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Prof. Steven Mintz,
Slavery in New York Themes, 11/30/2004

1. Slavery was not exclusively a southern institution. Clement Clarke Moore, the likely author of "'Twas the Night before Christmas," was a New York slaveholder. So, too, were John Jay and Aaron Burr. Alexander Hamilton didn't own enslaved people, but he never persuaded his wife's family to free theirs. President Martin Van Buren was a descendant of a Dutch New York slave-holding family.
2. Slavery in New York was not a static, unchanging institution. In New York, the law of slavery, the demographic characteristics of the enslaved population, work regimes, and slave culture all underwent profound transformations over time.
3. Slavery in New York was part of a broader Atlantic slave system. With bases extending from Elmina Castle on Africa's western coast to Curacao in the Caribbean and Brazil, the Dutch in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created the most extensive slave-trading network up until that time. Even in the nineteenth century, New York was part of a slave-based network of investment, insurance, shipping, and commerce that connected New York to Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean, and the American South.
4. Slavery played a crucial role in New York's settlement and development. Trinity Church, the city's early streets, and even the wall that gave Wall Street its name were built with enslaved labor. By the mid-eighteenth century, New York had more enslaved people than any other city in the thirteen colonies except Charleston. At least 130 slave-trading voyages originated from New York's harbor.
5. The absence of a highly regimented plantation system in New York did not lessen slavery's brutality. The small-scale slavery found in New York was no more mild or benign than slavery in the South. New York's enslaved population was unable to reproduce its numbers naturally until the 1750s.
6. Individually and collectively, black New Yorkers repeatedly resisted slavery. Several of the most significant slave conspiracies during the colonial era took place in or near New York City, including the 1708 uprising on Long Island, and the 1712 and 1741 conspiracies in the city itself. Black New Yorkers also created a vibrant culture with distinctive rituals, festivals, and symbolic ties to Africa.
7. The Revolution transformed slavery into an inescapable moral problem and the chaos and disruption of the Revolution gave African Americans unprecedented opportunities to escape from bondage.
8. Even in northern states like New York, resistance to abolishing slavery was fierce. Slavery in the state continued to grow following the Revolution. Repeated attempts to end slavery in New York were defeated until a gradual emancipation law was enacted in 1799. Slavery did not legally end in Connecticut until 1848

and in New Jersey, slavery was legal until the Thirteenth Amendment of 1865 (which freed a very small number of vestigial enslaved people). Slavery in New York died a long, lingering death. Racial segregation originated in the North, not the South, and a pervasive racial segregation shaped every dimension of black life. Nevertheless, New York's African American population did not accept discrimination passively and they organized throughout the antebellum era to end it.

9. Even after the abolition of slavery, the city's economy contributed in significant ways to sustain the functioning of the slave system elsewhere.

10. Crucial national political battles over slavery played out decisively in New York. New Yorkers were at the forefront of the struggles over the extension of slavery into Missouri, the Amistad captives, the Mexican war, and the filibustering expeditions in the 1850s. New York was home to many leading opponents of slavery, black and white. But compared to Boston and Philadelphia, New York's abolition movement was more divided along racial lines. There were stark differences in strategy and tactics among New York's black and white abolitionists. Lincoln's Cooper Union address transformed him into a serious contender for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination. During the war, New Yorkers directed the voluntary efforts of the Sanitary Commission and the Union Defense Committee, but the city was also the center of anti-war sentiment in the North. The Draft Riots of 1863, protesting the imposition of conscription laws, attacked Lincoln supporters and many blacks in the worst civil violence on American streets in the nation's history.