

Lesson 4, Worksheet 2

Expert Topic Sheet - Manumission

Background

Manumission is the legal process of becoming free. Enslaved people were usually manumitted after they worked for a specific amount of time or after completing a particular work requirement. These terms were sometimes laid out in a slaveholder's will. This route to freedom often failed because many white Brooklynites ignored the terms of the manumission, forcing African Americans to work beyond the terms of the agreement.

Example

An enslaved man in Brooklyn named Harry was promised money, manumission, and an apprenticeship at the age of 21 upon the death of his original enslaver, Maria Magdalene Ruble. In 1809, when he was around the age of 24, Harry enlisted the help of William Livingston, the Surrogate of Kings County. Livingston wrote a letter to the New-York Manumission Society, calling upon them to help Harry. It is not known if Harry ever found freedom.

Discussion questions

- What are the pros of being manumitted?
- What are the cons of being manumitted?