



Above, clockwise from top: Cobblestone path at Sylvester Manor, Shelter Island, NY; memorial stone at the Afro-Indigenous Burial Ground at the manor; Sylvester Manor house; and the entry drive. All photos are by Donnamarie Barnes.

Landscape and Memory at Sylvester Manor

By Donnamarie Barnes

As you enter the long drive at Sylvester Manor, the outside world drifts away and you are surrounded by the sounds and silence of the forest. Senses are heightened with the sway of the trees in the wind and the smell of the woods and the water. A feeling of “story” is present often without knowing anything about the place. This is a place of history and memory whose essence has been held by the land itself over the centuries and through generations.

Sylvester Manor on Shelter Island in New York is considered to be the most intact Northern plantation remnant. The island is the ancestral home of the Indigenous Manhansett people, who called it *Manhansack-aha-quash-awamock*, “Island Sheltered by Islands,” in the waters now known as Eastern Long Island’s Peconic Bay. The English claimed the territory for the king in 1638 and, in 1651, Shelter Island was purchased with 1,600 pounds of turbinado sugar by four English partners, including brothers Constant and Nathaniel Sylvester, to serve as a Provisioning Plantation for their sugar operations on the West Indies island of Barbados.

Far from the sugarcane killing fields, they brought to Shelter Island enslaved African men, women, and children to perform the labors of clearing and farming the land, raising livestock, harvesting timber for barrel staves to transport foodstuffs, sugar, and molasses, and tending the Sylvester house and family. For 368 years, property ownership passed through eleven generations of Sylvester descendants, until Sylvester Manor Educational Farm was established in 2009 and the land donated in 2014 to the nonprofit organization. Now comprising 235 acres, a Georgian-style Manor House built in 1737, outbuildings, and a working farm, Sylvester Manor Educational Farm’s mission is to preserve, cultivate, and share the history of Sylvester Manor.

As the Manor’s curator and archivist, I am dedicated to telling the stories of all the people of this land, openly and honestly promoting dialogue and insights into our history. And as a photographer, I am inspired by the memories I find evoked in the landscape that help me to imagine the lives of the people who lived and worked on this place. Their presence is palpable, and I am called to tell their stories as revealed and held in the landscape and captured in my photographs.

At the fork of the main entry drive, a mighty oak stands before a circle of eastern white pine trees surrounding an old fence. A large stone placed beside the road in 1886 by Sylvester descendants reads “Burying Ground of the Colored People of the Manor From 1651.” The stone acknowledges as many as 200 people believed to be laid to rest in this Afro-Indigenous Burial Ground. Grave mounds are barely discernible; a few field stones in loose alignment mark the site. This is sacred ground of the Manhansett people, who lost this land as their ancestral home, and of the enslaved African people brought here against their will, isolated, and held captive in a foreign place. Beyond scant listings of their names in last wills and testaments,

account books and letters, their individual lives are all but undocumented.

We look closely today to find their stories. Walking the grounds, remnants of their existence and their labors can be found — in the stone boulder wall constructed as a boundary, still evident from edge to edge of the property. And in the cobbled stone dooryard buried under the front lawn of the grand eighteenth-century house, that perhaps once served as a link between the work areas of the provisioning operations and the shoreline where workers unloaded molasses, sugar, and rum and reloaded the holds with preserved foodstuffs and material for the profitable sugar plantations in far-off Barbados.

These stones in the Manor landscape endure, as memorials to the people who placed them here, and to all that their labor represented and represents to today’s story of our nation.

Though we have only their names and their echoes in the land, in truth they are among the founding families of Sylvester Manor and of Shelter Island. Through the stories, images, and art that we capture, create, and share, we pay them tribute.

Hannah, Jacquero, and their daughters Hope and Isabell, were among the first Black families of Shelter Island; they lived in bondage on this land and were laid to rest here.

Tammero and his wife, Oyou, Africans living enslaved at Sylvester Manor, started a family that would go on to include Jupiter Hammon, the first published African American poet.

Julia Dyd Havens Johnson, a free-born woman of color, worked for three generations of Manor owners, only to have the land she inherited swindled from her. Julia is the last person known to be buried in the Burial Ground.

The landscape of Sylvester Manor is imbued with the memory of these individuals and countless others. Every day we strive to honor and celebrate them and to present their part in our history.

As I walk the land with my camera in hand, I call their names. Through captured images of the trees and woodlands, the waterways and gardens within the Manor house and the outbuildings—in the land, the soil, the boulders and beams, the boards and nails—I seek, and find, and reveal, their energy and their essence.



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