

Language

Sojourner Truth was once Isabella Van Wagenen Dutch Culture and Language among African-Americans

Sojourner Truth, the United States' best-known African-American woman of the nineteenth century, grew up speaking Dutch. She was born into slavery as Isabella Bomefree in 1797 in Ulster County, which lies north or upstate along the Hudson River from New York City. Her family was owned by well-to-do land-owners, the Hardenberghs. In her autobiography she speaks about her mother ('*mau-mau Bett*'), whose only language was Dutch. In the community where she lived, Dutch was spoken both by the owners and the slaves. Also in her autobiography, Sojourner Truth relates how she was sold to English-speakers when she was nine years old. She didn't understand a word of English and was severely punished for not doing what was expected of her. The narrative of Sojourner Truth is one example of how widespread the Dutch language and culture were among African-Americans during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is well known that New York City and the Hudson Valley retained much of their Dutch character long after New Netherland was taken over by the English in 1664. What is not well known is that the thousands of slaves who lived among the Dutch and their descendants adopted the culture and language of their owners.

The writings of Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), a Connecticut preacher who ultimately became president of Yale, tell us something of what the Hudson Valley looked like when he passed through the area in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and recorded some observations: '*The women commonly walk without shoes, and the number of Negroes is large. The latter and the whites speak Dutch generally, so that the traveler imagines himself in the middle of a Dutch colony.*'

What is certain is that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and into the nineteenth tens of thousands of slaves had to cope with Dutch owners, their culture and their language. In 1749 one-third of the population of Kings County, the present New York

City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, was of African origin and almost all of them were slaves. In Bergen County, New Jersey, directly across the Hudson River from New York City, the ratio of African-Americans was one in five. Kings County and Bergen County both had populations that were predominantly of Dutch



Sojourner Truth (1797-1883).

descent. Graham Russell Hodges, researcher and author of numerous publications on slavery, estimates that in around 1750 there were about ten thousand slaves living within a fifty-mile radius of New York City.

Hodges collected advertisements for runaway slaves from the area around New York City, including New Jersey. In the description owners usually list their characteristics, one of which is the languages they speak. A number of them spoke Dutch, Low Dutch or Negro Dutch. 58 out of 662 ads mention the slave's ability to speak Dutch, less than ten percent. On the other hand, at least one Dutch-speaking slave ran away more than once, and on the second occasion the

owner didn't bother to mention that he spoke Dutch. In some areas that might not have been anything very special.

Much has been written about the so-called Pinkster festivities among African-Americans. Originally Pinkster was introduced as the Dutch version of Whitsun, the religious celebration seven weeks after Easter. It is said that many slaves would have been familiar with the religious holiday from Africa, where missionaries had been teaching Roman Catholicism. Converting African people according to the Catholic tradition usually meant accepting all their current traditional beliefs as long as they were not incompatible with Christianity. Some Africans may have had a festival similar to Pinkster and the two may have merged together. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there weren't many Roman Catholics in the Hudson Valley.

Pinkster became a genuine festival for blacks from the beginning of the eighteenth century. The week-long celebration brought together African-American and white people. Pinkster included elements of the European Shrove Tuesday/Mardi Gras celebrations, part of which were role reversals, but also of African festivities. During the eighteenth century there was a slave in the Hudson Valley who during Pinkster became King Charley and danced the 'Toto'. In the early nineteenth century Pinkster was banned, not only because it became too raucous, but also because of a growing fear that at gatherings like these conspiracies for revolts were formed.

James Fenimore Cooper gave an account of a Pinkster celebration in New York City in his novel *Satanstoe*. The novel was written in 1845, but the author returns to a period a hundred years earlier. He describes how everybody in the city is leaving to go to The Park, where the Pinksterground is. The Park he refers to is the area that now lies just north of City Hall, which wasn't built until 1807. Cooper is very detailed in his descriptions. He claims that almost all the African-Americans had been born in America. He tells us that 90% of all the area's African-Americans are present and there are African songs. The festival is also a destination for girls aged fifteen to twenty; these are

chaperoned by older women, 'who belonged to the race that kept the festival'. Cooper mentions as typically Dutch that young children are partnered with a slave of the same age and in this way form a combination which can last a lifetime. This particular custom was adopted by the English.

The Dutch Reformed Church in America was established shortly after the founding of New Amsterdam in 1625. The first slaves were imported in the same year or in 1626. The slaves enjoyed some autonomy under the Dutch, and in 1641 two black couples married in the Church. When some slaves petitioned for freedom in 1644 they were successful, but had to pay a kind of annual tax or they would lose their freedom again. Their children remained the property of the West Indian Company. In 1649 some citizens protested at the children of free Christian mothers being enslaved and the WIC quickly made some concessions so that only now and then would they be called upon to work for the Company. Under Dutch rule between 1641 and 1664 twenty-six marriages of African-Americans took place in the Dutch Reformed Church. The reverend ministers wanted to stop baptising African-American children because 'the parents wanted nothing else than to deliver their children from bodily slavery, without striving for Christian virtues.' It became increasingly difficult for African-Americans to convert or become members of the Dutch Reformed Church or any other church. It was only towards the end of the eighteenth century, as abolitionist ideas became more popular, that the churches changed their attitude.

The itinerant preacher John Jea testified to having had a dream one night around 1790 in which an angel appeared before him with a Holy Bible. The angel is quoted as saying: 'Thou hast desired to read and understand this book and to speak the language of it both in English and in Dutch; I will therefore teach thee, and now read.' And when he woke up, Jea, until then illiterate, was able to read. Jea had been born in Nigeria in 1756 and came to America as a slave when he was two and a half. His family was sold to the Terhunes, a New York Dutch family in Flatbush (today part of Brooklyn). He was interested in religion, but converted to Christianity without asking his master's permission. Terhune

wanted to have the baptism annulled, but could not. Jea wanted to read the Bible, but his master would not allow him to learn to read and write. Then, six weeks later, he had this dream. Word of the miracle spread through New York and the authorities gave him his freedom.

Before taking the name Sojourner Truth the slave Isabella Bomefree chose to call herself Van Wagenen after the Van Wagenen family, who had hired her from the man who claimed to be her owner. Many slaves ended up taking the names of their owners, so it is not uncommon to come across African-Americans named Schermerhorn or Schenck or Sutphen. And it was not only slaves who took Dutch names. Free African-Americans who lived in a Dutch society adopted Dutch names. In the Ramapo Mountains area on the border of New York State and New Jersey there are people with names like De Freeze and Van der Dunk. They claim to be of native American descent and they could well be, but it is likely that they also descend from the first free seventeenth-century African-Americans who lived on Manhattan Island. Imported as slaves, they petitioned and gained their freedom and owned land. When the English took over in 1664 and New Amsterdam became New York they moved uptown, but around 1680 they left for a quieter area across the Hudson. During the eighteenth century their situation did not improve, with restrictions on slaves increasing and life becoming more difficult for all non-whites along the way. The free African-Americans moved into mountainous, more isolated areas, such as the Ramapo Mountains. Less than one hundred years ago the descendants of these people were still speaking Low Dutch, the term which is always used for the Dutch language that survived in the United States.

Lucas Ligtenberg