A Walk Through the Past in New York

Ahead of next year's 400th anniversary of the Dutch colony of New Netherland, the historian and author of "The Island at the Center of the World" offers a walking tour of often-overlooked Native American and Black sites.

In the 1600s, the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam was situated on what is now the southern tip of Manhattan, the present location of the Financial District. George Etheredge for The New York Times

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By Russell Shorto

Russell Shorto, the author of "The Island at the Center of the World" and director of the New Amsterdam Project at the New-York Historical Society, is working on a book about early Manhattan.

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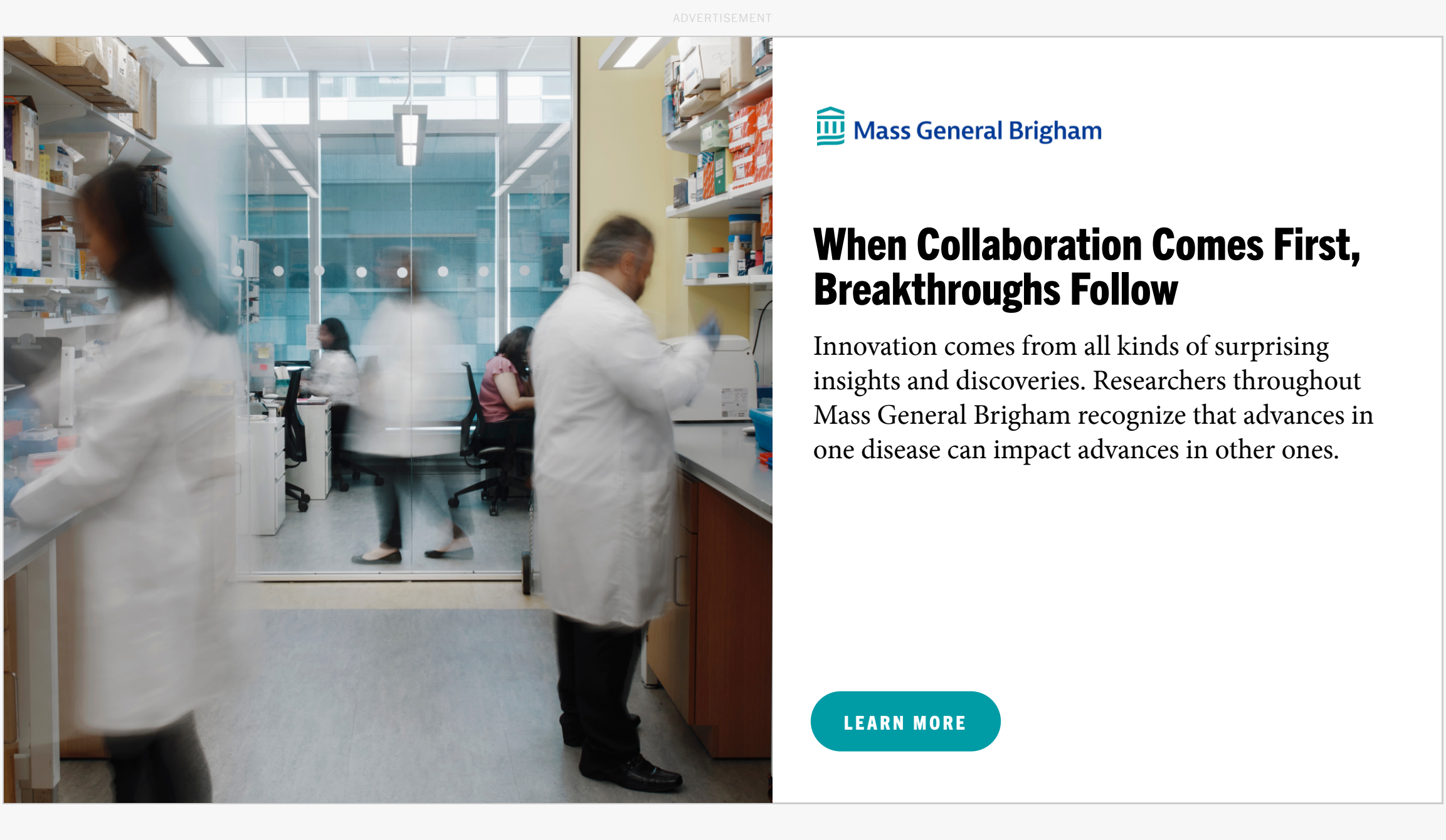
In the 19 years since my book "The Island at the Center of the World," about the Dutch settlement that preceded New York, came out, I've changed the way I think about the history and geography of New Amsterdam, which occupied the southern tip of Manhattan Island in the 1600s.

In recent years, as the culpability of our forebears has come into focus, I've come to see the "Dutch" period as comprising three constituencies: the European settlement (which was only about half Dutch); the Native Americans, who were steadily displaced yet remained a force; and the enslaved Africans, who were brought here against their will but employed agency and ingenuity to their situation.

In preparation for next year's 400th anniversary of the Dutch colony, I'm hitting the streets as I put together a walking tour that will tell a complex story of New York's beginnings. It's a story of settlement, conquest, peace, strife, promise, prosperity, enslavement and freedom. Here's how you can follow.



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Battery Park

The start of this walking tour begins at Battery Park on the southern tip of Manhattan. George Etheredge for The New York Times

The obvious start of such a tour is at the tip of Battery Park, looking into the harbor. The Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island speak to the city's ideals of freedom and promise and its long relationship with the water, from clipper ships to World War II battleships to commuter ferries. But in my mind's eye I see the waterscape incised by silent canoes. Several groups of Munsee people inhabited the wider region for centuries — a homeland stretching from Connecticut through New York and New Jersey to Delaware — and moved seasonally from the mainland to the island they called Manahatta, which translates roughly as "place of wood for making bows," to fish and hunt.

I envision, too, Henry Hudson's small wooden sailing vessel, the Half Moon, appearing on the horizon in September 1609, as he charted the area for the Dutch, setting in motion a historic transformation. Then, in 1624, another Dutch vessel arrived, bearing the first settlers of the colony of New Netherland.

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Custom House

The Custom House, built in 1907, occupies the site of Fort Amsterdam, the bulwark that protected New Amsterdam. It is now the home of the National Museum of the American Indian. George Etheredge for The New York Times

Cross Battery Park, which is all landfill, and you come to the original shoreline of Manhattan. The plaza in front of the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House is probably where, in 1626, Dutch settlers under the command of Peter Minuit made the infamous purchase of the island from a branch of the Munsee. What each side thought was going on in this exchange is an interesting question. The Dutch knew that the Native Americans had no notion of property transfer. Both sides believed they were entering into a defensive pact. Neither could know what the coming centuries would bring. But it can't be denied that the event was a milestone in the dispossession of Native Americans from their land.

The Custom House, which was built in 1907 from a design by the architect Cass Gilbert, occupies the site of Fort Amsterdam, the bulwark that protected New Amsterdam. By a curious coincidence it happens to be the home of the National Museum of the American Indian, whose permanent exhibition, "Native New York," offers a primer on the Indigenous groups who have called the New York State region home, from the Unkechaug and other tribes of pre-contact Long Island to the Mohawk ironworkers who helped build 20th-century skyscrapers.

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"Native New York," an exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, offers a primer on the Indigenous groups who have called the New York State region home. George Etheredge for The New York Times

The Munsee surely had in mind a working relationship with the Dutch, who came initially to trade furs. That trade continued throughout the lifetime of the colony, but the Dutch soon shifted their attention northward, where the Mohawk, who lived along the river of the same name, had a more plentiful supply of beavers. The relationship suffered its first serious blow when Willem Kieft, a director of New Netherland, declared war on the Munsee in 1643. In attacking his colony's business partners, Kieft acted against the wishes of his own people, and the war inflicted terrible losses to both sides. Even greater suffering came to the Native Americans as a result of smallpox, which the Europeans brought unwittingly.

Various displays at the "Native New York" exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian. George Etheredge for The New York Times

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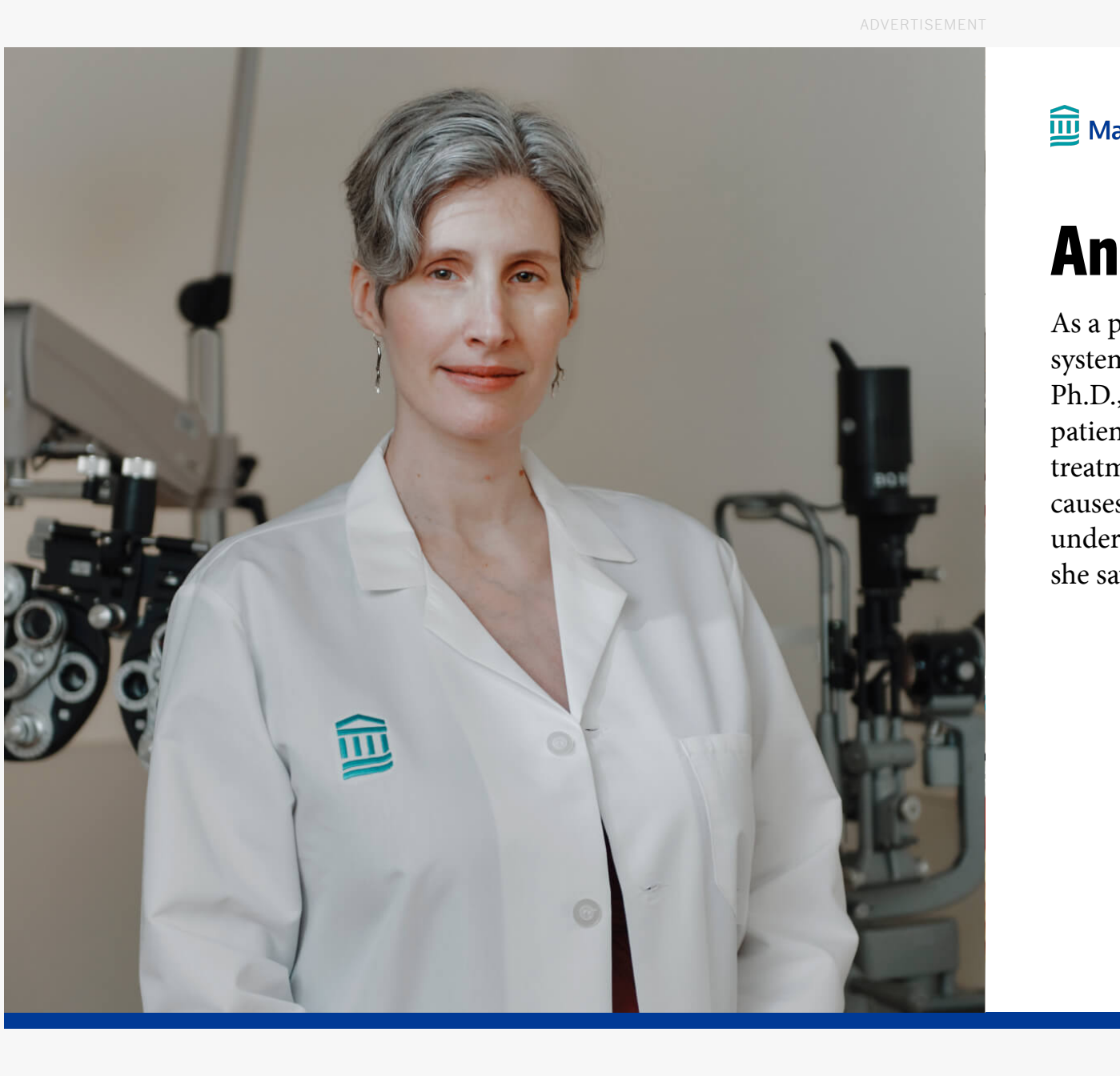
That said, the Munsee are very much alive today. Through myriad treaties and swindles they were split apart, and many were relocated or simply moved — to Oklahoma, Kansas, Delaware and Ontario. Others never went anywhere. "We're still here, 30 miles from where we were all those years ago," Michaeline Picaro, a member of the Turtle Clan of the Ramapough Munsee Lenape, in Andover, N.J., told me. She and her husband, Chief Vincent Mann, run a farm and serve as advocates for their community.

Pearl Street

A continuous wall of buildings in the Financial District. George Etheredge for The New York Times



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An Eye Toward Innovation

As a physician-scientist at Mass General Brigham, a health system in Boston, ophthalmologist Milica Margeta, M.D., Ph.D., has a foot in two worlds: In addition to seeing patients and doing eye surgery, she's developing new treatments for glaucoma, one of the world's most common causes of blindness. "My goal in all of this is to really understand how this disease kills off neurons in the eye," she says. "Why is it happening? And how can we stop it?"

1 of 5

Head down Whitehall to Pearl Street. Lower Manhattan is enveloped by several blocks of landfill. I find it useful to walk the original shoreline, which on the east was Pearl Street. The section on either side of Whitehall Street contained the first Dutch houses, erected in the 1620s: On the west side of the street, a row of them overlooked the East River and the wilds of what would later become the village of Breuckelen. In one of these lived Catalina Trico and her husband, Joris Rapalje, a couple of nobodies from present-day Belgium who showed up in Amsterdam as immigrants seeking work, heard of this new venture, got married, jumped on one of the first ships and made their lives here. They would have 11 children, 10 of whom lived to marry and have children of their own. Their descendants today number in the millions. I think of them as the Adam and Eve of New Amsterdam.

Pearl and Wall Streets

At the corner of Pearl Street and Coenties Slip, an outline in gray stones on the wide sidewalk marks the foundation of a building that started life as the Stadts Herberg, or city tavern. Ships arriving from Europe would anchor in the East River; then passengers were rowed to a nearby dock. Apparently the first thing everyone wanted to do after 10 or 12 weeks at sea was have a drink, so this was the most popular spot in town.

The corner of Pearl Street and Coenties Slip, where, outlined on the pavement, is the foundation of what was New York's first City Hall. George Etheredge for The New York Times

It stood to reason, then, that when the city won a municipal charter in 1653, this same building would be converted into Manhattan's first City Hall. Here, New Amsterdam's twin burgemeesters, or mayors, would hold sessions with their council, resolving disputes and managing their city.

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Continuing to the corner of Pearl and Wall Streets, we come to the site of one of the most far-reaching achievements of that council. Stop and face south. You're at the northeast corner of the city. To your left, imagine the East River lapping at your feet. To your right, it's not so hard to envision the legendary wall running down the middle of the street. The wall — actually more of a fence made of planks — was built in the wake of the municipal charter, when the new city government took measures to defend the place against an expected attack from the English. It's no accident that global finance is associated with that wall and this street.

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The corner of Pearl and Wall Streets in the Financial District. George Etheredge for The New York Times

The same Dutch who founded New Amsterdam created the world's first stock exchange and invented many of the building blocks of capitalism, upon which New York rose.

South William and Broad Streets

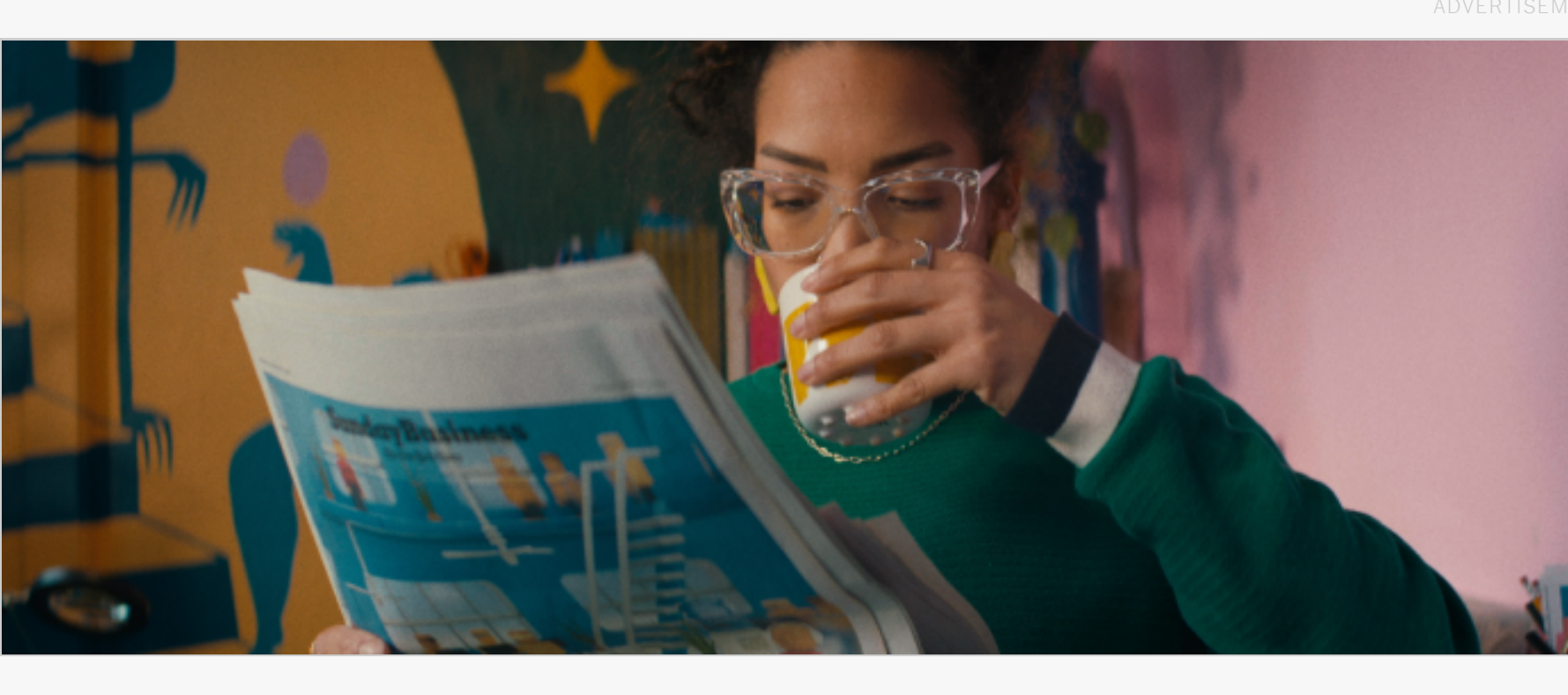
From here, one might head west down Wall Street, traversing New Amsterdam's northern border, but let's cut down Beaver Street into the middle of the city. On South William Street in the Dutch period there stood a building that was for a time the home of the enslaved Africans owned by the West India Company. Throughout most of the Dutch period, slavery was a haphazard business in New Netherland, with Africans reaching Manhattan as "cargo" on Spanish or Portuguese ships that had been captured in the Caribbean. Those who arrived were pressed into the service of the West India Company, or W.I.C., which ran the colony.

Street scenes in the Financial District. George Etheredge for The New York Times

George Etheredge for The New York Times

Andrea C. Mosterman, the author of "Spaces of Enslavement: A History of Slavery and Resistance in Dutch New York," surmises that multiple families were crammed here into one modest house. In 1659, five years before the English took over the colony, the

W.I.C. decided to undertake an “experiment with a parcel of Negroes,” beginning what would become, under English rule, a major trade that would forever alter the trajectory of the American experience.



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Continuing down South William and turning right, we come to Broad Street. It got its name because the Dutch had carved a canal down the middle, with roads on both sides. Later, the whole thing was paved over, and it became one of the widest streets in Lower Manhattan.

A bronze statue of George Washington in the Financial District. George Etheredge for The New York Times

The intersection of Broad and Wall Streets is one of those spots that overload the mind with historical associations. Here is the New York Stock Exchange, another reminder of Dutch financial innovations. Opposite it sits Federal Hall, where George Washington was inaugurated as the first president in 1789. In the Dutch period this was the northern edge of the city. Just a few steps away, at Wall and Broadway, was the gate that led out of the city.

Broadway and Park Row

The southernmost section of Broadway follows the route of the Wickquasgeck Trail, named for a branch of the Munsee whose territory encompassed much of Manhattan. The Dutch adopted it as their main thoroughfare up the island. It was a busy road, plied by Europeans, Africans and Native Americans, as well as by horses and wagons. Walking up it as I did recently, hearing snippets of French, Spanish, Chinese and what might have been Tagalog, I reflected on a talk I heard recently by Ross Perlin, director of the Endangered Language Alliance. He noted that the often cited figure of 18 languages spoken in New Amsterdam almost certainly didn’t include African or Native American languages, and that, when these were added, the figure would probably have been 25 or more.

Between Liberty and Ann Streets, Broadway skirts the World Trade Center site, yet another reminder of how 17th-century concepts of free trade grew in Manhattan. As you approach City Hall Park, Park Row continues the course of the Wickquasgeck Trail as it jogs eastward then continues north.

The African Burial Ground at Broadway and Duane Street is an excavated burial ground — the oldest in North America — for free and enslaved Africans. George Etheredge for The New York Times

At Broadway and Duane is the African Burial Ground National Monument, an appropriate spot to reorient one’s thinking. If the beginnings of slavery in New York were haphazard, it quickly became a hardened institution in the English period. And it grew. I’m continually amazed at our ability to will away the past. We still associate slavery with the South, yet by 1730, 42 percent of New Yorkers owned another human being, a higher proportion than in any city in the colonies except Charleston, S.C.

The city began to segregate burials in 1697. About 15,000 people were buried at this site designated for interring those of African heritage. It occupied five city blocks. Yet when digging began for an office building in 1991, the city was stunned to learn that there were human remains here. Somehow, we forgot.

Collect Pond

Collect Pond Park was once the location of a five-acre lake in what is now Chinatown. George Etheredge for The New York Times

At Leonard and Centre Streets you come to a scruffy little oasis called Collect Pond Park. Once, a five-acre lake dominated this section of what is now Chinatown. It was spring-fed, deep and cold. A Munsee village sat on the southern shore. This was Manahatta in its primordial state.

Manuel Plaza

The last stop is a mile north. I followed the Bowery, which tracks the Wickquasgeck Trail. Manuel Plaza, on East Fourth Street, is one of the newest city parks, and a testament to the enslaved Black people of New Amsterdam.

In the era before slave codes, Black people had some rights, including the right to sue. In 1644, 11 men petitioned for their freedom and that of their wives. They won it, with conditions, and they and others were given land here, two miles north of New Amsterdam, in what became known as the Land of the Blacks. “It was more than 100 acres, a significant amount of Manhattan real estate,” said Kamau Ware, the owner of Black Gotham Experience, which gives walking tours.

Manuel Plaza sits on what was once the property of Manuel de Gerrit de Reus, a Black resident of Dutch Manhattan. George Etheredge for The New York Times

But the relatively bright moment was short-lived. “It wasn’t outlawed for Black people to own land in the English period,” Mr. Ware said, but those families were stripped of their land through gimmicks, including a law that made it illegal for a Black person to inherit property.

Manuel Plaza, which sits on what was once the property of Manuel de Gerrit de Reus, a Black resident of Dutch Manhattan, is a quiet place to rest and contemplate the way our inheritances from the past are interwoven. We can trace back our ideals of tolerance, of individual freedom. They made us who we are and give us hope for the future. But they come to us bound up with their opposites, and we struggle to untangle the threads.

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