



# PLACES THE SLAVES MADE



The late historian Eugene D. Genovese, in his 1976 book *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, put the history of slavery in the United States in a new light. Until then, mainstream historians assumed that, as enslaved people had little power or control over their lives, they lacked what historians call *agency* — the ability to shape themselves, their lives, and the world around them. But Genovese, using oral histories of slavery created by the Federal Writers Project during the New Deal, demonstrated that enslaved people *did* have agency, that — seemingly against all odds — they *were* able to affect the world around them in many important ways. A few years later, another historian, Mechal Sobel, expanded on Genovese’s point. Colonial America, Sobel wrote in *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (1989), was shaped by both enslaved people and by their enslavers. The same was true in colonial northeastern Connecticut., where the towns, villages, and rural neighborhoods were places that the enslaved people helped make. African American had less power and freedom than their Anglo-American neighbors, and they were much less numerous, so sometimes their contributions were subtle. But they left their mark, nevertheless.



### THE TRINITY CARVINGS

Godfrey Malbone, Jr., the Newport, RI slave owner who took up residence in northeast Connecticut in 1766, built Trinity Church (now called Old Trinity Church) in Pomfret (now Brooklyn), CT in 1770. Modeled on Trinity Church in Newport, it was an Anglican (Episcopalian) church. As many as 21 enslaved people are believed to be buried in its churchyard. Inside the church, white worshippers sat in pews on the ground floor, while enslaved people occupied benches in a balcony. A partition hid the Blacks from view. Graffiti carved into the rough board partitions are believed to have been made by slaves. One carving depicts a wooden three-masted sailing ship — quite likely a Newport slave ship. Another shows the hand of God reaching for a long-winded preacher. There are many more carvings in which the enslaved people of Mortlake found a voice.



### MORTLAKE

While colonial Connecticut did not have a plantation economy in the normal sense of the term, where large numbers of either enslaved people or contract laborers worked to plant, tend, and harvest crops, it did have a few large agricultural holdings worked at least in part by African American slaves. One such “Connecticut plantation” existed in northeast Connecticut in a place called Mortlake. In 1687 the Connecticut General Court (as the legislature was then called) granted a tract of land in northeast Connecticut to Captain William Blackwell, to be used as a refuge for Puritans fleeing England to escape Stuart rule. Rather than simply deed Blackwell land in fee simple, the General Court made the grant in the form of a township, but constituted the township as an English manor rather than a town. Blackwell named the grant, which today is the northern portion of the Connecticut town of Brooklyn, *Mortlake*. Subsequently, Massachusetts Governor Jonathan Belcher bought Mortlake from Blackwell. Both Blackwell and Belcher sold smaller tracts to Anglo-American settlers, but in 1739-40 Belcher conveyed his interests in Mortlake in two separate sales to Israel Putnam (1739) and Godfrey Malbone, Sr. (1740). Malbone (1695-1768), a Newport, RI, merchant, slave trader, and privateer, paid a substantial sum for 3,000 acres of forest and farmland. He moved a large number of slaves to Mortlake, and turned over the management of the land to his sons, Godfrey, Jr. (1724-1785) and John. Because Mortlake was a manor, it lacked normal New England town government. In 1766, Godfrey, Jr. moved to Mortlake, by now “well stocked with cows, horses, sheep, swine, goats and negroes,” although by then the General Court had stripped Mortlake of its manorial status and folded it into the town of Pomfret (1757). Malbone, Jr., built Trinity Church, an Anglican (Episcopalian) church in Mortlake, modeled after Trinity Church in Newport. Besides agriculture, he also engaged in quarrying brownstone. The Malbones lost part of their estate during the Revolution, a consequence of their tory activities. When Godfrey Malbone, Jr. died in 1785 and his brother John a few years later, their estate probate inventories listed a fine house in Pomfret, an abundance of personal property, several thousand acres of land split between Pomfret and Newport, a goodly amount of livestock, but no slaves.

### OLD TRINITY CHURCHYARD

It is believed that at least twenty-one enslaved people are buried in marked graves in the churchyard of the Old Trinity Church in Brooklyn, CT. Six gravestones are legible, marked with the names Eliza, James, Orrin, Sarah, Godfrey, and Louisa. These gravestones are smaller and plainer than those of the many white people buried in the Old Trinity Churchyard, and they are located together in the back, in the southeast corner. In addition, there are relics of what appear to be at least fifteen other graves in the same area — the stones on these graves are broken and unreadable (if they ever had writing on them at all), but they are arranged in rows and so seem to be markers. Elsewhere, the graves of enslaved people are difficult to find. None of the cemeteries in Windham have slave graves — not marked ones, anyway, not that we could find. It may be that most enslaved people were buried on the land of their owners. But the gravestones in the Old Trinity Churchyard proclaim, “We were here.”

