

St. Augustine's Slave Galleries

| The St. Augustine's Project Inc.

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[The History](#)

[Updates and Events](#)

[Support Us](#)

[Links](#)

[Overview](#)

[Brief History](#)

[Videos](#)

[Critical Essays](#)

[Research Papers](#)

[Press](#)



[Visit Us!](#)



[Join Our Mailing List!](#)



[Make a Donation!](#)



History of the Slave Galleries

New York City was an early center of slavery in colonial America--- for much of the period only the city of Charleston, South Carolina had a larger enslaved population. Brought to New York from Africa, South America, the Caribbean and the South, people of African descent were largely commodities to be purchased, traded, measured and sold. For most, New York and its unwinding harbor was a quick stopping off point on the way to somewhere else on the triangulated trade route that led primarily south. Most must have found it an exotic, scary, sometimes cold and fleeting place. Yet, a significant number remained, to undertake the backbreaking work that building this expansive metropolis required.

As decades passed, the city and the African population grew, as did New York's dependence on the free labor they provided. Special laws were passed to control the enslaved population. To calm the fear of revolt and insurrection, it became illegal for Black New Yorkers to gather in groups of more than three. To justify and maintain a white privileged class, African New Yorkers were denied access to housing, jobs and most public and private institutions, businesses and facilities. We often lose sight of the fact that New York City played a crucial role in both the development of the slave trade in colonial America and the virulent racism that accompanied it and helped codify the culture and concept that later came to be called in the South -- Jim Crow.

Across the street from what is today City Hall in downtown Manhattan, the African Burial Ground, the graveyard of colonial African New Yorkers was rediscovered in the 1990s. It was about five acres wide and used for virtually a hundred years until the end of the Revolutionary War. The history and existence of the African Burial Ground demonstrates that New York Jim Crow reached into the graveyard. Indeed segregation in New York reached into every facet of life for African

and African American New Yorkers, including, perhaps especially their religious sanctuaries and institutions.

On the odd occasion, in the hands of a racist priest or a rowdy hate mongering congregation, religious events like marriage, communion or baptism could erupt into embarrassing and even dangerous experiences. In the main, for Black New York, when allowed entrance, church must have been oddly like the devil wrestling with God, as they were closely monitored and set apart. In some, Black New Yorkers had to sit or stand in the back of the parish, in others they were confined to an area in the balcony. In several churches there were rooms for Blacks, often out of view. These rooms, like the two at St. Augustine's Landmark Church at 290 Henry Street in Lower Manhattan, were called **Slave Galleries**.

"Once in a while some of the old timers would talk," says Harold Hayes, long time parishioner and Lower East Sider, "I used to hear little things that the blacks used to sing up there and such things and they were slaves."

What is now St. Augustine's landmark church has been standing on Henry Street in Manhattan since 1828. Constructed, legend has it, with rocks gathered from a long gone mountain, locally known as Mount Pitt, once a few blocks away. Originally, the church was called All Saints. A controversial aspect of its design, are two rooms on either side of a more than 150 year old Erben Organ one flight above the balcony. We know from articles and church records that these rooms were referred to as slave galleries and associated with the African American community. A historical anomaly is that slavery in New York City and State officially ended in 1827. If so, why would a church that opened in 1828 build two slave galleries? This question ignited some intense debate in corners of the New York Historical community.

"Maybe they didn't believe slavery was going to end." The Reverend Errol Harvey, Rector of St. Augustine's Church has said with his wry smile.

Though the vast majority of African American New Yorkers were no longer enslaved by 1827, the last gained freedom in 1841. The emancipation of slavery in New York was complicated and gradual. A law to stop slavery in New York State passed in 1799, starting a process that climaxed in 1827. A great deal is yet to be learned about who sat in the St. Augustine's slave galleries - were they slaves -- indentured servants ill treated or otherwise -- free blacks encumbered by New York Jim Crow?

Around 1949, after decades spent struggling to survive, a decision was made to move St. Augustine's Church, located on E. Houston Street into the All Saints Building on Henry Street and merge the institutions. The Christian part of the community had largely become African American and Hispanic. The new Church leaders decided to assertively reach out to them. In the ensuing years ironically, the once rich white All Saints Free Church became the primarily working class African American St. Augustine's Church. Its first African American Rector was appointed in 1977. Reverend Errol Harvey, who has been at St. Augustine's for 23 years, is the second. Reverend Harvey has spearheaded and supported renewed interest in the Slave Galleries, embracing the St. Augustine's Project's mission to help tell the story of African American New Yorkers and their contributions to the culture and development of the City and the neighborhood.

Rodger Taylor
Management Board member

