

Laws Affecting Blacks in Manhattan

The Dutch Period

1640: Only Europeans were allowed to become skilled tradesmen, like carpenters or bricklayers. (The Dutch passed very few laws to control black people. Custom and unwritten rules mostly determined what blacks could and could not do.)

The British Period

1664: When the British took control of New York, the Duke of York proclaimed that no Christian could be held in slavery. This rule, and the principle behind it, became an issue later, when enslaved blacks wanted to convert to Christianity.

1681-3: In a series of laws, slaves were forbidden to leave their master's house without permission. They could not own weapons. They could not gather in groups larger than four. Whites and free blacks could not entertain slaves in their homes, sell them liquor, or take goods or money from them.

1692: Slaves who made noise in the streets on Sundays could be whipped.

1702: Slaves could not gather in groups larger than three; 40 lashes on the naked back of offenders. Masters were free to punish their slaves for any misdeed however they chose, short of killing them or cutting off their limbs.

1706: To encourage owners to let their slaves become Christians, and to prevent the loss of slaves who had converted, a law ruled that owners did not need to free a baptized slave. The same law ruled that any child born to an enslaved mother was a slave for life.

1707: Newly freed blacks could not own or inherit land.

1708: Any slave who murdered his or her master, or conspired to do so, would face a horrible death.

1712: After the 1712 revolt, the British organized and restated earlier laws to form what was called the Black Code. Among the rules it reaffirmed: Any slave convicted of conspiring to revolt against whites would suffer a horrible death. No slave could ever own a gun or pistol. No black who became free after 1712 could own a house or pass belongings on to children. No slave could be freed without a £200 bond being paid, in case the former slave became a public charge.

1713: No slaves over the age of 14 could be out at night without a lantern by which they could be plainly seen.

1722: Black funerals had to be held during daylight.

1731: Slaves were not permitted to gamble for money. Slaves who rode a horse recklessly or fast within the city could be whipped.

1731: No more than 12 slaves could assemble for a funeral. They would be chosen by the dead slave's master.

1742: Blacks were prohibited from fetching water on Sundays, unless the well was next to their master's home. Every household was required to keep watch for suspicious night-time behavior of slaves.

1773: White residents were required to take any slave found in the streets after dark to be whipped.

The United States Period

1788: In one of the first actions of the new State of New York, the sale of slaves imported from outside the state was outlawed. This ended the legal slave trade into New York, but did not free slaves already in the state, and the illegal slave trade continued. It was also ruled illegal to buy a slave for the purpose of selling him or her out of state.

1799: New York State's first Gradual Emancipation law ruled that any child born to a slave mother *after* July 4, 1799 was considered free. Boys born to enslaved mothers, however, had to remain servants to their mother's owner until they were 28 and girls until they were 25.

1817: New York State's second Gradual Emancipation law ruled that all slaves born *before* July 4, 1799 would be freed on July 4, 1827. Enslaved children born between 1817 and July 4, 1827 would remain servants until they were 21. Anyone who tried to export a New York slave or servant to another state would be guilty of a public offence and fined \$500.

1821: The second New York State constitution set a \$250 property requirement for black men wishing to vote. There was no property requirement for white men if they had served in the militia or paid taxes, as most white men had.

Sources: Thelma Wills Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
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