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Slaves and Slavery in the Mid-Hudson Valley

BOB WAS ONE OF MANY COLONISTS whose strength and ingenuity helped to settle the eighteenth-century Hudson Valley. A young man in his mid-twenties at the time of the Revolution who stood a full six feet tall, Bob was literate, highly skilled, and exceptionally versatile. Not only did he perform the myriad tasks associated with farming in the region, but he also labored as a gifted craftsman. An accomplished carpenter, Bob could also “turn, [and] make shoes” as a cobbler and even work with “mortar in a doctor’s shop.” Simply put, the man was a “mechanical genius.”¹ Bob readily conforms to the popular image of the enterprising and rugged Early American pioneer in all but one very important respect. For Bob was a slave, one of several thousand Africans and African Americans whose muscle, sweat, intelligence—and sometimes blood—proved indispensable to the development of the Mid-Hudson Valley. As elsewhere in the Americas, colonists in the region turned to enslaved workers to meet an insatiable demand for labor in an expanding economy. By the time of the Revolution, Africans and African Americans were a visible presence in local fields, homes, mills, and shops and on the region’s roads and riverfront landings. Enslaved men and women in the central Hudson Valley shared much with slaves who toiled downriver in New York City, but their experience differed from those in colonial seaports in important respects. Bondage in Dutchess County could be brutal and violent, and household slavery in the countryside could be extraordinarily oppressive. Low population density and dispersed settlement isolated many black residents from one another, and slaves in rural regions lacked those social and cultural supports available in urban centers. In the midst of such a stultifying environment, however, slaves in the Mid-Hudson region

carved out a small degree of personal and communal autonomy that afforded a means of psychological and cultural resistance.²

The African presence in early New York predated European settlement of the central Hudson Valley. Slave labor proved vital to the development of New Netherland. Uninterested in promoting extensive settlement but unable to recruit a sufficient labor force, the Dutch West India Company relied on involuntary bound labor to establish a permanent presence in North America during the first part of the seventeenth century. Company slaves cleared land, constructed buildings, erected fortifications, laid out roads, and performed other heavy labor in New Amsterdam and fledgling settlements in the lower and upper Hudson Valley. Dutch slavery was largely a New World creation. The institution did not exist in the United Provinces. Bondage in early New Netherland was neither codified nor systematic, and people of African descent held an ambiguous legal status. Relationships between masters and slaves were ad hoc and familiar, and bound laborers in the Dutch province enjoyed privileges that later generations of slaves would not. Blacks worked their own plots, engaged in independent economic activity, served in the militia, and even represented themselves in court. Under a system of “half-freedom,” slaves enjoyed full liberty to live and work for themselves in exchange for annual payments and a promise to perform labor when called upon by the Dutch West India Company. “Half-freedom” was not inheritable, but several slaves in the province managed to negotiate their own manumission. Although their cultural origins and position as bound laborers clearly set slaves apart from free white colonists, people of color in New Netherland did not constitute a distinct racial caste. Emancipated slaves enjoyed the same rights and privileges as other free colonists; several became freeholders. Coming from many different parts of the wider Atlantic World, blacks in New Netherland were intimately familiar with different European, African, and American ways. They retained a strong African identity but also fused and adapted other cultural forms. Although denied full church membership, for example, some people of African descent attended Christian religious services; a few black couples in New Amsterdam even solemnized marriage vows and baptized children in the Dutch Reformed Church. By the middle of the seventeenth century, New Netherland was coalescing into a slave society. When the English assumed control of the province in 1664, people of African descent—who comprised approximately ten percent of the colony’s population—were not only performing critical economic roles but also leaving an indelible imprint on provincial culture.³

The development of the Mid-Hudson region proceeded slowly. Seventeenth-century Dutch settlement was concentrated in two distinct regions: New Amsterdam and its environs in the lower Hudson Valley and the area surrounding Fort Orange and the patroonship of Rensselaerswyck to the north. Preoccupied with the fur trade and imperial commerce, the Dutch West India Company found little of value in the extensive region lying between its principal fur trading post in the upper Hudson Valley and its commercial entrepôt on the tip of Manhattan Island. Interest in the central valley increased moderately after the English seized the colony from their Dutch rivals. Europeans first settled the west bank, as English, Dutch, French Huguenot, and Palatine German settlers spread out slowly from Esopus (Kingston), a small outpost established in the 1650s. For the most part, however, population growth remained modest for several decades. Ethnic conflict, political factionalism, the absence of representative government, and the proximity of hostile French and Native American nations retarded settlement in New York for much of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Restrictive patterns of land tenure rendered the Hudson Valley especially unattractive to prospective immigrants. For much of the colonial period, provincial governors regularly dispensed patronage in the form of extensive land grants to political allies. By the early eighteenth century, landlords and speculators held title to hundreds of thousands of acres in the province; fewer than one dozen landlords held title to virtually every acre in Dutchess County alone.⁴ In theory, the owners of such vast tracts would entice migration to their estates and stimulate economic development. In practice, however, the awarding of such extensive patents to a privileged gentry retarded population growth for several decades. Although lease agreements in colonial New York were not necessarily onerous and tenancy provided colonists of modest means opportunities to cultivate land they would not have been able to purchase, the leasehold system discouraged the immigration of ambitious yeomen who eschewed New York in favor of opportunities to purchase freeholds in Pennsylvania and the Chesapeake region. Settlement of the river's east bank proceeded especially slowly. It is unclear whether any European resided in Dutchess County when it was organized in 1683, and its population remained so small that colonial authorities provisionally attached the county to neighboring Ulster until 1713. As late as 1731, Dutchess ranked dead last in population among the province's ten counties, numbering a mere 1,724 (non-Indian) persons.⁵

Profound economic changes beginning in the early eighteenth century brought about a dramatic reversal in the region's fortunes. For many years, the lure of the fur trade, restrictive patterns of land tenure, exorbitant transportation costs, and the absence of lucrative markets discouraged settlement and limited acreage under cultivation. However, a long-term recession in the fur trade beginning in the latter part of the seventeenth century encouraged New Yorkers to diversify their economic activities.⁶ By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, an expanding trade in foodstuffs encouraged producers to look to the fertile soils of the central Hudson region. The less mountainous eastern bank proved especially attractive. Dutchess' soils proved superior to rockier soils west of the river, while gently rolling hills provided excellent irrigation and drainage. The many creeks and streams on the eastern bank provided water power for a variety of milling enterprises, while multiple sites for river landings provided ideal access to more distant markets. Dutchess' rich soils beckoned land-hungry immigrants from New York City, Long Island, and neighboring New England. After decades of halting growth, Dutchess became the fastest-growing county in the colony by the middle of the eighteenth century. During the half century between 1723 and 1771, the county's population increased an astounding twentyfold to more than twenty-two thousand residents. Within a mere twenty-five years, Dutchess jumped from the position of least to second most populous county in the province, a rank it held for the rest of the century.⁷

The region's rapid economic development exacerbated a chronic shortage of labor. In the semi-subsistent economy of the eighteenth-century Hudson Valley, most farmers produced largely for themselves and exchanged small surpluses in local markets. Most farms were small in size, and growers relied predominately on family labor.⁸ However, the increasing volume of extra-local trade and expanded enterprises of larger farmers and landlords intensified labor demands. The majority of masters and employers in the Hudson Valley, however, struggled to attract and retain workers. J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a French commentator of eighteenth-century American life who became a landholder and slaveowner on the west bank, lamented that when it came to hiring laborers, employers had to "pray and entreat them" and concede virtually anything they demanded.⁹ Landlords offered a variety of incentives to prospective tenants, but many newcomers left not long after they arrived to purchase freeholds elsewhere. Indentured servants, moreover, were too few and costly to meet the pressing labor

need. Like other prospective immigrants, servants regarded their prospects brighter in colonies other than New York.¹⁰

Unable to attract or retain a sufficient number of free or bound European immigrants, producers in the Hudson Valley turned to slaves as a more convenient source of labor. Although black labor proved critical to early colonial development, the importation of slaves into the province was comparatively modest during the seventeenth century. New Netherland and New York occupied the periphery of the Atlantic World, and slave importations were irregular. Slaves typically arrived in small parcels from the Caribbean and southern mainland colonies—rarely from the African continent directly. Although New York buyers often complained that merchants in the West Indies dumped unhealthy, unproductive, and intractable slaves onto northern markets, such slaves remained attractive because they had survived the “seasoning” process and had become at least partially acculturated to European and American ways. Skilled cosmopolitan “creoles” born elsewhere in the Atlantic World were especially prized. The supply of enslaved laborers, however, remained inadequate to meet the needs of a rapidly growing economy. As production and commerce expanded, authorities took steps to promote the importation of slaves directly from the African continent. As early as 1709, the Crown directed New York’s Governor Hunter to give “all due encouragement and invitation” to merchants engaged in the African trade and directed the Royal African Company to provide the colony with “a constant and sufficient supply of Merchantable Negroes at moderate process.”¹¹ New York buyers continued to face stiff competition from purchasers in the West Indies and southern colonies, but the fantastic growth in the transatlantic slave trade and a discriminatory tariff policy that promoted African importations provided New Yorkers with an expanded supply of enslaved laborers. By midcentury, slaves comprised as many as one-third of all immigrants to the colony.¹² New York’s black population doubled between 1723 and 1756 and tripled during the six decades between 1731 and 1790, jumping from 7,231 to 25,983 persons, making the province the largest slave society north of the Chesapeake.

The rate of increase was particularly dramatic in the Hudson Valley, where more than half of the colony’s slave population lived and worked. Dutchess County’s black population almost tripled between 1756 and 1790, exceeding the rate of increase for the colony and state as a whole. By the beginning of the final decade of the eighteenth century, Dutchess was home to 2,300 people of color, 1,856 of whom were slaves.¹³ The

county's black population was heavily concentrated in the more populous western regions along the Hudson River, the foci of economic activity. At the time of the first federal census in 1790, three of every four slaves in the county lived and worked in the four townships of Clinton, Fishkill, Poughkeepsie, and Rhinebeck.¹⁴ Although slaves comprised only four percent of the county population as whole, twelve percent of residents in Rhinebeck, ten percent in Fishkill, and eight percent in Poughkeepsie were held in bondage.¹⁵ Comparatively few residents of eastern and southern Dutchess were slaveowners, but between one in five and one in four households in Fishkill, Poughkeepsie, and Rhinebeck included slaves at the end of the century.¹⁶

Slaveowners in the region relied not only on the specific skills of their slaves but also on their adaptability to the myriad labor demands of the regional economy. Grains like barley, maize, oats, rye, and especially wheat were the mainstay of the eighteenth-century economy, but over time, farmers increasingly diversified their activities to include flax, hay, hemp, and a wide variety of vegetables. Virtually all farmers tended orchards that produced apples, cherries, plums, and peaches. The rhythms of work varied with the changing seasons. When not engaged in plowing, planting, and harvesting, slaves busied themselves felling trees, clearing fields, tending livestock, constructing barns, repairing fences, fixing tools, and carting produce to market.¹⁷ Hudson Valley farmers and their slaves were "jacks of all trades" who labored as their own blacksmiths, butchers, carpenters, cobblers, coopers, distillers, joiners, masons, rope makers, sawyers, tanners, tailors, and weavers. The phrase "understands all kinds of farm work" appeared regularly in newspaper advertisements for male slaves during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Abel Noble, for example, boasted that his twenty-seven-year-old slave was "a handy fellow at many sorts of business."¹⁸ Slaves not only performed multiple tasks but also mastered specific skills. Caesar, an accomplished farmer who labored for Thomas Dearn of Poughkeepsie, was a talented mason adept at making "a very good stone-wall."¹⁹ The versatility of male slaves extended beyond the farm to include rural manufacture and commerce. Mill operators in Dutchess County employed slave labor, and slaves worked in local forges.²⁰ Merchants utilized Africans and African Americans in their warehouses, while black teamsters and boatmen transported goods along local highways and waterways. Well acquainted with farm work, one twenty-year-old offered for sale was also "used to the boating business," and another skilled farmhand came well recommended as "an excellent teamster."²¹ While engaged in farming,

rural manufacture, and commerce, male slaves also worked within their masters' households. Boys typically labored as house servants, while men in genteel families served as coachmen, porters, and waiters. Slaveowners particularly valued those capable of work on both the farm and in the home. One young man offered for sale in 1782 not only tended his master's farm but also served as a "genteel waiter" and "good teemsman."²²

Enslaved women and girls labored predominately as domestics, whose responsibilities around the home were likewise numerous and wide-ranging. While the phrase "understands all kinds of farm work" typically appeared in ads for male slaves, advertisements for women regularly noted familiarity with "all kinds of house work." Domestics maintained individual households, assumed responsibilities of child care, and engaged in rural manufacture. Advertisements for female slaves enumerated skills in baking, cooking, ironing, knitting, needlework, scrubbing, sewing, spinning, starching, and washing. Butter and cheese were important commodities in local trade, and ads routinely identified slaves' skills in dairying, milking, and butter making. Responsibilities of slave women, however, extended beyond the domain of the household. As they valued the versatility of their male slaves, slaveowners prized the adaptability of female slaves to different tasks. Sellers described their slave women as "remarkably nimble" and "exceeding [sic] handy," capable of performing "any kind of business" and "all kinds of work."²³ One seller boasted that the woman he offered for sale—recommended for her "sobriety and honesty"—was the "most compleat [sic] house wench."²⁴ Women were not absent from the fields, particularly during harvest and other busy times. One twenty-four-year-old woman offered for sale by Thomas Palmer in 1783 was not only familiar with "kitchen work" but also "capable of working in hay or harvest, as a common Negro man."²⁵ Across the river in Ulster County, the region's most famous slave—a young woman named Isabella who assumed the name Sojourner Truth later in life—supposedly performed the work of two laborers. Slaveowner John Dumont boasted that Isabella was in fact more valuable than a man since she could "do a good family's washing in the night, and be ready in the morning to go into the field," where she performed as well as Dumont's best hands.²⁶

Work in the eighteenth-century Hudson Valley was hard. Whether laborers toiled indoors or out, the workday began before daylight and ended long after the sun set in the evening. Labor on farms and in shops, mills, forges, and homes was not only long but often dangerous. Physical descriptions of fugitive slaves provide glimpses into the rugged and violent

lives slaves led. Advertisements for runaways regularly noted bruises, lumps, scars, and other distinguishing marks. Caesar, a young man approximately fifteen or sixteen years of age, bore a “remarkable scar” on his forehead from the kick of a horse.²⁷ One of Faurt’s middle fingers “stood square” due to an accident.²⁸ Anyone who worked around fireplaces ran the risk of burns. Thirty-year-old Sook appeared cross-eyed “on account of a burn upon the eye lid.”²⁹ Many slaves carried the marks of injuries and illnesses throughout their lives. As a young man, Maurice still bore the scar from an accident he suffered years earlier as a child.³⁰ Masters frequently described their fugitives as being lame or suffering a limp; such slaves typically walked “a little stooping,” “a little stiff,” “considerably bent,” or “rather one-sided.”³¹ Even less fortunate slaves suffered the loss of extremities such as fingers and toes; Christopher, a “stout” twenty-three-year-old man from Clinton, “lost a piece of one ear.”³²

Scars and disabilities attested not only to the harsh reality of life and labor in the eighteenth-century Hudson Valley but also to the violence of an institution that grew more brutal over time. As the colony’s black population increased and as white fears of an increasingly alien and potentially dangerous population intensified, New York was transformed from what Ira Berlin has characterized as a “society with slaves” into a “slave society.” What few opportunities and privileges Africans and African Americans had enjoyed under the Dutch disappeared as a more oppressive racially based system of bondage emerged in the province during the 1700s.³³ The creation and adaptation of slave law both reflected and shaped this transformation. The emergence of slavery in English America over the course of the seventeenth century raised troubling legal questions. First, common law presumed that only a heathen could be a slave; did conversion and Christian baptism liberate someone held in bondage? Second, patrilineal descent had awkward implications for free white men—notably slaveowners—who fathered children born of slave women. Could such children sue for freedom on the basis of paternity? New York took steps early in the eighteenth century to clarify legal confusion and close avenues of potential emancipation. Following the lead of the Caribbean and southern colonies, provincial lawmakers in 1706 decreed that Christian baptism presented no “Cause or reason” for emancipation and stipulated that the legal status of a child born of a slave followed that of the mother, that is, such a child was to be “adjudged a Slave.” Passed ostensibly to

assist “good subjects” in their efforts to proselytize the colony’s black population, the “Act to Encourage the Baptizing of Negro, Indian and Mulatto Slaves” effectively solidified the property rights of slaveowners while guaranteeing them a potentially self-reproducing labor force.³⁴ The 1702 “Act for Regulateing [sic] of Slaves” and subsequent revisions confirmed the near absolute power slaveowners and civil authorities wielded over the province’s enslaved population. Masters enjoyed the right to punish slaves at their full “discretion,” short only of premeditated murder or willful mutilation. Municipalities were authorized to employ a “common whipper” of slaves at public expense to administer physical punishment. Legislation attempted to circumscribe slave life by curtailing movement, prohibiting unauthorized assembly, barring the ownership of guns, and criminalizing illicit trade. In an attempt to separate the colony’s enslaved and free populations and reinforce the dependence of slaves on their masters, the law imposed penalties on any colonist who engaged in illegal commerce with slaves or who employed, harbored, concealed, or entertained a slave without the permission of the slave’s master. Enslaved New Yorkers were subject to a legal double standard. Legislation denied slaves the right to a jury trial; criminal cases against slaves were heard by a panel of freeholders and three justices of the peace who wielded significant discretion in administering punishment. On the west bank, a special court in Kingston was demonstrative in sentencing a slave named Thom of the murder of a black woman in 1696, ordering that Thom be hung by the neck until “dead, dead, dead”—after which his throat was to be cut and his corpse “hanged in a Chaine [sic] for an Example to others.”³⁵ Slaves could testify only against other slaves—in no case whatsoever could a slave testify against a free person. Any slave convicted of striking a free man or woman was subject to imprisonment or corporal punishment. In 1707, for example, the Court of Sessions in Ulster County sentenced a slave named Pierro to be whipped publicly in every corner of the town of Kingston for assaulting Catrina Cortregt, the wife of Hendrick Cortegt.³⁶ Periods of conflict and social unrest heightened fears of the province’s enslaved population. Anxious colonists were particularly inclined to suspect their slaves during wartime. In an attempt to prevent slaves from escaping and carrying intelligence to their French enemy in Canada, lawmakers authorized the execution of any fugitive captured above Albany.³⁷ Most terrifying were incidents of slave violence and conspiracy, which prompted the adoption of yet

more stringent and oppressive controls. Passed after the “Execrable and Barberous [sic]” murder of a Queens County slaveowner and his family by a slave, the 1708 “Act for preventing the Conspiracy of Slaves” authorized the execution of any slave convicted of murdering or conspiring to murder any free person.³⁸ In the aftermath of a deadly slave uprising in New York City in 1712, lawmakers strengthened slave controls, explicitly designating murder, conspiracy, arson, rape, and the mutilation or dismemberment of a free person as capital crimes. “An Act for preventing[,] Suppressing[,] and punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negroes and other Slaves” also denied the right of black colonists to hold property and stiffened penalties for those who illegally harbored, entertained, or traded with slaves. And, in a move of far-reaching consequence, lawmakers all but closed avenues toward emancipation by rendering the costs of freeing a slave prohibitively expensive; after 1712, a slaveowner wishing to manumit human property needed to post a hefty two-hundred-pound bond.³⁹

The legal authority to sell a slave as an object of property was one of the most terrifying weapons a master wielded. Slaveholders frequently justified northern slavery as an allegedly benign institution that recognized and protected slave families. Orange County farmer J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur claimed that adult slaves freely married partners of their choosing, spent regular time together, and enjoyed the privilege of “educating, cherishing, and chastising their children.”⁴⁰ De Crevecoeur’s idyllic portrayal grossly misrepresented reality. Throughout the colonial period, the slave family enjoyed no legal protection; not until 1809 did state law recognize slave families. The threat of sale was particularly salient in the Hudson Valley, where the seasonal economy meant that slaveowners frequently hired out their slaves during slack times. Selling slaves for days, weeks, months, or even years not only allowed slaveholders to adjust their labor needs to the changing seasons and shifting economic fortunes but also provided masters supplemental income and relieved them from costs of slave maintenance. The comparatively cheaper cost of hiring also put enslaved labor within reach of smaller farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers of more modest means.⁴¹ Consequently, slaves in the Mid-Hudson region like Diana Jackson were “sold from one Person to another” and relocated from place to place during their lives in bondage.⁴² Phillis Anthony spent the most productive years of her life serving no fewer than seven different masters.⁴³ Rachel Pride labored for at least eight, making her way to the

central Hudson Valley from her native New Jersey over the course of several years.⁴⁴ The threat of sale was a source of constant anxiety; actual separation produced gut-wrenching anguish. Sojourner Truth's mother, "Mau-Mau Bett," saw most of her children sold away; Sojourner herself never knew several of her older siblings.⁴⁵

Patterns of slaveholding had an especially devastating impact on black family life in the Mid-Hudson Valley. A discernable preference for male slaves to perform heavy labor and the hesitancy to purchase women of childbearing age who could burden masters with the maintenance of slave children meant that black males outnumbered females for most of the eighteenth century. Since settlement of the central Hudson region proceeded later than other parts of the province, the sex ratio remained more skewed in Dutchess than in other counties, stabilizing only in the 1770s and 1780s.⁴⁶ Most devastating was the small size of slaveholdings that fragmented slave families. Unlike most slaves in the southern colonies who typically worked and lived with or near other bondmen and women, slaves in the Mid-Hudson Valley were comparatively isolated. The mean slaveholding in Dutchess County at the beginning of the final decade of the eighteenth century was 2.8 slaves. Almost three-quarters of county slaveowners held fewer than four; more than two of five slaveholders owned only a single slave. Slaveholding on such a small-scale often separated spouses and parents from children. Almost half of all African Americans in white households in 1790 resided in homes with three or fewer blacks; fully one-third lived only with whites. Conceivably as many as three-quarters of slaves in the central Hudson Valley lived apart from loved ones.⁴⁷ Similar slaveholding patterns existed in seaports, but concentrated settlement in urban environments allowed city dwellers to associate with other slaves on a daily basis—on streets and docks, and in markets, shops, and alleyways. However, comparatively dispersed settlement in the countryside served to isolate African Americans in the central Hudson Valley. While many of the region's black residents might have traveled only to neighboring farms to visit friends or loved ones, others undoubtedly had to traverse greater distances. Even when family members resided nearby or within the same household, demanding work routines meant that members spent precious little time together. Dutchess County's black residents enjoyed little privacy. Slaves typically resided in their masters' homes, usually in attics, basements, cellars, garrets, or kitchens that were often dark, cramped, and uncomfortable. Even as an adult, Sojourner Truth could still vividly recall the small

basement quarters she shared with several other slaves as a young child, its little light streaming through a “few panes of glass,” and “annoying” and “noxious” odors emanating from the mud floor below the floor boards.⁴⁸ Such spatial intimacy could have devastating consequences. The master undermined the position of husbands, wives, and parents as providers and protectors.⁴⁹ Sojourner Truth knew far too well how capricious and devastating a slaveowner’s power over slave family life could be. Incensed by an intimate romantic relationship his slave Robert had cultivated with the young Isabella, Robert’s owner brutally beat the young man, forbade him from seeing Isabella again, and forced him to marry someone else.⁵⁰ Women, children, and men who lived under the same roof as their owners were constantly vulnerable to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Scars and injuries hint at such brutality, but explicit details of such traumatic encounters will likely remain forever hidden. When composing Sojourner Truth’s narrative, Oliver Gilbert recorded only that it was during the young woman’s time in the Dumont household that there “arose a long series of trials in the life of our heroine, which we must pass over in silence.”⁵¹

However, if the familial nature of slavery in the Hudson Valley bred cruelty and engendered fear and distrust, it also fostered bonds of genuine affection. Slaves and their owners became intimately acquainted with each other. Hudson Valley slaves were integral, if clearly subordinate, members of their owners’ households. As Melvin Patrick Ely has demonstrated in his study of black life in rural Virginia, there existed a wide gap between how whites perceived slaves in the abstract and how they interacted with those with whom they were intimately acquainted. However unequal, interracial relationships in smaller rural communities were personal, casual, and familiar.⁵² White and black residents of Dutchess County worked, lived, ate, drank, played, sang, and danced together. Patterns of rural social life dictated such intimate exchange. Family and community celebrations regularly mixed free and slave. J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur recalled how white and black residents shared life’s “joys and pleasures” and partook of “the mirth and good cheer” of festive seasons.⁵³ Several slaves were accomplished fiddlers and musicians who played at country frolics and dances to the enjoyment of white and black revelers alike.⁵⁴ Strict legal controls on slave behavior and prohibitions on illicit social intercourse between slaves and free colonists proved practically unenforceable.⁵⁵ A county grand jury indicted Johannis Radcliff, a Rhinebeck cooper, for entertaining slaves and encouraging them to drink “to excess” and engage in “riotous and rude

behavior.”⁵⁶ Slaves could be not only companions, confidants, and friends but also lovers. “Mulatto” and “yellow” slaves were products not only of forcible rape but also of more consensual unions. Even De Crevecoeur admitted that intimacy between black and white in the valley sometimes degenerated into “licentiousness” despite laws to the contrary.⁵⁷ In 1762, Adreyan Van Voorhees was accused of having “Carnell [sic] knowledge” of a slave belonging to Captain Nicholas Emigh and having “gotten her with Child.” An affidavit sworn by Adreyan’s brother Stephen vehemently denying the charges maintained that the slanderous accusation had impugned Adreyan’s good character—especially among “Young Ladies of Credit and Reputation”—and had damaged his business.⁵⁸ Men, however, were not the only ones to stand accused of improper sexual activity. John and Mary Van Camp sued Polly Knap for slander in 1792 after Polly alleged that Mary had miscarried a black child fathered by Van Camp’s “servant” Peat. According to the Van Camps’ complaint, Polly envied Mary’s “happy state and condition” and maliciously attempted to discredit her “good name[,] credit[,] and esteem.” Like Stephen Van Voorhees, the Van Camps claimed that neighbors and friends had “withdrawn themselves” from Mary’s company.⁵⁹ In both instances, however, scandal seemed to have arisen from the accusation of an illicit sexual union—not necessarily the racial identity or legal status of the alleged sexual partner.

Slaves in Dutchess County and the wider region exploited the familial nature of slaveholding to extract concessions from their owners. A struggle for power lay at the heart of the master-slave relationship. Slavery entailed the constant and daily negotiation between slave and master that required accommodation and resistance on the part of each party. Slaves occupied a clearly inferior position in such dealings, but the master’s authority was never absolute, and slaves were never completely powerless. The physical and emotional intimacy of slavery in the Mid-Hudson Valley enhanced the bargaining position of bondmen and bondwomen in the incessant “give-and-take” between master and slave. Slaves exerted some say in the tasks to be performed and lobbied their masters for improved conditions, extra provisions, time off, and opportunities to visit loved ones.⁶⁰ Some exercised voice in determining where and for whom they labored. According to his master’s 1771 last will and testament, William Doughty’s slave Sampson could not be sold against his will.⁶¹ Benjamin Roe’s slave Nann enjoyed full “liberty to chuse [sic] herself a master to live with,” as did Abraham Kip’s slaves, who were free to be hired by “honest persons” whom “they shall

think best.”⁶² Genuine compassion and a sense of paternalism obviously informed a slaveholder’s willingness to make such concessions, but slaves undoubtedly influenced such decisions, and some agreements were likely the consequence of lobbying by slaves themselves. Of course, the leverage slaves wielded vis-à-vis their owners was limited. Ignoring the entreaties of their bondmen and women, the vast majority of colonial slaveholders bequeathed or sold slaves without a second thought. Even when making concessions, masters typically circumscribed slaves’ freedom of action by limiting the choice of a new master to heirs, requiring the approval of a prospective sale by executors, and insisting on adequate compensation for their estates. John Montross’ slave, for example, enjoyed the right to select a new owner only if he earned a “reasonable sum.”⁶³ An opportunity to negotiate or reject a sale usually required some concession on the part of the slave. A recalcitrant bondman or woman did not earn a master’s goodwill. Abraham Kip, Peter Jay, and Catherine Reade indicated that it was only in recognition of loyal and obedient service that they permitted their slaves some discretion in choosing new masters.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, although slaveholders restricted slaves’ choice of new masters, demanded fair compensation, and insisted on the involvement of their executors, the fact that such masters and mistresses made such allowances at all is suggestive of the intimacy of slaveholding in the region.

Concessions to slaves served a master’s interest by providing incentive and positive reinforcement for dutiful service, but they simultaneously eroded a slaveholder’s authority in other ways. Independent economic activity such as hunting, fishing, and gardening allowed slaves opportunities to supplement their diets and reduce their material dependence on their owners. Moreover, the sale of goods in local markets provided discretionary income to purchase articles of clothing, household items, and small gifts for family members. For a period of time, Sojourner Truth’s parents cultivated tobacco, corn, and flax on a small plot along a mountain slope on the west bank.⁶⁵ Although liberty to engage in such activities was clearly circumscribed, the small informal slave economy allowed enslaved women and men to assume roles as actors and decision-makers who exercised a small degree of control over their lives.⁶⁶ Theft of a slaveowner’s goods and engagement in illegal economic activity was even more subversive of a master’s authority. Illicit trade and social intercourse between slaves and nonslaveholding whites persisted throughout the colonial period—to the consternation of provincial authorities. Writing to the justices of the peace in Dutchess County amid

the hysteria precipitated by the discovery of an alleged slave conspiracy in New York City in 1741, Lieutenant Governor George Clarke pleaded with the judges—in the name of “Peace, the Safety of the Province, and your own Preservation”—to enforce legal controls vigorously and aggressively prosecute those colonists who illegally consorted with slaves.⁶⁷ At times authorities were indeed vigilant. In late 1741, justices in Ulster County fined several local slaveowners for allowing their slaves to meet illegally at the home of Abraham Stoubergh.⁶⁸ Finding William Lester of the Rombout Precinct guilty of harboring slaves at different times between May and September of 1746, the Court of General Sessions in Dutchess County concluded that the shoemaker must not have had “God before his Eyes” but had been “seduced by the Instigation of the Devil.”⁶⁹ For the most part, however, legislation prohibiting illicit economic intercourse between slaves and free colonists was largely ineffective in the rural Mid-Hudson Valley, where blacks and whites consorted with each other on a regular basis. As late as 1791, the black market in stolen goods had grown so alarming to a group of slaveowning farmers in Ulster County that they petitioned the legislature for redress. Decrying the frequent theft committed by slaves and the “scandalous custom” of many citizens in trading with black residents, the petitioners exhorted their representatives to adopt measures to quell such “destructive” commerce.⁷⁰

African Americans in bondage not only exercised a modicum of economic independence but also carved out a unique social and cultural space in the Mid-Hudson Valley. Born and raised in their masters’ homes, often separated from kin, and working and living with their owners on a daily basis, African Americans rapidly acculturated to the particularly rich and diverse cultural world of the eighteenth-century Hudson Valley. The vast majority of native-born slaves typically spoke different European languages heard in the region, notably Dutch or English.⁷¹ New Yorkers of Dutch descent clung fiercely to traditional ways, and some slaves raised in such households knew no language other than Dutch. Having been brought up “among Low Dutch,” for example, Tom, a seventeen-year-old mulatto in the Fishkill home of Adrian Brinckerhoff, spoke but “bad English.”⁷² However, black residents of the central Hudson Valley were just as frequently conversant in both languages; Hendrick Benner’s slave Abraham was even multilingual, fluent in English, Low Dutch, and German.⁷³ Levels of language proficiency varied greatly. Some black residents spoke poorly—at least to the ears of their owners. Slaves like James, Daniel, and Tom stuttered or stammered.⁷⁴ While someone like Rachael spoke “quick and hoarse,” others

like James and Jack were “slow in speech” or spoke “thick and slow.”⁷⁵ Alleged deficiencies in speech stemmed from different causes. A physical disability afflicted nineteen-year-old Harry, who spoke “awkwardly” due to a drooping lower lip.⁷⁶ Speech difficulties could also indicate ignorance or insecurity when conversing with whites. Some, however, demonstrated an excellent command of language; Caesar and William, for example, each spoke “very good” Dutch and English.⁷⁷ However, if African Americans in the central Hudson Valley spoke the languages of their owners and imbued many different European values, they retained a unique cultural identity and exercised a degree of social autonomy. Surrounded by whites, people of color consciously sought out and nurtured relationships with other black men and women on neighboring farms and in nearby shops and homes. Different historians of the rural African American experience have demonstrated the existence of informal black social networks in the countryside, and fragmentary evidence suggests that such networks existed in the Mid-Hudson Valley. De Crevecoeur, for example, observed that slaves in the region occasionally managed to escape white supervision to conduct “their own meetings.”⁷⁸ Black New Yorkers occupied a clearly distinctive religious and spiritual world. Slaves appeared periodically in the baptismal and marriage records of eighteenth-century churches—typically recorded without surnames and identified by their owners—and occasionally accompanied their masters to religious services. Christianity, however, made only limited inroads among the region’s black population during the colonial era. The principal denominations evinced limited interest in proselytizing among New York’s black population, while slaveowners for their part remained decidedly hesitant to catechize their slaves. Despite legal assurance that Christian baptism did not alter a slave’s status, masters feared the potentially subversive consequences of the Gospel; white New Yorkers blamed both the 1712 slave uprising and alleged 1741 conspiracy in part on efforts to proselytize and instruct slaves. White opposition alone, however, was not the only reason for the limited conversion of slaves. Many in bondage remained indifferent and even hostile to the creed of their enslavers. Resistance intensified as the number of African-born slaves in the colony increased over the course of the eighteenth century.⁷⁹ The cultural divide between white colonists and their black slaves widened as the infusion of foreign-born slaves served to “Africanize” black life and culture—religious beliefs, rituals, burial practices, language, naming patterns, work ways, healing practices, material culture, food ways, music, dance, and folklore.⁸⁰ Typically identified by their Hudson Valley owners simply as “Guinea born” regardless of nativity, some native Africans

struggled to adjust to their new environment. Although Pomp managed to become proficient in English, Ananias Cooper's slave Tom spoke "broken English," and the "Guinea Negro" Adam could only "read English broken."⁸¹ Retention of native languages and traditional ways could provide a powerful weapon of individual resistance. A woman with an "ungovernable temper" who spoke only broken English, John L. Holthuysen's slave supposedly laughed when spoken to and only pretended "to understand the person who speaks to her."⁸²

Although the importation of African-born slaves served to "Africanize" eighteenth-century black life, black culture in the Hudson Valley in fact represented the fusion of multiple European, African, and American cultural forms. Since its inception, the colony of New York was the most culturally heterogeneous in North America. White colonists traced their origins to the British Isles, France, the Netherlands, Iberia, and different Germanic kingdoms in Central Europe. The colony's black population, however, was yet more diverse. Enslaved New Yorkers came from many different regions in West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, Madagascar, the Caribbean, and other parts of the Atlantic World.⁸³ Although the rural Hudson Valley was less ethnically diverse than the "melting pot" of New York City, slaves borrowed from different ethnicities in the region and fused them to fashion new cultural forms. Language is one example. Black speakers of European languages created their own structures, idioms, and dialects; what slave-owners like Ananias Cooper and John Holthuysen heard as poor speech was just as likely "Africanized" variants of Dutch and English.⁸⁴ The syncretization of European and African cultural forms in the Hudson Valley is perhaps best demonstrated by the Afro-Dutch celebration of Pinkster. Black New Yorkers appropriated and transformed the Dutch and German religious holiday over the course of the eighteenth century. Lasting for several days after Pentecost Sunday, the festival was an especially powerful sensation of sights, smells, tastes, and sounds. Days were filled with sporting events, games, feasting, and drinking. Dressed in elaborate, colorful, and even gaudy costumes, revelers paraded and marched about festival grounds in grand style. By the turn of the nineteenth century, evidence of African cultural influences was unmistakable. Musicians played on drums, rattles, and stringed instruments that closely resembled African counterparts. One observer of Pinkster festivities in Albany in 1803 recorded that during the evenings prior to the festival blacks roamed the streets beating a "Guinea drum" to announce the upcoming holiday and awaken "the latent spark of love for his native country and native dance in the bosom of the African."

The frenzied, expressive, improvisational, and sexually provocative style of dance shocked white observers. In a ritual of role reversal, an African “king” ruled the festivities, lording over white and black alike. The white witness to the 1803 festival considered the whole spectacle “a chaos of sin and folly, of misery and fun” where “every vice” was “practiced without reproof and without reserve.”⁸⁵ Like other festivals of misrule, Pinkster had contradictory implications. On the one hand, an inversion of the social hierarchy and seemingly unrestrained revelry served to reinforce the existing social order by providing a “safety valve” of sorts that released anger and discontent among the oppressed. On the other hand, by the turn of the nineteenth century, black New Yorkers had transformed the festival into a celebration of a unique creole culture, creating and expressing a distinctive identity and racial consciousness that nurtured individual and communal pride. African Americans in the Hudson Valley ultimately engaged in what William Piersen has called a “resistant accommodation,” never directly challenging the existing order, but adapting different cultural forms to meet their own emotional, cultural, and spiritual needs.⁸⁶

By the latter part of the eighteenth century, Africans and African Americans occupied an important economic and unique social space in the Mid-Hudson Valley. Although a distinct minority, slaves played vital roles, performing varied tasks and plying multiple skills in the region’s mixed economy. The institution of slavery as it evolved in the region, however, could be extraordinarily brutal and violent. Slave law gave masters near absolute control over their slaves, and the small scale of slaveholding in the rural Hudson Valley severely circumscribed black life. Paradoxically, however, intimate familiarity with their owners empowered slaves in their dealings with their masters and enabled some to extract concessions from them. Neither fully African nor fully European, African Americans drew upon and fused different cultural traditions to construct a unique social and cultural identity. Often isolated from family and friends and living in their masters’ households, African Americans rapidly acquired European languages and values. Given their comparatively smaller numbers and relative isolation, slaves in Dutchess County could never recreate the rich, complex, and dynamic cultural world of New York City. However, the shared experience of bondage and common ancestry united all people of color in the central Hudson Valley and set them apart from their white owners. That sense of cultural distinctiveness and the intimacy of slaveholding in the region empowered African Americans in the freedom struggle during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.