Wilson's Creek National Battlefield Prescribed Burns 2026

Wildland firefighters carefully monitor prescribed fires to contain them within established perimeters NPS

Alicea Powell, *NPS,* February 9, 2026

REPUBLIC, Mo. – Wilson's Creek National Battlefield may intermittently conduct prescribed burns in the park between February 14, 2026, and March 15, 2026. The range of dates is necessary because prescribed fires are dependent on weather conditions. The burn is expected to last multiple days. To assure visitor safety, some trails, trailheads, parking areas including horse trailer parking, and areas of the battlefield will be closed to visitors while the prescribed burn is conducted. The tour road may be closed. The visitor center and museum will remain open.

Weather conditions permitting, up to 440 acres of grassland and forest will be burned. All burns will be conducted by trained and experienced National Park Service fire personnel. The objective of the prescribed burns is to provide for the safety of employees, visitors, and the surrounding communities and improve the natural and cultural landscape of the site. The prescribed fire will reduce woody plants and invasive plant species; and create good soil conditions for native seeds.

Prescribed fire is planned around the following areas:

- Northwest around the junction of Farm Road 182 and ZZ Highway
- West of Stop 1 on the Tour Road
- Between Stop 1 and Stop 2, northeast of the Tour Road
- Between the Tour Road and eastern park boundary, around the Manley Uplands Trail

Fire managers make every effort to minimize smoke impacts to surrounding communities, but smoke drifting in and around park lands and roadways is possible. Smoke-sensitive individuals may want to avoid outside activities on the days of operations.

Wilson's Creek is currently involved in a long-term program aimed at restoring the historic landscape within the park through periodic prescribed burns. At the time of the 1861 battle, much of the vegetation was an upland savanna. Both historically and naturally, fire played an important role in maintaining this savanna landscape. Prescribed fire is a tool used in a carefully planned manner, following guidelines to protect public safety, to achieve resource management objectives. With its prescribed fire program, the National Park Service is reintroducing fire as an effective management tool

to assist with the restoration of this important historic scene.

For additional information on whether prescribed fire operations and closures will occur on a given day, call the Wilson's Creek Visitor Center at 417-732-2662 or visit the website at nps.gov/wicr, or the Wilson's Creek National Battlefield Facebook page.

About the National Park Service. More than 20,000 National Park Service employees care for America's 430+ national parks and work with communities across the nation to help preserve local history and create close-to-home recreational opportunities. Learn more at www.nps.gov, and on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

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The Time When New York City Seriously Considered Seceding From the United States

A culture clash driven by finances and Old World alignments had the Big Apple contemplating leaving the Union. The Civil War ended that

Colin Woodard, Smithsonian Magazine, January/February 2026

A hand-colored map from 1860 depicts parts of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Hoboken and Jersey City. Geographicus Rare Antique Maps

A divisive presidential election threatened to destroy the Union. It was 1860, and Abraham Lincoln, on record as being morally opposed to the enslavement of human beings, had swept nearly every county in the Northeast and Upper Midwest, and lost every single one south of the Mason-Dixon line. He'd also lost every county in and around New York City, fracturing the nation's largest state. The city's mayor, Fernando Wood, decided to act.

Wood could see the Union was coming to an end. Expecting the breakup to be peaceful, he wanted his metropolis to seek its independence as well, ending an unhappy, two-century-long marriage between the Dutch-founded city and the New England-settled upstate New York, rival cultures that had never seen eye to eye. "While other portions of our state have unfortunately been imbued with the fanatical spirit which actuates a portion of the people of New England, the city of New York has unfalteringly preserved the integrity of its

principles in adherence to the compromises of the Constitution," he would later say. The real danger to the city, he added, wasn't the Confederacy but hostile upstate lawmakers in Albany.

Names to Know: Who was Fernando Wood? *Born June 14, 1812, in Philadelphia, Wood served as mayor of New York City twice, and for three separate stretches in the House of Representatives. He vociferously opposed abolition and worked to declare New York an independent city-state, which he suggested calling "Tri-insula."*

Three-time Mayor Fernando Wood proposed seceding to form a city-state, "Tri-Insula" (referring to Manhattan, Staten Island and Long Island). Library of Congress

Before November 1860 was out, Wood was holding private secession planning meetings at his sprawling country estate on what's now the Upper West Side, with invitations going out to real estate tycoon William Astor, financier August Belmont and Democratic Party honcho Samuel Tilden. Financier George Law, one of Wood's most powerful allies, was dispatched to Washington to rally the city's congressional delegation to support the plan, while worried officials in Albany tasked Metropolitan Police Superintendent John Kennedy with gathering intelligence on the mayor's plans. Reporters at newspapers opposed to the mayor began receiving leaks that Wood might lead the city out of the Union. By December 10, it was all out in the open.

On that day, pro-secession Congressman Daniel Sickles delivered a fiery speech on the U.S. House floor. "Secession, although it may begin at the South, will not end at the South," he told his colleagues. "There is no sympathy now between the city and the State of New York ... nor has there been for years."

"When this Union is no more, we will not consent to remain the submissive appendage of a Puritan province," Sickles added. "I tell you [our] imperial city will ... repel the hateful cabal at Albany, which has so long abused its power over her, and ... as a free city, open wide her gates to the civilization and commerce of the world." James Buchanan, the lame-duck president, was alarmed, writing a friend that no "adequate cause exists for the extent and violence of the existing panic in New York."

Through that momentous winter—as the Deep South seceded, the Confederate States of America was created and Lincoln was inaugurated—it seemed Wood's secession plan might work. Many in the metropolis


hoped it would. Merchants feared staying with the Union would mean losing the city's lucrative Southern trade. But the most urgent concern was that greater New York City—a polyglot, multiethnic, commercially minded, raucously tolerant society founded by the Dutch—would be trapped in a state and rump federation dominated by Yankees of Puritan New England origin, with their moralistic missions; assimilative predilections; and growing hostility to drinking, Catholicism and slavery. Had the South Carolinians not fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861, New York City might well have become its own country, a Singapore-like city-state on the Hudson.

New York has always been a state divided between two colonial-era cultures, whose peoples have looked askance at one another since the 17th century.

The towns and cities on Manhattan, western Long Island, the Hudson shore of New Jersey and in the lowermost Hudson Valley were the legacy of the New Netherland colony, with Dutch names scattered from Haarlem and Breukelen to Hoboken, Vlacke Bos (Flatbush) and Staaten Eylandt. For decades after its 1624 foundation, the colony was ruled by a global corporation, the Dutch West India Company, and served as an entrepôt between Virginia, New England and the Iroquois Confederacy. From the start it was diverse, populated by French-speaking Walloons, Scandinavian Lutherans, Irish and Portuguese Catholics, Sephardic Jews, Anglican and Quaker English, free and enslaved Africans, and at least one Muslim farmer from Morocco. The Dutch were rarely in the majority, even as their signature architecture—stepped gable roofs crowned with red tile—defined New Amsterdam, the settlement at the tip of Manhattan Island. Their government promoted trade and eschewed democracy while tolerating cultural differences, religious dissenters, freedom of inquiry and human bondage. At a time when social status was largely a matter of birth, New Netherland's local elite were self-made men. The first Vanderbilt (Jan Aertsen Van der Bilt) was an indentured servant, the founder of the Van Cortlandt dynasty was a soldier, and the Van Burens started as tenant farmers.

After an English victory over the Dutch in 1664, New Netherland became New York, but greater New York City—including northern New Jersey, western Long Island and the lower Hudson counties—remained culturally Dutch, and the language was dominant there for another century. By 1861 the city had become what (Old) Amsterdam had been two centuries earlier: a cosmopolitan center of banking, publishing and trade—and a haven for people persecuted in neighboring polities.

Upstate New York, by contrast, had been settled by New Englanders. Hundreds had moved south to infiltrate the contested intercolonial border before 1664, and afterward they came in numbers that alarmed the Dutch, who had long dismissed their provincial northern neighbors as "Jan Kaas," a derogatory epithet that was essentially the Dutch version of "cheese


head," and which sounded like "Yankees" to the English.

These upstate Yankee colonists were the descendants of the early Puritans, who believed they had been chosen by God to create a more perfect society in the New England wilderness. Unlike the Dutch, 17th-century New Englanders were decidedly monocultural, obsessively moralistic and notoriously intolerant, hanging Quakers, attacking Indians and driving out dissenters.

By the early 19th century, the Puritans' Yankee descendants had become convinced their mission was to consummate the ideals in the Declaration of Independence. By the antebellum period, the New England-founded settlements across the northern seven-eighths of New York State weren't just part of greater New England; they'd become the primary stronghold of its messianic social projects. This was the "Burned-Over District," center of the utopian religious awakening that produced Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism and the "free love" Oneida Community. The women's suffrage movement started in Seneca Falls, and some paths of the Underground Railroad terminated on the shores of Lake Erie.

The leaders of these rival cultural zones—the "anything goes" Dutch space and the moralistic, orderly Yankee one—did not see eye to eye on either slavery or multiculturalism. Tensions only increased as large numbers of Irish, German and other foreign immigrants arrived in the city, and the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act—which forced citizens of free states to participate in capturing enslaved people seeking freedom—stirred abolitionist sentiment in the rest of the state. New York City and its mayor, tolerant of slavery and diversity alike, aligned with the Southern-dominated Democratic Party; upstate New York—which then had more people—joined Lincoln's new, antislavery Republican Party while taking measures to bring the unruly metropolis to heel.

In 1857, the upstate Yankees used their legislative majorities and governorship to severely restrict when, where and by whom liquor could be sold in the state, while taking over control of the city's Metropolitan Police, port and major public works projects. In response, Mayor Wood created his own rival police force, which released suspects arrested by the Metropolitans; when the latter arrived to arrest Wood himself for inciting a riot, Wood's men engaged them in a violent battle on the steps of City Hall.

Wood and his allies therefore saw the impending collapse of the Union as an opportunity. They knew there was no appetite for open rebellion—New Yorkers' beef was with the state, not the federal government—and put their hopes in a peaceful dissolution. "If the Confederacy is broken up the government is dissolved, and it behooves every distinct community, as well as every individual, to take care of themselves," Wood explained.

On January 7, 1861, the mayor made his move, telling city aldermen that New York City would proclaim its independence. Writing in reference to the New England-colonized upstate, Wood asked: "Why may not New York disrupt the bands which bind her to a corrupt and venal master?" Instead, he argued, the city would form its own city-state, pointing to examples such as Hamburg, Frankfurt, Bremen and other Hanseatic states in what would later become Germany. "Amid the gloom which the present and prospective condition of things must cast over the country, New York, as a *Free City*, may shed the only light and hope for a future reconstruction" of the nation, he declared.

Representative Daniel Sickles, who warned Congress in 1860 that New York City was ready to secede, later rose to a major general in the Union Army. Library of Congress

Southerners loved the mayor's proposal, with Virginian writer George Fitzhugh lauding it as a chance to escape "the immoral, infidel, agrarian, free-love democracy of western New York [and] ... the rule of Puritans, the vilest, most selfish and unprincipled of the human race." At least three members of the city's congressional delegation were for it. Three daily newspapers—the *Express*, *Day Book* and *Daily News*—were enthusiastic, as were many merchants and bankers. Secession "by peaceful and legal means," the *Daily News* editorialized, "is worthy of the attention of every New Yorker."

But South Carolina's shocking April 12 attack on Fort Sumter, a federal military base protecting Charleston's harbor, incensed most everyone living north of the Mason-Dixon line, effectively ending the city's move for independence. Popular opinion in New York City swung behind Lincoln's call for troops to put down the rebels. Wood directed citizens to set aside partisanship "and rally to the restoration of the Constitution and the Union." Sickles raised four regiments of soldiers and, as a major general at Gettysburg, lost a leg and earned the Medal of Honor fighting the Confederates.

Charlestonians had ended Gotham's bid for nationhood, but the dream of escaping Albany's control continued. For more than a century, downstate legislators repeatedly submitted bills to let the metropolis become its own U.S. state. Their upstate colleagues—who controlled state politics by force of population until the mid-20th century—laughed them off. One of two 1919 plans proposed a new state of Greater New York to include Long Island and seven

counties on the lower Hudson, which corresponded almost exactly with the old Dutch influence zone. A 1959 effort was endorsed by the City Council, 23-1, and a 1966 statehood plan was floated by State Supreme Court Justice Emeritus Samuel Hofstadter. Author Norman Mailer made an unsuccessful 1969 mayoral run on a secession platform. But the high-water mark came in 1971, when Representative Bella Abzug's "51st State" plan had the support of 4 of her House colleagues, 7 state senators, 33 assembly members, 22 city councilors and 3 borough presidents. (The effort died after a mayoral commission found the city's balance sheets would be hurt.)

A 1651 Dutch print shows the traffic around Manhattan Island of mishoons, canoes that ferried furs, firewood and other goods along the coast. NYPL

This article is a selection from the January/February 2026 issue of Smithsonian magazine

By the 1970s, though, the balance of power had shifted. Metropolitan New York's population growth outstripped upstate's as deindustrialization hammered Buffalo, Syracuse and Rochester. Upstate pride and resentment were encapsulated in the political writing of native son Bill Kauffman: "Kooks and visionaries—Jemima Wilkinson and the Fox sisters and Frederick Douglass—took root in our soil. Shanty Irishmen built the Erie Canal; Gerritt Smith bought John Brown his guns," he argued in a 1991 essay in the *Crooked Lake Review*. "Give us our own state," he added, "and we just might give America another Bob Taft or William Jennings Bryan."

Since the late 1990s, bills to divide the Empire State have come from upstate leaders at a rate of nearly one a year, only to be killed in committee by Gothamites. One perennial sponsor, State Senator John R. Kuhl Jr., once said his Finger Lakes-area constituents often asked him: "Why don't you just cut the city of New York off and let it drift out to sea?"

The answer, of course, is that New Amsterdam no longer sees the need to leave.

Colin Woodard

Colin Woodard is a journalist and historian, and the author of six books including Union: The Struggle to Forge the Story of United States Nationhood. He lives in Maine.

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There's More to That/
A *Smithsonian* magazine special report

A Stunning Escape From Slavery Told on Tattered Pages

Thomas White's tale of finding freedom is discovered more than a century after it was documented

Ari Daniel - Host, "There's More to That", January 29, 2026

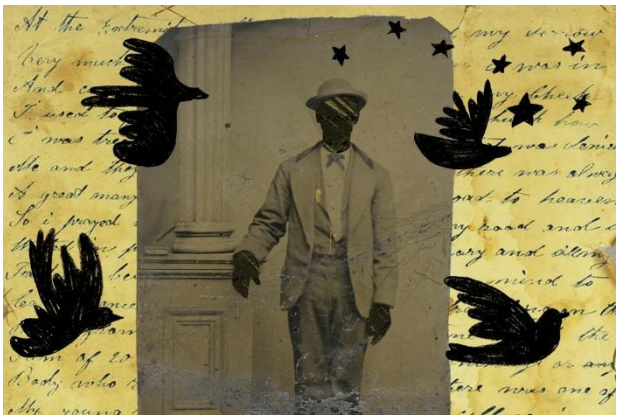

Illustration by Emily Lankiewicz / Images from Anastasiia Hevko via Adobe Stock / Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture / Cindy Elder

In the mid-1800s, before the Civil War, Thomas White fled his enslavement in Maryland for freedom. It was a risky escape, one that involved a horseback ride under the cover of darkness, abolitionists helping to hide him, and a northward journey through Delaware and Pennsylvania.
Ultimately, he arrived—safe and free—in Massachusetts. The details of White's flight are chronicled on 40-odd sheets of paper and were written most probably by other people who heard his story. Such slave narratives are exceedingly rare, and this one's length made it especially unique. Smithsonian *magazine wrote about the discovery last year.*
In this episode, we speak with Rachel Fortuna Cabral, the Roger Williams University undergraduate who helped study the manuscript, and scholar Deborah Plant to learn about White's escape, how the papers were discovered, and what such narratives tell us about slavery and emancipation in the United States.
A transcript is below. To subscribe to "There's More to That," and to listen to past episodes about a recently solved mystery surrounding the burial of JFK, the only battalion during World War II composed entirely of Black women and a baseball field resurrected in a World War II-era Japanese internment camp find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, iHeartRadio or wherever you get your podcasts.

Ari Daniel: There's a moment from the autumn of 2024 that Rachel Fortuna Cabral remembers acutely.

Rachel Fortuna Cabral: We're sitting in the history wing, and in front of me is a box.

Daniel: Rachel was on campus at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island where she's an undergrad majoring in history.

Cabral: And we open up the box, and in it sits the tattered pages of the yellowing manuscript. And I just felt chills go across my body. You see this beautiful cursive. And the pages are big. It's not like notebook paper. They are big sheets of paper. And I remember touching to turn the page and just being so careful because I was holding history in my hands.


Daniel: Specifically, it appeared to be the history of Thomas White, an African American man who escaped slavery in the mid-1800s and lived to recount the tale. What made these 41 giant, double-sided, handwritten pages even more remarkable is that they'd just been discovered unexpectedly on the screened-in porch of the in-laws of Cindy Elder in Barrington, Rhode Island.

Cabral: It's not in an archival box. It's left open to the elements amongst family documents for the Elder family.

Daniel: At the time, Cindy was doing research for a book of historical fiction based on her family's legacy in the shipping and sailing industries. But when she found this unexpected manuscript in a pile of ship logs, newspaper clippings and other historic documents, she was more than a little confused. What did this narrative have to do with her family?

Cabral: We think that the Elder family had a sailing ship that Thomas was a ship's cook on, but we're really not certain.

Daniel: To learn more, Cindy brought the manuscript to Charlotte Carrington-Farmer, a historian of early America at Roger Williams University. Charlotte invited Rachel to help lead an investigation of the manuscript. They wanted to uncover as much as they could about Thomas White and how this document came to be. *Smithsonian* magazine recently reported on its discovery and significance.

Cabral: I had already read the manuscript and started to familiarize myself with it, but it's so different from reading the transcribed version on a Google Doc and then seeing and holding the manuscript itself—these tattered pages that have watermarks on them and are ripping away. It was a very emotional experience. And I want to be able to ensure that that feeling that I had gets to Thomas' descendants. I want them to be able to have that feeling too.

Daniel: From *Smithsonian* magazine and PRX productions, this is "There's More to That," the show that views history as a living journey. I'm Ari Daniel. In this episode, we follow the incredible story of a self-emancipated man, and we explore the genre of first-person accounts from formerly enslaved people and what those voices from the past can teach us today. Stay tuned.

Daniel: So you're holding these pages. They tell a story about a man named Thomas White. Who was Thomas White?

Cabral: He was a remarkable man, genuinely. I mean, when we talk about this manuscript, we talk about it in the context of slave history, but to me, this manuscript goes beyond that. Thomas is not just a man who escaped enslavement. He is determined, not only in his escape from enslavement, but beyond that, when he takes up numerous jobs, starting as a ship's cook and just traveling the world. When you're reading the manuscript, you can really feel his personality shine through.


Daniel: What was his childhood like? Where did he grow up?

Cabral: He grew up in Cambridge, Maryland, is what he says in the manuscript, on a plantation. He never mentions a master. He mentions a mistress and he talks about the brutality of slavery. What inspires him to escape is stories that he hears from his mistress's son. The mistress's son spends some time at university in Philadelphia, comes back and tells Thomas about the free Black population in Philadelphia and how white people there are not allowed to insult them or treat them as they do in Maryland.

Daniel: So he hears about the possibility of being free farther north and hatches this plan to escape. Do we know much about what he was feeling in the period leading up to his intended escape?

Cabral: He was scared.

Daniel: Yeah.

Cabral: He talks about this moment where before he sets off on his journey, he goes to his mother's grave, knowing that that is the last time he will be able to visit his mother's grave. Because once he sets out for freedom, he can't step back in Maryland, or he will be re-enslaved.

Daniel: What did he say at his mother's grave? Do we know?

Cabral: So he says, "As I turned to leave the only home I had ever known, I could not restrain a tear from crying in my eyes as I looked on it for the last time. I then visited the grave of my dear mother and on it I breathed a fervent prayer to heaven to grant me success in the perilous journey I was about to undertake. I then proceeded to the stables, which were situated about a quarter of a mile from the house. On reaching them, I let out two horses and saddled them and then repaired to a corner of the street where my comrade was awaiting my arrival."

Daniel: What was that journey like?

Cabral: The journey itself was perilous. He sets out with one of his friends who lives on a neighboring plantation, and his friend doesn't complete the journey, but Thomas does. With the help of abolitionists, Thomas is able to escape up the northeast. He describes how, to his understanding, there's spies along the way, too, who tried to catch people who are trying to self-emancipate.

Daniel: So he quickly fell into the hands of abolitionists and the Underground Railroad to help him farther north?

Cabral: Yes. Yep. So to our understanding of it, Thomas starts in Cambridge, makes his way through Maryland, then through Pennsylvania, and then New York, and ends up in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he stays for a time working at a Young Ladies Seminary, and then off to Boston where he meets his wife, Ellen.

Daniel: Did he write this?


Cabral: Thomas is illiterate. We know that he did not hand write this manuscript. So our best guess goes back to why this manuscript is in with the rest of the Elder family's shipping records. And that's that when Thomas likely worked as a ship's cook on one of the Elder family's ships, they would sit around and Thomas would tell his incredible life story, and various people on the ship would write it down. There's what we think are four distinct handwriting styles within the manuscript.

Daniel: So, going back to the discovery of the manuscript for a moment: Charlotte Carrington-Farmer, who was overseeing the research, and she said she was really taken by the document, but also somewhat nervous, because historians are usually trained to be skeptical about new documents and their origins, particularly ones like this. So what's your understanding of why historians should be skeptical, and how does that relate to this manuscript?

Cabral: Sure. It's not every day that a 41-page manuscript detailing the story of a man who escapes enslavement winds up at your doorstep. So I completely understand her pause. Another reason why we had to take a beat there was because there are works of abolitionist propaganda that have been written where it'll tell a story, and the function of it is to try and further the abolitionist effort. So scholars who we had spoken to had suggested that this might be a work of abolitionist propaganda. Obviously, we hope that that wasn't the case. We hoped that there was more to this story. And with the finding of what we believe is Thomas's marriage certificate, that was kind of our big moment where we were able to say, "Thomas, we found you in the archival records." This is not a piece of abolitionist propaganda. This is real.

I think another thing, too, is the manuscript is so detailed and a lot of it does line up with real places and things that we know happened within history. For example, the Young Ladies Seminary in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, that I said Thomas works at for a time, we know that that existed because of research that we've done. So it seemed too detailed to just be a piece of abolitionist propaganda.

Daniel: You were coordinating a team of student researchers. What was the goal of your work over the course of the semester?

Cabral: So, one group of students was focused on the paleography and trying to understand how many different types of handwriting there are in the manuscript, and how we can determine that they are definitely different, and it's not just that the ship was moving differently that day or the writer was tired.

Another group was trying to learn more about Thomas' time whilst he was enslaved. So, seeing if we could find his name in any records in Cambridge, Maryland, and trying to understand what enslavement in Cambridge looked like during this time period and providing that historical context to the team.

Another group was focused on trying to track descendants, because another major

goal of this project is to reunite his descendants with the story of their remarkable ancestor. That group found the marriage certificate and who we believed to be Thomas' daughter. And we hope that through the *Smithsonian* article and podcasts like this, maybe this story will ring familiar to someone and they'll reach out and say, "Hey, this might be my ancestor."

Daniel: You mentioned the marriage records that you discovered, and so you found out that Thomas married Ellen Steward. Can you tell me who Ellen was?

Cabral: As far as we can tell, Ellen had a pretty remarkable life of her own. We believe that Ellen's mother was Sukey Steward, who was enslaved to President James Madison and his wife, Dolley Madison. When we found that out, I remember my jaw just dropping, because this manuscript already has such significance, I believe, but this just reaffirmed that. And beyond that, Ellen's escape from enslavement is pretty remarkable in itself. She attempts to escape enslavement aboard the *Pearl*, which is the largest nonviolent escape from enslavement in United States history. Unfortunately, not successful in her attempted escape, [she] is captured. But abolitionists in Boston raised money to purchase her freedom, which is what leads her to Boston, where she eventually meets Thomas.

Daniel: After they married, Thomas White traveled extensively for work. Where did he go, and what did he do?

Cabral: He starts out as a captain's steward on a ship that goes from Boston to California. And then from there, Thomas travels the world. He goes to Calcutta. He goes to Melbourne, Australia.

Daniel: And leaves his wife behind for months on end.

Cabral: Yes. So the only time that is mentioned in the manuscript that Thomas reunites with Ellen is for a short period of three months in New York that they're together. And why that's so important is because, to our understanding, that must be when their child was conceived. And it lines up with census records and everything. The years seem to line up well if they were to spend three months in New York together and then their daughter Gertrude was born. But it gets to a point where his wife, Ellen, starts self-reporting as widowed in the census. And I don't know if that's because Thomas has actually passed or because her thought process is, "He's always away, who knows if I'm ever going to see him again. He might be dead." That's another one of our research questions. What happened to Thomas after this manuscript just abruptly ends?

Daniel: What were some of the inconsistencies that you ran into while trying to tie Thomas White to the historical record, and how did you resolve those?

Cabral: So, one of the biggest inconsistencies was time—our timeline, the years we were working in—because Thomas

only mentions a year once. When he's escaping enslavement, he says, "Bidding adieu to the town forever in the 2nd of March 1831. I, being then in my 15th year," et cetera, et cetera. So he says he's 15 in March of 1831. And that's the only date that we're ever provided.

And in the early phases when we were sending out this document to scholars, we sent it to Dr. Timothy Walker at UMass Dartmouth. He suggested that our timeline was off by ten years based on everything else that was happening in the manuscript and what he knows to be true of history. At this point, we had been hitting a lot of dead ends in archival research. When we extended our timeline these ten years, particularly in terms of the marriage record, that's when things started turning up. The marriage record actually comes up from 1852, so quite a discrepancy there. So yeah, I would say the biggest issue that we had to resolve was the timeline. And it still is.

Deborah Plant: I think in the case of the discrepancy with the date, I think that's going to be an open question for historians to ponder. It's really hard to say, especially because he didn't write it.

Daniel: This is Deborah Plant, an independent scholar in African American literature and Africana studies, and a literary critic specializing in the life and work of writer Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston was a 20th century author, anthropologist, playwright and member of the Harlem Renaissance. She's most famous for her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. But she also compiled oral histories of former enslaved African Americans, including that of Oluale Kossola, who at the time was believed to be the last survivor of the last American slave ship. Hurston's posthumously published book, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo*, told Kossola's story.

Plant: When you talk about dates, especially that ten-year span, it reminds me of Hurston, who would write her birthdate ten years later. But she had a reason for changing it. She wanted to go back to school, and it would have been free for those of a certain age, and she was older than that age limit. And so she changed it so that she could go back to school and get her high school diploma. She had a reason for it. Then we could ask the question, "Did Thomas?" I think when we find discrepancies like that, Ari, that it allows us to ask questions, right? Because one of the things about history is it keeps morphing. And it's always going to do that because human beings are involved.

Daniel: Deborah, how does having these first-person accounts enrich the historical record?

Plant: With the first-person account, that's a lens that is unique, because no one else is going to have that particular experience. There's the experience of enslavement, but each enslaved person experienced it differently. We can identify with the individual. "I experienced this," and when you read, "I" becomes the reader. In this way,

we can develop that empathy. And this, of course, is one of the reasons why *Barracoon* has been so important, because when it comes to what happened to us on the African continent, where's the account of the individual who actually experienced it? We have very little of that when it comes to not only what happened on the continent, but also what happened during the Middle Passage.

Daniel: Deborah, you edited Zora Neale Hurston's oral history of the life of Oluale Kossola, who was one of the last known surviving Africans transported by an American slave ship. I'm wondering if you can talk about the importance of having an account from someone like Hurston, who was a literary giant and an anthropologist?

Plant: She was consummate in her methodology, and she was revolutionary in protecting the integrity of her work. One of the reasons that the work was published only in 2018 was because she refused to change it. Publishers who were interested in the work said that they would publish it if she would, as they put it, write it in language rather than dialect. And if she had changed it, it would have been a work of fiction, not the document that it is today. In maintaining the dialect, what Hurston knew and understood was that language was an authenticating feature of an individual or a group or a society. This is a prominent feature of expression. And so she was very meticulous in how she captured his expression, how she documented it. And so we get a real feel for the human being. It's not just a story.

Daniel: Given that so many of these stories were transcribed by white writers or abolitionists, like Thomas White's, what is the significance of having the account of Oluale Kossola from a Black writer, from Hurston?

Plant: The most important thing would be to have a transcriber who is interested in being a conduit or vessel for the person whose story you're writing down. What comes to mind are the WPA narratives where there were workers who were sent out to collect these stories from the formerly enslaved individuals.

Daniel: You're referring to the Works Projects Administration in the 1930s.

Plant: Yes. And you can tell from reading the collected narratives that the individuals were basically answering set questions and doing so with an intention not to say too much to the stranger. And many of them, if not most of them, were white individuals. Because that fear of what those who were the perceived authority, what they might do or think, or what they might do with your story, is ever present. With Thomas White, he was very careful who he talked to. So that fear of someone actually knowing really what you think. When they are in a position to punish you or to tell your story to someone else who can and might punish you or take revenge or somehow put you in a negative situation, that was a very real fear. And so it mattered who collected these stories, and how, and with what purpose.


Now, if your purpose is to get your story before you die so we can put this in our archives and whatnot, then you have a function that you're performing and it's not about portraying the humanity of the individuals that you are talking to. Hurston was unique in her work. She had the wisdom to open herself up to the subjectivity of her "subject" and allow him to teach her how to get his story. With Hurston, it's very clear that Kossola had come not only to trust her, but also to love her.

Daniel: We don't know who listened to Thomas White's story originally and wrote it down, or whether Thomas trusted them fully. But one thing Deborah Plant can say with certainty is that each account like this that surfaces from someone who was once enslaved adds a piece to the larger puzzle.

Plant: For every Thomas White, there are, like, thousands who never told anyone their story. We don't know their story. And so just like with Kossola, Thomas White and those other individuals who have, very amazingly, been able to have their stories documented in one way or another, these individuals speak for so many whose names we'll never know, whose voices we'll never hear, not their own particular tonality. But in some way it's encoded in Thomas White's narrative. He is speaking for all of those who didn't have someone to write their story down. And he's speaking for those who died in that institution. It's like a mythology of the wisdom from what's called the hero's journey. You escaped; you made it. But all of the experiences of the hero are for the collective, it's for humanity as a whole. And so Thomas White's narrative is this boon that we get from his heroic journey. And it was heroic. He manages to escape, to fall into the hands of people who are willing to help, and do help. He works hard. He helps others. And so his story, the importance of it is, again, it's like our history is alive. And so here's a voice from another dimension, so to speak, that insinuates itself into our now moment and says, "Here I am. Here is what I have for us to understand about ourselves as individuals, as Americans, as human beings." We have to keep educating one another and cultivate within one another the empathy required to evolve humanity. I think a manuscript like Thomas White's helps us to do that.

Daniel: Rachel, where does the manuscript end?

Cabral: The manuscript ends in the middle of a voyage for Thomas. The last few pages are completely unreadable and then everything just kind of stops. The pages end. There's no more there.

Daniel: It seems like it's captured your imagination, it's captured your mind, it's captured your heart.

Cabral: Yeah. I get emotional talking about it a lot of the times. Before I go on to give a presentation, I have to give myself a little pep talk where I'm like, "Okay, get it all out now." Even just the opening quote of the manuscript, which I'd love to share.

Daniel: Sure.

Cabral: "At the extremity of the house, it increased my sorrow very much when I thought of the situation I was in and caused many a tear to run down my cheek. I used to go and tell the members of my church how I was treated and the trifling comfort that was denied me, and they told me not to lose heart as there was always a great many trials and troubles in the road to heaven. So I prayed to God to remove them from my road and I waited in patience, but my heart grew weary and all my faith was being shaken when I made up my mind to leave at once."
And I mean, a lot of times when talking about American culture and American history, we talk about this bootstraps mentality—freeing yourself from the situation you're in and making the best of it. And this is what Thomas' story is. I mean, he escapes from bondage and goes out and sets sail across the world.

Daniel: What's this personal connection? Why do you think you feel so tethered to him?

Cabral: I think the time at which this manuscript came to me is incredibly important when we've been having discussions on how to teach history, particularly concerning slave history. Thomas has a voice, and it deserves to be heard.

Daniel: I remember one of the challenges for me of studying history was it never felt alive. It felt distant and random. And something like this, it's reaching … it's grabbing you from another moment and bringing you close and saying, "Pay attention."

Cabral: Yeah. When the manuscript is sitting right in front of you, it doesn't feel distant at all.

Daniel: To read more about the discovery of the Thomas White manuscript, visit smithsonianmag.com. We'll put a link in our show notes.
On the next episode of "There's More to That," we'll travel to the Swiss Alps where climate change is threatening glaciers, towns and even the future of winter sports.
If you like this show, please consider leaving us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, the iHeartRadio app, or wherever you get your podcasts. It helps new listeners find the show, and we'd appreciate it.
"There's More to That" is a production of *Smithsonian* magazine and PRX productions.
From the magazine, our team is me, Debra Rosenberg and Brian Wolly. From PRX, our team is Ali Budner, Cleo Levin, Genevieve Sponsler, Sandra Lopez-Monsalve and Edwin Ochoa. The executive producer of PRX Productions is Jocelyn Gonzalez.
Our episode artwork is by Emily Lankiewicz. Fact-checking by Stephanie Abramson. I'm Ari Daniel. Thanks for listening.

Daniel: Rachel, have you had any dreams about Thomas White, or has he come into

your life in other ways besides the manuscript?

Cabral: I'm waiting for Thomas to appear to me in a dream. No, but a fun little fact here—Thomas has his own family tree on my ancestry account.

Daniel: Really?

Cabral: Yep. Ancestry has a great online archival database for things like census records and marriage certificates, etc., etc. So I've created a tree with Thomas and Ellen, and then trying to track their descendants. I also have little alerts for any time a document with the name Thomas White between 1840 and 1850 in the United States comes into the database. So yeah, Thomas is basically my family now.

Ari Daniel
Ari Daniel, the host of Smithsonian magazine's "There's More to That" podcast, is an independent science journalist who has reported across six continents and contributes regularly to National Public Radio among other outlets. In a previous life, he trained grey seal pups and studied wild Norwegian killer whales.

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New Trail to Commemorate the Battle of New Market Heights

Joint-effort recreational path will make battlefield more accessible than ever

American Battlefield Trust, January 12, 2026

In the early hours of September 29, 1864, Gen. Benjamin Butler's Army of the James crossed the James River to prepare for a diversionary attack, aimed at distracting Gen. Robert E. Lee from movement against the Southside Railroad. At dawn, the Union troops, including Maj. Gen. David Birney's X Corps, attacked the Confederates' high ground position. The ensuing action resulted in more than 5,000 casualties, with 14 Medals of Honor awarded for the valor demonstrated by Black men in U.S. Colored Troop (USCT) units of the X Corps.

Sgt. Christian Fleetwood seizing the flag at the Battle of New Market Heights. County of Henrico

"This battle is arguably the most important moment in African American military history, yet a fitting memorial is missing to remember their service and sacrifice," said Tim Talbot, president of the Battle of New Market Heights Memorial and Education Association. "Few people, even in our own

community, know about the battle or what happened here."

Now, thanks to a joint venture between Henrico County, the Capital Region Land Conservancy, the Battle of New Market Heights Memorial and Education Association, the Richmond Battlefields Association, the National Park Service and the American Battlefield Trust, that's about to change.

The 3.2-mile New Market Heights Trail will follow the path of the USCT soldiers as they advanced to attack the Confederate line. Crossing land owned by the Trust, Henrico County and the Capital Region Land Conservancy, the trail will connect Four Mile Creek Trailhead to Deep Bottom Park, where pontoon bridges brought Union troops across the James River. The trail will feature prominent interpretive signage, telling the story of New Market Heights to all who visit the trail. Also planned is a monument to permanently honor those USCT soldiers awarded the Medal of Honor for their acts of valor during the battle.

"This land communicates what real courage is," said Chuck Laudner, a consultant for the Trust, while speaking at a public meeting to gather feedback on the project. "This is, for us and future generations, a place for people to go and not just be contemplative, but to learn and get a real sense of the weight these men had to bear."

An interpretive sign on the New Market Heights Battlefield

In addition to providing the public with interpretation and access to the county's historic resources, the trail addresses a growing need in the region: The most requested resource to the Henrico County Department of Recreation and Parks was new trails and more connectivity to the county's parks and open spaces. As the project advances, more spur trails are planned to deepen the interconnectivity with other trails in the area. The ADA-compliant project with 10-to-12-foot shared-use paths also addresses an accessibility gap in the county's outdoor amenities.

The New Market Heights Trail will additionally usher in roadway-crossing improvements. This includes improved access across the often busy Route 5, which is adjacent to the planned trail, creating a seamless connection to the 52-mile Capital Trail that runs from Richmond to Williamsburg.

"Public access for recreation and education is important, because if you live here, you love land, you love preservation and you love history," said Varina District Supervisor

Tyrone Nelson, who has been involved with the project since its inception.

This fall, Henrico County will debut the complete trail concept. A phased construction is planned for 2026 and 2027, with the trail being fully ready to welcome the public in 2028. The project, which has been in development for the past two years, comes with a price tag of $16 million. Along with local funding, county officials hope to complete the project with grants, such as those from the federal Transportation Alternatives Program.

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