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Introduction: African Americans on Long Island, A Rich History

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Abstract: This introduction provides an overview of the contents of this special issue and some reflections on the theme of the importance of local history and social memory that it raises.

Keywords: African American, archaeology, community history, local history, Long Island

- ¹ Issues of cultural awareness and racial equality for African Americans have long been important topics of discussion on Long Island. Historical research has proven that blacks were tightly woven into the social fabrics of both Nassau and Suffolk Counties since the earliest settlement period. However, most of the initial fact-finding and preservation of artifacts related to African American history on Long Island was done by members of local historical societies who were predominately white. As these historians and preservationists undertook this important work, they became custodians of the past. But too often, they merely organized their findings into vertical files without necessarily sharing them with a wider audience. In other instances, researching or interpreting the history of minority or traditionally marginalized populations was simply not a priority.

- 2 Many black communities still face significant challenges in interpreting their history because existing research is often fragmentary, making it harder to tell a full or accurate story. Another obstacle is the seldom acknowledged fact that not all African Americans are proud of their roots or eager to delve into the history of their ancestors, given the demeaning conditions under which they came to America. Some African Americans still feel embarrassed and tend to reject the negative stigma associated with slavery.
- 3 Nevertheless, the last fifteen years have seen a growing desire by academics, community leaders, and the general public to learn more about African Americans' contributions to Long Island's diverse heritage. There are some communities where black history has been well documented and taught in recent years. Annual black history programs now serve as building blocks reinforcing and enhancing positive attitudes among people of different races while celebrating the achievements of black Americans. Black churches have also played an important role in reinforcing the teaching of local African American history, such as by sharing the principals of Kwanzaa, a celebration honoring African heritage and culture. Spreading awareness of black history and teaching cultural values in these ways allows members of a younger generation to become proud and active participants in investigating and preserving the history of their families and communities.
- 4 Today, these efforts are being invigorated by several organizations and scholars whose new investigations are helping us learn more about Long Island's early enslaved population and the strong African American communities that developed later. In particular, archaeology allows us to glean evidence about the formerly obscure lives of less-documented persons from a more direct angle than is possible through archival documents alone. Archaeological and historical investigations at several significant Long Island sites are allowing researchers to piece together fascinating details about the region's African American presence. This special issue of the *Long Island History Journal* highlights several of these exciting initiatives, including:

Rock Hall Manor

- 5 Some early aspects of western Long Island's African American past are illuminated by the in-depth research project on the enslaved Africans at Rock Hall Manor in Lawrence. Home to the prominent Martin family, the residents at Rock Hall came to Long Island from Antigua in the 1760s. Of particular interest in this study is the combining of early survey maps and archeological explorations to unravel the unknown secrets of the Manor's west yard. At Rock Hall, archaeologists Ross Rava and Christopher Matthews have collaborated to give a rare and intriguing glimpse into the lives of slaves as they lived in close proximity with their owners. Although the quality of the relationship between master and servants at this site remains uncertain, the excavation of the west yard structure has provided enough concrete facts and evidence of slaves' daily existence and possible cultural influences to drive a re-interpretation of material remains from earlier excavations.

Lloyd Manor, Huntington

- 6 Jupiter Hammon has long been celebrated as one of America's first published African American poets. Some details of his life at Lloyd Manor, New York are relatively well documented. Much less is known, however, about his ancestry or his extended family's experiences of slavery and freedom. For example, although slave owners usually named their slaves, Jupiter, a butler and senior servant, was allowed to choose his own name and he was educated along with the Lloyd children, yet there is little evidence to suggest that his other family members received similar considerations. Local historians Charla Bolton and Rex Metcalf have compiled extensive original research about the Hammons, producing a much fuller family history and genealogy than has been previously presented. The Hammon family members' varied experiences, before and after slavery, provide revealing insights to the life patterns of African Americans living in and around Huntington Village in the early 19th century.

Church Lane Community

- 7 A drive down Main Street in Cutchogue, New York explains why it is known as one the most charming out-of-the-way small towns in America. It is a tranquil, relatively affluent community with several farms selling roasted corn and vegetables during the summer. This area would not lead you to suspect that situated just north of Middle Road there resides a small group of African Americans who have comfortably called this town home since the 1920s. As reported in the press, however, members of the Church Lane Community, as it is known, had to struggle to protect their neighborhood from a threatening effort to rezone it as a light industrial site. Armed with their faith and years of personal accounts of families who migrated to their historic community, the residents reached out to local organizations for assistance to fight Town Hall. David Bernstein and Alison McGovern have analyzed how, amidst that area's seemingly accepted ethnic and racial divides, the Institute for Long Island Archaeology at Stony Brook University assisted Church Lane residents to overturn the discriminatory zoning laws. Much can be learned from exploring the history of this modern day community and their struggles over the years.

Mapping Long Island's African American History

- 8 The final essay includes short vignettes of other archaeological and community history projects, written by their respective participants and edited by Jenna Coplin. The sites highlighted cover the length and breadth of Long Island—including Shelter Island, Setauket, East Setauket, Lloyd Neck, Eastville, and Westbury. One virtual site, entitled "Mapping the African American Past," is also discussed as it provides a valuable repository of new research and educational resources relating to significant African American historic sites in the greater New York region.
- 9 In addition, a photo essay, co-authored by Judith Burgess, Robert Lewis and Christopher Matthews, highlights the "A Long Time Coming" project, a collaborative community-based initiative to document and

preserve a historic neighborhood in Setauket, New York, whose residents share a rich melding of African American and Native American heritages.

Final Note

- 10 As someone who moved to Long Island from the Deep South, the desire for a sense of pride and a feeling of belonging in a community—not merely as an intruder in someone else’s town—led me to start researching and sharing my new town’s African American history. I believe that if people of different races and religions knew more about each other and took the time to appreciate and respect these differences, as well to find where they have common ground and shared values, it would make it easier for all of us to live harmoniously in our communities. By helping to advance learning about our region’s remarkable diversity, the contributors to this issue of the *Long Island History Journal* are helping to build stronger communities where everyone can live peacefully together.