

# Home, Enslavement, and Gender: Re-encountering the Stuyvesants' Bowery

NICOLE SAFFOLD MASKIELL

**Nicole Saffold Maskiell** is an Associate Professor of African and African American Studies at Dartmouth College. She is the author of *Bound by Bondage. Slavery and the Creation of a Northern Gentry* (Ithaca 2022) and the winner of the 2023 Henricks Award for best book-length manuscript relating to New Netherland and the Dutch colonial experience.

## Abstract

When wealthy widow Judith Stuyvesant died in her seventh decade of life, she left a will passing down her possessions to her descendants. Judith Stuyvesant's 1684 will exposes the fraught connections between family, race, property, and power in colonial New Netherland. Her life intersected with diverse women, and her legacy was shaped by their lives as well. Among them was Mayken van Angola, an African woman who petitioned for her freedom and later married in Judith's chapel, and Judith's granddaughter, Anna, whose inheritance was marked by loss and violence. This article examines how wills, court petitions, and depositions offer insight into the lives of women who shaped, and were shaped by, a colonial world defined by landownership, labour, and enslavement. Through an analysis of Judith's bowery, the family vault, and the chapel, it considers how material spaces reflected both privilege and dispossession in early New York.

**Keywords:** Dutch colonialism, New Netherland, gender, enslavement, women's legal history, material culture

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NICOLE SAFFOLD MASKIELL

On 1 December 1684, Judith Stuyvesant signed and delivered the last version of her will in Manhattan. She was, by then, in the seventh decade of her life – a mother, grandmother, and widow. She had been born an ocean away in Breda and had, while pregnant with her first child, crossed that distance, stopping first on the Caribbean Island of Curaçao before finally arriving on the shores of southern Manhattan in 1647. As the wife of the Dutch colony's leader, Petrus Stuyvesant, she enjoyed privilege: her American lifestyle was partly made possible by the unfree labour of others. But the remnants of Judith's life tell a complex story: one of gender, class, race, and family. Over the course of her long life, near forty years in the colony, Judith sold land to diverse neighbours, including a free Black man named Frans Bastiaensz, whose wife Barbara was in her final weeks of pregnancy. Judith lived out her final days on the bowery (her farm), named in her will as 'lands of inheritance' according to 'the laws of this Government'. She carefully enumerated her wishes for the disposal of her chapel, vault, and possessions.<sup>1</sup>

Other women whose lives intersected with Judith's experienced the colonial world of New Amsterdam (and, as it was later known, New York) differently. Among them was Mayken van Angola, an African woman who claimed freedom through the Dutch courts and whose labour and community ties shaped the world that women like Judith inhabited.

<sup>1</sup> New York, Original Will Libers in the Surrogate's Office (hereafter NY Will Libers), Microfilmed by the Historical Documents Collection of the Paul Klapper Library of Queens College of the City University of New York, Film #005512799, 497592, 1684-1686, III, 67-71, Will of Judith Stuyvesant, New Amsterdam, 1 December 1684, also published in Pasko (ed.), *Old New York*, I, 257-260. Petrus and Judith were wed in Breda: Breda, Gemeentearchief, Walloon Church, Marriages 1607-1810, Filmed by the Genealogical Society Salt-Lake City, film #005843283, Marriage of Petrus Stuyvesant and Judith Bayard, 13 August 1645. For mention of Judith enquiring as to the fate of several enslaved people she baptized who were sold in Curaçao see Albany, New York State Archives (hereafter NYS), New Netherland Council, Curaçao records 17, Matthias Beck to the Council of the Dutch West India Company and Peter Stuyvesant, Curaçao, 5 November 1664. For an English translation, see Gehring, *Curaçao Papers*, 210-211. Petrus granted Judith power of attorney in 1665 and after his death she was granted power of attorney on 14 January 1678: Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island*, 278, 297; New York, New York Historical Society (hereafter NYHS), Ms. 1972, City Deeds, fol. 23, Conveyance of Judith Stuyvesant to Frans Bastiaensz, 24 September 1674. For a published English translation of the Frans Bastiaensz record, see 'Original Book of New York Deeds', 42-43; 'Baptism of Magdalena, daughter of Francis Bastiaenszen and Barbara Emanuels, 5 January 1675', in Sypher Jr. (ed. and trans.), *Liber A*, 215. For more context, see: Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*, 47-49.

Mayken became not only a free woman but a member of the local community through her own actions in the courts and marriages to two free Black landowners, with the second marriage occurring in Judith's chapel. Judith's granddaughter, Anna, inhabited the same space as her grandmother, but lived a startlingly different existence. Her story emerges in the deposition of her mother, Elisabeth Stuyvesant Sydenham, who recounted the brutal violence inflicted on her household by her second husband, George Sydenham.

These varied documents – Judith's will, Mayken van Angola's freedom petitions, and Elisabeth Stuyvesant Sydenham's deposition – together reveal the complex and often contradictory roles women held in the social, racial, and legal culture of early New York. Recent work foregrounding women (largely written by female scholars) have served to present fuller engagements with the colonial past and the Dutch Republic's place in global networks of power.<sup>2</sup> Through these documents, this essay will explore the webs of privilege, oppression, relationships, and work that defined these women's experiences, while also focusing on the spaces – Judith's chapel, the family vault, and the lands of inheritance – that shaped their lives.<sup>3</sup>

### *My... Church or Chapell*

By the time Judith Stuyvesant gave 'to the Reformed Mother Dutch Church or Congregation of the city of New York' her 'Church or Chappel Situated (*sic*) on my bowery or farms', the site had witnessed decades of weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Judith included the chapel's wooden structure, hewn out of the old-growth forests that had made up the physical landscape of the Lenape people, in her will, and she made provisions for the community to reuse that wood when it began to decay, as it inevitably would.<sup>4</sup> Women from the surrounding bowery village had sat with scores of children in that chapel, likely segregated in the centre of the sanctuary that was rimmed by benches intended for male congregants, following early modern Dutch Reformed practice.<sup>5</sup> The bowery's chapel had played host to several ministers, but none wrote more prolifically (and poetically) about the diversity of his time in that community than the reverend Henricus Selijns. Gender, enslavement, dispossession, and war infused the verses Selijns penned in his 1663 wedding gift poem entitled *Bruydloft Toorts*

2 Susanah Shaw Romney's work *New Netherland Connections* interrogates the importance of Dutch women to the colonization of New Netherland and examines how Indigenous and African peoples struggled to survive such colonial projects. Andrea Mosterman has challenged us to re-encounter the Dutch colonised space of New Netherland and engage the relevance of proximity in creating a community of African peoples in New Netherland: Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 3-4, 7-11, 32, esp. fn. 4-5.

3 Reading Judith Stuyvesant's will 'along the bias grain', as Marisa Fuentes has encouraged, can, 'like cutting fabric on the bias to create more elasticity', expose the lives of women who exert a 'spectral influence' on the documentary record but nevertheless contributed to the evolution of gendered notions under Dutch colonial rule: Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 78.

4 NY Will Libers, Film #005512799, 497592, III, 67-71, Will of Judith Stuyvesant, New Amsterdam, 1 December 1684.

5 Howell and Munsell, *History of the County of Schenectady*, 90-92. For an analysis of the uniqueness of this Dutch seating arrangement in comparison to English gendered seating segregation practices, see Warner, 'Let All Things Be Done Decently and in Order', 4, 131, fig. 1.

(Bridal Torch) for his friends' marriage in New Amsterdam. In it, he described the colonists' revenge for the Esopus attack of Wiltwijck, such as burned crops and the murder and dispossession of Indigenous people, specifically women and children.<sup>6</sup> Women in Indigenous communities across the eastern seaboard held natal rights to land and waterways alongside men, in contrast to the patrilineal norm in Northern Western Europe. Such clashing conceptions of usage led to violence directed against Native women and people in general, colonial violence that made up the tapestry of Judith's life in New Netherland. The geography of warfare shaped the location and placement of the chapel's surrounding community.

In 1655, an overwhelming force of Indigenous peoples from the river valleys and eastern coast occupied New Amsterdam, partly in retaliation for the Dutch incursion into the Delaware river valley and the murder of an Indigenous woman by a Dutch colonist, Hendrick van Dijck. The woman had reportedly been killed for taking a peach from van Dijck's bowery. Left alone in New Amsterdam while her husband sailed south to conquer the Swedish Delaware colony for the Dutch, Judith would have borne witness to scores of burned boweries and known the women, children, and men taken hostage. Judith's husband Petrus settled a group of free Black families on the border of his bowery as a buffer for any future invasion and requested the Dutch West India Company (wic) send enslaved African men to aid in later war efforts against the Esopus.<sup>7</sup> The Stuyvesant bowery's wheat fields, dairy cows, pigs, horses, wagons, sleighs, and brick bowery house tied it to Dutch early modern culture. Its chapel's wooden frame physically and religiously marked the land as a colonised space; the diverse women and children gathered in the sanctuary's centre promised successive generations committed to the Dutch colonial project of dispossession.

### *Mayken's Request*

By the time that Judith wrote her will, scores of Black couples had spoken their vows at the chapel on the Stuyvesants' bowery.<sup>8</sup> At least one elderly Black woman within that

<sup>6</sup> Blom, 'Of Wedding and War'. For the poem's allusions to slavery, see Maskiell, 'Elite Slave Networks in the Dutch Atlantic', 192; Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*, 31 fn. 90, 36-37. For Selijns's description of services at the chapel and bowery community, see Gardner A. Sage Library, General Synod, Reformed Church of America, Amsterdam Correspondence 1, Selijns to Amsterdam classis, 9 June 1664. The older translation in Van der Linde (ed. and trans.), *New York Historical Manuscripts. Dutch*, 231, has been shown by Jaap Jacobs to be faulty when used to estimate the makeup of the Black population, as it was created out of nineteenth-century racial and social conventions rather than seventeenth-century norms: Jacobs, 'Slavery in Stuyvesant's World'.

<sup>7</sup> Petition, 4 September 1664, in O'Callaghan (ed.), *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts*, 1, 269; NYSA, New Netherland Council, Dutch colonial council minutes (hereafter NNCM) 10, Certificate, 20/30 April 1665. See for a transcription: <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/files/2814/0681/8946/Stuyvesantmanumission.pdf> (Accessed on 5 February 2025); NYSA, NNCM 9, Stuyvesant to Van Ruyven, 18 march 1660. For an older English translation, see O'Callaghan and Fernow (eds.), *Documents*, XIII, 151-152. For recent work on the importance of women in Indigenous communities, see Kane, *Shirts Powdered Red*; Bauer, *Becoming Catawba*; Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin*; Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman*. For more on the Esopus war's gendered and racial context, see Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*, 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> Sunday Services stopped after Stuyvesant's death in 1672, but marriages continued: 'Records of St. Marks Church in the Bowery', 334. See also Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*, 20 fn. 22, 24, 31, 45, 47.

community, named Mayken van Angola, may even have remembered the site before the chapel was erected. Mayken had lived in southern Manhattan at least two decades longer than Judith, and in her freedom petition of 1662 testified that she had been enslaved to the wIC and was among the first Black women to arrive in the colony.<sup>9</sup> She arrived as an adolescent or young woman. Brought in as comfort women by the wIC for the men enslaved to the company, these young women faced a harsh existence and were, as historians Leslie Harris and Susanah Shaw Romney assert, explicitly meant for both physical and reproductive labour.<sup>10</sup> Andrea Mosterman has persuasively argued that the Dutch used the importation of enslaved peoples throughout their global empire to displace local populations and claim land.<sup>11</sup> Such activities also gesture to the West India Company's desire that these captive women would produce a certain kind of upright enslaved worker for the colony. No such official settlement plan existed for European arrivals to New Netherland, despite small numbers and anxieties about Indigenous peoples and the growing English presence in Long Island and New England.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the stories of Mayken and other early African women uncover the importance of Black women in the creation of a certain type of racialised subject: progeny meant not merely for labour but who, at least in the first generation of settlement, could be inculcated to a certain degree of socio-religious loyalty.

Mayken, like Judith, worshipped in the Dutch Reformed Church and witnessed community baptisms. But inequality infused the entwined nature of these early American women's lives. Mayken negotiated an attenuated freedom alongside two friends – one that included the stipulation that they take turns serving Judith's household by cleaning the Stuyvesant property. Mayken subsequently gained her full freedom after approaching the court a second time in 1663.<sup>13</sup> Although her final petition cited her ill health and advanced age, Mayken lived several more decades as a vital member of the free Black bowery community: she married twice – both husbands, Domingo d'Angola and Manuel Pieters, were free Black landowners. When Mayken wed Manuel, six decades after arriving in the colony, she said her vows at the chapel on the Stuyvesants' Bowery.<sup>14</sup>

When Mayken was laid to rest at the end of her long and eventful life, she may have been buried in the Stuyvesant family vault. While the burial of an African-descended woman with a prominent Dutch colonial ruling family might have been meant as a final act of honour, if she were indeed interned on the bowery, Mayken's earthly remains would not rest near the descendants of the majority of the Black community, either enslaved or free.<sup>15</sup>

9 NYSA, NNCM 10, Petition, 19 April 1663.

10 Harris, 'Slave Labor in New York', 30; Romney, 'Reytory Angola', 65.

11 Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 16-17, 26-28.

12 Both England's 'maids to be made wives' who were sent to Jamestown during the first decades of the seventeenth century and France's *filles du roi* who arrived in New France during the mid-seventeenth century were trafficked adolescent girls and young women whose fertility was used to buttress the European population in a generational settlement program aimed to displace Indigenous groups. They were also intended to be women devoid of scandalous community standing: Gossard, *Young Subjects*, 146-165; Brown, *Good Wives*, 81-83.

13 NYSA, NNCM 10, Petitions, 28 December 1662 and 19 April 1663. See also Maskiell, 'Dutch-American Stories'.

14 For Domingo d'Angola and Manuel Pieters listed as landowners, see NYSA, NNCM 10, Certificate, 20/30 April 1665, also transcribed at [www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/files/2814/0681/8946/Stuyvesantmanumission.pdf](http://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/files/2814/0681/8946/Stuyvesantmanumission.pdf) (Accessed on 5 February 2025). For the marriage of Manuel Pieters and Maijken d'Angola, see Sypher Jr. (ed. and trans.), *Liber A*, 568.

Scholars have detailed the activities of executioners (some of whom were African), grave-diggers, and *aansprekers* (funeral bidders), in the context of colonial New Netherlands, but little attention has been given to the duties performed by women in caring for the dead.<sup>16</sup> Before her burial, Mayken's body would have been prepared by those close to her, who washed, shrouded, and laid her out on a bed of straw, as Mayken had no doubt done for many others during her own lifetime. Mayken's hands, which had cleaned the Stuyvesants' property, would have also likely prepared the bodies of her friends Susanna and Lucretia, who had not lived to see a day when their freedom was not attenuated. Judith Stuyvesant took care to ensure the preservation of the 'tombe or vault which was built by my deceased husband in the said Church', but made no mention of arrangements for Mayken's burial in the vault.<sup>17</sup> Mayken outlived Judith, so if she were interred in the vault it would have been at the behest of Judith's son, Nicolaes Willem, or his second wife, Elisabeth.<sup>18</sup> Judith's great-grandson Petrus Stuyvesant would, in the nineteenth century, officially open the family vault to the burial of those he enslaved and their families. By the time of Mayken's death, enslaved African-descended people were being brought in increasing numbers into the colony and, by the turn of the century, they were buried in a separate burial ground outside the city.<sup>19</sup>

### *Anna's Inheritance*

Anna, one of Judith Stuyvesant's granddaughters, grew up on the bowery, but her life starkly contrasted with her grandmother's. Anna lived through the deaths of her father in 1698 and elder brother Petrus, who died by drowning in 1706, when she was nine and seventeen years old respectively. Petrus died a year after the Dutch Reformed Church community of New York refused to recognise the legitimacy of his marriage to Rachel Eckeson, a local woman of lower status, thus dooming his infant son to carry the name *Benoni*, a term which publicly denoted bastard status for male children.<sup>20</sup> After the death

15 Jacobs, 'Slavery in Stuyvesant's World'.

16 Jacobs, *New Netherland*, 442. For work devoted to early modern Dutch women's activities in death commemoration, see Scholten, 'Good Widows and the Sleeping Dead'. For a collection of resources, including a brief list of citations on Dutch women's activities in dressing and caring for the deceased, see Kaldenbach, 'Burials in Holland'.

17 NY Will Libers, Film #005512799, 497592, III, 67-71, Will of Judith Stuyvesant, New Amsterdam, 1 December 1684.

18 For an in-depth exploration of seventeenth-century Congolese burial practices in relation to the death of Queen Njinga, a Lusco-African context that would have been legible to Mayken, see Heywood, *Njinga of Angola*, 236-239. For the diasporic reach of African practices of waking the dead, see Dewulf, *Afro-Atlantic Catholics*, 190. After Judith died, her son and his second wife inherited the bowery: Marriage of Nicolaes Willem Stuyvesant to Elisabeth van Slichtenhorst, in Sypher Jr. (ed. and trans.), *Liber A*, 543, 568.

19 *A Memorial of Saint Mark's Church on the Bowery*, 116; Medford and Brown, 'New York's First Black Institution', 3.

20 In the baptismal record of the Dutch Reformed Church of New York, the child has no first name and is listed as Benoni. In the margin under the date, *ongetrouwt* (unmarried) appears before his parents's names. See for the baptism of Petrus Stuyvesant's and Rachel Eckeson's son 'Benoni', dated 2 May 1705: Evans (ed.), *Records of*

of her father Nicolaes Willem Stuyvesant, Anna's mother Elizabeth married the English captain George Sydenham, who was physically abusive. Anna and her siblings, as Judith's last living heirs, inherited Judith's 'gold and silver either coined or uncoined consisting in Jewells', her 'best Casse [Case] or Coobert [cupboard]' as well as all her 'China Earthen Ware' and 'all my linen, none excepted'.<sup>21</sup>

Despite such an inheritance, Anna Stuyvesant's childhood was marked by want and abuse. Anna's family was alienated from her mother's female relatives through a series of legal suits pressed by George. He also locked away food, and Anna's mother testified that she sometimes had to hide food 'in the cellar under the tub' for her children to eat. Cellars were frequently places where enslaved labourers were forced to live out their days in captivity. Such hidden places were meant to mask the active labour of the household that wealthy and middling Low County women were tasked with managing.<sup>22</sup> Elisabeth maintained that in addition to abusing her and her children from her first marriage, George 'tied the negroes up and whipped them for nothing'. The Sydenhams enslaved ten people at the time: four men, two women, two little boys, and two little girls.<sup>23</sup> Due to English common law, George claimed the lands that Elisabeth brought into their marriage and attempted to wrest title to the bowery from her grasp as well, even though the will of her first husband, Nicolaes Willem Stuyvesant, ensured the bowery would legally pass to their children in the event of his death. George had Elisabeth arrested and imprisoned after she refused to leave the bowery, and Anna – by then a young widow – sheltered her mother in New Jersey after breaking her out of jail. In the end, only Anna's brother Gerardus's gendered claim to the land prevented George's efforts to take possession of the bowery.

Wills have long been used to construct histories of New Netherland's colonial past, and even chart the changes experienced by colonists and the enslaved under first Dutch and then English rule.<sup>24</sup> Within the lines of Judith's will lay pathways towards exploring the ways that European women living under Dutch rule constructed and conceived of their

*the Reformed Dutch Church*, 315. Because most of the Stuyvesant family papers were destroyed in 1777 when the bowery burned down, many details are recounted through family and nineteenth-century histories. Stuyvesant Fish's nineteenth-century family history, *Petrus Stuyvesant*, lists the circumstances of Petrus's and Rachel's marriage. According to Fish, they were legally married under English law, but the Dutch Reformed community refused to recognise their union because Rachel was of lower status than Petrus. Spooner, *Historic Families of America*, 138, includes Petrus's drowning in 1706. These citations are compiled in Wachter, *Sidman-Sidnam*, 32. 21 NY Will Libers, Film #005512799, 497592, III, 67–71, Will of Judith Stuyvesant, New Amsterdam, 1 December 1684.

22 Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*, 24, 83, 90, 96; Wolfthal, 'Foregrounding the Background', 229–265.

23 NYHS, Mss Collection AHMC, Stuyvesant Family 20573, 'Memoranda van Klaverack', signed by Elis [Elisabeth] Stuyvesant, undated: 'bondt de negers op en geselt ze voor niemendal'. George and Elisabeth Sydenham (Elisabeth was Judith's and Petrus's youngest son Nicolaes's widow) leased the property to Christopher Rousby for a nine-year period agreeing to an annual rent of £102 2. Two enslaved men, John and Samson, were listed as part of the included rent: Wachter, *Sidman-Sidnam*, 49. See also New York City, Register's Office, New York County, Alphabetical Index Grantors, N-YR 0310P Roll 978, Lease of George Sydenham to Christopher Rousby, 6 March 1705. For detail of Elisabeth's imprisonment and Anna's help with the escape, see Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*, 92–96.

24 Todt and Shattuck, 'Capable Entrepreneurs', esp. 212–213, for the slow transition to English coverture culture experienced by Dutch-descended female traders and landowners.



possessions and environments as part of the Dutch colonial project. Enslavement shaped the lives of most African-descended women in the colony, but some were free, and a few owned lands near the Stuyvesant Bowery. Mayken's story uncovers the memories that such African women held about the bowery and the strength of their social ties to the place histories have most frequently associated with the Stuyvesant family. Despite the ascendancy of English common law, Judith conveyed land to her neighbours, and Dutch female trading culture continued to proliferate across the newly conquered New York. Yet, legal arguments resting on Roman-Dutch precedent versus English coverture miss the ways that these changes were racialised, enacted in violence, and played out in gendered spaces that were actively being claimed and transformed by the actions of colonial men and women. Judith described the bowery in her will, not primarily in terms of 'Lands and real Estate' but rather as linens, cash, and furniture. While Judith's male grandchildren inherited the lands that made up the bowery, it was her female descendants who carried with them the material bowery that Judith claimed. When Anna Stuyvesant Prichard wrote her own will in 1759, she, like her grandmother before her, passed down gold, linens, furniture, and money. Her brother Gerardus inherited the bowery and the enslaved men, women, and children who toiled on the property.<sup>25</sup>

The spaces described in Judith Stuyvesant's will – her chapel, family vault, and lands of inheritance – when read alongside the evidence of diverse women's lives offer an alternate view into colonial New Netherland and New York. These documents illuminate how possession operated in multiple forms: Judith's bequests, Mayken's requests, and Anna's inheritance. Such documents reveal the myriad ways that possession was always refracted through the prism of experience for early Americans and how considering gender from diverse perspectives can offer deep avenues of historical discovery, from documents that have long been positioned as fragments.

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<sup>25</sup> NYSA, New York State, Court of Probates, Probated wills, Series Joo38-92, Sub series 2, Box 30, Will of Anna Stuyvesant Prichard, 7 June 1759. Petrus, Gerardus's elder brother, was explicitly bequeathed an enslaved boy in Nicolaes Willem's will and the bowery was rented along with its enslaved workforce: Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*, 93-95.



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