

St. James' Church involvement in the business and practice of slavery, 1810-1830

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Part I: Historical context of slavery in New York

When St. James' was founded in 1810, slavery was legal and widespread in New York. The next-to-last northern state to end slavery, New York had adopted An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in 1799, reflecting the tremendous importance of slavery in New York's economy, which provided that all children born into slavery in the state after July 4, 1799 would become indentured servants, to be freed when they turned 25 (for women) or 28 (for men). Enslaved people born before that date, however, remained enslaved. A further law, passed in 1817, granted eventual freedom to slaves born prior to 1799, but delayed their emancipation for ten years. Therefore, slavery in New York State did not come to a complete legal end until July 4, 1827, after almost 30 years of legal transition.

[Mary Freeman, <http://historyinaction.columbia.edu/field-notes/slavery-and-emancipation-new-york>]

The founders of St. James' Church represented many of the wealthiest families in the city whose country estates were near their new summer church and most of whose fortunes derived from slavery-related businesses. For example, three of the land trustees who conveyed the original land Trinity Church had granted to St. James' in 1809—Joshua Jones, Peter Schermerhorn, and William Rhinelander—both personally owned slaves and also profited from the labor of slaves in their businesses.

Part II: Parish funds derived from slavery

The first St. James' building was subscribed in 1809 with \$3K from Trinity Church and \$2.5K from the well-off members of St. James', in amounts from \$100 to \$300, substantial funds for the time, when most workers earned \$1/day. To provide endowed income going forward, St. James' received four downtown properties gifted from Trinity Church and then collected the ground rents from the lessees, including two slaveholders at 143 Chambers Street, Jonathan B. Murray and Ellis Potter.

Part III: Wardens and vestrymen owned slaves and slavery-related businesses

Of the first six wardens, 1810-1830, four were slaveowners or engaged directly in slavery-related businesses:

- Peter Schermerhorn (1810-1826) Owned 1 adult female slave, Nancy, in 1808; owned 2 slaves in the 1820 census. Heir to the family shipping and ship-supply business, which since 1728 ran direct packet service to Charleston, SC; he also speculated in Manhattan real estate [Schermerhorn Row]. Owned an enslaved man named Boston Crummell, whom family history records to have asserted his own manumission and continued to live in the city as an oysterman.
- Francis B. Winthrop (1810-1812) Owned 2 slaves, 1800 census
- Martin Hoffman (1812-1828) Owned 3 slaves, 1790 census; owned 2 slaves, 1800 census

- David Wagstaff (1828-1829) Owned 1 slave, 1800 census; owned 3 slaves, 1820 census

Of the first 30 vestrymen, 1810-1831, 12 were slaveowners or engaged directly in slavery-related businesses:

- John Mason (1810-1827) Freed slave James Gomez 1 October 1816
- John G. Bogert (1810-1820) Owned 3 slaves, 1790 census; 1 slave in 1810 census
- Peter Schermerhorn Jr. (1810-1815) Son of founding warden, heir of family shipping and ship-supply business, in direct trade with Charleston, SC
- William H. Jephson (1810-1812) Owned 1 slave, 1810 census
- John Jones (1810-1815) Owned 3 slaves, 1790 and 1800 censuses
- John H. Talman (1810-1819) Owned 1 slave, 1820 census
- Edward Dunscomb (1811-1812) Owned 1 slave, 1790 census; owned 3 slaves, 1800 census; owned 3 slaves, 1810 census. Trustee of Columbia College and sheriff of NY County
- Joshua Jones (1813-1822) Owned 1 slave, 1790 census; owned 4 slaves, 1800 census; owned 2 slaves, 1810 census
- Isaac C. Jones (1820-1831) Owned 1 adult male slave, George Tiebout, born 1770, date of record 1809; owned 1 slave, 1820 census
- James I. Jones (1821-1831) Owned 1 “mulatto” slave, Edward; Jones also promised him \$100, to be given in four quarterly payments by his executors within one year after Jones’s death.
- Philip Rhinelander (1827-1828) Owned 1 slave, 1790 census. Sugar-refining from slave-grown cane founded the Rhinelander fortune; the Rhinelander sugar house stood at William and Duane Street until 1892, and a window from the building remains on Police Plaza (as a memorial to the building’s likely-apocryphal use as a Revolution-era POW prison).
- William A. De Peyster (1831-1843) Owned 3 slaves, 1790 census. Compensated by the War Department for his slave, Romeo, transported to Arkansas with the Seminole Indians, June 17, 1844.

Part IV: St. James’ historical reckoning with slavery

While St. James’ Church has long since embraced a commitment to social and racial justice as integral to its mission to actively share the love of Jesus Christ with each other, its city, and the world, the parish’s founding and early leadership are deeply implicated in slavery, and the parish is called to recognize this history and acknowledge its legacy, to contribute to the diocesan “historical reckoning involving acknowledgement that an offense against humanity was committed and that the victims have not received justice.”