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A Biohistory of 19th-Century Afro-Americans: The Burial Remains of a Philadelphia Cemetery

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Rankin-Hill presents an analysis of the skeletal remains of approximately 140 members of the First African Baptist Church (FABC) who were interred between c. 1822 and 1843. This forgotten cemetery was discovered during a construction project in Center City Philadelphia and was subsequently excavated by team led by Michael Parrington. Rankin-Hill was a member of a team of physical anthropologists working at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History who examined and recorded the remains, under the direction of the late Dr. Larry Angel, prior to their reburial.

Rankin-Hill situates her study by discussing the difficulty of studying the history of a people who are essentially invisible in the documentary record and the importance of cemetery archaeology as a source of information on demography, health, and disease in such populations. She offers what she terms a "biocultural approach" (p. 13) that recognizes local environmental and cultural factors that affect the human organism. She details her methods and identifies comparative data from other African-American cemetery studies, mostly slave cemeteries excavated in the South, and provides a detailed historical context for her data including brief discussions of socioeconomic conditions, churches and beneficial societies, and residential and population demography of the antebellum African-American community of Philadelphia based on documentary sources.

The bulk of the volume presents the analysis of the skeletal population including its demographic and mortality profile and evidence of nutritional deficiencies, infectious disease, trauma, degenerative joint disorders, and occupational stress markers and anomalies. Much of the discussion is highly technical, but the concluding summary and discussion of results are not. The evidence Rankin-Hill presents clearly shows that the urban existence of the FABC congregation was stressful and unstable in ways that increased risk of disease, trauma, and mortality. While the African-American community of Philadelphia organized itself to "culturally buffer" the effects of local environmental conditions, additional stress arose from the social context of racism and the ethnically-based division of labor which kept African-Americans in the lowest paid menial occupations and segregated in the poorest housing.

Notwithstanding the apparent truth of the study's conclusions, the meaning of most of the specific results of the analyses are difficult to assess without comparative data from contemporary European-American populations. Cemeteries associated with such populations are seldom "lost" and remains were often removed when congregations relocated. Comparison is limited to a number of Southern slave cemeteries. While rates of infant mortality appear to be relatively high and evidence

of infection and periodic nutritional stress (undernutrition) was widespread, these free Black Philadelphians appear to have been better fed and healthier than their enslaved counterparts.

The subsequent discovery and excavation of an earlier cemetery, used by the FABC c. 1810-22, presents the opportunity to consider the stories the skeletons tell over most of the course of the first half of the 19th century. Further, excavation of a portion of the eighteenth-century African Burial Ground in lower Manhattan presents additional comparative material that will further enrich the interpretation of the FABC cemetery populations.