

This article appeared in the New York edition of Newsday, page A23 on Sunday, May 28, 2006. On line you can see photographs. Following the article is an email exchange between Alan and the Downtown Alliance. The students from Law, Government are meeting to discuss their next move on Tuesday.

Students trace the history of slavery in New York City

BY MERLE ENGLISH

<http://www.newsday.com/news/local/newyork/am-diar0528,0,244874.story?coll=ny-nycnews-headlines>

Passersby watched curiously Friday as a group of Queens high school seniors stapled a brightly colored poster around a light pole near the World Trade Center site.

The poster reminded people that they were at the site of the 1712 Slave Rebellion, when more than 20 enslaved Africans set fire to a building on Maiden Lane and ambushed whites who tried to extinguish the blaze.

In response to the killing of at least nine white men in the melee, 25 black men were executed, with some hanged and others burned alive, according to the "Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History."

"People fought back all the time, black people and white people who supported them," said Alan Singer, professor of curriculum and teaching at Hofstra University, as he addressed a gathering of some 50 students who walked a two-mile "African-American Heritage Trail" the students designated in lower Manhattan in a class project.

Their goal was as simple as it was profound: to leave physical reminders where there were none of the role New York City played in the brutal slave trade. They left posters at 11 sites, and plan to ask the city to replace them with permanent markers.

New York was second only to Charleston, S.C., in its involvement in the slave trade in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Singer led the students from the Law, Government and Community Service Magnet High School in Cambria Heights and University High School at Bronx Community College on a tour of the 11 sites, including the corner of Wall and Water streets, where slaves were auctioned in the 17th century, and the South Street Seaport where Africans captured by the Portuguese, mostly from the Congo, were unloaded as cargo referred to as "black ivory."

"Every African that entered New York City was dropped off from boats here, but there is no sign here," said Singer, who wore a T-shirt with the image of a black man in chains with the legend: "New York City and Slavery. Time to Tell the Truth."

"It's been written out of history," Singer said. "Our job today is to put it back."

Singer developed an award-winning high school curriculum: "New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance," which he has been testing at schools citywide and on Long Island. It won the 2005 National Council for the Social Studies Program of Excellence Award.

Michael Pezone, a history teacher at the magnet school, and an adjunct in Hofstra's Education Department, introduced the curriculum to his students, who suggested and mapped the tour.

"What struck us, and the students especially," Pezone said, "is that there are no historical markers or memorials. It's as if this history did not exist. . . We're going to do it every year."

The students made several stops, including a former restaurant in Fulton Mall where slave traders would meet; Foley Square, a former swamp where public executions took place; and City Hall. Fernando Wood, mayor in 1861, in sympathy with the slave states, called on the city to secede from the union along with the South -- a call that went unheeded.

As they walked, the students handed out a flier with information about the sites. Much of the information was as new to them as to those who took the flier.

"I never knew about it," said Evan Jacobs, a student from University High School.

"I'm from Africa. I never knew New York participated in the slave trade," said Aissata Camara, a student from Guinea.

Jonai Heyliger, a senior at the magnet school, said, "If you don't understand the past you have less understanding of why things are the way they are with our school system, disenfranchisement and unemployment in the African-American community. The history we had trickles into generations."