

STATE OF NEW YORK

1118

2021-2022 Regular Sessions

IN SENATE

January 7, 2021

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

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; making an appropriation therefor; 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

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

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1 1624, New Amsterdam became a provincial extension of the Dutch Republic
2 and it was designated the capital of the province in 1625.

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

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

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

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

31 Penalties for breaking these and other laws were severe. Beatings,
32 mutilations and executions were common.

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

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

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

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

52 Despite these laws, there were exceptions under which certain persons
53 could still own slaves. Non-residents could enter New York with slaves
54 for up to nine months, and allowing part-time residents to bring their
55 slaves into the state temporarily. The nine-months exception remained

1 law until its repeal in 1841, when the North was re-defining itself as
2 the "free" region in advance of the civil war.

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

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

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

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

19 (1) Examine the institution of slavery which existed within the state
20 of New York and in the city of New York. The commission's examination
21 shall include an examination of:

22 (A) the capture and procurement of Africans;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

54 c. Report to the legislature. The commission shall submit a written
55 report of its findings and recommendations to the temporary president of
56 the senate, the speaker of the assembly, the minority leaders of the

1 senate and the assembly and the governor not later than the date which
2 is one year after the date of the first meeting of the commission held
3 pursuant to subdivision c of section four of this act.

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

7 (1) three members shall be appointed by the governor;

8 (2) three members shall be appointed by the speaker of the assembly;

9 (3) three members shall be appointed by the temporary president of the
10 senate; and

11 (4) six members shall be selected from the major civil society and
12 reparations organizations that have historically championed the cause of
13 reparatory justice. The commission shall determine these major civil
14 society and reparations organizations and such civil society and repara-
15 tions organizations shall select a member for the commission.

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

20 c. First meeting. The chair shall call the first meeting of the
21 commission within 120 days after the effective date of this act or with-
22 in 30 days after the date on which legislation is enacted making appro-
23 priations to carry out this act, whichever date is later.

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

26 e. Chair and vice chair. The commission shall elect a Chair and Vice
27 Chair from among its members. The term of office for each shall be for
28 one year.

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, and request the attendance and testimony of such
37 witnesses and the production of such books, records, correspondence,
38 memoranda, papers, and documents, as the commission considers appropri-
39 ate.

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

43 c. Obtaining official data. The commission may acquire directly from
44 the head of any department, agency, or instrumentality of the executive
45 branch of the government, available information which the commission
46 considers useful in the discharge of its duties. All departments, agen-
47 cies, and instrumentalities of the executive branch of the government
48 shall cooperate with the commission with respect to such information and
49 shall furnish all information requested by the commission to the extent
50 permitted by law.

51 § 6. Administrative provisions. a. Experts and consultants. The
52 commission may procure through a competitive process the services of
53 experts and consultants.

54 b. Administrative support services. The commission may enter into
55 agreements with the commissioner of general services for procurement of
56 financial and administrative services necessary for the discharge of the

1 duties of the commission. Payment for such services shall be made by
2 reimbursement from funds of the commission in such amounts as may be
3 agreed upon by the chair of the commission and the commissioner of
4 general services.

5 c. Contracts. The commission may:

6 (1) procure supplies, services, and property by contract in accordance
7 with applicable laws and regulations and to the extent or in such
8 amounts as are provided in appropriations acts; and

9 (2) enter into contracts with departments, agencies, and instrumental-
10 ities of the federal government, state agencies, and private firms,
11 institutions, and agencies, for the conduct of research or surveys, the
12 preparation of reports, and other activities necessary for the discharge
13 of the duties of the commission, to the extent or in such amounts as are
14 provided in appropriations acts.

15 § 7. Termination. The commission shall terminate 90 days after the
16 date on which the commission submits its report to the temporary presi-
17 dent of the senate, the speaker of the assembly, the minority leaders of
18 the senate and the assembly and the governor as provided in subdivision
19 c of section three of this act.

20 § 8. The performance of the commission's duties, purposes and objec-
21 tives shall be executed within amounts made available by appropriation
22 therefor.

23 § 9. The sum of two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000), or so
24 much thereof as may be necessary, is hereby appropriated to the New York
25 state community commission to study reparations remedies from any moneys
26 in the state treasury in the general fund, not otherwise appropriated,
27 for the purposes of carrying out the provisions of this act. Such sum
28 shall be payable on the audit and warrant of the state chair of the New
29 York state community commission to study reparations remedies, or his or
30 her duly designated representative in the manner provided by law.

31 § 10. This act shall take effect immediately and shall expire and be
32 deemed repealed 30 days after the New York state community commission to
33 study reparations remedies submits its report to the temporary president
34 of the senate, the speaker of the assembly, the minority leaders of the
35 senate and the assembly and the governor as provided in subdivision c of
36 section three of this act; provided that, the chair of the New York
37 state community commission to study reparations remedies shall notify
38 the legislative bill drafting commission upon the submission of its
39 report as provided in subdivision c of section three of this act in
40 order that the commission may maintain an accurate and timely effective
41 data base of the official text of the laws of the state of New York in
42 furtherance of effecting the provisions of section 44 of the legislative
43 law and section 70-b of the public officers law.