

## The Home Forum®

### BLACK HISTORY MONTH

# Digging into the lives of slaves



IN A RUN-DOWN house in Brooklyn, N.Y., archaeologists recently made an important discovery: a bunch of dried-up corncobs that had lain undisturbed beneath some floorboards for two centuries.

The corncobs are the latest clues to how African-American slaves may have lived in the northern United States.

Much more is known about how slaves fared on big farms called plantations in the American South. Less attention has been given to the lives of Northern slaves.

Most history books have focused instead on Northern abolitionists who fought to end slavery in the South. But this house in Brooklyn – as well as some recently discovered burial grounds – show that life wasn't much easier for slaves who lived in the North.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BROOKLYN COLLEGE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH CENTER

**THE LOTT HOUSE IN 1909:** This historic home in Brooklyn, N.Y. (note the then-rural setting) was chosen by researchers studying how a country neighborhood became urban. To their surprise, instead they found evidence of slaves' lives in the North.

Archaeologist H. Arthur Bankoff, co-director Christopher Ricciardi, and students at Brooklyn College had no idea they would discover one of the first slave quarters in the Northern US. They were just trying to learn how a neighborhood changed from a rural farming commu-

nity called Flatlands to the city neighborhood of Marine Park.

The Lott House, which was built in the early 1700s and expanded around 1800, is mostly the same as it was 200 years ago. So, starting in 1998, students carefully began to dig outside. The group

also examined the inside of the house.

As the team searched a closet that had once been a staircase, they found a trap door. Up three steps was a boarded-up door that led to a windowless, cramped room. That's when they found the corncobs underneath the floorboards. The cobs looked to be in a starburst or cross shape. Corncobs in such patterns had been found in slave quarters in the South.

No one is sure what the corncobs mean, but experts who study Africa are familiar with them. Some experts think the cobs were used in a religious ritual the slaves brought with them from West Africa. Students also found an oyster shell and a cloth pouch, items that slaves thought could be used to contact spirits.

The family that owned this 18-room home had as many as 12 slaves in the early 1800s. Five of them were children.

**A**FRICAN-AMERICAN slaves first arrived in New York in the 1600s. At the time, New York was a Dutch settlement called New Amsterdam. Slaves worked on farms at the southern tip of Manhattan, where Wall Street now stands. Later, they worked in the houses of merchants, ministers, and doctors.

By the 1700s, one-fifth of New York's population were slaves. It had more slaves than any other city in the country except Charleston, S.C. Hendrick Lott freed his slaves between 1801 and 1805. And family legend has it that, after slav-

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## Life in a 'free' Northern state didn't always feel free

**S**LAVES who escaped to the North in pre-Civil War America were never truly free. State and federal laws regarding 'fugitive slaves' meant that they might be recaptured and returned to their former masters, regardless of their situation or how long they had lived in the North.

Harriet Jacobs was born a slave in Edenton, N.C., in 1813. She fled in 1835 from her owner, who threatened her and her children. Jacobs hid at the home of her grandmother for seven years before moving north to Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City.

Slavery had ended in New York in 1827. Jacobs found work as a nanny. In 1861, she published a book titled 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.' Here's what she wrote about the cruel federal fugitive slave act passed in 1850:

Many families, who had lived in the city for 20 years, fled from it now.

Many a poor washerwoman, who, by hard labor, had made herself a comfortable home, was obliged to sacrifice her furniture, bid a hurried farewell to her friends, and seek her fortune among strangers in Canada. Many a wife discovered a secret she had never known before – that her husband was a fugitive,

and must leave her to insure his own safety. Worse still, many a husband discovered that his wife had fled from slavery years ago, and as "the child follows the condition of its mother," the children of his love were liable to be seized and carried into slavery. Every where, in those humble homes, there was consternation and anguish. But what cared the legislators of the

**'I WAS, IN FACT, A SLAVE IN NEW YORK,' SHE WROTE. 'STRANGE INCONGRUITY IN A STATE CALLED FREE!'**

"dominant race" for the blood they were crushing out of trampled hearts? ... I seldom ventured into the streets; I went as much as possible through back streets and by-ways. What a disgrace to a city calling itself free that inhabitants, guiltless of offense, and seeking to perform their duties conscientiously, should be condemned to live in such incessant fear, and have nowhere to turn for protection!....

When I took the children out to breathe the air, I closely observed the countenances of all I met. I dreaded the approach of summer, when snakes and slaveholders make their appearance. I was, in fact, a slave in New York, as subject to slave laws, as I had been in a Slave State. Strange incongruity in a State called free!

■ From 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,' published in 'The Classic Slaves Narrative,' 1987, by Putnam-Penguin.



**OLD KITCHEN:** Researchers dug up the remains (above) of a stone building (right) that had also served as servants' quarters.



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ery was abolished in New York by 1827, the Lott house was a stop on the Underground Railroad, a series of houses where runaway Southern slaves could safely hide.

Bankoff and his students found a small room hidden behind a bedroom closet. The walls of the room were lined with newspapers from the 1860s. Was it a place where runaways hid?

**S**LAVES in the North probably lived in the same house as the white owners, who worked alongside slaves in the field. Southern slaves lived in separate quarters and were looked after by overseers.

But the fact that slaves in the North lived in the same house as their owners doesn't mean that Northern slaves were treated as equals. Some of the Lott family slaves probably had to live in the narrow, windowless passageway where the corn cobs were found.

"This gives us the first good picture of where slaves in the rural part of New York would have lived," Bankoff says. Over the past 10 years, other archaeologists have learned more about how slaves in New York lived by excavating burial grounds. Construction workers erecting an office building in Manhattan's financial district found a burial ground for thousands of slaves.

Some 400 of the remains were sent to

Howard University in Washington, D.C., where scientists examined them for clues about how the slaves had lived. Among their discoveries: evidence of violent deaths and injuries from overwork.

"Their lives were very painful," says Warren Perry, a professor at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, who led the examination. "The folks were being worked to death."

The remains, which were later reburied, also showed how slaves kept many of their African traditions. For instance, some had filed their teeth into the distinctive hourglass shapes still found in West and Southern Africa.

In one coffin, tacks formed the pattern of a heart. This was common in Ghanaian culture. (Ghana is a nation on Africa's West coast.) Another slave had been buried wearing an "ear bob" of pure silver. The jewelry was similar to those worn by native Americans. That suggests that slaves and native Americans may have lived together. Archaeologists found hundreds of other artifacts, including beads, pottery, and buttons.

Scientists are still unearthing other forgotten slave burial grounds. More recently, Professor Perry helped explore a recently discovered slave burial ground in Salem, Conn. That burial ground was the site of a plantation where as many as 100 slaves once lived. "It's the hidden history we're uncovering," Perry says.

Seth Stern



**DOING ARCHAEOLOGY:** Alyssa Loorya, excavating at the Lott House in 1998, smiles after finding an 18th-century plate near the foundation wall of the stone kitchen.

● ▲ TODAY'S ARTICLE ON CHRISTIAN SCIENCE ▲ ●

*Helping children learn about God's care*

## Friends

**FRIENDS ARE IMPORTANT.** They go to movies together and hang out, talk on the phone, and do lots of other fun things. Once, when a group of kids were talking about having fun with their friends, some tough questions came up.

**What if you don't have any friends?** Maybe you've moved or your best friend has moved. Sam said, "God is always your friend." You can be grateful for that. He'll make His love practical so you can feel God's love and you won't be lonely. Then you can use this love from God. You can look around and be a friend to someone else who needs one. Several kids shared how they did this. Patricia said she introduced a new girl to students who were in that girl's classes. Another girl, Alex, went for a sleep-over at a girl's house. The girl wasn't all that popular, and Alex wanted to be a friend. Robert told about someone at school who is of a different race than almost everyone else. He didn't talk with the other kids. So Robert talked with him, and they got to be friends.

**What if there are lots of kids you don't know, like at a party or a dance, and you're afraid you won't know what to say or how to act?** Jen said, "You can always ask God to show you." The kids remembered a Bible story where God asked Moses to do something, and Moses was afraid he wouldn't know what to do or say. God told him, "Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak" (Ex. 4:12). God will always be with you and will always show you what to do and say. When you think about how you're really God's child - and then act that way - you won't be afraid.

**What if one of your friends hurts you or disappoints you?** Maybe he says something that's not true about you or she breaks a promise. You can think about how your friend is God's child, too, and is really only good. You can focus on the good things - all the Godlike things about your friend. This is what is really true. The good in him will help push out whatever seems bad. The kids said you shouldn't just ignore a problem like this. If you do, it just sits there and might get worse. You need to

pray about it and heal it.

**What if one of your friends is doing something wrong, like stealing or cheating or doing drugs?** They said first they'd talk to this friend and tell her how doing those things could hurt her. They'd pray, too, knowing that God would show her what is right for her to do and think, and that she can hear God talking to her. When you trust your friend to God, you won't be afraid for her.

Don't just feel sorry for her. Feeling sorry for someone just keeps you thinking about the tough situation. It won't help. Trusting your friend to God does help. God's love can take care of anything.

**What if you're jealous of someone, maybe because they play soccer better or have nicer clothes or have more friends?** They all said, "All that material stuff isn't important." You need to think more about how God made you - spiritual and perfect and wonderful. God loves you and gives you everything good. God doesn't have favorites; He loves each of us. You can always learn more about your true spiri-

tual self. Then you'll see how good you really are, and you'll be happy. When you're feeling good about yourself, lots of people will want to be your friend.

**What if you feel someone doesn't like you and might be thinking bad things about you?** This is when you need to pray for yourself. You can be sure that God is always taking care of you, so you're always safe. God gives you all your thoughts, so you can't believe anything that someone else thinks about you. God comes to that other person's thought, too, and corrects it, because God loves both of you.

Friends are a very special part of life. And when problems come up in friendships, it can hurt. But no matter what tough situation comes up, God can help you find answers.

... may Thy Word enrich  
the affections of all mankind,  
and govern them!

Mary Baker Eddy  
(founder of the Monitor)

Finding  
certainty  
in  
uncertain  
times

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