

STATE OF NEW YORK

7215

2021-2022 Regular Sessions

IN SENATE

June 7, 2021

Introduced by Sen. BRISPORT -- read twice and ordered printed, and when printed to be committed to the Committee on Rules

AN ACT to acknowledge the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality and inhumanity of slavery in the city of New York and the state of New York; to establish the New York state community commission on reparations remedies, to examine the institution of slavery, subsequently de jure and de facto racial and economic discrimination against African-Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African-Americans and to make determinations regarding compensation; and providing for the repeal of such provisions upon expiration thereof

The People of the State of New York, represented in Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows:

1 Section 1. This act shall be known and may be cited as the "New York
2 state community commission on reparations remedies".

3 § 2. Legislative intent. Contrary to what many people believe, slav-
4 ery was not just a southern institution. Prior to the American Revo-
5 lution, there were more enslaved Africans in New York City than in any
6 other city except Charleston, South Carolina. During this period, slaves
7 accounted for 20% of the population of New York and approximately 40% of
8 colonial New York's households owned slaves. These slaves were an inte-
9 gral part of the population which settled and developed what we now know
10 as the state of New York.

11 The first slaves arrived in New Amsterdam, a Dutch settlement estab-
12 lished at the southern tip of Manhattan Island, around 1627. These
13 enslaved Africans did not belong to individuals, but worked for the
14 Dutch West India Company. The Dutch East India Company had established
15 Fort Amsterdam, a fortification located on the southern tip of the
16 island of Manhattan, for the purpose of defending the company's fur
17 trade operations in the North River, now known as the Hudson River. In
18 1624, New Amsterdam became a provincial extension of the Dutch Republic
19 and it was designated the capital of the province in 1625.

EXPLANATION--Matter in italics (underscored) is new; matter in brackets
[-] is old law to be omitted.

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1 These first enslaved Africans cleared forests, prepared land for agri-
2 culture and built an infrastructure of roads, buildings and walls of
3 timber and earthwork, including the wall that gives Wall Street its
4 name. During the following years, more and more enslaved Africans were
5 brought to the New World for the purpose of expanding the settlement.

6 New Amsterdam came under English control in 1664 and was renamed New
7 York in honor of the then Duke of York, in whose name the English had
8 captured it. Three years later, the Dutch gave up their claim to the
9 town and the rest of the colony, in exchange for control of certain
10 trade routes and areas.

11 The change of control of the city did not deter slavery; it was an
12 enormously profitable enterprise and it continued under the English. New
13 York businesses engaged directly in slave trade and also in the
14 production of supplies used in the slave trade. They supplied food,
15 tools and grain to slave plantations in North America and in the West
16 Indies. Slave labor built and maintained ships used for trade between
17 North America, Europe, the Caribbean and Africa. Slaves produced goods
18 for sale and worked in private homes. Even newspapers benefited from
19 slavery: advertisements of slaves for purchase were a major source of
20 revenue for the papers during the eighteenth century.

21 Life was repressive for enslaved Africans in New York. The New York
22 City Common Council passed a number of restrictive laws designed at
23 curtailing the rights and freedoms of slaves. Slaves were barred from
24 owning significant property and from bequeathing what they did own to
25 their children. The number of people of African descent who could gather
26 in one place was limited. Restrictions on movement included requiring
27 slaves to carry lanterns after dark and to remain in certain geographic
28 areas.

29 Penalties for breaking these and other laws were severe. Beatings,
30 mutilations and executions were common.

31 Enslaved Africans refused to submit to the slave existence. The condi-
32 tions of their lives gave rise to rebellions and the development in the
33 city of a network of the Underground Railroad.

34 Not all citizens of New York agreed with slavery. A powerful aboli-
35 tionist movement developed, but the end of slavery in New York did not
36 come easily or quickly. Those who profited from the slave economy fought
37 to maintain the system.

38 In 1799 the New York state legislature passed "An Act for the Gradual
39 Abolition of Slavery". This legislation was a first step in the direc-
40 tion of emancipation, but did not have an immediate effect or affect all
41 slaves. Rather, it provided for gradual manumission. All children born
42 to slave women after July 4, 1799 would be freed, but only after their
43 most productive years: age 28 for men and age 25 for women. Slaves
44 already in servitude before July 4, 1799 were reclassified as "inden-
45 tured servants", but in reality, remained slaves for the duration of
46 their lives.

47 In 1817, the Legislature enacted a statute that gave freedom to New
48 York slaves who had been born before July 4, 1799. This statute did not
49 become effective until July 4, 1827, however.

50 Despite these laws, there were exceptions under which certain persons
51 could still own slaves. Non-residents could enter New York with slaves
52 for up to nine months, and allowing part-time residents to bring their
53 slaves into the state temporarily. The nine-months exception remained
54 law until its repeal in 1841, when the North was re-defining itself as
55 the "free" region in advance of the civil war.

1 In 1991, a huge African burial ground was discovered in the heart of
2 New York's financial district during construction of a skyscraper. The
3 excavations that followed the termination of the construction project
4 yielded the skeletal remains of 419 Africans, many of whom were women
5 and children.

6 The slavery that flourished in the New York state constituted an
7 immoral and inhumane deprivation of Africans' life, liberty, African
8 citizenship rights, and cultural heritage, and denied them the fruits of
9 their own labor. Sufficient inquiry has not been made into the effects
10 of the institution of slavery on living African-Americans and society in
11 New York.

12 § 3. Establishment, purpose and duties of the commission. a. Estab-
13 lishment. There is hereby established the New York state community
14 commission on reparations remedies (hereinafter referred to as the
15 "commission").

16 b. Duties. The commission shall perform the following duties:

17 (1) Examine the institution of slavery which existed within the state
18 of New York and in the city of New York. The commission's examination
19 shall include, but not be limited to, an examination of:

20 (A) the capture and procurement of Africans;

21 (B) the transport of Africans to the United States and the colonies
22 that became the United States for the purpose of enslavement, including
23 their treatment during transport;

24 (C) the sale and acquisition of Africans as chattel property in inter-
25 state and intrastate commerce; and

26 (D) the treatment of enslaved Africans in the city of New York and the
27 state of New York, including the deprivation of their freedom, exploita-
28 tion of their labor, and destruction of their culture, language, reli-
29 gion, and families.

30 (2) Examine the extent to which the federal and state governments of
31 the United States supported the institution of slavery in constitutional
32 and statutory provisions, including the extent to which such governments
33 prevented, opposed, or restricted efforts of freed enslaved Africans to
34 repatriate to their homeland.

35 (3) Examine federal and state laws that discriminated against freed
36 enslaved Africans and their descendants during the period between the
37 end of the Civil War and the present.

38 (4) Examine other forms of discrimination in the public and private
39 sectors against freed enslaved Africans and their descendants during the
40 period between the end of the Civil War and the present.

41 (5) Examine the lingering negative effects of the institution of slav-
42 ery and the matters described in paragraphs (1), (2), (3), and (4) of
43 this subdivision on living African-Americans and on society in the
44 United States.

45 (6) Recommend appropriate ways to educate the American public of the
46 commission's findings.

47 (7) Recommend appropriate remedies in consideration of the commis-
48 sion's findings on the matters described in paragraphs (1), (2), (3),
49 and (4) of this subdivision. The commission shall determine the form of
50 compensation, the amount of compensation and who should be eligible for
51 such compensation.

52 c. Report to the legislature. The commission shall submit a written
53 report of its findings and recommendations to the temporary president of
54 the senate, the speaker of the assembly, the minority leaders of the
55 senate and the assembly and the governor not later than the date which

1 is one year after the date of the first meeting of the commission held
2 pursuant to subdivision c of section four of this act.

3 § 4. Membership. a. Appointment of members. The commission shall be
4 composed of eleven members who shall be appointed within 90 days after
5 the effective date of this act, as follows:

6 (1) one member shall be appointed by the governor;

7 (2) one member shall be appointed by the speaker of the assembly;

8 (3) one member shall be appointed by the temporary president of the
9 senate;

10 (4) one member shall be appointed by the minority leader of the assem-
11 bly;

12 (5) one member shall be appointed by the minority leader of the
13 senate;

14 (6) two members shall be appointed by the National Coalition of Blacks
15 for Reparations in America (N.C.O.B.R.A.);

16 (7) two members shall be appointed by the December 12th Movement; and

17 (8) two members shall be appointed by the Institute of the Black
18 World.

19 b. Qualification of members. All members of the commission shall be
20 persons who are especially qualified to serve on the commission by
21 virtue of their education, training, or experience, particularly in the
22 field of African-American studies.

23 c. First meeting. The chair shall call the first meeting of the
24 commission within 120 days after the effective date of this act.

25 d. Quorum. Six members of the commission shall constitute a quorum,
26 but a lesser number may hold hearings.

27 e. Chair and vice chair. The commission shall elect a Chair and Vice
28 Chair from among its members.

29 f. Compensation. The members of the commission shall receive no
30 compensation for their services as members, but shall be reimbursed for
31 their actual and necessary expenses incurred in the performance of their
32 duties.

33 § 5. Powers of the commission. a. Hearings and sessions. The commis-
34 sion may, for the purpose of carrying out the provisions of this act,
35 hold such hearings and sit and act at such times and at such places in
36 the United States, as the commission considers appropriate.

37 b. Powers of subcommittees and members. Any subcommittee or member of
38 the commission may, if authorized by the commission, take any action
39 which the commission is authorized to take by this section.

40 c. Obtaining official data. The commission may acquire directly from
41 the head of any department, agency, or instrumentality of the state,
42 available information which the commission considers useful in the
43 discharge of its duties. All departments, agencies, and instrumentalities
44 of the state shall cooperate with the commission with respect to
45 such information and shall furnish all information requested by the
46 commission to the extent permitted by law.

47 § 6. Termination. The commission shall terminate 90 days after the
48 date on which the commission submits its report to the temporary presi-
49 dent of the senate, the speaker of the assembly, the minority leaders of
50 the senate and the assembly and the governor as provided in subdivision
51 c of section three of this act.

52 § 7. This act shall take effect immediately and shall expire and be
53 deemed repealed 90 days after the New York state community commission to
54 study reparations remedies submits its report to the temporary president
55 of the senate, the speaker of the assembly, the minority leaders of the
56 senate and the assembly and the governor as provided in subdivision c of

1 section three of this act; provided that, the chair of the New York
2 state community commission to study reparations remedies shall notify
3 the legislative bill drafting commission upon the submission of its
4 report as provided in subdivision c of section three of this act in
5 order that the commission may maintain an accurate and timely effective
6 data base of the official text of the laws of the state of New York in
7 furtherance of effecting the provisions of section 44 of the legislative
8 law and section 70-b of the public officers law.