

“To Purchase or Hire”:
Life at the Convergence of Freedom and Slavery
in British Occupied New York, 1776-1783

by

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This paper examines the lives and livelihoods of newly free black refugees in New York during the American Revolution. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children converged on the city following the British-occupying government's promise of freedom for those who fled rebel masters, though New York was not a haven for all. The British-occupying government was not in support of universal manumission, and the newly free found themselves living alongside those still enslaved to Loyalists, continually struggling against white policing of freedoms under the constant threat of re-enslavement. As the American Revolution came to a close, their personal war for freedoms did not end. Taking their lived experiences with them, these refugees became the first settlers in colonized Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, creating a new generation of freedom.

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