

# SHEDDING LIGHT ON SLAVERY IN THE NORTH

## EDUCATORS WANT MORE PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS TO KNOW

*The Associated Press*  
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OYSTER BAY, New York (AP) -- A group of mostly white seventh and eighth graders sleepily sauntered into their school library one recent morning, soon to get a surprise awakening about a part of their town's history they never knew existed.

"Did anybody in this room know there were 60 enslaved Africans, people, human beings, buried a mile from here?" Alan Singer, a professor at Hofstra University, asked them. "Those people have been erased from history. It is as if they never existed."

Singer and Mary Carter, a retired middle school social studies teacher, were in Oyster Bay to speak to the kids -- part of a quest to develop a public school curriculum guide focusing on slavery's impact in the northern U.S., specifically New York.

Their efforts have been buoyed by state legislation enacted last year creating the Amistad Commission to examine whether the slave trade is being adequately taught in New York schools.

The commission, one of a number formed around the country in recent years, is named for the slave ship *Amistad*, which was commandeered by slaves who eventually won their freedom in the U.S. Supreme Court.

"Many people are surprised when you talk about slavery's existence in New York," Carter said. "They're surprised because it's taught as something that happened in the South."



*Professor Alan Singer speaks at a Middle School.*

In three separate sessions with Oyster Bay students in grades 7-12, Singer and Carter sought to impart that it is important for them to know about the role slavery played in U.S. history. They also want the students to know that racial division in the United States today "is very much a direct result of the racial divisions that come out of slavery days."

Singer, who is a social studies education professor, uses 18th and 19th century newspaper ads from slave owners seeking help in capturing their runaway slaves on Long Island, as well as diaries and other publications to document the slave trade in New York.

He cited an 1877 passage from the diary of Harris Underhill, reporting on a visit to the family homestead near Oyster Bay: "On this farm are buried sixty slaves which once belonged to the Underhills."

That was a revelation to eighth-grader Ben Selman.

"I thought it was pretty interesting to find out there were actually 60 slaves buried a mile from here," he said. "I didn't realize they were so close."

Singer also tries to engage the students by using rap. Though he admits he's an awful rapper, he dons a T-shirt and cap (appropriately askew) and presses on anyway: "Time to learn the truth, our local his-to-ry, that Long Island was the land of slave-r-ry."

Most Americans do not know the story of slavery in the North, said Jill Lepore, a professor of history at Harvard University and author of "New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery and Conspiracy in Eighteenth Century Manhattan."

"There's no reason to hide the fact that New York City was built by slaves," she said. "It's an important part of the city's past."

Harlem state Assemblyman Keith Wright, who sponsored the legislation creating the Amistad Commission, said although the majority of the commission's members have yet to be appointed and no meetings have been held, he is optimistic that more schoolchildren will be taught about slavery.

Teaching about the slave trade "is the right thing to do," Wright said. "Absent South Carolina, the biggest importer of slaves was New York City."

The New York Historical Society recently presented an exhibition on slavery in New York that featured documents, paintings, video and sculpture.

In lower Manhattan, a long-lost burial ground where thousands of slaves and free blacks were laid to rest during the 18th century was recently declared a national monument by President Bush.

Slavery was abolished in New York in 1827, but when the American Revolution began in 1776, the only city with more slaves than New York was Charleston, South Carolina.

Oyster Bay eighth-grader Fiona Brunner said she was amazed to find out there were slaves buried near Oyster Bay.

"You always think that happened so far away, only in the South, and a lot of it was right here in our town," she said.