

St. Augustine's "Slave Galleries" Project

Summary of Research Findings

The memory of St. Augustine's Slave Galleries

All Saint's Church (as St. Augustine's was formerly known) was completed in October of 1828, nearly a year after African Americans paraded through the streets of New York to celebrate the final abolition of slavery in New York State. Into the original design of the church were built two box-like rooms on either side of the organ. We have found no mention of these specific spaces before 1916; but from then on, they were remembered as places where enslaved African Americans sat during services. In order to piece together this complicated story, we must first address the long history of its memory, and how it has shaped our understanding of the Galleries today.

Remembering slavery

The first mention of the term "slave gallery" to describe the strange spaces in All Saint's Church dates from a 1916 article in the *New York Sun* entitled, "Last Remaining Slave Gallery in New York." The article remembered the days of slavery in New York State, painting a somewhat nostalgic portrait of "pickininnies" crowding in the galleries while their masters worshipped below. In 1921, the *Living Church* published an investigation of the "Slave Gallery" in what was by then a "venerable but little known Church," remembering the days when Episcopalians brought their slaves to church because it was their obligation to convert them or maintain their faith in God. The articles cited no sources for their stories of the slave gallery, both of which assumed that slavery was in full effect in the 1830s in New York though it was abolished in 1827, and implied that all African American New Yorkers were slaves, though even when slavery was legal free blacks far outnumbered slaves. We can only imagine that the articles were based on

interviews with Dr. Kenneth S. Guthrie, who became Reverend of All Saint's in 1915 and was committed to bringing the stories of the Slave Galleries to light.

1920s: Coming to terms

In the 1920s, under the leadership of Reverend Guthrie, the congregation tried to come to terms with the memory of slavery and segregation in its church. In 1924, in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the congregation's founding, All Saint's Church put on a pageant in which it remembered the Slave Galleries and the slaves who sat there. A character named "Negro Slave," accompanied by children wearing chains on their wrists, asked whether God reserved a place in heaven for him. The character "All Saint's" responded by inviting "Negro Slave" to join the congregation, proclaiming, "For you I built two special galleries." Later, "New York Government," enters and declares the end of slavery in New York State, whereupon the "slaves" burst free of their paper chains. Here, the opening of All Saint's galleries preceded the abolition of slavery in New York State, though the church was not built until one year afterwards. The Church's oral tradition already preserved the memory of galleries created for and filled by slaves. By the 1930s, guide books report a "Lincoln Museum" housed in the church, in which an iron shackle and a bill of sale for a slave were exhibited.

1950 s: Suppressing the memory

By the late 1950s, the congregation had become almost entirely African American. The memory of the Slave Galleries they inherited from their predecessors was, suggested, painful, shameful, and suppressed. A.J. Williams Myers, professor of black history at SUNY New Paltz and former congregant of St. Augustine's Church remembers that in the 1950s and 60s no one wanted to talk about the tiny windows that loomed behind them as they prayed, though everyone knew what they were. The spaces remained empty, not even used for storage.

1990s: Breaking the silence

In the 1990s, an outspoken new Reverend, Dr. Errol Harvey, decided it was time to talk about the space. The congregation formed the Slave Galleries Committee (now The St. Augustine's Project) to discuss how to use the Slave Galleries to educate its community and city about African American history in Lower Manhattan. Some stories of the space had been passed down through the silence of the 1950s and 60s. One was that many of the original congregants were from Williamsburg, and were rowed over to Manhattan by slaves. Congregants needed a slave gallery in which to keep their slaves under close watch while they attended services.

The memory of the galleries, and of slavery in New York, does not address the fact that the "Slave Galleries" were completed after slavery was legally abolished in New York State. But we believe that the meaning and importance of the "Slave Galleries" does not hinge on whether or not all of the people who sat in the space were legally enslaved. We have endeavored to expand the terms of the discussion of the Slave galleries significance. As we consider the powerful memory of the slave galleries, our research must explore what the space can tell us about the complicated histories of race, slavery, and freedom.

For although New Yorker William Hamilton rejoiced on July 4th, 1827, that "no more shall "negro" and "slave" be synonymous," by 1837 an outraged editor of the New York black periodical *The Weekly Advocate* protested, "Free man indeed! When so unrighteous deprived of every civil and political privilege A freeman when prejudice binds the most galling chains around him! What a sad perversion of the term 'freeman.'

" [1]

Early life of All Saint's Church

In May of 1824, Rev. William A. Clark founded the congregation of All Saint's and held meetings in a small wooden structure on Grand and Pitt Streets. Founding congregants included many of the city's patrician elites such as James P. Allaire, who operated a large iron and brass foundry and is credited with the construction of the first tenement in New York City in 1833. In October of 1827, the congregation of All Saint's began construction on a church of their own. Congregants who entered the church on the day of its consecration in June of 1828, nearly a year after the abolition of slavery in New York, would have found two box-like rooms on either side of the organ.

In 1810, Allaire, Dominick, and others shared their city with 9,000 African Americans, 84% of them free. By 1820, only 518 slaves remained in New York, while the population of free blacks grew to 10,000. [2] According to the 1820 census, at least two founding vestrymen, merchant William P. Rathbone and blockmaker John Rooke, each owned a single slave. A free black male of fourteen years of age or under also resided in Rooke's household. African Americans do not appear in their households in the 1830 census.

Researchers have been working to identify African Americans in the early congregation and understand the varying degrees of freedom and slavery they might have experienced. It is possible that free blacks, indentured servants, and enslaved people could all have set foot in All Saint's Church.

In sacramental records found in the Trinity Church archives, researchers discovered that a Henry Nichols, together with his wife and three of his children, were baptized at All Saint's on July 5th, 1829. Since the first parade through the city to celebrate the

emancipation of slavery in 1827, July 5th was celebrated as "Independence Day" for African American New Yorkers. The only Henry Nichols listed in the 1830 census is a free black man with a wife and eight children. In the city directory, the only Henry Nichols to appear is a saddler living a stone's throw from All Saint's church at 11 Lewis Street. Several other names found in baptismal records from as early as 1824, the founding year of the congregation, correspond to free black heads of household found in the 1820 and 1830 census. We do not know whether African Americans were listed with white parishioners in All Saint's sacramental records, since other churches such as St. Ann's in Brooklyn listed African American baptisms and marriages separately; we also do not know whether African Americans were listed in the city directory. We are therefore not certain whether Henry Nichols, parishioner of All Saint's, is the same Henry Nichols, free black father of eight.

The law abolishing slavery in New York State allowed slave owners from other states, including New Jersey, where slavery was still legal, to reside in New York with their slaves for 9 months out of the year. Children born before July 4th 1827 were classed as indentured servants until they reached the age of 21, or some as late as 1848. It is possible, then, that slaves brought by Episcopalians from other states or indentured servants from New York sat in the slave gallery while their masters participated in services in the sanctuary below.

Segregation in area churches

We have found dozens of accounts of segregated seating in churches in New York and other northern cities both before and after the abolition of slavery. Early- to mid-19th century sources usually referred to these areas as "Negro pews," "nigger seats," or "the African corner." In the 1830s and 40s, the New York *Colored American* ran several editorials urging its readers to oppose segregation in New York churches by standing in the aisle instead of sitting in Negro pews.

Segregated seating appears to have taken three forms. First, pews in the sanctuary could be segregated by race, with blacks designated to the rear pews or to seats around the sides. On August 19, 1837, the *Colored American* published an editorial criticizing the Broadway Tabernacle, a Presbyterian Church, for forcing blacks to sit in the "southern tier of pews." In his 1897 autobiography, *Reminiscences of An Octogenarian*, Charles Haswell remembered the New York City of the 1820s as a place that enforced a rigid racial code of conduct. Haswell specifically recalled that some New York City Churches restricted black worshippers to seats in "pews at the foot of aisles."

Second, and perhaps most common, were galleries, or balconies. At the opening of the John Street Methodist Church in lower Manhattan in January 1818, Rev. Nathan Bangs, addressed "those in the gallery" when welcoming the inclusion of African Americans and praising Methodist preachers for their active and early opposition to slavery. In 1819 John Pintard described his delight at seeing "about 700 children, males and females, and a large number of color, assembled in the galleries" of New York Protestant Episcopal Sunday meeting at St. Paul's Chapel. Alexander Crummell, the second black Episcopal minister to be ordained in New York, protested that in Episcopal churches in the 1840s "negro-pews were stuck up in obscure places." Even the Plymouth Church, built in 1849 on Orange Street in Brooklyn Heights as the center of the abolitionist movement, showed upper galleries labeled "for colored people" in its 1934 HABS measured drawings.

The third form of segregated seating are what we have called "hidden galleries," separate, closed rooms above the balcony as found in St. Augustine's. We have only found a few examples of hidden galleries so far. An editorial in *The Colored American* from the 1830s described the offensive seating arrangement for blacks in the Dutch Reform Church of Schenectady:

[The church had] so-called 'negro pews' . . . situated in the east and west corners of the church, two up, and two down stairs; and they are as far off

from the pulpit as they could be without going out of doors . . . The ones upstairs are not so pleasant; they are built each side of the organ, over the stairway, and will hold about eight persons each, and to get into them you must ascend three or four steps. Truly they are very offensive to me, because they are haughty monuments of the colored people's sufferings, and the Church's disgrace."

In Boston, at the First and Second Baptist Churches, blacks were limited to "Negro Pews where they could hear [but] not see the preacher or be observed by him or the white congregation." [3] According to Historic American Buildings Survey Drawings from the 1930s, The Old John Street Church and the First Chinese Presbyterian Church (formerly the Market Street Reformed Church, built 1818) had hidden galleries at the back of their balconies. In the narrative *Clotel; or, the Presidents' Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*, published in 1853, the author remembers galleries segregated by sex as well as by race. "We once visited a church New York that had a place set apart for the sons of Ham," she writes. "It was a dark, dismal looking place in one corner of the gallery, grated in like a front hen coop, with a black border around it. It had two doors; over one was B.M. black men; over the other B. W. black women." Together, this evidence indicates that All Saint's slave galleries could easily have been used for African Americans in the 1830s and 40s, since such segregation was consistent with other churches in the area.

What were conditions like in the gallery?

The descriptions of other hidden galleries raised many questions about conditions in the space: could the people sitting there see or hear the services? Did they have pews to sit on? What did the conditions say about how black parishioners were understood and treated as Christians?

Lines of sight

The architectural preservation firm Li/Saltzman has been conducting wood and paint analyses of the space to determine how it was used and what modifications were made over time. Today, the galleries have paneled windows, containing screens installed in the 1970s. A photograph (n.d., but pre-1946), a sketch (1930s), and the drawings of the Historic American Buildings Survey (1934), all indicate hinged wooden panels that could be swung inwards and propped up with a stick to afford a view of the sanctuary. When closed, anyone inside would neither be able to see the pulpit nor hear much of what was being said.

Initial wood and paint analyses make strong suggestions about whether the panels were open or closed, though the evidence is not conclusive. Wood analysis indicates that the hinges were not original and were installed long after the founding of the church, and that panels were not in the original construction, though they could have been added soon after the construction of the frames to hold them. Paint analysis, on the other hand, suggests panels were not installed until several decades after the construction of the church. In the east gallery, although there is a ghost of a panel in the window opening, the window frame was painted on two separate occasions in the 19th century before panels or screens were installed. In the west gallery, the window frames carry several layers of paint identical to those used in the sanctuary outside, though the interior of the gallery was painted only rarely.

Seating

Today, the galleries have stepped floors but no seating. The initial wood analysis revealed the ghost of a pew in one of the galleries, and suggested that it dated from the early years of the gallery's use. The paint analysis supported the idea that at least one small pew may have been installed in one of the galleries when the church first opened, and certainly by the time the gallery was painted for a second time. This provides further evidence that the galleries were used to seat people.

African American resistance to slave galleries

In the late 1830s and early 40s, the *Colored American*, edited by a black Presbyterian minister, vigorously denounced white churches' "anti-Christian practice of seating colored people in separate places." It encouraged blacks to openly express their disenchantment with " *proscribed negro pews*," by standing silently in the aisles of churches that maintained segregated seating, and to support struggling black churches. But how many other options did black Episcopalians have for their worship? In 1809, African Americans had organized St. Philip's Episcopal Church, the first black Episcopal Church in New York City. It took over twenty years for a second black Episcopalian parish to emerge in New York City. In 1840, black New Yorkers organized St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, but a lack of funds forced it to close. Four years later, former parishioners reformed St. Matthew's Church, but under a new name, the Church of the Messiah, with 125 members described by its minister as "mostly poor servants." The congregation met in rented rooms, but its inability to pay rent for the hired rooms sometimes led to the suspension of religious services. Their new minister, Alexander Crummell (1819-1898), sought funds for the erection of a church for three years, but abandoned the effort and moved to England in 1847. Black churches from other denominations shared problems similar to those of the Church of the Messiah. Would the difficulties of nascent black churches have forced free blacks to choose to worship in All Saint's slave galleries?

Questions for further research

The information we have uncovered about the memory and history of the slave galleries raises more questions than it answers. Accordingly, we expect the research effort to be a continuous process throughout the restoration and preservation and beyond.