

LONG ISLAND

Telling their stories: Research highlights the role of enslaved people on LI



Deborah Galloway visits St. David AME Zion Cemetery in Sag Harbor, where she goes to feel connected to history and her community. Credit: Randee Daddona

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When Karen Masterson's students showed up last fall for her Advanced Reporting class at Stony Brook University, serendipity became part of the lesson plan.

Instead of the usual class focusing on advanced writing, the 17 students embarked on researching the history of slavery on Long Island, a pivot made possible by funds remaining from an independent research project, said Masterson, who left Stony Brook to begin a professorship this fall at the University of Richmond.

The assignment was designed to report on the remnants and effects of slavery on Long Island, a place that hardly acknowledges the practice, said Zachary R. Dowdy, an adjunct instructor who helped direct the students' research and who is

also a longtime Newsday reporter. Terry Sheridan, the managing editor of WSHU Public Radio who directs Stony Brook's internship program, was also part of the teaching team.

The students dug into historical documents and research databases and located sources to interview. The resulting stories range from explaining the Plain Sight Project, which is endeavoring to document every enslaved person who lived in East Hampton Town, to delving into whether the Maine Maid Inn was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Some of the students' stories also were made into episodes that aired on WSHU.

The reporting, said Masterson, allowed the students "to connect past to present in a very direct way."

The stories that follow are from three students: Brianne Ledda, Megan Valle and Vaidik Trivedi. Stories from the other students will appear in LI Life in the coming month.



Stony Brook University journalism student Brianne Ledda, a native of Long Island, said she was surprised to learn about the magnitude of slavery on Long Island. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

The Plain Sight Project

By Brianne Ledda

Ledda, 21, will begin her senior year at Stony Brook in the fall. "It was fascinating for me to learn where I came from," said Ledda, an intern at WSHU who grew up in Miller Place. "I grew up on Long Island, but I was shocked to learn there was such a large population of enslaved people."

Jon Kuperschmid, a rising junior at East Hampton High School, was stunned last year when he discovered in an 18th century Long Island estate inventory that cheese was worth more than an

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Hampton Star and the East Hampton Free Library that's uncovering the history of slavery. Gardiner owned what is now Gardiners Island in East Hampton.

Kuperschmid said that before joining the project, he had no idea slavery existed on Long Island. "When you think of slavery, you think of the South," he said, adding that what he learned in school suggested that the institution had passed over the island.

The Plain Sight Project intends to change this assumption — if not for all of Long Island, at least in East Hampton Town. The project's goal is to document names "of all the enslaved people that have ever lived in East Hampton Town," according to David Ratray, editor-in-chief of the East Hampton Star and the project's founder. More broadly, the project plans to let people know that slavery was "as much a part of the North as any other part of the country," Ratray said.

The aim is to eventually create an online database and to integrate Long Island slavery — which existed from the 1600s until at least 1827, when slave ownership became illegal for full-time state residents — into the historical narrative.

"The idea is to be able to create a story for each of the enslaved people we find," Kuperschmid said of his research efforts since February 2019. "So eventually [we'll] have an online database where people can look up certain people, maybe, or certain family, and learn about the people who helped build their town."

enslaved woman.

"Phillis" was valued at 8 pounds while "sundry cheeses" were valued at 15 in the "Inventory for the Estate of David Gardiner" that listed 15 other people valued between 5 and 70 pounds. Kuperschmid, 16, said he was shocked that "a human life was worth less than a piece of dairy."

He made the discovery as one of a handful of volunteers for the Plain Sight Project — a research effort of the East

The project began in 2017, after Rattray stumbled across church records. He was investigating an enslaved person named Ned, whose gravestone in behind a home in East Hampton vanished for years before it was returned in 2015. The records list births and deaths in East Hampton during the “height of slavery,” he said. He asked an intern to type it up, and the Plain Sight Project was born.



Jon Kuperschmid is an East Hampton High School student who is volunteering for the Plain Sight Project, an attempt to uncover the lives of enslaved people in East Hampton Town. Credit: Randee Daddona

Now, volunteers are searching the library’s Long Island Collection to fill in the pieces of a forgotten history. One of the largest collections of manuscript materials in Nassau and Suffolk counties, the five-room wing holds more than 100,000 items — including about 70 original whaling logs and hundreds of account books — dating back centuries. Much of it is available online.

Andrea Meyer, the head of the collection, said the earliest items she’s seen in the collection date to 1599. Volunteers for the Plain Sight Project might “find nothing” some days, but 10 names another day, according to Meyer, who readies materials for them according to Rattray’s direction.

Kuperschmid said he typically researched after school for an hour and half twice a week, working carefully with documents using his bare hands, turning pages from the bottom corner. He might get through two to five documents in one sitting. That was before the coronavirus pandemic.

East Hampton Library was closed during the early days of the pandemic; it reopened in early August. In the meanwhile, work continued off-site.

The project has confirmed that more than 250 enslaved people lived in East Hampton Town between 1657 and 1829. Two graves in the town for people of African descent from the Revolutionary period and earlier, had led Rattray to assume that they

were the only enslaved people in East Hampton.

Rattray said that the story Long Islanders tell about their origins — such as from the American Revolution — “omits the muscle and intelligence and the skills that enslaved people lent to the American project.”

Documents detailing slavery on Long Island are hard to find. Historian Jennifer Anderson has cobbled together stories from scraps. “Oftentimes, it might be sources, for example, that an enslaved person didn't put together, but where they just happened to show up in the archives and pages of their owner or sometimes in legal records,” said Anderson, a history professor at Stony Brook University and expert on colonialism and slavery on Long Island.

For example, even though Sylvester Manor, Long Island's first plantation, is packed with artifacts and stores more than 10,000 documents at New York University's Fales Library, very few of its records describe the lives of people enslaved there.

“Those kind of records were not kept,” said Donnamarie Barnes, a Sylvester Manor archivist and Plain Sight board member. “We have to imagine, and you have to do the imagining.”

Recreating the lives of enslaved people is “hard to do because we don't have the documentation,” she said.

Plain Sight relies on inventories and account books for most of its information, but cemetery and church records also contribute. Account books range from “literally being pieces of paper in tatters that were once bound together to leather bound volumes still in good shape,” Meyer said. Those that predate 1850 usually need added support or wrapping.

Historian Steve Boerner, who has transcribed account books at East Hampton Library into a digital database, said they're among the best records available. “They really give you so much information beyond what people were able to purchase and sell and consume,” he said — such as, in many cases, the names of people who were likely enslaved.

Detailed receipts, inventories and fiscal accounts nevertheless provide little narrative about the lives of enslaved people.

Firsthand written accounts of slavery in the Northern colonies are rare. One of the best known is that of Venture Smith — a formerly enslaved man whose autobiography, “A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by Himself,” was published in 1798.

This chronic lack of documentation feeds misconceptions.

The Long Island Museum’s 2019 exhibit “Long Road to Freedom: Surviving Slavery on Long Island” examined the legacy of slavery on Long Island, focusing on the African American experience from the Colonial period through the 19th century. The exhibit included one section on the “slavery story” and another on the “freedom story,” which focused on “the development of African American communities throughout the 19th century,” the exhibit’s curator, Jonathan Olly, said. There was a small section that looked toward the African American experience in the 20th century.

Feedback on the exhibit collected by Olly demonstrated people were unaware that slavery existed on the Island.

“It is so easy to pass the buk [sic] to the South for their atrocities,” one response read. “The problem is built into the fabric of our nation, and this exhibit allows us to face our history. Bone chilling. Well done.”

“Thank you for this exhibit. I did not know,” another read.

Slavery is a topic that has not been well-taught in American schools. Teaching Tolerance, an organization that offers free resources to K-12 educators to help students “explore identity and diversity, recognize injustice and learn to take action,” contracted with Survey USA in December 2016 to conduct an online poll of 1,000 high school seniors across the United States.

It saw dismal results. Only 8% of students identified slavery as the cause of the Civil War, only 32% were able to identify which amendment formally ended slavery, and 29% mistakenly believed that Frederick Douglass, Henry “Box” Brown and Harriet Tubman led slave revolts.

“It has not been part of most people's educational curriculum. It's not part of the telling of the founding of a town really,” Sylvester Manor archivist Barnes said. “It has sort of been that history that was forgotten to be remembered, or they remembered to forget it.”

Georgette Grier-Key, the executive director and chief curator of the Eastville Community Historical Society and an adviser to the Plain Sight Project, pointed out that many teachers feel uncomfortable teaching slavery.

In recent years, however, more local historians have been focusing on educating people about slavery's legacy.

The historical society in Southold opened an exhibit in August 2019 about the lives of enslaved people in the town. Southampton plans to rebuild the home of Pyrrhus Concer, a formerly enslaved man from Southampton who was on the first American ship to visit Tokyo. Grier-Key, along with Brenda Simmons, the executive director of the Southampton African American Museum, have been driving forces behind restoration efforts through the Pyrrhus Concer Action Committee.

Grier-Key said public discussions about slavery need to be structured and facilitated because “the wrong conversation can really do a disservice.”

“It's really not about who did wrong or who did right,” she said. “The problem is, this is the stain on America. We don't want to talk about it. It did happen.”

Rattray said records indicate nearly every household of means in East Hampton from the 1650s onward had one or two enslaved people — including his own. That discovery was the core moment, he said, when he realized that asking questions about slavery, even if they lack answers, will help people think “a little differently” about the past.

Looking toward the future, Plain Sight is creating a template that can be used elsewhere to identify enslaved people and understand the roles they played in history.

In the meantime, Kuperschmid taught a seventh-grade history class about local slavery over Zoom. He made a short video about the Plain Sight Project and gave a live lecture, leaving time for questions. He said the students were “very into it.”

Educating people will help them “really know the true history of our town, and just give credit where it's due,” he said. “These are the people who really built our town that we live in.”



Stony Brook graduate Megan Valle, right, reported on the efforts of Babylon Town Historian Mary Cascone to get historical recognition for North Amityville's Colored School No. 6. The school in the poster is of Park North, which was integrated after it opened in 1895. Credit: Yvonne Albinowski

Colored School No. 6

By Megan Valle

Valle, 22, graduated in May from Stony Brook. “I was really interested in doing something with education,” said Valle, who lives on Staten Island. “I decided to do North Amityville because I was doing a lot of reading about that — and found Amityville was very segregated.”

When Babylon Town Historian Mary Cascone walked into the New York State Archives in Albany last September, she hoped to find the final document she needed to prove that the former Colored School No. 6 in North Amityville taught free Black and

American Indian children. To her dismay, she found that thousands of school records had been destroyed by a fire in 1911, halting her quest to prove the historic significance of the schoolhouse that once stood on Albany Avenue.

The one-room school was built in 1871 for freed Black children in North Amityville, a minority community since the 1700s when the first people of color came to the area as enslaved people, freed people and indentured servants.

“Language is difficult because at the time, the only word they used to describe people of color was simply ‘colored,’” Cascone explained, “ ... whether they were Native American or African American.”

Cascone has spent months working on a historical marker application for the school to validate its importance to the community. “The one piece I’m held up on is ‘and [American] Indians,’” she said. Cascone had planned to submit her application last November to the William G. Pomeroy Foundation, which funds historic markers in New York State, but didn’t make the deadline. She remains on the hunt for evidence to prove American Indian children attended Colored School No. 6.

The school marker is part of Cascone's mission to get historic African American and American Indian sites recognized. She said it’s important to tell the history of communities that have been overlooked or inaccurately portrayed.

“I feel addicted to figuring out the truth,” Cascone said. “And I don’t always know what that’s going to be, but I have to be open to whatever it is.”

The school operated for more than 20 years until 1895, when Amityville built its first high school, Park North. The building still stands on Park Avenue. According to “Long Island’s Black School War,” by Carleton Mabree, in 1895 when Charles D. Brewster, a Black and American Indian laborer who served the Union Army in the Civil War, sent his son to the new school, he was refused admittance. Brewster, a descendant of enslaved people on Long Island, and others in the village grew angry and confronted the school board. Ultimately, the board voted to close No. 6, and Park North was integrated.

Cascone said describing Colored School No. 6 as “a school that taught freed” children of color is historically accurate. However, the term is unclear. Describing the school most accurately requires determining whether the school's name referred to both African Americans and American Indians. Such documentation has proved elusive.

The United States has conducted a census every 10 years since 1790. From 1790 to 1840, only heads of household were recorded, and the number of people in each household was described by gender, race and as free or enslaved. In 1850, the census began to count every person in the house. More detail was added by 1860, including an indication of “I” for American

Indian.

Nevertheless, census takers were inconsistent. “The census takers decided what to label someone as,” said John Strong, an author and expert on Long Island American Indian history. “The census takers would identify [American] Indians as African Americans.”



This 1888 map shows the location of North Amityville's Colored School No. 6, which was closed in 1895 after protests about segregation of schools. Credit: Babylon History Museum

The most Cascone can do is sift through scant evidence in search of a document that identifies a child or parent as “I” for American Indian.

“One of the things that did happen up through the 1860s, was that there was a school census and they didn’t necessarily write down the names of the students that attended there,” she said. “Rather, the names of the parents, but more their fathers.”

By looking at school census documents, Cascone can find the name of a student’s father, then look for him in government censuses. That trail took her to the State Archives — and the discovery of the 1911 fire.

Cascone has received Pomeroy Foundation grants for more than a dozen roadside markers, including one in 2016 to mark Ronek Park in North Amityville as a nondiscriminatory housing development started by Thomas Romano in 1950. The foundation’s goal is to help people celebrate their community’s history and fill a gap, as New York State stopped funding roadside markers in 1939. Since 2006, the foundation has funded more than 600 markers in 53 counties.

Cascone hopes to submit her application when she finds evidence that confirms Colored School No. 6 taught free Black and American Indian children. “I want the things that we put out there to be as accurate as possible,” she said.

St. David AME Zion Church



Vaidik Trivedi, a recent graduate of Stony Brook University, sits in front of the church he wrote about, St. David AME Zion Church in Sag Harbor in August 2020. Credit: Randee Daddona

By Vaidik Trivedi

Trivedi, 22, graduated in May from Stony Brook and is an intern at Bank Innovation. "Reporting on this topic gave me a different perspective on how African Americans were treated in the past," said Trivedi, a native of India. "If I hadn't done this, I wouldn't have understood the issue of racism — how issues now are related to what was faced in the past."

Deborah Galloway, 68, clapped her hands and stomped her feet while swaying her body to "I Wanna Be Like Jesus," a contemporary Christian song, inside St. David AME Zion Church

in Sag Harbor.

Fourteen people sang in harmony, led by the Rev. Michael J. Jackson, pastor of Triune Baptist Church, which rents the building for weekly services and Sunday school.

"It's the same people that come here every Sunday," Galloway said, explaining that she's attended the church since moving to Sag Harbor in 1994.

Galloway cherishes the memories of her first visit to the church with her parents when she was a child, though her family lived in Brooklyn then. "Especially when everyone started singing, it is something you feel inside," Galloway recalled.

"It is a place for family, respect, a sense of community," she said. "Which is hard to come by."

Though the modest 180-year-old shingled structure, owned now by the Eastville Community Historical Society, surely has many stories to tell, its most enduring narrative may be as a symbol of the African American community on Long Island's East End since 1840.

"The church was established by free African Americans and Native Americans [Shinnecock and Montauk American Indians]," explained Georgette Grier-Key, executive director and chief curator of historical society, formed in 1981 primarily to preserve St. David. "They came together to create a place of worship together after being segregated by the European settlers."

The church is believed to have been part of Underground Railroad, the network of people who helped enslaved African Americans escape their captors.

"The trapdoor behind the Communion table allegedly led to a tunnel which opens underneath the house next door," Jackson said. "It is rumored that enslaved African Americans used to hide here and were helped in eluding their captors."

Although the church isn't officially listed as part of the Underground Railroad, said Michael A. Butler, chairman of the nearby St. David AME Zion Cemetery, "there's a strong oral history and tradition" of its role in the Underground Railroad." In addition to the church's trapdoor, he cited one in the house next door, which was owned by David Hempstead, a church founder.

After her Sunday worship, Galloway takes a walk to the cemetery with her grandson Maxwell Perodin, 4.

"I try to bring him to the church whenever I can. He loves it here," she said. "It's like passing on the tradition and values of our history and culture, which is important in our family and the community."

In 2001, the society took on the cemetery, where it's recently helped erect a fence and rehabilitate gravestones.

While the church opened in 1840, the land for the cemetery was acquired in 1857 by David Hempstead for \$50 from Hannah Solomon and Anna Maria Solomon, Eastville residents, Butler said. Hempstead was a whaler who came to Sag Harbor in

search of employment opportunities.

Before that, “people of color, Native Americans and African Americans were buried in segregated sections of some of the local cemeteries in Sag Harbor,” Butler said.

David Hempstead is buried at St. David as is its first pastor, the Rev. J.P. Thompson, and abolitionist who died in 1862.

Sag Harbor was the sixth largest whaling port in the nation and was declared an official port of entry to the United States by Congress in 1789, according to Richard Doctorow, director of Sag Harbor Whaling and Historical Museum. “Sag Harbor became the focal point on eastern Long Island for maritime trade and travel,” he said.

There were more than 64 whaling ships docked in Sag Harbor at its peak in 1845, that traveled to the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Ocean, Doctorow said. Sag Harbor became a village the following year.

Pyrrhus Concer, who was born into indentured servitude and went on to earn his freedom, worked on whaling ships out of Sag Harbor, becoming the first African American to set foot on Japanese soil, Grier-Key said. After New York made it unlawful for residents to own slaves in 1827, many freed African Americans like Concer moved closer to Sag Harbor in search of employment on ships, she said.

African Americans, American Indians and European settlers mingled well when the whaling industry was booming, she added. “It was their shared occupation that helped them coexist,” Grier-Key explained. “Most of the men were whalers and merchants, meaning they’d be stuck on ships for months at a time.”

Although freed African Americans and American Indians coexisted with European settlers in the village, their integration into the society was restricted.

In 1839, the African Americans and American Indians came together to build St. David church. “We need to understand that

building a church was not just about building a church in that time,” Grier-Key said. “They [the founders], were bold and the church not only became a place of worship but also became a cultural hub for the two communities.”

In the beginning, St. David was a plain structure with 16 members. As whaling grew, so did the Eastville community. By 1843, there were 83 church members and a Sunday school for Eastville’s youth.

Through different congregations, the church has continued to serve its youth. “It’s wonderful to see children like myself grow up in this church,” said Elijah Jackson, 22, the Rev. Jackson’s “nephew.” “I only hope to be a pastor that last a lifetime.”

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