



[Slavery in Revolutionary-Era Connecticut \(Topical Guide\)](#)

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Dr. Christopher Sawula, Visual Resources Librarian for Art History at Emory University, offers H-Slavery the most recent in a series of topical guides concerning the study of slavery. The goal of this post is to provide a concise introduction to the major themes and works within this field with the hope of fostering more dialogue on the topic. H-Slavery invites and encourages its subscribers to use the "Post a Reply" feature to propose revisions to the author. A revised version of this post will soon appear as a webpage on H-Slavery's menu bar.

Slavery in Revolutionary-Era Connecticut

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Introduction

The increased interest in slavery in New England over the last two decades presents the opportunity to assess the field and examine the gaps in the existing literature. In particular, historians have taken great strides to expand our understanding of the Indian slave trade, African importation, and the community bonds that emerged among the enslaved, but have focused almost exclusively on Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Key works enriching the literature include Fitts' *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise* (1998), Horton and Horton's *In Hope of Liberty* (1998), Melish's *Disowning Slavery* (1998), Sweet's *Bodies Politic*, and Warren's *New England Bound* (2016). In establishing the major social, economic, and cultural trends of New England slavery, historians have understandably sought out major urban centers, Atlantic ports, and large farms where the importance of Indian, African, and African American slaves to the New England economy blurred the line between southern "slave societies" and New England's "societies with slaves."

As Wendy Warren explains in *New England Bound* (2016), the critical role of New England in Atlantic slavery and intercolonial commerce should encourage historians to move beyond this dichotomy and revisit the region with fresh eyes. One particular problem underscores how much more research we need on the place of slavery in New England: the number of slaves in colonial Connecticut. Often treated briefly by recent studies, Connecticut was a key site for slavery in New England, both because of its particular mix of urban centers, small ports, and frontier farms, and because of the evidence it provides about conflict with Native Americans, foreign accounts of slaveholding, and legal change. But how much do we really know about slavery in Connecticut?

The Numbers Game



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Ironically, the most compelling statistic that might draw historians to Connecticut slavery as an avenue of research is a historiographic error. In Connecticut's final colonial census, taken in 1774, the General Assembly announced that 6,464 "blacks" resided in the colony. In *The Negro in Colonial New England* (1942), Lorenzo J. Greene took this figure to be the number of enslaved African Americans in the colony. Were this figure true, Connecticut would have the dubious distinction of holding the most slaves in New England on the eve of the American Revolution. In the same work, Greene placed Massachusetts behind Connecticut with approximately 5,250 enslaved African Americans.

Had Greene examined Connecticut's records further, he would have seen that the General Assembly had combined the figures for African Americans and Native Americans. When tabulated from the individual numbers collected in Connecticut's six counties, the 1774 census registered 5,085 Africans and African Americans and 1,363 Indians (Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, Vol. XIV, 1887). To complicate matters further, Connecticut's legislature neglected to delineate between free and enslaved people of color. The astute observer may also notice that the county figures do not actually add up to 6,464. Given this lack of clarity and colony's categorization of African Americans and Indians as "blacks," these figures speak more to the colony's racial attitudes on the eve of the American Revolution than to its actual enslaved population. Even superb works of scholarship, such as Jackson Turner Main's *Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut* (1985), sometimes cite the 6,464 number.

Unfortunately, the second most-used source in the historiography provides no further clarification. The Colonial and Pre-Federal Statistics provided by the United States Census Bureau estimate that 5,698 "Negroes" lived in Connecticut in 1770 and that this number grew to 5,885 in 1780. As with the tallies provided by the General Assembly in 1774, the Census Bureau notes that these figures "include some Indians" (United States Census Bureau, 1975). This figure appears in Ira Berlin's award-winning work, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (2000). While some historians have attempted to avoid Connecticut's conflation of both race and legal status, they have tended to do so by suggesting that white slaveholders only began manumitting slaves in significant numbers after the American Revolution had begun (Menschel, 2001). This seems dubious since the records we do have suggest that about one fifth $1/5$ of the 6,464 "blacks" were in fact Native Americans. Likewise, the federal estimate relative to the 1774 colonial census implies that about $1/10$ one tenth of the colony's actual black population was free, and that the free population was growing rapidly. More to the point, the lack of a consistent estimate demonstrates the need for additional research.

The Problem of Sources

While the range of estimates proposed for Connecticut's enslaved population may appear to fall within an acceptable margin of error, they speak to the overall lack of study committed to New England's southernmost colony. For instance, the current paradigm for Connecticut slavery suggests that, like the rest of the region, the colony's slaves either lived on isolated rural farms or sought community within the wealthy urban centers of the Connecticut River Valley and the coast of Long Island Sound. This portrayal, however, fails to take into the consideration why Connecticut was home



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to a surprising number of plantation-like farms. As Joel Lang reported in the *Hartford Courant* in 2002, three different slaveholders, with sixty, twenty-four, and twenty-eight slaves, respectively, operated large plantations in the colony. (Lang, <http://www.courant.com/news/special-reports/hc-plantation.artsep29-story.html>, 2002). Only the dairy farms of southern Rhode Island could claim to have enslaved workforces operating at such a scale (Fitts, 1998).

Historians have also struggled to articulate the extent to which the transatlantic slave trade brought enslaved Africans to Connecticut's ports. This is due to a variety of unique factors that have limited the depth of available sources. For one, the colonial government was notorious for withholding information requested by the Board of Trade. In 1740, the Board of Trade reported that Connecticut, as a corporate colony, "think themselves by their charters little dependent on the Crown, and seldom pay obedience to royal orders" (Andrews, 1933). Subsequently, the correspondence between Connecticut officials and the Board of Trade regarding the Atlantic slave trade can be frustratingly brief, revealing little about the colony's role.

Secondly, Benedict Arnold destroyed the majority of Connecticut's colonial shipping records along with the New London Customs House in 1781. For the historian, this is deeply unfortunate: while surviving records indicate that New Haven, Middletown, Norwich, and Stonington were all active in Connecticut's coastal trade, New London was the primary port of entry for slave importations. Circumstantial evidence suggests New London traders contributed to Connecticut's growing slave population by importing African slaves to work alongside enslaved African Americans born in the colonies and those brought from the West Indies. Middletown, for instance, was home to three slave traders in the latter half of the eighteenth century (Fowler, 1877). One of these, Dr. Thomas Walker, placed an advertisement in the *New London Summary* in 1762 for "a parcel of likely young negroes, lately imported from the Coast of Africa." Similar advertisements described newly arrived slaves from the "Windward" and "Guinea" coasts.

Connecticut's runaway slave advertisements also point to the colony's direct importation of African slaves. In 1777, Samuel Gardner described his escaped slave, Prince, as "about 5 feet 6 or 7 inches high, well set, has three Marks or Scars on each Temple (made in Guinea.)" Other slaveholders revealed a familiarity with African cultural practices. John Dean explained to readers of the *Norwich Packet* in 1776 that his slave, Dick, "speaks very bad English, and is marked in the Face with his Country Marks." While neither the shipments nor the runaway advertisements are enough to provide an estimate of how many enslaved Africans were brought into Connecticut ports, the surviving evidence highlights the need for a reexamination of the colony's slaving activities. Slaves likely arrived in Connecticut from other New England colonies as well as New York. In that sense, Connecticut's slave population may also tell us about regional patterns of settlement and trade.

Conclusion

Our understanding of New England slavery continues to evolve and improve as historians revisit established paradigms and investigate the region through new analytical lenses. In the last two decades, scholars have revolutionized our knowledge of how early Europeans encountered Native



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Americans, how they justified Indian enslavement, and how they integrated natives into the Atlantic economy (Lepore, 1998; Warren, 2016). Similarly, historians have taken great strides to explore the ideologies New Englanders used to justify both slavery and abolition in the latter half of the eighteenth century (Melish, 1998; Sweet, 2003). The unknown number of slaves in Connecticut, however, reminds us how much more work needs to be done. Along with quantitative research, further works might investigate Connecticut's role in the transatlantic slave trade and the makeup of the colony's slave population. Another possibility might be to reexamine the role of slaves in the colony's local economy to understand why Connecticut was home to at least a small number of slave plantations that were large for the region. In order to understand why Connecticut, and in particular New Haven, became such a critical voice for abolition in the eighteenth century, we need to understand how slavery fit into the colony's social, cultural, and economic fabric.

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