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New Website 'Bearing Witness' to Our Slaveholding Past

News By Steve Ellman



Ulster County Truth and Reconciliation Commission co-chairs Susan Stessin-Cohn and Albert Cook. Courtesy

KINGSTON - The county Truth and Reconciliation Commission's website, "Bearing Witness," has gone live, providing a searchable database of documents, maps, stories and data

Recent Comments...

1 **K** "Idiot. No sympathy for drunks."
— C. Rice, 40 mins ago

1 **K** "Thank you for recognizing the massive effort that has been, and continues to be, placed..."
— A. notherTakeOnIt, 12 hrs ago

3 **K** "I can't wait to see it!"
— w. hall, 13 hrs ago

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related to the practice of slavery in Ulster County. Overarching point: It wasn't just the South.

The site is the most readily accessible aspect of the commission's work since its creation three years ago under the auspices of then-county executive Pat Ryan and Radio Kingston. Ushered along by current County Executive Jen Metzger and County Clerk Nina Postupack, the commission's board of local historians and educators conducts primary historical research into slavery in Ulster County and, ultimately, will host a truth and reconciliation conference including descendants of slaveholding families and enslaved people.

Just short of one of every four households in Ulster County — 24.1 percent — held enslaved people. Slavery in New York was phased out beginning in 1817 and completely abolished July 4, 1827.

The site's accounts of the history of local slavery are dumbfounding:

“From its earliest years as a glorified trading post, enslavement of people, both Black and Indigenous, has been present in Kingston. Thomas Chambers, the man who secured the foundational gift of land from the Esopus people in

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1652, is recorded to have enslaved a man named Harry Olferts; Harry is said to have died in the second Esopus War (the first of which, incidentally, Thomas Chambers inadvertently caused) ... As farming surpassed the fur trade as the guiding industry of the area, residents grew more keen to offload labor and the cost involved, and so, over time, the enslaved population of Kingston grew steadily ... According to a 1738 document found at the Ulster County Hall of Records, Tunis Ploegh of Kingston is appointed Town Whipper, and is paid a base sum of five pounds. Each time he is called to whip a 'slave, slaves, or [offender],' he makes an additional commission to be paid by the owners or offenders.”

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The site's maps and associated images are especially striking — a tally of local historic buildings and when and how they played a role in the enslavement of African Americans in Ulster County. These are streets and places known to most of us but now with the aura of brutal facts.

On Kingston's Front Street in a building long gone between Dietz Stadium Diner and Deising's Bakery, lived Cornelius "Kees" Pieterszoon Hoogenboom and his second wife Annetje Cornelisdr Slecht. On March 26, 1681, Hoogenboom bought a 12-year-old boy named Tromp

for 300 schepels of wheat (one schepel = 45 pounds). As documented by the clerk's office:

"I, the undersigned, Cornelis Hoogboom, residing in the town of Kingstone in the Esopus, acknowledge in the presence of the witnesses named below, to be certainly and justly indebted to Mr. Isaac Deschamps Marchand in New IJorck, for the sum of three hundred schepels of salable winter arising from a Negro [sic], approximately twelve years old, sold to me and delivered to my satisfaction... Everything without guile or cunning. In affirmation of the truth [of this, I] have signed this with my own hand, in the presence, as stated above, of the witnesses signed below, New IJorck, March 26, 1681 upon condition of [it being] delivered to the harbor. We [being] present
A. De La Noy
Cornelis Hoogenboom
Clement Sebrah
New Yorke, Aprill the 10th, 1683"

The Hoffman House, further along Front Street? There, per clerk's records, on June 14, 1678, "Tam Tylor, an enslaved man, was purchased by [homeowner] Edward Whittaker from Jan Hendrix for 470 schepels. Jan Hendrix promised to furnish him with clothing as part of this

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sale: a red coat, a pair of leather pants, and a pair of broadcloth pants.”

Two years later, Whittaker sold “three negresses, to Roelof Swardtwoudt [Swartout]. The three enslaved women — Catharina, Chrispina, and Marta (Grandmother, Mother, Child), mentioned in the undated document above — were sold for a total of 400 schepels of wheat, which was to include their clothes.”

The Old Dutch Church on Wall Street in Kingston? There from the late 1600s through the 1750s enslaved persons were regularly baptized by local clergy. The church regularly paid slaveowners for the use of their “property.”

There's a good deal more to the site, with individual sections focused on Kingston/Esopus, New Paltz/Gardiner, Hurley, Marbletown, Marlborough, Wawarsing and Shawangunk. And, as the commission notes, while they were “able identify several of the locations and houses that held enslaved people in Ulster County ... obviously there were many, many more.”

Kingston • 721 words • 1 photo



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