting to the designer. A few of the firms we interviewed brought along their own "content developers," generally young and relatively inexperienced researchers. (One team

11. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), chap. 4, "The Physical Context."

even proposed to throw out our plan entirely and substitute its own scheme, which was a naïve misreading of African American history. They did not make the short list.) Only a few, we felt, responded creatively to three questions posed in our brief:

- (1) How can we capture (reconstruct, reimagine, etc.) the voices of the inarticulate in history?
- (2) How can we assist visitors in confronting painful historical and contemporary issues in an exhibit?
- (3) How can we employ and integrate the work of modern-day artists in the design of such an exhibit?

The Boston firm of Krent Paffett Carney [KPC] were chosen as the design team, with Ed Krent as our chief designer and Michael Roper of the associated group Experience Media as our chief media producer.<sup>12</sup> By the end of December, KPC had laid out the themes in nine galleries. They assumed that original documents, semi-environmental settings, and audio-visual pieces would be distributed rather evenly throughout the entire exhibition.

### ***Researching and selecting documents for inclusion***

From the beginning of the project, our team had been scouring the important repositories for the best documents and artifacts. Whatever our ambitions to be comprehensive, we knew that our schedule would not allow a lot of primary research.<sup>13</sup> To find out where the goodies were, we drilled into the memories of our scholarly advisers and we tested every citation in all the scholarly monographs on New York's early history. Including items from the N-YHS collection were the highest priority, as that would lend greater credibility to the institution's sponsorship of this show. Happily we soon confirmed that the historical society had for practical purposes become the repository for a lot of New York's colonial period records. In the N-YHS library we found official papers, scraps of business correspondence, and lots of ephemera. We also leaned heavily upon I.N. Phelps Stokes's celebrated six-volume compilation, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island* from almost a century ago.<sup>14</sup> We

12. Other key design team members included Nicholas B. Paffett, John Carney, Ed Malouf, and Rebecca Schreiber Shreckengast. I also want to acknowledge their contribution to the accuracy of this essay and its visual documentation.

13. Key members of the team included Dr. Peter Hinks as senior research historian and Lynda B. Kaplan as curatorial director. On one occasion, we did plunge into primary research. Even as the movement to full emancipation of black New Yorkers continued, their exclusion from voting and jury duty intensified. In the New York City Municipal Archives, we discovered the New York County "jury lists" for 1818-20, noting the names and addresses of black men forbidden from serving on juries. Paradoxically, this turned out to be a previously unused "census" and from it we were able to derive lots of biographical information about this part of the population. Dr. Hinks and Anne Parsons on the AHW team did splendid work in compiling this material.

14. I.N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909*, 6 vols. (New York: R.H. Dodd, 1915-1928).

dug carefully through the manuscript, rare book, newspaper, and print collections of the New York Public Library. Both Peter Hinks and I spent long days in the State Archives in Albany, and I had come home with a list of thirty-odd “eligibles” among the manuscript collections. Ultimately, the list of repositories included the Museum of the City of New York, the New York City Municipal Archives, the Metropolitan Museum, the Collegiate Church of New York, the British Library, the American Antiquarian Society, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan, Colonial Williamsburg, the Gilder Lehrman Collection, the Library of Congress, Historic Hudson Valley, the university libraries of Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, and Yale, and dozens of others.

Still, to the slight dismay of our N-YHS colleagues, we did not quickly firm up a “checklist” of artifacts and documents, as is common among art museum curators. We wanted to pick and choose those that would be most useful constructing narratives and experiences.

### ***Overviews and immersions***

Area by area, through January and February 2005, the designers and the curators brought together all these working assumptions, the results of our historical curatorial research, and our readings of the architectural constraints and opportunities in the N-YHS building, to create the detailed exhibition plan.

One of the first key decisions concerned the relationship between overviews and immersions. These are the two basic types of physical contexts and corresponding learning situations in museums. It is useful to divide exhibition media into those that (1) provide visitors with a broad *overview* of a whole subject or (2) offer visitors an opportunity to *immerse* themselves in the actions and settings of the historical characters we portray. Overviews give a commanding prospect over the narrative landscape, immersions a dense refuge inside its details. Overviews are aerial perspectives, immersions work at eye level.<sup>15</sup> Although any single type of interpretive device may sometimes be used for either, in general they have different strengths:

<b>Overviews</b>	<b>Immersions</b>
Graphic panels in 3 <sup>rd</sup> person (historian's) voice	Historical quotations, 1 <sup>st</sup> person voice
Docent talks, in 3 <sup>rd</sup> person voice	“Living history” performances, 1 <sup>st</sup> person voice

15. This distinction is derived from the “prospect” and “refuge” theory elaborated by Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (London: Wiley, 1975).

Overviews	Immersion
Maps, charts	Scrapbook of views along the path traveled
Video programs	Audio programs
Annotated reproductions of documents	“Performed” documents
Original documents, framed	Original documents, set in reconstructed physical surroundings
Taxonomic arrangements of historical, archeological specimens	Objects set in reconstructed physical surroundings
Lecture/demonstrations	Hands-on learning opportunities
Computer-interactive exhibition “tables,” introductory level	Computer-interactive exhibition “tables,” in-depth levels

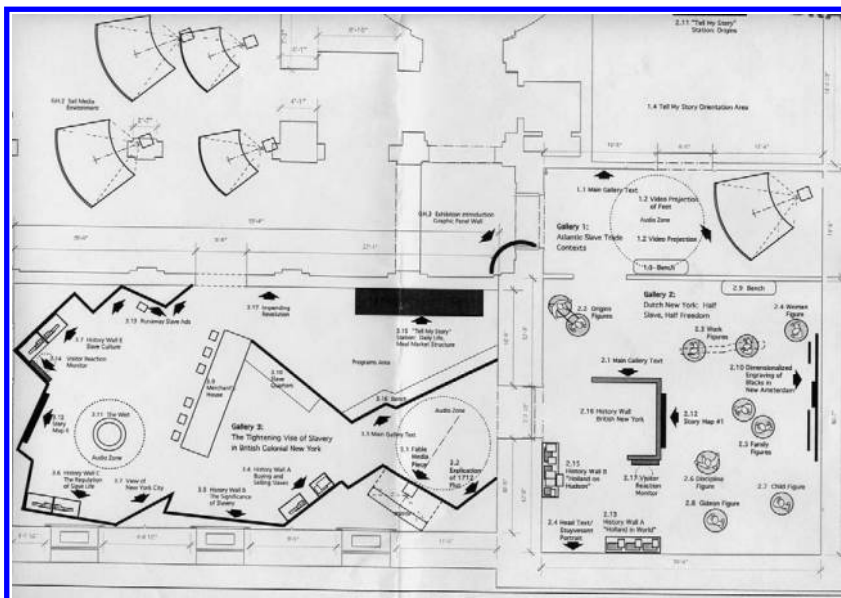
Overviews and immersion have to be balanced. Overviews create confidence, immersion offers comfort. Each runs a risk for visitors. Too much overview and the learner may be dangerously removed from the actual human beings featured in the exhibition. Then history is altogether too abstract. Too much immersion and the visitor might lose contact with the context of the actions, its larger political and social meanings, and its historical transformations. The careful sequencing of overview and immersion is the most important element in successful exhibition development.

## *PART TWO:* *MAPPING THE INTERPRETIVE MEDIA IN SLAVERY IN NEW YORK*

For the next several months, until the bid package was put together for the fabricators and installers, the collaboration between the designers and the curators intensified. This section of the essay reviews how the decisions on interpretive media were made. I’ll take you on a walk through the first exhibition galleries of *Slavery in New York* and try to explore how we realized our vision of the show, space by space. (See the April 2005 draft floor plan, next page).

### **A. THE ENTRY: PROJECTING WORDS AND IMAGES TO ORIENT VISITORS TO THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY**

An exhibition entry always has the paradoxically double purpose of heightening visitor expectations, on the one hand, and reassuring visitors that they are fully capable of enjoying themselves for the next hour or so, on the other. The entry to *Slavery in New York* was complicated by the building’s 1909 architecture—designed to welcome gentlemen members rather than a broad public. The Great Hall had many functions. It was a milling space for visitors



Draft floor plan by KPC, Great Hall and Galleries 1-3, April 2005. (Courtesy of KPC.)

awaiting auditorium programs, checking coats, and using the restrooms. It served to introduce the entire building upstairs, including the Luce Center study-storage area, a dignified picture gallery, and the library. And it was the beginning of our exhibition.<sup>16</sup>

To orient visitors to the exhibition, we chose an iconic image. An 1853 daguerreotype of “Caesar,” born into slavery and a long-lived denizen of a Bethlehem, New York farm, became the face of the show.<sup>17</sup> Caesar got himself onto the Great Hall wall, and then onto dozens of banners, subway and bus cards, and a dozen different kinds of knickknacks.

In an early meeting, Louise Mirrer argued for “a lobby piece that introduces the global picture.” KPC had had great success with “dynamic text” in its work at the Mary Baker Eddy Center in Boston. In this technique, words are projected in movement onto walls, panels, floors, or anything else. We used several projectors to create a flowing, run-on narrative about the global importance of the Atlantic slave trade, with words pouring out onto screens, the Great Hall floors, and the bodies of the visitors themselves.

16. The first floor was totally redesigned in 2011 to make it more welcoming. In the process, however, some of the most commodious exhibition galleries were sacrificed to make way for better orientation and other visitor amenities.

17. In discussions with museum leaders and advertising/public relations counsel, there was some ambivalence about using this image since it postdated the exhibition period itself, derived from an area outside the city, and portrayed one of the people last emancipated. But the daguerreotype belonged to N-YHS, and nothing is more recognizable as an icon than a face. Inevitably, the public message has to distill the exhibition’s complex meanings. Beyond the face of Caesar, the N-YHS newspaper ads used the phrase “It Happened Here!” accompanied by reproduction of an eighteenth-century advertisement for a slave sale in New York City.



Daguerreotype of “Caesar” used as icon in Great Hall. (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

One fragment:

Slavery in New York

One in five New Yorkers was an enslaved African in 1775

Africans – Mende, Ibo, Mandingo, Coramantee, Pawpaw

Africans from Guinea, from Senegambia, from Benin and Congo and Angola

Africans who had been in El Mina, Barbados, Martinique, Liverpool

Some of the 12 million who crossed the ocean

Who made the crossing successfully

Over 440 years, 80 a day, every day

One visitor later wrote to me, “I am struck by the way the facts stick in my mind. The appalling statistics at the beginning of the show I have quoted over and over to people.”<sup>18</sup>

At the end of the hallway the figure of Caesar beckoned visitors into the beginning of their journey through the galleries. The first step was to sit down

18. Anne D. Emerson, e-mail message to the author, December 21, 2005.



Great Hall, “dynamic text” on sails, Document of Caesar, and entry to orientation videos. (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

and watch a series of five brief videos, silent presentations of historical images. The first, a minute and a half long, summarized the scale, duration, and significance of the Atlantic slave trade. The second, a sixty-second animated piece, illustrated the macroeconomics and consequences of the triangle trade. The next, also sixty seconds, detailed the stages of the slave trade from Africa to the Middle Passage to the Americas, and back to Europe. The fourth, a two-minute long piece, was a “portrait gallery” of the people of the slave trade, emphasizing their diversity and the variety of fates they experienced. The last, a thirty-second, more upbeat piece, represented New York as the “island at the center of the world.”

These pieces, gently dissolving into one another in sequence and looped without any evident start or finish to the whole program, provided a soft introduction to the subject, injecting images and words without much didactic exposition. Much of this was somewhat familiar to visitors, which usefully reinforced their self-confidence as they began the encounter with new material. The graphics on the screen were brief and not tightly tied to the images.



The “portrait gallery” had no words other than the identifications of the characters portrayed. This program slowly pulsed visitors into the entry, averting a crush in the first galleries.

## B. EXHIBITION GALLERIES, CLUSTERS, AND ELEMENTS: TEXT PANELS

Graphic panels with interpretive text are not neutral. They do not stand outside the experience of the visit. They are, in fact, visual, kinesthetic, and even auditory events. (Watch how visitors move their lips as they read the panels.) Used appropriately, they are architectural signals. They mark the progression of the exhibition themes, narratives, and experiences. Used badly, they compete for attention with other interpretive media, clutter up the space, fragment the audience (some visitors simply cannot read them), and diminish the educational effectiveness of the show.

Hierarchy is essential in guiding visitors through a narrative exhibition, and text panels are the most fundamental ways of communicating what’s most important and what can be quickly scanned or safely overlooked in the interest of time, convenience, and accessibility. In art museum and library shows, a long introductory text panel is commonly followed by a succession of art works or display cases treated in pretty much the same way, piece after piece. In history exhibitions, the documents, artifacts, and images are usually so heterogeneous that it is senseless to mount them alone, one by one, with the same kind of captioning. Further, a story-telling exhibition is composed of episodes rather than of objects. The theater is a better analogy. Think of the overall exhibition as a *Play*. Each of its galleries is an *Act* that contains several (episodic) clusters (or *Scenes*), which in turn are assemblages of individual elements (*Dialogues, Soliloquies, etc.*).

### ***Head Texts in Each Gallery***

In the American History Workshop plan, each of these levels gets its own type of interpretive panel. In *Slavery in New York*, we created *head texts* for each of the nine galleries. Silk-screened onto freestanding, seven-foot-high exhibition panels in very large fonts (the titles in 5” high letters, with the subtitles 2” high and the body text 1½” high), they were big enough to be viewed by a whole group of companions at one time.

Here is the head text of the first gallery:

#### **Slavery, Plantations, and Ships**

##### **Enormous numbers, transforming effects**

The Atlantic Slave Trade was the largest forced migration in world history. Twelve million Africans were captured and enslaved in the Americas, or more



Head text for Gallery 4. (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

than 80 per day for 400 years. Over 40,000 ships brought slaves across the ocean.

Before 1800, many more Africans crossed the Atlantic than Europeans. Africans became the largest population group in all of the most productive tropical regions of the Americas.

The trade in slaves and the products of slave labor tied the world together. Profits from this trade fueled the world's first industrial revolution in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England. And by 1800, the moral outrage against slave trading sparked the first international human rights movement.

By 1888, slavery had been abolished throughout the New World.

The head text, roughly 75-125 words long, tells visitors why they should care about the story in this gallery. Writing has to be tailored to this purpose.

Subordinate clauses vanish in the editing. Half the terms should be somewhat familiar—“industrial revolution,” “human rights.” Graphically, these words should be printed in relatively short line lengths, as they are here, so that visitors don’t have to take in more than three or four gulps as they consume each line:

The Atlantic Slave Trade / was the largest forced migration / in world history.

And when visitors reach the end of one line, we don’t want them to have any trouble locating the next line on the left margin.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Section Texts for Each Episodic Cluster***

The next level down is the *section text*. These are printed or screened on independent panels or a graphic panel with other information, perhaps five feet high and in 42-point type. They introduce a cluster of documents and interpretive devices and explain what brings them all together. Often they have only a header, not a subheader. The section text operates as part of a cluster of elements.

Section texts spark a sequence of behaviors among our audience. After visitors *arrive* at the cluster, they take a moment to *decompress* and *refocus*. Their eyes then move to *survey* the various elements, each offering an opportunity for *investigation*. Often the cluster will contain diverse media—an image, a model, an interactive device, as well as the section text label. Redundancy in the message reflects the diversity of learning styles among our audience and encourages interaction. Children are often loath to read the texts but quickly try out the interactives. Parents and kids “deconstruct” a model together. Detailed captions reward the most curious and diligent within a visiting group. If guided well, parents can explain to their children how the elements fit together.

Here is an example of a section text:

#### **The New York market for slave labor**

Labor was in desperately short supply in colonial New York. English authorities had difficulty recruiting European settlers. Free men and women saw few advantages in the colony. Unfree workers faced long terms as indentured servants. Wars in Europe disrupted the flow of emigrants.

New York’s merchant elite wanted slaves for domestic service as well as dockside labor. Craftsmen wanted slaves for their shops. But England’s slave trading monopoly, like the Dutch one before it, saw better profits in selling

19. See the useful article, with excellent references, by Stephen Bitgood, “The Role of Attention in Designing Effective Interpretive Labels,” *Journal of Interpretation Research* 5 no. 2 (2000): 31-45. Also, Andrée Blais, ed., *Text in the Exhibition Medium* (Québec City, QC: Société des musées québécois, 1995).



Gallery 3 section text, display of documents, graphic panels, and interactive devices (*Sloop Rhode Island ledger on the left*). (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

Africans in the sugar islands. Shrewd merchants evaded the monopoly, buying slaves from pirates off the coast of Madagascar.

After 1720, the supply from West Africa widened. Ships carried hundreds of slaves to New York. No longer were these Atlantic creoles familiar with European ways. Captives from Africa's interior provided the labor that made New York boom.

### ***Caption Texts for Each Element***

Finally, the lowest level is the *caption*, or *ID label*, or “gravestone” panel, which describes an individual document or a group of related documents. Here’s an example:

#### **English Justice**

City official Augustus Grasset was stabbed in the neck by Toby, a slave of wine merchant John Cure. Here the coroner’s jury accused 38 slaves of involvement in the murder. Each juryman attached his blood-red seal to the indictment. Exact court procedure was followed, except that slaves were not provided with defense counsel.

New-York Historical Society Library.

These, too, are printed in 28-point type. These captions try to provide visitors with some way of seeing and interpreting a historical object. They may be quite various, focusing on the context of its creation, the identity of the people involved, or its subsequent preservation.

Writing exhibition text is a great challenge. I think of it as a concrete poetry in form, laying out a sequence of sound- and sense-units that will hold attention for a moment or two while the visitor comprehends this point in the story. But unlike poetry, it shouldn't attract attention to itself. The best captions invite the eyes to move to the surrounding and succeeding materials.

### C. LOCATING GREAT ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTS

Though the direct, signed evidence of the African presence in New York was so scarce, slavery was everywhere in the archival record. The Dutch church recorded births, baptisms, and marriages. In the State Archives in Albany, we found Director-General Kieft's epochal grant of "half-freedom" and the land around what is now Washington Square to a dozen Africans in 1644, recognizing their value in defending New Amsterdam from Indian threats. The records showed that enslaved black men served as the Dutch West India Company's public works department, so to speak, building docks and warehouses, laying out the road to Harlem that is now Broadway, and constructing the wall (now Wall Street) that bounded the village on its north end.

So in fact, Ira Berlin's complaint, "We had nothing!" was not completely accurate. There was something, but not a lot. Rumor had it that only Charlie Gehring and Janny Venema, scholars at the New Netherland Institute in Albany, could actually decipher the antique Dutch calligraphy and language in the colony's records. For the British period, things looked a little brighter. Manuscripts and newspapers at N-YHS and the New York Public Library included the records of merchants' importing and selling slaves in New York and renting them out as day laborers. Newspapers advertised for slave auctions and for the recovery of runaways. On the other hand, remarkably few private letters mentioned slaves in the household, though as many as forty-two percent of colonial New York households had at least one enslaved inhabitant.

Each document has to be evaluated on several criteria. Does it speak to a moment in history that is connected to the larger dramas we want to tell? Can the document be decoded with relative ease? If these two conditions are met, we have to decide whether we can include it as an original or whether we will exhibition a reproduced copy. (Of course, in a "permanent" exhibition, the choice is negated by the conservators' limits on the length of exposure for paper and textile objects.) The originals convey a power that is hard to match, even if one tries hard to produce a fine facsimile copy with the right paper and ink color.

But displaying original manuscripts and early published documents is always a powerful challenge. Any historical document longer than a page presents a problem to the interpretive designer, and bound volumes are a particular kind of exhibition nightmare. Which page is best shown? And how do visitors get to see the rest of the document? Conservators place tough limits on how documents can be presented. Five candle-feet of light (informally, equivalent to the light registered on an object one foot away by a five-candle source) is the maximum allowable. Documents usually have to be framed. If they are borrowed from another repository, they often come to us already framed—and almost always the frame is aesthetically very different from what we have chosen. Paper (and textiles) can generally be exhibited for no longer than three months, no matter how long the show is planned to run. Conservators often want documents to lie flat (or almost flat) in an exhibit case, which would make them hard for many to read. And a flat case occupies more floor space per document.

Notwithstanding all this, original documents are worth the trouble. Even within a Plexiglas frame, the singular object rescued from history communicates an intimate relationship between the pen, the paper, and the writer—or more imaginatively, between the act of writing and its setting, the room, the light and sound in the space, the weather, the moment of its creation. For students who have learned history through textbooks or heavily edited sourcebooks with a few juicy quotations, the real thing is a priceless avenue for an empathetic connection with the people of the past. A phrase plucked out of a letter and put in quotation marks may be quite incidental to the purpose of the communication. Or, and this is a more serious problem, it may even be contradicted (or its pointedness mitigated) by other parts of the same document. Showing visitors a bigger chunk of the original often sparks new and unanticipated insights.

#### D. DISPLAYING THE DRAMA IN THE ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTS

What can we learn from documents? The object and its language each have histories. The Dutch West India Company records barely escaped destruction in a ravaging fire in Albany in 1912. The edges of the paper show burn marks a century old. From the N-YHS library collection, one of our simplest documents, just fifty words long, recorded the butcher Robert Heaton's sale of his enslaved girl Violet to Nicholas Jones for £56 in January 1781. The ordinariness of the document was our key interpretive point, so we needed to avoid "gussying up" its presentation. Beyond the identification label, the text merely said, "This form could be used for the transfer of any property, including people." A lawyer-friend was stunned to realize that the deed of conveyance used exactly the same language as the one used today in New York for leasing or selling property. Carefully constructed texts can thus "wink" knowingly at parts of our audience, silently signaling that some visitors already know

a crucial piece of the story. *Slavery in New York* frequently rewarded “insiders” to the story—old-time New Yorkers, African Americans, military veterans, clergy, parents of small children—with such reassuring phrases.

In these interpretive acts, the museum curator becomes a theater director operating in two time frames at once. The contents of an exhibit case are transformed into an animated field of action. To interpret is to imagine one cast of historical actors stepping out of the document, and another set of modern-day visitors coming across it. Historical time and exhibit time flow together. This particular document, we might say, was written by so-and-so, in this place and time, for that purpose. This particular family of visitors, we predict, will look at it in just this way, for this amount of time, and here’s what it can say to them.

Another example: in 1731, *The New-York Gazette* reprinted the colony’s slave code in its entirety. We reproduced the entire front page of the paper, and then reprinted its diverse provisions on a large panel to maximize its legibility. Here are a few:

1684: No slave shall sell or trade in any item whatsoever.

1692: No slaves shall play games or be disorderly on the Sabbath on pain of whipping.

1702: No free white or black person is ever to entertain another man’s slave.

1731: No more than twelve slaves shall ever assemble for a funeral.

1731: No slave shall ride a horse recklessly or swiftly within the city upon pain of whipping.

Our interpretive text invited visitors to explore these dicta, some trivial, some cruel. Simply by adding the dates, the series itself conveys the tightening of control over African lives in the seaport city.<sup>20</sup>

Neat archive boxes in N-YHS library calmly house spectacular testimonies of the violence at the heart of North American slavery. In one, we found the bill of indictment—the ID label for which has been described above—of the recently imported Gold Coast men who ambushed whites on Maiden Lane in 1712. Another contains a slave-trading ledger of the sloop *Rhode Island*, owned by the Livingston family. It records in laborious detail its voyage along the African coast in 1748–49, selling grain and rum to British sea captains in exchange for ironware, Indian cloth, and guns, and then trading these with Africans for men, women, and children. On the back page, Captain Peter James registered the deaths of 38 of his captives on the Middle Passage back to New York, more than thirty per cent of the 124 people he had bought. N-YHS also owned the copy of the *New-York Weekly Journal*, in which the

20. The newspaper was borrowed from the New York Public Library. The inspiration for this exhibition idea came from a list I saw in the Anne Frank House of the progressively more repressive measures imposed on the Jewish population in Amsterdam after the Nazi invasion in 1940.



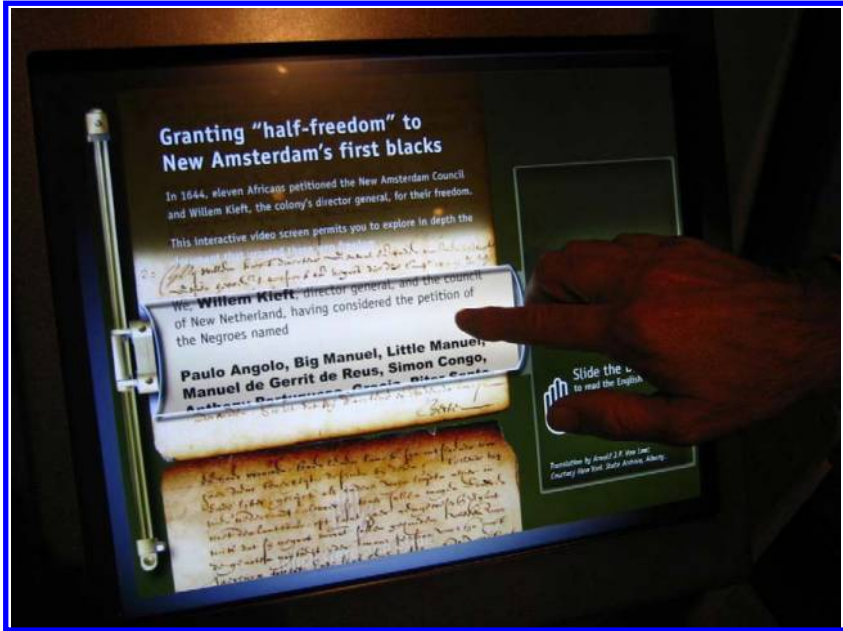
Graphic panel with slave laws, whip, and shackles (1741 Story Map at right, “The Well” video in foreground). (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

*Rhode Island’s* human cargo was sold in New York in July 1749. And finally, the N-YHS map collection has a remarkable “memory map” drawn by David Grim in 1813, when he was 76 years old. Burned in his memory, and recorded on Grim’s map, were the execution-sites of the thirty black men caught up in the “Great Negro Plot” of 1741.<sup>21</sup>

In the well-lit, air-conditioned comfort of the library, such documents thrill the historian who brings training, contextual knowledge, and patience to their examination. But broad public engagement with the substance of a historical document requires real accessibility. Often electronic media provide the only answer. The simplest gizmo is a page-turning program, wherein an entire document can be scanned and read by the touch of a finger. Providing a deeper interpretive engagement requires more. To our rescue came the KPC media team, led by Michael Roper. He designed a touchscreen translator that allowed visitors to scroll with their fingers

21. Seventy more were deported to the West Indies and enslavement, probably on the killing-fields of sugar plantations. Executions in Salem in 1692, by comparison, totaled twenty. The exhibition also included a first edition of City Recorder Daniel Horsmanden’s *Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy* (New York: James Parker, 1744). Horsmanden’s frenzied narrative of his interviews with suspected African “conspirators” shows the city swept up in blood-crazy visions of slave revolt and Spanish invasion. See especially Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 2005), and T. J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The “Great Negro Plot” in Colonial New York* (New York: The Free Press, 1985). I wish that *Slavery in New York* had been able to portray the “enhanced interrogation techniques” of the British authorities in 1741 New York. That would be worthy of an exhibition in itself.





Transcription and translation interactive device. (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

down an image of the Kieft emancipation document; as they did, the text was instantly transcribed and then translated into English. At “hot spots” along the scroll, visitors could delve into the definition of obscure words and the historical significance of its details. Meanwhile, the original document rested regally in a case nearby.

The slave trading ledger of the sloop *Rhode Island* was even more challenging. The Dutch record, after all, was famous. We could simply use texts already transcribed, translated, and published. Not so the trading book. Transcription and identification of dozens of terms for various commodities was a considerable research task.<sup>22</sup> But such painstaking research, as is often the case, forced us to confront the concrete realities of the trade. Our shoulders seem to bend to the offloading on January 18, 1749, of twenty pounds of “oybons” [onions], three large iron “kettels” and two dozen “Hatts.” We imagined the makings of a feast for an African ruler or merchant, the table

22. Dr. Jeanne Houck of AHW performed the hard labor of untangling these historical mysteries. Among the cloths mentioned, for example, three were especially common:

**Baft:** A kind of coarse and cheap (generally cotton) fabric, originally of oriental manufacture, but made in Great Britain in the eighteenth century, especially for export to Africa

**Caloco (i.e., calico):** Originally cotton cloth imported from the East (the name comes from Calcutta), by then a variety of cotton cloths manufactured in Europe and North America

**Chinch (i.e., chintz):** Calicoes printed with flowers, in color. In the *Rhode Island* text, the phrase could be “patterned chintz.” Note that “chints” was originally plural and became singular, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in the third quarter of the eighteenth century.

garnished with slabs of beef, pipefuls of tobacco, and gallons of rum. And then we read that with the kettles also came “2 slaves one Boy one garl,” valued at £84, and we shuddered.

KPC and AHW created a computer interactive program that allowed visitors to trace the voyage of the *Rhode Island* on a map of the West African coast, to see images of the places and trade objects, and to pause for a detailed view of several days of slave trading. The last page, as in the manuscript ledger itself, was an enumeration of the dying of the enslaved men, women, and children on the three-month-long Middle Passage back to New York, one or two on any given day, all nameless, tossed unceremoniously into an ocean grave.

Often we benefit from the painstaking labors of historians who have come before us. Elizabeth Donnan’s *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade*, published in the 1930s, quickly revealed that virtually every New York merchant swelled his coffers with outfitting slave ships, sending them off to Africa and the Caribbean.<sup>23</sup> We were able to turn a sampling of these voyages into an animated info-graphic—the kind often seen on financial news channels. The contemporary form of the device nicely communicated the relevance of the analogy to a city in the midst of a stock market boom in the mid-2000s.

## E. ANIMATING SLAVE LABOR: THE WIRE SCULPTURES

Amazingly enough, we do have the names of the first Africans in New Amsterdam—Anthony Portuguese, Simon Congo, Pieter Santome, Paul D’Angola, Lewis Guinea, Peter Criole. Their given names, evidences of Christian (and most likely, Roman Catholic) baptism, tell us that they were “Atlantic Creoles,” probably long experienced in the ports and vessels of West Africa and the Caribbean. They could speak Portuguese, and maybe Dutch, Spanish, and English as well as their African mother tongues. And the colonial records have told us what work they did here. But we haven’t any idea what they looked like.

In a meeting at the Boston studio of designer Ed Krent, a plan emerged. What if we could create life-size figures, each of them in pose that represents the sort of work they did—lifting, carrying, chopping, and hammering? Krent suggested a Brooklyn-based sculptor, Deryck Fraser, of African Surinamese extraction—what could be more appropriate for representing black men in the Dutch-speaking world? Fraser was commissioned to produce a dozen figures. They were of heavy-duty wire, hollow men and women, chained and apparently chastened. Visitors were to come face-to-face with the blank

23. *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1930-1935). More recently, this has been enormously expanded by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database (<http://www.slavevoyages.org>), directed by David Eltis and David Richardson, and embodied in their magnificent edition of the *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).



Wire sculptures by Deryck Fraser and David Geiger. (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

expressions and taut muscles of these men and women. A year later, after the opening, the visitors' reactions were fascinating. One South Asian student commented, "This brought home to me the whole painful history of the anonymous masses who labored so hard in history and are forgotten. The emptiness of their bodies tore me apart."<sup>24</sup>

The sculptures were set in a spacious landscape, the walls painted a spring-time green. Behind the figures, on one wall of the room, a graphic artist from Boston, Gareth Hinds, created an enormous detailed illustration—in the style

24. This was one of several thousand visitor responses collected by American History Workshop at its *Telling Lives* video feedback station at the conclusion of the exhibition pathway. An analysis of those responses is in preparation.

but very distinctly not in the racist rendering of Victorian magazines—of Kieft’s bestowing half-freedom and land to the company’s black laborers. Our goal was to dimensionalize this image, to have it pop out of the wall, by connecting it to the wire figures.

## F. BRINGING VISITORS CLOSER TO THE SLAVES’ WORLD

The interpretive strategy in this gallery aimed to move visitors from an outside view of the enslaved in New York, as articles of commerce, toward a more concrete and intimate encounter with them as human beings. Our method was to turn the key historical sources inside out and upside down. What the slaveholder and the authorities’ slave regimen thought, said, and did could be a valuable window into the ideas and actions of the people they enslaved.

### *Fugitive Slave Ads*

The most familiar of these sources for historians are advertisements for the recapture of fugitive slaves. Almost every issue of an eighteenth-century New York newspaper contained five or six of these notices. One historian posits that the income derived from such advertising was a mainstay of early American publishing, indeed a vital—though ironic—ingredient in creating the tradition of a free press.<sup>25</sup>

So, in addition to reproducing the original advertisements, we explicated them with graphic annotations. The left column of the table below shows the text of the ad for the recapture of Pegg, a runaway, in the *New-York Gazette* for December 13, 1764. In the right column are the annotations inscribed on the enlarged image of the notice.<sup>26</sup>

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<b>The original text of the advertisement</b>	<b>Curatorial annotations</b>
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RUN-AWAY,

Last night the 12<sup>th</sup> instant, from  
Rebecca Morehouse,

*The widow Morehouse may have hired  
her slaves out—frequently a sort of  
insurance policy for widows. Perhaps  
the widow may not act for herself in  
this matter. (She remarried the  
following July.)*

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25. David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), pp. 23-25 et passim.

26. See the reproduced advertisement at [http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/gallery\\_3.htm](http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/gallery_3.htm).

The original text of the advertisement	Curatorial annotations
opposite to Alderman Benson, at the ship yards, New-York,	<i>Homes of prominent citizens adjoin the working shipyards.</i>
a rail slim straight negro wench, nam'd Pegg, about 40 years of age, of a yellowish complexion,	<i>The fugitive is known only by one name and is subjected to disparagement for all her physical features.</i>
has had the small pox, but is smooth faced, and talks good English,	<i>Now she is immune from the disease, which makes her more valuable</i>
has the middle finger of her left hand crooked and cannot straiten it;	<i>Bodily disfigurements are often signs of abusive treatment</i>
was born at Oyster-Bay, but has resided several years in New-York, and formerly belonged to Mr. Pell;	<i>A native New Yorker, Pegg has probably been sold more than once. The thriving agricultural town of Oyster Bay on Long Island's North Shore had a large enslaved population. The Pells were an important family in Westchester County (note "Pelham"), which then included the Bronx.</i>
is sensible, cunning and artful,	<i>Ads often explain running away as a deception, but these terms may also betray admiration.</i>
and can wash, iron and cook;	<i>With these skills, Pegg may try to be hired out as a free woman.</i>
Had on a short red cloak, a white hat and a pair of mens shoes, and had with her a calico gown and a variety of other clothes.	<i>Did she steal these, perhaps to protect against the winter cold? Were they among her mistress's best garments?</i>
Whoever will bring home the said wench to her mistress or to the subscriber, ship-carpenter at the ship-yards, shall have a dollars reward if taken in town or 3 dollars, if taken out of town, beside all reasonable charges. JOHN LEVERSAGE	<i>Hefty reward for recapture.</i>
All masters of vessels and others are forwar'd not to entertain or carry her away as they will answer it at their peril.	<i>She may well have tried to stow away on a boat heading off toward familiar terrain on Long Island Sound.</i>

There is a world of information in these 180 words, but more can be deduced from a knowledge of the place and the time. On that Tuesday night, a forty-year-old multitalented mulatto woman vanishes into the shadows of the port. Perhaps that night she hid with a friend, in a nearby cellar or out-building. It would be safer if the friend's owner were himself away. Then,

soon after dawn on the following day, Wednesday the 13<sup>th</sup>, the widow Morehouse awakens to discover Pegg missing. She hastens to Alderman Benson for advice. The sturdy town official, later a key member of the Sons of Liberty, hastily scribbles the copy for the ad and crosses Water Street to the shipyard. He comes across the ship-carpenter Leversage, tells him to put down his maul, and sends him off with the sheet of paper to the print shop of the *Gazette*. By this time, Pegg has probably tried to secure a berth on a coastal schooner. Maybe she'll try first to go up the East River and the Sound to Oyster Bay where she can find family or childhood friends.<sup>27</sup>

Was she ever recaptured? The likelihood is yes.

Our friends, the expert seamstresses and tailors at Colonial Williamsburg, reproduced and lent us a calico dress and red cloak just right for 1764, and they properly “aged” the garments so that they might have a plausible appearance on that gaunt fugitive from slavery.

### ***The Story Maps***

Another interpretive device, similar to this, was a series of “story maps.” Drawn by the cartographer and artist Albert Lorenz, these bird’s-eye views represented the geography of black New Yorkers at four moments in our exhibition’s history—1664, 1741, 1776, and 1827. (See map at <http://www.publichistorycommons.org/eavesdropping-at-the-well/>) Our model was David Grim’s map of 1813, and we adopted Grim’s device of framing the map with vignettes of notable buildings at each moment in time. The story map posited that even under the harsh regime of slavery, blacks moved through a landscape of their own, finding work, gathering by day at wells and by night at taverns, burying their dead, and striking back at their oppressors from time to time.

### ***The Merchant’s House***

The day of reckoning had arrived. All these original documents and graphic treatments were fine, but a history museum exhibition needs objects, three-dimensional artifacts. Stuff creates presence and immediacy. Even when an object is cased in Plexiglas, it still invites visitors to adopt a kinesthetic relationship to the story, to extend their own senses. Projecting themselves forward, they can feel the heft of the tomahawk handle, anticipate the pain of its honed edge, and shudder at its collision with flesh and bone.

“We had nothing.” The distinctive material culture of the enslaved was meager, to say the least. Rumors of religious rituals, especially around burials

27. In 2009, the local historical society mounted an exhibition called “Tracing Peg: Slavery in Oyster Bay,” but the links of this “Peg” to the 1764 “Pegg” are uncertain.



Exhibition case with objects representing the lives of the enslaved in colonial New York. (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

and festivals, circulated in the city and found their way into a few historical notes. But in all practical ways, we had to conclude that most enslaved Africans in New York dressed as European-descended people did, only more shabbily; were housed as poor whites were, but even more desperately; ate the same foods—boiled Indian corn, doused with sour buttermilk, along with a slice of dark bread and rancid lard—but even less often; worked with the same tools, but for longer hours and with less rest.

Through the eighteenth century, British rule gradually foreclosed opportunities for black New Yorkers to achieve or maintain their freedom. Consequently, few Africans had property rights or independent financial transactions—accounts with merchants, deeds, labor contracts. Although slaves continued to be imported into New York, more came from the West Indies and not directly from Africa. Slaves arrived essentially naked. They had virtually no opportunity to bring objects from their home cultures into their lives in New York. The “material culture” of Africans in New York, then, was most likely small items—ornamental, recreational, or devotional—of European cultural origin that were appropriated for personal use. A pipe or a fiddle, a comb or a necklace, a headscarf or a bottle of herbs: these might be invested and employed with cultural meanings derived from African traditions.

We were nowhere. And then, at the end of one frustrating planning session, it struck us. Who says that all that elegant stuff in the N-YHS open storage “Luce Center” is not African American? If slavery touched everything in colonial New York, then wasn’t its presence felt in all these lovely items of “decorative arts,” “material culture,” “material life,” call them what you will?

In the museum world, objects are generally described with reference to their designers, or purchasers, or donors. Walking tour guidebooks tell us the name of an architect, sometimes a developer, and very occasionally an occupant—particularly if some notorious event happened on site. In catalogues, objects are squeezed to fit into design categories—Sheraton, Arte Moderne, and so on. But the whole history of an object intersects with many other people, who employ many other skills and attach many other meanings. How can we discover the role of workshop assistants, the merchant, the cleaner, the repairman, the purchaser of the object second-hand, its preserver or adapter, curator, conservator, and so on? Many hands are needed for the thing to come down to us today. In a society with slaves, like eighteenth-century New York, Africans were involved with objects at many stages of their “life course.” So a New York object is in fact a locus of many narratives or, as a wit on our team interjected, a “multi-story dwelling.”<sup>28</sup>

How would we find these stories? Fortunately for us, the collection of the New-York Historical Society often came in the form of family gifts, including papers as well as heirloom objects. The accession records of N-YHS, supplemented by a careful research in New York newspapers, allow us to find many stories behind these artifacts.<sup>29</sup> From the James Beekman mansion, set far out of town at what is now 51<sup>st</sup> Street and First Avenue, there came a silver framed mirror with two candles. Think of the four slaves at work in the house preparing for the visit of a distinguished guest. The silver must be polished, the candles replaced—and it’s fairly certain that it was the enslaved women who did such work. But didn’t they, too, look at themselves in this glass, and what did they see? Here’s a spoon that silversmith John Hastier made for a family living on what’s now the Upper West Side. Did Jasper, his highly skilled enslaved assistant, hold the spoon mold or help file down the edges? We don’t know, but the records indicate that Jasper fled from Hastier’s house and shop in 1758.

So, too, for several dozen objects in the N-YHS collection that we decided to display in a giant vitrine with a heading that says, “Everything is touched by

28. Acknowledgment should be made of the powerful influence of artist Fred Wilson’s 1992 exhibition, *Mining the Museum*, which unpacked the African presence (and absence) in the collections of the Maryland Historical Society. See Lisa J. Corrin, ed., *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson* (Baltimore: Contemporary, 1994) and Wilson’s video presentation at <http://vimeo.com/11838838>.

29. An extremely valuable source was Rita Susswein Gottesman, comp., *The Arts and Crafts in New York, 1726-1776: Advertisements and News Items from New York City Newspapers* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1938).





The Merchant's House vitrine with "video flip labels." (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

slavery." Our interpretive solution at this "Merchant's House" was to create "video flip labels" for many of them. An artifact is pictured, with a conventional label. "This silver porringer (shallow bowl) was a lovely wedding gift for Mayor John Cruger." After a moment, the label dissolves and a new one appears, "The man who made the porringer, Peter Van Dyck, bought and re-used silver stolen by slaves." Again, here is a commode chair in the Sheraton style, with pewter insert, ca. 1770. "One could relieve oneself at such a comfortable chair." And then the label flips: "At dawn, enslaved men and women carried off the pans of human waste to the river."

Stories of slavery are everywhere. Visitors, we hope, will never look at lovely eighteenth-century objects in the same way again, or indeed at the things around us today, for almost every artifact we encounter is dense with human stories, many of them a compounding of aesthetic ambition and economic injustice.

### ***The Cellar and the Well***

We are getting closer to the reality of slavery in New York, despite the paucity of visual evidence. Behind the "Merchant's House," a contrasting assemblage of household implements registers the "dark, cold, and hungry" world of the lives of enslaved New Yorkers. From the N-YHS collections, we

brought in a table, a candle box and lantern, a pewter plate and wooden implements (bowl, scoop, mallet, pitcher), and an iron kettle. The craftspeople at Colonial Williamsburg loaned reproductions of a stool, a butter firkin, keg, several pieces of clothing, sewing implements, and a basket. These represented the intimate material lives of many New York enslaved people. But all of them together, though squeezed into a dark, plank-sided mock garret room, did not have great power to engage visitors' imaginations.<sup>30</sup> And we had no historical tales of particular enslaved people with which to annotate them.

Fortunately, a great deal of historical information about the everyday lives of the enslaved was just at this moment being assembled by the African Burial Ground project. Edna Greene Medford's "History Final Report" compiled data from public records, manuscript collections, and published sources in the United States and Britain.<sup>31</sup> The report spoke of housing, diet, clothing, health, birth, marriage, and death, of work conditions and religious ritual, of discipline and resistance. But the individual documents cited were, almost without exception, impossible for us to exhibit. They were buried within paragraphs in books largely devoted to other subjects, or within manuscript collections that had been bound in large, unwieldy volumes. With the exception of a memoir or two published long after the Revolution, none of the commentaries on slave life came from the enslaved themselves. No contemporaneous illustrations of slave dwellings or scenes of work survived.

The only way to present the voices of the enslaved in colonial New York was to render them aurally, based as carefully as we could both in their languages and speech-patterns of and in the detailed historical sources of the Medford report. The first program aimed to re-create a tale of the 1712 revolt by newly imported Coramantee (Gold Coast) men, as it might have been shared with later African arrivals. I wrote the prose poem after several weeks of reading and studying the literature of the region. I aimed simply to capture the horror of enslavement for such men. My focus was the shocking realization they might have felt at the eternal isolation to which their bodies and spirits were now subject.

The video showed men gathered in a city cellar, shrouded in shadow, with one man speaking his prose poem in Akan (the lingua franca of West Africa), which then gradually evolved (in the manner of an Nation Public Radio news interview of someone speaking a foreign language) into a neutral English voice-over. (See image at <http://www.publichistorycommons.org/eavesdropping-at-the-well/>) We wanted visitors to feel surrounded by a language they didn't know—a fairly common experience in New York then as now.

30. Critics complained that we had failed in this regard, and we have to agree.

31. Edna Greene Medford, ed., *The New York African Burial Ground: History Final Report* (Washington: The African Burial Ground Project, Howard University for the United States General Services Administration, Northeast and Caribbean Region, 2004), esp. Part Two.

We knew to be slaves at home.  
 But slaves there become part of the people.  
 Here we were to live and die as beasts, apart.  
 No family of our own, no family in the house.

One Sunday, the men decided. Burn a back house.  
 Wait for the whites.  
 Kill them when they come with water.  
 Run off to the woods.  
 They burned, they waited, they killed, and they ran.  
 Many were caught.  
 But they would not go back.  
 They stabbed themselves.

Others, the eighteen, were left hanging, burning.  
 Heads on poles. Not as people do.  
 I remember. Many years ago. I am still here, left to tell you.  
 York—a dark place.

The production and installation of the piece, I'm afraid, met few of our goals. In trying to communicate the sharp difference between the seventeenth-century Dutch slave regimen and that imposed by the British after 1664—bringing New York practice in line with the codes used in Jamaica, Barbados, and the southern colonies—we adopted a phrase used in Graham Hodges's *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863*: "the closing vise." The designers had the walls painted a deep midnight blue. Visitors entered the gallery through a narrower opening. The gallery was introduced by a head text, placed prominently on a seven-foot-high panel:

### **Slavery in English New York**

#### **Surviving in a World Apart**

Slavery touched everything in colonial times. In 1703, 42% of New York's households had slaves, compared to 6% in Philadelphia and 2% in Boston. Among cities, only Charleston, South Carolina, had more slaves. Trading in slaves was big business and enriched merchants, farmers, professionals, and craftsmen.

Slave laws became ever more restrictive, punishments more severe. Living conditions were harsh, work constant. Fearing resistance, authorities limited opportunities for slaves to gather, to maintain families, or to win freedom.

Despite this, black New Yorkers shared a community invisible to most whites – meeting secretly, burying their dead with dignity, and preserving traces of Africa. There were two New Yorks, one public and one secret.

All this prevented visitors from properly attending to the Akan *griot* and his "poem" about the 1712 revolt. Attentiveness in such exhibitions is always intermittent. Text panels tend to fragment the audience, as children and many

non-reading adults skip the words. Exhibition elements always need a little anticipation to work well. They are best prepared from afar. Most visitors, we judged, missed the murky video of a gathering of slaves in a cellar.

Not so “The Well.” A little further along the visitor path, just after the Merchant’s House, a cylindrical island sat in the middle of the room. Onto it from above was projected the outline of its brick construction. To most, it was immediately recognizable as a well from which one might draw buckets of water for household use. Historically, Manhattan’s wells had served as almost the only safe meeting-places for enslaved women in daylight—they were simply doing their work, and no one was at hand to enforce the local laws against gatherings larger than three.

With our media production team, we developed a video dialogue among four such women. Nick Paffett of KPC sketched out the idea. One could see them a variety of headwear by looking down at the reflections of their faces in the water. The dialogue moved in a desultory way from one subject to another in a five-minute loop, punctuated every minute or so by the sight and sound of a bucket splashing into the well, breaking the view of the faces for a moment or two. Visitors simply drifted away when the conversation began to repeat itself. (See cover image.)

The four women were each given a “back story,” explaining their ages (from 17 to 55), place of origin (New York City, Hudson Valley, Jamaica, Dahomey/Benin), and other characteristics—marriage, skill as a seamstress, the occupation of her owner. We worked with the actors to develop accents reflective of their age and origins. And then we let them go on, sliding from one piece of gossip to another—a story of a recent runaway, of a Muslim man newly enslaved in the city, of living apart from husbands, of relying on other women for bringing up their children, of the threat of epidemic disease and the healing potions and prayers that could combat its ravages, of the cold and discomfort, and so on. My inspiration, to be honest, came from eavesdropping as a child on the neighborhood women who rested in late spring and summer afternoons on the stoops in my Brooklyn block. Brenda Greene, an English professor at Medgar Evans College, CUNY, worked closely with me to hone the language.

Nothing else in *Slavery in New York* worked so well. Although there were occasional problems with audio clarity and sound levels, “The Well” communicated an immediacy that moved many visitors to laughter and tears. “The Well,” like many of our other interpretive media, was a form of investigation as much as a method of presentation.

Producing such visualizations and dramatizations of history requires lots of research. Some of that is curatorial—identifying the correct costumes, making the language as accurate as possible. But even more of it is deeply historical—attributing a full humanity to the people of the past, even when their lives are largely undocumented, then discovering what might have been important to them, and finally surrounding them with plausible versions of the historical settings, actions, and experiences missing from the archive. As we have



Gallery 8 (Conclusion): figures of black New Yorkers in freedom. (Photo courtesy of Nick Paffett, KPC.)

shown, deadline pressures often limit the ability of a curatorial team to undertake primary research and to privilege documents already identified by scholars as vital to the story. Nonetheless, exhibition interpretation ventures far beyond the dissemination of academic scholarship. The materiality of the sources displayed, the diversity of the audience, and the timeliness of the exhibition event all push curators toward an original reworking of the historical narrative.

Coming about a third of the way through the exhibition, the Well video definitively concluded the introductory challenge of *Slavery in New York*: to make Africans present, in body and voice, in the story. From this point forward, their actions count, their voices appear in the archives, they begin to create their own New York in full daylight. During the Revolutionary War, runaways transformed the city into one of the largest refugee encampments in American history. In the 1790s, a dozen black men signed their names on petitions for a burying-ground of their own. In 1799, they secured a gradual emancipation act from the state legislature. They founded churches that are today anchors of local black identity. By the end of this exhibition, the first of two at N-YHS devoted to New York's relationship with slavery, their images could be rendered in full-color, life-size figures, documented with names, addresses, and rich life-stories—a pointed contrast to the wire figures seen earlier.

*Slavery in New York* offered its curators and designers an opportunity to create a complex interweaving of many elements. What did our visitors feel? Many, especially white New Yorkers, reported surprise at the weight of the

historical evidence, argument, and narrative about “our city.” Others of all backgrounds were provoked to unexpected moral, political and aesthetic reflection about enslavement and liberty in America. Many found it exciting to share in witnessing this story with such diverse fellow museumgoers in such a mainstream, legendarily insular, institution. Others emphasized the sting of the persistence of racial categories in American life. But the long, though painful, history of Africans in New York also allowed some black New Yorkers to stake a new claim: one young black lawyer, a native and graduate of the city’s public schools and its private universities, told us that she would “feel differently returning to work on Monday on Wall Street, when I think that the people who built that [Dutch-era] wall looked a lot more like me than like most of my colleagues. For the first time I don’t feel like an outsider.” Still another visitor appreciated the meanings beneath the surface:

The impression that endures for me is of the shadowy, suggestive quality of the exhibit: the deep colors, the wispy wire figures, and the dim lighting cued me to expect a glimpse of something like an undercurrent beneath the surface of life in a New York whose history I thought I knew. Most sections of the exhibit had the quality of secrets communicated. The settings were umbrous, but the images, objects and language were spare and clear.<sup>32</sup>

## ***In Conclusion***

A history exhibition like *Slavery in New York* construes past and present as parallel pathways. On one set of tracks move historical characters, weighed down for a time, looking up at another, each person among them unique and complex. Along another course strides and shuffles our modern-day contemporaries, the exhibition visitors, each creating her own account of this day, when she was invited to look across the historical divide at the people of the past. As interpreters we create the devices that we hope will bridge this divide—the artifacts, images, and documents of the history and the interpretive media that make them accessible to our audiences. In sum, the form of the exhibition is another kind of narrative, perhaps as important as the “content” it is designed to communicate or the stories visitors are inscribing as they move through our galleries. Public historians need to understand *how* and not merely *what* exhibitions mean.

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32. Ellen Fletcher, e-mail message to author, December 21, 2005.

the New-York Historical Society, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum; the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute; the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati; and other sites in 33 states and the District of Columbia. Rabinowitz has an A.B. *summa cum laude* and a PhD from Harvard University. He is currently a Fellow at the Gilder Lehrman Center for Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University. He was awarded the 2012 Herbert Feis Prize for distinguished contributions to public history by the American Historical Association. He can be reached at rrahw@earthlink.net and blogs occasionally at [www.historydoctor.com](http://www.historydoctor.com).