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June 2009 Newsletter

Uncovering Inspiration: Current Archaeology Investigations of Harriet Tubman in Central New York

By Douglas V. Armstrong and Anna Hill*

Archaeological research is illuminating details of Harriet Tubman's life through the recovery and analysis of material remains from her two farmsteads in Central New York (Figure 1). This study is being conducted by Syracuse University in cooperation with the Harriet Tubman Home, Inc. The properties involved comprise 32 acres and two farmsteads owned by Harriet Tubman (Figure 2). The first was a seven acre farm that she bought on good terms from U.S. Senator William Seward in 1859, who later acted as Secretary of State during the Lincoln and Johnson administrations. This farmstead was Tubman's residence for more than fifty years (Figure 3).

In 1896, Tubman bought the adjacent twenty-five acre farmstead in an effort to set up a cooperative farm on which to support and expand the home for aging African Americans that she had chartered. She conveyed this parcel to the AME Zion Church in 1903, and they embarked on a fund-raising effort that resulted in the refurbishing of buildings and the formal opening of the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged in 1908. This facility became the residence for Tubman herself in 1911. The Home for the Aged was maintained after Tubman's death in 1913, but due to problems of financing a care facility for the elderly, no new residents were taken in after Tubman's death and the facility was closed when the last of the residents died in the 1920s. Fortunately, even though the Home closed and the buildings on the property declined into a state of severe disrepair, the AME Zion Church held onto the intact farmstead and has begun a process of renewal and restoration. This has included the purchase of Tubman's seven acre farm and a series of site evaluations and restoration projects. The properties are part of the Harriet Tubman National Historic Landmark (NHL 2000) and have been recommended as the New York State foci of a new Harriet Tubman National Park (NPS 2008).

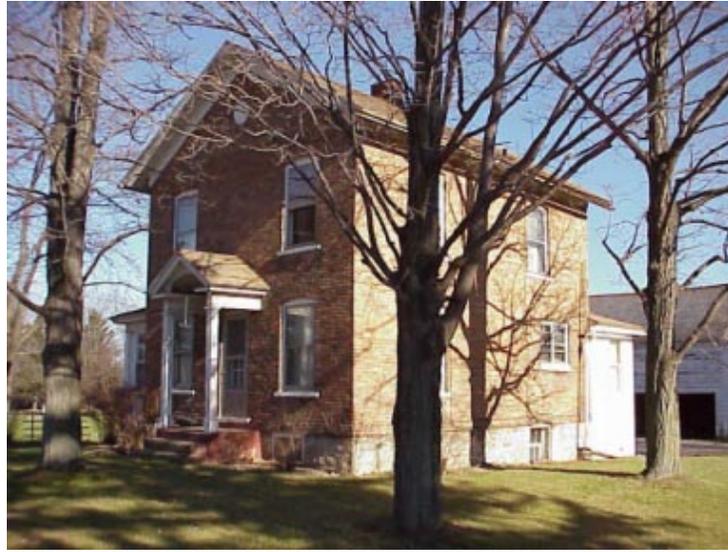


Figure 1. Harriet Tubman's brick farm house on seven acre farmstead, Fleming, New York.

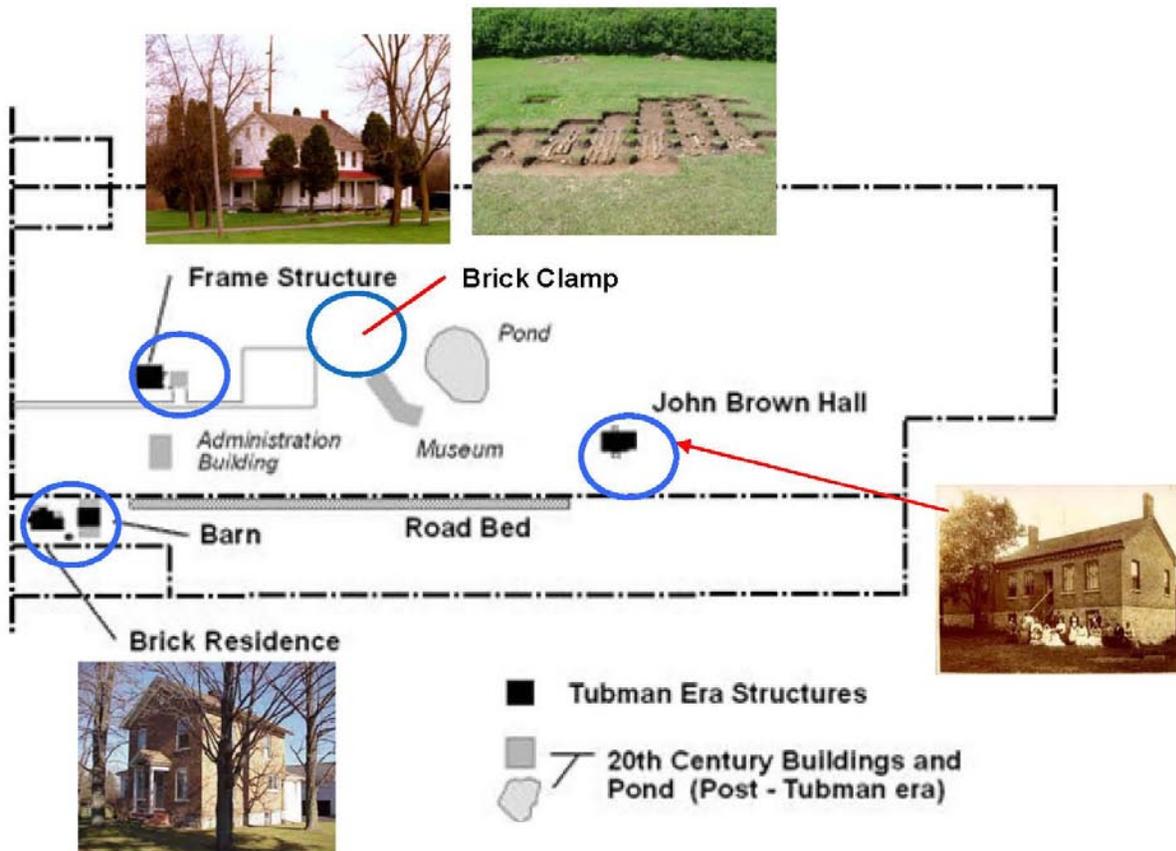


Figure 2. Map of the Harriet Tubman properties.

Research at the Tubman Home began in 1998 with archaeological investigations that defined the location and material record at John Brown Hall, the primary dormitory and infirmary at Harriet Tubman's Home for the Aged, which served as a cooperative care facility that Tubman and the AME Zion Church established to assist elderly and infirm African Americans (Armstrong 2003a, Ryan and Armstrong 2000; Ryan 2000). Based on the positive response to the John Brown Hall study, a survey of the entire property was carried out in 2002



Figure 3. Harriet Tubman (photograph in the collection of the Library of Congress).

(Armstrong 2003a, b). This work included pedestrian surveys, with a winter survey designed to explore the landscape when the vegetation was free from leaves (Armstrong 2003b), and remote sensing of select areas to help identify subsurface finds. These preliminary studies helped to define the extent of archaeological resources on the property and provided guidance for expanding plans for the property in terms of restoration, public interpretation, and increased access for heritage tourism. The objective was to define the parameters of cultural resources and

provide guidance regarding how to effectively utilize the sites without compromising the cultural resources on the property.

Based on the surveys and the sequencing of plans for restoration of sites on the property by the Harriet Tubman Home, Inc., it was decided that Harriet Tubman's brick house, on her original seven acre farmstead, would be the focus of our archaeological explorations beginning in 2002. Almost immediately after beginning excavations just outside the foundations of the standing brick house, we found evidence of a house fire and over the next several years continued to excavate discrete features that revealed not only the fact that Tubman's original wood frame structure burned in 1880, but that she and her family rebuilt on the same foundation (Figures 4-6). They first dug a builder's trench, then re-pointed the old field stone (shale) foundation and added a cut limestone foundation (Onondaga limestone) upon which they built a brick house. Most of the personal and household possessions of Tubman and those who resided



Figure 4. Syracuse University students excavating under porch at Harriet Tubman's brick house.

there were broken and damaged. They were apparently cleared out of the house as the site was being prepared for reconstruction. Then when they cleaned the yard after constructing the new brick house, these items became part of the fill of the builder's trench. Most of the broken household wares such as plates, cutlery, candy jars, stemware, and figurines were placed in the trench by the front door (Figure 5). This area also had a large number of clothing buttons and architectural and furniture elements, including many partially melted porcelain and burned bone

buttons. Another feature containing a concentration of pharmaceutical bottles (one still containing glycerin) and toiletry items (including a tooth brush with evidence that the bristles had burned during the fire) were found in a clustered feature by the door on the west side of the house (Figure 6).

The brick house erected by Tubman and her husband Nelson Davis was built on the same site as the earlier house, but was designed and constructed by African Americans, probably under the direction of Nelson Davis, who was a brick mason. The bricks themselves were probably made on the property, or from bricks formed and fired on Tubman's farmstead or adjacent properties. Brick making was an important aspect of the local economy and there is an abundance of evidence of borrow pits for the gathering of clay on both of Tubman's farmsteads as well as neighboring farms. Surveys identified an abundance of waster brick in the woods adjacent to a field in which strong magnetic anomalies were identified by remote sensing (Armstrong 2003a). Our first shovel test at the center of the magnetic anomaly identified rows of brick with ash. The presence of an intact feature was confirmed first with a series of shovel tests in 2005. Extensive excavations in 2006 revealed the intact base of a complete brick clamp marked by alternating sets of five rows of brick and areas which had served as fire boxes for a



Figure 5. Stemware burned in house fire (February 10, 1880) and deposited in builder's trench near Harriet Tubman's front door of brick house constructed on the same site in between 1880 and 1882.

brick kiln (Figure 7). This type of brick kiln was constructed of raw brick and was dismantled after the bricks were fired. The fired brick were then sold for use in regional house construction. This type of brick clamp is the probable source of brick used in the construction of Tubman's house. The African American community, including Nelson Davis, was deeply involved in the local brick making industry and it is probable that Davis, as well as other relatives and friends, were involved in all phases of the design, production of materials, and construction of her brick house. The brick clamp at the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged is currently being analyzed as part of Alan Armstrong's honors thesis at Syracuse University.



Figure 6. A builder's trench with brick at the base contains a cache of medicinal items, including fourteen pharmaceutical bottles and a tooth brush (highlighted by the red circle); the bristles on the tooth brush were apparently burned in the fire.

Currently, archaeological investigations continue to examine the materials from Tubman's house. In the fall of 2008 a wooden cistern was found just outside the east door of the house when the post-Tubman era porches were removed as part of the process of restoring the house to the configuration that it had during the Tubman era. Most recently, as part of the monitoring of restoration efforts related to the reconstruction of Tubman's 1890s era barn, additional materials dating to the period of the Tubman house fire were found among fill deposits beneath the barn. These findings are currently being assessed.

During May and early June of 2009 we will explore deposits associated with Tubman's house and barns. We plan excavation units in the basement of the house and within the barn. The next phase of research at the Tubman properties will be extensive excavations related to a frame house on the Home for the Aged property. This structure was rebuilt in the early 1950s after it fell into severe disrepair. Over the next several years it will be restored again, this time with a more focused view of its historical use. Over the past several decades the house has often been misidentified as either Harriet Tubman's house (which was in fact the brick house on the farm on the property immediately south of and in clear view from this house), or it has been called "The Home for the Aged." The latter name is closer to the truth, but was actually a contributing house of the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged. John Brown Hall served as the primary residential structure and was fully outfitted for the purposes of a home for elderly African Americans. This wood frame house, served as part of the home for the aged, but its



Figure 7. Base of brick clamp on the Harriet Tubman Home property.

specific application or function to the Home for the Aged is currently under investigation. This house and the associated outbuildings that once existed in its yard are the focus of doctoral dissertation work being carried out by Anna Hill. In 2008 a foundation of dry masonry brick, made up of brick wasters (indicating probable local on-site production), was found just outside

the east, or kitchen door. Studies in 2009 will include further excavation of this structural feature as well as testing for other structures in the yard behind (north) of the house.

In keeping with the theme of this *Newsletter*, we hope that this short description will lead to feedback and ideas concerning what we have found and what might be expected on the property. In particular, we are interested in any information regarding brick clamps, brick production and labor systems, African Americans' involvement in industries such as brick making, and settings where they may have owned or operated such industries. With respect to on-going research at the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged, we have compiled considerable information about the site (Armstrong et. al. 2000; Armstrong 2003a, b; Ryan and Armstrong 2000; Ryan 2000), and are now keenly interested in studies related to African American health practice and the formal establishment of institutions aimed at addressing health care issues particularly for the aged and infirm.

Additionally, the site is an excellent venue for the study of female-headed households. Tubman was not only the property owner and a charismatic personality who attracted others to her for inspiration and support. She also positioned herself and was used by others as a figure in the women's movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hence, we are interested in gender issues related to women as heads of households in the late nineteenth century as well as more specific information researchers in other regions may have come across related to visitation by Tubman to persons or events in their regions. Given the fact that Tubman owned and operated two small mixed produce/industry farmsteads which were literally on the edge of town which reflect continual interaction between rural and urban landscapes, we are also interested in studies of late nineteenth and early twentieth century farms in this type of mixed use setting.

Note

* The authors are affiliated with Syracuse University.

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