

Serving Chitterlins' in the Upper Room: A Historical Fiction Narrative on the Religious Conversion of Slaves in Eighteenth Century New York

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Abstract

Most of the African slaves of Eighteenth Century New Amsterdam (New York) lived and died as foreigners to Christianity. This narrative will encompass the evidence of the thousands of African slaves who maintained the religious practices and beliefs of their native lands despite conversion efforts by slave owners and the efforts of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, formed by the British Crown in the year 1701. In the form of a historical-fiction narrative, this project will utilize fictitious characters and events as a means of blending historical facts and fiction and allow the reader to do more than simply read history. The story is narrated by the main character, who is a second generational African slave born in New Amsterdam and who struggles with the dilemma of being baptized as a Christian by slave owners. This story will also highlight aspects of African indigenous religions as well as a focus on a Muslim slave with family ties to Islam and his refusal to convert to Christianity. This research project which includes character formation, will detail historical events and the responses of those involved. By using a narrative form as a research model, the project is formulated in the format of a short story.

1. Preface

*"That I might say, and say truly, that if there be any terrestrial happiness to be had by people of all ranks, especially of an inferior rank, it must certainly be here... [I]f there be any terrestrial Canaan, 'tis surely here, where the land floweth with milk and honey...In a word, Blessed in whatsoever they take in hand, or go about, the Earth yielding plentiful increase to all their painful labors."*¹ (Daniel Denton, 1633)

On the twelfth of September of 1609, Sea Explorer Henry Hudson and a crew of Dutch and English sailors rode a tide across the river along a wooded, ecological haven called *Mannahatta*. While looking for a western route to Asia under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company, Hudson explored the river which eventually was named for him. It was here where he laid the foundation for the Dutch colonization of the region. *Mannahatta*, which meant "island of many hills," was named by the Algonquin culture that lived in the local area for more than four hundred generations before Hudson arrived.² The Dutch government gave exclusive trading rights to the Dutch West India Company, and colonizer Peter Minuit was named the first Director of their colony, New Netherlands.³ Minuit traded goods with the local tribes and purchased the land from the island's indigenous Indians. The port off the "North River"⁴ had become the center for trade between the Caribbean and Europe, and the place where raw materials such as pelts, lumber, and tobacco were loaded and shipped for trading.

During the same year of 1626, the Dutch West India Company became active in the Trans Atlantic slave trade as their cargo ships began to include loads of African slaves as a result of the labor force required to build the new land.⁵ The Dutchmen roamed the shores of West Africa, and eventually Brazil and Curacao in South America to trade and exchange Indians for Negro men, women and children.⁶ The tip of the New Netherland Island, then named the town of New Amsterdam, was surrounded by the North and East rivers and is where the first African slaves arrived in 1626. Thus, the first African community of slaves drawn from many tribal religious practices, cultures and languages was also established in the land called New Amsterdam.

On the morning of September 30, 1991, the General Services Administration agency (GSA) of New York, along with bulldozers and construction workers happened upon one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century. This excavation site at the intersections of Broadway, Duane, Elk and Reade streets in Lower Manhattan was initially intended for the construction of a new federal building. What was unearthed was a section of 6.6 acres of land which was a portion of the final resting place for as many as 15,000 mostly enslaved Africans and their descendants who were buried there. During the late seventeenth century into the late eighteenth century, the Trinity Church of Lower Manhattan had forbid those of African descent to be buried in their cemetery and within city limits. They were restricted to a separate place, a portion of the land that had not been consecrated by the church, but sacred to those of color who buried their loved ones in the honor of their native lands nonetheless.⁷

Hence, this area had been designated, the *Negro Burial Ground* from 1650 to its closing in 1795. Burials containing intact skeletons and wooden caskets were unearthed and within a year when the excavation was completed, more than four hundred burials had been found.⁸ Many of the excavated remains were evinced to having pronounced details which supported the fact that the various African religions and rituals were respected upon the laying of these individuals to rest. Revealed were various religious symbols carved on the caskets or the use of iron tacks to inscribe symbols or initials in the wood. For example, a burial designated as #101 was found with the carving which could have been identified as the *Akan -Sankofa*⁹ symbol indicating that those buried maintained this African religious rite and beliefs associated with these sacred legends. The skeletal remains included those of many children and young adults¹⁰ further verifying the retention of the native religious practices within the specified period of time and generations. Many of the artifacts found were of tribal nature as was the positioning of the skeletal remains. A consistent number of these remains were found with the heads facing east.¹¹ The preparation of a portion of the wrapped bodies, the placement of grave goods and the adornment of various tribal beads were also indicative of the mixture of the sacred and profane during the eighteenth century. There were clear findings that African religions and identities remained strong in colonial New York. Not surprisingly since Africans were constantly arriving in Manhattan for decades, renewing knowledge and traditions amongst the enslaved.¹²

Thus, throughout the eighteenth century, despite the religious conversion efforts by slave owners and various Christian associations, such as the British Crown's charter to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), African slaves maintained the religious practices and beliefs of their native lands. Most of these early African-Americans and their descendants lived and died as foreigners to Christianity.¹³ The characters depicted in this story will reflect the lives of those found deeply buried in the trenches of the blood-red clay dirt, along with the hundreds of rocks and pebbles that once graced the woods of the land known as New Amsterdam.¹⁴ There are many historical-fiction works that served as an inspiration to create this project. By employing this idea with a number of historical resources that are cited,¹⁵ particular care has been taken to ensure the time and labor applied by these researchers and scholars are transformed into a life-giving short story represented by these characters. The characters depicted in this story will be shaped by their experiences, religion and culture. The goal of this project is to allow the reader to participate in the hopes, fears, passions, and mishaps of the people who lived it. A clearer understanding of the past religious practices and the fascinating details of the lives of these early Americans will help readers understand our own time and our own motivations better. This is one of their many stories.

2. Sunset

*"But thou, when thou prayest, enter thy closet and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."*¹⁶

Folks around here say that it's a long walk to freedom. I say, how do they know I'll be walking? My name is Maharba. I was born in the winter of 1674. My father once told me that when I was born, the frost was lasting through the night and the fields were all picked bare. I 'reckon that would have been some time in the month of November. Our owners, Master George and Mrs. Grace being Christian folks, often taught my father readings from the Bible. The years of his bible teaching gave Papa the desire that I should be called "Abraham" and become the father of a nation like him, but a nation of freed Negroes, right here in this land. So he named me "Maharba." This was a secret dream he had, so he spelled my name backwards so Master George and the Mrs. wouldn't come to know of his dream. Only white folks were allowed to be named for someone so important. This was a desire my Papa died with; that his line of sons would be free one day. Before he died in 1691, he told me that the day I became free, I was allowed to change my name back to Abraham, since it was what he had intended. Dreams can pain you when you realize they aren't real. They were also dangerous for a Negro to have around these parts. Therefore, I always kept mine secret, dreaming only when the sun went down. It hurt my soul to bury my father, but at the same time gave me peace that his long years of working this land were over and he could finally live in the place some folks called heaven.

Some Christian folks whispered that Papa had not been baptized and it wasn't guaranteed that he went home to be with the Lord. I would reply by the time Papa got there, his body was so broken and worn from his labor¹⁷ as well as the rickets he had for all those years,¹⁸ there had to be a special place for Africans to have peace from a life of being colored. His body was freed the day he took his last breath, but somehow I always knew his spirit was free while he was here on earth. How do I know? Because he always spoke about the free open land where he hunted with his father and that he could still hear sound of his father's laugh until the day he died. He was from *Kumasi*, in the land called Ghana, the land of our *Akan* people.¹⁹ The god he spoke of during the day around the Master was one thing, but the one he prayed to when the sun went down was the god of his father, who was the keeper of his ancestors.

I and my good friend Sesom buried my father at the place by the Common,²⁰ near the Collect Water Pond²¹ where they used to graze cattle and cut timber. All of us Negroes were buried there at the Common, away from the white folks. Here in this land, no Negro was to be buried in or near a white graveyard. I 'reckon Christian white folks will never mingle with Negroes, even after being dead in the grave. Under the black sky of night, I secretly prayed for his soul in the manner of his father, and carved the *Sankafa* symbol of the Twi-speaking *Akan* people on his pine coffin.²² I made sure to wrap his body and faced his head toward the east like he taught me, and I buried him with the small strand of beads he kept in his pocket since the day he arrived on these shores.²³ I was forced to become a man that day, but inside I felt just like the day Mama died. I was a just a child back then and the pain in my heart felt too large for my little body. Back then, Papa held me and wrapped my body up with his, on that starry night by the North River. I 'aint cried like that since, except for that night by the Common when I buried him. Since then I have often dreamed of Abraham.

I was born and raised on this land some ten or so years after the British folks came and took it over from the Dutchmen. Their army defeated the Dutch and they renamed the land New York.²⁴ They required much more work from slaves to run the timber, farm, and work the docks during those times. Back then, both the British owned Royal African Company²⁵ and the Dutch trade companies needed many more slaves 'cause they were always pressed to keep building things and acquiring farmland. They used to rustle up farmers and money, "[T]o transport hither a lot of Negroes for agricultural purposes."²⁶ They were bringing more and more Africans here each year, especially after the English took over. I grew up in the slave quarters where they first brought my father from Africa and whenever I had to fetch supplies from the docks, I would watch as they brought in new slaves every month. My mother soon got sick when I was six years old and gave up the ghost after she had my sister, Jael. Miss Bea, who worked the big house, took us in as her own kin and raised us when our Papa died. She didn't have children of her own 'cause Master George never permitted her to marry. Besides that, I have never heard of Miss Bea speaking kindly of any man or to having children. She always said that children broke one's spirit, especially when they got sold off. Miss Bea begged Mr. George to keep us together so she could teach Jael the ways of working the big house. My father used to call Miss Bea the *Queen Mother*. His boyhood tribe of the *Akan* held the *Queen Mother* in high regard as the most powerful woman around.²⁷ She always knew what was going on in the big house and what news came from town. So at the end of the week, Miss Bea would meet us by the Common at sunset and give us the earful. Miss Bea was the only mother Jael knew since she never knew our own. She's been slaying hogs, chickens, cooking and cleaning for the Master and the Mrs. ever since any of us could remember.

Jael became a fine cook and was usually fed better than all of us. I knew by her working in the Master's house, she would be taken care of if they wanted a house maid after Miss Bea got too old. Mrs. Grace used to read the Bible to Jael every day and eventually gave her the little black book when her eyesight began to wander. Slowly,

Jael began to read a few words here and there in secret, until she was able to read whole scriptures. Jael's work in the Master's kitchen served us well sometimes. I and the other land workers got our rations of food in the fields during the day or at the slave quarters in the evenings, but it was never enough to go around. Many a night I have slept with the hunger pangs. Whenever Jael got the chance, she would start speaking out scriptures and at the same time whiskin' flies from around the Master's dinner table to gather scraps of fried chicken and some half eaten biscuits off the plates.²⁸ When the sun went down, she would sneak the food to us out in the field where we waited. On good nights we got some bean porridge or a few boiled potatoes and bacon from the Master's table. We would share a fork made out of bone splinters or a piece of firewood amongst four, sometimes seven of us.²⁹ A Negro never, ever got served bacon by the slave owners in those days. When one of us slaughtered a hog for the Master, the innards, feet and the hide parts would get thrown to the Negroes. White folks called the waste parts as *pluck* and then we began to call the rationed remains, *offal*.³⁰ It used to take the women hours to clean and stew a batch of hog innards we called '*chitterlins*. Nothing went to waste, we had to find a way to season, boil, pickle, smoke and stew all parts of the hog if we wanted to eat.

I must get to tellin' you about Sesom who had become by best friend. He and I had been working this land since we were able to walk. That boy and I have known each other since I had my first thought. His people also came from across the sea generations ago, but no one really knew from whence they came. He said his mama was sold off to a New England trader long ago. No one ever really knew how he got to be with us. No one had ever seen his daddy. Sesom was a frail, small fellow with fair skin that some say you can almost see through. Folks around here say his daddy was probably a white man. Others say he must have had a sickness as a child that stole away his color. All I know is that he was always around and he was a "gentle soul" like my Papa used to say. In all the years I've known him, he never asked me for a thing. As a matter of fact, one day we fished down in the North River and he lost one of his raggedy shoes he'd been wearing since I could remember. I gave him a pair of Papa's old shoes, because knowing him, he would have walked around with one bare foot 'til the frost came. He never really spoke much. I 'reckoned when he had something to say, he would.

Master George had twenty-two slaves that worked his land and during harvest time, he especially worked us to the bone. Come winter, many slaveholders who raised hogs, grew corn and potatoes, endured the long winter making no kind of good money. Some of the other white farmers used to say by the time the spring came back around," [H]e had nothing left but us Negroes."³¹ There were days when some of us would find a way to steal a few ears of corn from the crops to eat, but not often. Every single potato and ear of corn was counted. Master George made sure anything a Negro could possibly eat or steal was accounted for.

I had known most of the Negro families who lived here, all of my life. There was Mr. Jed who had been with Master George some say over twenty nine years. Twenty years ago, he was married or as they called it, "[L]icensed to be conversant and familiar together as husband and wife."³² As with most Negroes the white folks had allowed Mr. Jed and Miss Lilly to be together, but when they finished the ceremony, they didn't go home as Mr. and Mrs.; they went home as Jed Negro and his wife Lilly Negro.³³ They had three children. After seven years, the bond of his family proved nothing to the £ 50 (sterling)³⁴ Master George's father got for Miss Lilly and the children. After that, my Papa had told us that it took Master George six months to find 'ol Mr. Jed who had run away to find Lilly or to find his lost soul, whichever way you wanted to view it. A notice in the town news said he was found trying to hitch a cargo ship somewhere in Rhode Island. He could barely speak the language of white men back then and couldn't get on board.³⁵ When they found him, he tried to cut his own throat with an old, rusted skinning knife. He bore the scar across his neck for the rest of his days. They say that he was flogged for two days after he was returned to the Master. He had some broken bones³⁶ when they carried him back and since then, could never use his left arm quite right. Papa used to tell us that nothing else pained Mr. Jed since losing Miss Lilly. Some folks would hear him weeping down by the river at sunset. Mr. Jed was bequeathed to Master George after his father died. Just like Sesom, 'ol Mr. Jed had nothing much to say for the next twenty years.

Umar was what they called a "Mohammedan."³⁷ His whole family was brought here by the Dutch some thirty years ago when he was just a sucklin' child. He taught me that his father named him after one of what his people called the first *caliphs*, which were the companions of their Prophet Muhammad.³⁸ Back then, Master George used to say that their souls were doomed to eternal perdition since they were what he called infidels by birth, because they were Mohammedans. All of us on this land were always taught that we were heathens and barbarians and that slavery was an act of mercy, since only through being owned by Christians could we be brought to Christ.³⁹ Umar was what white folks would call a fine buck who stood taller than most of us. He had a strong body and a strong streak of stubbornness to match. Master George called him Samson and he used to say that God blessed him with the strength of Samson. As a matter of fact, Mr. George named him Samson. The Master's blessing was Umar's curse because he got worked the most in the fields, chopping timber and workin'

the fields from sun up to sun down. When Umar used to hear the Master calling out the name Samson, he would ignore him, 'sayin that was not the name his father had given him. You could always tell how far the Negro would go, trying to stand up and be a man by the stripes on his back. Umar took the whip more than most of us until Mr. George's bones started to ache too much. When that time came, he started to call Umar by his name.

It was about that time that Umar and his wife, Balia were having their first child. Balia was one of what they called "mulattos" from Africa who was taken to the West Indies before she was sold to Master George. She was just twelve years old when she got here. There came a time when slave owners started to prefer colored folks and children from there, since they said that they were already "seasoned" in the white man's ways.⁴⁰ According to their custom, Umar was allowed to marry Balia even though she was not born a Mohammedan. Their people believed marriage was a covenant that joined not only two people, but two families.⁴¹ Umar's father, who most called Mr. Abu 'cause they never could pronounce his name, used to be a preacher of some kind that led their prayers; his family called him *Imam*,⁴² but only when they were at home. He performed the marriage of Umar and Balia, in front of Miss Bea who stood in for the family that Balia did not have.

That June we all gathered by the North River's waterfront at sunset and we had the best party ever. We sang and danced by the twinkling rhythms of the lightning bugs while Umar's family prayed just about the whole night. Jael and Miss Bea had prepared ahead of time by taking bits of cornmeal, millet, yams and molasses from the big house weeks before the ceremony.⁴³ Mr. Jed got plenty of collards and okra from the patches he was growing in his garden⁴⁴ near the smokehouse. Most of us were always grateful to Mr. Jed and his garden. Seemed like the last bit of love he had left went to his collards and okra. Umar's people ate no kind of swine and they didn't even eat cornbread 'cause it was made with lard. He said it was against their *Islamic* law to even touch a hog, let alone eat the darn thing.⁴⁵ We heard that back when his father was taken from Senegal and brought here, he almost died of starvation 'cause early slaves like him, my Papa, and the women and children had to eat mush out of a great long pig trough the Master set up outside their slave cabins.⁴⁶ Folks used to say that mush was most likely mixed with hog dung and all kinds of filth. Umar's mother had to use her wisdom and skills of a woman's kind to get food like potatoes, okra and corn to feed her husband and children.

Mr. Abu, like all of the past Africans had to learn English and the white folks always began their lessons with preachin' the Bible scriptures. After so many years of hearing the word of the Lord, Mr. Abu had a few Bible stories that were his favorites. He often stated that the God of the white man was a righteous God, and He was the same God as *Allah*, and that Jesus, he believed, was a prophet just like the Prophet Muhammad. Mr. Abu always claimed God as forgiving spirit. He said He had to be, considering his people were runnin' amok down here by pecking away at the souls of Negro folk. Mr. Abu died going on eight years now. Me, Sesom and some of the men folk helped Umar bury his father near my Papa one night, over in the Common. Umar read and prayed from his father's worn book they called the *Qur'an*. He washed his father's body, wrapped him and laid his body on its right side, and his feet towards the east.⁴⁷ Everything Mr. Abu taught Umar, he did faithfully every day. His father taught him to read Arabic and he would read his *Qur'an* and pray five times a day according to his good book.⁴⁸ He would time his prayers during the day to match up to his work load. At sunset, his whereabouts were secret and were known only to us Negroes. Three things white folks did not stand for and that was a runaway slave, a slave who could read, and a slave who prayed to a god not of their own. Each and every one of us just waited for sunset. The white folks owned the sunlight that oversaw us sweatin' and breakin' our backs in the fields every day. But us Negroes didn't really live until sunset. At the sight of the first lightning bug, we knew that if there was praying to do, babies to dedicate or a burial rite to perform, it all began at sunset.

It was the during the summer season of 1704 when things around here started to change. Something new had come upon us. Besides the warm breeze, the new flowers, and all the critters coming out of winters hiding, there came a new presence to the land. Strange white folks started coming around more often; we found out that they were from the land of England. Master George told Miss Bea they were sent by the British Crown to make the colonies start teaching us Negroes and the Indians about the Christian Gospel.⁴⁹ They were making their rounds all around New York, through the ports, around the courthouse and to every farm. One night, Miss Bea gathered us by the river and told us that they were called the *Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (SPG). Not one of us knew what the heck she was talking about. She explained that they were here to baptize all of us and make us Christians. I could see by the light of the oil lamp, the look on Umar's face that told me he was not taking the thought too kindly.

3. Whited Sepulchres

*"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness."*⁵⁰

They were men wearing knickers and stockings and had hats with long feathers. They had a holy man with them. He wore a long black robe with a high choking collar and a red shawl. He was a deacon or some kind of priest sent by the Church of England and was in charge of these new folks. He sent carriers with letters to all the farms in the region stating that "[A]ll slaveholders had a religious duty to teach their slaves and domestics to read and write."⁵¹ Miss Bea said that these people were from the Anglican Church and in the letter Master George read, he told her that they claimed it didn't make sense to convert Negroes into Christians, if we couldn't read the Bible. Miss Bea also told us that they would be sending teachers and what they called catechists to give us some learning in readin' and writin'. I can say, on that day was the very first time in my life that the news I heard, spoken by white folks, bought a tiny spark of hope to my spirit. It was the first time I heard an offer from white folks that did not include pain to my body. I thought I was dreaming. The thought of learning the ways of readin' and writin' somehow brought me to my first real thought of a little freedom...but my real sense quickly restored itself. I 'aint seen it yet, so I shouldn't get to hoping.

Not soon after, to no surprise, most of the slave masters in these parts wouldn't take kindly to baptizing us Negroes. The need to protect their property and security they believed, had to include keeping the Negro as an infidel, so rightfully he could be held as slaves. Since our souls were already doomed, most folks, especially Master George felt that our bondage was the merciful way to be bought to Christ.⁵² Slave owners feared if they baptized a Negro slave as a Christian, that no true man of the Lord could rightfully hold another Christian in bondage.⁵³ I have often heard the groups of white men talking, saying if us Negroes were baptized, our souls would be freed but bodies would also have to be freed from slavery; they used the word "manumission."⁵⁴ One night, Miss Bea told us that while at the market she heard that some masters were sayin' they would not send their Negroes for Christian lessons and some of 'em told their slaves they would be sold if they became Christians.⁵⁵

Up until the time these new folks came and started talking about teaching us to read, I'd had rather worked in the fields all day until my back felt like it was 'gonna break than hear those Bible stories from the Master and his folks. Everything us Negroes knew about the Lord, just didn't match with the Christian white folks that we were living here under. White folks who owned slaves just didn't pair up with Jesus stories. It was like they wore two different shoes at the same time; their stories just did not match their own souls, so why were they telling 'em? I had a good friend Jimbo long ago that used to say the white slave owners were like chitterlins'; no matter how you clean 'em, dress 'em and season 'em, they still held the stink. Later on when the new English folks came talking about making us Christians, I understood what Jimbo said to be true. I gathered that most of the slave owners just wanted to talk about Jesus, but not be like him. You see, a Negro just didn't take well to a story about Jesus and his loving, healing powers when he's trapped in a neck yoke and chains. Like I said, it was like them wearing two different shoes; Master George with a cat 'o nine whip in one hand and a Bible in the other. So I always paid it no mind when I saw Master George tryin' to fancy up to go to church. They all cleaned their boots, shaved their faces and starched their collars 'til the kingdom come, but something inside most of 'em still stunk!

There were some nights that my sister Jael used to read us scriptures that she learned from Mrs. Grace. Some of them I took a liking to, especially when Jesus would get angry at the well learned priests who would complain about him. Many of them he called hypocrites! I especially liked the story when they complained that he healed "the man with the withered hand,"⁵⁶ because it was on their Sabbath day. I guess certain days were more important than caring for the body and souls of the sick and weary. It reminded me of all the times some of us were sick with the fever from falling teeth, weakened from hunger and crippled from soft bones,⁵⁷ but still had to work, even on church days. These were the folks and Master who spoke of the Lord, but were like Jesus said, "appearing righteous unto men, but within, were full of hypocrisy and iniquity."⁵⁸ I thought about my Papa; what would he have thought about these new SPG folks coming and wanting to teach us Negroes? Well, I believed he would have been pleased to know we would soon learn how to read. Now as for Umar and the rest of the folks here, this had become another story.

A few weeks passed and us Negroes and slave owners were gathered in the town square, farm by farm. Many farmers and slave owners were there to hear the message brought hither from across the sea. There were so many

white men there in one setting that I thought someone important had up and died! From the moment we all heard the news of the SPG arriving, Umar said most sincerely that he would never convert and become a Christian. He didn't understand how a cruel man like Mr. George could ever say he loved and submitted to God. Umar did not want to go to the town square that day but he got into the wagon 'cause Master George threatened him and his young son Hanif with the whip. There were many white men there. White men in black robes with long white collars, some in knickers and fancy hats and the ones I was 'customed to had on farmer's britches and bore muskets. One of the English men appeared quite important since he was wearing a flat, red hat on the crown of his head. He had come forth and started to read from a paper that he said was given to the Council for Foreign Plantations in the year 1660 by the King of England: ⁵⁹

And you are to consider how such of the Natives or such as are purchased by you from other parts to be servants or slaves may be best invited to the Christian Faith, and be made capable of being baptized thereunto, it being to the honor of our Crowne and of the Protestant Religion that all persons in any of our Dominions should be taught the knowledge of God, and be made acquainted with the misteries of Salvation. ⁶⁰

Then he read another paper tellin' us that in 1686, the Governor of New York was given instruction to have slaves Christianized:

You are alsoe with the assistance of Our Council to find out the best means to facilitate and encourage the Conversion of the Negro and Indian to the Christian Religion. ⁶¹

The Holy Man then went on to let everyone know that they arrived to complete what the King of England started years ago. We could see Master George and the other slave owners squirming in their boots as the man was talkin'. They were plannin' to start teaching us Negroes the ways of readin' the scriptures in the following days. There was an old barn down by the Common that Master Mills owned, but couldn't sell, so he left it behind when he moved to the north. The SPG folks planned to use it as a school for Negroes. Master George was told that he must send us there in the following three days at four o'clock in the evenin' time.

That night most of us gathered by the river and had the longest talk we ever had about becoming Christians. Mr. Jed, Miss Bea, Jael were there along with me and Sesom. We had to go and fetch Umar and Balia to come and talk with us that evening, and when they arrived I felt an uneasiness come over me in Umar's presence. Something was stirred up in Umar's spirit that I didn't quite understand at that moment. Miss Bea began to tell us about the plans for a teacher coming our way to set up school and lessons for us to start readin'. She said the catechist teacher was an Anglican and she saw him in town talking to Master George and a few other farmers. ⁶² Miss Bea said he was sent by the SPG and he appeared as a kind man with a soft face and eyes. Mr. Jed said with a low tone in his voice, that he was too old to be learnin' anything about readin' and writin'. He went on to say that he was not keen to hear another thing from any other white man and would be just fine if folks just left him at peace. As we discussed amongst ourselves, no one noticed that Umar and Balia had walked away. I started to go and follow after him, but a voice inside of me not coming through my ears, whispered to me to let him be. It was quite clear that Umar, Mr. Jed and many of the other Negroes on the farm were not too pleased with another plan by white men that stole away the tiny bit of spiritual peace we had on this land. I said earlier that I had heard an offer of learning to read the Bible, and it did not include pain to my body. Well I had to forgive myself for not thinking of the others like Umar, whose life was devoted to his beliefs and the submission to God which was a part of his ancestor's lives for generations. Any forced conversion would have caused a pain to his body as well as his own soul.

We started going to the old barn that we called "the schoolhouse" shortly after that evening. Miss Bea's feelings had told the truth about the SPG teacher Mr. Smith. ⁶³ He spoke rather kindly to us and always seemed to get happy and excited when he spoke of the mysteries of the gospel and salvation. Many things about him made some of us Negroes ask ourselves: "what kind of white man was this that was placed among us?" He would speak in a soft tone and would put his hand on my shoulder so gently when it seemed like what he was saying was real important. He didn't seem to mind when a Negro looked him in the eyes. Many of the folks from the farm would meet more often by the river at night to discuss this stranger named Mr. Smith who seemed to have come to these parts by someone's secret prayer. He was unlike any other white man any of us had ever met. I had found myself trying to remember the letters and words Mr. Smith was teaching us while working in the fields during the day. Some days I was so tired after working so hard, but each time something inside forced me to go to the schoolhouse after my day's work was over.

Master George did everything he could to make it so we couldn't get to the schoolhouse by dusk. Most of the time, he kept Jael and Miss Bea in the big house with extra work to make sure they could not go. I had in memory the scripture that Mr. Smith would read each day: "For they that hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord... Therefore, shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them."⁶⁴ That seemed to fit Master George like a well-starched shirt. Master George was well pleased that Umar and Balia never came to Mr. Smith's school. I was learnin' that I should forgive those who reek hatred and harm to others; those who did not want anything good for another human being. I was told by Mr. Smith that I should pray for them. I was hoping the Lord would forgive me, but when it came to Master George and the masters of the land, I was not willing to do so at the time. I made sure I went to school on the three days of the week that Mr. Smith told us to come. I finished all the back breakin' work placed on me by the Master, not giving him any excuse to fetch his whip. Sesom came with me each time. He seemed at peace there. Not that he ever told me so, but his quiet way of just lookin' peaceful told me so. I found myself wanting to know more about the gospel of Jesus. Some of the others on the farm use to get to arguing about Jesus being a white man. It did not matter to me what color he was for some reason. I had started to believe that what I was learnin' about Jesus, he would have touched me on the shoulder so gentle and kindly too; and that the sight of me would not have offended him.

4. The Upper Room

"And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room... [A]nd there were many lights in the upper chamber, where they were gathered together."⁶⁵

Quite a few weeks after our school lessons started, there was a certain evening that changed most of our lives forever. One Sunday in the early evening, many of the nearby farmers had come to Master George's big house to discuss the matters of the colony of New York and they were not speaking too kindly of the British Crown trying to control the schooling and baptizing of their property. They meant us Negroes. There must have been fifteen horses, some with buggies outside of Master George's house. Jael and Miss Bea had to serve all them which included the finest parts of the hog, corn, biscuits and gravy before the Master ordered them to leave the premises, so they could get to talkin'. No one ever knew what they were scheming up that night. We were down by the Common when Jael and Miss Bea came with some food wrapped in their aprons. What started out as an evening of talking and the children runnin' around in play, became one filled with sorrow.

Suddenly, we were all startled by what sounded like a musket shot that came from the area of the Master's house. It was at that moment I realized that Umar and his family were not among us and it swept through my mind that I had not seen him or heard his son Hanif all day. I ran as fast as I could towards the big house with Sesom right behind me, which I had never seen him run so fast as if he were attached to me. As I got closer, I could see most of the white men with the Master outside runnin' in all directions as if they were looking for something; or someone. I heard Master Walker yellin' that Master George had better pay him for his horse and wagon that was stolen from outside his house. At that instant, Mrs. Grace had come out of the house in a running manner that had just about stole her breath away, while yellin' that three loaves of bread, something about corn and two sacks of wheat flour Jael had sifted were gone from the cupboards. I could not keep up with the thoughts that were drowning my mind. Seconds later, it became very clear. Umar had taken his wife, Balia, and his son, Hanif, and fled.⁶⁶ He had become one of whom I had heard about all of my life; a fugitive slave. He went and stole a white man's horse, wagon and food and Lord knows what else. My thoughts did not come one at a time; there were many and they came faster than my heart was beating. How did he get in the Master's house? Did he have help? I had to stop my thoughts right then and there 'cause it brought too much fear in my heart. Most of the men were mounting their horses with the rage of pursuit glaring from their eyes when lo and behold I heard a blast that sent most of the horses up on their hind legs, and most of the white men to the ground. What followed the blast was a burst of light that lit up the night sky. It was the smokehouse gone up in flames!

We ran to the water well to fetch buckets when I heard Mrs. Grace send out a wailing scream. I looked to the burning smokehouse and out of the doorway came 'ol Mr. Jed. Along with the flames that were shooting out of the burning house came Mr. Jed stumbling with a lit up torch in one hand and a flaming oil rag in the other. His hair and trousers were lit on fire as he struggled to walk. At that moment, Master George was screaming his soul to hell for setting his property on fire while raising his musket as he fired; sending Mr. Jed crumbling to the ground. Sesom and I ran to the burning body of Mr. Jed as he lay on his back. A scream escaped out of me from

somewhere deep as I held his head up to look into his eyes. The bright light from the raging fire surrounded his sweaty face. I cried out his name as he looked at me for the last time and said, "Umar's gone, he's free...now so am I." He took his last breath and then quietly, gave up the ghost. I suddenly felt a rush of sorrow come over me; but shortly after a peace came over me when I thought, that it was a long walk to freedom, but Mr. Jed was walkin' no more. As we all buried Mr. Jed by the Common that night, some were weeping, some were quiet. I quietly whispered something I had learned in my lessons, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid..."⁶⁷ I knew Mr. Jed was with his dear Lilly again; somewhere they were no longer troubled. That thought brought a peaceful feelin' back inside of me.

Just before dawn's light I had awakened to the sound of horses being saddled up. Master George and his friends were fixin' to go hunt down Umar. He had almost a whole day's start ahead of the posse thanks to 'ol Mr. Jed keepin' them busy puttin' out the fire all night. It was a last sacrifice by Mr. Jed that Master George had coming to him. I thought of the pain and agony Umar and his family would suffer if they even survived capture and returned to the Master. I pictured them somewhere lost in the thick of the wooded fields with his wife and son. I even thought of my father praying in secret to the gods who lived in the heavens called *Orun*.⁶⁸ He believed that plants, animals, and trees had souls. He also spoke of fairies, witches, and forest monsters (*mmoatia*).⁶⁹ At that moment it brought me some comfort to know that if my Papa believed in those spirits of the forest, then they would watch over Umar and his family.

That morning I went to the school house and told Mr. Smith what had gone on the night before. He tried to warn me that I should stay away from the area of the big house for a time, until the Master and Mrs. Grace could collect themselves. I was always grateful for the kind words Mr. Smith placed on me, but I was more vexed at the thought of us on this farm having to suffer the wrath of Mr. George and his posse when they returned. There was also the matter of my sister, Jael. I knew in my heart that she had helped Umar to the cupboards in the big house and watched out for him when he escaped. Lord knows what else she did. They say one of the white men who, in the company of the Master's house, just upped and disappeared in the mist of all the bedlam the night before. They hadn't paid much mind to that fact since they were so pressed to find a Negro on the loose. I too, was pressed to find Jael and question her regardin' her whereabouts and her mischief. Sesom and I went and summoned Jael out of the big house to talk. They say that one moment in time can change a life forever. It wasn't too long after I had that talk with my sister I knew what we had to do.

It took three days before Master George returned and by all of the screaming and cussin' he did, I was told that they all knew right away he did not find Umar. I was not present when the Master returned. You see, what I knew in my heart was true. That slave owner that had disappeared did so by the hand of Jael. She 'fessed up and told me that he was the first to discover a slave riding one of the horses just before dusk and was about to tell Master George. Jael had just cleaned up the kitchen when he was walking through and she told him that she would show him that the Negro in question was out back and lured him outside. Little did he know she had an iron poker stick in her apron and knocked him cold on his head!⁷⁰ She panicked and got Mr. Jed to help her drag him deep into the woods. When I got wind of this, I knew it was time for me to take my sister and run. I would not leave her at the hands of these raging white men once they found out what happened. I would have risked my life for her, Miss Bea, Umar and Mr. Jed if I had to. We gathered all the supplies we could muster up and left at dawn, before Master George returned. I have asked the Lord several times to forgive my sister. I remembered Mr. Abu always said that God was a forgiving one. I then thought if he could forgive all of the evil ways of these slave owners, he would surely forgive Jael.

We headed north on foot. We were heading, I hoped, to a place called Canada where they say their people took in Negroes 'cause they didn't like the British folk anyway.⁷¹ The days passed and Jael and I walked until our feet started to blister and bleed. We rationed our food day by day. I was worried that my sister would not make the journey; the journey that was a mystery to both of us. All I knew was to keep heading north. The woods were too big for me to even understand; they seemed to have swallowed me up without my permission. The world had a way of telling me that my whole life had been so small, stuck on seventy acres of land for my entire thirty years of life. I was walking into the unknown and trying to remember some of the scriptures Mr. Smith had taught us: "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed..."⁷² What I had believed to be the seventh day by the number of sunsets, we came across a clearing. We heard what I knew to be drummin' and chanting from the Indians far ahead in the distance.⁷³ We saw the light of their fire; that sight was a comfort.

That same moment brought the sound of a musket shot that whisked right by the side of my head. It was getting to be nightfall and I could see the fire about a half a mile ahead, but as I turned, there was a sea of lighted torches not so far a distance behind us. I shouted to Jael to run ahead as fast as she could towards the chanting fire, which felt like the thing to do. She threw down her parcels and ran as I cut into the thick of the woods to my left. Jael had to get away. I heard the sound of the horses hooves headed my way. Soon the gunfire began to get

closer. The woods swallowed me up again as I ran until I could not see for the sweat pouring down on my face. I don't know which came first, the shot or the burning pierce through my back. I felt like I was falling, falling off a cliff of some kind; but I did not feel the ground. Suddenly there came a rushing wind that seemed to have filled the woods and lingered for a more than a moment. I felt a warm body catch my fall. I saw lights, many lights; were they the lights of the torches? I didn't know what was happening; I was so confused, but I felt safe. I realized then I had never, ever in my life felt safe before. I relaxed and felt the arms around me. I took the moment to raise my head and look up. It was Sesom.

Folks always said that it was a long walk to freedom. I was walking no more. By the light of the full moon I could see him, but it was as if I was looking right through him. I stared into Sesom's eyes and spoke his name. Somehow without moving his lips I heard him say "I am here. You are safe Maharba. I will never leave you." I laid there in his arms as the Master's posse came upon us, but they seemed to have walked right through us without notice. I watched them as they ran deeper into the forest. I had a thought of Jael and without speaking it, Sesom answered, "She is safe." My friend Sesom had been with me since I had my first thought. He didn't have much to say for all of those years, nor did he ever ask me for a thing. I then received His kind spirit that held me ever so gently and kind. He was always by my side.

On the morning of September 30, 1991, a few folks unearthed a part of the history of 'ol New Amsterdam. On that day, they released my story. Amongst the rubble and the old rotted wooden caskets were the remains of my Papa, Mr. Abu, 'ol Mr. Jed and quite a host of others who were laid to rest after living a life of bondage in this land. Each one was buried in the ways of our ancestors and our African sacred legends. Umar and Balia were not there, for they found refuge amongst the Seneca tribe, along with my sister, Jael. I believe I had been the only Negro on Master George's farm that had taken to the teachings of Mr. Smith. The scriptures and the learnin' of the Bible had brought me some peace back then. Mr. Smith had planned to baptize me in the Collect Water Pond, but I 'reckon it was not meant to be. Sesom somehow carried my resting body home to be placed in the ground with my family.

On that September day in New York City, buried along top of my father's box they found an old wooden casket with the carving of a cross and simple capital "A"; that was me, Abraham.

6. Notes

- 1 Eric W. Sanderson, *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City*, (HNA Publishers, N.Y., 2009), 39. Notation: Daniel Denton (c. 1626 – 1703) was an early American colonist and chronicler of the geography, climate, economy, and native inhabitants of the present-day New York City. A portion cited from this tract is perhaps most famous for its early statement of Manifest Destiny: "how a Divine Hand makes way for them [the English settlers] by removing or cutting off the Indians, either by Wars one with the other, or by some raging mortal Disease." 39.
- 2 Ibid, 10-13
- 3 Ibid, 301
- 4 Hudson River, named in 1900.
- 5 Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, (Syracuse University Press, N.Y., 1973), 2-3.
- 6 Ibid, 7-9
- 7 Joyce Hansen and Gary McGowan, *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African Burial Ground*. (Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 33-34.
- 8 Howard University and United States General Services Administration, *The New York African Burial Ground: Unearthing the African Presence in Colonial New York*. (Washington, D.C., Howard University Press, 2009), 2.
- 9 Nathaniel S. Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, (Temple University Press, PA, 2010), 29-30.
- 10 Ibid, 22
- 11 Hansen and McGowan, *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence*, 36.
- 12 Howard University and United States General Services Administration, 46-48.
- 13 Marcus W. Jernegan, "Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies"; *American Historical Review* 21(April 1916). HTML by Dinsmore Documentation, Accessed 2002, 504.
- 14 Hansen and McGowan, *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence*, 3.
- 15 Note from author: The language is written similar to the vernacular of its time, but not in actual slave narrative dialect due to the linguistic form required for this project and its assured legibility.
- 16 Matthew 6:6.

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- 17 Howard University and United States General Services Administration, 68-69.
“Musculoskeletal stress markers were found amongst numerous skeletal remains where muscle attachments once were. Stress markers indicate repeated physical activity over long periods of time. Burial # 97 identified as male, aged 35-50, had extreme stress markers on over half of his muscle attachment areas as compared to burial #323, male, 15-24 which had moderate to severe stress markers.”
- 18 Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eissach, *What the Slaves Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2009), 15-16.
Notation: Rickets, a softening of the bone tissue which causes bone distortion and curvature are due to vitamin D deficiency.
- 19 Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, 16-17.
- 20 Howard University and United States General Services Administration, 36.
- 21 Ibid, 36-38
“The Common and Collect Water Pond were located at the vicinity that is now, 290 Broadway, Block #154 (centered at Duane, Reade and Elk Streets).” Notation: A portion of this area was designated as slave quarters as well as the Negro burial ground.
- 22 Ibid, 102
- 23 Hansen and McGowan, *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence*, 33-36.
- 24 Howard University, and United States General Services Administration, 18-20.
“At the start of British rule in 1664, New York was named to honor James, the Duke of York who was the brother of the king of England, Charles II.”
- 25 Ibid, 20-22
- 26 Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 4.
- 27 Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, 43-44.
“Queen Mother” represented the powerful role of the wise woman amongst the Ashanti, who are an Akan people who live predominantly in the Ashanti Region and Cote d'Ivoire. The popular idiom, “consult the wise woman” makes her the important decision maker in many communities.
- 28 Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eissach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 97.
- 29 Ibid, 67
- 30 Ibid, 98
“Rationed meat was usually inferior or tainted; poor quality and quantity was provided. Inferior meats such as calf or hog liver, hearts, lungs were referred to as *pluck*. Another term used by slaves was *offal*, which were the entrails and internal organs of butchered animals.”
- 31 Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 52-53.
- 32 Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (New York: Columbia University Press), 211.
- 33 Ibid, 212
- 34 McManus, Edgar J. *Black Bondage in the North*, 50.
- 35 Ibid, 114-115
- 36 Howard University and United States General Services Administration, 24.
“Broken bones represented evidence for violence or accidents. Remains at the ABG revealed twenty three males and eighteen females examined had fractured bones. While skull fractures were the most commonly found, evidence revealed that men suffered numerous upper and lower limb fractures, as compared to women with more fractured hands and feet.”
- 37 Jernegan, “Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies”, 505.
- 38 John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, (Oxford University Press, 1991), 37-38.
- 39 Marcus W. Jernegan, “Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies”, 505-506.
- 40 McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 20-21.
“The slaves shipped from Antigua, Barbados, St. Christopher and Jamaica were highly preferred since they were considered familiar with Western customs and habits of work. So strong was this preference, merchants advertised these slaves as “seasoned.”
- 41 John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 95.
- 42 Ibid, 90
- 43 Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eissach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 79-85.
- 44 Ibid, 73-75

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- 45 Sylvaine A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved In America* (New York University Press, 1998), 88-89
- 46 Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisanach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 69-71. "Some owners viewed and treated their slaves similar to farm animals and fed them in the same manner. According to slave narratives and other accounts, children would have to compete with animals for what little food they received in this manner." Mush was usually made with coarse corn meal, butter milk, fried meats that had been eaten by bugs and contained remnants of unsanitary conditions.
- 47 Sylvaine A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 193.
- 48 Ibid, 88
- 49 Daniel O'Conner, *Three Centuries of Mission: The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel 1701-2000* (British Library Publication), 2000. 34-35.
- 50 Matthew 23:27.
- 51 Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 100.
- 52 Marcus W. Jenergan, "Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies", 505.
- 53 Gerald F. De Jong, "The Dutch Reformed Church and Negro Slavery in Colonial America," *American Society of Church History* vol. 40, No 4; (Cambridge University Press, 1971), 430.
- 54 Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 260.
- "When humanitarians insisted that Negroes were not *beasts* but men, many masters appealed to the colonial legislatures for legal assurance that Christianization would not result in manumission."
- 55 Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 102.
- "An SPG catechist for New York City's slaves reported that eventually the work had to be done secretly, against the will and without the knowledge of their masters, because they fear lest by baptism they should become temporarily free."
- 56 Mark 3:1-4.
- 57 Howard University, and United States General Services Administration, *The New York African Burial Ground*, 70-72.
- 58 Matthew 23:28.
- 59 Quoted in: Jenergan, "Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies," 509.
- 60 Ibid, 509-510
- 61 Marcus W. Jenergan, "Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies," 510-511. "The Charter for the SPG was destined to be the most important single agency by sending numerous missionaries, catechists and schoolmasters with further instructions to promote the conversion of Negro slaves."
- 62 Daniel O'Conner, *Three Centuries of Mission: The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel*, 35.
- 63 Ibid, 35-36.
- Notation: Elias Neau (characterized as "Mr. Smith") was a former French Huguenot priest who converted to Protestant Anglicanism and was commissioned by the SPG to open a catechizing school for slaves in 1704. Neau went from house to house, persuading owners to send their slaves to be schooled every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.
- 64 Proverbs 1:29, 31-32.
- 65 Acts 1:13, 20:8.
- 66 Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 115-117.
- "Frequently, male fugitives brought along their women and children, though this seriously reduced their chances of getting away. Most runaways timed their break for freedom with the most favorable weather. Clothes, coats, tools and sometimes horses were stolen to facilitate their flight."
- 67 John 14:15.
- 68 Nathaniel S. Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, 29. "The traditional West African cosmos envisions a universe of interactions among many divinities, spirits, ancestors, humans, animals and cosmic life. These ideas reveal an underlying search for an ordered universe in the *Orun*, the abode of the gods and ancestors."
- 69 Ibid, 30
- 70 Judges 5:21
- 71 Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 110. Notation: Many fugitives tried to reach Canada. So serious was the problem that New York imposed the death penalty on slaves trying to reach Canada. These fugitives were considered dangerous for they often brought information regarding British garrisons and details of the frontier. "[T]he law passed by Queen Anne stated any fugitives found forty miles north of Albany were to be hanged and their masters reimbursed by the county."

72 Matthew 17:20.

73 Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*, 108. “Some runaways fled to the forest where they sought refuge among the Indians. The Senecas and Onondagas of northern New York assisted numerous fugitives, and the Minisinks (Munsee band of Indians named by the Dutch) of eastern Long Island not only provided help but also welcomed many blacks into their tribe.”