
SECTION I

First Wave of Anti-Slavery Activism (1783-1834)

Lesson 1

Brooklyn: A Slaveholding Capital

Grade Level: Middle & High School

Objectives:

Students will

- Analyze census data that reveal the number of slave holding families in Brooklyn, NY.
- Create a map marking Brooklyn streets that are named after prominent slaveholding families.

Time: Two 50-minute class periods

Materials:

- Worksheet 1: Original Six Towns of Kings County
- Worksheet 2: 1790 United States Census Data, Kings County
- Worksheet 3: Brooklyn's Slaveholding Families, 1790
- Computers with Internet access

Background:

By many accounts, Brooklyn can be regarded as a “slaveholding capital.” Brooklyn was one of six towns in Kings County, from its Dutch inception in 1634 to its incorporation as a city in 1834. Kings County had a larger concentration of enslaved people than any other county in New York State. According to the first official federal census taken in 1790, the population of Kings County was 4,495. One third of this population was of African descent, and virtually all were enslaved. In addition, the rate of slaveholding was significant. On average, 60% of Dutch families were slaveholders in Kings County; in outer areas, such as the town of Flatbush, the numbers were as high as 74%. Brooklyn's slaveholding percentages exceeded that of South Carolina and neighboring Manhattan where 40% of families were slaveholders.

Some Kings County slaveholding families who became incredibly wealthy during this time included the Lefferts, Lott, Bergen, Vanderveer, and Vanderbeek families. Their names are still visible in Brooklyn's landscape: the Prospect-Lefferts Gardens neighborhood and Lott Street in Flatbush; Bergen Street which runs east to west from Cobble Hill to East New York; Vanderveer Street in Bushwick; and Remsen Street (named after a descendant of Ram Jansen Vanderbeek) in Brooklyn Heights. In fact, there are 82 streets named after Brooklyn's slaveholding families that still exist in the borough today.



Original Six Towns of Kings County from Brooklyn (Breukelen). Brooklyn Eagle. 1946. F129.B7 B766
1946 c.2. Brooklyn Historical Society.

“Slavery, too, died hard in New York’s hinterland. Ironically, the factors that had combined to push slavery towards the periphery of the Manhattan’s economy—immigration, the consequent dramatic expansion in the size of the city, and the development of a system of wage labor—made slaves all the more desirable in its hinterland. The farmers of Kings [County] in New York wanted slaves not as servants but as agricultural laborers as they sought to profit from feeding the metropolis.”

—White, Shane. *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810*. Athens: University of Georgia, 1991.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Begin by handing out a blank outline map of the United States (downloadable outline maps are available at: <http://www.eduplace.com/ss/maps/>) and ask the students to color in all of the states where they think slavery was practiced. Have them share their answers and what they know about slavery in the United States. Make sure students know that although slavery in the United States is most commonly associated with southern states, the North was also actively involved.

2. Distribute **Worksheet 1: Original Six Towns of Brooklyn**. Explain to students that in 1683, Kings County was established and was comprised of six agricultural towns: Brooklyn, Bushwick, Flatbush, Flatlands, Gravesend, and New Utrecht.

3. Share with students that Kings County has been labeled by historians as “a slaveholding capital,” as it had a larger concentration of enslaved people than any other county in New York State and its slaveholding percentages exceeded those of South Carolina.

4. Explain that many of present-day Brooklyn streets are named after many prominent slaveholding families, including the Lotts, Remsens, Bergens, and Lefferts. In fact, 82 streets named after slaveholding families exist in Brooklyn today.

5. Pass out **Worksheet 2: 1790 United States Census Data, Kings County**. Ask students the following questions:

- How many enslaved people lived in Brooklyn in 1790?
- How many heads of households lived in Brooklyn in 1790?
- What percentage of the total population were enslaved people?
- Based on this data, what conclusions can we come to about slavery in Brooklyn?

6. After students have considered and discussed the census data, pass out **Worksheet 3: Brooklyn’s Slaveholding Families, 1790**. Explain to students that this excerpt from the 1790 United States Census reveals the names of several slaveholding families that have streets named after them.

7. Using **Google Map Maker**, have students search and plot the streets named after slaveholders. Students can gather further research on the slaveholding families listed in **Worksheet 3** (suggested resource: **Brooklyn by Name: How the Neighborhoods, Streets, Parks, Bridges, and More Got Their Names** by Leonard Benardo & Jennifer Weiss). Locations can include brief descriptions of the slaveholding families.

Linking Past and Present

- Many place names (including schools, streets, parks, and schools) are named after slave owners. Hold a class debate on whether places named after slave owners should be renamed. If time allows, have students conduct additional research to find places in the United States named after slaveholders.