

OF OLD NEW YORK

Slave Burials in New York

W. L. CALVER

Directly on the line of Tenth Avenue near its junction with 212th Street in the fields of Inwood about thirty rude stones may be seen projecting a few inches above the sod. These stones are partly enclosed by a semi-circle of wild pear trees which have been permitted to grow and furnish shade for the cattle which represent Manhattan Island's last herd. The regularity with which these stones have been placed is not at first apparent, and a careless observer might easily pass them without notice; indeed, few residents of Inwood know of their existence; yet they mark human graves—and real slave graves at that. Within a stone's throw of this burial place is another where lie the masters of these poor blacks. It was a custom, more forcible than law—though laws there were, too—that the servant could not be consigned to consecrated ground. For further proof of this one need only stroll out the Hunt's Point Road to where that thoroughfare first reaches the Sound, and there where rest other ancient lords and masters of the soil in the "Hunt and Legget burial ground" may be seen the usual adjunct—a slave plot—just across the roadway.

By a singular coincidence these two reminders of slavery days in New York are most inappropriately situated. The fields of Inwood encircled by the surrounding heights are like a vast amphitheater in whose arena was fought one of the most disastrous battles in the struggle for American Independence. The human chattels interred subsequently in the blood-bought soil were not the property of Loyalists. There is quite a touch of irony in

the fact that in the Hunt's Point burial plot, which excluded the sable representatives of our race, rests Joseph Rodman Drake, one of freedom's best friends.

The Hunts and Leggets, for whom the little cemetery at Hunt's Point is named, were descended from the Jessups and Richardsons, the original patentees of the country thereabouts. To the present representatives of these old families one must go to obtain what little information of a positive character there is concerning the occupants of the slave plot at Hunt's Point.

Mr. Henry D. Tiffany, who resides at "Foxhurst" at the junction of the Southern Boulevard and Westchester Avenue, is the son of Mary L. Fox, whose mother was Charlotte Legget, who was descended from John Richardson, the original patentee of Hunt's Point—or the planting neck of West Farms, as the point was known in Colonial times. Mr. Tiffany's mother, who died in 1897, had a clear recollection of the last black interred in the slave plot. This was an old negress named "Aunt Rose." She had formerly been a slave in the Legget family, but she and her children had been manumitted. Aunt Rose was something of a character in her way and a memory of her has consequently survived to the present time in Mr. Tiffany's family. She was buried in the slave plot some time away back in the forties.

Slavery in New York was the subject of much legislation in old times, and the laws in relation to the burial of slaves were strictly enforced. Some of these laws were peculiar. In 1684 the burial of slaves was first legislated upon. The private burial of a slave by his master was forbidden, and a citizen of Albany who interred his slave in a private and suspicious manner was fined 12 shillings. The object of this law was of course

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to prevent the concealment of a murder, either by or at the instigation of his master.

Thirty-eight years later the Corporation of New York ordered that all Negro and Indian slaves dying within the city should be buried by daylight. The penalty for infraction of this law was ten shillings, to be paid by the masters or owners. Under the laws of 1731 not more than twelve slaves were to attend a funeral, under penalty of being publicly whipped, unless the master pay a fine of 12 shillings. No pall, gloves or favors were to be used. A slave who had held a pall, or wore gloves or favors, was to be publicly whipped. The object of these laws was to prevent conspiracy and sedition. The two things which New Yorkers dreaded most apparently were fires and slave insurrections. By an ordinance passed March 10th, 1712, all slaves, whether Negro or Indian, were forbidden to appear in the streets an hour after sunset. Statistics prove that from 1698 to the Revolution the slaves stood to freemen in the proportion of only one to seven.

The marriage of slaves was made legal in 1813. One or other of the parties might be free, but the children followed the condition of the mother. Those familiar with the dusky "hot corn" vender of the present time will be interested to know that by an ordinance passed 160 years ago, blacks were forbidden to sell boiled Indian corn on the streets of New York.

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