

Twenty Years After: Re-examining Archaeological Collections for Evidence of New York City's Colonial African Past

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Introduction

Over the last quarter century, archaeologists working in the southern United States have made enormous strides in the study of the enslaved people of African descent who lived there. Working at both plantation and urban sites, numerous assemblages that can be linked with Africans have been discovered. Until recently, however, there have been relatively few attempts on the part of archaeologists studying sites in the north to explore the experience of enslaved Africans there (for exceptions, see Fitts 1996 and Perry personal communication 1999). I believe that this is true for two reasons. First, European Americans living in the north have tended to deny the importance of slavery to the history of the region. Secondly, the nature of slavery in the north makes it much more difficult to examine than in the south (a point which I develop more fully below). Recently, this situation has begun to change in New York City and in this paper, I describe some of the finds made there.

The discovery of the African Burial Ground in New York City in 1991, and the subsequent successful effort on the part of members of the city's modern African-American community to gain control of the archaeological project brought New York's long tradition of enslavement home to many New Yorkers in a very powerful way. The first arrival of enslaved Africans in New Amsterdam in 1626 followed the European settlement by only one year, and Africans continued to make up most of the city's enslaved labor force for over two centuries, more than half of the city's history (Wilson 1994). Throughout the eighteenth century, enslaved Africans made up between 14 and 21 percent of the city's population (Rosenwaike 1972:8). The Howard University team's study of the people who were interred in the African Burial Ground and their cultural context in the eighteenth-century city is revealing enormously important information about life and death in New York's enslaved community (e.g., Blakey 1997; Howard 1998; Perry 1997, 1998).

Notwithstanding this ground breaking project, to date there has been little success at discovering archaeological deposits associated with the homes of people of African descent in the city, primarily due to the nature of the settlement system of enslavement in New York.

Slavery in New York was very different from that in those parts of the world where the enslaved worked in a plantation economy and lived in their own spatially separate quarters. The enslaved in New York usually lived under the same roofs as their owners, forming part of the urban colonial household. Some lived in cellars, others in garrets, and others still in the so-called "Negro kitchens" that were located in their owners' back yards (Foote 1991:91; White 1991:9). While a large percentage of the city's households included enslaved members, they lived in 40 percent of the households on Manhattan Island in 1703 (Foote 1991:91), most of these

households included only one or two slaves. Accordingly, the enslaved were widely dispersed among white households throughout the city.

This settlement system has ramifications for archaeologists trying to study the African presence in colonial homes in New York. Until recently, it had been assumed it would be impossible to study the African presence in colonial homes for two reasons. First, some thought that the practice of housing the enslaved under the watchful eyes of the slave holders denied the enslaved the privacy afforded them in the southern quarters, a privacy which allowed them "to practice African traditions openly and build a culture of resistance" (Fitts 1996:57-58). Second, others thought that the archaeological remains of the sustaining cultural life that the enslaved were able to create in the interstices of the dominant culture would be invisible archaeologically in these combined households (e.g., Wall 1995).

Recent work, however, suggests that it is time to re-think the assumption that it is not possible to see the African presence in these multiracial homes. (Here I use the word "racial" in the cultural and not the biological sense.) This work, which has focused on the enslaved in the south, points to the importance of developing different lines of evidence to link archaeological assemblages to people of particular ethnic or racial groups. Three lines of evidence are of particular importance.

One consists of archaeological context, a concept originally stressed by Kenneth Brown and Doreen Cooper (1990; see also Cochran 1999:6-7). Two different kinds of contexts have been shown relevant for identifying artifacts associated with African life in the south. In one, artifacts are found in spaces over which Africans had some, albeit limited, control. These include the cabins in the quarters where they lived on the plantations and the kitchens and laundries of the big houses where they worked in southern cities like Annapolis and Williamsburg (e.g., Leone and Fry 1999; Samford 1996:109). There, both indoors and out, archaeologists have found pits that were used for storing a variety of objects, ranging from food remains to personal valuables and including artifacts used in rituals associated with traditional African-American spiritual life (e.g., Cooper and Brown 1990; Kelso 1984; Leone and Fry 1999; McKee 1992; Mouer 1991). Other caches were put in the ground as part of rituals (Leone and Fry 1999). They were placed in key locations, such as the northeast corners of rooms and under hearths and door sills, by religious specialists "to direct spirits, protect, diagnose, and foretell" (Leone and Fry 1999:380).

A second archaeological context consists of rivers and other bodies of water that served as the final resting place for objects used in other rituals. Leland Ferguson (1992) has made a convincing case linking bowls inscribed with "X"s that have been found in stream and river beds with cosmograms designed by the Bakongo in today's Kongo and Angola.

A second line of evidence consists of the artifacts themselves. Some objects have been identified as having been important in the spiritual lives of Africans living in North America (e.g., Patten 1992; Samford 1996; Leone and Fry 1999). These artifacts include discs which are sometimes perforated (including buttons, coins, and ceramic sherds roughly shaped into circles which are often referred to as gaming pieces in the literature), quartz crystals and pieces of glass, cowrie shells, glass beads, Native American stone tools, black pebbles, marbles (including some incised with "X"s), blue-painted white ceramic sherds, and objects made out of metal, including pins, locks, keys, nails, etc. (compiled from Klingelhofer 1987; Leone and Fry 1999; Patten 1992;

Russell 1997). However, it is not to determine whether any particular object held spiritual significance for African Americans. The objects do not speak for themselves; they are all multivalent and might have one set of meanings in one context for one group of people and another set of meanings in a different context and/or for another group of people (Brown and Cooper 1991; Cochran 1999; Perry 1997:14). For example, although buttons can have ritual significance in one context for some people, they are also used by many people in other contexts for fastening clothing. Further, some of these artifacts also had spiritual meaning for the members of other groups, such as the quartz crystals, glass beads, and objects made of copper, which had spiritual connotations for some Native American groups (e.g., Cantwell and Wall in press; Native Americans continued to form part of the enslaved population in New York until the 1740s [Davis in Jackson 1995:1076]). Therefore it is not possible to use particular kinds of artifact as *fossiles directeurs* to make a link with people of African descent; instead the presence of particular kinds of artifacts has to be combined with other kinds of evidence, particularly the evidence of context (Brown and Cooper 1990; Cochran 1999; Wilkie 1997:102).

A third line of evidence consists of the documentary record, which can be used to link enslaved Africans with the site where the artifacts were found. Archival records sometimes show whether or not enslaved Africans and Native Americans lived on a particular site during the period when artifacts were deposited in the ground.

What is obvious in looking at these different kinds of evidence is that each alone is insufficient to link artifact assemblages with people of African descent in interracial homes. Although we know that storing objects in cache pits has a long tradition in some African cultures and that enslaved Africans are reported in contemporary accounts to have done this in New York (e.g., Foote 1991:283), we also know that anyone can dig a hole under a kitchen floor and use it as a hiding place and that in fact the members of many groups have been documented as having done so (Samford 1996:100; see Kelso 1984:123, Yentsch 1991, Sanford 1991, Chambers 1992). We have to assume that a button found as yard scatter was probably lost from clothing. And knowing that Africans lived in an interracial home in its own right does not provide a link between them (or the Europeans they lived with) and any of the assemblages found associated with that home. It is only when we can combine several of these lines of evidence that we can infer that particular artifacts were probably associated with particular groups of people.

Bearing this line of reasoning in mind, I went back through some of the collections that have been excavated in New York over the last 20 years to see if I could identify assemblages that might have been associated with enslaved people of African descent. The collections included those from: the Stadt Huys Block site, excavated under the direction of Nan Rothschild and myself in 1979-80 (Rothschild et al. 1987); the 7 Hanover Square site, excavated under the direction of Rothschild, Arnold Pickman, and myself in 1981 (Rothschild and Pickman 1990); the Broad Financial Centersite, excavated under the direction of Joel Grossman in 1984 (Grossman 1985); and the Assay site, excavated under the direction of Roselle Henn and myself in 1984 (Louis Berger and Associates 1991).

Underground Caches

To date, at least six pits that can be interpreted as underground caches have been uncovered at these New York sites (see Table 1). Most of these pits, which date to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, were lined with barrels, baskets, or bricks. Some of these features may in fact have been originally made for other purposes: it has been suggested, for example, that one (Comp. 38) had served as a drain (Grossman 1985; Dallal 1995) and that several others (Comps. 13, 14, 62, and 63) may have functioned as privy pits (Cantwell and Wall in press). In all but two cases, the spatial relationship between these features and the buildings associated with them cannot be confirmed since the building foundations had been destroyed; however, in each case the features are within approximately 25 to 30 feet of the front property line, which was coterminous with the fronts of the houses during this period. These locations probably place many of them within the boundaries of the homes that were on the properties in the colonial city; in other words, many of them could have been located under the floors of kitchens and the other ground floor domestic spaces that were often the domains of the enslaved. In the two cases where the features can be positioned in relation to contemporary building foundations, at the King's House tavern at the Stadt Huys Block and a house at 7 Hanover Square, the pits were located toward the rear of the houses, in areas where kitchens were located.

Artifacts from the Caches

The artifacts found in these features fall into two different groups. Some were objects that anyone, regardless of their cultural affiliation, might have hidden there: they were inherently valuable in colonial New York. In one case, the tavern at the Stadt Huys Block, an underground barrel was found which contained approximately 20 bottles of liquor along with clay tobacco pipes (Rothschild et al. 1987:132, 134). This cache was apparently abandoned when the tavern burned in 1705. However, the meanings of some of the artifacts from other features are more equivocal; seen through modern western eyes, some might be interpreted as trash (see Dallas 1995). However, in light of the artifacts uncovered in the caches in the quarters of the southern plantations and discoveries in Annapolis and Williamsburg, it seems probable that many of the New York pits contained objects hidden there by enslaved Africans. The pits contain a large number of metal artifacts, relatively unusual finds in New York during the colonial period, when metal objects were recycled rather than discarded, as well as the ceramic discs, pieces of glass, buttons, pins, etc., often found in cache pits in the south (see Table 1).

Documentary History

Unfortunately, in regard to documentary history, there are enormous gaps in the tax, conveyance, and census records used to reconstruct the micro histories of properties in New York for the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These gaps are so great that it can be impossible to identify the names of householders for a particular period. In those cases where it is possible to identify the names of householders, it can be impossible to identify whether or not enslaved people were also living in the house during the target period when the artifacts were placed in the ground. In some cases, however, we do know who the householders were at the critical period, and we have begun research designed to link the presence of enslaved Africans to the properties where these pits were found. The results so far are promising. One of the properties, Lot 14 at the Broad Financial Center site, was owned by members of the Kierstede family, a family which was known to hold slaves. When Sara Roelofs Kierstede died in 1693, for example, she left six

enslaved people, including five Africans and one Indian, to her children. One, a "Negro boy, Hans," was left to her daughter Blandina (Pelletreau 1893:225); Blandina is thought to have lived on the Kierstede property during the period when objects were placed in one of these pits. Other pits, on Lot 8 at the Broad Financial Center site, were on property owned by the van Tienhoven family. Most of the members of this family who were listed in the 1703 census also owned slaves. And a court record tells a tragic story linking the King's House Tavern at the Stadt Huys Block with at least one enslaved person: "In 1697, when Elias Boudinot entered the kitchen of the tavern looking for an enslaved African who had run away, he saw the said Negro Dick with a Negro woman he calls his wife." A scuffle ensued, during which Dick wounded three men with a knife with which he had been eating bread and butter; one of the men died (Goodfriend 1992:118). Unfortunately, we do not know the outcome of this trial. We need to do much more archival research on this and on the history of the tavern and the other properties. Hopefully, this research will provide more information about the Africans living in these homes.

The Spoon from the East River

Another find that might be attributed to people of African descent who lived in New York. In this case, a late eighteenth-century spoon was discovered under the landfill at the bottom of the East River at the Assay site. As archaeologists worked to uncover the large wooden wharf complex at this site, they found a number of objects embedded in the river bottom silts. The wharf had been built c. 1790. Shortly after 1800, additional landfill was added, moving the shoreline further to the east and sealing the riverbottom deposits in this area. One of the artifacts found in the silt was a spoon that had several "X"s scratched on the inside of its bowl. In 1984, when the find was made, the archaeologists did not even notice the "X"s, and if they had, they might have assumed that they had been scratched there accidentally. However, Ferguson's (1992) work suggests another interpretation (see also Klingelhofer 1987).

Ferguson was the first archaeologist to notice the presence of incised "X"s on the bases of some handbuilt colonoware bowls from the Carolina Lowcountry. Similar motifs have also been found on the bowls of spoons found on plantations in Virginia. Ferguson has interpreted these marks as cosmograms derived from the Bakongo of West Africa, in today's Angola and Kongo, formerly Zaire. The Bakongo use this cosmogram to depict the relationship between the earth and the water and the living and the dead: the horizontal line represents the water that serves as the boundary between the living and their ancestors, while the vertical line represents the path of power across the boundary, from below (the land of the ancestors) to above (the land of the living). The bowls are thought to have served as containers for minkisi or sacred medicines which "control the cosmos connecting the living with the powers of the dead." (Ferguson 1992:114). It is possible that the spoons played a similar role.

Table 1. The sites, features, dates of deposit, and the names of associated European-American families where the artifacts were found.

SITE	LOT	FEATURE	DESCRIPTION	DATE OF DEPOSIT	ASSOCIATED OCCUPANTS
Broad Street	8	Comp. 13	barrel-lined pit	c. 1660	Van Tienhoven

Broad Street	8	Comp. 38	basket-lined pit	post 1670	Van Tienhoven
Broad Street	8	Comp. 14	barrel-lined pit	1690s	Van Tienhoven
Broad Street	14	Comp. 62	barrel-lined pit	1680s	Kierstede/Bayard
Broad Street	14	Comp. 63	brick-lined pit	c. 1715	Kierstede
Stadt Huys	9	T.C. AQ	barrel-lined pit	c. 1705	King's House Tavern
7 Hanover Square	14	T.C. 0, 0'	unlined pit	1760-80	?

Table 2. Those artifacts from the features which are similar to those associated with Africans at sites in the south.

FEATURES	ARTIFACTS
Comp. 13	3 large pcs. of Delft tile, 50 glass beads, 1 quartz flake, jawbone, i marble, 1 pc. coral, 1 pc. mica
Comp. 14	2 large pcs. of a pair of Chinese export porcelain saucers, i louse comb, 2 pcs. mica, 3 pcs. chert, i glass bead, 4 marbles, 1 knife (?) with an antler handle, 1 pc. lead shot, i wine bottle, 1 pin, 1 lead fishing sinker
Comp. 38	1/2 Delft plate, iron nails, 2 pcs. lead window caning, 1 pc. lead shot, 1 thimble, i needle fragment, 17 marbles, quartzite flakes, 3 glass beads, 3 shell beads (wampum)
Comp. 62	2 red earthenware gaming pieces, 1 wineglass stem, 1 chert, 1 jasper, 1 glass bead, 1 delft plate, 1 latten spoon bowl, 1 large pewter plate fragment, 1 turtle carapace, 1 pc. keratin, 15 pins and pin fragments, 3 mica, 1 brass wall candle holder, 1 brass candle snuffer, 1 drawer pull, 1 pin, 28 nails and nail fragments
Comp. 63	1 whistle made from a pipestem, 1 ear of a Delft porringer, 1 louse comb, ~ marbles, 35 pcs. chitin, 8 wine glass stems; 1 wine bottle, 2 pins, 1 thimble, 2 buttons, 1 green glazed earthenware bowl,
T.C. AQ	c. 20 wine bottles, several tobacco pipes
T.C. 0,0'	2 creamware bowls, 1 glass bottle stopper, copper disc or coin?, 2 chert flakes, layer of white sand
<p><i>Note: With one exception, the lists are from the inventories included with the site reports and/or site records; the artifacts themselves have yet to be examined. The inventory sheets are not available for this deposit in T.C. AQ at the Stadt Huys Block.</i></p>	

Most of the marked colonoware bowls were found in the waters of rivers and streams, confirming their roles in rituals involving the waters that separate the living from the dead. To

my knowledge, no colonoware bowls have been found in New York or elsewhere in the north. But the discovery of the spoon with its inscribed "X"s in what had been the waters of the East River suggests the possibility that this ritual may have been practiced there.

Conclusion

I want to close with several points. First of all, this paper presents an approach for linking particular assemblages of artifacts with enslaved people of African descent who were living in biracial homes, alongside the Europeans who enslaved them. This approach has the potential for complementing the study of the dead at the African Burial Ground with glimpses of the home lives of the enslaved in New York City. However, the approach has further ramifications for studying the lives of the enslaved that lived throughout the north, where the settlement system was characterized by biracial homes in both rural and urban areas. Hopefully, archaeologists who are working in the north and who are interested in studying the lives of the enslaved there will no longer simply assume either that enslaved Africans in the north constructed a culture that was extremely different from that in the south or that the traces of the culture that they did create would be invisible. Instead, I hope that they will begin to look for underground storage pits dug beneath domestic spaces and caches placed under floors, in the northeast corners of rooms and under hearths and door sills. I think they will be surprised at what they find. In fact, archaeologists working with architectural historians recently discovered what could be such a cache under the floor of a second story loft at a farmhouse in Brooklyn (Ricciardi et al. 2000).

Secondly, this argument also has another implication that I mentioned but did not develop in the body of this paper. If we have to make a case for linking particular assemblages with people of African descent who were living and/or working at these sites, we also have to make a case for linking other assemblages with people of European or Native American descent who shared these sites with them, instead, as often seems to be the case, of simply assuming that unless otherwise indicated, all artifacts were associated with the site's European inhabitants.

Finally, as has been pointed out by several archaeologists (e.g., Singleton and Bograd 1995; Samford 1996; and Russell 1997), now that we are in a position to link assemblages with people of African descent in both the north and in the south, we need to develop relevant research questions and bridging arguments that use that data to understand the experiences of Africans in America.

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