

The Birthplace of the Book of Negroes

By Brian McConnell, UE

On May 14, 2025 I visited Fraunces Tavern in New York City where the Book of Negroes was assembled in 1783. The book was a ledger commissioned by Sir Guy Carleton and compiled under the direction of Brigadier General Samuel Birch that documented the names and details of formerly enslaved African people who were evacuating at the end of the American Revolution.

Sir Guy Carleton was the commander – in- chief of British forces in North America, responsible for overseeing the evacuation of British troops and loyalist refugees from New York City at the end of the Revolutionary War. Brigadier General Samuel Birch was the British Commandant of New York City and played a key role in the evacuation process particularly in managing the embarkation of Black Loyalists.

Fraunces Tavern was originally built in 1719 as a residence for Stephen de Lancey. It was purchased in 1762 by Samuel Fraunces and turned into a tavern. In 1775 Fraunces left for New Jersey and his Loyalist son – in- law Charles Campbell operated the Tavern until his return. (1)



Fraunces Tavern located on southeast corner of Pearl and Broad Streets, New York City

A portion of Fraunces Tavern is now a museum including the upstairs Long Room where it is believed the Book of Negroes was prepared. (2) It was also the location on December 4, 1783 at the conclusion of the American Revolutionary War where General George Washington met with his Continental Army officers for the final time and bid them farewell. (3)



The Long Room in Fraunces Tavern

Across the hall from the Long Room on the second floor is another room with displays and information to explain the experience of African Americans during the American Revolution and Black Loyalists. (4) Here it is noted that before the British Army and Loyalists completed their evacuation of New York “the parties negotiated the terms of peace and an orderly exit. One question was how to treat Black Loyalists, including those who had assisted British forces.

The joint British and American commission that met at Fraunces Tavern was overseen by Brigadier General Samuel Birch, Commander of the 17th Regiment of Light Dragoons and Commandant of New York. As a result, these proceedings have come to be called the ‘Birch Trials’. The ‘Birch Trials’ were part of a process whereby approximately 3,000 Black Loyalists whose names were recorded by the commission in what was called the Book of Negroes, evacuated New York between April and November 1783. Their evacuation was one of the largest emancipations of Black People prior to the American Civil War.”

“Captain Armstrong Deputy Quarter Master General, Captain Gillian Deputy Quarter Master General, Major of Brigade Phillips, Captain Cooke 37th Regiment, Egbert Benson, Esquire, Lieut. Col. Smith, and Daniel Parker, Esquire, are to compose the Board appointed by the Orders of 18th April 1783 to superintend all embarkations.

The Refugees and all Masters of Vessels will be attentive that no person is permitted to embark as a Refugee who has not resided twelve months within the British Lines, without a special Passport from the Commandant. It is also recommended to the Refugees to take Care no person of bad character is suffered to embark with them.

The above Board will assemble at Fraunces Tavern every Wednesday at 10 o'clock where they will attend from that Hour to two o'clock to receive and settle all Claims relative to Negroes, etc."

The Minutes of the Commission meetings provide an interesting look at the type of cases which were reviewed.

Minutes of Board of Commissioners for Superintending Embarkations held the 30th May 1783

Present:

On the part of Great Britain

Captain Armstrong

Major Phillips

Captain Cooke

of America

Egbert Benson, Esquire

Lieut. Col. Smith

Case 1:

A. Bertram, a Negro, complains that his daughter Nancy is detained by Henry Rogers of Queen Street in order to send her to her former Master in Connecticut.

It appears by Certificate of Captain Nathan Hubbell that A. Bartram with his two daughters Nancy and Flora came within the British Lines in July 1779.

A. Bartram demands his daughter Nancy of Henry Rogers as she came with him into the British Lines at the abovementioned time.

Henry Rogers could not produce anything for detaining Bertram's daughter Nancy.

Opinion sent to the Commandant: The abovementioned child is ordered by the Board to be set at liberty by Henry Rogers and he is ordered not to detain her any longer contrary to her inclinations.

Case 2:

Captain Hewetson lays claim to a Negro Woman named Sally.

It appears by the report of the Police of the 27th October 1780 that the abovementioned Sally was sentenced for consequence of being an accomplice in a Robbery to be whipped through the Town and then put on board a vessel bound to the West Indies. The former part of the Sentence was put in Execution and then afterwards remained in Provost four months, at the expiration of which time Captain Hewetson took her out of the Provost and now claims under an Indenture bearing date the 29 January 1781 the aforementioned Sally as his property.

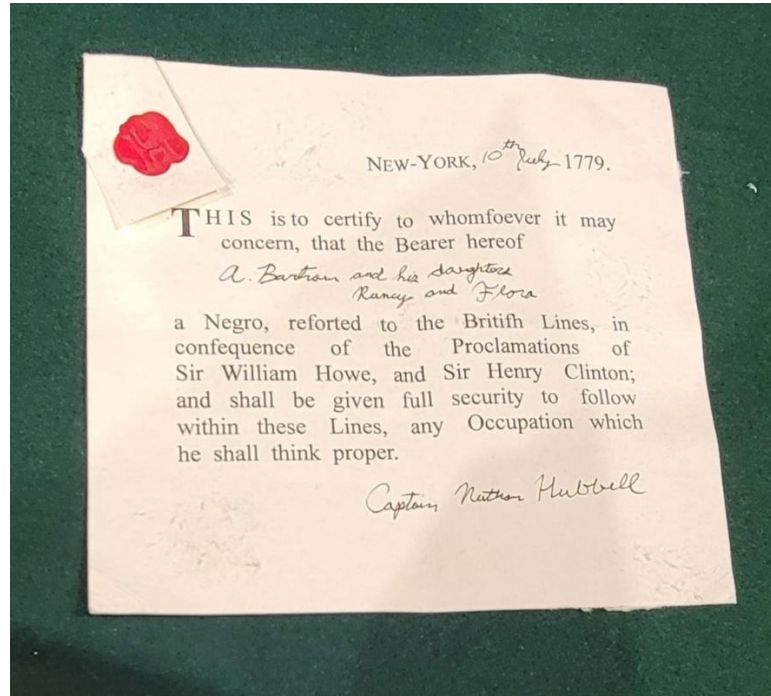
Opinion to the Commandant: The Board is of opinion that the Indenture being founded upon false principles is void and of no effect and that Captain Hewetson has no Claim to the Service of the Wench and of consequence no Property on her.

Case 3:

Violet Taulbert, a Negro woman, complains of being detained by David Campbell as a Slave without sufficient authority.

It appears to the Board that the aforesaid Violet was the Property of John Gilchrist of Virginia and that after his decease his brother Thomas Gilchrist as Executor disposed of her to the aforesaid David Campbell for a certain sum of money agreeable to a Bill of Sale and that the transaction met with the approbation of the Magistrates of Police as certified by Mr. St. Clair, Secretary to the Commandant.

Opinion sent to the Commandant: The Board is of Opinion that Violet Taulbert is the Property of David Campbell by regular transfer.

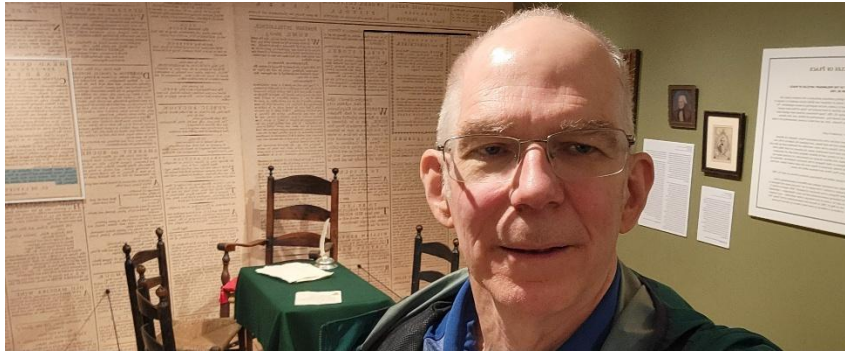


Certificate of Freedom dated July 10, 1779

The Certificates given to formerly enslaved Black people by the British during the American Revolution for free passage to Nova Scotia were called Certificates of Freedom. They were recorded in the Book of Negroes. (5)

A case involving a Certificate of Freedom during the Birch Trials concerned Judith Jackson. She was claimed by Jonathan Ellbeck, a loyalist Virginian kidnapper who was living in New York at the time. "Judith produced a Certificate of Freedom dated June 5, 1783, bearing the name Jenny Jackson. Her former slaveowner, John McLean, was a Loyalist who returned to England because of the war, leaving Judith behind. She stated she had crossed into British Lines at Charleston, South Carolina, where she reported to British General Leslie and travelled to New York with the army.

Ellbeck produced a Bill of Sale from McLean dated July 16, 1782, but the case was forwarded to Carleton's office for decision." Carleton decided she was free to evacuate and she departed for Port Mouton, Nova Scotia on November 30, 1783. (6)



In room at Fraunces Tavern Museum about the Birch Trials

Notes:

- This article was prepared by Brian McConnell, UE on June 30, 2025. To contact him email brianm564@gmail.com
- (1) Fraunces Tavern Museum, accessed on June 29, 2025 at <https://www.frauncestavernmuseum.org/history>
 - (2) The Long Room, Fraunces Tavern, N.Y. accessed on June 30, 2025 at https://youtu.be/Yj0F3k_96QI?si=3OAOz1YSWIHW89HU
 - (3) Long Room Archive, accessed on June 28, 2025 at <https://www.frauncestavernmuseum.org/long-room-archive>
 - (4) The Birch Trials at Fraunces Tavern accessed June 30, 2025 at https://youtu.be/aFsV-DJlhSA?si=-q_8Wkaf4mSuryiz
 - (5) Black Loyalists: Our History, Our People, accessed on June 29, 2025 at <https://blackloyalist.com/cdc/story/exile/certificate.htm>
 - (6) Black Loyalists in the Evacuation of New York City accessed on June 29, 2025 at <https://www.gothamcenter.org/blog/black-loyalists-evacuation-zy4la>