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THE  
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VALLEY  
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**MARIST**



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## From the Editors

From 1609 through the 1960s, and right up to today, the history of the Hudson River Valley has included points of contention. To misquote Heraclitus, you cannot sail the same river twice. Ever since Europeans first explored the Mahicannituck, today called the Hudson, there have been discrepancies in their descriptions and maps. Patrick Landewe focuses on the number and location of the “racks,” or reaches, that navigators recorded and cartographers fixed to better understand the river. Contrary to what many of us learned even a generation ago, slavery existed in New York, and enslavement could be as brutal here as in the South. Similarly, the lives of Black residents throughout the Hudson River Valley could be just as fraught with peril. This was proven when Port Jervis resident Robert Lewis was lynched by fellow townspeople in 1892. Philip Dray recounts the incident and its aftermath as part of his examination of racial relations and injustices in American history. Another aspect of Black life in the region was Pinkster, an annual celebration that provided enslaved people a brief reprieve from daily life. Few firsthand accounts of these festivities exist, but the late-life recollection of James Eights provides a glimpse of how Pinkster was celebrated by both the Black and white communities in Albany in the early 1800s. In his introduction to Eights’ reminiscence, Michael Groth asks whether — and how — we can know the origins and purposes of certain cultural traditions. Sara Evenson asks the same question through her investigation of family recipes exchanged between Catherine Teresa Romeyn Beck and her granddaughter, Catherine Beck Van Cortlandt, in the mid-nineteenth century. Finally, in the Regional History Forum, Michaela Ellison-Davidson offers a tour of Hudson River School art exhibited across the region. She visits two museums and two historic sites that offer experiences of the landscape, art, architecture, and artists who defined and continue to redefine America’s first art movement.



*On the cover: Michael Seymour (1802–1887), Butter Hill (Storm King) and the Highlands from Newburgh on the Hudson River, July 24, 1846, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Purchase: William Reese Company, DLC/PP-2000:086*

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# Introduction to James Eights' Contemporary Account of Pinkster Festivities in Nineteenth-Century Albany

Michael E. Groth

Accounts of the Afro-Dutch celebration of Pinkster provide brief but fascinating glimpses into the vibrant cultural world of the early Hudson River Valley. The unfortunate paucity of contemporary descriptions of the festival has forced historians to rely on a handful of printed accounts, including reminiscences like that of Dr. James Eights, published six decades after the fact, in Joel Munsell's *Collections on the History of Albany*. However incomplete, the existing record clearly suggests that by the early nineteenth century the Dutch (and German) religious holiday commemorating Pentecost had been transformed by Black residents of Albany, the Hudson Valley, and other Afro-Dutch regions of New York and New Jersey. The fragmentary record raises many provocative questions.

What roles did Pinkster fill in a slave society? New York emerged as the largest slave society in the northern British mainland colonies during the eighteenth century, and the state's powerful slaveholding interest fiercely resisted efforts to emancipate Black New Yorkers during and after the American Revolution. Adopted in 1799, the state's gradual abolition statute in fact liberated no one; although theoretically free, children born of enslaved women after July 4, 1799, were bound to serve their mother's masters until adulthood. What did Pinkster mean in such a context? Was the celebration comparable to other festivals of misrule that served to reinforce the existing social order by providing a "safety valve" for the oppressed to release anger and discontent in a controlled environment? Or did Black New Yorkers actively transform the holiday into a celebration of a unique Creole culture that nurtured individual and communal pride? That the Albany Common Council in 1811 adopted an ordinance that sharply curtailed many of the activities associated with the festival is suggestive.

Brief but detailed descriptions of Pinkster festivities also raise many questions about Black life and culture. African cultural influences were unmistakable in early nineteenth-century celebrations, but historians struggle to decipher their meaning. To what extent did the specific rituals, activities, and styles signify the direct transfer of particular "African" cultural forms brought to the Hudson Valley during the era of the transatlantic slave trade? Vivid descriptions of elaborate and colorful costumes,

unique musical instruments, distinctive musical rhythms, and expressive dance clearly suggest the persistence of “Africanisms” in the Hudson Valley. But did the celebration in fact represent not the persistence of any particular African forms but the fusion of many different traditions — European and American as well as African? Since its inception, New York had been the most culturally heterogeneous province in North America. White colonists traced their origins to England and the British Isles, France, the Netherlands, Iberia, and different Germanic kingdoms of Central Europe. The colony’s Black population was yet more diverse; enslaved New Yorkers came from East Africa, Madagascar, Central Africa, West Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the Atlantic World. Rather than thinking of Pinkster as an expression of authentically “African” traditions, is it more appropriate to imagine the celebration as the syncretization of multiple cultural forms and the fashioning of a new *African-American* identity in the Hudson Valley? That the few written accounts of Pinkster were composed by whites raises other questions. Even if the region’s Black residents appropriated the festival over time, Dr. Eights’ reminiscence suggests that the festivities attracted others in the community as observers and perhaps even as participants. If observers, what did they come to see? If actual participants, what did they propose to do? When contemplating Pinkster, should the historian imagine not one but multiple celebrations?

Although colored by nostalgia and the experience of Civil War, James Eights’ account offers a window through which the historian can imagine and contemplate the extraordinarily rich and dynamic cultural world of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hudson Valley.

*Michael E. Groth is Professor of History at Wells College.*

## Editors' Note:

The following account was written by James Eights (1798–1882) and initially appeared in the newspaper *The Cultivator*. Joel Munsell later reprinted it under the title “Pinkster Festivities in Albany Sixty Years Ago” in his book *Collections on the History of Albany: From Its Discovery to the Present Time; With Notices of its Public Institutions, and Biographical Sketches of Citizens Deceased* (1865). The first paragraph below was Munsell’s introduction in that volume; it is followed by Eights’ original account.

*[This great festival of the negroes when slavery existed in the state, and when every family of wealth or distinction possessed one or more slaves, took place usually in May, and continued an entire week. It began on the Monday following the Whitsunday or Pentecost of the Catholic and Episcopal churches, and was the carnival of the African race, in which they indulged in unrestrained merriment and revelry. The excesses which attended these occasions were so great that in 1811 the common council was forced to prohibit the erection of booths and stalls, the parades, dances, gaming and drunkenness, with which they were attended, under penalty of fine or imprisonment; and being thereby deprived of their principal incitements and attractions, the anniversary soon fell into disuse, and is therefore unknown to the present generation. The following account of the Pinkster jubilee is taken from the Cultivator, for which it was written by Dr. JAMES EIGHTS, as the recollections of what he witnessed in his youth, when the custom was at its zenith. Pinkster hill, the scene of these celebrations, was the site of the Capitol, before the hand of man was stretched forth to pull down that eminence. Afterwards it was held at various places, but on the death of King Charles, it was observed with less enthusiasm, and finally sank into such a low nuisance as to fall under the ban of the authorities.]*

Bright and beautifully broke the morning that ushered in the first great day of the Pinkster jubilee. The air was filled with melody, and the purple hued martins, from their well provided shelter against the walls, or from the far-projecting eaves of many antiquated mansions, were chattering with noisy garrulity, as if in thankfulness for having been brought safely through the night to witness the light of this new born day. The lilacs in the garden around were everywhere redolent with sweet smelling odors,

while the pink blossomed azalias (sic) from the neighboring plains fairly saturated the bright morning air with their ever-delicious fragrance. But, within doors, all was bustling commotion, nor did the overjoyous (sic) little ones, with their merry, gleesome mirth-ringing music to the ear, contribute greatly to quell these conflicting tumults within, and bring peace and order to this bewildering scene; but at every turn, where'er (sic) you went, you would be sure to encounter some one or more of these juvenile prattlers, frisking about with various garments on their arms and sometimes strewing them in wild dismay, all over the chamber floor, calling lustily for aid to adjust them in their befitting position; nor could a frown or even a scolding tongue for a moment quiet them in their noisy vociferations and frolicsome glee.

Quiet in some degree was at length restored to the household. The younger members of the family — both white and colored — had peacefully submitted to the process of cleansing, and were now tastefully adorned in all their varied finery, with numberless small coins merrily jingling in their ample pockets, seemingly keeping time to their sprightly movements, as well as to the silvery music of their mirthful voices. To witness this scene of innocent delight was a pleasing sight to all, and caused the bright eye of the mother to sparkle with pride, and her affectionate heart to expand within her bosom.

Under the careful guidance of a trusty slave, forth we were ushered into the densely thronged streets, and never shall we forget the scene of gayety and merriment that there prevailed — joyous groups of children, all under the protecting care of some favorite old dame or damsel, gayly decorated with ribbons and flowers of every description, blithly (sic) wending their way along the different avenues that led to the far-famed Pinkster hill — and long before we reached the appointed place rejoicing, were our ears greeted with the murmuring sound of many voices, harmoniously intermingled with the occasional shouts of boisterous mirth, and when we arrived on the field we found the green sward already darkened by the gathering multitude, consisting chiefly of individuals of almost every description of feature, form and color, from the sable sons of Africa, neatly attired and scrupulously clean in all their holiday habiliments, to the half clad and blanketed children of the forest, accompanied by their squaws, these latter being heavily burdened with all their different wares, such as baskets, moccasins, birch-bark, nick-nacks, and many other things much too numerous for us even here to mention, and boys and girls of every age and condition were everywhere seen gliding to and fro amid this motley group.

The Pinkster grounds, where we now found ourselves comfortably provided for in a friendly booth or tent, securely protected from the pressure of the swaying multitude without, gave us a most convenient opportunity to inspect the place, and witness at our leisure the entire proceedings of this tumultuous mass of human beings, as they passed in disorderly review before our eyes. The grounds were quaintly laid out in the form of an oblong square, and closely hemmed in with the

rude buildings on every side save one, and this was left free, so as to give entrance and freely to admit the crowd. Beyond this square, and in the rear of all the tents, were to be found the spaces appropriated to the various exhibitions, such as of wild animals, rope dancing, circus-riding and the playing ground of all simple gaming sports. Here might be seen for a moderate pittance, the royal tiger of Bengal, and the lordly lion from Africa, with a monkey perched over the entrance door, profusely provided for by the youth and children of the white population; and much did these little ones enjoy themselves in witnessing the wonderful agility with which this diminutive satire on man caught the numerous cakes and other good things thrown within his reach; and then there was Mademoiselle Some-one, with a hard, unpronounceable name, to perform amazing wonders on the slack rope; and in the next enclosure was Monsieur Gutta Percha, to ride the famous horse Selim, and throw a somerset through a blazing hoop, attended by the great Rickett, the celebrated clown of the day, to display his stock of buffoonery on horseback, and break his neck, if necessary, to afford the amplest satisfaction to the assembled auditors.

Thus passed the first day of the festival, merry enough, no doubt, but, being considered vastly ungenteel for the colored nobility to make their appearance on the commencing day, we must defer our more minute details of the ceremonies until the approaching morrow.

The morning sun rose again as beautifully over the smiling landscape as on the preceding day, and cast a cheerful glow of animation over everything around; the excited youngsters, too, were all awake at the early chirping of the birds, and with their silver-toned voices gave a lively chorus to the surrounding scene. After the preliminary preparation, as on the previous day, each was again attired in an appropriate manner to revisit the festal meeting at the usual hour. Early again the crowd were assembled, fully prepared to enter with pleasurable feelings into all the exciting events, as they from time to time should transpire; but far more circumspect were they, and orderly in their demeanor, as all the more respectable members of their community were there to witness any discreditable act, and ever afterward be sure to reward the transgressors with their most severe indignation and contempt.

The master of ceremonies, on this occasion — the Beau Brummel of the day — was Adam Blake, then body servant to the old patroon, and a young man in all the grace and elegance of manner, which so eminently characterized his progress through life until his dying day; to him was unanimously entrusted the arduous duty of reducing to some kind of order this vast mass of incongruent material, which his superior ability soon enabled him to accomplish with complete success.

The hour of ten having now arrived, and the assembled multitude being considered most complete, a deputation was then selected to wait upon their venerable sovereign king, “Charley of the Pinkster hill,” with the intelligence that

his respectful subjects were congregated, and were anxiously desirous to pay all proper homage to his majesty their king. Charles originally came from Africa, having, in his infant days, been brought from Angola, in the Guinea gulf; and soon after his arrival became the purchased slave of one of the most ancient and respectable merchant princes of the olden time, then residing on the opposite bank of the Hudson. He was tall, thin and athletic; and although the frost of nearly seventy winters had settled on his brow, its chilling influence had not yet extended to his bosom, and he still retained all the vigor and agility of his younger years. Such were his manly attributes at this present time.

Loud rang the sound of many voices from the neighboring street, shoutingly (sic) proclaiming the arrival of the master of the revels, and soon the opening crowd admitted him within their presence, and never, if our memory serve us, shall we forget the mingled sensations of awe and grandeur that were impressed on our youthful minds, when first we beheld his stately form and dignified aspect, slowly moving before us and approaching the centre of the ring. His costume on this memorable occasion was graphic and unique to the greatest degree, being that worn by a British brigadier of the olden time. Ample broad cloth scarlet coat, with wide flaps almost reaching to his heels, and gayly ornamented everywhere with broad tracings of bright golden lace; his small clothes were of yellow buckskin, fresh and new, with stockings blue, and burnished silver buckles to his well-blackened shoe; when we add to these the tricornered cocked hat trimmed also with lace of gold, and which so gracefully set upon his noble, globular pate, we nearly complete the rude sketch of the Pinkster king.

The greetings were at length over, and the hour of twelve having arrived, peace and tranquility had once more been partially restored to the multitude; his majesty, the king, was in the midst of his assembled friends and subjects, and the accomplished master of the ceremonies, with his efficient aids were busily employed in making the necessary arrangements to commence the festivities with zeal and earnestness; partners were then selected and led out upon the green, and the dancing was about to commence.

The dance had its peculiarities, as well as everything else connected with this august celebration. It consisted chiefly of couples joining in the performances at varying times, and continuing it with their utmost energy until extreme fatigue or weariness compelled them to retire and give space to a less exhausted set; and in this successive manner was the excitement kept up with unabated vigor, until the shades of night began to fall slowly over the land, and at length deepen into the silent gloom of midnight.

The music made use of on this occasion, was likewise singular in the extreme. The principal instrument selected to furnish this important portion of the ceremony was a symmetrically formed wooden article usually denominated an *eel-pot*, with

a cleanly dressed sheep skin drawn tightly over its wide and open extremity — no doubt obtained expressly for the occasion from the celebrated *Fish slip*, at the foot of the Maiden's lane. Astride this rude utensil sat Jackey Quackenboss, then in his prime of life and well known energy, beating lustily with his naked hands upon its loudly sounding head, successively repeating the ever wild, though euphonic cry of *Hi-a-bomba, bomba, bomba*, in full harmony with the thumping sounds. These vocal sounds were readily taken up and as oft repeated by the female portion of the spectators not otherwise engaged in the exercises of the scene, accompanied by the beating of time with their ungloved hands, in strict accordance with the eel-pot melody.

Merrily now the dance moved on, and briskly twirled the lads and lasses over the well trampled green sward; loud and more quickly swelled the sounds of music to the ear, as the excited movements increased in energy and action; rapid and furious became their motions, as the manifold stimulating potions, they from time to time imbibed, vibrated along their brains, and gave a strengthening influence to all their nerves and muscular powers; copiously flowed the perspiration, in frequent streams, from brow to heel, and still the dance went on with all its accustomed energy and might; but the eye at length, becoming weary in gazing on this wild and intricate maze, would oftentimes turn and seek relief by searching for the king, amid the dingy mass; and there, enclosed within their midst, was his stately form beheld, moving along with all the simple grace and elastic action of his youthful days, now with a partner here, and then with another there, and sometimes displaying some of his many amusing antics, to the delight and wonderment of the surrounding crowd, and which, as frequently, kept the faces of this joyous multitude broadly expanded in boisterous mirth and jollity. And thus the scene continued until the shades of night and morning almost mingled together, when the wearied revelers slowly retired to their resting places, and quickly sought their nightly repose.<sup>1</sup>

Morning again returned with all its renovating influence, when most of the sable throng were seen loitering along the streets toward the accustomed field of sports; and the bright day moved merrily onward to its close, with all the happy enjoyments of that which had preceded it; and long ere the night had again arrived, the upper class of revelers had left the ground to seek entertainment elsewhere, or spend the evening in tea party gossip, among their numerous friends and visitors. And thus terminated the third day of the Pinkster festival.

On the succeeding fourth and fifth days, the grounds were left to the free enjoyment of the humbler classes, and well did they improve the time in joyous merriment until near the close of the latter, when, instigated by the more potent draughts they swallowed, speedily brought on wrangling discord, quickly succeeded

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1 See page 56 of this volume. (*Collections on the history of Albany: from its discovery to the present time; with notices of its public institutions, and biographical sketches of citizens deceased*, Joel Munsell [J. Munsell, 1865])

by rounds of fighting, bruised eyes, and bloody noses unnumbered, (sic) big Jack Van Patten, the city bully, being unanimously declared the champion of the lists, having successfully overthrown all his numerous opponents.

The last day of the week, and also of the Pinkster revels, was chiefly occupied in removing the unpurchased materials from the field, and also in the distribution of the remaining vestiges of the broken meats and pastries to the poorer classes of individuals who still lingered about the now almost abandoned ground of rejoicing. Some, few liquoring establishments still continued their traffic, being amply patronized by the more rude and belligerent number that yet remained, as if loth to leave the endearing spot as long as a stimulating drop could there be procured.

The following sabbath was literally considered by them as really a day of rest, and mid-day's sun was at its height e'er many awoke from their refreshing slumbers, and the succeeding day found the numerous visitors joyfully journeying toward their respective homes. Our ancient city was at length again left to its usual quietude, and all things within its confines soon became properly restored to its accustomed routine of duty and order. And thus ended the Pinkster holidays, with all its rollicking (sic) festivities.

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*The Hudson River Valley Review* will consider essays on all aspects of the Hudson River Valley—its intellectual, political, economic, social, and cultural history, its prehistory, architecture, literature, art, and music—as well as essays on the ideas and ideologies of regionalism itself. All articles in *The Hudson River Valley Review* undergo peer review.

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Illustrations or photographs that are germane to the writing should accompany the hard copy. Illustrations and photographs are the responsibility of the authors. Scanned photos or digital art must be 300 pixels per inch (or greater) at 8 in. x 10 in. (between 7 and 20 mb). No responsibility is assumed for the loss of materials. An e-mail address should be included whenever possible.

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