

# Cruel Murder:

## A Story of Fear, Death, Childhood, and Enslavement in Early Nineteenth-Century Ulster County, New York

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### Introduction

On July 8, 1803, in Kingston, Ulster County, New York, Deyon, an enslaved teenaged girl, was escorted to her place of execution by a group of local clergymen.<sup>1</sup> “An immense course of people” was said to have gathered to watch her hang from the gallows. The crime for which she had been convicted was especially horrific—the murder one month earlier of six-year-old Harrietta Bruyn, daughter of Deyon’s enslavers, Abraham Bruyn and Sarah Jansen of the town of Shawangunk.<sup>2</sup>

Deyon, sixteen years old at the time of her execution, is believed to have lived out her short life in the town of Shawangunk, located in the southwestern corner of Ulster County and remembered as a place where slavery retained a tenacious hold.<sup>3</sup> Harrietta, whose life

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1. Today, Kingston is the county seat of Ulster County. For Kingston’s history, see Marc B. Fried, *The Early History of Kingston and Ulster County, N.Y.* (Ulster County Historical Society, 1975); Marius Schoonmaker, *The History of Kingston, New York, from Its Earliest Settlement to the Year 1820* (New York: Burr Printing House, 1888); Thomas S. Wermuth, *Rip Van Winkle’s Neighbors: The Transformation of Rural Society in the Hudson River Valley, 1720–1850* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). For the history of the town of Shawangunk, see Kenneth E. Hasbrouck, *History of the Township of Shawangunk* (Newburgh, NY: D.A. Stillwaggon, 1955); Nathaniel B. Sylvester, ed., “Town of Shawangunk,” in *History of Ulster County, New York* (Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1880), 157–68. For a newspaper account of Deyon’s execution, see “Mr. Abraham Bruyn, Clergy,” *Albany Centennial*, July 15, 1803, 3.

2. For newspaper accounts of the alleged crime, see “Cruel Murder,” *Centennial of Freedom* (Newark, NJ), June 21, 1803, 3; “Kingston (Esopus),” *Republican Spy* (Springfield, Mass.), June 28, 1803, 3.

3. Aspects of the town of Shawangunk’s problematic relationship with enslavement are explored in the documentary video *Where Slavery Died Hard: The Forgotten History of Ulster County and the Shawangunk Mountain Region* (2018), produced by the Cragsmoor Historical Society and co-authored by Wendy E. Harris and Arnold Pickman, <https://www.cragsmoorhistoricalsociety.com/slavery-film>, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-IR5\\_f9V6U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-IR5_f9V6U).

was to be even shorter than Deyon's, was the second youngest of the Bruyns' many children, documented as having been baptized at the Shawangunk Reformed Church on June 26, 1797.<sup>4</sup>

The two newspaper articles carrying an account of the alleged murder stated that it occurred on June 7 at a mill pond on the Bruyns' farm. According to these accounts, Deyon, accompanied by Harrietta, had been sent to the pond to cut sticks for use in the garden. Once there, Deyon is said to have cut Harrietta's throat with a knife and subsequently thrown the child into the pond. According to the *Centennial of Freedom*, Deyon then "returned by herself with the sticks and went to work as usual." When questioned about Harrietta, she had no answer. That night, when the family and their neighbors went out to look for the missing child, Deyon joined them, described "as diligent in search as any." Harrietta's body was finally discovered when the mill pond was drained the following morning.

How are we to interpret Deyon's murderous act, and how do we reconcile our ideas about enslavement's savagery with the murder of a small child by a teenaged girl who was enslaved by the child's parents? Although we can never know precisely what might have driven Deyon to murder Harrietta, we can at least explore the historical and cultural circumstances within which Deyon's act and her execution occurred. The essay that follows will describe these tragically intertwined events with the aim of interpreting them within the broader context of the history of slavery in Ulster County and the town of Shawangunk. In doing so, the essay will also attempt to reconstruct the lives of those involved—including the enslaved, their enslavers, those whose lives were shaped by slavery's impacts, as well as individuals, who by virtue of their positions of authority, were able to influence the course that these events would take.

## Grist Mills, Enslavement, and the Bruyn Family

From a hand-drawn 1798 surveyor's map of the town of Shawangunk, we learn not only the location of Abraham Bruyn's farm but also details regarding sources of the Bruyn family's livelihood.<sup>5</sup> The map contains depictions of landscape features, dwellings, and other structures. Among the latter are a series of four grist mills located at various points along the Shawangunk Kill, a tributary of the Wallkill River (itself a tributary of the Hudson River), where many of the region's earliest white inhabitants chose to settle and to farm. According to the map, the southernmost of these mills belonged to Harrietta's father and

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4. Alphonso T. Clearwater, ed., "Records of the Reformed Dutch Church of Shawangunk, New York," in *Yearbook of the Holland Society of New York, 1928 and 1929* (New York: Stearns & Beale, 1931), 115.

5. "Map of the Town of Shawangunk, Ulster County. By Johs. Bruyn," Certified February 1st, 1798, by Joseph J. Hasbrouck, Supervisor, New York State Archives, New York (State), State Engineer and Surveyor, Survey maps of lands in New York State, ca. 1711–1913, Series A0273-78, Map #426, <https://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/36978> (courtesy of Jordan Jace, New York State Archives).

Deyon's enslaver, Abraham Bruyn.<sup>6</sup> Just to the north of this grist mill is a grist mill belonging to Cornelius Bruyn, Abraham's cousin. At grist mills such as theirs, locally harvested wheat was ground into flour. Much of the surplus was then shipped to New York City where it was then exported to the West Indies.<sup>7</sup>

A. J. Williams-Myers, in his discussion of likely sources of labor for wheat and flour production in the Hudson River Valley, observes "moderately high numbers" of the enslaved within regions "where milling was quite evident."<sup>8</sup> Primary documents tend to support this. The census taken in 1800 reveals that 12 percent of the town's total population was enslaved.<sup>9</sup> The same census indicates that Abraham and Cornelius Bruyn were among



Figure 1. Detail, "Map of the Town of Shawangunk, Ulster County. By Johs. Bruyn," showing the grist mill of Abraham Bruyn, Deyon's enslaver. Located on the Shawangunk Kill, this is also the site of Deyon's alleged murder of Harrietta Bruyn. COURTESY OF THE NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES, DIGITAL COLLECTIONS.

6. Next to each of the four mills depicted on the 1798 map (including Abraham Bruyn's) is an inscription containing the property owner's name along with the words "Bridge and Mills."

7. Andrea K. Zimmerman, "Nineteenth-Century Wheat Production in Four New York State Regions: A Comparative Examination," *The Hudson Valley Regional Review* 5, no. 2 (1988): 50.

8. A. J. Williams-Myers, *Long Hammering: Essays on the Forging of an African American Presence in the Hudson River Valley to the Early Twentieth Century* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994), 29–30.

9. "Town of Shawangunk," *1800 U.S. Census, Ulster Co., N.Y.*, United States Bureau of the Census, National Archives and Records Administration microfilm publication M32, Roll 21, Vol. 1, 246–54, <https://archive.org/details/populationsc18000021unit/page/n251/mode/2up?view=theater>.

the town's top ten enslavers, each of whom held between eight and twelve individuals in bondage. At Abraham Bruyn's grist mill, labor for harvesting the wheat—and possibly for the operation of the grist mill itself— would have been supplied by some of the ten enslaved Black men and women listed in his census entry. This would hold true for Cornelius as well, listed in the census as an enslaver of eight people. Based on assessments of real and personal property presented in the Town of Shawangunk Tax Assessment Rolls, this group of wealthy enslavers can be viewed as “farmers of means” who owed their prosperity to enslaved workers, none of whom received compensation for their labor.<sup>10</sup>

At the age of six, Harrietta could not have known that she had been born into a family that had held others in bondage for generations.<sup>11</sup> Her parents, Abraham Bruyn and Sarah Jensen, were among the five largest slaveholders in the town, enslaving as many as ten people within their household. Members of Sarah's extended family living in the town of Shawangunk enslaved twenty-seven people between their various households. In addition to those enslaved within his own household, Abraham's extended family enslaved thirty people.<sup>12</sup> Harrietta's paternal grandparents, Cornelius Bruyn and Ida Hoffman, can be documented as the enslavers of at least five people—three men (Piet, Robin, and Bristo) and two women (Jean and Diean).<sup>13</sup> Ida Hoffman's father, Zacharais Hoffman, finalized his last will and testament in 1743–1744.<sup>14</sup> This document indicates that during Zacharais's lifetime, he was the enslaver of many people, some named and some unnamed. In the will, Zacharais bequeathed a group of enslaved women and girls (Peg, Isabella, Bett, Nance, and Diean) to his sons and daughters. In addition to a group described as “the rest of my slaves,” Zacharais also mentions a group of enslaved men and boys (Simon, Frank, and Andries).

Hester Bruyn, Zacharais Hoffman's wife, was Harrietta's great-grandmother. Hester, her mother Gertrude Iselsetyne-Bruyn, and her older brother Jacobus settled on the fertile bottomlands adjoining the western bank of the Shawangunk Kill during the late 17th century, thus becoming the first white family to live and farm in what would become the town of Shawangunk.<sup>15</sup> Gertrude's second husband, Severyn Ten Houdt, bequeathed her

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10. Town of Shawangunk Assessment Roll, 1801, Box 53, Folder 23, Roll 23, New York State Comptroller's Office Tax Assessment Rolls of Real and Personal Estates, 1794–1804, New York State Archives, New York State Education Department, <https://iaarchives.nysed.gov/xtf/view?docId=ead/findingaids/B0950.xml>.

11. In addition to various primary sources used to research the Bruyn's family history, the following secondary source was also consulted: Thomas G. Evans, “The Bruyn Family of Ulster County, New York,” *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 20, no. 1 (Jan. 1889): 26–29. (Additional genealogical research courtesy of Arnold Pickman.)

12. “Town of Shawangunk,” *1800 U.S. Census, Ulster Co., N.Y.*, 246–54.

13. E. B. O'Callaghan, ed., “Slaves in Ulster Co. 1755,” in *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, Vol. III (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons Co., 1850), 846.

14. Gustav Anjou, *Ulster County, N.Y. Probate Records*, Vol. II (New York: Privately published, 1906), 130–31.

15. Marc B. Fried, *Shawangunk Place Names* (Privately published, 2005), 96–97, 107.

“negroes, horses and cattle,”<sup>16</sup> indicating that Harrietta’s family of origin had been enslavers for at least four generations.

Through the generations, Harrietta’s ancestors were baptized, married, and welcomed as worshippers at the Reformed Dutch Church of Shawangunk. This is hardly surprising. Thomas Wermuth, for example, has described these churches as “the central social and cultural institution in Ulster County communities through the period of the American Revolution.”<sup>17</sup> Of note, however, is the Shawangunk Church’s decades-long ties to slavery. The minister who most likely baptized Harrietta, Moses Froeligh, served from 1788 to 1812 and can be documented as the enslaver of three people.<sup>18</sup> Physical reminders of the church’s historic relationship to slavery remain evident today. Buried beneath the church’s floorboards lie the remains of Johannes Mauritius Goetschius, an esteemed minister and practicing physician.<sup>19</sup> Following his death in 1777, he left behind a will bequeathing enslaved men, women, and children to his wife, most of whom were to be auctioned off to pay his debts.<sup>20</sup> Based on the wording of this document, it is probable that at some point during Goetschius’s ministry, these enslaved people lived and labored on the church’s grounds. Attached to the church’s northern interior wall is a somewhat tarnished brass plaque commemorating Goetschius’s memory as well as that of another pastor, Henry Polhemus. As stated on the plaque, “Both men spoke the word of the Lord from this place and are buried beneath it.” A builder’s stone embedded in the church’s southern exterior wall bears the letters “IH,” noting the contribution of church construction manager Issac Hasbrouck, documented as the enslaver of Piet, Dick, Ephraim, and Luce.<sup>21</sup> The church’s U-shaped gallery and its twin exterior stairways are considered two of the church’s most significant architectural elements. They too are believed to be associated with the church’s historic ties to enslavement.<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly, like the church itself and its clergy, the history of the Shawangunk Church’s lay leadership also reflects Ulster County’s history of enslavement. According

16. Anjou, *Ulster County, N.Y. Probate Records*, Vol. I, 95–96.

17. Wermuth, *Rip Van Winkle’s Neighbors*, 38.

18. Clearwater, *Yearbook of the Holland Society of New York, 1928 and 1929*, 4; *1800 U.S. Census, Ulster Co., N.Y.*, 249.

19. For Rev. J. M. Goetschius, see Charles E. Corwin, “Goetschius, John Mauritius,” in *A Manual of the Reformed Church in America, 1628–1922* (New York: Board of Publications and Bible School, Work of the Reformed Church in America, 1922), 348–49, <https://archive.org/details/manualofreformed1922corw/page/348/mode/2up?view=theater>.

20. “Johannes Mauritius Will, Probate dated 12 June 1771,” Court of Probates, Probated Wills, 1665–1815, Series J0038, NYSA\_J0038\_--\_41751\_34255\_00342, New York State Archives. (Courtesy of Jordan Jace, New York State Archives.)

21. For Issac Hasbrouck’s builder’s stone, see Kenneth E. Hasbrouck, “History of Shawangunk Church,” in *History of the Township of Shawangunk*, 36; O’Callaghan, “Slaves in Ulster Co. 1755,” Vol. III, 846–47.

22. For a discussion of this aspect of the Shawangunk Church’s architecture, see William B. Rhoads, *Ulster County, New York: The Architectural History & Guide* (Delmar, NY: Black Dome Press, 2011), 238–40.

to the 1790 and 1800 censuses, all the original trustees were enslavers.<sup>23</sup> During the three decades that New York's Assembly debated the 1799 gradual abolition bill, Ulster County's "die hard" proslavery delegation relied on its town of Shawangunk members to support this point of view. Two of these men were Shawangunk Church trustees Cornelius Schoonmaker and Johannis Bruyn, Abraham's cousin.<sup>24</sup>

In the spring of 1796, Johannis Bruyn and two other original church trustees, Henry Vanweyan, and Thomas Jansen Jr., joined twelve of their neighbors to become founding members of the town of Shawangunk's "Slave Apprehending Society" (also known as "The Society for the Apprehending of Slaves"). As stated plainly in the Society's constitution, the goal of its members was to "detect and prevent Runaway slaves."<sup>25</sup> This document was yet another indication of the unease that was spreading throughout the county as abolition of the entire enslaved population was beginning to be seen as an inevitability.

### A Fearful Society

A public execution such as Deyon's would have been intended to convey a message to "the immense crowd" who had gathered to witness it. As must have been perceived by the many white people among the crowd, the proper order of things had been disrupted by Harrietta's murder at the hands of an enslaved member of the Bruyn family's household. But as also witnessed and shared by them, this order was restored by her execution—a public act sufficiently violent to ensure that justice had been delivered. Still, the crime for which she had been convicted—the murder of a white child—made manifest the very worst fears of Ulster County's enslaving class and its citizenry. And this was a fearful society with much to be frightened of.

Slavery had been a fact of life in Ulster County since the second half of the 17th century. The earliest indication suggesting the existence of slavery occurs in 1663 on a list of those killed, wounded, or taken prisoner when Wiltwyck (the Dutch settlement i.e. now Kingston) was attacked by Ulster County's Indigenous inhabitants—the Esopus—whose

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23. For the Shawangunk Church's leadership (including first subscribers, construction managers, trustees) and their ties to enslavement, see Hasbrouck, *History of the Township of Shawangunk*, 35–36; Sylvester, "Town of Shawangunk," 165–66; the 1790 U.S. Census, *Ulster Co., N.Y.*, National Archives and Records Administration microfilm publication M637, Roll 6, Vol. 3, 194–99, <https://archive.org/details/populationsc17900006unit/page/n467/mode/2up?view=theater>; "Town of Shawangunk," 1800 U.S. Census, *Ulster Co., N.Y.*, 246–54.

24. For the New York's legislature's passage of abolition laws, see David N. Gelman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777–1827* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 177–78; Schoonmaker, *The History of Kingston, New York, from Its Earliest Settlement to the Year 1820*, 538–39. For the Ulster County delegation's proslavery stance, see also Michael E. Groth, *Slavery and Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 46, 49.

25. "The Slave Apprehending Society/The Society for Apprehending of Slaves," (Constitution and Minutes), May 21, 1796, MSS 1115, Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library, Albany.

lands were being usurped by European settlers. Among those killed was a man described only as “Thomas Chambers’ negro.”<sup>26</sup> By the time of a census taken in 1703, Kingston’s enslaved population had grown to 91 out of a total population of 804.<sup>27</sup> It was during this period, however, that the descendants of Kingston’s earliest white settlers had begun fanning out along the region’s waterways. The 1703 census also indicated the presence of the enslaved within the nearby communities of Rochester and Marbletown. A special tax assessment of 1709–1710 reveals a small cluster of enslaved people living in Shawangunk.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, some of the European families that were settling the hinterlands had brought slavery with them.

Three years before Deyon’s execution, as reported in the 1800 Federal Census, 2,257 enslaved men, women, and children—human chattel deprived of all rights—lived in Ulster County interspersed among the rest of the population, of which 24,519 were white and 336 were described in the census as “other free persons.”<sup>29</sup> In 1799, New York passed the first of its gradual abolition acts, delaying actual freedom and imposing strict limits on whatever freedoms were granted.<sup>30</sup> The result was frustration and anger among the enslaved and fears of a backlash among the white populace. Whether or not one was an enslaver, there was always the fear that at any moment a person held in bondage could lash out in what Williams-Myers has termed a “violent act of retribution.”<sup>31</sup> As Carl Nostrum remarks in his analysis of this “slave-infected society,” “Possessing slaves, the society became possessed of slavery and of the fears it engendered.”<sup>32</sup>

Although these fears often arose in response to rumors of alleged conspiracies, some also arose in the wake of actual events, some local and some occurring in distant places. In Ulster County during the 18th century, several enslaved men had been tried and convicted for attacks on white people.<sup>33</sup> Even more frightening for Ulster County’s white

26. “Letter from the Magistrates at Wiltwyck to Director Stuyvesant; Massacre at Esopus; the Village Destroyed, June 1663,” in *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York (...Relating to the History and Settlements of the Towns along the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers ... from 1630 to 1684)*, ed. Berthold Fernow, Vol. 13 (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1881), 245–47.

27. “Census of Ulster Co. 1703,” in O’Callaghan, *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, Vol. III, 966.

28. For the cluster of unnamed enslaved people and their enslavers living in the Precinct of Shawangunk in 1709–1710, see the special assessments entitled “Chimney, Slaves, fyre places etc.” in “Ulster County, New York, Tax Lists, 1709/10, 1711/12, 1718/9 and 1720/21,” *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 62, no. 3 (July 1931): 280.

29. *1800 U.S. Census, Ulster Co., N.Y.*, 269 (Recapitulation).

30. For a useful summary of these laws, see Susan Stessin-Cohn and Ashley Hurlburt-Biagini, “Appendix C: Keypoints of New York’s Emancipation Acts,” in *In Defiance: Runaways from Slavery in New York’s Hudson River Valley, 1735–1831* (Delmar, NY: Black Dome Press, 2016), 330.

31. Williams-Myers, *Long Hammering*, 46.

32. Carl Nordstrom, “The New York Slave Code,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 4, no.1 (1980): 7.

33. Examples of attacks attributed to the enslaved individuals living in eighteenth-century Ulster County include: two alleged acts of arson, one in the town of Marbletown in 1730 and another in the town of Shawangunk in 1741; three alleged acts of murder or attempted murder, one in 1730 in the town of Shawangunk, one in 1741 in Kingston, and another in 1792 in Hurley. Sources

population—especially the enslavers among them—were acts of violence committed by organized groups of enslaved people rather than by solitary enslaved men or women. In 1775, plans for an uprising among Ulster County’s enslaved were uncovered. Newspapers provided details of the alleged conspiracy in which homes were to be set on fire and the inhabitants murdered as they fled. The plot was said to have also involved “most of the slaves for many miles around” as well as “five or six hundred Indians.” Although the newspapers mention the jailing of as many as twenty suspects, no further documentary evidence regarding the fate of those involved has been found.<sup>34</sup>

Prior to this, in New York City, there had been an uprising in 1712 during which white people were attacked and some killed as they attempted to extinguish blazes set by a group of enslaved men and women. Decades later, in 1741, a large conspiracy was alleged involving at least one actual act of arson and multiple suspected cases. Those charged and convicted included enslaved Black people as well as some working-class white people. At least twenty-one enslaved Black men were executed in the aftermath of the 1712 uprising. Following the trials of those accused in the 1741 conspiracy, twenty-nine enslaved Black men were executed along with four white men and women. Records associated with both events indicate exceedingly brutal methods of execution.<sup>35</sup> Farther afield were a series of uprisings in the American South and the West Indies.<sup>36</sup>

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for the 1730 Marbletown arson include: Swann Galleries Document # 740384, transcription by Susan Stessin; “Justices Expenses for Trying and Executing Jack,” U. C. Clerk’s Archives, 101 Box Collection, Inventory #88-00853, Folder: “Minutes/Board of Supervisors Oct. 1730–June 1731. Sources for the 1741 town of Shawangunk arson include: *New York Weekly Journal*, February 2, 1741. Sources for the attempted murder in Shawangunk include: U. C. Clerk’s Archives, 101 Box Collection, Inventory #88-00852, “Accusation,” Folder 21, “Accusations/Justice Court/April 1730 (?)...,” and Inventory #03-00866, “Examination,” Folder labeled “Examinations/Depositions/Testimony, 1722–1774) Sources for the 1741 murder in Kingston include Inventory #88-00852, Folder 22, “Proceedings/Justice Court/July 1741”. Sources for the 1792 murder in Hurley include the *Catskill Packet*, December 10, 1792; *Farmer’s Register*, June 1, 1793.

34. Sources for the alleged 1775 conspiracy include *New York Weekly Journal*, March 6, 1775; Susan Stessin, “The Conspiracy,” in “The Missing Chapter: Untold Stories of the African American Experience in the Mid-Hudson Valley,” <https://omeka.hrvh.org/exhibits/show/missing-chapter/resistance--runaways-and-the-k/the-conspiracy>. Also see “Deposition of John Schoonmaker before Jacob Hoornbe[ck], February 18, 1775,” Cornelius Ten Broeck papers (Ac. 1684), Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries. (Courtesy of Helene van Rossum.)

35. For the 1712 and 1741 events in New York, see Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1720–1863* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 37–39, 43–47; Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 91–98. Also see Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Vantage Books, 2005). For the executions following these uprisings, see David A. Hearn, *Legal Executions in New York State: A Comprehensive Reference, 1639–1963* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 1997), 6–7, 10–12.

36. Uprisings and conspiracies in the American South: For the 1739 Stono Rebellion, South Carolina, see Robert Olwell, *Master, Slaves and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 21–29. For the 1795 Pointe Coupee Conspiracy, Louisiana, see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “The 1795 Slave Conspiracy in Pointe Coupee: Impact of the French Revolution,” *Proceedings of the Meeting of the*



Of all of these, it was the success of the Haitian (Saint-Domingue) Rebellion that most terrified Americans. The rebellion began in 1791 and ended in 1804 with the establishment of a free, self-governing Black nation. As summarized by Leslie Alexander and Michelle Alexander, Haiti's independence "represented the culmination of white people's deepest fears and Black peoples' deepest hopes."<sup>37</sup>

### Childhood in a Time of Enslavement

From newspaper accounts of Harrietta's murder, we learn that the enslaved members of the Bruyn household were questioned, with suspicion soon focusing on Deyon. She is reported to have continued denying the accusation before finally confessing. In doing so, she claimed that her actions had been at the instigation of another enslaved woman "who told her that if she would murder one of the children, it would procure her milder treatment from her master and mistress."<sup>38</sup>

Deyon, it should be noted, was not the first of New York's enslaved to be accused of murdering a white child. In fact, eight white children are believed to have died in this manner. The earliest incident dated to 1682, in which an enslaved Albany man was said to have cut the throats of his enslaver's two children. Following the infamous Hallett family murder of 1708, the household's enslaved were accused of killing five children along with their pregnant mother. Although few details are available, another such murder is believed to have occurred in 1741 in Albany.<sup>39</sup> At this point we can only hypothesize as to the motivations and emotions triggering these attacks. For the enslaved who were implicated,

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*French Colonial Historical Society* 15 (1992): 130–42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42952224>. For the 1800 Gabriel's Rebellion in Richmond, Virginia, see Michael L. Nicholls, *Whispers of Rebellion: Narrating Gabriel's Conspiracy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012). Uprisings in the West Indies: For the 1736 Antigua Slave Conspiracy, see David Barry Gaspar, "The Antigua Slave Conspiracy of 1736: A Case Study of the Origins of Collective Resistance," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (April 1978): 308–23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1921837>; for the 1733 St. John's Slave Uprising, see Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 105.

37. For the 1791 to 1804 Haitian/Saint-Domingue Revolution, see Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2000): 103–15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2652438>; Leslie Alexander and Michelle Alexander, "Fear," in *The 1619 Project, A New Origin Story*, eds. Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, and Jack Silverstein (New York: One World, 2021), 110.

38. *Republican Spy*, June 28, 1803, 3.

39. For murders of white children by the enslaved, see Hearn, *Legal Executions in New York State*, 4, 6, 11. For the Hallett family murder, see "Chapter 181, An Act Preventing the Conspiracy of Slaves, passed October 30 1708," *The Colonial Laws of New York from the Year 1664 to the Revolution*, Commissioners of Statutory Revision State of New York Assembly (Albany, NY: James B. Lyon, State Printer, 1894), 631. One of the so-called slave codes, the 1708 law was enacted by New York's provincial Assembly in the aftermath of what the text of the law describes as "the Execrable and Barberous [*sic*] Murder committed on the family of William Hallet Junr late of New Town in Queens County." <https://archive.org/details/coloniallawsnew01johnngoog/page/n3/mode/2up?view=theater>.

it is possible that underlying such acts were emotional responses akin to what Frederick Douglass has termed “the soul killing effects of slavery.”<sup>40</sup> For the white parents whose households included enslaved men and women, news of the murders would have brought deep and lingering fears.

Of course, the murder of children (white or Black) by adults (white or Black) represents violence directed toward those least able to defend themselves. Although little information is available regarding the number of Black children slain by white enslavers, their suffering has been well chronicled by Vivienne Kruger. She notes that “[f]rom the eighteenth century through the end of slavery in 1827, almost forty percent of the enslaved Blacks in New York were children.”<sup>41</sup> According to Kruger, most of these children were sold away from their mothers by the time they were six years old. She states that “the normal psychological growth stages of childhood ... were sidetracked by the overwhelming fact that these blacks were slaves first and children only second.... [They] grew up with meager personal expectations and family separation as a way of life; as they began to form families of their own in late adolescence, they must have approached marriage and parenthood with ingrained expectations of continued emotional and physical isolation from loved ones.”

Kruger’s insights are further verified by primary documents. The 1820 Federal Census is the first census to provide the number of children who were enslaved in Ulster County. From it, we learn that even at this relatively late date, their numbers totaled 558.<sup>42</sup> A coroner’s inquisition conducted in that year provides additional evidence of the toll that enslavement and its associated miseries took on mothers and children, including indications that enslaved mothers were occasionally driven to kill their babies. From this document we learn the story of Susan, enslaved to Judge Conrad J. Elmendorf, accused of suffocating her female infant, described as “a mulatto.”<sup>43</sup> The history of infanticide among the enslaved includes cases like Susan’s in which the victim was a mixed-race infant. Of

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40. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 27.

41. For Vivienne Kruger’s insights as well as quotes and citations, see “Seeking Shelter from the Storm,” in *Born to Run: The Slave Family in Early New York, 1626 to 1827* (an unpaginated online version of her 1985 Columbia University dissertation), <http://newyorkslavery.blogspot.com>.

42. “United States Census, 1820,” Database with images, citing National Archives and Records Administration microfilm publication M33 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), accessible at *FamilySearch*, <http://FamilySearch.org> (accessed January 20, 2023).

43. “Inquisition on a Black child of Susan, slave of Judge Elmendorf, filed 17 April 1820,” Box 88-00857, Ulster County Hall of Records, Kingston, NY. (Courtesy of Susan Stessin, Town of New Paltz Historian.)

For Judge Elmendorf, see Tania Barricklo, “Lawbooks of Judge Lucas Conrad Elmendorf Installed in Ulster County Courthouse,” *Daily Freeman*, April 28, 2023, <https://www.dailyfreeman.com/2023/04/28/photos-law-books-of-lucas-conrad-elmendorf-installed-in-ulster-county-courthouse/>. During his lifetime, Elmendorf (1758–1843) served in a variety of public offices including congressman (1797–1803), New York State assemblyman (1804–1805), New York State senator (1814–1817), first Judge of the Court of Common Pleas (1815–1821), and Ulster County Surrogate Court (1835–1840).

special significance is that such a birth may have been the result of sexual relations between the enslaved mother and her enslaver or one of her enslaver's family members.<sup>44</sup> In other cases, infanticide committed by enslaved women has been linked to their desire to spare their children the misery of an existence lived in enslavement.<sup>45</sup>

We learn more of enslaved children's suffering from Sojourner Truth, who like Deyon, was born into slavery in Ulster County. Later in life she recalled that as a nine-year-old she had endured "plenty of whippings" by the family who enslaved her. During the most "torturous" of these, her hands were tied and she was whipped "till the flesh was deeply lacerated and the blood streamed from her wounds." In early adolescence, she was subsequently enslaved by another Ulster County family. Although she would eventually profess fondness for them, she was nonetheless whipped, beaten, and most likely sexually abused.<sup>46</sup>

Newspaper accounts of Harrietta's murder provide clues as to additional forms of physical suffering inflicted on enslaved young people, reporting that suspicion soon focused on Deyon due to her footprints, said to be "well known, from the loss of a big toe."<sup>47</sup> In his introduction to Stessin-Cohn's and Hurlburt-Biagini's compilation of Hudson River Valley fugitive slave ads, Williams-Myers discusses how these individuals were often identified by "the body abrasions/scars" found on their bodies.<sup>48</sup> Appearing in the collection are ads for some who had lost toes as well as fingers or an ear. Those missing toes include twenty-year-old Bob of Poughkeepsie, who in 1799 is described as having "lost the great toe of his right foot"; nineteen-year-old Tom from Canaan, who in 1805 is described as having "no artificial mark except the toe next to his great toe cut off of one foot"; and twenty-two-year-old Philip of Mamakating, who in 1810 is described as having had "one of his little toes ... cut off."<sup>49</sup> Because of Bob, Tom, and Philip's relative youth, there is the possibility that they—like Deyon—suffered the loss of their toes in childhood or adolescence.

44. Kristen Green, "The Body of an Infant There and Then Laying Dead": Infanticide in Coroner's Inquisitions At the Library of Virginia," *The UnCommonwealth, Voices from the Library of Virginia*, <https://uncommonwealth.virginiamemory.com/2018/06/27/the-body-of-an-infant-there-and-then-laying-dead-infanticide-in-coroners-inquisitions-at-the-library-of-virginia/>.

45. "Reproduction and Resistance/Hidden Voices: Enslaved Women in the Low Country and U.S. South," *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative*, <https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/hidden-voices>. This is also the subject of author Toni Morrison's 1987 Nobel Prize winning novel *Beloved*.

46. Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Bondswoman of Olden Time* (Battle Creek, MI: Published for the author, 1878), 26, 33; Nell Irwin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 13–18.

47. *Republican Spy*, June 28, 1803, 3.

48. A. J. Williams-Myers, "Foreword," in Stessin-Cohn and Hurlburt-Biagini, *In Defiance*, 4. For additional insights regarding such forms of dismemberment, see John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 216–19. Focusing on nineteenth-century Virginia, they assert that "for a number of slaves there was a direct connection between deformities and prior punishment." Among the various "marks, scars and disfigurements" noted in fugitive slave ads, they list "finger deformity, limp, unusual gait, leg deformity, unusual feet, missing toes, lame arm, lame hand ... missing ear[s]."

49. For specific examples suggesting dismemberment among the Hudson River Valley's enslaved, see Stessin-Cohn and Hurlburt-Biagini, *In Defiance*. For the loss of toes described above, see

Williams-Myers concludes that such disfigurements “are often the end results of violent encounters with their owners ... expos[ing] the violence and cruelty that were inherent in the slave system.”<sup>50</sup>

## Deyon’s Execution

By 1803, the year Deyon was publicly executed, hundreds of New Yorkers—the enslaved, free Black, Indigenous, and white Americans—had met the same fate. Deyon, in fact, may have been the last enslaved person executed in Ulster County.<sup>51</sup> Although newspapers reported that she had been convicted in a circuit court session held in Ulster County, the records from this trial have yet to be located.<sup>52</sup>

Newspaper accounts describe the location of Deyon’s execution as “on the plains near this town.” Assuming that “the plains” is the same feature identified in an 1820 map as “First Plains” and “Second Plains,” this would place her execution site at what is today the intersection of three of Kingston’s busiest thoroughfares, an area now covered in concrete.<sup>53</sup> As for her burial, archaeologist Joseph Diamond has suggested that Deyon was interred at what is today known as Kingston’s Pine Street African Burial Ground.<sup>54</sup>

Entries recorded in the Ulster County supervisors’ minutes contain several important details about her execution. We learn that on that day Deyon’s attire consisted of a “cap” and a “frock,” both sewn specially for the event. Awaiting her was the newly constructed gallows on which she would be hanged.<sup>55</sup> The newspaper accounts are brief. We are told that the execution (“an awful occasion”) was held on the “plains” near Kingston in the “presence of

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pages 131, 197, and 248. Although loss of fingers and toes may have been caused by exposure to the cold, this too would represent a form of physical abuse.

50. Williams-Myers, “Foreword,” 4.

51. For reports of executions prior to Deyon’s, see Hearn, *Legal Executions in New York State*, 3–29. Hearn presents documentation on 327 of these for which some record exists. Of these 111 were Black, most of them enslaved. Nor were enslaved young people exempt from public hangings. In 1794, Bett, aged twelve, Dean, aged fourteen, and Pompey, aged sixteen, were hung after their conviction for an act of arson that resulted in the destruction of portions of Albany. Cato, seventeen years old and convicted of raping a thirteen-year-old white girl, was hung in Johnstown just two months prior to Deyon. For the executions of Deyon and other Black teenagers, see pages 28–29.

52. *The Bee* (Hudson, NY), June 28, 1803, 3.

53. For the 1820 map, see, Marius Schoonmaker, “Map of Kingston, 1820,” *The History of Kingston, New York, from Its Earliest Settlement to the Year 1820*, 436; Joseph E. Diamond (State University of New York at New Paltz), email correspondence with author, August 25, 2023.

54. Joseph E. Diamond, “Owned in Life, Owned in Death: The Pine Street African and African-American Burial Ground in Kingston, New York,” *Northeast Historical Archaeology* 35, no. 1 (2006): 57. See also “Pine Street African Burial Ground,” Kingston Land Trust, <https://kingston-landtrust.org/pine-street-african-burial-ground>.

55. “To Henry Sleght Sheriff for executing the Wench Deyon of Abrm. Bruyn of Shawangunk for murder of her masters Child,” entries made on Oct. 5–7, 1803,” in “Supervisors’ Minutes 1793–1806,” Ulster County Clerk’s Office Archives Division, Box 101 Collection, Inventory#88-00865.

an immense concourse of people.” The newspapers do not identify Deyon by name, only as “the wench belonging to Mr. Abraham Bruyn, of Shawangunk (convicted of murder).”<sup>56</sup>

Those responsible for organizing and staging Deyon’s execution recruited the event’s participants from the church, the military, and the upper ranks of local government. In doing so, Ulster County unleashed the full force of its authority, directing it toward executing an enslaved Black teenager convicted of murdering a white child. Michel Foucault has suggested that a public execution is essentially “a political ritual,” belonging to “the ceremonies by which power is manifested.”<sup>57</sup> As will be seen below, the backgrounds of the execution’s lead participants indicate that all were white men of power and authority within their community.

According to the supervisors’ entries, Sheriff Henry Sleight oversaw the execution and all the details associated with it.<sup>58</sup> His commission would have come directly from the governor and was limited to four years. As seen in the tallying of Sleight’s expenditures preparing for and overseeing Deyon’s execution, sheriffs were legally entitled to collect fees for the various services they performed in the course of duty.<sup>59</sup> Prior to becoming sheriff, and like his father before him, Henry Sleight served as a trustee of the corporation of Kingston on

An Account of all the Allowances for the Treasurer of the County & Transcribing all the Allowances &c		84.50
Together 26 1/2 Dollars for Each town		
To Henry Sleight Sheriff for executing the Wench	126.80	126.80
lab <sup>r</sup> of Prison of Shawangunk Prison of her masters Child		
Executing the Wench as above	87.50	
Expenses for the Gallows &c	5.00	
Coffin	1.50	
a pack for S <sup>r</sup> Wench & making a Cap	1.75	
digging the Grave burying her	1.00	
		16.75
		1281.55

Figure 2. A page from “Ulster County Supervisors’ Minutes 1793–1806,” showing entries for October 7, 1803. The lower portion of the page contains Sheriff Henry Sleight’s itemized expenses for Deyon’s execution. COURTESY OF ULSTER COUNTY CLERK’S OFFICE ARCHIVES DIVISION, BOX 101 COLLECTION.

56. *Albany Centennial*, July 15, 1803, 3.

57. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 47. See also Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 96, who describes executions of the enslaved in eighteenth-century South Carolina as “carefully planned public spectacles.”

58. The supervisors’ entries for October 5 to 7 directed that Sleight be reimbursed for the costs of the execution, noting also that the Light Infantry was present at Sleight’s request (see footnote below regarding the responsibilities of sheriffs).

59. For the history of New York State’s county sheriffs and their responsibilities, see “Sheriff, Introduction,” in *Inventory of the County and Borough Archives of New York City, No. 5* (Historic Records Survey, Works Progress Administration, 1939), 255, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Inventory\\_of\\_the\\_County\\_and\\_Borough\\_Arch/wtZFAQAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22the+custody+and+transportation+of+prisoners%22+sheriff&pg=PA262&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Inventory_of_the_County_and_Borough_Arch/wtZFAQAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22the+custody+and+transportation+of+prisoners%22+sheriff&pg=PA262&printsec=frontcover).

numerous occasions. Sleght was also an enslaver. According to the 1800 census, one member of his household was held in bondage. Sleght's term as sheriff ended in 1804, the same year he placed an ad in *The Plebian* advertising twenty dollars for the return of Stephen, "a young mulatto Negro man" whom he had enslaved and who had now evidently sought his freedom by running away.<sup>60</sup>

The county supervisors' entries also indicate that it was in response to Sleght's request that judges James Oliver and Abraham Bancker secured the participation of sixteen members of the county's light infantry. Oliver and Bancker brought a certain dignity and prestige to the proceedings stemming in part from their roles as judges in the Court of Common Pleas. Oliver's life of civic responsibility involved service as town supervisor of Marbletown and trustee of the Kingston Academy. He was also a highly respected physician who had been a charter member and president of the Ulster County Medical Society. Judge Bancker was remembered for his seventeen sessions as State Senate clerk from 1784 to 1802. In addition to their impressive career histories, Judges Bancker and Oliver also shared another attribute with Sheriff Sleght—according to the 1800 census, both were enslavers. Judge Bancker's household held four people in bondage while Judge Oliver's held ten. This number placed him among the county's twenty largest slaveholders.<sup>61</sup>

Newspaper coverage of the execution told readers that "she [Deyon] was attended to the place of execution by several of the clergy." The unnamed clergymen at Deyon's execution would have likely presided over nearby churches. We don't know how many ministers were present that day, but evidence suggests that there may have been enslavers among them. As already seen with the Reverend Johannes M. Goetschius, holding others in bondage was not at all unusual for the county's Reformed Dutch ministers. This was a tradition dating back at least to the Kingston church's Pastor Petrus Vas, who served from 1710 to 1756. Remembered for his decades-long ministry and his successful efforts to establish the region's first hinterland congregations, he was an enslaver of at least two people.<sup>62</sup> At the time of Deyon's execution, at least three local pastors were enslavers. These included Reverend George J. L. Doll of the Kingston's Dutch Reformed Church from 1775 to 1808, owner of five enslaved people; Reverend Moses Froeligh, minister at the Shawangunk Church from 1788 to 1813, owner of three enslaved people; and Reverend Stephen Goetschius, minister

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60. For Henry Sleght's political offices, see Sylvester, *History of Ulster County, New York*, 98, 189–90, 200, 256. For Sleght as an enslaver, see *1800 U.S. Census, Ulster Co., N.Y.*, 228; Stessin-Cohn and Hurlburt-Biagini, *In Defiance*, 196.

61. For Judge James Oliver's medical and political career, see Sylvester, *History of Ulster County, New York*, 97, 122, 192, 211–21. For Judge Abraham Bancker's political career, see Sylvester, *History of Ulster County, New York*, 174, 200. For both men as enslavers, see *1800 U.S. Census, Ulster Co., N.Y.*, 204, 227.

62. For Pastor Petrus Vas, see Edward T. Corwin and Hugh Hastings, eds., *Ecclesiastical Records: State of New York*, Vol. 4 (Albany, NY: J. B. Lyon, State Printer), 2571–73. For Vas as an enslaver in 1755, see E.B. O'Callaghan, "Slaves in Ulster Co. 1755," in *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, Vol. III, 845.

at the Marbletown Church from 1796 to 1814, owner of one enslaved person. Any of these clergymen, or perhaps all, may have accompanied Deyon to her death.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, there is the crowd, described as an “immense concourse of people.” How immense, though, was the crowd at Deyon’s execution and what drew them there? Legal scholar Michael Maddow notes that although probably overestimated, crowds attending public hangings in New York City were said to number “at least 50,000.” Elsewhere in the state, large crowds were also reported. For example, at an 1825 hanging in Buffalo, 30,000 spectators were reported. In small rural New York State communities such as Cooperstown (Otsego County) and Mayville (Chautauqua County), crowds numbering in the thousands were said to have traveled long distances, often camping nearby for days.<sup>64</sup>

With only newspaper accounts and the county supervisors’ entries to rely on, how are we to understand what the crowd at Kingston might have made of Deyon, her alleged crime, and the execution itself? In his analysis of the 1825 New York City hanging of a seaman named James Reynolds, Maddow categorizes such an event as a “ceremonial civico-religious spectacle.”<sup>65</sup> For this execution, and others like it, he observes that “officials deliberately arranged the proceedings to enhance, if not maximize, their public visibility.” Such events tended to be scheduled for the early afternoon, staged on elevated wooden platforms, watched over by infantry battalions, and preceded by “a long meandering urban procession” from the jail to the place of execution.<sup>66</sup> Similar to Reynolds’s execution, Deyon’s execution occurred between 1:00 and 2:00.<sup>67</sup> As was the custom, the gallows may well have been mounted atop a scaffold in order to provide a better view. Additionally, the large crowd, the presence of the sixteen-member “light infantry,” and the contingent of clergymen said to have escorted Deyon “to the place of execution” all typify the various elements comprising capital punishment prior to its removal from public spaces to the interior space of prisons.<sup>68</sup>

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63. For newspaper quotations about the clergy and other aspects of Deyon’s execution, see *Spectator* (New York City), July 20, 1803, 2; *Albany Centennial*, July 15, 1803, 3. For Rev. George Doll, see Sylvester, *History of Ulster County, New York*, 225. For Doll as an enslaver, see *1800 U.S. Census, Ulster Co., N.Y.*, 228. For Rev. Moses Froeligh, see Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church in America*, 477. For Froeligh as an enslaver, see *1800 U.S. Census, Ulster Co., N.Y.*, 249. For Rev. Stephen Goetschius (nephew of Johannes M. Goetschius), see Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church in America*, 492–93. For Goetschius as an enslaver, see *1800 U.S. Census, Ulster Co., N.Y.*, 204.

64. Michael Maddow, “Forbidden Spectacle: Executions, the Public and the Press in Nineteenth Century New York,” *Buffalo Law Review* 43, no. 2 (1995): 461–562. For the size of crowds at public executions, see 477.

65. Maddow, “Forbidden Spectacle,” 479.

66. Maddow, “Forbidden Spectacle,” 478.

67. “Mr. Abraham Bruyn; Clergy,” *Albany Centennial*, July 15, 1803, 3.

68. In addition to Maddow, another interpretation of public executions can be found in Peter Linebaugh, “The Tyburn Riot against the Surgeons,” in *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, eds. Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John C. Rule, E. P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow (London and New York: Verso, 2011), 65–117, specifically 65–69. See also Steven Wilf, “Imagining Justice: Aesthetics and Public Executions in Late Eighteenth-Century England,” *Yale Journal of Law and Humanities* 5, no.1 (1993): 51–78.

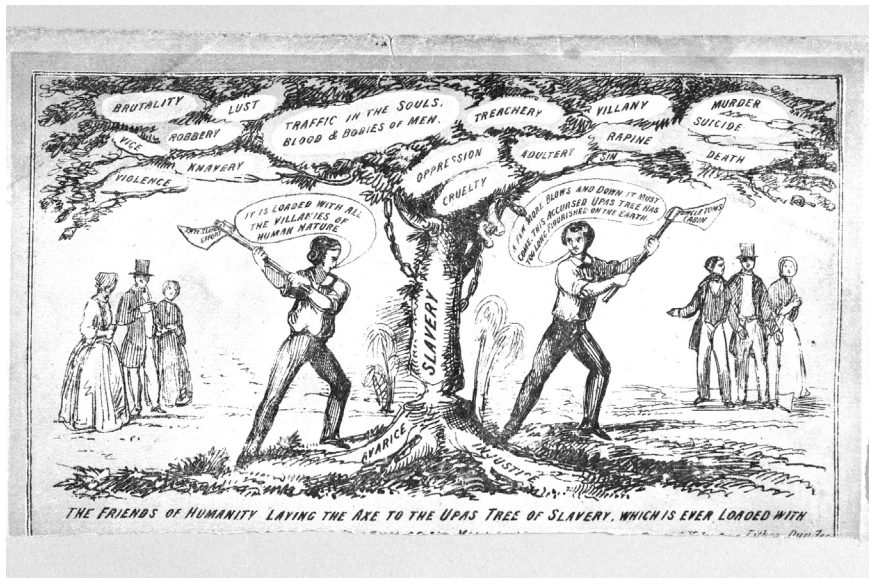


Figure 3. “The Upas Tree of Slavery” was a visual metaphor used by abolitionists in their critiques of American slavery. Frederick Douglass believed that both the enslaved and their enslavers were victims of its “overshadowing evils.” COURTESY OF THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY SCHOMBURG COLLECTION FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE.

### The Upas Tree as Metaphor

Among the antislavery tracts collected in Wilson Amistead’s 1853 pamphlet *Five Hundred Strokes for Freedom* is a print depicting two axe-wielding men in the process of felling what the print’s caption identifies as “the upas tree of slavery ... which is ever loaded with the sum of all villainies.” In the print, the tree’s roots are labeled “avarice” and “injustice” and its trunk labeled “slavery.” Among its many branches are “brutality,” “lust,” “traffic in the souls, blood and bodies of men,” “oppression,” “cruelty,” “rapine,” “murder,” and “death.” Of the axes aimed at the upas tree, one is labeled “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and its wielder captioned as saying “A few more blows and down it must come. This accursed upas tree has too long flourished upon the earth.”<sup>69</sup> Although this essay has focused on the historic forces shaping Deyon and Harrietta’s stories, the upas tree may provide an additional and primarily metaphorical lens through which to view these same events.

Native to southeastern Asia, the upas tree was known for its poisonous sap and for its seeds, used as a source of strychnine. British and American abolitionists employed the tree

69. Wilson Amistead, “The Friends of Humanity Laying the Axe to the Upas Tree of Slavery, which Is Ever Loaded with the Sum of All Villanies,” in *Five Hundred Thousand Strokes for Freedom: A Series of Anti-Slavery Tracts, of which Half a Million Are Now First Issued by the Friends of the Negro* (New York: New York Public Library Schomburg Collection for Research in Black Culture, originally published 1853), <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/five-hundred-thousand-strokes-for-freedom-a-series-of-anti-slavery-tracts/#?tab=about>.



as a visual metaphor, likening it to the original sin of slavery, deeply rooted in the American South, where its “deadly fruit” poisoned all who partook of it. In Frederick Douglass’s eyes, both the enslaved and their enslavers were victims of its “overshadowing evil.” Abraham Lincoln understood it as “an evil tree [that] cannot bring forth good fruit.” Historian Jared Farmer describes it as “the devilish tree [that] took root in Jamestown with the arrival of the first slave ship and twistingly spread its curses throughout the South.”<sup>70</sup> But the North, specifically the province and then state of New York, had once possessed its own overshadowing upas tree, one that was rooted in a slavery regime dating as far back as the early 17th century.

As discussed above, among the primary documents specific to Deyon’s life and death are minutes from meetings of the Ulster County Board of Supervisors conducted in 1803. One entry itemizes all the costs associated with Deyon’s execution. On another page can be found the costs charged for “An inquest taken ... on the body of a child of Abrm. Brown.” Twenty-four jurors had been called.<sup>71</sup> Reading the handwritten pages, one envisions the upas tree of slavery flowering again, its deadly branches enveloping these two young people—one free and whose life had barely begun, the other enslaved and who would not survive her adolescence.

## Conclusion

Deyon, an enslaved sixteen-year-old, undoubtedly died penniless on the scaffold. Among the enslaved adults enumerated as Abraham Bruyn’s property in the various censuses, it should be assumed that few, if any, possessed savings reflecting their years of labor. An examination of Bruyn’s 1826 will, however, reveals that during his lifetime he had accumulated considerable monetary wealth as well as property.<sup>72</sup> His seven surviving offspring were bequeathed hundreds of dollars, many acres of land, and various dwellings and out-buildings in both Ulster and Orange counties. To two of his sons, Thomas and Cornelius, he left “the farm on which I now reside including the grist mill, saw mill, water privileges and adjoining lands.”

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70. Upas tree quotations: Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time* (Chapel Hill, NC: Documenting the American South, University Library of the University of North Carolina, originally published in 1881), 72–79, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/doug192/menu.html>; Abraham Lincoln, “Letter to Williamson Durley, Oct 3. 1845,” in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 1 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Digital Library Production Services, 2001), 348, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln1/1:373?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/index.html>; Jared Farmer, “In America Trees Symbolize Both Freedom and Unfreedom,” Oxford University Press, OUP Blog, April 2019, <https://blog.oup.com/2019/04/america-trees-freedom/>.

71. “An Inquest...,” Entries made on October 5–7, 1803, in “Supervisors’ Minutes 1793–1806.”

72. “Last Will and Testament of Abraham Bruyn, June 7, 1826,” New York Probate Record 1629–1971, Ulster County Wills, 1814–1832, Book E, pgs. 311–13, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-L99P-533F?i=1&wc=Q754-82S%3A213302401%2C221331001&cc=1920234.n>.

As described above, two decades prior to Thomas and Cornelius Bruyn's inheriting their father's grist mill, it had been the site of their sister Harrietta's murder. With the aid of historic and contemporary maps, this location has now been identified. Slightly south-east of the present-day hamlet of Ulsterville, the former site of the Bruyn Grist Mill lies along the western bank of the Shawangunk Kill, atop one of the river's more distinctive meanders. Even today, a dam can be seen here spanning the river.<sup>73</sup> While in use, Bruyn's mill dam would have directed the river's waters into the grist mill's headrace, thus powering the wheel, pulleys, gears, and ultimately the millstones that ground the wheat into flour.<sup>74</sup> However, as described above and in contemporary newspaper accounts, the actual site of the alleged murder was not the dam itself but a "mill pond," created by impounding the river's waters and which would have been located immediately upstream of the dam.<sup>75</sup> It was only by draining this mill pond that Harrietta's body was discovered.

Despite the upas tree and any lessons it may have imparted, the murder that occurred at a Shawangunk Kill grist mill 220 years ago is now forgotten. Forgotten also are Deyon and Harrietta. This essay has sought to illustrate how their short lives encapsulate Ulster County's history of enslavement as it was experienced by the enslaved and by the families and individuals who enslaved them. By telling such stories, it is hoped that this history will be remembered and ultimately restored to the county's understanding of its own past.

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73. Whether the present-day dam is the mill dam owned and operated by Abraham Bruyn at the time of Harrietta's murder is unknown. At some point in its history, it is possible that the original structure was extensively reinforced or rebuilt entirely.

74. For illustrations depicting the construction and operation of grist mills, see David Macaulay, *Mill* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983).

75. For mill ponds, see Theodore R. Hazen, "Historically, How to Site a Mill." This illustration is credited to "Mills on the Tsatsawassa: Techniques for Documenting Early 19th Century Water-Power Industry in Rural New York," Philip L. Lord, Purple Mountain Press, Fleischmanns, New York, 1983. This website includes a schematic drawing that depicts the location of a mill pond relative to the location of its associated mill dam. [www.angelfire.com/journal/millrestoration/site.html](http://www.angelfire.com/journal/millrestoration/site.html). Also see Michael Hodgson and Sylvia Piovan, "Modelling and Mapping Elusive Locations of Historic Water-Powered Grist Mills," Abstracts of the International Cartographic Association, 2019, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334497439\\_Modelling\\_and\\_Mapping\\_Elusive\\_Locations\\_of\\_Historic\\_Water-Powered\\_Grist\\_Mills](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334497439_Modelling_and_Mapping_Elusive_Locations_of_Historic_Water-Powered_Grist_Mills).