



Early Black New York

The Creation of a City
(1526-1741)

PART 1

A Visual Essay w/
Sources



Rembrandt, Study of a Standing African Woman, c.
1642. Present location unknown (Montreux, E.J.
Reynolds Collection, until 1932).



A Free Man on Munsee Land

A free Black man was already living and trading on Manhattan Island before Dutch colonists had established a real foothold there.



SOURCES: CUNY DOMINICAN STUDIES INSTITUTE, JUAN RODRIGUEZ AND THE BEGINNINGS OF NEW YORK CITY (NEW YORK: CUNY DOMINICAN STUDIES INSTITUTE, 2013)

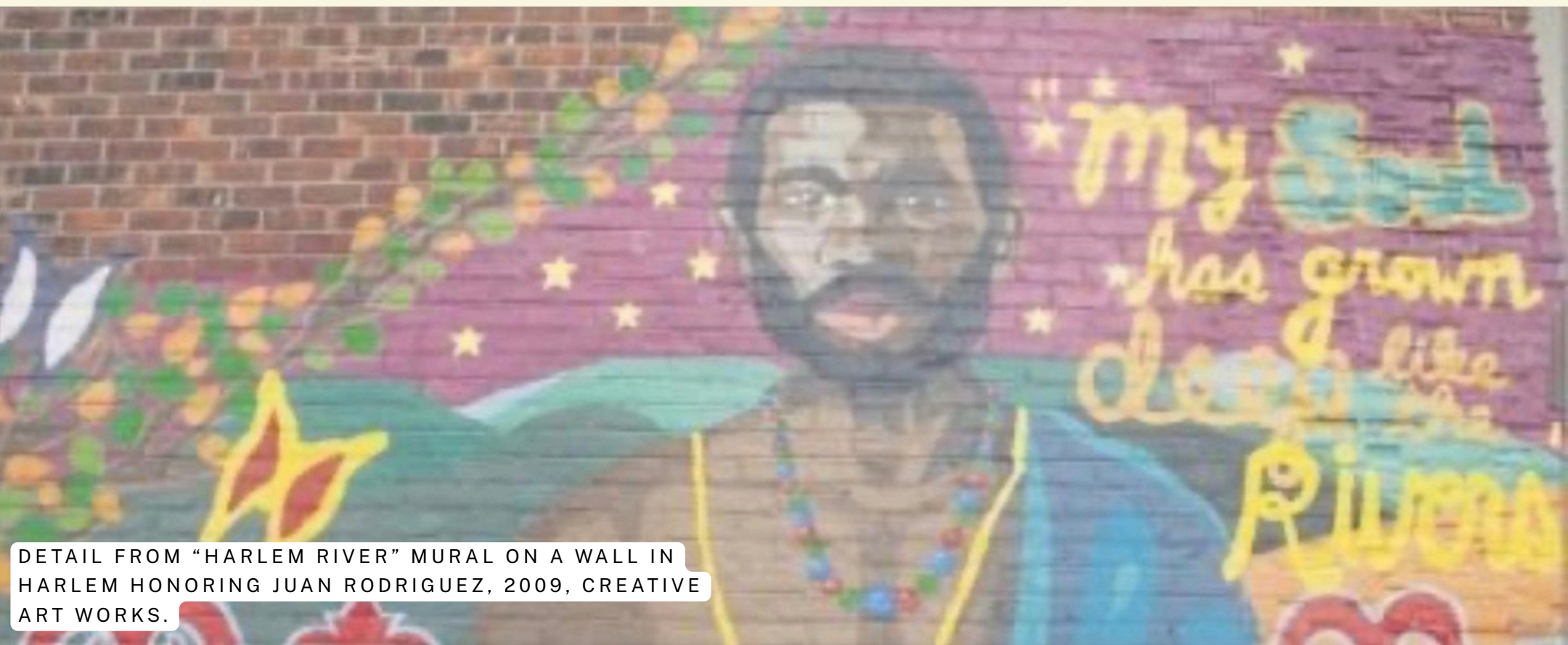
CHRISTOPHER PAUL MOORE, "JAN RODRIGUES," IN AFRICAN AMERICAN NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY, ED. HENRY LOUIS GATES JR. AND EVELYN BROOKS HIGGINBOTHAM (OXFORD AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES CENTER), ADAPTED FOR ENSLAVED.ORG, ACCESSED 2026, [HTTPS://ENSLAVED.ORG/STORIES/JAN-RODRIGUES/](https://enslaved.org/stories/jan-rodrigues/).



Juan Rodriguez, 1613–1614

In 1613, Juan Rodriguez, a free man born in Santo Domingo (Haiti/Dominican Republic) likely the son of an Afro-Caribbean mother and a European father, arrived on a Dutch ship and stayed behind on Manhattan Island to trade independently with the Munsee (indigenous community). When a rival Dutch captain later sued to challenge his status, arguing Rodriguez was a servant, not a free trader, a Dutch court ruled against him. In 1614, when his former captain returned and tried to reclaim him, Rodriguez fired on the ship, was briefly captured, escaped, and found protection with a different Dutch captain. He kept trading on the island for years afterward, possibly into the late 1620s.

SOURCES: CUNY DOMINICAN STUDIES INSTITUTE, JUAN RODRIGUEZ AND THE BEGINNINGS OF NEW YORK CITY; MOORE, "JAN RODRIGUES," ENSLAVED.ORG.



DETAIL FROM "HARLEM RIVER" MURAL ON A WALL IN HARLEM HONORING JUAN RODRIGUEZ, 2009, CREATIVE ART WORKS.



SLAVERY'S ORIGIN: THE FIRST ELEVEN

Slavery in New York didn't start as law. It started as piracy. In 1626, the Dutch West India Company seized a Portuguese ship carrying 11 enslaved Africans as war plunder and kept them as company property. Two decades of "indenture" later, in 1644, they won a partial freedom: themselves, not their children.



Bowery →

New York's First Black Landowners

Houston St

Starting in 1643, the Dutch Council of New Amsterdam granted land to formerly enslaved Africans, including several of the First Eleven. By the 1660s, about 30 African-owned farms covered roughly 130 acres of what's now Greenwich Village, SoHo, and Washington Square Park. When the British took over in 1664, they stripped free Black settlers of landowning rights entirely, and after the 1712 revolt, remaining Black property owners were forced to forfeit their land to the crown.

**African Landholdings
in New Amsterdam**

SOURCE: PHILIPSE MANOR HALL STATE HISTORIC SITE, "A BLACK HISTORY OF COLONIAL NEW YORK."

NYPL, "NIEU-AMSTERDAM," WALLACH DIVISION OF ART, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS, ACCESSED 2026,
<https://libguides.nypl.org/nyc-early-africanamerican-settlements/new-amsterdam>



The 1712 Revolt

On the night of April 6, 1712, a group of enslaved Africans, joined by two Native Americans, met in an orchard on Maiden Lane, in what's now the Wall Street area, to plan an uprising. They set fire to a building and attacked white residents who came to put it out, killing nine and wounding eight more. Seventy people were jailed, 43 stood trial, and 25 were convicted: 20 were hanged, three were burned at the stake. New York responded with even harsher slave codes, making it nearly impossible for enslavers to ever free anyone again.

SOURCES: PHILIPSE MANOR HALL STATE HISTORIC SITE, "A BLACK HISTORY OF COLONIAL NEW YORK," ACCESSED 2026, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILIPSEMANORHALL.COM/BLOG/A-BLACK-HISTORY-OF-COLONIAL-NEW-YORK](https://www.philipsemanorhall.com/blog/a-black-history-of-colonial-new-york)



THE 1741 CONSPIRACY

Thirty years later, on March 8, 1741, a fire destroyed the governor's residence at Fort George. Nine more fires followed in the following weeks, and the city spiraled into panic. A servant named Mary Burton, pressured with jail threats and bribed with her freedom, testified to a citywide plot to burn New York and kill its residents. Nearly 200 people were eventually tried based largely on her testimony and the escalating accusations it triggered. Thirty were sentenced to death and 70 more sold into slavery in the Caribbean.

SOURCES: PHILIPSE MANOR HALL STATE HISTORIC SITE, "A BLACK HISTORY OF COLONIAL NEW YORK," ACCESSED 2026, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILIPSEMANORHALL.COM/BLOG/A-BLACK-HISTORY-OF-COLONIAL-NEW-YORK](https://www.philipsemanorhall.com/blog/a-black-history-of-colonial-new-york)

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History Never Remains Hidden

Here's the full picture. A free Black man helped map this city before it had a name. The next two centuries brought slavery, two uprisings, mass executions, and a graveyard the city paved over and tried to forget. And through all of it, Black New Yorkers kept building anyway: land, trades, families, community. That fight didn't end with the colony. It just moved into the next chapter.



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