
SECTION I

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

Lesson 5

The New-York Manumission Society

Grade Level: High School

Objectives:

Students will

- Understand the role the New-York Manumission Society played in helping enslaved people secure freedom.
- Analyze the contested will of a slaveholder who intended to manumit her slave, Harry.
- Assume the identity of a member of the New-York Manumission Society and write a letter to the court on Harry's behalf.

Time: One 50-minute class period

Materials:

- Worksheet 1: Activities of the New-York Manumission Society on Long Island
- Worksheet 2: Primary Source—Maria Magdalene Ruble's Last Will and Testament

Background:

After the Revolutionary War, free black communities, manumissions, and anti-slavery societies grew in the North. In 1785, thirty-two white men from Manhattan's elite formed the "New-York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting Them as Have Been, or May be Liberated," otherwise known as the New-York Manumission Society (N-YMS). The society's founders included Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. The society drafted thirteen by-laws, none of which addressed eligibility requirements for its members. As a result, many officers and members were also slaveholders. The contradiction of being a slaveholding anti-slavery reformer was not lost on people like John Jay who held six bonds people in the year of the N-YMS's founding. Many believed that their reform work with the N-YMS addressed their sin of slaveholding and would eventually result in the moral and economic collapse of slavery.

The N-YMS was responsible for (1) establishing the African Free School on Cliff Street in Manhattan in 1787, (2) persuading the legislature to prevent the importation and exportation of enslaved people via the international slave trade in New York in 1788 (U.S. participation in the international slave trade finally ended in 1808), and (3) assisting in thousands of court cases for people entrapped in slavery, over a hundred of whom came from Long Island.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Share information from the **Background** with students about how the N-YMS was established, the contradictory presence of slaveholders within its ranks, and society's area of operations.

2. Distribute **Worksheet 1: Activities of the New-York Manumission Society on Long Island**. Place students in small groups and ask them to examine the table to draw conclusions about the activities of the N-YMS and explain what the table reveals about the nature of slavery in Brooklyn and neighboring areas at the time. Ask the following questions:

- What types of complaints did the N-YMS receive?
- Which complaint did they receive the most of?
- What conclusions can you come to about the lives of enslaved people based on this table?
- What conclusions can you come to about the N-YMS based on this table?

3. Explain that as shown in the table, the N-YMS often intervened in court cases where the terms of an enslaved person's manumission had been violated. Distribute **Worksheet 2: Primary Source - Maria Magdalene Ruble's Last Will and Testament**. Explain that 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 still enslaved 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.

4. Ask students to read Maria Magdalene's will and make a list of the terms of Harry's manumission. Have students share their lists and record their answers on the board. Ask students to assume the role of William Livingston and to write a letter to the N-YMS, asking for them to assist in securing Harry's freedom. Students should use their list of the terms of Harry's manumission to support their claims.

Linking Past and Present

- Have students define the term "paradox." Discuss the paradox of slave owners also serving as members of the New-York Manumission Society. Ask students to find a modern example of a paradox in the political realm and compare it to the contradictions of slavery in the land of the free.