



HISTORICAL SOCIETY *of the* NEW YORK COURTS

The Origins and Development of American Legal History in New York City (1609 – 1865)

Lesson Plan #3: Crime and Criminal Justice in Antebellum New York City

Background Reading: Elliot Gorn, “‘Goodbye Boys, I Die a True American’: Homicide, Nativism, and Working-Class Culture in Antebellum New York City,” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 74, No. 2 (Sept. 1987) pgs. 388 – 410.

Class Activity #1 (20 minutes):

Divide the class into four groups. Using the “Criminal Law” section of the [“Revolution and the Emerging State”](#) page from the HSNYC’s website, each group will analyze a different court case. Group #1 will read and analyze [“People v. Levi Weeks”](#) (1800); Group #2 will read and analyze [“People v. Barrett and Ward”](#) (1806); Group #3 will read and analyze [“People v. Ruggles”](#) (1811); Group #4 will read and analyze [“People v. Christian Smith”](#). Each group should then answer the following questions:

1. What was this case about? What legal issue does this case deal with?
2. Who were some of the legal figures active in this case? What was their view of the law?
3. What does this criminal case tell us about the antebellum criminal justice system in the US/NYC?

Class Activity #2 (10 minutes):

These court cases should now be put in conversation with the reading for this class – Eliot Gorn’s article “Homicide, Nativism, and Working-Class Culture in Antebellum New York City.” The class should have a discussion guided by the following questions:

1. What challenges did New York City’s criminal justice face in the antebellum period?
2. How does New York as an immigrant city influence these criminal justice issues?
3. How did industrialization affect crime in antebellum New York and the city’s criminal justice system?

Class Activity #3 (15 minutes):

The class will now read [“Inside the Salacious 19th-Century Murder of New York Courtesan Helen Jewett, America’s First Tabloid Bombshell”](#), by Natasha Ishak. The class will then answer the following questions together:

1. Did Helen Jewett receive justice in the trial of her suspected murder – why or why not?
2. How does gender change our understanding of crime and criminal justice in antebellum New York?

Class Activity #4 (5 minutes):

Concluding Questions: How did the law transform from the colonial and Revolutionary periods into the antebellum period in New York City? How is the criminal justice system changing over this period?



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Homework: Students should read the HSNYC's description of the 1845 episode of "[The Anti-Rent War Prosecution of Dr. Smith Boughton](#)" Over one to two pages, students should answer the question: How does the issue of economic class affect the criminal justice and courts system?