

**Freedom's Perch:  
The Slave Galleries and the  
Importance of Historical Dialogue**

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I'm not a religious man. Yet, it's Sunday morning, and I'm in church services for the first time in my adult life. I'm perched on bleachers in a fourteen by twenty-two foot room looking out at a forty-five degree angle to the ceremonies a good 100 feet down at Saint Augustine's Episcopal Church. It feels like the nosebleed section of Yankee Stadium. But these are no ordinary bleachers. I'm in what the church has long called its "slave gallery"—a segregated, hidden, and inaccessible room lost in time and virtually forgotten.

Outside, we're at 290 Henry Street, Manhattan, in the urban heart of the U.S., across from the chain-link fenced basketball courts. Nearby is the well-known original row house of Lillian Wald's 1895 Henry Street Settlement that pioneered the idea of public health nursing serving the immigrant and the poor. In contrast, this upscale granite church is not known. Why the historical amnesia?

All Saints Church was completed in 1828 when the property was amidst open fields adjacent to the shipyards and docks extending to Dutch Corlear's Hook. That was before Loisaida, before the projects, before the social workers, before the tenements, before the large Jewish, Italian, Greek, and Irish migrations.

When All Saints Church was organized in 1824 by Reverend William Attwater Clark, the American Revolution was still a living memory, the Constitution an untested document, and New York Harbor was the major slave port of the U.S. With the beginning of German and Irish immigration, the city was growing rapidly, already the largest in the nation—boasting 200,000 residents (a tiny fraction of our city of over eight million). One in seven residents were of African descent. Manhattan's vessels traded throughout the Atlantic and at the ports of the Pacific and China. As the wealth of the area grew, Reverend Clark saw the opportunity to build a church with strong ties to British elite culture. Starting out in his house, the congregation grew rapidly. Within years they paid builder John Heath \$13,554, a large sum, to construct a ninety foot deep by sixty-four foot wide by thirty-two foot high gray granite structure with a bell tower. Completed in a year's time, the church seated up to 1,300 people and apparently filled up every Sunday.<sup>1</sup>

Within these walls a sacred part of the city's past is hidden. All Saints dissolved in the 1940s and became part of Saint Augustine's Church. Now this largely African American and Puerto Rican congregation is working to become the living link to the original Negro New York City settlements in lower Manhattan. And I've been asked by Deacon Edgar Hopper to help solve a problem.

## The Future of the Past

The deacon is not a man you can say “no” to. He’s an intense, bald, slender man, in spirit and looks years younger than his chronological age. He retired from a high-powered corporate publishing career and is now looking to make a difference. This church is feeling the squeeze of changing times. With an aging congregation, gentrification, and the rapid increase of non-Episcopalian Chinese, the church is reaching out. His vision is to make New Yorkers care about the Slave Galleries and to create an African American heritage trail for the city. He is a man comfortable in his role of authority and now fully confident he is doing a Christian God’s work. He wants me to figure out what the larger meanings of these hidden galleries are for neighborhood resident New Yorkers today. Why should the recent Chinese immigrants care? And why should Loisaida *campaneros/as* or other New Yorkers? He stares me in the eyes: “Can you do this?”

The educator-activist in me jumps at the chance to make connections among Lower East Siders, present and past—my favorite part of what’s left of old New York. With the latest flock of real estate speculators eager to sell tenement apartments for outrageous prices, hemming in immigrants and longtime residents, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, and Jews, the new hipsters, and the disenfranchised need to talk and come together. And most people don’t even realize that, after the American Indians, it is the enslaved Africans, along with the Dutch and a handful of Sephardic Jews, who have been here the longest. The Dutch have long since become mainstream Americans; so have the Irish, Jews, Italians, and others become white.<sup>2</sup> But African Americans in the Lower East Side?

The historian in me knows this is a tricky problem. Scholars have yet to write a true history of New Yorkers living together. It’s only been since the civil rights movement that the studies of women, separate ethnic groups, and racism have fought their way into the hallowed halls of academia. Furthermore, U.S. citizens largely don’t know their own histories. And immigrants, Chinese or otherwise, are struggling to gain a foothold in this new country. What do they care about others? Most Americans imagine slavery ended with emancipation and freed African Americans became part of we, the people. Sure, the civil rights movement had to strike down remaining barriers in the South, but don’t we now celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday? The typical narrative, from the victorious northern states perspective, believes that once segregation was legally ended, everyone was free to compete in the marketplace. The complacent say: Look at all the successful individual African Americans on television and in sports! We all know life is not what free marketer tales would like us to believe, but few want to deal with the ongoing legacy of enslavement. Everyone wants to put food on the table, have some fun, make some money. This is in the past, just keep it there.

Our fixed notions of the past numb us from feeling and understanding the continuity of unresolved and contested issues into the present. Deacon Hopper understands this dirty little secret. For most whites, it is easier to believe the American dream of freedom, hard work, and upward mobility. He understands non-Blacks don’t believe enslavement has anything to do with them. Do people want to learn about the slave galleries? What kind of history can be written that speaks to this broader public? Denial and forgetting are

also part of the American past. And what is systematically *not* common public knowledge reveals much about the politics of our culture. Systemic amnesia needs to be replaced by a democratic, popular, living understanding of the past.

### **Clues and Fragments**

The usual evidence for historical detective work is largely missing here. No original records of the building design have been found. Unlike many other New York City churches, All Saints Church kept few archives. And the documentation on enslavement and slave ownership is scarce. The census, newspapers, and directories yield but tidbits of information, yet these clues are valuable.

First, three questions must be answered:

#### ***Were slaves ever part of All Saints'?***

Yes, probably. The 1820 census manuscripts show that at least two of Reverend Clark's founding 1824 vestrymen owned one slave each. William P. Rathbone, a merchant at 2 Fulton Slip, lived at 384 Bowery with a household of six members. He reported one female slave (between the ages of 14 and 26). John Rooke, a blockmaker at a lumberyard, worked at 270 Cherry and lived at 69 Rutgers with a household listed as ten members. He reported one male slave (between 26 and 45), and one "free colored male" under 14. We also know U.S. Christian churches urged slave masters to convert their slaves. Their slaves, therefore, very likely joined the master's family in Reverend Clark's early services.

We also know James Peter Allaire, an original warden (officer) of All Saints Church, apparently did not own slaves. Likely to be the most successful and wealthy of early congregants, Allaire (1765–1858) founded a brass foundry at 434 Cherry Street assisted by Robert Fulton. He constructed steam engines for Fulton and, after the entrepreneur's death, purchased his steamship factory in 1816 and moved it to Corlear's Hook—eventually becoming one of the largest such factories in the young nation. Allaire's financier and consultant, Joseph B. Curtis (1782–1856), supported the New York Manumission Society for the Freeing of Slaves. He helped to formulate the 1799 New York State manumission (emancipation) legislation and, with Reverend Samuel Cornish, founded the African Free School.<sup>3</sup> Did Allaire's artisan-workers own slaves? Did they attend the boss's church? Or did they all oppose slavery?

Historian Shane White has estimated that two of three merchants in New York owned slaves. Among retailers, ranging from peddlers to shopkeepers, one in four to one in three owned slaves. The largest group of slaveholders was the city's many artisans. One in eight possessed slaves. Most slaves in the city were women, and 13 percent of slaveholders were women heads of households.<sup>4</sup> Even if church members owned relatively few slaves, the debate about manumission must have swirled around all.

We have no records of enslaved African Americans before Freedom Day. Fortunately, All Saints' sacramental lists provide some insights into the lives of otherwise nameless

“Free Colored” congregants. On July 5, 1829, for example, Henry and Phoebe Nichols along with their three children, William, Caesar, and Susan, were baptized at All Saints Church. In the 1830 Federal census, a Henry Nichols is listed as head of a household of ten, all of whom are listed as “Free.” The 1828–1829 city directory lists him as a saddle maker living at 11 Lewis Street, a few blocks north of the church. On October 11, 1829, Samuel and Catherine Barber baptized their daughter at All Saints. A Samuel Barber is listed as a mason who lived at 137 Orange Street (now Baxter) further west in the Five Points neighborhood.<sup>5</sup>

In these scant historical fragments, we can glimpse the social and spatial dynamics surrounding the church. Lives were in the midst of dramatic changes. In 1830, New York City boasted a population of 202,589 and was already the largest city in the nation. New York Harbor’s deep port, the Hudson River, and the completion of the Erie Canal enabled Manhattan Island to become the hub of a growing nation’s internal and international shipping and manufacturing. From a modest population of 33,131 in 1790, migrants and immigrants tripled the population by 1820, when Episcopalians first sought to establish a church in Corlear’s Hook. The population doubled a mere ten years later. In 1790, one of five households in the city owned at least one slave. The slave population of New York was second only to Charlotte. Fully two of every three African Americans were enslaved. European American New Yorkers depended on enslaved labor to keep their work and households functioning and thriving.<sup>6</sup> After thirty years of struggle, New York State abolitionists, adopting the strategy of gradual manumission, achieved victory. On July 4, 1827, all African Americans in the state were free. Yet, due to limited opportunities and continued racism, many continued to work in subservient positions.

Research has revealed that a Mr. Henry Cotheal, a merchant at 49 Water Street, purchased two pews in 1845, 27 years after New York State manumission. In his household of 13, a “free colored male” (between ages 10 and 24) was listed.<sup>7</sup> I suspect this young man was a house servant or worker. Did he attend All Saints Church?

### *Isn’t the name “ slave galleries ” inaccurate?*

If All Saints Church opened its doors the year after manumission, why name these rooms slave galleries? If slavery technically was over, shouldn’t we use another name? Couldn’t we use the common, and equally offensive, term of the era, “Negro Pews?” Indeed, “Jim Crow” segregation was alive and well in the North even before the phrase was coined. Yet, “slave galleries” is what generations of All Saints’ priests and parishioners called it. This name, therefore, reveals something valuable about the attitudes of the church post-1827 Emancipation.

The 1924 pageant script, already quoted by Rodger Taylor, amply illustrates All Saints’ own racial mythology. The poor immigrants of All Saints acted out a revealing theatrical. “[F]or you I build two special galleries, where you, locked in, may join in all the hymns and shout Amen! To what your Masters pray.” This same year anti-immigrant sentiment raged across the U.S. culminating in immigration restriction laws cutting off the entry of “undesirable” (non-Protestant) Jews, Slovaks, Greeks, Italians,

and others. Reverend Clark, it was told, locked the slaves in. But with the pleas of Little Eva and the undying loyalty of Uncle Tom, the New York Governor draws his sword and liberates the slaves. The prevailing practice of segregation never troubles this story telling. Rector William Nicholas Dunnell was christened in All Saints in 1825 and even upon retiring in 1911 noted the “slave gallery” to reporters.

I believe the name was used in both a racist and a reaffirming sense for white parishioners. During enslavement and post-enslavement segregation, both “slave gallery” and “Negro pews” were odious terms to African Americans. They smacked of white arrogance and affirmation of the status quo. One hundred years later, the attitude was still patronizing and racist. As time passed, what it meant to be a good Christian blunted historical complexities. Simpler tales were told. The story of the Governor’s smiting of the chains of slavery effectively kept ongoing anti-Black racism frozen as a problem of the past. New York public and private schools would also teach the simplified story of evil Southern pro-slavery and good Northern anti-slavery. During the xenophobic 1920s, immigrants became “100 percent Americans,” in part, by mimicking the Protestant-dominated secular narrative.

Rector Dunnell’s retrospective stories to the press were also laced with nostalgia, decline, and Christian resolve. When he became rector in 1871, he claimed Irish Protestants filled the 1,300 seats. In contrast to Lillian Wald’s concerns about aiding the poor, he framed his forty-year rectorship as one of decline and displacement. Then Jews came, *New York Times* reporters reiterated, crowding the former residents uptown or over to Brooklyn. Novelty stories were retold of an era passed, notable to early twentieth-century sensibilities, anecdotes about the Vestryman “Boss” Tweed, the congregation’s slaves rowing masters across from Williamsburg, and, of course, the slave galleries. Slavery and the galleries were discussed in a narrative of the loss of a more prosperous, colorful, past community and the murky future. One article proclaimed, “Rector Retires, Church to Close.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the uncritical tradition of All Saints Church did not distinguish, or care to distinguish, if their slave galleries were actually used by slaves or not. From its founding in 1824 it was likely that slaves sat in segregated benches and the culture of segregated attitudes (and the active denial of ongoing racist practices) continued unabated.

Yet today Saint Augustine’s ministry has totally re-appropriated the slave galleries—in name and in usage. Father Harvey, the head pastor, and Deacon Hopper are committed to promoting cross-cultural dialogues against racism and for broader human rights. At the services I attended, the parish prayed expansively, including for “the sick, the homebound, the homeless, the hungry, all prisoners, especially all inmates on death row, all victims of violence, war, domestic and child abuse, and police brutality; for all travelers, for all workers, for all people with AIDS, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, and lastly for our community.”<sup>9</sup> The slave galleries are now used to promote critical historical awareness of past wrongs.

***What’s the physical evidence?***

Evoking the “slave gallery” by tradition, and now for educational purposes, leaves an unanswered question: What was the actual experience of blacks—slave and free—in the church? That’s why I’m here Sunday morning. I’m looking for any clues. I need to get a feel of the place as it is being used. Does the architecture offer any evidence that freedom changed the church’s practices?

As I sit in on the wooden bleachers and visually search my surroundings, the organ begins. As an outsider, I’m pulled into the communal experience. The procession begins. A man is purifying the air with the censer. A silver encased Book of Gospels is carefully placed on the central altar. The spectacle is timeless. I realize this ritual in this building brings us back to how the building was used when first opened. Or it could be centuries back, across the Atlantic in London. Yet, from my perch, I realize this collective experience was far from egalitarian.

I’ll start with the obvious: a highly ordered, hierarchic relation to the altar stage was designed into the very architecture of the interior space. After the Anglican Church in England, pews were paid for and counted as a form of property. And as property values in Manhattan, the more central the location of the pews to the altar, and therefore to God, the higher the rent. The best seats, front and central, were charged 2 percent on the valuation added to the “ground rent.” Lesser pews went from 1.5 percent to 1 percent, to free pews in “The Missionary Gallery” upstairs.<sup>10</sup> Were masters charged for their enslaved, indentured, or “free colored” workers’ attendance in the slave galleries?

I realize that the very entryway from the street immediately signaled the status of the parishioner. Though the exterior three doors appear simple and the same, which door used was highly significant. The center door was the main entrance, in line with the best pews of the central ground floor. The two flanking doors led to the lesser ground floor pews, and the stairs to the lesser balcony pews. Once having climbed the steps to the balcony, a steep, narrow, and shallow set of stairs take you up to the slave galleries. My feet, not especially large, can only safely fit sideways. Six steep steps, three curved steps, another six steps—all ascended and descended at a near forty-five-degree angle. Once up in the bleachers I’m sitting in the very top corner of the building envelope, near the ceiling and at the top of the arched windows. The slave galleries are at the level of the crown molding. The stark, stripped-down simplicity of this interior is contrasted by the ornamentation of the balcony just outside the gallery.

John Heath, the builder, and the vestrymen clearly did not design these galleries for church members. As they planned the design, no changes were made for manumission day, a date that had been set since July 4, 1817. If any change was made from prior church designs, it was the further segregation of the “Negro pews” into specially designed closets even further removed from white attendees. Evidently, the church didn’t think Emancipation should prompt them to rethink where blacks, enslaved or free, would sit. In this sense, their sense of proper design did not change, and their judgment of chattel status did not change either.

What happened to the slave galleries of All Saints Church? The fact that they were built indicates that the architect, the rector, wardens, and the vestrymen expected the segregation of slaves serving white congregants to continue within the church. Yet, a baptism on a nontraditional day was held. Other changes were beginning to happen. The rector, the vestrymen, and the congregants could choose to change, but did they?

I suspect the church continued to be segregated, and African Americans left All Saints Church, leaving the slave galleries empty, ignored, and soon to be mythologized by well-meaning but racist immigrant “pageants.” The Nichols and the Barbers probably voted with their feet and left All Saints. They may have joined an African American church west in the Five Points area, and they probably intermingled with the African-inflected port culture of lower Manhattan.

### **The Big Picture**

How do the stories of various groups of Lower Eastsiders interrelate? Sociologist Benjamin Ringer offers a useful framework. The British, Spanish, and other European conquests of the Americas created a duality of colonizers and colonized—of whom would be included and whom would be excluded. For the U.S., John Locke’s ideas of property and citizenship, combined with the Eurocentric view of the hierarchy of the five races of mankind, deeply influenced who would be part of “we, the people.”

Rebelling from British colonialism, colonial rebels sought a more egalitarian society. Yet, as an expanding culture based on private ownership and white, male citizenship, Indian tribes, Mexicans, African Americans, and Asians were deemed unworthy.<sup>11</sup> A place such as lower Manhattan was complicated by how even certain migrating European groups such as the Irish, Jews, and Italians were racialized as non-Protestant, non-white, and inferior. Each ethnic-racial group entering New York may have had a different language and history, but all encountered being excluded from the mainstream.

In secular Protestant Anglo-America, to own property conferred power and rights—the rights of a citizen and the power to vote. The promise of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” was a social contract meant for white men, who were the only ones thought capable of what C. B. MacPherson called “possessive individualism.” The most important quality for a free citizenry was not simply owning property but owning oneself. Inferior races and women were not believed by many elite white Protestant men to be capable of making such rational, independent judgments. New York State legislators decided that all white men, when properly acculturated, should be able to vote; whereas freed black citizens should first be required to own property.<sup>12</sup> This was not simply about whites and blacks but represented a systemic world view that regulated the thinking and practices of the U.S.’s expansion into the continent and overseas.

All Saints Church embodied the growth and wealth of the city, but also the deep conflicts and ongoing post-slavery racism. After the British devastated lower Manhattan at the revolutionary war’s end in the 1780s, the slave system (and the servant system) were critical to digging out and rebuilding the city that created the platform for the port

economy to take off. It may take a non-U.S. scholar to analyze these power dynamics most clearly.

Euro-Australian historian Shane White has demonstrated the correlation between wealth, occupation, and slave ownership in New York. Census records of 1790 indicate the wealthiest 10 percent of the city's population owned 55.6 percent of the total taxable wealth and owned 39.9 percent of the slaves. The top 20 percent owned 73.4 percent of the wealth and 60.9 percent of the slaves; the top 30 percent, 83.1 percent and 74.3 percent. But not just wealthy New Yorkers benefited from slavery. Even though the bottom 30 percent of the city's population owned 2% of the wealth, they still possessed 7.4 percent of the slaves. In contrast to the Southern plantation system, wealthy and poor New Yorkers ran modest-sized to small workplaces and households. Seventy-five percent of the slave households of this time owned only one or two slaves. Prominent households, not surprisingly, owned five or more slaves. For example, "the Beekmans and the Livingstons [and] Governor George Clinton owned eight slaves, Chief Justice Richard Morris six, and Aaron Burr five. John Jay, the president of the Manumission Society, also owned five slaves."<sup>13</sup>

White develops this point further. The growing city depended on the rural surround for foodstuffs and firewood. He calculates that four of every ten white households within a twelve-mile radius of Manhattan owned slaves. He unearths a startling insight. In Kings, Queens, and Richmond counties, 39.5 percent of the households had slaves. This meant "there were proportionately more households containing slaves in New York's hinterland than in the whole of any Southern state." In still rural Kings County, an astounding 58.8 percent of the population owned slaves!<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately manumission, and the Civil War, was not about African American freedom but about the future of white elites in an expanding Northern industrial economy. Gradual manumission enabled property owners, so deeply invested in slave labor, to squeeze out every bit of labor before freedom and to find other exploitable labor. How would wealth and economic growth be sustained?

The early nineteenth-century slave system's decline in New York coincided with the decline of the apprenticeship system of skilled artisans. Steam power and the British industrial system inaugurated early mass production techniques. The pride of shoemakers controlling their own workshops and training young apprentices was soon to be displaced by less skilled workers assembling parts under factory discipline. The decades of the rise of the Port of New York renewed fundamental issues of labor and prosperity, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (and property): Who would do it and at what cost? Could black servitude be continued? Who should qualify to be citizens? Voters?

Certainly the master of Sojourner Truth tried to extend her bondage illegally. Others tried to renegotiate work relations to keep slaves working for them after manumission.<sup>15</sup> British and Spanish plantation owners successfully experimented with Chinese and South Asian laborers to replace and supplement enslaved plantation workers. After fierce slave

and indentured revolts, the British banned slavery in 1807. The profitable sugar plantation economy created a market for contract laborers from China and South Asia. From 1838 to 1870, over half a million laborers were brought on slave ships to plantations throughout the British West Indies and Latin America. These “coolie” itinerant port laborers were lured and kidnapped into eight-year contracts slaving on colonial plantations. Hotly protested by New York tradesmen, this type of coercive labor was correctly perceived as another form of brutal exploitation. Among the first Chinese and South Asians in New York City were escaped indentures.<sup>16</sup>

Another more powerful labor system was in the making. The market system of wage labor, exemplified by new entrepreneurs such as steam engine builder Allaire, were transforming the way people worked and lived in New York. The anti-slavery movement was driven by the ideology of the voluntary contract. Heralding a utopia, abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison believed all forms of human bondage would be destroyed with manumission and reconstruction. “Where are the slave auction-blocks . . . the slave-yokes and fetters. . . They are all gone! From chattels to human beings. . . Freedmen at work as independent laborers by voluntary contract!” European immigrants, however, were soon to suffer and fight a new form of bondage; wage slavery was to smash dreams of worker independence. To a member of the Knights of Labor, Garrison’s utopian claims made but 17 years earlier would already prove preposterous.

Garrison expressed a different viewpoint by 1886 in “Thoughts of a Workingman,” “They say slavery is abolished in the United States now, but I say no. True, the colored people are free, but how many thousands of white slaves are there all over the country? What do you call men, women, and children that work in a mill or factory fourteen and fifteen hours a day. . . Are they not slaves?”<sup>17</sup> European American male workers, however, since 1821 in New York State, no matter how badly exploited, could become citizens and could vote. Voting property requirements were waived for white males, but simultaneously imposed on African Americans. We know free African New Yorkers continued to be violated and marginalized after manumission and after reconstruction. And in 1882, Chinese laborers were also found to be not capable of acting on their own behalf, and officially excluded from U.S. citizenship and denied naturalization rights until 1952.

The European immigrant system effectively became the new engine for capitalist growth. Catholic and Jewish immigrants would soon inundate lower Manhattan workplaces and housing. Lower Manhattan African Americans would soon be forced uptown. Indeed, it was the Irish and immigrant-led 1863 draft riots that dislodged the African New York community from their original home, pushing them westward and uptown—ultimately to Harlem.<sup>18</sup> Among these immigrants were the new congregants of Dunnell’s All Saints’ Church. Their simplistic myths about black freedom and the American dream kept them ignorant of the shared problems they had with the church’s segregated history.

### **Where is Home?**

All Saints' Church embodies the historic battle of elites and various groups of "others." The Anglo-American elite norm of self-possessed, male citizens was the founding ethos of All Saints' Church. First African Americans, later other groups, and now Chinese immigrants battle and negotiate against and within these norms to survive and find their piece of the American dream. To understand what happened here, and what continues to happen to African American New Yorkers, is to understand how the dynamics of racialization affects us all in various ways.

What might freedom have meant for the newly baptized Nichols family? Where was home? It did not mean dramatic change of attitude or power. In 1821 it was decided by the New York State Legislature that African American free men could not vote unless they owned property, whereas the property requirements were waived for white men. A re-segregation of rights was underway, and white men, U.S. born and immigrant, would gain substantial power over African Americans. Henry Nichols could not vote, but his newly arriving Irish neighbors could. A Montreal visitor noted the segregation of public life: If " these ' Niggers' are on board a steam boat they dine together after the other passengers." If they attend church, " they are crammed into some corner like a proscribed body." " They are indiscriminately looked upon with aversion by the white population." <sup>19</sup>

Deacon Hopper provides two clues to the question "Where is home?" Henry and Phoebe Nichols' baptism with their children indicates that they may have been recent converts. The Christian church expected slave owners to convert their human chattel. Clearly their post-manumission decision to baptize was their own decision. The baptism took place on July 5<sup>th</sup>, manumission day for black New Yorkers. Conventionally, baptisms would be conducted a limited number of days of the year, and surely July 5<sup>th</sup> was not one of them. They somehow gained the support of Reverend Clark to conduct a special baptism. Deacon Hopper believes they must have been " infected by the celebration attitude" of that day of freedom.

This joyous moment within the church was linked to the massive, typically male, street parade outside. James McCune Smith recalled, " That was a celebration! A real, full-souled, full-voiced shouting for joy, and marching through the crowded streets, with feet jubilant to songs of freedom!" Beginning at 9am, Grand Marshall Samuel Hardenburgh carried a long staff and led four or five bands of many instruments and " played with much skill," with officers and members of charitable organizations wearing their special uniforms. The five-and-a-half hour street procession wended through all major and most minor streets.<sup>20</sup> Just as the city' s African Americans jubilantly claimed the public streets, the Nichols family claimed the ritual altar of All Saints'. The personal was linked to the political: the private linked to the public. Freedom did not mean the end of racism, but it did mean there was more physical and spiritual space in which to wage the struggle.

Black New Yorkers have continued to struggle against the odds and enlarge what it means to be an American. As we reconstruct the slave galleries history, so too must we reconstruct the histories of the various groups who have lived and worked in lower Manhattan. All these paths intersect: all these groups lived a distinctive and intermingled history. The discoveries of Saint Augustine’s reminds us how little we know. We have to keep asking questions and we have to keep doing more research.

“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” had a different meaning for African New Yorkers. In an elite, Episcopal church, trying to become a good Christian slave would only succeed so far. Racism, segregation, and at best patronizing treatment defined so many relationships. In sharp contrast the polyglot, ordinary people who traveled through and landed in this growing port created another culture—a popular people’s culture. Making a living and living daily life meant transformation. In the streets, taverns, and public markets, Africans mixed with French-speaking West Indians; Protestant butchers with Bowery *boys* and *gals*; escaped Chinese-Cuban cigar wrappers created families with Irish women, taking on names such as John Thompson; and radical Germans talked international politics with abolitionists. As this port grew, so did the cross-cultural mass of people—all attempting to find their place in this island port of exchange.

Whether it was becoming regulars at an international diner or visiting with neighbors on Henry Street, those who stayed added their personal background to the amalgamation we still celebrate in the street life of New York. It wasn’t fancy. It was a survivalist, aggressive, rough-and-tumble basic culture, but it was honest and it was less segregated. It was in this culture that people discovered their individuality by negotiating elements of the culture they came from with elements of the culture they were embracing. And it was in this culture that African American individuals discovered their affiliations with someone from County Cork, as a wage worker or as a street merchant, or as part of a youth culture.<sup>21</sup>

## **Public Dialogues**

The slave galleries are a sacred historical site for all invested in continuing to press for more inclusion and more democracy. Part of Deacon Hopper’s vision is to open up the slave galleries as a historic site. Members of Saint Augustine’s trained with Tenement Museum staff and others with funds supported by the Animating Democracy Initiative in a series of diversity communication workshops to get people talking.<sup>22</sup> In February 2000, over 250 supporters from diverse communities and professions met at St. Augustine’s to discuss the meaning of that space for them. Meeting on the same day the four officers tried for the shooting of Amadou Diallo were acquitted, a sense of injustices from the past and present collided. Since then, parishioners have been trained in leading cross-cultural dialogues with a range of individuals and organizations in the area. These face-to-face discussions push all parties to compare personal stories and group histories. The more questions are asked, the more people realize how little history is known. The spirit has been infectious. Dialogues about the galleries open up new areas of research yet to be done. More fragments, more clues, now need to be pursued.

Perhaps soon the relations between the growing Chinese community, Jews, Puerto Ricans, and the congregants of Saint Augustine's can be honestly explored. What are the perceptions of each other? What are the conflicts today? What are the interrelated histories? Food can be shared; mutual recognition can be opened up. What is necessary for this to flourish? Honest, mutual, and informed recognition can become the basis of long term cross-cultural reconciliation and collaboration.<sup>23</sup>

More local historical research is desperately needed. The documentation of current residents is a great beginning point. Neighborhood youth, with good mentoring and tape recorders, can do wonders. Historians can be enlisted to pull together the best of what has been written and chart out research strategies. Organizations of the Lower East Side working on their own histories of place can join The Slave Galleries Project for the long haul. Annual cross-cultural story-telling and history conferences can be organized. True dialogues need this kind of support.

The history of this place matters. Hierarchy, inequity, and power are inscribed into all of what we take for granted today. Reclaiming these historical experiences and understanding their roots is powerful. And like all traditions, it can only be kept alive in the engaged retelling. What ongoing meanings does this past have for us today? And as we understand the diversity of struggles today, dialoguers can better ask the historical questions of where these issues originated and how they played out with earlier residents.

Now as before, the political culture of this historic neighborhood depends on the people knowing its own history and acting to extend its radical democratic traditions. I imagine us continuing in the footsteps of the Nichols family—of dreaming, pushing, and cajoling for bread (pasta, rice), but also roses.<sup>24</sup>

The slave gallery perch is a precarious, dangerous, but also a privileged position. If we truly understand the power of these humble confines, this sacred place can generate profound insights and a community of conscience from which more freedom springs.

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<sup>1</sup> All Saints' Church Vestry Minutes, December 13, 1827; Willam Nichols Dunnell, "Jubilee Sermon," May 27, 1874, All Saints' Church (New York: John F. Baldwin, 1874) 6; Existing Conditions Report, Slave Galleries, St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, October 25, 2001, 1.

<sup>2</sup> For more on these popular education questions, see: Tchen, "Back to Basics: Who Is Researching and Interpreting for Whom?," special issue, "The Practice of American History," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 81, No. 3, December 1994, 1004-1011; Tchen, "Whose downtown?!", in *After the World Trade Center*, Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin, eds (NY: Routledge, 2002); Tchen, "Rethinking Who 'We' Are: A Basic Discussion of Basic Terms," *Voices From the Battlefield, Achieving Cultural Equity*, edited by Marta Moreno Vega & Cheryl Y. Greene (Trenton, N. J.: Africa World Press), 3-9; and Tchen "Towards a Dialogic Museum," in *Museums and Communities*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press), 285-326.

<sup>3</sup> Here I rely on the research of Allen Ingraham "Report of Research on Saint Augustine's Episcopal Church" conducted for the Tenement Museum and Saint Augustine's Church, 2001, 22-27; and the valuable contextual study of Lucien Sonder (New York: Columbia University, MA Thesis, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1991) 8-9.

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<sup>5</sup> Ingraham, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ira Rosenwaik, *Population History of New York City* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1972) 16-18; White, 5-9, 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> 1840 Federal Census; cited from Slave Galleries Project research files, 1840/1860 Census Findings, St. Augustine's Project.

<sup>8</sup> "Old All Saints' Doomed," *New York Times*, March 20, 1911; "Dr. Dunnell Leaving All Saints' Church," *New York Times*, April 15, 1911; "Dr. Dunnell Says Farewell," *New York Times*, April 17, 1911; "Rector Retires, Church to Close," unidentified clipping, March 20, 1911, from Slave Gallery Project research files.

<sup>9</sup> The Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 25, 2003 program, Saint Augustine's Church.

<sup>10</sup> All Saints' Church vestry minutes, Saint Augustine's Church.

<sup>11</sup> Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), xv-xxiv; Benjamin B. Ringer, *'We the People' and Others: Duality and America's Treatment of Racial Minorities* (New York: Tavistock Publishers, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> White, Independent, 5-9, 9-10.

<sup>14</sup> White, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Nell I. Painter and Olive Gilbert, eds. (NY: Viking Penguin, 1998); Hodges, 191-93.

<sup>16</sup> Tchen, *Chinatown*, 49-51.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley, 4, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Reported in *New York Evening Post*, July 22, 1829, cited by Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) 60.

<sup>20</sup> White, *Freedom*, 65-6.

<sup>21</sup> For the idea of a port culture, see Tchen, *Chinatown*, 71-93. On cross-cultural popular culture stemming from the docks, see: W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 22-34 and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press 2000).

<sup>22</sup> The Lower East Side Tenement Museum has played a leadership role in organizing a network of "museums of conscience" and the Animating Democracy Initiative has actively supported humanities dialogues projects in the U.S. For the museums of conscience see: <http://sitesofconscience.org/about.html>. Also, see: Barbara Scaffer Bacon, Cheryl Yuen, and Pam Korza, *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue* (Washington D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Eric K. Yamamoto, *Interracial Justice: Conflict & Reconciliation in Post-Civil Rights America* (NY: NYU Press, 1999), 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> For the origins of the "bread and roses" phrase, see: Jim Zwick, "Bread and Roses: The Lost History of a Slogan and a Poem," [www.boondocksnet.com/labor/history/bread\\_and\\_roses\\_history.html](http://www.boondocksnet.com/labor/history/bread_and_roses_history.html).