

# Yonkers statues share story of enslaved Africans in New York



**Diana Dombrowski**  
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On the backs and clothing of five figures are the Big Dipper, an African mask, an Igbo prayer and a river escape.

Five life-size statues of enslaved Africans, rich in symbolism and rooted in New York's own history with slavery, were placed along the Hudson shoreline in Yonkers last week in their permanent home, a rain garden over a decade in the making.

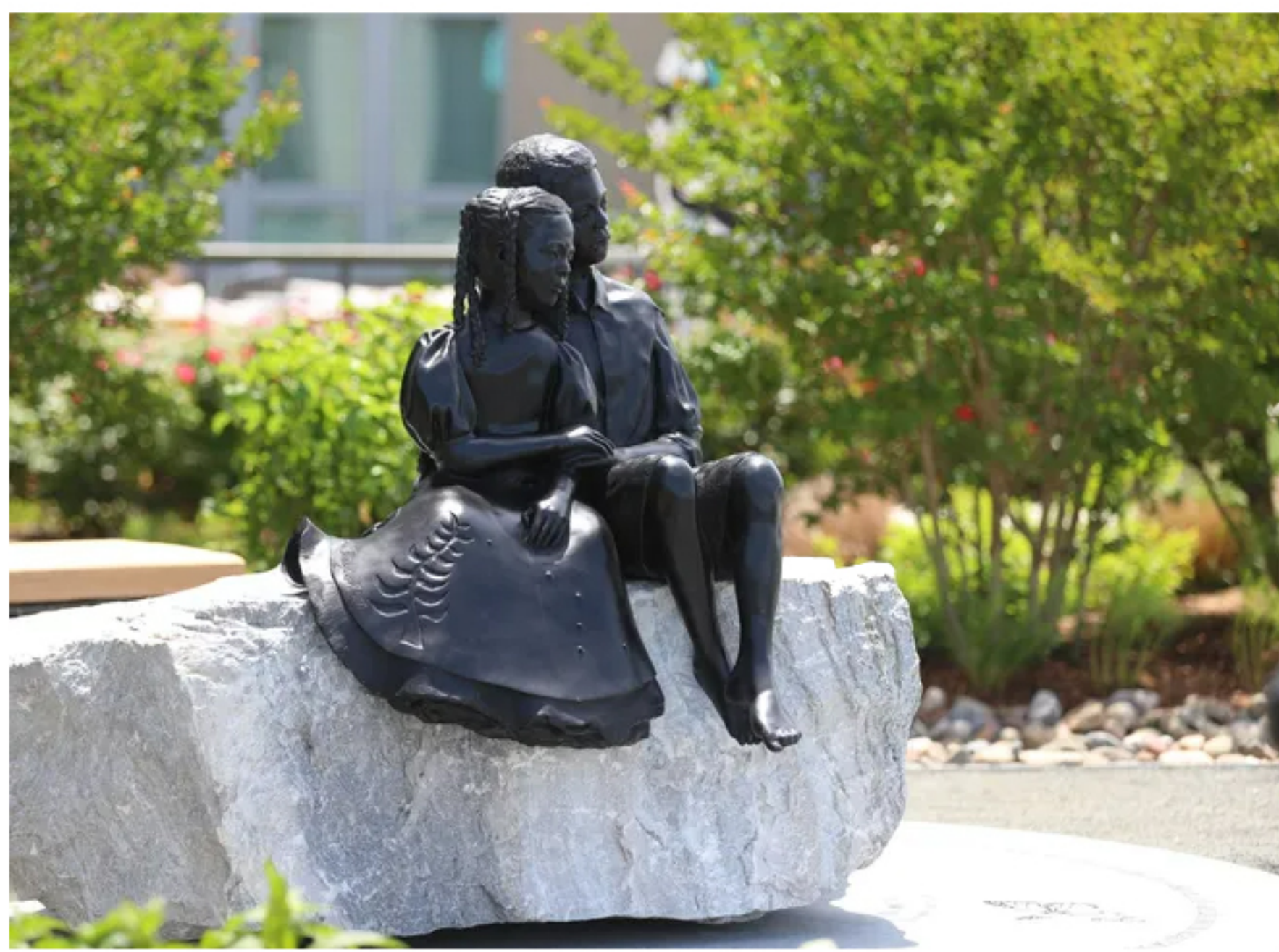
"You don't have to speak my language to understand what this artwork is about," said Vinnie Bagwell, the artist. She's been contacted by people from all over the world who have watched the progression of the statues coming to life on her Facebook page.

Starting off Juneteenth weekend celebrations, the Enslaved Africans' Rain Garden, located at 20 Water Grant St. in Yonkers, will be unveiled Friday at 11:30 a.m.

The statues represent the enslaved Africans who lived at Philipse Manor Hall in Yonkers, and honor the contributions enslaved Africans made to the development of the area. The Philipse family was one of the most prominent enslavers in colonial New York, according to the [Hudson Highlands Land Trust](#). The statues also represent the first people freed from slavery in New York over five decades before the Emancipation Proclamation.

People don't realize there were many enslaved Africans in Westchester County, said Janet Langsam, CEO of ArtsWestchester. In Westchester, "it really is the first major visible tribute to enslaved Africans," she said.

ArtsWestchester sponsored Bagwell and was a grant recipient for the project, Langsam said. When she first heard of the project, Langsam thought it was about time tribute was paid to the enslaved people who contributed to the wealth and prosperity of the county through forced labor.



"This is one of the ways slave traders dehumanized them," Bagwell said of taking away the names of enslaved people.

Each cast bronze statue weighs around 1,000 pounds and required a small team of movers with heavy duty equipment to move them from the Yonkers Riverfront Library, where they'd been on display since March 2021, to their permanent home.

Movers unscrewed the statues from their bases, hoisted them onto dollies and wheeled them outside to transport them by truck.

Each has their own name and story.

Themba the Boatman steers boats by day and helps others escape by night.

I'Satta, an "iconic woman," carries water on her head. Madagascar, Angola and South Africa are on her back, as well as a drowning man representing all those lost at sea.

Bibi represents the elderly — "You're never too old to be a slave," Bagwell said. But, she noted, people also died younger then.

Sola and Olumide, sit close together. Animals are on the back of Sola's dress. Together they represent all the children who were enslaved.

"It's about making sure history is told and history is remembered," said Mayor Mike Spano. "We have to tell the whole story."

## Sending a message

Bagwell hopes the Enslaved Africans' Rain Garden will serve as a model for other communities: that they'll acknowledge the contributions of enslaved Africans and realize doing so through public art is possible.



Statues honoring the enslaved Africans who worked at the Philipse Manor on display at the esplanade along Water Grant Street in Yonkers on Tuesday, June 14, 2022. John Meore/The Journal News

Each statue costs around \$100,000 including labor and materials, Bagwell said, but not each project has to be as big as Yonkers' rain garden.

Some communities are already on that path.

A sculpture of an enslaved girl Bagwell created for Irvington is being cast. Another sculpture for Old Dutch Church in Sleepy Hollow depicting a scene of enslaved people with the church in the background should be done by the end of the year.

Bagwell is also creating a statue of a young Harriet Tubman for the city of Niagara Falls and was selected to replace the Central Park statue of J. Marion Sims with a Black angel. Sims, known as the "father of gynecology," experimented on enslaved women. His statue was taken down in 2018.

Bagwell was also recently named a finalist to create a sculpture in Philadelphia of singer and civil rights activist Marian Anderson.

Funding for Yonkers' project came from the state, county, city and other donors. Support came in other forms, too. Bagwell's landlord in Yonkers gave her five months of free rent while she initially started raising money for the project.

At one point Philipse Manor was considered as the location, but a number of factors pointed to along the river, Spano said, which will attract more people.

Over the years, the project also served as a way to get the community involved. ArtsWestchester hosted exhibitions along the way and Bagwell hosted students in her studio so they could learn about the statues' creation.

"The joy is to be able to complete it," Bagwell said, like waiting for the birth of a child. "It's viable. It's live. It's real. It's here. Look."

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