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Shedding Light On Slavery: North's little-known role in the nation's slave trade

By Martin C. Evans, STAFF WRITER

On the eve of the Civil War, as the debate over whether the United States should remain a slaveholding nation raged, a Louisiana slave owner living in Islip had a fast ship built in East Setauket.

The ship sailed for the Congo River in 1858 and took on some 600 captive Africans, who were sold on Georgia's Jekyll Island.

Ethel Lee Mitchell, 94, the granddaughter of one of slaves sold that day, lives in East Elmhurst. Michael Higgins, a great- great grandson, is a guidance counselor at Hempstead High School.

Now teachers from districts across New York say stories like these need to be included in lesson plans for New York's children, to balance the impression that slavery was strictly a southern abomination that New Yorkers opposed.

They say such balance is needed to help youngsters understand how support for slavery on Long Island and elsewhere evolved into housing segregation, unequal schools, racial intolerance and other ills that continue to influence life today.

"A lot of kids, especially by the time they get to the 11th grade, think that everyone in New York was an abolitionist," said Nichole Williams, a history teacher at Westbury High School. "They learn throughout their education that New York was a beacon of freedom. We're trying to re-teach the topic to give them the correct information."

Teachers with the New York State Council for the Social Studies, along with members of a sister organization in New Jersey, have begun circulating a 76-page reference guide for teachers titled "Slavery and the Northern States."

The guide, which was edited by Hofstra education professor Alan Singer, includes references to New York slave narratives, runaway slave advertisements, and examples of complicity with slavery. It also includes sections on abolitionists among New York's founding fathers and topics pertaining to the Underground Railroad.

The guide is printed in the summer issue of Social Science Docket, a joint publication of the New York and New Jersey State Councils for the Social Studies.

Supporters say the guide is particularly timely because plans by New York education officials to develop a curriculum focusing on the Underground Railroad, if left unbalanced, could broaden the misperception that opposition to slavery was universal in New York, where slavery was abolished in 1827, and other northern states.

"If the focus is on the Underground Railroad, children will be told that we were the good guys and the south was the bad guys, and that is a myth," Singer said. "Slavery was a national institution."

Among examples designed to offer a broader view, the guide points out that Fernando Wood, then the mayor of New York City, spoke in favor of secession from the Union in 1861. Far from being hurt politically, he was elected to Congress, where in 1864 he voted against the 13th Amendment ban on slavery.

The New York City Board of Education has plans to use the material in staff development seminars for social studies teachers, according to a letter to Singer from Evelyn B. Kalibala, director of the board's Office of Multicultural Education/Social Studies.

"I think people are open to it, although it will put further demands on the time teachers have," said David Golden, the New York state council's past president and a former high school teacher in the Shenendehowa district north of Albany.

But the guide is certain to be controversial among some teachers already burdened by the task of preparing for state proficiency examinations.

"Do we need a wholesale review of New York's role in slavery?" said Stuart Rubin, co-president of the Long Island Council for the Social Studies. "I think there are more contemporary issues, such as segregation on Long Island, that are more relevant than bringing up whether New Yorkers were in the forefront of slavery or were complicit."

Currently, the state education department suggests that schools begin teaching colonial-era slavery to children beginning in the fourth grade. In high school, slavery typically is taught as a factor leading to the Civil War, with northerners generally opposed to it and southerners as favoring its expansion, Rubin and others said.

That does not go far enough, supporters of broadening curriculums say.

In short, how does one effectively teach the great "American paradox," John McNamara, one of the guide's contributing writers, wrote in one of its articles, "that 'the land of the free' was also the home of the slave?"

Higgins, 38, whose great-great-grandfather, Ward Lee, came to America aboard Wanderer, tried to raise money to return to Africa, and eventually bought a South Carolina farm that remains in his family, said knowing firsthand how slavery touched their lives helped his family understand feelings of despair, anger, suspiciousness and other stresses that some have referred to as "post-slavery stress syndrome."

"For us, there were never any negative connotations of being African," Higgins said. "We were survivors and moved forward.

"But you can't heal until you deal with truth," he said. "And so far, that hasn't happened."