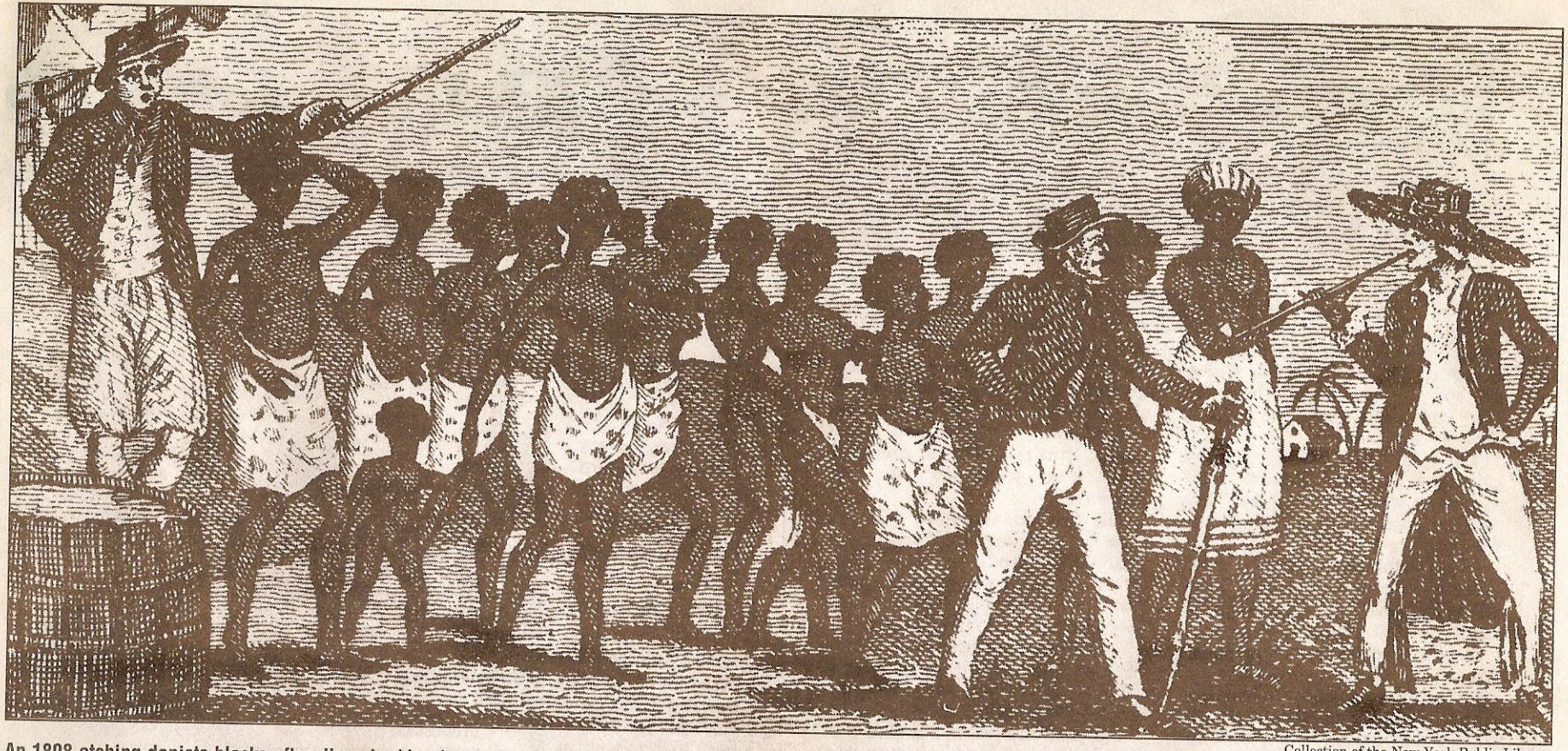

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An 1808 etching depicts blacks after disembarking from a slave ship. July 4, 1827, brought freedom for about 3,000 slaves in Long Island, New York City and the Hudson Valley.

July 4, 1827

The Day New York Freed Its Slaves

By Martin C. Evans
STAFF WRITER

At a church in lower Manhattan, a former magazine publisher and Westbury resident is trying to expand the meaning of the Fourth of July.

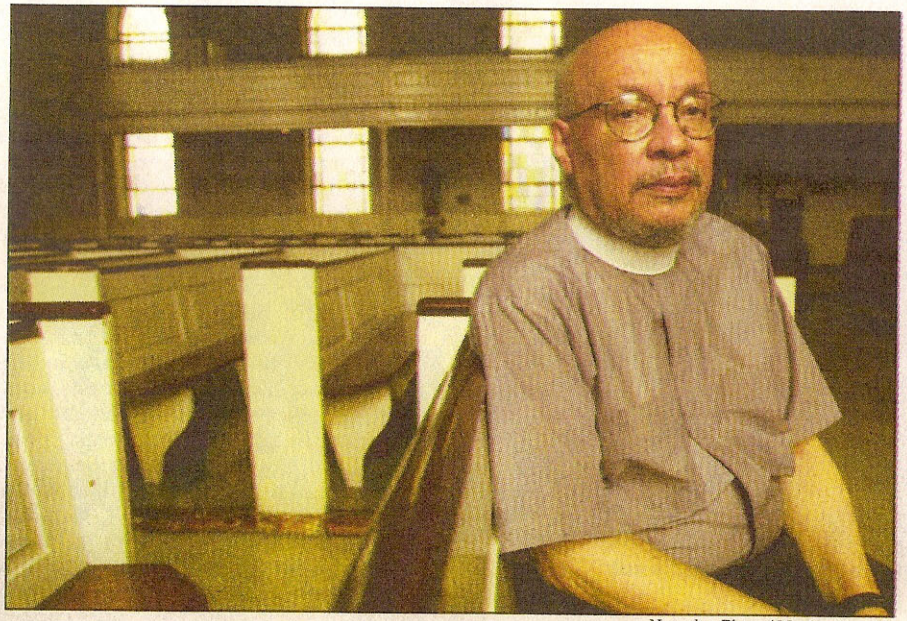
Everyone knows the Fourth is a day to celebrate the birth of the American nation. But how many people know, as Rev. Deacon Edgar W. Hopper does, that on that date in 1827 more than two centuries of slavery came to an end in New York State?

"Knowledge about Manumission Day doesn't exist in New York," said Hopper, a freckled, bespectacled deacon at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church on Henry Street. "They don't talk about it in the public schools, but it's an important date."

On July 3, 2003, Hopper bustled about the old church, preparing the last details for a July 5 celebration of what he calls New York's own Juneteenth — a reference to the day in 1865 that slaves in Texas received belated news of their liberation.

At one moment, he spoke tersely into a cell phone, demanding to know why a compilation of slave narratives to be read at the July 5 celebration was still incomplete.

Minutes later, he was showing a photographer a section of the 175-year-old church where, high in the rafters, slaves and free blacks had been shunted during Sunday services, while whites worshiped in the pews below.



Newsday Photo / Mayita Mendez

The Rev. Deacon Edgar W. Hopper of St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Manhattan

"There is this misconception that enlightened New York City could not have been deeply entrenched in the slave trade," said Hopper, 74, who as publisher of Stereo Review during the 1970s nurtured a generation of audiophiles. "I think all New Yorkers, and at least black New Yorkers, ought to realize that July Fourth was a significant day."

DePauw University Professor David Gellman, author of "Jim Crow New York: A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship, 1777-1877," said the decision to end slavery in New York "sowed seeds of slaveless democracy throughout North America."

The move to end slavery in the state was fueled by Quakers from Queens, Long Island and the Hudson Valley, plus white immigrant city dwellers angry at having to compete with free labor. But resistance to the end of slavery ran high, in part because in some areas, includ-

See FREEDOM on 4

A version of this story appeared in Newsday on July 4, 2003.

NEWSDAY, FEBRUARY 2004

Freeing NY's Slaves

FREEDOM from 3

ing parts of Brooklyn and Suffolk County, as many as 1 in 3 families held at least one slave.

In 1799, the state legislature enacted a plan to bring about gradual emancipation, under which people born to slave mothers after July 4, 1799, would be freed at age 27, for men, and at 25, for women. Blacks born before that date could be held in slavery until death.

Then, in 1817, the legislature provided that on July 4, 1827, slavery would end for any "Negro, mulatto or mustee" born before July 4, 1799.

The emancipation would mean freedom for about 3,000 slaves living in New York City, Long Island and the Hudson Valley.

As the day of manumission approached, black New Yorkers contemplated joyous celebrations. Freedom's Journal, the first black newspaper published in New York City, indicated that some in the community were calling for a huge parade.

But plans to celebrate manumission were delayed for one day, out of fear that whites engaged in traditional festivities would consider open rejoicing by blacks as irreverent or unpatriotic.

"The eyes of the world are upon us, our enemies watch us narrowly, to catch each little failing," stated one writer, using the name Libertinus, Latin for "freed slave." "Let us show them we have hearts capable of gratitude ... by abstaining from all riotous indulgence, from unbecoming mirth and extravagance."

Already, Jim Crow laws and traditions — the systematic practice of segregating and discriminating against black people — were accelerating. At its 1821 constitutional convention, New York State effectively stripped free blacks of the right to vote by imposing an onerous property requirement that did not apply to whites.

Edwin Burrows, a Northport historian who co-wrote the book "Gotham," said animosity among immigrants toward slaves and free blacks possessing skills as shipwrights, stevedores, blacksmiths, teamsters or other trades often provoked violence.

As July 4, 1827, approached, fears among blacks ran high. The idea of holding a parade was discarded. "The question in the black community was, 'Are we going to run the risk of antagonizing white opinion, or are we going to do what is best for ourselves?' " Burrows said. "And really, that is a tactical question that has persisted to the present."

But the emancipation of 3,000 New York residents did not go entirely unmarked. The next day, July 5, black New Yorkers paraded through lower Manhattan, then down Broadway to the Battery.

A Presbyterian preacher, Henry Highland Garnet, witnessed the festivities as a boy, and later described them in his 1865 biography.

The parade's grand marshal was "a splendid-looking black man in a cocked hat and drawn sword, mounted on a white steed. . . . The sidewalks were crowded with the wives, daughters, sisters and mothers of the celebrants representing every state in the Union and not a few with gay bandana handkerchief betraying their West Indian birth."

Hopper hoped to capture a bit of that spirit at St. Augustine's Church on July 5 with a program that included Negro spirituals, African drumming and gospel music. Another commemoration of the end of slavery was held at the Sandy Ground Historical Society on Staten Island. The organization documented the lives of free blacks who settled on Staten Island before the Civil War.

For Hopper, making note of slavery's mark on New York is key to understanding its continuing legacy.

"We actually built the early infrastructure of New York — built bridges, cleared forests, built roads," Hopper said. "It's critical that we examine the institution of slavery in New York."