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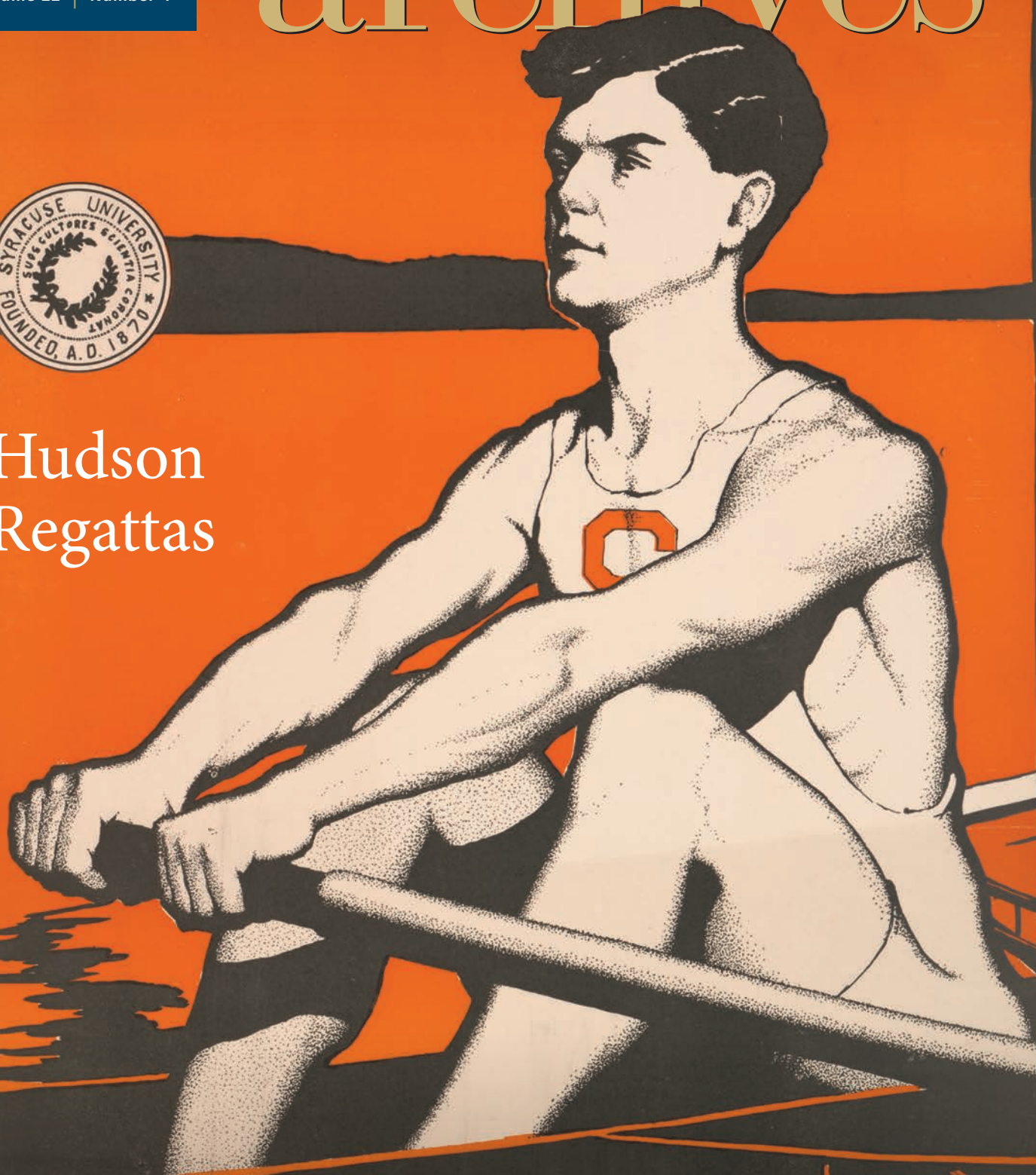
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"Land of the Blacks": America's First Free Black Community

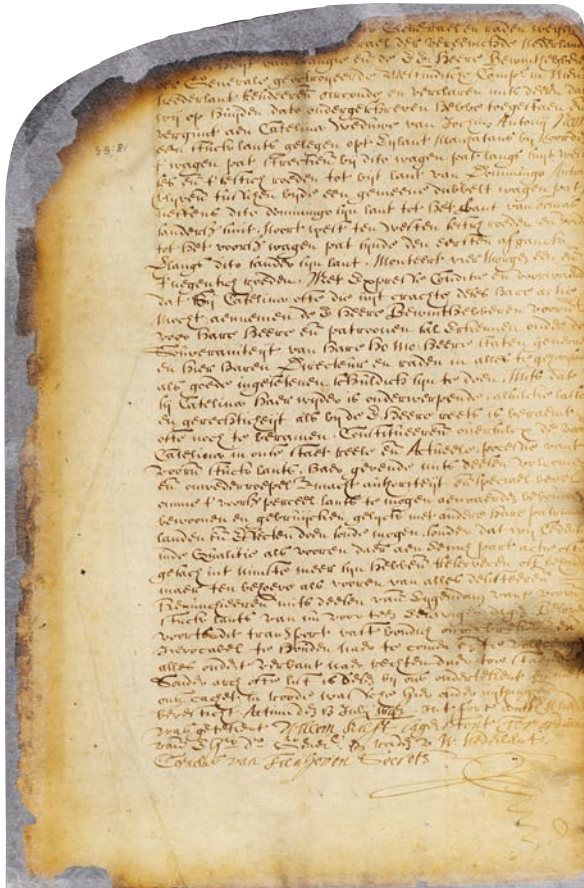
BY JASMINE BUMPERS AND JAMIE BRINKMAN

On July 13, 1643, Catelina Antony, widow of Jochim, and Domingo Antony received the first of more than two dozen land grants issued to Black residents of New Netherland. The grants, totaling 130 acres, stretched across the present-day Manhattan neighborhoods of Greenwich Village, SoHo, Chinatown, and Little Italy. To create a buffer zone between New Amsterdam and the neighboring Algonquian-speaking tribes with which the colony was at war, Dutch colonial directors beginning with Willem Kieft issued these land

grants, under the guise of a reward for years of loyal servitude, to formerly enslaved Black men and women granted "half-freedom." This was a status unique to New Netherland in which Blacks, enslaved by the Dutch West India Company and individual slaveholders, were released from bondage and granted a limited form of freedom contingent upon specific conditions. Paying yearly dues (usually in the form of produce or livestock); the weekly cleaning of the Director's house; and their children remaining enslaved were some of the conditions.

Though most of the land's inhabitants were not fully manumitted, the settlement that emerged in this area, known as "Land of the Blacks," is often referred to as one of the first free Black communities in the United States. Despite the less than honorable intentions surrounding its creation, it flourished. Owners established farms, sold the crops they cultivated, attended church together, and developed close-knit bonds with their neighbors.

On September 8, 1664, the Dutch surrendered New Netherland to the British, who questioned both the freedom status of the Black landowners and their rights to the land they occupied. In April 1665, former Director General Peter Stuyvesant formally verified the land grants via a certificate stating the "parcels of land were granted and given to the underwritten in free and true ownership." Therefore, confirmations of the original Dutch land grants were issued by the British colonial government, and the Black real property owners were allowed to keep their land. However, in December 1712, "An Act for Preventing, Suppressing and Punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negroes and other Slaves" was passed by the New York Provincial Assembly, which implemented stricter regulations regarding enslaved people.



Patent of Catelina Antony for a plot of land in Manhattan

NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES



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This 1766 map has been overlaid with information on individual land grants compiled by Village Preservation.

- 1 Catelina Antony
- 2 Domingo Antony
- 3 Cleyln Manuel
- 4 Manuel de Gerrit de Rues
- 5 Manuel Trumpeter
- 6 Marycke
- 7 Gracia d'Angola
- 8 Simon Congo
- 9 Jan Francisco
- 10 Pieter San Tome
- 11 Manuel Groot
- 13 Cleyln Antony
- 14 Paulo d'Angola
- 15 Anthony Portuguese
- 16 Anna d'Angola
- 17 Francisco d'Angola
- 18 Anthony Congo
- 19 Bastiaen Negro
- 20 Jan Negro
- 21 Manuel the Spaniard
- 22 Mathias Anthony
- 23 Domingo Angola
- 24 Claes Negro
- 25 Assento Angola
- 26 Francisco Cartagena
- 27 Anthony of the Bowery
- 28 Anthony of the Blind Negro
- 29 Manuel Sanders

The law also banned the inheritance of property by free Black individuals. As a result, Black landowners were prevented from passing their land down to their descendants, and the once thriving village slowly withered away.

The New York State Archives holds a majority of both the original patents, written in Dutch and issued by the New Netherland Council (Series A1880), and the confirmations of the patents, written in English and issued by

the British colonial government (Series 12943). These little-known documents, which provide evidence of the short-lived community's existence and the rare status awarded to some Black residents of the Dutch colonial period, have been digitized and can be found in the State Archives' Digital Collections, as well as a newly created exhibit page: <https://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Gallery/280>. ■



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