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Midday Magazine

Ulster County launches website "bearing witness" to county's history with slavery

WAMC Northeast Public Radio | By [Jesse King](#)

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Susan Stessin-Cohn, the historian for the town of New Paltz, demonstrates one of the maps on Ulster County's new website "Bearing Witness: Exploring the Legacy of Enslavement in Ulster County, New York."

Jesse King

Ahead of Juneteenth, Ulster County launched a new website Monday organizing its historical records related to slavery.

For two years, the Ulster County Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been sifting through the county archives to identify anything related to enslaved people or slavery. Kingston Historian Taylor Bruck and New Paltz Historian Susan Stessin-Cohn say they initially weren't sure where to look — there was no category or label for "slavery" in the county archives — but the answer quickly became apparent.

"We almost found things everywhere. There was little hints in court records, deeds, mortgages, wills, random transcripts," says Bruck. "And that's when we realized the project was going to be bigger than we maybe imagined, and we really did have to go through every single document before a certain date."

While Ulster County celebrates its colonial and Revolutionary history (the city of Kingston was New York's first capitol, after all), it also has an extensive, less-acknowledged history with slavery, one that challenges the perception — or rather, misconception — that New York, by being part of the North, was a champion for abolitionism.

The resulting website, called "Bearing Witness," lays out everything the Commission has found so far. Visitors can search databases on enslaved people who were sold in the county, who went to church there, who tried to run away, who were killed, or who ultimately gained their freedom.

Stessin-Cohn says enslaved people, Black and indigenous, were present in Ulster County from its earliest settlements, and the county was one of the biggest proponents of slavery right up until New York abolished it in 1827. A map on the new website shows where enslaved people lived in historic homes across the county. Looking at Kingston, Stessin-Cohn says you'll recognize a lot of the names: pretty much every street named after a historical figure is named after someone who enslaved people.

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"Four of the ministers of the Dutch Church were enslavers themselves," she notes. "And one man had a man named Bastien that got in trouble for something, and they were going to brand his face. And the minister said, 'Oh no, just put it on his breast, instead of his face.' And that was the 'good deed' he was doing. And so it seemed like most people that had enough money were involved in slavery."

The map endeavors to include as much information as possible about the enslaved persons who lived at each house, and Stessin-Cohn notes the site can be an important resource for Black residents trying to trace their family history. In addition to the new website, the Ulster County records have been shared with WikiTree's [U.S. Black Heritage Project](#), a national genealogical database.

Esi Lewis, the county's chief diversity officer, says the descendants of some of the people on the website are still in Ulster County. The ultimate goal of the Commission is to bring together descendants of enslaved people and those who benefitted from slavery to help the county develop a path for reconciliation going forward.

"So that our future can be informed. We'll know better where we came from, to see where we're going," says Lewis. "The point is that we'll be able to unify and move together."

As a lot of the information on the site is upsetting, the Commission says it is committed to connecting those who participate in the project with emotional support, if needed. The Commission also plans to launch an audio walking tour in Kingston using data from the website starting this fall.

You can look through the records yourself [here](#).

News



Jesse King

Jesse King is the host of WAMC's national program on women's issues, "51%" and

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