

## Part I: Introduction

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### **Colonial Slavery**

Slavery was introduced into the colony of New Jersey in the 17th century. The colonial system of slavery was a labor system known as chattel slavery, in which the slave was the personal property of his or her owner for life. Men and women brought from Africa, either directly or by way of the Caribbean Islands, were enslaved under this system. Children born of slave women became the property of their mother's owner and slaves for life, perpetuating the system indefinitely. Colonial settlers were encouraged to bring servants and slaves with them through extra grants of land under the 1665 Concessions and Agreements of Sir John Carteret and John Lord Berkeley. By the end of the 17th century, slaves had become an important part of the labor force in the colony's developing economy, and Perth Amboy had developed into a slave trade port. Special laws were enacted to control the actions of slaves, setting harsh punishments for infractions and crimes; special courts were established to enforce those laws. According to historian Clement A. Price, "support for the institution was stronger in New Jersey than in any other northern colony."

### **Revolutionary Era Slavery**

In the 18th century, especially during the Revolutionary era, the contrast between the institution of slavery and the principles of human rights endorsed by New Jersey patriots and Quakers resulted in outspoken opposition to slavery and attempts to cause the colonial legislature to end the slave trade. Despite the service of slaves in patriot military forces and their work on the home front, the 1776 Constitution of the new state of New Jersey did not abolish slavery. Indeed, New Jersey and New York were the only northern states that did not move to limit slavery during the Revolutionary War.

By 1800, there were an estimated 12,422 enslaved men and women in New Jersey, or 5.8 percent of the population. Some steps were taken by the legislature during the late 18th century to improve the condition of slaves, but it was not until 1804 that the New Jersey legislature passed the Act for the Gradual Emancipation of Slavery. Under this act, children born to an enslaved woman after July 4, 1804 were free. However, the law provided that female children were obligated to serve their mother's owner until the age of 21, and male children were obligated until the age of 25. If an owner did not wish to enforce this obligation, he or she could abandon the infant to the local overseers of the poor when it was one year old and be relieved of its care. People who were born into slavery before July 4, 1804 were slaves for life unless their owners chose to manumit

them, that is, to give them their freedom. Even as late as the Civil War there were still a few very elderly slaves in New Jersey.

## **Enslaved Women**

It is important to remember that some slaves and slave owners were women. The documents included here illustrate some of the experiences and conditions of enslaved and free African American women in New Jersey in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. From the very earliest colonial days enslaved women served a dual purpose for their owners. Not only did they labor in households and farms as farmhands, gardeners, cooks, laundresses, nursemaids, nannies, seamstresses, and scrubwomen; they also gave birth to future generations of slaves, expanding their owner's wealth, and were responsible for the care of their own families. Historical evidence about the lives of these women in New Jersey is rare, making it necessary to imaginatively interpret the meanings of the evidence that remains.

## **Note**

For more information on slavery in early New Jersey see:

Clement A Price. *Freedom Not Far Distant: A Documentary History of Afro-Americans in New Jersey*. Newark: New Jersey Historical Society, 1980.

For biographical information on enslaved women, emancipated slave women, and free black women see:

Joan N. Burstyn, ed. *Past and Promise: Lives of New Jersey Women*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997.

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## Part II: Documents

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Please use the primary documents on the following pages.

**Document 1**

*T O B E S O L D,*  
**N**EAR nine years time of a **BLACK**  
GIRL, about nineteen years of age ;  
she is sober and honest, has been brought up in  
the country, and wishes a situation in it ; she will  
be sold reasonable. Enquire of the Printer.  
April 24, 1797. 42---t. f.

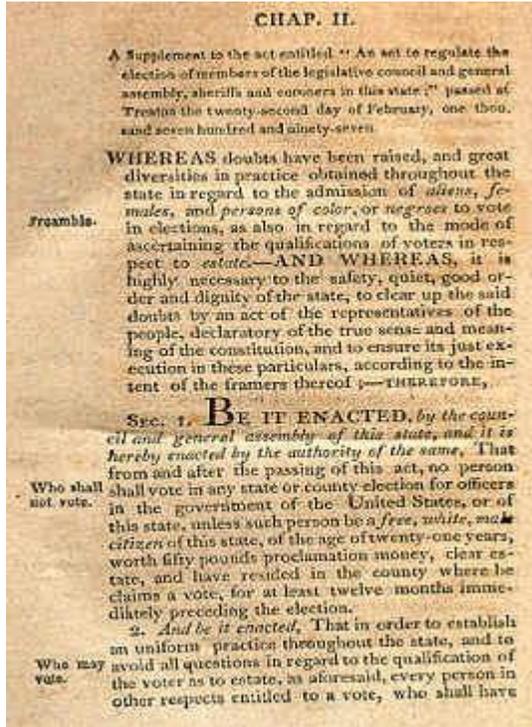
"To Be Sold," an advertisement for the sale of a 19-year-old slave woman that appeared in a Trenton newspaper on May 30, 1797.

**Document 2**

To the Town Clerk & Overseers of the Poor of the Township  
of Piscataway Gentlemen these are to inform you that  
my Negro wench Judy was brought to bed the <sup>10th</sup> day  
of November last with a female child which she  
named Sarah - I do therefore give you notice that I do  
abandon all my right & title to the said female child agree-  
ably to an Act of the Legislature in such case made &  
provided - Given under my hand the 6<sup>th</sup> day of June 1806  
her  
Mary J. Boice  
mark

"Certificate of Abandonment," a manuscript document, from 1806 in Piscataway, Middlesex County, freeing a slave owner from any obligations to the baby daughter born to her slave, Judy.

## Document 3



"Who Shall not Vote," an excerpt from the 1807 New Jersey law which limited the franchise to free, white men.

Document 4

Manumission of } State of New Jersey, Middlesex County  
Abigal - } These are to certify to whom it may  
concern, that Ephraim Ryall, of the township of  
Piscataway, State and County aforesaid, do manumit  
and set free my Negro Woman, Abigal, who  
is under the age of forty years and above the age of twenty  
one years & who appears to be of sound mind and not com-  
petent by her own incapacity of obtaining her support, and  
I have this day obtained a certificate for said Abigal,  
signed by Edward Griffith & Ephraim Rensselaer, two of  
the Justices of the Peace for the township of Piscataway,  
in said County and Samuel & John Randolph, two of the  
Justices of the Peace for the County & State aforesaid, for  
her freedom - Given under my hand & seal this eight  
day of August in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred  
and eight - 1808 -  
Ephraim Ryall. (S)

Witness my hands  
Edward Griffith  
Ephraim Rensselaer  
John L. Randolph

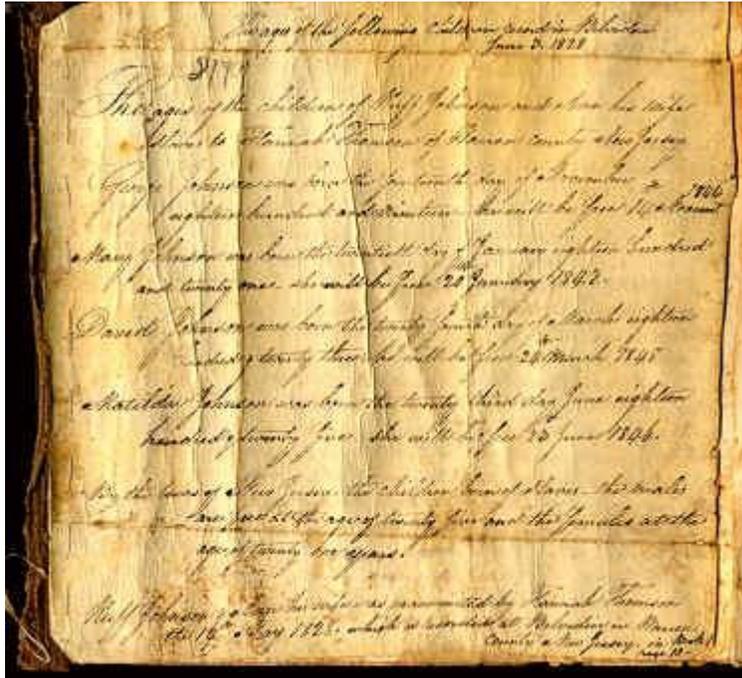
"Manumission of Abigal," a manuscript document freeing the slave woman Abigal in Piscataway, Middlesex County, 1808.

**Document 5**



"Portrait of a Scrubwoman," a rare 1822 drawing of an enslaved scrubwoman, 1822.

## Document 6



"The Manumission of Ann and Rufus Johnson," two manuscript documents from Belvidere, Warren County, freeing a married slave couple in 1828 and verifying the birth dates of their four children and the years in which these children would be free from the legal obligation to work for the Johnson's former mistress.

## Document 7



"Portrait of Jarena Lee (1783-unknown)," an 1843 drawing of the first known woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a free African American woman from Cape May.

## Document 8



The Little Vardun  
It was a winter evening  
The snow was falling fast  
There was a little twinkling weather  
Some falling through the black  
It had no coming on its head  
Accident to take it warm  
I ran to and it on its way  
I saw it from the storm  
If it blew and some at last

9  
The wind would be the stick  
It stopped and took it on its head  
There was a little twinkling weather  
I saw it to my village door  
It was glad to take the house  
It was glad to take the floor  
When the wind and quiet reigns  
It was a little twinkling weather  
It was a little twinkling weather  
It was a little twinkling weather  
It was a little twinkling weather

"The Little Wanderer," two documents, a poem written c. 1840 by Esther "Hetty" Saunders (1793-1862) from Salem County, the daughter of an escaped slave from Delaware, and a pencil portrait of Saunders.

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## Part III: Activities

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1. **Reading.** Students read the Introduction and study the eight documents and images, using the guidelines for reading primary documents.

2. **Research Project.** Students research the circumstances of the passage of the [New Jersey Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1804](#).

Why did the New Jersey legislature pass a gradual abolition act instead of abolishing slavery once and for all?

How did the Act benefit slave owners? How did the Act benefit slave families? Who do you think benefitted most from this law?

How was this Act amended in 1820?

3. **Document Discussion.**

**"To Be Sold."** Compare this newspaper advertisement with the Classified Ads in your local newspaper. What information about this slave does the owner think a potential buyer needs to know? What does this ad tell us about the relationship between the slave and the slave owner?

**"Certificate of Abandonment."** What reasons do you think Mary Boice would have had for relinquishing her claim to the baby daughter of Judi? Does this mean that Judi and her baby will be separated?

**"Who Shall Not Vote."** This act was passed three years after the Gradual Abolition Act of 1804. What relationship to government does the NJ Legislature envision for free black men and women?

**"Manumission of Abigail."** Abigail was obviously born before 1804. What reasons might Ephraim Pyatt have had for freeing her?

**"Portrait of a Scrubwoman."** Why do you imagine depictions of enslaved New Jersey women are so very rare? Why would the visiting French artist choose this women as a subject for her art?

**"The Manumission of Ann and Rufus Johnson."** Rufus and Ann were born before the Gradual Abolition Act of 1804. Why do you think Hannah Thomson is manumitting them but not also relinquishing claims to the services of their children? How might their new legal status have affected Ann, Rufus, and their children?

**"The Little Wanderer."** In what ways does "Hetty" Saunders' poem reflect her thoughts and feelings about her own childhood and situation in life?

**"Portrait of Jarena Lee."** Jarena Lee was born of free African-American parents in 1783 and thus was never a slave. Read about her life in *Past and Promise: Lives of New Jersey Women*, p. 77-79, (Introduction Note). Discuss the impact of freedom and of slavery on her life experience.

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## Part IV: Tips for Reading Documents

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Read the documents carefully, asking yourself the following questions:

**Who** wrote or created this document?

**Who** was the intended reader or audience of this document? Who might have been the unintended audience?

**When** was it written?

**What** sort of document is it? Is it a personal letter, a newspaper article, a government document, a speech, a pamphlet? Can you find a specific date for it or place it within a particular decade?

**Why** was this document written? Under what circumstances was it written and what was its purpose?

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## Part V: Curriculum Standards

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### NEW JERSEY CORE CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

This activity addresses the following elements of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, draft, 2003. [www.state.nj.us/njded/cccs/drafts/ss.pdf](http://www.state.nj.us/njded/cccs/drafts/ss.pdf).

#### Standard 6.3 United States and New Jersey History

Grade 8: A. Critical Thinking skills A.3, A.4, A.5.

D.2 Expansion and Reform (1801-1861): Explain New Jersey's critical role in...Gradual Abolition

E.7 Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877) Examine slavery, black culture, and the varieties of resistance...

Grade 12: A. Historical Understanding skills: A.2, A.3, A.7

B. American History Through Reconstruction

B.2 Colonization and Settlement (1585-1763): Examine slavery and rights of men and women

B.4 Expansion and Reform (1801-1861): Analyze characteristics of cultural, religious, and social reform movements in the antebellum period....including abolition

B.5 Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877): Analyze key issues...including New Jersey's role in the Abolition Movement

*According to Title 18A of the New Jersey State Statutes, each school district "shall adopt a suitable two-year course of study in the history of the United States, including the history of New Jersey, to be given to each student during the last four years of high school." Teaching New Jersey history and geography is a major priority of the Core Curriculum Content Standards. Within these standards, there are many places where the teaching of Women's History and gender differentiation is appropriate.*

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## Part VI: Citing Internet Sources

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When you quote, refer to, or use the information from an internet source you must credit your source. The Drew University Library suggests you use this form for your citation.

Author. "Title of Page." Date of page. URL (Date of Access).

*Example:* Portia Gage, "Portia Gage Tries to Vote in Vineland." 1868.  
[www.scc.rutgers.edu/njwomenshistory/Period\\_3/portiagage.htm](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njwomenshistory/Period_3/portiagage.htm) (May 15, 2001)