Photographic essay shot at a Founding Father’s estate illuminates a time of slavery on Long Island

‘The Other Side’

This collection of 25 images by photographer Xiomáro of Roslyn Heights, plus four historical images, centers on the burial ground of the forgotten slaves on the William Floyd Estate. A free, limited-edition e-book of the exhibit can be downloaded at xiomaro.com.

WHEN | WHERE

Through March 29, Angela Koenig Center, Oyster Bay Historical Society, 20 Summit St., Oyster Bay. Xiomáro will be giving talks about the exhibit on March 15 at 2 p.m. and March 26 at 6:30 p.m.

INFO
Free; 516-922-5032, oysterbayhistorical.org

‘People evolve’

Xio, 54, a longtime Roslyn Heights resident, admits that before visiting the estate he knew little about Floyd. While he seeks to rescue Floyd’s slaves from the margins of history, Xio also asserts that the exhibit is neither an exercise in revisionist history nor condemnation of Floyd as a hypocrite. “Who am I to say I would have been any different from Floyd if I’d been born in the same era?” says Xio. “People evolve.”

Here, Xio has some personal...
Stark markers on slaves’ graves stand in contrast to those on Floyd family graves.

Gravestones in the Floyd family cemetery also became photographic subjects.

A photograph of the grave markers, bearing single names only, that first caught Xiomáro’s eye while he was on assignment to shoot the interior of the estate’s main house.
Exposures of history

A simple name and a crucifix grace a weathered cross in this photograph from the exhibit.

A photograph of the signature of William Floyd, who also signed his name to the Declaration of Independence.

COVER STORY from G4

al experience.
Born Richard Dieguez in Brooklyn — the son of a Cuban father and Puerto Rican mother — he went to New York University, and became a successful entertainment lawyer with a side career as a musician, playing guitar with rock bands in coffeehouses and bars around the New York area.

In 2004, Dieguez was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He was 44. “Not young enough to make medical history,” he says with a laugh. “But extraordinarily young for that form of cancer.”

Because of his age, his doctors decided to surgically remove the prostate entirely. “I was told there were no guarantees,” he said. The surgery was successful, the disease didn’t spread, and today, he is cancer-free. But, he says, he is not the same person.

‘Second shot at life’

During the year he spent dealing with the disease, he battled depression. His legal practice suffered, as well. But, he says, “When I realized I had a second shot at life, I told myself, ‘I am going to treat it as such.’”

In 2006, Dieguez and his wife, Rita, visited the national parks in Colorado and Utah. Along the way, he began taking snapshots. After the trip, Dieguez decided to use the images to promote his musical performances, and displayed some of them during the shows. To his surprise, he said, “people started buying them. And it wasn’t family members just trying to be nice. It was complete strangers!”

He realized this new form of artistic expression offered him
the opportunity to take that second shot at life. He decided, along with a new focus should come a new image — and a new name. He chose Xiomáro, a Spanish name that he says can be translated to mean “ready for battle.”

Xio, as he calls himself, struck out to build a career as a photographer. His break came in 2011, when he was selected as artist-in-residence at the Weir Farm National Historic Site in Wilton, Connecticut, home of Impressionist painter Julian Alden Weir. Then-U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut saw some of the photos Xio took there and exhibited them in his Washington, D.C., office. Subsequently, Xio began landing commissions to shoot parks throughout the Northeast.

“I’d like to do for the national parks in the East what Ansel Adams did for the ones in the West,” he said.

“The Other Side” is less about a national historic site and more about an ugly and little-known chapter in history: slavery in Colonial New York.

“It was complicated and it was dirty,” said Philip Blocklyn, executive director of the Oyster Bay Historical Society. “Many people don’t even realize it existed here.”

Blocklyn knew about Xio’s work from a project Xio had done shooting the interior of Sagamore Hill. When Blocklyn heard about the Floyd estate photos, he was intrigued, even though the subject was in the Town of Brookhaven, not Oyster Bay.

“We’re looking for stories that resonate locally,” Blocklyn says.

This one has.

“The images were powerful,” says Steve Gilroy, a history teacher at Manhasset Middle School, who attended the Jan. 11 opening. “I love the way it was presented and how it went from Colonial times to the present.”

Creating the images

The exhibit consists of 25 photos taken by Xio, plus four historical images, in addition to accompanying text that he researched and wrote. Xio captured the images with a simple Nikon D200 and some special lenses to achieve what he calls a “blurry, dreamy effect”: an appropriate treat-