

E. SLAVERY: A DUTCH-AMERICAN CULTURAL TRADITION

During the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, Dutch-American families tended to rely heavily on the institution of slavery for help in the care of their homes, in the working of their farms and in daily operation of their businesses. To some extent the Dutch tradition of keeping slaves is linked to the fact that the Dutch nation was a major player in the slave trade of the 17th century and the plantation economy of the Dutch West Indies, but the Duke of York (later King James II) was also financially linked with slave trading companies and actively protected and encouraged the practice in the colonies under his control. Although slave holding was not uncommon in 18th- and 19th-century New York and New Jersey among wealthy individuals of all ethnic backgrounds, the Dutch were perhaps the only group to so completely incorporate the practice as part of their culture.

Probate records demonstrate just how commonplace the practice was in Dutch households. Time and time again, wills and inventories record the presence of slaves on Dutch farms and in Dutch households in numbers not seen among their "English" neighbors. Typically, these numbers seem to involve between one and six individuals, more than an individual house servant and significantly less than one might associate with plantation agriculture. There were exceptions to this rule. Many of the old Dutch manors and some of the larger farms particularly in New York State had substantial slave populations ranging between 20 and 30 persons but such circumstances are not believed to have existed in the Raritan Valley.

Although slaves were possessions, they were also an integral part of the extended Dutch household. In most cases they lived under the same roof as their masters. Kitchen wings and kitchen garrets, in particular, seem to have been the domain of slaves although some references to slaves occupying/sleeping in cellar spaces and independent housing does exist. Female slaves seem primarily to have worked in housekeeping or in the kitchen, while male slaves worked on the farm or, occasionally, in trades and crafts.

In the early years of the Dutch West India Company, African slaves in New Netherland who converted to Christianity were supposed to be manumitted in accordance with the Council of Dordrecht of 1618, which held that Christian people were not to be held in permanent bondage. During the 1640s, many African servants of the company were eventually set free and some became "Afro-Dutch" freeholders but by the 1650s the practice had largely stopped as "the economic seductions of slavery grew more addictive." The Dutch Reformed Church adopted religious doctrine designed to justify the practice of keeping Christian slaves. New Netherland's Reformed ministers largely abandoned the practice of catechizing or baptizing slaves. This was probably in part due to the drop in demand after such actions no longer lead directly to freedom but also to insulate against the doctrinal problems of keeping Christian slaves (Hodges 1997:26).

The issue again became problematic after the English takeover of the colony. The Anglican Church at the behest of the Crown instituted a policy of actively proselytizing to enslaved Africans and African-Americans in the Colonies. The English colonial government did not recognize the rights of a Christian slave to freedom but the acts of the Anglican Church in seeking the conversion of slaves did invoke extreme displeasure among the Dutch slave holding community. The Dutch viewed the actions of the Anglican Church as "Religious imperialism." Believing the Baptism of slaves had played a role in a New York slave revolt of 1712 and fearing continued conflict rising from the practice of keeping Christian slaves, the Dutch population viewed the actions

of the Anglican Church with suspicion. Tensions between the Dutch and Anglo-populations were increased. These disputes helped to bring further cohesion to the “Dutch” cultural group, reinforcing their culture and, therefore in the process, perhaps further entrenching one of the defining “Dutch-American” cultural traits, the practice of keeping slaves.

1. African-American Participation in Dutch-American Culture: Celebrating Pinkster

The Dutch did not baptize slaves or allow them formal participation in their church but they did allow them to share in one aspect of their religious life, Pinkster. Pinkster was a celebration of the Pentecost. It was an important religious and folk holiday throughout much of Europe and was imported to the mid-Atlantic colonies where it functioned both as a sacred event celebrated within the home and a community festival or fair. The tradition of Pinkster was especially strong in agricultural contexts in which most of the population belonged to Dutch Reformed, Lutheran and Huguenot churches but the holiday was cause for major celebrations in both the rural communities of the Raritan Valley and urban centers like New York City. During Pinkster blacks and whites frolicked side by side with a remarkable degree of interaction (Hodges 1997:31, 56-58, Cohen 1992:161-163).

Prevented from celebrating overtly African holidays, the Dutch slave community recognized parallels between Pinkster and traditional native African celebrations. For example, the religious aspects of Pinkster, like those of many African spiritual beliefs, could involve ecstatic preaching and speaking in tongues. Denied other opportunities for public cultural and religious expression, the slave population adopted and adapted the holiday to their own uses, along the way incorporating aspects of African rituals and belief systems. Some components of the celebration of Pinkster by Dutch slaves was parallel and apart from that of the broader Dutch/White community, but because of the festival like nature of much of Pinkster, ultimately the end result was a shared holiday that borrowed from many ethnic traditions. Denied formal membership in their masters’ faith, slaves also viewed their participation in the “Christian” holiday of Pinkster as an opportunity for some measure of “sacred equality.”

Ultimately, Pinkster evolved into something more akin to a carnival celebration than to a pious religious holiday. In part because it was so totally assimilated by the African-American community, by the end of the 19th century, it was largely abandoned by the white population. However, the shared nature of the holiday during the 18th and early 19th centuries demonstrates how African-American slaves were incorporated into and actively contributed to the larger Dutch-American culture (Hodges 1997:31, 56-58, Cohen 1992 161-163).

2. The Enslaved Vanderveers (Figures 4.5-4.7)

Like that of so many of his “Dutch” neighbors, Jacobus Vanderveer Sr.’s probate inventory included slaves. Four were listed in the inventory, “1 negro man named Quash,” “1 negro boy named Jupiter,” “1 negro girl named Eve” and “1 negro Child about 4 years named Joe” and two other individuals “negro wens (sic, for probably for “wench”) named Wine” and a “negro gerrel (sic, for “girl”) named June” (New Jersey Will 18:558). Jacobus Sr.’s will indicated that his son, Jacobus was at first to receive Wine as part of his estate but this stipula-

tion was later altered and Wine was exchanged for June. An unidentified Negro wench, possibly Wine for she was the only female slave referenced in the will or inventory specifically as a wench rather than as a girl, was bequeathed to Jacobus Sr.'s widowed daughter-in-law Catherine.

These transactions emphasize the fact that although slaves may have been a part of the Vanderveer extended household they were still possessions and their lives could be uprooted at a moment's notice. Even if a slaveholding family chose not to sell their slaves out of the household during their lifetime, the death of a master could be a traumatic time of upheaval for slaves who could be sold to satisfy a debt or willed to distant relatives in another part of New Jersey or even further afield. Thus regardless of their desires, slave families could be torn asunder with little warning or time for preparation.

June is the first slave known to be historically associated with the Jacobus Vanderveer House. The oldest part of the house was erected in the years between the writing of Jacobus Vanderveer Sr.'s will in 1772 and 1778. Jacobus Vanderveer Jr. remained in possession of the property until his death in 1810. The inventory of his estate did not specify how many slaves he owned but gave their total value as being \$685.00. Comparisons with the values of the slaves enumerated in the inventory of his son's estate (see below) would suggest that this figure probably represented between four and six individuals (New Jersey Will A-229). His will specifically mentioned only two slaves, one not identified by name who was bequeathed to Jacobus' granddaughter Maria Vail upon the completion of a period of indenture for which the girl had been bound out to another master and a black girl named "Bit" who was willed to his other granddaughter, Catherine Vail.

Upon Jacobus Jr.'s death in 1810, his house and most of his estate passed to his son, Henry S. Vanderveer who outlived his father by only three years. The inventory of his estate recorded the presence of five slaves, a "negro woman...Eve," a "negro man...Jack," a "negro girl...Susan," a "negro girl...Betty," and an unnamed "negro boy." Unlike the rest of the inventoried slaves, the "negro boy" had been born after July 4, 1804. A special notation was made in the inventory indicating the relevance of New Jersey's gradual emancipation act of 1804 which called for all male children of slaves born after July 4, 1804 to be set free upon achieving the age of twenty-five. Female children were to be set free at age twenty-one. In order to get the act passed by the state legislature, a provision was added which allowed slaveholders to legally abandon such children. Following their abandonment, in most cases, the slave children remained in servitude with their former owners until they reached the required age for freedom but the owners were afterwards financially compensated by the state for their care. So under the act, Jack, Eve, Susan and Betty would remain slaves for the rest of their lives but the unnamed "negro boy" would gain his freedom at some point between July 4, 1825 (the earliest possible date for male emancipation) and February 17, 1838 (the date of the inventory plus 25 years).

Although it may well be simply coincidence, the group of slaves identified by the inventory seems to resemble a single nuclear family, a man and woman, two daughters and a son. The negro woman identified in Henry S. Vanderveer's inventory as "Eve" may be the same individual identified thirty-five years earlier in Jacobus Vanderveer Sr.'s inventory as "1 negro girl named Eve." Although Eve was not bequeathed to Jacob Vanderveer Jr. by his father, and although Eve was not a remarkably uncommon name, the likelihood does exist that the two

Eves were in fact the same person. If this is the case it points to what would only otherwise be expected...that there were continuing ties between the communities of the neighboring farms of the two Vanderveer brothers, Jacobus and Elias. It may be an indication of extended family groups and patterns of daily social interaction that spanned property boundaries.

The history of slave keeping on the farm of Elias Vanderveer may provide additional insight into the conditions of slave life on the Jacobus Vanderveer property. Elias Vanderveer's farm was the homestead farm of Jacobus Vanderveer, Sr. During Elias' early years of tenure the farm would have been home to the majority of the slaves listed in Jacobus Sr.'s probate records. The household also included a number of slaves acquired by Elias under his own name. The property's historical associations with slavery would be strongest following Elias' death when ownership passed to his son, Doctor Henry Vanderveer and his sister, Phebe. In 1833, Henry Vanderveer acquired Jacobus Vanderveer Jr.'s farm and once again reunited much of the land of Jacobus Vanderveer Sr. A survey (Figure 4.4) made following Henry Vanderveer's death shows the full extent of the recombined properties.

For most of their long lives, Henry and Phebe shared their house with their mother, Catherine Frelinghuysen Vanderveer who lived until 1836. A biographical account written several years after Henry's death relates the details of Henry and Phebe's rather eccentric habits towards the end of their lives. Henry had resided in one of the house's two front rooms, while his sister had lived in the other. Separated by the house's central hall, the two had little interaction in their final years besides weekly, formalized visitations. None of the house's other six rooms were lived in although all were well furnished. Following Phebe's death in 1849, Henry occupied both first floor front rooms, while his black servants occupied the kitchen (Honeyman 1873:159; Mapes 1942).

Several biographical accounts of Henry and Phebe describe the numerous black servants attending the two siblings. Both had their own personal black cooks and always had "several small negroes around them" (Honeyman 1873:159). One account references a certain "Ethiopia" who was required to rock Phebe in a rocking chair all night long, night after night, after Phoebe "fancied" that she could no longer fall asleep in a bed. Should "Ethiopia" fall asleep herself, Phebe would awaken her with a blow from "a stout hickory stick" fitted with a pin in its end (Honeyman 1873:159).

The population schedules of the federal census of 1840 show that there were 13 free blacks and four black slaves living on the property in that year. According to the 1850 census data, the number of blacks on the property had dropped to nine. The census data of 1860 record the presence ten individuals: All black males over 12 years of age were listed as being farm laborers and all females of similar years were listed as domestics. Following emancipation and with nowhere else to go, many former slaves chose to remain with their Dutch-American masters. Although the legal realities of the relationship may have changed, little else appears to have been altered in terms of their economic and social relationships with their former masters.

A contemporary account notes that the daily business of running the Vanderveer farm was in fact carried out by Harry, an African-American farmer who was probably the same man as the 63-year-old individual enumerated in the census of 1860 (Honeyman 1873:211). Harry may also have been the same person mentioned in Elias Vanderveer's will as being a "negro boy," the son of Betty, one of the Vanderveer family slaves in the late 18th century.

All of the African-Americans listed in the Vanderveer household in both the 1850 and 1860 censuses had Vanderveer given as their last name, indicating the complexity of the relationship between Dutch master and Dutch slave. Slaves and later free blacks both belonged to Dutch families or members in the greater "Dutch-American" cultural group and yet in many ways were entirely separate from it. The Vanderveer slaves either took the Vanderveer family name on as their own or were given it by the census taker in lieu of other surnames but in either case it is evidence that their own personal identities had become linked with the family to whom they served.

Although enslaved, they were undeniably members of the Vanderveer household in name, but also in other, more significant ways, such as living in the household and running the family farm, they were to some degree members of an extended Vanderveer family. It is worth noting, however, that none of the African-American "Vanderveers" are buried alongside the family in the Bedminster Reformed Cemetery. The very fact that the descendants of Jacobus Vanderveer Sr. were so deeply entangled in the tradition of slavery is further evidence of their inherent and enduring "Dutchness."