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Freedman's Cemetery (1869-1907): Establishing a Chronology for Exhumed Burials from an African-American Burial Ground, Dallas, Texas

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In the early 1990s, archaeologists working in Dallas, Texas, participated in one of the largest historic cemetery removal projects, to be treated archaeologically, ever conducted in the United States. The focus of the project, Freedman's Cemetery, was the principal burial ground for virtually every African American in Dallas between the years 1869 and 1907, a critical period spanning the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras.

The Freedman's Cemetery Project was necessitated by the expansion of North Central Expressway (U.S. Highway 75). In the late 1980s, a preliminary pedestrian survey of threatened cultural resources performed by the Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) identified the remaining intact portion of Freedman's Cemetery. Later research revealed that previous highway building efforts undertaken in the 1940s had paved over nearly an acre of the site.

To mitigate the effects of highway expansion, the Freedman's Cemetery Archaeological Project was formed by TXDOT. Between November 1991 and August 1994, excavations within Freedman's Cemetery encompassed nearly an acre (.95 acre). At the close of these excavations, archaeological investigations had resulted in the exhumation, documentation, and analysis of 1,150 burials (containing the remains of 1,157 individuals); i.e., nearly 1,200 men, women, and children who had lived and died a century ago (Condon et. al 1998). Since none of the graves were marked with dated tombstones, both the identities and dates of interment for these individuals were unknown.

Without knowing when someone lived and died, without the ability to view them in the very context of their times, it becomes difficult to judge with any certainty the quality or content of their lives in any meaningful way, economically, spiritually, or socially. Thus, establishing a chronology for these exhumed burials became the first step involved in realizing the vast potential of the Freedman's Cemetery data.

Numerous prior historic cemeteries have been excavated and reports produced, all without a thorough knowledge (or at times even a basic grounding) in the material culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century funerary industry (e.g., coffin hardware). Though most historic cemeteries subjected to archaeological investigation are unmarked, and the individual burials undated, as a rule the resulting site reports make only limited attempts at interpretation or chronology. Some do not even deign to hazard a guess as to when the burials, that are the very subject of the report, were originally interred (e.g., Taylor, et. al 1986). What, then, made the Freedman's Cemetery Project any different from previous investigations, and therefore significant enough to justify the added time and expense in documenting the site as fully as possible?

When excavations ended in the summer of 1994, the Freedman's Cemetery Project had exhumed a total of 1,157 individuals, a population equal to a small town. This staggering figure makes Freedman's one of the largest historic cemeteries ever excavated archaeologically in the United States. This circumstance alone makes the Freedman's Archaeological Project largely unique.

Additionally, unlike many historic cemetery excavations, where only the most superficial study is permitted, the skeletal remains and associated artifacts exhumed at Freedman's Cemetery were subjected to both extensive and intensive documentation and analyses. For example, the typical burial generated 29 pages of documentation (e.g., excavation form, artifact inventory and analysis form, skeletal analysis form, and dental analysis form). For the 1,150 burials exhumed archaeologically, the combined documentation is approximately 33,000 pages (66 reams or 330 pounds of paper). Also, extensive photographic documentation occurred with both artifacts and skeletal remains; over 185,000 negatives exist (Condon et. al 1998).

Extensive local archival documentation was available as well. Such data were an enormous help in interpreting the cemetery in its totality, and aided in understanding individual graves as well.

The fact that Freedman's was an African-American cemetery was, for me, yet another significant factor in the project. African Americans founded the Freedman's Town, of which the cemetery was but one part, in the early years of Reconstruction. Arguably, the one period in American history most fraught with change for African Americans spans the Reconstruction Era to the time of Jim Crow, a period within which the use of Freedman's Cemetery was known to fall. Finally, it was established that for nearly all of its history, the Freedman's Cemetery served as the only public burial ground for African Americans residing within Dallas. Thus, the demography of the cemetery is an inclusive one, simultaneously containing both the poorest members of the community (numerous paupers buried at city expense), as well as Dallas' African-American middle class or elite represented by elaborately trimmed caskets.

Two basic and complimentary dating schema were used in the creation of the Freedman's Cemetery chronology. First, an entirely internal chronology was established, using specific artifacts as temporal diagnostics, cross-dating, stacked burials (i.e., superposition), as well as knowledge of land purchase and subsequent use (e.g., the spatial patterning of graves). The other dating schema made use of broad, national trends in coffin hardware innovations and stylistic motifs, through an exhaustive study of coffin hardware catalogues, trade journals, and all pertinent records of the United States Patent Office. Although extremely time-consuming, this study was a necessary step to advance the knowledge base of 19th and early 20th century mortuary hardware beyond the preliminary studies of Hacker-Norton and Trinkley (1984), Garrow (1987), and others.

The chronology created for Freedman's Cemetery made it possible to assign narrow date ranges to virtually all of the recovered burials. From historic records, I was able to establish that Freedman's Cemetery was founded on April 29, 1869, and remained open and received interments up to July 26, 1907. Three major (and one minor) time periods were identified. The Early Period spans sixteen years, from the cemetery's founding in 1869 until 1884 (n=64 burials; 5.5% of total exhumed). The next period defined for Freedman's Cemetery is the Middle Period, a fifteen year interval stretching from 1885 to 1899 (n=170 burials; 14.8% of total exhumed).

The next temporal period is a minor one, termed simply "Pre-1900." This designation was devised to describe those burials that while identified as dating prior to 1900, could not be further subdivided into either the Early or Middle Periods. The "Pre-1900" Period contains 37 burials (3.2% of total exhumed). The final temporal period is termed the Late Period; it covers a mere eight year interval occurring between 1900 and 1907. The Late Period contains the bulk of the exhumed burials (n=878; 76.4% of total exhumed). Of the 1150 burials exhumed during excavations, only one (Burial 1127) could not be more finely dated due to its highly disturbed nature, location within the cemetery, and complete lack of associated artifacts.

The Freedman's Cemetery chronology took approximately six years to formulate, research, implement, and finally, document within my masters thesis (Davidson 1999). Other investigators involved with historic cemetery excavations might wonder at the necessity or the lengths that I have taken in this detailed analysis and subdivision of a relatively short 39-year time span. This seemed the first order of importance for a number of reasons. To date, Freedman's Cemetery is the largest historical cemetery of its kind in the United States to have been excavated, documented, and analyzed to the extent performed in Dallas, and it seems unlikely that such a site of comparable size will ever again be examined as minutely as Freedman's.

Until Freedman's Cemetery was firmly tethered in time, any analyses conducted would have been perfunctory in tone or preliminary in extent. Indeed, for any analysis or meaningful interpretations to come of the Freedman's Cemetery Project, a diachronic perspective was imperative. The chronology forms the basis for my dissertation work: diachronic studies of the subject of race and racism within Dallas, the changing cultural landscape, health and demography, socioeconomic, and the socio-religious realm as mirrored through specific burial practices.

To only view this skeletal population and material culture (in toto) as contemporaneous would deny the wonderful opportunity to chart the social, economic, and health trends within the African-American communities of 19th and early 20th century Dallas. Indeed, the active "life" of Freedman's Cemetery parallels some of the most formative years of the Black Experience, beginning during the troubled Recon-struction period and proceeding into the early 20th century, both of which influenced the birth of America's modern era.

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