

# Constructing History: Documenting Red Hook's Hidden Past

By William P. Tatum III, Ph.D., February 22, 2021

How do historians reconstruct the past from fragmentary evidence? Join us for the introduction to this new series exploring how we uncover Red Hook's hidden past.

## "How was your week?"

Consider your reaction when someone unexpectedly asks you what you've been up to over the past week. If you're like me, a sip of coffee, a few "hmmms," or a drawn out "weeeelllll" covers your desperate rifling through your memory. One day tends to bleed seamlessly into the next, especially in these "interesting" times.

Historians face a similar challenge. We ask them questions, expecting a polished, complete answer informing us about events that transpired before our earliest memories. There is little patience for gaps or best guesses, unless one is discussing known mysteries. **Yet the records from which they can draw factual information are even more fragmentary than our memories of last week.**

SLAVES IN DUTCHESS COUNTY. 1755.		
<i>A true List of all the Negroes that are in my District above the Age of fourteen according to the Act of Assembly for that purpose made and provided</i>		
Masters and Mistress Names	Negroes Names Males	Negroes Names Females
Collo: Martin Hoffman.....	Jack Fortune Frank Francis.....	Sarah Dean Susan Bet
Capt Zacharias Hoffman.....	Toby Jo:.....	Jenny Peggy
Vullard Widbeck.....	Bristol, Will .....	Diana
Harman Knickerbacker.....	Jack.....	
John Van Benthuse.....	Tom .....	Hannah, Jenny
Barrent Van Benthuse.....	Pompey, Cuffy.....	
	Bastian, Andrew, Cuffy, Peter.....	
Anthony Hoffman.....	Simon, prince Adam Mathew.....	
John Vosburgh.....	Jo:.....	Phillis
Capt Evert Knickerbacker.....	Jo Tom.....	Maria
Adam Pitzer.....		Kate
Peter Pitzer.....	Fortune .....	Diana
Rier Schemerhorn.....	Quash .....	
Peter Heermanse.....	Ned .....	
Garrett Heermanse.....		
The above List was taken by me this 12th Day of May 1755		
ZACHARIAS HOFFMAN Captain		

*Transcript of 1755 slave census of Rhynebeck Precinct; the original documents were destroyed in the 1911 NY capital fire leaving us only with these 19th-century transcripts. Edward O'Callaghan, The Documentary History of the State of New York, v. II...*

## What is the difference between "the past" and "history"?

The popular idea of history conflates two contrasting elements: the **past** and **historical narrative**. The past is fact: people lived, died, and did things, but the records left are incomplete. Historical narratives—the histories we read, hear, and watch—are stories we tell ourselves about the past. Usually, the goal of a "history" is to illuminate something we care about in the present. Like the news, sports, and other media, historical narratives are subject to the market forces of perceived relevance. **History is the opinion we hold of the fragmentary facts we know about the past.**

## So, how do we “do” history?

This blog series will present the primary sources—those surviving fragments of the past—that inform our work in local history. Our goal is to demonstrate the difficulties involved in recovering the stories that are hidden from view. Enslaved persons, the poor, immigrants, and other downtrodden groups and individuals have left us with few documents detailing their experiences of life. Yet now, more than ever, we must make every effort to reconstruct their experiences. The names and the faces have changed, but the challenges of inequity, poverty, and social isolation remain.

## Assembling a puzzle

The posts in this series will focus on the challenges of the surviving evidence. You will not find complete stories. You will see how historians account for bias in the source material and seek to address the multiplicity of loose ends and missing information. We will explore where the historical narratives begin and how researchers and writers apply the art of history to **reconstruct a 10,000-piece jigsaw puzzle** using only a few pieces and never peeking at the box cover.

We encourage you to share your thoughts and insights as part of an on-going community conversation about how our shared past can help us understand the challenges we face today. Red Hook has always been a diverse community: in recovering the stories of our predecessors, we seek to construct histories that resonate with everyone today.

### Further Resources:

- Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History*
- Lucy Maynard Salmon, *Why is History Rewritten?*
- National Council on Public History, blog “History @ Work” [ncph.org/history-at-work](http://ncph.org/history-at-work)
- “Doing History” A Podcast from the Omohundro Institute
- Episode 14 “History & Historians in the Public” from Lonnie Bunch, the Founding Director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture [doinghistory-podcast.com/history-historians-in-the-public](http://doinghistory-podcast.com/history-historians-in-the-public)

### About the Author

William P. Tatum III has served as the Dutchess County Historian since 2012. He earned his B.A. in History from the College of William & Mary in Virginia and his M.A. and Ph.D. in History from Brown University. His work has focused on building a collaborative county history community and increasing access to our county’s historic documents. You can find more information at [www.dutchessny.gov/history](http://www.dutchessny.gov/history).