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## Prices of Enslaved Persons in New York and New Jersey

Data Article

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### Description

This is a dataset of sales, probate inventories, and newspaper advertisements of prices of enslaved persons in New York and New Jersey from 1672 to 1856. It includes 2,362 entries comprising the sales or valuations of 3,378 persons.

Slave sales came from transactions in which a buyer and seller agreed on a price. Probate inventory records as well as newspaper advertisements, however, give the price at which a slaveowner *wished* to sell their slave. Historians can compare market prices with inventory valuations to determine how well New York and New Jersey probate recorders could estimate prices. In other words, if probate prices and actual sales prices are similar, it shows that probate recorders commonly understood what the monetary value of enslaved persons was, indicating their familiarity with the subject.

This is the first dataset of slave prices and values for Northern states. It is necessarily built from a heterogeneous collection of sources, since no single source documenting such data exists for

New York or New Jersey. The data allow for estimates of the average price of an enslaved person by age, sex, county, and state.

Slavery existed in New Netherland as early as 1627 and met its legal end in New York state on July 4, 1827. A gradual emancipation scheme began in New York in 1799. In New Jersey, slavery began nearly as early and lasted much later. A gradual emancipation scheme was begun in New Jersey in 1804, but slavery in the state was not abolished until 1846. Slaveholding was commonplace in this region, but slaveholders often held smaller numbers of enslaved people. These slaves were often bought, sold, and rented out, so that at one time or another, most free whites in the region had some relationship or direct experience with slavery. In the seventeenth century, the demand for enslaved labor was satisfied mostly through imported slaves from the Caribbean, but in the early eighteenth century, ships with enslaved persons often arrived in New York directly from Africa. By the 1750s, slave importation had mostly dried up and the regional market for enslaved persons relied on domestic births. Although there were some enslaved persons traded out of the region, to Montreal and Detroit, for example, most remained in New York and New Jersey for life, as domestics, field workers, and delivery persons, both in urban and rural contexts. In particular, the numbers of the enslaved grew over time in the Hudson Valley, where enslaved labor was put to use in harvesting wheat, among many other tasks.

Since the 1950s, economic historians have sought and analyzed data on slave sales in Southern states. Typically, such data is rather homogenous and comes from a single source, such as the slave auction books of New Orleans or the probate records of South Carolina.<sup>1</sup> Data of the kind gathered here is valuable for cliometric and econometric research, not only to better understand slavery in the North, but to compare slavery in Northern states with slavery in Southern States. Prices and probate valuations indicate the perceived values of enslaved persons in the slave economy. They indicate when and where slavery was growing or declining, and whether and where it was profitable or failing. Information about the enslaved is sometimes missing in the data, but many of the records include their first names, and some records include their full first and last names. In tracking the stories of individual enslaved persons who were bought and sold in the region, this data is invaluable. For example, while working on this project, I was in touch with Claire Bellerjeau, author of a recent book titled *Espionage and Enslavement in the Revolution: The True Story of Robert Townsend and Elizabeth* (Lyons Press, 2021), which investigates stories of slavery in Long Island. After learning about Claire's project, I was able to search my database and quickly find references to enslaved persons from Long Island that Claire had not previously seen, despite her significant work in local archives.

The extensive list of sellers and buyers of slaves is also useful for historians conducting local history research, or biographers of early New Yorkers. As well, the city and county columns allow local history researchers to quickly find composite information. The advantage of this dataset is that someone can make a search by name or place, and then work from there to find connections. This data is sortable by county and includes the names of specific places where slave sales occurred. Genealogists who wish to trace family histories will also find this dataset invaluable. The information about enslaved persons here goes beyond what is typically found in

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<sup>1</sup> Peter C. Mancall, Joshua L. Rosenbloom, and Thomas Weiss, "Slave Prices and the South Carolina Economy, 1722-1809," *The Journal of Economic History* 61, no. 3 (Sept., 2001); Laurence Kotlikoff, "The Structure of Slave Prices in New Orleans, 1804 to 1862," *Economic Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (October 1979): 496–518.

census records and published recollections. Because the data links enslaved persons with slaveholders (both buyers and sellers), it is useful for tracking important changes in slaves' lives, and it suggests connections between people. Information about specific enslaved persons in New York and New Jersey is often very meager, so this dataset will, in many instances, provide the first available and accessible source for information on certain individuals.

In some instances, the recorded sale of a slave was in fact a self-purchase, or a family member of an enslaved person purchased the freedom of another. In these cases, I have provided the label "self-purchase" instead of "sold." Enslaved persons in New York and New Jersey, especially in the nineteenth century, were frequently rented to others or made agreements with their enslavers to seek compensated work and then return with cash. This free market for slave labor was particularly common in New York City, and it helped in the transition from slavery to freedom in the region.

The sources for this database are many and varied. Archival collections, some of which are available online, provide primary sources that give confident data about slave prices.

There are a number of online search engines for slave documents in New York and New Jersey, though none of them are comprehensive nor organized in such a way as to present data on slave prices. The largest of these are the Northeast Slavery Records Index ([nesri.commons.gc.cuny.edu](https://nesri.commons.gc.cuny.edu)), and the New York Slavery Records Index (<https://nyslavery.commons.gc.cuny.edu/search/>), and Historic Huguenot Street (<https://www.huguenotstreet.org/>). Newspapers, dissertations, and archival sources not included in the major online search databases round out this collection. The New Jersey data (listed in the dataset with the source name "NJ-Inventory") was primarily compiled by Timothy Hack from the files of the New Jersey State Archives. Hack has granted permission to use this data that he compiled.

Online auctions of historical documents also offer an opportunity to find data on slave prices. Slave bills of sale posted for sale online engender a variety of moral concerns. In no case did I purchase such a document, but rather, I screenshot the image of the document for sale and saved these image files, noting the source in the database as "online auction" and providing an online link when possible. The sources section below includes a list of online auction documents that I have saved in digital form, and which will be reproduced as an appendix connected to this publication.

In addition to primary sources, the dataset also draws significantly on data provided in secondary source publications. County histories, both modern ones and those published in the nineteenth century, often include stray bits of information about slave prices, or they give a list of slave sales data that could be incorporated into a dataset of this kind. Two excellent examples include David Mitros' *Slave Records of Morris County, 1756-1841*, and Carl Nordstrom's "Slavery in a New York County: Rockland County, 1686-1827." Unfortunately, however, data gleaned from secondary sources cannot always be traced to a primary archival source, and in many cases, I had to accept the authority of the author when they claimed that they had seen documents with such information. Slave price data tends to be quite particular and is not generally the kind of information that is forged or misused for political purposes. Instead, authors who insert this kind of data in their text generally appear to be genuine and merely offer a few examples of prices as testimony. Most older secondary sources that include

slave price data have only general footnote citations, pointing to an archive (the New York Public Library, for example), but not to specific collections, or, when they do reference specific collections, these collections are either too large or too unorganized for the historian citing them to provide any more specific location of the materials. An effort has been made to ensure that slave price data located in one source is not the same as that identified in another source, so that particular data are not duplicated in this dataset.

The compilation of this data was intended for research for a chapter in my forthcoming book *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York*.<sup>2</sup>

## **Dates of Data Collection**

2017-2023

## **Dataset Languages**

English

## **Geographic Coverage**

New York and New Jersey

## **Temporal Coverage**

1672-1856

## **Document Types**

Bill of Sale, Invoice, or Receipt

Contract

Inventory or Probate Record

## **Sources**

### **Archives, Libraries, and Digital Repositories**

Amsterdam City Archives

Ancestry.com

Brooklyn Historical Society

Rutgers University Special Collections

Dutchess County

East Hampton Library

Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Goshen Library and Historical Society

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York: A Cultural, Economic, and Demographic History of the Period 1700-1827* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

Guilderland Historical Society Archives  
Harvard University, Schlesinger Library  
Historic Huguenot Street  
Howard University  
Jersey City Free Public Library  
Johns Hopkins Libraries  
Kingston Senate House  
Library of Virginia  
Montgomery County Archives  
Museum of the City of New York  
New Jersey Historical Society  
New York Public Library, Digital Collections  
Onondaga Historical Association  
Raynham Hall Museum  
Rye Historical Society  
Grems-Doolittle Library Collections  
Schomburg Library  
Suffolk County Historical Society  
Syracuse University Special Collections  
UC Santa Barbara Special Collections  
University of Michigan Special Collections  
University of North Carolina Special Collections  
New York State Library  
Vedder Library  
Westlaw  
Wichita State University Special Collections  
Winterthur Library  
Xavier University

### **Online Auction Notices**

Deaton Family slave bill of sale, 1745, Worthpoint.com  
Bill of sale for Valentine, 1787, Worthpoint.com  
Bill of sale for Negro boy, 1813, from Van Schellayne, Worthpoint.com  
1788 Loucks to Cremma bill of sale, HeritageAuctions.com  
Adam Tipple, Margaret Hittle bill of sale, 1806, private ownership  
Bill of sale, Adam Brown to John Roof, 1808. Antipodean.com  
Cuffee bill of sale, Peter Byvanck, EarlyAmerican.com  
Bill of Sale from John W. Stoothoff, Worthpoint.com  
Bill of sale, Annanias Wickes to Phainehas Carll, Worthpoint.com  
Indenture with Bartholomew Vosburgh, Abebooks.com  
1815 servant agreement, UncleDavysAmericana.com

### **Newspapers**

*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*  
*Daily Advertiser*  
*Evening Post*  
*New York Gazette*

*New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*  
*New York Journal, or the General Advertiser*  
*New York Mercury*  
*Poughkeepsie Journal*  
*The Gaslamp*  
*Weekly Museum*

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Wellman, Judith and Kelley Yacobucci Farquhar. *Uncovering the Underground Railroad: Abolitionism and African American Life in Montgomery County, New York 1820-1890*. Fonda, NY: Montgomery County Historian's Office, 2011.

Williams-Myers, A. J. *Longhammering: Essays on the Forging of an African American Presence in the Hudson River Valley to the Early Twentieth Century*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994.

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## Methodology

The only particular method used in collecting this data was widespread searching of published secondary works, archival collections, and digital archival collections. Discussions with other scholars working on slavery in New York and New Jersey also led to the discovery of relevant data included in the dataset. Because I (the compiler) was not able to visit every archive in these two states, I relied heavily on historians (such as Vivienne Kruger for the New York City municipal archives) who had visited particular repositories in the past and who compiled their own limited slave sale data for particular counties and cities. Surprisingly, I found little overlapping data, that is, particular instances of slave pricing that appeared in multiple sources. This indicates a number of things. First, it shows that there has been little attempt to aggregate or compare slave prices across various publications on the history of New York and New Jersey. It also indicates that there is more relevant data to be found in additional archival searches in those states. I say this because, had archival research on the topic been thorough, it would have been more likely that two or more researchers would have discovered and published the same information in separate publications.

By sorting by year, and then enslaved person's name, or the name of the buyers and sellers of an enslaved person, and then sorting separately by year and price, I was able to identify possible duplicate data, which I then compared more closely to determine whether two instances of recording slave pricing were in fact one and the same.

This dataset includes 2,362 rows of entries with 19 columns of data about proscribed values given to enslaved persons in various documents in New York and New Jersey. The eleven columns of data are as follows:

**Year:** This is the year in which the transaction or act of valuing the slave took place. This is not necessarily the year which the document is from, as some documents record information from earlier years.

**Name:** This is the name of the enslaved person who was assigned a value in the document.

**Age:** The given age of the enslaved person in question. When an age range of only 1 year was given (e.g. 14 or 15), I selected the higher of the two ages, 15.

**To:** The name of the purchaser or receiver of the enslaved person.

**From:** The name of the person selling the enslaved person in question, or the name of the owner of the enslaved person listed in the document.

**City:** Generally, the city of the seller (i.e. person in column "From"). If no information about the location of the seller was provided, but the location of the purchaser was given, I used the latter.

**County:** Generally, the county of the seller (i.e. person in column "From"). If no information about the location of the seller was provided, but the location of the purchaser was given, I used the latter.

**State:** Generally, the state of the seller (i.e. person in column "From"). If no information about the location of the seller was provided, but the location of the purchaser was given, I used the latter.

**Men:** The number of men (aged 18 or above) included in the sale or valuation.

**Women:** The number of women (aged 18 or above) included in the sale or valuation.

**Boys:** The number of boys (aged below 18) included in the sale or valuation.

**Girls:** The number of girls (aged below 18) included in the sale or valuation.

**Children (exclusive):** The number of children (aged below 18 years) whose sex was not included in the sale or valuation. Many of these were infants whose sex was not disclosed. This number does not include the boys and girls listed in columns L and M.

**Total People Exclusive:** The total number of people (from columns J, K, L, M, and N) included in the sale or valuation.

**Price (Pounds):** The monetary value in New York Pounds assigned to the sale or valuation of the enslaved person or persons in question. Most of the sales and valuations in New Jersey do not specify whether New York or New Jersey pounds were used. Some, however, do specify New York pounds, which seem to have been in common use in New Jersey. The ratio of the value of New York to New Jersey pounds was often close to 1:1, although in some years, particularly the 1770s, it appears that New Jersey pounds were traded in New York at a 10% premium. The consequence of this uncertainty in the data is that New Jersey sales and valuations in the dataset may sometimes be undervalued.

**Price (Dollars):** The monetary value in U.S. Dollars assigned to the sale or valuation of the enslaved person or persons in question. The standard ratio for converting New York pounds to dollars in the period of currency transition (roughly 1792 through 1810) was 2.5 dollars to the pound. I applied this ratio consistently when moving backwards in the eighteenth century and converting earlier values to dollars. By retaining a column for pounds in the original source, other historians and economists can apply different conversion rates to the data over time, applying, for example, the variable rates given by McCusker in John J. McCusker, *How Much is that in Real Money: A Historical Price Index for Use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1992).

**Currency Type:** For the purposes of coding, this column again distinguishes whether a sale or valuation was in New York Pounds or U.S. Dollars.

**Source:** The archival source or published secondary work where the information was found.



## Date of Publication

December 2023

## Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/4X2SA1>

Linked Data Representation: [Enslaved.org](https://enslaved.org)

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