

Old First and Slavery

Report from the First Church History Group

In this report, the First Church History Group provides an overview of the history of slavery in relation to “Old First,” a historical predecessor to The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, from the arrival of the first Black enslaved persons in New Amsterdam until the end of the Civil War.

In 1626, eleven African slaves were brought to New York City, then known as New Amsterdam and under Dutch control. In 1664 the British took control of New Amsterdam, renaming the city and continuing to import enslaved Africans. A slave market was established at the east end of Wall Street on the East River in 1711. Eight years later, in 1719, Old First was built near the west end of Wall Street. By 1730, 42 percent of the population owned enslaved persons, a higher percentage than in any other city in the colonies except Charleston, South Carolina.

First Church archives and public records from that period indicate that a number of Old First pastors, officers and members were slaveholders. Several members accumulated wealth through enslavement of others or by participating directly in the slave trade. The early church was supported in part by wealth and leadership skills contributed by those slaveholding individuals. During that time, the congregation included Black people, both free and enslaved. The names and available information concerning those Black members are referenced in the report.

Twelve pastors served the church from its founding through the end of the Civil War. Church archives and public records indicate that seven of the first nine Old First pastors were owners of enslaved persons.

- Rev. James Anderson, our founding pastor, left three slaves to his descendants.
- Rev. Ebenezer Pemberton Jr. granted his slave freedom in his will.
- Rev. David Bostwick sold two of his slaves in 1759.
- Rev. Joseph Treat was a slaveowner while a tutor at the College of New Jersey.
- Rev. John Rodgers owned one slave at the time of the 1790 census.

- Rev. John McKnight owned enslaved persons while a professor at King's College.
- Rev. Samuel Miller owned several enslaved persons, at least one of whom attempted to escape.

Two of the first nine pastors had served in the South prior to or after their calls to Old First – Rev. Alexander Cumming and Rev. James Wilson. While it may be reasonable to assume that some pastors serving in the South may have owned slaves, research at present shows no record of such ownership by these two pastors.

Of the three remaining Old First pastors installed before the Civil War, there is no evidence of slaveholding – Rev. Philip Milledoler, Rev. Philip Whelpley and Rev. William Wirt Phillips.

The History Group also researched the extent of slave ownership by the officers and members of Old First. Public records showed that a significant number of founders and trustees owned enslaved persons, indicating that between 1784 and 1812 the majority of trustees and elders serving Old First owned slaves.

Records show that Trinity Church was constructed in 1696 with substantial help from enslaved persons. It has been asked if the original Old First Wall Street church may have been constructed similarly, but the FC History Group was unable to find any records of such assistance. Funds for the construction of the church were raised from many sources, including donations of 600 pounds from residents, a significant level of participation and commitment in a city of only 5,000 inhabitants. The most significant funds, however, were provided by Presbyterian churches in Scotland.

Due to accounting and reporting practices of the time, the precise economic impact of slavery upon our present time is difficult to estimate. However, it is clear that our church and city were involved with slavery from its beginning to at least the Civil War, and such involvement has left a legacy that still exists today.