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Sylvester Manor

COURTESY SYLVESTER MANOR AND DONNAMARIE BARNES

Manor Earns Major Grant

Funding will allow for research collaboration

BY STEPHEN J. KOTZ

Sylvester Manor has announced a collaboration with the University of the West Indies in Cave Hill, Barbados, on a three-year research project that will explore the historical and economic ties between Barbados and Shelter Island, in an effort to better understand the complex legacy of sugar production, trade, and enslavement.

The project will be underwritten by a \$1 million grant from the Mellon Foundation to UWI.

"The partnership between Sylvester Manor and UWI, Cave Hill, presents a unique opportunity to bridge academic scholarship and public history, connecting the histories of northern slavery and the Caribbean economy through the lived experiences of those who labored under these systems," said Donnamarie Barnes, Sylvester Manor's director of history and heritage, in a release.

"By examining Sylvester Manor's role in Barbados

and within the broader Atlantic world, we aim to foster a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the transatlantic slave economy and its lasting legacies."

Sylvester Manor, which stands on land that was the home of the Indigenous Manhansett people on Shelter Island, was established as a provisioning plantation in 1652 when it was purchased by a group of four business partners and Barbados sugar plantation owners including the Anglo-Dutch brothers Nathaniel and Constant Sylvester.

The 236-acre site is the most intact remnant of a former slave-holding provisioning plantation north of Virginia.

Sylvester Manor supplied food stuffs and materials to Barbadian sugar operations at Constant and Carmichael plantations, which remain working farms, with the Constant Plantation growing sugarcane and the Carmichael plantation a variety of vegetables, said Barnes, who was given a tour of the properties this week.

Plantations in Barbados thrived on the brutal sugar economy, and the provisioning plantation at Shelter Island played a critical role in sustaining that system, supplying essential goods like livestock, preserved meats, timber and grains to support sugar production in the Caribbean.

The press release stated the new collaboration with UWI, Cave Hill, marks a pivotal moment in Sylvester Manor's evolution as a center for scholarship and public engagement.

Over the next three years, the project will focus on the connections between Barbados and Shelter Island, exploring how the provisioning plantation at Sylvester Manor supported and sustained the sugar plantations in Barbados.

The project will sponsor study tours for students from UWI and American universities, fellowships for faculty and graduate students to advance research, academic conferences, and the creation of a documentary, podcasts,

and a research collection at the UWI library housing records of the project.

Barnes said the partnership with UWI had already begun, with the visit this week from Sylvester Manor officials serving as an introduction to students and faculty there. A group from Barbados will visit Sylvester Manor in June.

Sylvester Manor was home to 11 generations of Sylvester family descendants, from 1652 until 2014, when it was turned over to a nonprofit. Over the past four centuries, the property has gone from a provisioning plantation to an Enlightenment-era farm, and a pioneering food industrialist's summer estate.

Today, the property includes the 1737 manor house, a restored 19th century windmill, an Afro-Indigenous burial ground, a working farm, and educational and cultural arts programs open to the public. Sylvester Manor was designated a historic district of national significance on the National Register of Historic Places in 2015.