

# ‘This Land Is Yours’

**Nell Irvin Painter**

Two recent books recover the missing Black history of upstate New York, challenging the delusion of New York as a land of freedom far removed from the American original sin of slavery.

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Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York/Richard Walker

The Van Bergen Overmantel, depicting the Van Bergen family, two Native Americans, indentured servants, and enslaved people on the Van Bergen farm in Leeds, New York; painting attributed to John Heaton, circa 1728–1738

## **Reviewed:**

### **The Black Woods: Pursuing Racial Justice on the Adirondack Frontier**

by Amy Godine

Three Hills/Cornell University Press, 488 pp., \$35.95

### **A Hudson Valley Reckoning: Discovering the Forgotten History of Slaveholding in My Dutch American Family**

by Debra Bruno, with an afterword by Eleanor C. Mire

Three Hills/Cornell University Press, 287 pp., \$32.95

Leaving home in Essex County, New Jersey, I drive north from the metropolitan region. On the New York State Thruway, I-87, I stop just beyond exit 21B, Coxsackie and Ravena, at the Capital Region Welcome Center. I pee, eat a hulking Taste NY sandwich, and watch a video on a giant screen touting the region’s glories. On-screen I see only White people. Only White people paddling pristine lakes in impressive kayaks. Only White people in appropriate footwear climbing picturesque mountains and peering into stunning valleys. Only grinning White people drinking craft beer and reenacting the region’s history. At the “comments” kiosk I complain about the video for fortifying the erroneous, harmful assumption that New York state north of the city is for White people only. At the Adirondacks Welcome Center, near Glens Falls, I repeat my complaint in vain.

There is something sinister about this presentation that, I fear, encourages White visitors to look askance at non-White visitors—or worse. I take the video personally. I’ve been coming upstate for twenty years, since my friend and Princeton colleague Russell Banks, aware of my need for cool weather and quiet, invited my husband and me to the Adirondacks.

Two recent books, Amy Godine’s *The Black Woods* and Debra Bruno’s *A Hudson Valley Reckoning*, take my side. They belong to a harvest of books published since the late twentieth century, initially written by scholars like A.J. Williams-Myers of SUNY New Paltz, that show that places assumed to be only and always White were not. This understanding is now reaching a much wider audience, challenging the delusion of New York state as a land of freedom far removed from the American original sin of slavery.

In downtown Newark, near my home in New Jersey, a monument of Harriet Tubman now graces a park formerly named for George Washington. In Central Park a newish statue commemorating nineteenth-century women’s rights seats Sojourner Truth with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. But today I’m driving north. As I continue past Albany on I-87—now the Adirondack Northway—I pass exit 26, Minerva, the birthplace of Solomon Northup, the abolitionist author of *Twelve Years a Slave*. He moved south to exit 15, Saratoga Springs, to make a living before he was kidnapped in Washington, D.C., and trafficked to Louisiana, losing his freedom and nearly his life. (In February what is believed to be the first public sculpture of Northup was unveiled in Marksville, Louisiana.)

Godine, a scholar and lecturer based in Saratoga Springs, has been writing social histories of New York’s North Country for more than three decades. In *The Black Woods* she recounts the White abolitionist Gerrit Smith’s plan, hatched in 1846, to offer 120,000 acres of undeveloped Adirondack land to some three thousand Black New Yorkers. In Smith’s vision, these parcels of land, valued at \$250 or more, would allow Black men to meet the state’s property requirements for voting, imposed in 1821.

Smith’s gifts did not come ready-made. The plots had to be cleared and improved, daunting tasks for families otherwise unable to meet the property qualification. Perhaps two hundred intrepid Black settlers moved north from different parts of New York state and the South. They established farms in the three counties at the far northeastern corner of the state—Essex, Franklin, and Clinton—that endured into the late nineteenth century.

Bruno, a journalist originally from the Hudson Valley, now lives in Washington, D.C. Her father’s family were Italian immigrants; growing up in Athens, near Coxsackie, in the 1960s and 1970s, she thought of herself as Italian American and was only vaguely aware of her mother’s deep Hudson Valley Dutch heritage. Ignorant of the region’s social and political history, she took its Whiteness for granted and did not think to question the commonplace that slavery and Black people belonged to the South. But late in the 2010s, her genealogical research on Ancestry.com revealed more than a quaint, bucolic saga of wholesome farmers.

It took Bruno about a decade to discover the history of slavery in Ulster and Greene Counties: exit 18, New Paltz; exit 19, Kingston; exit 21, Catskill; exit 21B, Coxsackie. Through a Facebook group called I’ve Traced My Enslaved Ancestors and Their Owners, she connected with Eleanor Mire of Malden, Massachusetts, a descendant of the people Bruno’s ancestors had enslaved.

Bruno and Mire learned that their seventeenth-century ancestors were part of an economy largely based on barter. Purchases, loans, and collateral were accounted for in measures of meat, wheat, oats, peas, tobacco, and human beings. People held as chattel represented a substantial part of the region’s population and wealth. The 1796 last will and testament of Bruno’s five-times-great-grandfather Isaac Collier bequeathed to family heirs “one other Feather Bed, one Negro Boy named Will and my sorrel mare and sorrel stallion, one waggon & harrow,” and “my negro wench named marie.” Bruno was devastated to find this. “They all owned slaves,” she writes. “And they too were all my kin.”

Only in 1799, more than a century and a half after the first enslaved person arrived in New York, did the state pass an act “for the gradual abolition of slavery,” meaning it remained a slave state well into the nineteenth century. Children born to enslaved mothers after July 4, 1799, were declared free but forced to work as indentured servants until age twenty-five if female or twenty-eight if male. A law passed in 1817 changed the age to twenty-one. All enslaved people were to be free after July 4, 1827, leaving only the indentured children to complete their terms of servitude. In 1820 in Greene County, 128 people were still bound to service. Godine’s rich history begins in this post-emancipation period, when slavery was fading but voting restrictions crippled Black New Yorkers’ citizenship.

Because Godine’s and Bruno’s books are in large part about contemporary revisions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, historiography plays a large part in each story. Willis Augustus Hodges, a cofounder of the antislavery newspaper *The Ram’s Horn*, wrote about the Adirondack story in his memoir, *Free Man of Color*, which he completed in Franklin County in 1849. (The memoir was serialized posthumously in *The Indianapolis Freeman* in 1896, but it wasn’t published in book form until 1982.) The project of revising Adirondack history began in 1989, when Katherine Butler Jones discovered a nineteenth-century marriage certificate that she recognized as a document of not just personal but regional importance.

Jones, who was a professor of African American history at Simmons College in Boston, found the document, dated October 30, 1843, while visiting her widowed mother in Harlem. Signed by the Reverend Henry Highland Garnet, it legalized the marriage of Hannah Dimond and Edward Weeks, Jones’s great-grandparents, who lived in Westport, a

small town on Lake Champlain. “I held a piece of history in my hands,” Jones wrote in “They Called It Timbucto,” an essay in *Orion* magazine in which she detailed her findings.

Garnet was born enslaved in 1815 in Kent County, Maryland, and escaped with his family in 1824, ultimately to New York City. A student at the African Free School in New York City, Noyes Academy in Canaan, New Hampshire, and the Oneida Institute near Utica, Garnet was unusually well-educated for an American of his time, particularly a Black American. Lacking employment commensurate with his education, Garnet worked at sea before being ordained in 1842 and taking over Liberty Street Presbyterian Church in Troy, across the Hudson from Albany. There he published the short-lived newspaper *The National Watchman* and was active in the Black convention movement.

From the 1830s through the 1890s, before and after legal emancipation, the Black convention movement gathered Black men—women were not welcome—to discuss politics and means of attaining social justice. At the 1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, when the abolition of slavery seemed beyond the reach of political action, Garnet issued his “Address to the Slaves” urging enslaved people to seize their own freedom by force if necessary. The White abolitionist John Brown, a confirmed believer in armed direct action who would soon establish his own farm on Gerrit Smith’s land, supported Garnet’s statement, which other abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass, dismissed as too radical.

Garnet, an early promoter of Smith’s land grant, was a thoroughgoing advocate of Black self-sufficiency. Smith owned and paid taxes on more Adirondack land than he could exploit, and when he proposed his grants in 1846 he knew that Black New Yorkers, many formerly enslaved, had no other way of accumulating \$250 in property. Garnet was one of several landowners seeking to persuade people in New York, Albany, Troy, and other cities to move into the mountain wilderness, clear forested land, and improve it.

Smith and Garnet hoped to draw three thousand families to the North Country, but most Black families lacked the money needed to make the move. Those who did accept the offer created new neighborhoods of their own, such as Freeman’s Home, Timbuctoo, Blacksville, and Negro Brook. About seventy families persevered into later decades. When the Fifteenth Amendment abolished discriminatory property qualification for voting in 1870, many of the Smith grantees gave up their land and moved to Westport, Elizabethtown, and other points south, where they were more likely to find paid employment. John Thomas, a fugitive from Maryland, stayed on until his death in 1894. At the end of the nineteenth century, while scores of Black Adirondackers lived in the region and up and down the Hudson Valley, only one Black family among the Smith grantees remained in place.

Lyman Epps, born in 1815, had settled his family near John Brown’s farm in North Elba, where Epps cultivated corn, rye, peas, and turnips and owned several cows and sheep. The death of his son Lyman Jr. in 1942 closed the Smith grantees’ chapter.

Even though the Smith grantees proved just as mobile as other Americans, Godine grasps the profound significance of their initial settlement to the region’s history. “Ground was gained,” she writes, through “imperfect, rangy, and adaptive” strategies of coexistence across the American color line. The cohort of grantees inspired the creation of more Black settlements in Vermont, Maine, Indiana, Oregon, and California.

Our twenty-first-century rediscovery of Black Adirondackers owes much not only to Katherine Butler Jones’s research but to the fame of John Brown. Today John Brown Farm, a state historic site in North Elba on the outskirts of Lake Placid, exploits Brown’s history for the sake of the region’s antislavery bona fides. Brown had visited Smith in 1848, and the two agreed that as a sheep and cattle farmer, Brown could advise settlers on Smith’s Adirondack grants. Brown moved his family to North Elba, but his residence there was only intermittent, as his antislavery mission called him to battle proslavery settlers in Kansas in the 1850s and to lead his raid on the federal armory in Virginia. Brown, his son, and his Harpers Ferry comrades are buried on the North Elba farm, but his widow sold the property in the mid-1860s and moved with her surviving children to California. Although the farm changed private hands in the years that followed, many pilgrims visited the site to honor Brown’s antislavery memory.

New York state acquired the farm in 1896. In the 1920s, Black John Brown devotees in Philadelphia began organizing annual visits that grew throughout the twentieth century. Godine chronicles the fascinating, prickly visits of Black John Brown pilgrims to Lake Placid, whose main developer, Melvil Dewey (of Dewey Decimal fame), was an ardent Anglo-Saxonist intolerant even of White Catholics. In 1999 Martha Swan, with the encouragement of Russell Banks, the author of the John Brown–themed novel *Cloudsplitter* (1998), founded the antiracist organization John Brown Lives!, to which I belong. The organization hosts a variety of human rights events and celebrates Black history, including an annual John Brown Day. In 2001, Godine, who is also involved with John Brown Lives!, curated “Dreaming of Timbuctoo,” an exhibition inspired by Jones’s essay that toured the region before its permanent installation in the barn at John Brown Farm. Both the exhibition and the farm that now hosts it are models of Adirondack desegregation.

Godine begins *The Black Woods* with the antisegregation activist and environmentalist Brother Yusuf Abdul-Wasi Burgess of Albany. Until his death in 2013, Brother Yusuf took teenagers of color camping in the Adirondacks every year on a mission to let them feel at home in the

mountains. The trips always included a visit to John Brown Farm. “You don’t have to buy this story,” he would tell them. “You own it. You’re stakeholders. This land is my land. This land is yours.”

Bruno’s book includes a similar example of a contemporary embrace of the North’s long-ignored Black presence. In the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, she and Mire saw the Van Bergen Overmantel (circa 1728–1738), a painting that depicts a working farm in the Catskills and its people, Black, Indigenous, and White. Such visual records of a multiracial past disappeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as non-White people were scrubbed from historical exhibitions. The painting was hidden away, first in private hands, then in museum storage, only rarely to be publicly exhibited.

The restoration of northern New York’s history continues at the hands of local historical societies. The Cragmoor Historical Society in Ulster County, founded in 1996, has been especially effective. Its widely honored 2018 documentary *Where Slavery Died Hard: The Forgotten History of Ulster County and the Shawangunk Mountain Region*, made in collaboration with the archaeologists Wendy E. Harris and Arnold Pickman, presents textual and photographic evidence of the intensity of slavery in Ulster County over some two hundred years.

Closer to New York City, the Philipsburg Manor in Westchester County was the state’s largest eighteenth-century slave plantation. Long after it became a National Historic Landmark in 1961, the manor’s educational materials portrayed it as a nice place to work. For decades it celebrated Pinkster, a holiday celebrated by Black New Yorkers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as charmingly White and quintessentially Dutch, with tulips and wooden shoes. In the 1990s the emphasis finally began to shift. Philipsburg Manor has now returned Pinkster to the history of Black New Yorkers; the annual festival includes Black drumming, dancing, and storytelling. Con Edison boasts of having supported Pinkster for more than thirty years.

Bruno ends her book with a chapter on historical “repair” and “reparation,” an effort of which her book is a part. She leaves the final pages to Mire, who writes about her research before meeting Bruno and then after, as they filled in the gaps of Hudson Valley history together. Bruno and Mire discovered that a woman named Mary Vanderzee connects them. (*A Hudson Valley Reckoning* is dedicated to her.) Vanderzee, who was born in 1802 and lived for over a century, was owned by Bruno’s ancestors. Mire explains that Vanderzee family lore had held—comfortingly but incorrectly—that they had never been enslaved. But their intersecting lines of physical and legal kinship inspired Mire’s joke that soon there would be Black cousins at every family gathering. While learning of her slave-owning ancestry had initially disturbed Bruno, Mire discouraged her feelings of shame. “I believe we are only responsible for ourselves and what we do,” Mire writes, “not for our ancestors.”





Vedder Research Library Photographic Collection/Greene County Historical Society, New York

Mary Vanderzee on her one hundredth birthday, New Baltimore, New York, 1902

Bruno's personal account complements Godine's meticulously researched history; together they demonstrate how the writing and exhibiting of history have changed in our time. Published amid the intensification of the war on histories of race and racism in America, they may, unfortunately, come to represent the culmination of local Black histories. My fear now is that Donald Trump's second presidential term and the campaign against diversity, equity, and inclusion and so-called wokeism, a campaign threatening to resegregate American public life, will succeed in reverting American history to the lily-Whiteness that Debra Bruno grew up with. So much will have been lost—again.

**Nell Irvin Painter**

Nell Irvin Painter is the Edwards Professor of American History Emerita at Princeton and the author of *I Just Keep Talking*, *Old in Art School*, and *The History of White People*, among other books. (March 2025)