



This Interview has been conducted and digitized as part of the second installment of the Underground Railroad Center's Black Experience Exhibit Series, *Crossing the Line*.

I: This is Rosie Iorio from the Underground Railroad Education Center interviewing Heidi Hill from Schuyler Mansion. It is April 7th, 2026. So first and foremost, would you like to formally introduce yourself?

Sure. I'm Heidi Hill. I'm a historic site manager here at Schuyler Mansion. I've been here, I think, for 22 years now and it's really been a joy to work here and see the place sort of evolve over time.

I: So as a kind of a first question to situate ourselves. So, you know, your site deals primarily with early American history around the Revolutionary period. Would that be correct to say?

Yes. This mansion was built between the years 1761 and 1765. The family moved in as a young family in 1766. And the city of Albany was a very different place then than it is now.

I: So could you kind-of elucidate on the differences from the city then to today?

Well, sure. This was a mansion that was in the country. It was south of Albany and the center of Albany was still at least a quarter mile away. This place was called the Pastures.

And before the mansion, there was a hill that rolled down, sloped down to the water.

And this area was called the Pastures because in the Dutch period, in the 17th century, this is where the colonists really pastured their cows and sheep and when we think about early American history, of course, the question of enslavement is linked to that.

I: But when we think about New York and the history of New York City or New York State, upstate New York as a whole, we don't think of that. Obviously, your site complicates that kind of history, why do you think that's an important complication to make?

Well, I think it's important for all people to know that New York was more than complicit in the slave trade and the slave economy, and that was really from the very beginning. The Dutch became involved in slave trade in the 17th century on the west coast of Africa. They were trading during their golden age, really, for gold and sapphires, jewels, diamonds, and things of that nature and once they became victorious in war against the Spanish, they came into possession of sugar plantations in the Caribbean and South America. And they wanted free labor to populate

those sugar plantations. And so since they were already there on the west coast of Africa, they started trading in people as well.

I: Yeah.

And stealing people eventually, too.

I: And, you know, despite the fact that there's a plethora of evidence for this, it's not until relatively recently, I think, in historiography, that historic sites like yours began interpreting this at a deeper level, especially in New York State. Why do you think that was kind of an important intervention to make as a public historian?

So I really think that people were scared and intimidated to interpret this history.

You know, it was Howard Zinn that really introduced the idea of public history and sharing everyone's story. That was in the 60s. In the 80s and 90s, there was a lot of research done at this specific site on the enslaved people here. So there was good intent, but people didn't know what to do with the information they had gathered. So deep research was done here.

And documents were compiled from all sorts of archives all over, not just from New York State, on Philip Schuyler's involvement in slavery. And those were all chronologically organized in a binder and when I arrived here, I thought, this is great, we've got this binder. But now what do we do with it? We wanted to do an exhibit and I cautioned the staff that we can't do this exhibit on our own. We're a bunch of white people in a museum that don't have the same experiences as people of color. So we need to find, at the very least, a humanities scholar to help us with this exhibit. I was also working at Crailo State Historic Site, we wanted to talk about enslavement there as well and I just didn't know how to go about it. Luckily, I had a Ph.D. student on staff who was getting all sorts of interesting opportunities in her email and one of those was from Yale University. And it was for the Summer Institute, Public History Summer Institute at Yale.

They were working with the Gilder-Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, as well as the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture.

And they were inviting five museums a year to come to their site to learn how to interpret this history and to work with experts in the field to interpret this history. I thought, okay, let's apply.

I had no hope that we would ever win this award and I thought it would also be a good opportunity for this employee, this Ph.D. student, to learn how to write a grant, so we worked closely together, and we wrote a really great grant. But what are the chances, right?

Well, a couple months later, they called us and invited us to Yale. They said that if you can accomplish these numbers by May, you can come to our Summer Institute in July and we need three of your staff members to come. Now, we only had four staff members. and July is our busiest time of the year. So we said, okay, we'll be there. We didn't know how we'd do it, but we went and it was, in my career, in my education, in my career, the most rewarding and valuable week that I've spent. It was immersive, it was run by David Blight, the civil rights professor at

Yale and he started the week off with a picture of Trayvon Martin, who had been killed the year before, and he said, this is why we're here and you will see that by the end of the week. And we had all sorts of history lessons by history professors all week. We had people from around the country come in, leaders in interpretation of African and African-American history. Faith Ruffins and Christy Coleman and just wonderful people who taught us techniques in interpretation and also exhibit techniques. And then also the team from the Smithsonian Museum of African-American history and culture, who really helped guide us, workshopped our ideas, and would give us, you know, the straight talk about what we should be doing. It was amazing. I feel that they are still our partners, and we can call on them when we need to, to sort of see us through different projects. When I came back, we focused on that exhibit at Crailo, but I felt better equipped here to move forward with interpretation.

That was 2013, and since then, we have done different work with our both African and African-American histories here at the site. Before, we used to do programming that would include these people from the past. Now we focus on programming that's about these people from the past, the people who the Schuylers enslaved.

I: And when trying to create programming that's about the people from the past, not simply including them, what are kind of the elements of their lives you tend to focus on at this site?

We really try to focus on the humanity of these people. We focus less on the work that they did, because that's sort of a given. When people come, they understand that that was what these people were kept here in bondage for. We want to know them as families, We want to know them as, you know, friend groups. We want to know what they did between here and carting something to the Schuyler property in Saratoga. You know, and think about that. Maybe we don't know exactly, but we can think about the possibilities. If there was good weather and you could make good time, perhaps you could stop and see friends and family along the way, perhaps you could enjoy some fishing along a creek or the river. So those are the things that we want visitors to sort of think about more rather than the institution of slavery – these were individuals.

And yes, they were kept in captivity and they didn't have liberty. They didn't always have human rights, but they had things that the Schuylers couldn't take away from them and those are the things we want to think about.

I: And, you know, when you're concerning yourself with these questions of agency, were there any specific instances of people in history that, you know, come to mind when thinking about the way you reinterpreted the site after these experiences?

Yes, there are many things that we want to think about. For instance, there is Diana who escaped from bondage here during the war years. We know that she was gone for a considerable amount of time. We're guessing that was probably over a month. She was free and she was living with a

Scotsman. We know that many instances of Scottish people in the area of working with enslaved people to see them toward freedom. We took this one little letter that we have and thought about Diana's time away and what that must have been like for her. You know, she didn't know at that time whether she would be recaptured, she was probably snowed in and so had some time away from here as a free person. We don't know what happened with her later. But after Schuyler's death and because of other researchers' work, like Myra Armstead from Bard College, we know that there was a free person living in Easton, which is Washington County now, it was Albany County then. It was land that Schuyler owned and probably land that his son Rensselaer Schuyler inherited. There's a free man called Jim from Africa there, and he took the name Schuyler. So this is a long story, but we have a Schuyler family reunion every year and we have both white Schuylers and Black Schuylers that come to this family reunion. One person from Worcester, Massachusetts, Larry Schuyler, his mom and father and aunt also came to family reunions, and they knew the genealogy, but it's been lost, they're now gone. It's been lost and he asked us to help him with the genealogy. So he knew that he had relatives going back to the 1840s in Troy. So we took that information, and we connected him with Jim from Africa. Jim was married to Diana.

I: Wow.

And it is my hope that it is the same Diana who was recaptured during the war years, the Revolutionary War years, and eventually she gets her freedom and she marries Jim from Africa and is related to our good friend Larry Schuyler now from Worcester, Massachusetts, so, you know, we can make it relevant. We can bring it right up to the present. And those are the stories that kind of give me chills that are really exciting and, you know, help us bond with our visitation today.

I: Yeah, when speaking about relevancy and this connection from all the way back to the late 18th century to today, right, you speak about freedom seekers like Diana.

And usually when we talk about these things, we're associating that with the abolition movement, you know, a bit later, maybe 50 to 60 years later. But clearly this is a struggle that has been ongoing, right? And the site, despite not dealing with, say, the abolitionist movement as much, does deal with the legacy of freedom seekers within the revolutionary context, right? So do you see this all as kind of one history linking together?

I do, you know, and you can really see the changes, I think, from generation to generation. Schuyler's children, I think, felt differently about slavery than he and Catherine did. You know, he and Catherine, as young children, were probably given an enslaved child to grow up with. That may have happened with their children, but it didn't happen with their grandchildren, of course and I think things were changing gradually. We do know that the

children here grew up in the lap of luxury, and they were waited on hand and foot by enslaved people. They traveled back and forth to school in New York City with enslaved servants. And we've just recently found a really great letter over at the Union College archives about Schuyler instructing his youngest daughter about travel with an enslaved servant back from New York City and, you know, what she should wear, how she should keep track of her baggage, how much alcohol she should give the enslaved person at both breakfast and dinner, those sorts of things. So, you know, we're constantly finding new information. But yes, things were changing quite a bit. So much so that Schuyler's middle son, Philip Jeremiah, is very good friends with a formerly enslaved person, Pierre Toussaint, who was a hairdresser in New York City. And the Schuyler women were traveling to New York City to have their hair dressed by him. But Philip Jeremiah Schuyler, the middle son, his wife, was very good friends with Pierre Toussaint. They both went to his funeral and Philip Jeremiah Schuyler said some quote like, He's known Christian men and good men, but never the two together until Pierre Toussaint, who the Catholic Church was trying to canonize, not too many years ago. Pierre Toussaint's things were all given to the Schuylers upon his death. and that's why they are in the New York Historical Society now. Because the two Schuyler sisters, Georgina and Louisa Lee, who helped save this house, gave most of those things to the New York Historical Society.

I: And, you know, you mentioned the Schuyler family's kind of living in the lap of luxury. And Philip Schuyler as a general, a leader, but also a merchant, right? What was the connection between that wealth and the institution of slavery?

Oh, it's just, you know, extreme. So certainly Schuyler was so much wealthier because of free labor. and the ability to trade his goods that he was producing on the Saratoga estate, essentially wheat, with Caribbean islands, mostly Antigua and Jamaica. And, you know, this legacy, right, that the mansion we're now sitting in was, in large part, its existence was enabled by taking advantage of this free labor.

I: How else does that color your interpretation besides focusing on the lives of the servants here?

Well, we certainly always discuss how the free labor and the tenant farm system were supporting the wealth. You know, that's what's producing the wheat in Saratoga, the flax, felling the trees for timber that really produced so many ships. Many of them were slave ships or trade ships that were, you know, trading both in human lives, as well as sugar, rum, wheat, and all of those sorts of things, so the tenant farm system had a huge part in that as well. And that tenant farm system lasted from, you know, the Dutch right up to 1848, when it was finally abolished as an unfair practice.

I: And, you know, back to an earlier question, when we think about, you know, the entire history of the nation, we think about tenant farming and we think about enslaved labor, but usually in the

context of either sharecropping of the South or the way that chattel slavery and cash crops play out in the South. Obviously, the scholars living in New York, like we said earlier, complicate that history. What's usually people's reaction when being encountered with this information?

Many of our visitors are surprised. We do, as I mentioned earlier, really integrate this story throughout our entire interpretation. And so visitors hear about it very early in our tours and they can ask about it. We really invite a lot of conversation. We don't want to do a lot of lecturing to people. We really invite conversation. And that's how we can explore these other possibilities about the facts that we don't know. But we do know that enslaved people were human. We know human nature. We know that, you know, given the opportunity, they would find happiness or leisure as much as they could, just as anyone else would, a break from work and also connecting with loved ones, you know, whether that's family or visitors. So I think people are surprised at that. We have one activity where we focus on Silva and her husband, Tom, and their children. And we have some objects and people need to choose two objects associated with each one of these people. There are no wrong answers, but we ask them to choose them from a work object and a leisure time object because people don't think about these people having lives outside of the work. And there was time for leisure, there was time for families, and we try to make that connection. So that is something that surprises people. They're like, oh, I didn't think about that. Well, yes, these are people that would have feelings just like we do. And yes, they didn't have a lot of liberty. But given Pinkster, given New Year's, given the fact that they are working together, what are the interactions that they were having? So those are the things that we think about a lot.

I: And a lot of people might not be familiar with Pinkster.

Sure, it's a Dutch ceremony, but it was extremely important to the African-American community.

I: Why is that? And what would they do during that time?

So Pinkster was the Dutch Pentecost. It occurs, I think, 50 days after Easter. So it's sort of a moving holiday. It's never the same date any year. And this was a time that Dutch enslavers would give time off for their enslaved people. Here and in New Jersey and other places on the eastern seaboard, wherever Dutch people were, it became an African holiday. It was a time when people from Africa could really focus on their traditions, their culture, their food, their music. And they did that to share these traditions with their family who they'd be reunited with during Pinkster. This was generally a week-long event, but sometimes more time was given off so that you could prepare for Pinkster. And there were vendors, there were musical entertainments, there was all sorts of traditional food, and that was all shared during Pinkster this week. People would travel vast distances, but at the same time, there's one instance where people in Troy didn't want to row against the tide to come to Pinkster in Albany, so they had their own Pinkster in Troy.

So you partook of Pinkster no matter where you were. But Sojourner Truth, at one point in her memoir, laments that she no longer can take part in Pinkster because she's not part of that community anymore. So it was a really important event. And aside from Pinkster, the site has a lot of letters and artifacts kind of on hand that elucidate on the lives of enslaved people here.

I: So besides these holidays where they were given time off, what other ways would they find leisure on a day-to-day basis?

Well, we don't know so much about that. We have little snippets of information.

We do know that from runaway ads what people were carrying with them, and sometimes it was cards. Sometimes there were games that they took away with them. We know that probably dads were carving things from wood for their children to play with. You know, so we don't always know, but we do know what was available, and we do know that musical instruments were created, and those were certainly used. Drums were outlawed at different times, and so people made drums from whatever they had, baskets. Jackie Quackenbush, who was not enslaved here, I think he was from Columbia County, he actually made a drum out of an eel pot and a goat skin. So you would use what you had available to sort of recreate the past, the past culture that you knew.

I: And just as, you know, a kind of final overall question, you know, when speaking about all of these things, the history of the nation, history of enslavement, right? The site takes careful cause to be very neutral, I would say, in its interpretation of events. When speaking about, you know, the history, the complicated history of, say, the revolution and emancipation, enslavement, how do you go about that?

Well, I wouldn't say that we're neutral. I would say that we just share the facts. We don't shy away from history that some people might call hard history. Yes, these are topics that sometimes might make people uncomfortable, but we want to have conversations with people about that. So we will share the information we know and then carry on from there. For instance, now when we introduce Philip Schuyler, we talk about him as being, you know, a major general during the Revolutionary War, an entrepreneur, a canal promoter, an enslaver, a town destroyer. We put those things out there. So I don't know that that's being neutral because we kind of say it in, you know, we don't mince words. We get right to it. And, you know, if indigenous people are going to call Philip Schuyler a town—or Washington, George Washington, a town destroyer, we need to really put the architect of the Sullivan Campaign in there as well. And that was Philip Schuyler. Uh, we know of an instance where Philip Schuyler, uh, well, where Philip Schuyler's agent is in Montreal during the war and he has with him an enslaved woman that Philip Schuyler no longer wants because she's given him trouble. So she's traded in Montreal for a rug. You know, we don't keep that information from visitors. That's a harsh reality. Here she is now in a

foreign country, she has no idea where she is and she's. Traded, you know, or sold. That's as, you know, the way people were selling things then through trade for a carpet for Schuyler mansion. So, you know, we tell it like it is.

I: And, you know, just as one actual last question, when you're telling these hard histories, do you, have you since, you know, taking control of the site and since going on the, uh, Yale trip that you were saying about, but you continue to kind of change interpretation with time. Right?

Oh, for sure.

I: And how, what's that experience like continuing that pursuit of knowledge, um, for these hard histories?

Uh, it's really exciting when we can find a new piece of evidence that sort of helps us bridge these disparate stories or we think they are, but then they come together because of a missing puzzle piece. So we get excited about that because we can share more evidence, more stories, um, for instance, um, there was a man here named Lewis and, you know, in our archives, Lewis was famous for driving Benjamin Franklin back down to New York City in the springtime on very muddy roads. Benjamin Franklin was determined to do it himself, but Mrs. Schuyler insisted that he take Lewis, who is, um, you know, an exemplary, uh, carriage driver. So he writes a letter of thanks to, uh, Mr. Schuyler and says, "please thank Mrs. Schuyler for sending Lewis, my bones would have rattled apart had I driven myself, but Lewis was so adept at navigating these rough roads that I made it." So we always thought Lewis was the carriage driver.

Oh, it must've been the, you know, he lived in the carriage house. Well, as it turns out, Lewis was probably a young boy of 10 years old in the 1740s and kidnapped during a French raid on Philip Schuyler's uncle's land, which he later inherited in Saratoga. And he was not only, uh, he was a very dark native because his mother was Abenaki, but his father was a Black man. And so the French wanted to take him as a slave, but the mother says, no, he's, he's indigenous, he's indigenous. And she was speaking in, uh, her language and the indigenous people who were with the French on that raid, uh, negotiated his freedom back to his mother. And then this man, Lewis became an important spy in Philip Schuyler's, keep sort of, uh, and he was a translator. He was someone who was running messages back and forth for Schuyler. Schuyler got him the title of Colonel in the army, the Northern division of the Continental Army. So this is a story we just kind of teased out and that also was from Myra Armstead's assistance in that book that you found that handbook, because she talks about that raid in the 1740s on Schuyler House.

So, yeah, that's, uh, we're constantly getting new clues and it's really because we're working with different people, um, like Union College, like Schuyler House, um, the National Park Service at Lindenwald in Columbia County and all over. So, you know, we're very open to people reaching

out to us and saying, did you know about this? Or do you know about this, can you help me with my research? And it's the best way of doing history.

I: Thank you so much. Thank you for your time.

You're welcome.

I: Have a wonderful day.

Yeah. Thank you. This was fun.

I: Thank you.