

## “Digging” the Roots of Inequality: Archaeological Investigations of Ethnicity and Race on Long Island

Allison Manfra McGovern

*The Graduate Center, CUNY*

In conjunction with the 2013 special art exhibit at the Suffolk County Historical Society entitled *Hidden and Forbidden: Art and Objects of Intolerance: Evolving Depictions of Blacks in America*, a symposium was held featuring presentations from local archaeological research. Three presentations highlighted Long Island-based current archaeological research from doctoral students in anthropological archaeology at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York (CUNY): Jenna Wallace Coplin, Meg Gorsline, and Allison Manfra McGovern. Individually, their research addresses inequality, race, and racialization as themes evident in historical artifact patterns and topographies of difference. Collectively, the work of these three archaeologists is informed by each other's research in an effort to expose the range of experiences of Long Island peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The symposium was a unique opportunity to share results and ideas with scholars, students, and members of the general public. It also served to demonstrate how archaeological data is linked to historical memory and our images of the past. The images presented were far from those typically conjured by the idea of archaeology: of ancient relics from long-gone civilizations. Rather, the archaeologists demonstrated how items from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—ordinary objects like teawares, buttons, and construction nails that are recognizable to most people today—provide tangible evidence for the activities, experiences, and ideas of historical peoples. Through archaeology we can recover glimpses of daily activities, but we can also explore the social dimensions of those activities. The recovered, broken artifacts are clues to how people shaped their worlds through material culture and practice.

This type of archaeology—called historical archaeology—examines human experiences as components in the construction of our modern world. By emphasizing the social aspects of material life, it informs our cultural consciousness and our current experiences in local landscapes (Hodder 2007). In many cases, the neighborhoods that we drive through, the knowledge that we have (or that we *think* we have) about locations, and the ideas we maintain about gender, race, and class are historically situated. Many of these ideas and associations that we, as local residents, preserve are linked to historical situations and the presence (or absence) of different ethnic, racial, and class groups in the past. Archaeology exposes these historical situations to both challenge our ideas about the past and investigate how the history as we remember it (and teach it) is sometimes different from what we thought we knew (Delle, Mrozowski, and Paynter 2000).

### Historical Archaeology and the Silenced Voices of the Past

Historical archaeology has long suffered an identity crisis due to its methodological differences with the larger field of archaeology. Archaeology developed as a scientific discipline to investigate the material manifestations of human culture. The discipline is object-oriented, primarily because so many ancient, prehistoric sites and cultures lacked written accounts. The goal of most archaeologists, therefore, is to create a narrative account of human experience as it is revealed in the ground through artifact patterning, architecture, and settlement organization. Historical archaeologists use the same archaeological methods as archaeologists who study prehistoric sites; however, historical archaeologists work within a time frame that is considered “modern” and therefore includes written historical accounts.

As historical archaeologists began to define their craft roughly 40 years ago, they were confronted by critics. James Deetz, for instance, is remembered for exposing a rather unflattering definition of historical archaeology as “the most expensive way in the world to learn something we already know” (Deetz 1991:1). A leader in historical archaeology, Deetz knew this definition to be untrue and encouraged archaeologists to find ways to make their research comparative and far-reaching. Indeed, historical archaeology has made great strides in defining its

craft since its early days, having developed a wide array of methods and approaches for understanding the diversity of human experiences during the historic period.

One of the most significant contributions of historical archaeology is its ability to give voice to silenced histories (Leone et al. 1995; Deetz 1996). People of color, poor people, women—mostly ordinary people who lived, worked, and died with no mention of their names in local or national histories—left material manifestations of their particular experiences that remain deeply buried in history and the landscape. But historical archaeologists can find those vestiges of human activity left behind by forgotten peoples, and interpret their experiences meaningfully. The objects that are found are linked to social activity and human cultural experience. Their interpretation is, therefore, a key aspect of producing a more complete sense of local history.

Few projects exemplify this archaeological approach better than the New York African Burial Ground Project. While interring in both the Office of Public Education and Interpretation and the Archaeology Laboratory for the project, I realized the important role historical archaeology offers in challenging our myths and misconceptions about the past. In the early 1990s, a documented eighteenth-century cemetery that was presumed destroyed was in fact exposed prior to construction of a federal office building in downtown Manhattan. This cemetery was recorded on eighteenth-century maps as “Negro’s burying ground.” In short, it provided tangible evidence in documentary and archaeological forms that slavery existed in the “Free” North (LaRoche and Blakey 1997; Perry and Blakey 1997). In addition to promoting ethical considerations of researching human burials and burial practices and the importance of a community-minded research design, this archaeological project forced members of the public to engage in a difficult dialogue of how our history is constructed. This discussion forced researchers and the public to confront their discomfort with the realities of race and racialization in the past and in the present (Mathews and McGovern, forthcoming).

My attention to race, racism, and inequality in current research practices in historical archaeology is directly attributed to my

experiences at the New York African Burial Ground Project. Since then, I have brought a critical approach to investigating local, Long Island histories. There are many preserved sites, such as Manor houses, historic house museums, and historic farmsteads, that remain testimonies to our interest in and preservation of local histories and heritages. These sites often represent aspects of major themes in history, including participation in the American Revolution. But they also provide a means for understanding history as active, diverse, and even mundane. By this, I mean, we must think about how local historic sites can make less obvious contributions to our historical imaginings of the past.

Consider, for example, the William Floyd Estate in Mastic, New York. This historic Manor house, which is remembered as the home of Declaration of Independence signer William Floyd, is owned and operated by the National Park Service. The interpreters and docents provide tours of the buildings and grounds, and inform visitors on William Floyd’s activities, the agricultural activities of the plantation, and the occupation and activities of the estate in subsequent generations. At first glance, the estate is an important symbol of Long Island’s contribution to the new nation. But less obvious is the entanglement of the estate (its residents and its activities) with the local sociopolitical economy. This home was a symbol of wealth and status in the rural, historical landscape. Although it seems an isolated representation of history today, the place and its people were intimately entwined with diverse peoples in a complex history of economics, politics, and freedom. Enslaved and free people of color labored at the Floyd’s plantation. Floyd and his family were slave owners, and they maintained economic relationships with the Unkechaug whose reservation was (and is) located nearby. And following emancipation, the Floyd family continued to employ local people in farming, household duties, and other daily activities. These aspects of history should be considered valuable, as well, for their subtle contributions to the landscape and to modern sociopolitical and economic activities.

In addition to northern slavery, there are numerous examples of post-emancipation communities and nineteenth- through twentieth-century migration settlements that can be, and have been, explored through

historical archaeology. Some of these projects were presented in a recent thematic issue of *Long Island History Journal*.<sup>1</sup> The successes and failures of settlements and communities like these are part of the historical patterning that gave rise to contemporary neighborhoods and communities in the Long Island landscape.

### **Documents, Genealogy, and Archaeology**

Historical archaeologists use multiple resources to bring silenced histories to light. Although we often cannot turn to a local directory to find the material remains of individuals in the historical landscape, we can use several types of records to identify people and their activities in the past. We can begin with preserved or remembered aspects of history. Again, we can look to the William Floyd Estate as an example. A quick search of the Federal census for 1790 demonstrates that 14 slaves were enumerated in the home of William Floyd. Although this census only lists the head of household by name (i.e., no other names of household members, free or enslaved, are listed), the listing for 14 slaves is enough to suggest that the estate has the potential to tell us more about the diverse human experience at this particular location in history.

If you continue to navigate through the federal census decade by decade, you will find that little by little, more detailed information will be provided about household composition. For instance, by 1800, two enclaves of people of color become obvious in the Town of Brookhaven: one by the Floyd Estate in Mastic and another comprised of free people of color in Rocky Point (Manfra 2008).

The federal census is an important resource for locating people in the past, identifying economic patterns and wealth (because by 1850 census takers list information about occupations and property values), and recognizing categories of difference. An interesting factor in researching census listings is accounting for the variety of ways people both self-identified and were identified racially by census takers. The fixed categories of White and Black were often difficult to navigate in the past, particularly for people of racially mixed heritages. Terms like Black, mulatto, mustey, and colored were often inscribed to identify individuals of African, Native American, and/or European ancestries. Rather than complicating our understandings of racial identities in the

past, these terms should be understood as representative of categories that were probably fluid and changeable. They suggest that historic Long Islanders were entangled in a variety of ways that are meaningful to our constructions of the past.

Along with the federal census, historic maps provide a visual means for locating people and places in past landscapes. Some historic-period maps and atlases provide the names of heads of households, which are useful for marching up with the federal census listings. Together, these categories of data provide information about changes in households and settlement patterning over time. Although this is a useful means for investigating geographies, this approach often promotes a false sense of boundaries, dictated by local political designations and historic notions of community. In fact, the networks that people constructed through labor, family dynamics, and cultural activities often crossed geographical boundaries of towns and villages.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of geographic boundaries as limitations was challenged by historical archaeologists with the expansion of a map-based teaching module for studying New York's African American past. Hosted through Columbia University Teacher's College, Mapping the African American Past (MAAP) is a Web-based resource that ties current maps with historic maps, images, and descriptions of important sites of New York African American history. Under the direction of Jenna Wallace Coplin and Christopher N. Matthews, the Center for Public Archaeology at Hofstra University presented data for eleven sites that served to extend the New York module to include Long Island. The inclusion of these sites serves to engage and challenge publicly held perceptions of New York's landscape and to consider the web of places that embodied connections, social interactions, as well as barriers for those living in the region (Coplin and McGovern 2013).

### **Pulling Sources Together: An Example from Rocky Point**

While federal census listings, historic maps, and other documents point to locations and individuals of prominence in the past, they also provide subtle clues to the places and movement of the "regular" people of history: free and enslaved laborers, poor Whites and people of color,

and women, all of whom were the real backbone of modern progress but whose stories we know very little about. When you move through the documentary history, their presence appears in a patterning of activities. This is the case, for instance, with the nineteenth-century settlement of free people of color in Rocky Point. This enclave appears in the federal census listings as a small settlement of free people of color as early as 1790 (although their presence is documented earlier elsewhere) and as late as circa 1860 (Manfra 2008; McGovern 2010).

Geographically distant from the historic village of Rocky Point, this small free-black enclave was located along North Country Road between Miller Place and Wading River. By today's boundaries, the settlement was located in present-day Rocky Point. It was in this location that the foundation of a small house was encountered during an archaeological survey (LoRusso 1998, 2000; McGovern 2010).

The house is not well documented, so the archaeological evidence verifies that it was inhabited before the end of the eighteenth century. In 1790, four households (indicated on the federal census) were headed by "free people of color" in the vicinity of the Betssey Prince site. Jonah Miller, David, Betr Miller, and Press Miller were listed as heads of households. The presence of this distinct neighborhood becomes visible as the names of its residents are traced in federal census rolls, tax documents, and other records. Its demise is equally visible, as changing settlement patterns and economic activities leave forgotten changes to the landscape.

The Betssey Prince site and the surrounding community are best understood within a regional historical context. Following the American Revolution, rural Long Island agriculture was recovering at a slow pace. The Gradual Emancipation Act, which was established in New York in 1799, provided freedom gradually for individuals who were "born slaves" after July 4, 1799 (Berlin and Harris 2005; Hodges 1999; Medford 2004). Some people of color, like the few Rocky Point residents who lived around the Betssey Prince site, were free, while many other people of African descent remained legally enslaved in New York (until 1827, or later). And interestingly, the *Records of the Town of Brookhaven* contain approximately 70 manumission records between

the years 1798 and 1826. When compared to the 1820 and 1830 federal census rolls, it is evident that many recently freed people are identified by the surnames of their former owners. The Betssey Prince site, therefore, is an important material example of how a group of people was carving out an existence despite economic, political, and social challenges during the early nineteenth century.

The Betssey Prince archaeological site included remains of a modest house inhabited by Prince and Elizabeth Jessup, a married or common law couple. In 1810, as many as eight free people of color were living in the small, two-room house. Prince was probably a laborer who found work locally, and in 1815 his property included a lot of six acres, one house, and one barn valued at \$100. Some farming was probably done at the site. Following Prince's death in 1816, it seems that his house remained inhabited, probably by his wife and a few additional people whose identities remain unknown.

In the early 1990s, archaeologists uncovered the foundation of this house, including the remains of a brick chimney, cellar hole, storage pit dug into the base of the cellar, a small midden in the rear yard, and three additional artifact concentrations in the yard. The dimensions of the house included a main room that measured roughly 11x13 feet, and a 6x8-foot kitchen wing with a fireplace located west of the main room. The house foundation and chimney base were unmortared fieldstone boulders, and the chimney was brick. The remainder of the house was likely wood frame and clapboard construction, as was typical of the New England building tradition on eastern Long Island. Seven thousand ninety-five artifacts (exclusive of brick, mortar, and shell) were recovered at the site.

The artifacts were anything but exotic, but the story they tell is of central importance to the diversity of human experience in nineteenth-century Long Island. Kitchen-related artifacts dominated the assemblage at the site, most of which were ceramics. One hundred seventeen vessels were identified (MNV): these were 15–20 storage/dairy vessels, 22–29 kitchen vessels, 30–33 tablewares, 49 teawares, and one additional vessel. In addition, 44 burtons, 19 other personal items, 21 pieces of tobacco pipes, 12 tools, 326 architectural

artifacts, and various other items, including faunal material, were collected. Most of the artifacts were recovered from within the dwelling. Outside the structure, domestic disposal was limited to specific areas of the yard.

The assemblage of teawares—initially a nonmatched assemblage of creamwares, fine red earthenwares, Chinese porcelain, Jackfield, and red stoneware, but a later preference for polychrome pearlwares was demonstrated—recovered at the Betsey Prince site raises questions about the social and economic status of the household. By the nineteenth century, tea drinking was a common practice in American households. Tea serving and consumption are associated with domesticity and can be representative of social interactions (LoRusso 1998; Roth 1988; Wall 2000).

I wondered if the predominance of teawares at the site was suggestive of Betsey Jessup's activities and if these items could be viewed as representative of gendered activities. Scholars have warned against the association of specific items with certain genders. This trend of identifying separate "spheres of activities" is essentialist and as problematic as trying to identify ethnic markers. However, multiple lines of evidence can provide a better foundation for understanding gendered activities. In the case of the Betsey Prince site, this can be accomplished by comparing the probate inventory with the archaeological record (Brumfield 2006:42).

The probate inventory, which was compiled following Prince's death in 1816, listed all items owned by Prince, along with their dollar value. The materials are reminiscent of skilled household activities and include a hand saw, a square, four chisels, a drawing knife, five axes, a grindstone, a pounding barrel, and a ladder. Similar items recovered during excavations include a horse shoe, a horse shoe nail, a whetstone, and five chisel fragments. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, people of color in rural Long Island performed various skilled and unskilled tasks for a living (Moss 1993). The cutting of cordwood was a common practice in the wooded interior portions of Brookhaven Town, and the material represented in Jessup's probate inventory suggests he may have engaged in this type of labor. In addition, the four

or more chisels, drawing knife, and grindstone/whetstone mentioned in the archival and archaeological records suggest skilled woodworking was an activity performed at the Jessup household.

An interesting aspect of the probate inventory is the absence of ceramic and glass items appraised. Four bottles, two stone jugs, one jug, and a two-gallon stone jug are the only vessels listed for the storage or preparation of food and/or beverage. This presents a different image of household items than what was recovered during archaeological investigation. As with most documents, the probate inventory provides insight into what was valuable to the appraisers and may not necessarily reflect what was valued by the owner. However, it is interesting that the extensive collection of teawares was not appraised. This historical account raises questions about whether individual ownership was accounted for in the appraisal, whether the appraisers thought the items of little value, or whether the items were not made visible to the appraisers (i.e., if they were concealed or intentionally hidden). A range of factors contribute to the presence or absence of items in a probate inventory, but with the archaeological record, it is incredibly useful for understanding the material assemblage with greater accuracy.

At this point, the comparison between the documentary and archaeological records provides subtle hints into the gendered activities at the Betsey Prince site. This is particularly useful at a site such as this one, comprised of a small space that was shared by a husband, wife, and several other individuals. But it is important to note that political, economic, racial, ethnic, and class conditions, in addition to gender, all shape each person's experiences and lifeways in the past and in the present. These factors should be considered in an attempt at understanding gendered lifeways at an archaeological site. For Betsey Prince or Elizabeth Jessup—the female head of household at the site—it must be remembered that she was a woman of color whose presence is marked in history by subtle clues in the documentary and archaeological record. To understand her activities, and the activities of the other members of her household, we must consider the range of experiences that were available to her (however limited) and the opportunities she had for negotiating her identity in different situations—as wife, mother, head of household, worker, community

member, etc. After all, it is not the artifacts that define a person's identity in the past, but rather the political, economic, and social experiences that impact a person's life. As such, the artifacts must be understood simply as the material residue of social experience.

### Conclusion

Historical archaeology strives to present a more complete sense of local history by giving voice to the silenced past. This is particularly important, on Long Island and elsewhere, because it exposes the structures and ideologies that form the basis of our modern world. Methodologically, historical archaeology is multidisciplinary and strives for holism. Interpretively, it exposes the subtleties of the human experience and acknowledges people as active participants in the processes of human history. Most importantly, it informs our cultural consciousness and our imaginings about the past. This ability to inform the present on how it "came to be" is especially relevant to Long Island history, as a means for understanding the origins and histories behind our topographies of difference.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Georgette Grier-Key for inviting me to contribute to this issue, and for organizing the "Digging" the Roots symposium. The symposium was sponsored by the Doctoral Student Council of the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). Thanks to Jenna Coplin and Meg Gorsline, too, for joining me at the symposium and engaging in many meaningful discussions about local archaeology. This article benefited from editorial comments provided by Wendy Polhemus-Annibell, Suffolk County Historical Society Librarian.

### Notes

1. For examples of current research in historical archaeology on Long Island, see *Long Island History Journal* 23(1) (2013), available at <https://lihj.cc.stonybrook.edu/2013/volumes/2013-vol-23-2/>
2. The web of movement and networks of people of color in East Hampton, New York, is the subject of my current dissertation research through the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York.

### References

- Berlin, Ira, and Leslie M. Harris. 2005. *Slavery in New York*. New York: Plenum Press, pp. 16-17.
- Brunnfeld, Elizabeth. 2006. Methods in Feminist and Gender Archaeology: A Feeling for Difference— and Likeness. In *Handbook of Gender in Archaeology*, ed. Sarah Milledge Nelson. Oxford, MA: AltaMira Press.
- Coplin, Jenna Wallace. 2013. Mapping African American History Across Long Island. *Long Island History Journal* 23(1).
- Coplin, Jenna Wallace, and Allison Manfra McGovern. 2013. *Mapping the African American Past: A Model of Collaboration for Public Archaeologies*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting for the Society of Historical Archaeology, Leicester, England, January 2013.
- Deetz, James. 1991. Introduction: Archaeological Evidence of Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Encounters. In *Historical Archaeology in Global Perspective*, ed. Lisa Falk, pp. 1-9. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- . 1996. In *Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Delle, James A., Stephen A. Mrozowski, and Robert Paynter. 2000. *Lines That Divide: Historical Archaeologies of Race, Class, and Gender*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Hodder, Ian. 2007. The 'Social' in Archaeological Theory. In *A Companion to Social Archaeology*, ed. Lynn Meskell and Robert W. Preucel, pp. 23-43. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing.

- Hodges, Graham Russell. 1999. *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.
- La Roche, Cheryl J., and Michael L. Blakey. 1997. Seizing Intellectual Power: The Dialogue at the New York African Burial Ground. *Historical Archaeology* 31(3):84-106.
- Leone, Mark P., Paul R. Mullins, Marian C. Creveling, Laurence Hurst, Barbara Jackson-Nash, Lynn D. Jones, Hannah Jopling Kaiser, George C. Logan, and Mark S. Warner. 1995. Can an African American Historical Archaeology Be an Alternative Voice? In *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meaning in the Past*, ed. Ian Hodder, pp. 110-24. London: Routledge.
- LoRusso, Mark. 1998. A Cultural Resource Survey Report for Data Recovery Investigations of the Betsey Prince Site (NYSM#10625) and the Prince-Miller Site (NYSM#10626), PIN 0327.67.121 and PIN 0327.78.101, NY 25A, Town of Brookhaven, Suffolk County, New York for the New York State Department of Transportation. Anthropological Survey, New York State Museum, Albany.
- . 2000. The Betsey Prince Site: An Early Free Black Domestic Site on Long Island. In *Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Domestic Site Archaeology in New York State*, New York State Museum Bulletin 495, ed. John P. Hart and Charles L. Fisher, pp. 195-224. Albany: New York State Education Department.
- Manfra, Allison Joyce. 2008. Race and Ethnicity in Early America Reflected through Evidence from the Betsey Prince Archaeological Site, Long Island, New York. Unpublished MA paper, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University.
- Mathews, Christopher N., and Allison Manfra McGovern. forthcoming. Race in the Northeast: An Introduction, in *The Archaeology of Race in the Northeast*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- McGovern, Allison Manfra. 2010. Rocky Point's African American Past: A Forgotten History Remembered through Historical Archaeology at the Betsey Prince Site. *Long Island History Journal* 22(1), available at [http://www.stonybrook.edu/ihj/IssueFiles/V22\\_1/Articles/Manfra/Manfra.html](http://www.stonybrook.edu/ihj/IssueFiles/V22_1/Articles/Manfra/Manfra.html)
- Medford, Edna Greene. 2004. *The New York African Burial History Final Report*, prepared by Howard University for the General Services Administration Northeastern and Caribbean Region, November, pp. 209-10.
- Moss, Richard Shannon. 1993. *Slavery on Long Island: A Study in Local Institutional and Early African-American Communal Life*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Perry, Warren, and Michael Blakey. 1997. *Archaeology as Community Service: The African Burial Ground Project in New York City*. *North American Dialogue* 2(1):1-5.
- Roth, Rodris. 1988. Tea-Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage. In *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Wall, Diana diZerega. 2000. Family Meals and Evening Parties: Constructing Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century Middle-Class New York. In *Lines That Divide: Historical Archaeologies of Race, Class, and Gender*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.