

Northeast Slavery Records Collaborative

Draft Charter

February 26, 2021

Footnotes are explanatory and not formal parts of the charter.

Mission

The Northeast Slavery Records Collaborative (NSRC) develops and maintains an online searchable compilation of records, called the Northeast Slavery Records Index (NESRI). The NESRI identifies records of enslavement, including records that identify individual enslaved persons and enslavers, for the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New Jersey.¹

NESRI will index census records, slave trade transactions, cemetery records, birth certifications, manumissions, ship inventories, newspaper accounts, private narratives, legal documents and many other sources. The goal is to deepen the understanding of slavery in the participating states by bringing together information that until now has been largely disconnected and difficult to access. This allows for searches that combine records from all indexed sources based on parameters such as the name of an owner, a place name, and date ranges.

Participating Organizations

There are founding organizations and member organizations. Founding organizations are identified in the Charter at the time of initial approval, and may be added by amendment of the charter. Founding organizations may have ongoing responsibilities that are identified in the charter. These responsibilities may be amended or transferred by amendment of the charter. The following are founding organizations:

- John Jay College of Criminal Justice, of the City University of New York, which is responsible for the hosting and operation of the shared website and database, and which is the lead organization for NY State.
- Atlantic Black Box, which is the lead organization for the State of Maine and which is responsible for shipping records of enslavement for all participating states.

¹ The rationale for a project that encompasses the six states of New England along with New Jersey is primarily historical, based on the shifting jurisdictional boundaries of the states involved. For example, a Massachusetts index, for certain times when slavery existed, would include parts of what is now Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. The Dominion of New England included Massachusetts and extended into Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York and New Jersey. A single NESRI database would enable a locality to access enslavement records from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries for that location regardless of boundary and jurisdiction changes.

- Monmouth University is the lead organization for the State of New Jersey.

Organization members may include academic institutions or projects in academic institutions, as well as other partners like historical societies, commemorative projects and foundations. Organizational membership requires at least one representative of the organization to serve as the organization's liaison or representative, and organization memberships do not expire unless there is no member serving as representative and no ongoing efforts to designate one.

Membership

Individual membership is initiated by email to the Director and signified by a list of individual and organizational members on the NESRI website.

Individual membership is for two years, starting with each even-numbered year, and is renewable.² Membership renewal after the first full two-year term, requires that the member has been actively engaged in NESRI operations and governance. Engagement may include service on a committee, or adding records to the database, or posting an article.

Organization and Governance

NSRC is governed by its members, who meet online or in person at least once per year. There is an executive committee of the membership, which consists of one member per state and two members for any state with more than 500 records in the shared database. Members representing states will be selected by the members of each state by a method they select, provided that in the event of conflict a vote of the members shall take precedence.

A NSRC director or co-directors shall be selected for a two-year term by vote of the Executive Committee. Each state shall have a state director selected by the members of each state, or a term of two years by a method they select, provided that a vote of the members will take precedence over any other approach.

Where a state has a lead organization designated in the Charter, state director is not elected, but is designated by the lead organization.

Terms of the NSRC director(s), state directors and executive committee representatives shall begin at the start of each odd-numbered year.

Each state director will be responsible to review and approve proposed primary database records, and to answer inquiries on the website for their respective states.

The Executive Committee can create other committees, such as:

² The fixed term periods are intended so simplify membership management. Member terms are for two years starting with an odd-numbered year. Leadership terms are also for two years but the terms start with even-numbered years so that the membership is determined at the times that elections take place.

- Membership Committee to review and update membership status,
- Database Policy Committee to oversee the technical design and operation of the
- Website Policy and Design Committee to oversee the technical design and operation of the website,
- Editorial committee, to review and approve additional databases and articles for posting on the website.

Technical Principles

NESRI hosts a common “primary” database along with some additional databases, attributed to the developers of the databases, that cover topics that cannot be integrated into the general database.

The primary NESRI dataset indexes records of enslavement in the states involved. While member individuals and organization may have custody of actual records. The NESRI project does not seek to take custody of or manage records, but rather to provide a comprehensive index of the records that exist. Records can include but are not limited to:

- Colonial census records
- United States Census records
- Slave Trade Records: Emancipations
- Runaway Slave Advertisements and Announcements:
- Gradual Abolition Records: Connecticut and Rhode Island had “gradual abolition of slavery” laws like New York. Massachusetts freed enslaved people at the time of abolition. The graduate abolition laws imposed periods of servitude of children born to enslaved mothers and records of birth and eventual emancipation must be included in the database.
- Treaty of Paris Records: The Book of Negroes is a hand-written list of more than 3,000 formerly enslaved persons allowed to emigrate to Nova Scotia in 1783 because of their service to the British during the Revolutionary War.
- Cemetery Records
- Slave ship Records: NESRI will index records of slave ships that delivered enslaved people to or from the New England states, including records of ownership .
- Portraits and Sculptures and other memorializations: NESRI will index art representations of enslaved persons and enslavers from the New England States.
- Court records: These include criminal and civil records.
- Records from other indices: These would include records of enslaved persons in Louisiana who were born in a New England state, such as Simon who was born in Massachusetts in 1750 and sold in Louisiana in 1772. They will also include New York Slavery Records Index records with substantive relationships to New England States. The following numbers of records exist; CT 7, RI 17, MA 56, and ME 2.

The dataset design will initially be the basic structure and format of the NY Slavery Records Index³ (NYSRI) index, but it will be adapted to the multistate context, and it will include a field identifying the state or states associated with a record. Records can be associated with more than one state, such as records of interstate purchase transactions.

This initial website for the NESRI has been set up at <https://nesri.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>

Amendments

The Charter can be amended by two-thirds vote of the executive committee, followed by approval by two-thirds of the membership at an announced or annual meeting, provided that the amendment is circulated to the members at least 60 days before the meeting.

³ <https://nyslavery.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>