Archaeology
of the African Meeting House

A Dig and Discover Project
in Boston, Massachusetts

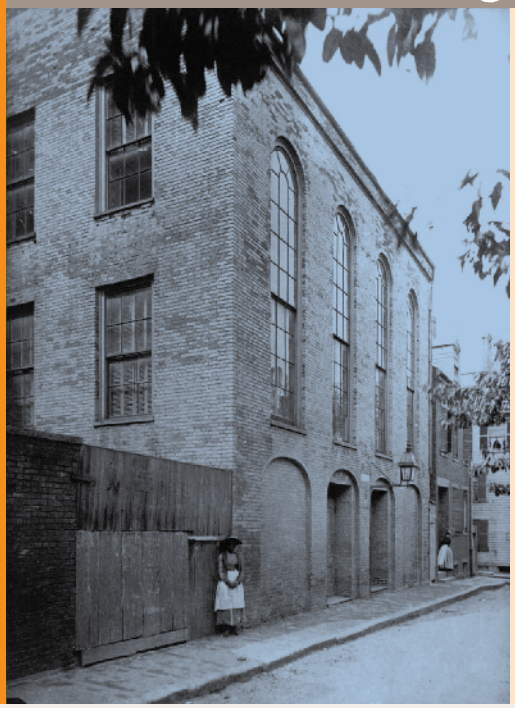
sponsored by
The Museum of African American History
Boston and Nantucket
and
The Fiske Center for Archaeological Research
at the University of Massachusetts Boston

What's Inside

Exploring a Vibrant Past

Archaeology is the exciting process of discovering and studying the material remains of past societies, connecting us through objects to people in the past. This booklet showcases the process of archaeological discovery undertaken by the Museum of African American History, Boston and Nantucket, at the African Meeting House in Boston, Massachusetts. The Meeting House was originally constructed in 1806, and during the rest of the 19th century it was a key social institution for Boston's free black community—an important church, a place of learning, and a center of the abolition movement. As part of the preparations for the Meeting House's bicentennial in 2006, a research team from the University of Massachusetts Boston undertook archaeological excavations at the site. In addition to discovering old drains and outhouses built on the urban backlots, these excavations recovered over 38,000 artifacts. These artifacts—broken bits of pottery, nails, bottles, and buttons—connect us to the routines of daily life for the African American men and women who lived in the neighborhood and visited the Meeting House. This publication gives both an understanding of the excavation process and the way that archaeology creates new stories about the past. We hope that it will help you share in the sense of discovery and gain a new connection to Boston's 19th-century free African American community.

The African Meeting House



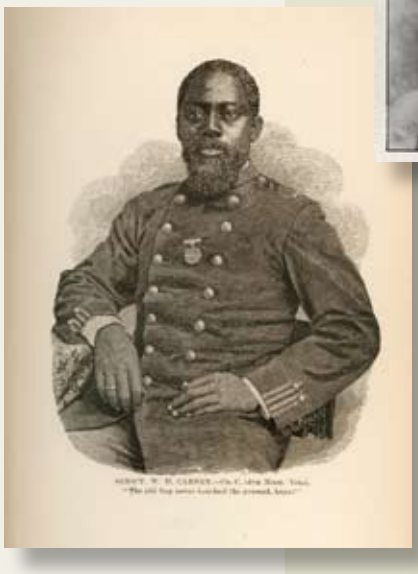
Building the Center of a Community

The African Meeting House is a three-story brick structure that stands at 8 Smith Court, on the north side of Beacon Hill, in Boston's West End. The property consists of the north-facing Meeting House, narrow east and west alleys, and a small yard in the back lot. The building is one of the earliest surviving structures associated with African American history in the country, and has an important cultural and historical heritage. The site is a National Historic Landmark, and a key part of the Museum of African American History, its Black Heritage Trail®, and the Boston African American National Historic Site of the National Park Service.

African American craftsmen completed the building in December 1806, constructing it with community needs in mind. A two-story sanctuary, capable of seating upwards of 600 people, occupied the first and second floors, while separate entrances led to

A 19th-Century Gathering Place

In addition to being a Baptist church, over the years this building would house the education of black children, the voices of political leaders, the celebrations of a community, and the domestic lives of tenants, both affluent and humble. The Meeting House is probably best known as a center of the anti-slavery movement, where many of the major events and personalities of the abolitionist movement converged. The Massachusetts General Colored Association—founded in 1826 by black abolitionists, and the first abolition society in the state—convened at the Meeting House. William Lloyd Garrison founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society there, and Frederick Douglass recruited soldiers for the 54th Massachusetts Regiment there. The structure is a powerful symbol of a free black community's determined stance against slavery and insistent push toward education, and stands today as a testimony to the Museum of African American History's success in preserving its rich historical legacy.



Above: Francis Ellen Watkins Harper was a famous female abolitionist, writer, and lecturer who spoke at the African Meeting House in 1854 and 1864. Left: Sergeant William H. Carney was a soldier in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism in the Civil War.

two rooms in the basement: a schoolroom and an apartment that was rented out to members of the African American community. The Meeting House helped draw African Americans to the north side of Beacon Hill, where they took up the challenge of developing the unsuitable land and constructing new buildings, making this area the heart of Boston's black community throughout the 19th century. During this time the Meeting House served as an institutional haven for Boston's organized community of free African Americans and the self-emancipated arriving via the Underground Railroad Network. Thus it became a center of action for the abolition of slavery, for equal rights, and for educational opportunity.

Archaeology and the Museum of African American History

Archaeology first began at the African Meeting House in 1975 at the request of the newly formed Museum of Afro-American History (now the Museum of African American History). The museum recognized a need for preservation at the Meeting House, and also sought to increase knowledge and public awareness of the history of African Americans in Boston. With these goals in mind, archaeologists have conducted a number of excavations since the 1970s. The archaeological work described in this publication began in 2005, in connection with renovation plans for the building's 2006 bicentennial. To insure that none of the buried history of the site would be lost, the 2005 excavations focused on areas in the backlot and side alleys that would be disturbed by the planned restoration, which included an elevator-stair tower for access to the sanctuary.

The Meeting House is now one of Boston's most thoroughly excavated and significant archaeological sites, and the work of archaeologists has contributed substantially to the museum's research, preservation, and educational efforts. In addition to discovering new information about Boston's African American community, work at the Meeting House has encouraged general interest in the archaeology of African American sites, which has now developed into an important research area.

Above: This historic plaque above the entrance to the Meeting House reads, "A Gift to CATO GARDNER first Promoter of this Building 1806."

An Archaeological Perspective

Explaining the importance of archaeology at a site with the rich historical legacy of the African Meeting House is, at first, difficult. What do broken pieces of pottery have to say about the abolition movement, or the fight for educational equality? Archaeological interpretation works literally from the ground up, and starts with the everyday lives of 19th-century African American Bostonians: how they outfitted their homes, carried out their daily tasks, prepared their meals, and shaped their yards. Through these daily practices, repeated countless times over, people established their families, secured their livelihoods, and built community institutions. Through these institutions people worked to ensure a better future for their children, their community, and their country. These stories are important, and add an archaeological perspective to the history of Boston's African American community.

Above: Two members of the archaeological field crew measure a drain uncovered in the excavation. Archaeology is based on careful note-taking to record the location of artifacts and map each excavation trench.

Digging at the African Meeting House

An Overview of the Excavations

During the summer of 2005, an archaeological research team from the University of Massachusetts Boston carried out excavations at the African Meeting House. A crew of graduate and undergraduate students from UMass Boston and other schools worked over a period of seven weeks, painstakingly mapping the area and digging out the layers of soil in a series of test units. Archaeologists dig carefully to record the "context" of artifacts—their location in the site, the type of soil that surrounds them, and the other artifacts found alongside—which is the key to interpreting how and when artifacts became buried. Excavators also record the buried features found at sites, such as drains, trash pits, builders' trenches along walls, and privies. Examples of all of these features were found in the Meeting House excavations. Throughout the dig, all of the excavated

The Meeting House Backlot Midden

The Meeting House backlot contained a series of significant artifact deposits and features. Against the south wall of the Meeting House, the excavation units uncovered a series of builders' trenches reflecting the historic sequence of construction and remodeling of the building, and the long-term attempts to waterproof its basement. Efforts to improve the land and control water in the backlot were also apparent in a series of buried stone and brick drains that cross the backlot. Finally, capping the drains and extending across much of the backlot was an artifact-filled soil layer reflecting a period of concentrated trash disposal. Archaeologists refer to a trash deposit of this type as a "midden."

The Meeting House backlot midden contains artifacts dating almost entirely from 1806 to 1840, and the archaeological context links this trash to the Meeting House and the people who lived in the basement apartment. In addition to a range of other artifacts, the midden contains an especially large number of broken ceramic vessels, including plates, bowls, and teacups, probably reflecting community dinners at the Meeting House, as well as the business of Domingo Williams, a caterer who rented the apartment.

Above: Excavation underway in the 44 Joy Street privy. Left: A sample of the artifacts—mostly pieces of broken pottery—recovered from the Meeting House backlot midden.

soil was screened for small objects, resulting in the recovery of over 38,000 artifacts. The field crew also collected a series of soil samples to take back to the laboratory for specialized analysis to identify pollen, seeds, parasites, and insect remains. Together, the archaeological deposits and features provide a variety of insights into the living conditions, economic opportunities, foodways, and health of 19th-century Boston's free black community.

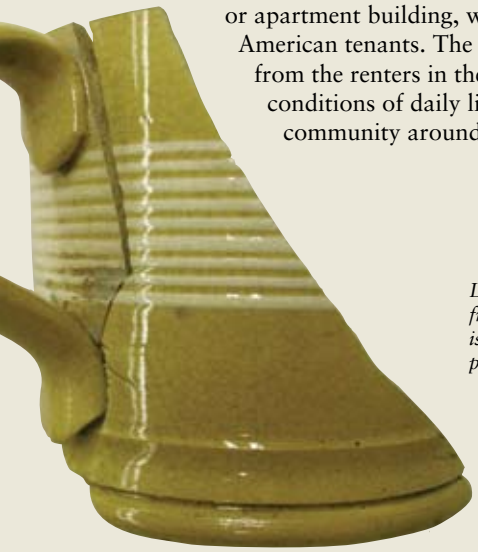
Below: Typical artifacts recovered from the 44 Joy Street privy, including the base of a redware pan, two dark green bottle bases, a ceramic pitcher handle, and fragments of blue edge-decorated and transfer-printed plates.

The 44 Joy Street Privy

At the south edge of the site one feature was excavated—a privy, or outhouse. Privies were a common feature on city lots prior to the development of municipal sewer systems. This privy was originally located at the rear of a property that faced out onto 44 Joy Street, and was not part of the Meeting House backlot until the early 20th century. It was constructed in much the same way as others in the early 19th century—a large hole was dug into the ground, lined with a wood plank box, and packed around the exterior with clay to seal the planks.

In addition to its use as a toilet, the privy was used for trash, and the bottommost deposits contain household trash in artifact-rich layers of nightsoil (human waste). These layers date from about 1811–1840.

During this period, the building on 44 Joy Street was a tenement, or apartment building, with rooms rented to a series of African American tenants. The artifacts—and nightsoil—thus come from the renters in the building, and give us insight into conditions of daily life for the broader African American community around the Meeting House.



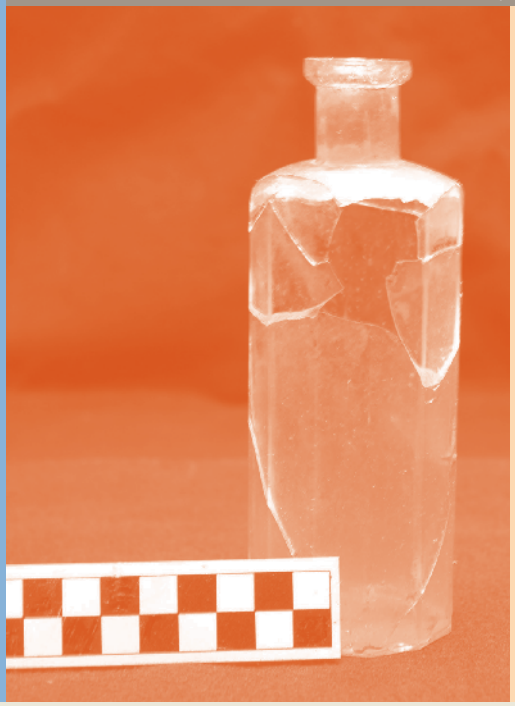
Left: A yellowware ceramic mug recovered from the 44 Joy Street privy. This example is decorated with bands of white clay, and probably dates to the 1830s.

Wet Screening the Privy Deposits

The bottommost layers in the Joy Street privy were waterlogged, and wet mud hid all of the artifacts and could not be sifted through a screen. As a result, the field crew used wet screening and field flotation to collect artifacts. A large tub was filled with water, and a second tub with a wire screen bottom, containing a load of privy soil, was lowered into it. Material that floated, mostly seeds, was skimmed from the surface. Once all the dirt was washed through the wire screen the remaining material was dumped out for sorting. This collection strategy ensured complete recovery of even very small artifacts from the privy.

Above: Wet screening and sorting of the privy deposits underway in the Meeting House backlot.

The Artifacts of Daily Life



Piecing Together the Past

When people envision archaeologists at work they frequently imagine the excavation process, but the laboratory work after the digging stops is equally important. The laboratory work on the artifacts from the 2005 African Meeting House excavations was a huge undertaking. More than 38,000 specimens were recovered, many more than initially anticipated. The area excavated was small, but artifacts had been densely deposited in the heavily used urban space. UMass Boston students washed, dried, labeled, sorted, identified, and cataloged all of these specimens. Once a basic catalog was complete, parts of the collection—such as the ceramics—were separated by type for more specific analysis. Identification of artifacts is a detailed process that uses reference collections of artifacts, published guides, and comparisons with materials from previously excavated sites.

Early 19th-Century Pottery

Broken pottery is one of the most common finds on archaeological sites, and thus the subject of careful study. Archaeologists define the different types of historic pottery as "wares" according to the clay and glaze used in their manufacture. Common early-19th-century wares include pearlware, creamware, stoneware, redware, and porcelain, all of which were found at the Meeting House. Archaeologists use the ware types and decorative patterns to characterize a ceramic collection as fancy or plain. The forms of ceramic vessels—which may be teacups, plates, or jugs, for example—also give clues to their use.

Above: A blue transfer-printed plate rim with floral decoration. Left: A sample of ceramics, including lead-glazed redware, a white clay pipe, Chinese export porcelain, blue transfer-printed whiteware, and green edge-decorated, hand-painted, and banded pearlware.

The ceramics from the midden level in the Meeting House backlot are mostly pearlware and creamware, with stoneware, porcelain, and redware well represented, and smaller quantities of other ware types. The pearlware is present in a variety of decorative types: there are shell-edge-decorated pieces, pieces decorated with blue transfer prints, and hand-painted blue and polychrome pieces. The creamware, by contrast is mostly undecorated, while the whiteware is mostly decorated with transfer prints in light blue and other colors. The many hand-painted wares and some porcelain indicate that this is a high-end assemblage—perhaps a testimony to the economic position of the Meeting House and the entrepreneurial success of the caterer living in the Meeting House apartment.

Almost half of the total artifact collection is architectural materials from the construction, repair, and remodeling of the Meeting House and adjacent buildings. Most of this is flat window glass and nails, with smaller quantities of mortar, wood, brick, and roofing slate. Fragments of broken ceramics (sherds) comprise about a third of the collection, with smaller quantities of bottle glass, glass tableware, and animal bones left as trash from meals. A wide variety of other artifacts are present in small numbers, including personal objects such as combs and clothing buttons, tobacco pipes, thimbles, pins, and beads. Many of these objects connect us directly to the daily routines of African Americans in 19th-century Boston.

Dating Historic Artifacts

One of the initial goals of the artifact-cataloging process is to determine the dates of the artifacts. Good artifact dating helps establish site chronology, providing date ranges for the archaeological deposits and helping to link artifacts to particular people and time periods. Archaeologists use a variety of information to determine the date range of a group of artifacts, including method of manufacture and style or decoration, both of which change through time. Some 19th-century companies also marked their products in specific ways that can be dated. Since the date ranges of many historic artifacts are known, a tight chronology can be constructed for the archaeological deposits at the Meeting House.

Ceramics in the Privy

Below: A sample of blue hand-painted pearlware teacups from the 44 Joy Street privy.

Artifacts from the privy include a wide range of household and kitchen trash, especially in the lower levels. The ceramic assemblage is dominated by pearlware, creamware and redware, with small numbers of a variety of other types. Most of the ceramics are tablewares, though teawares are also present. There is limited evidence for matched sets of vessels, probably reflecting the large numbers of households and individuals that lived at 44 Joy Street or less importance placed on matched sets.

The privy artifacts as a whole reflect the trappings of middle-class life, with a range of decorated tablewares and teawares, including hand-painted cups and transfer-printed saucers. A variety of vessel forms are present, including serving platters and plates, and many cups. The ceramic assemblage from the privy is not quite as fancy as that from the Meeting House backlot, and contains about twice the proportion of coarse earthenwares, primarily redwares. There are also more utility pieces, such as pots, jugs, and large pans. These differences reflect a greater emphasis on food preparation and storage in the Joy Street apartments.

Above: A group of UMass Boston students cleaning, sorting, and cataloguing artifacts in the archaeology lab.

Crafting a Career

Boston's Economy in the 1820s

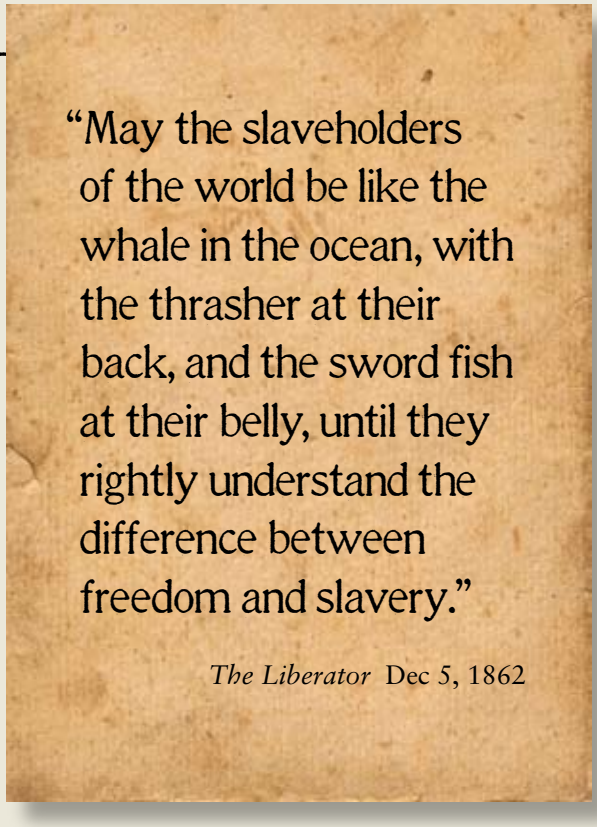
In the early 19th century, Boston's economy was very different from today's. The wharves of the shipping port were the main focus of the city's economic activity. Trade goods carried by ship were sold at the dock or at merchants' shops, while skilled craftsmen and their apprentices sold locally manufactured goods from their workshops. For free African Americans, economic advancement and success often came from running a small shop or acquiring the skills and tools of a trade.

At the African Meeting House and the neighboring property at 44 Joy Street, the archaeological excavations recovered a series of artifacts that are related to daily work tasks, and thus connect us to occupations for black men and women. Some of this evidence is isolated finds: a wig curler found at the Meeting House probably belonged to a hairdresser, and a folding ruler in the Joy Street privy is probably the lost tool of a skilled carpenter. We get a slightly more detailed picture of the work of two men, a cordwainer at 44 Joy Street and a caterer at the African Meeting House.

Domingo Williams, Caterer

One of the more notable tenants of the African Meeting House's basement apartment was Domingo Williams, who lived there with his family from 1819 to 1830. Williams was a caterer, and the large quantity of serving dishes and tableware recovered from the Meeting House backlot suggests that a large-scale catering business was based at his home. Some of these vessels were probably used for community dinners at the Meeting House, arranged with the help of Williams and drawing on his stock of ceramics. As the assemblage of a caterer, the ceramics reflect the decorative styles deemed appropriate by a discerning public. The serving vessels tend to be plain creamware, while plates and teacups are mostly decorated. There is little evidence for matched sets of ceramics, but the color and decoration instead suggest a table setting with complementary patterns that would be visually pleasing together.

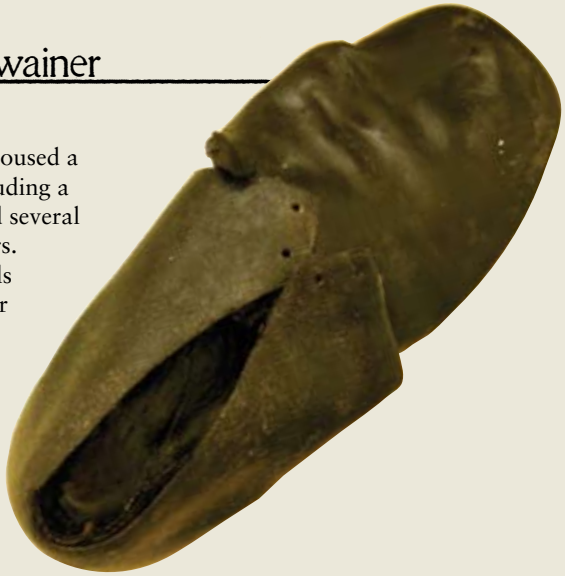
The strikingly large number of ceramics, and the regular need for new purchases to replace broken stock, both suggest that Williams made a significant investment in the tools of his trade. Williams's successful business placed him in the upper echelon of Beacon Hill's African American community, an idea reinforced by his lengthy obituary in an abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. His long rental of the Meeting House apartment suggests a stable income, and a life lived in the center of one of the community's most important public institutions.



Above: Domingo William's 1828 anti-slavery toast was printed in an abolitionist newspaper, The Liberator, *in 1862.*

Above: A vulcanized rubber comb recovered from the upper fill layers of the 44 Joy Street privy, probably dating to the late 1850s or 1860s. Far left: A wooden brush or mirror handle recovered from the lower, waterlogged layers of the privy fill.

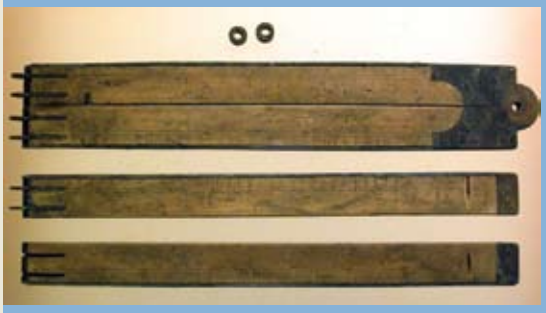
Cyrus Barrett, Cordwainer



Between 1811 and 1840, the property at 44 Joy Street also housed a number of skilled workers including a cordwainer (or shoemaker) and several tailors, waiters, and hairdressers. Excavations in the deepest levels of the privy recovered a number of fragments of leather, leather shoe parts, and an entire man's leather shoe. These shoe remnants from the privy probably point to the work of Cyrus Barrett, a cordwainer who lived at the property from at least 1825 to 1831. Additionally, in 1829, his Joy Street address is listed as his business address in the Boston City Directory. Barrett's use of 44 Joy Street as a place of business underscores the nature of the neighborhood as an economic center, with skilled craftsmen working out of apartments or small shops. It is difficult to say exactly why these shoe parts were discarded in the privy, but they speak of the variety of skills and resources, such as Barrett's business, that sustained the black community. Domingo Williams and Cyrus Barrett are just two examples of black businessmen in early 19th-century Boston. The material remnants of their work remind people today of their daily labors and the contributions of craftsmen to the establishment of the African American neighborhood on Beacon Hill.

Artifact Preservation on Sites

Materials deposited on archaeological sites survive differently according to their durability. Tough inorganic materials—such as ceramics, stone, and brick—survive extremely well, even over long periods of time. By contrast, organic materials—like leather, wood, and seeds—do not survive well except in what archaeologists call special preservation environments. The bottom of the 44 Joy Street privy contained waterlogged deposits, creating a special preservation environment that protected leather and similar materials from bacterial and fungal attack that causes decay. As a result, a variety of shoe parts and wooden artifacts were preserved in the privy. These artifacts were given special conservation treatment to remove the water, stabilize them, and keep them from deteriorating.



Above: A folding wooden carpenter's rule recovered from the 44 Joy Street privy. This would have been the tool of a skilled craftsman, and was probably lost by accident.

Left: A man's shoe and pieces of shoe heels recovered from the 44 Joy Street privy. These remarkably well-preserved shoe parts provide a rare view of the shoemaker's craft.

African American Foodways in Boston

The Leftovers of Meals

Archaeologists use the word "foodways" to describe a group of people's provisioning system, including the way food is grown, acquired, cooked, served, eaten, and then discarded. Ceramic vessels, animal bones, and plant remains all provide evidence of past foodways. For example, one interesting ceramic sherd from the Joy Street privy is a piece of a woven creamware fruit basket. The seeds collected from the privy show a diet rich in fruits, and we can imagine this basket sitting on a table or stand, filled with cherries, plums, apples, or pears. The privy also contained many plates, not just bowls. In combination with the animal bones in the privy, this suggests that some meat was prepared and served as roasts and chops, not just in stews.

Animal Bones and the Meat Diet

At both the Meeting House and 44 Joy Street, beef, mutton, and pork comprised the bulk of the meat consumed, followed by small quantities of domestic and wild fowl. Fish and wild mammals were rarely eaten. While all parts of the main domestic animals are represented, few cow and sheep heads and feet were found, suggesting that people purchased cuts of these animals that did not include these parts. Pigs' heads and feet are present in close-to-normal anatomical proportions, suggesting that these parts were commonly purchased at market, or that pigs were exchanged in larger portions that included these parts. The Meeting House assemblage shows a preference for leg of mutton, the most expensive cut. This was probably chosen for community or catered dinners. In the privy assemblage, a number of pigs' feet and a butchered snapping turtle bone may indicate aspects of distinctly African American foodways, with parallels in the diet of enslaved people on mid-Atlantic or southern plantations. Perhaps these are the remains of meals cooked to help make newly arrived self-emancipated people from the South feel welcome and comfortable in a cold and unfamiliar city.

Above: A small sample of the thousands of animal bones found in the excavation. These bones are trash from past meals, and show what type and cuts of meat people ate. Left: A leg bone from a snapping turtle.

In early-19th-century Boston, people frequently purchased large cuts of meat with the bones in them and discarded the bones in privy pits or trash middens after the meat was consumed. Other kitchen waste, such as spoiled food or fruit pits, was treated similarly. The nightsoil layers of the privy also contained numerous seeds, from fruits like strawberries and raspberries, which had been swallowed and passed through human digestive tracts. The animal bones and plant remnants recovered in the excavations give a very direct picture of the foods people ate, as they are quite literally the remains of past meals.

Seeds from the Privy

During the fieldwork the excavators collected a series of soil samples to run through a lab flotation machine for the purpose of collecting small seeds from the soil. The privy assemblage is particularly remarkable: it offers an array of seeds from at least 35 different types of plants, showing the broad diversity of the African American diet. There are large numbers of strawberry, blackberry, fig, cherry, huckleberry, blueberry, cranberry, grape, and tomato seeds; smaller numbers of apple, pear, and watermelon seeds, as well as walnut, hazelnut, chestnut, pepper, and mustard remnants; and seeds from a variety of other plants. The fruits and nuts could have been eaten fresh, as parts of jams or preserves, or in baked goods. The pepper and mustard suggest some of the seasonings added to dishes or condiments. Grains—such as wheat, corn, and barley—are distinctly absent from the otherwise large seed assemblage. This probably means that households purchased grain already ground into flour or made into bread or other products. Overall the seeds suggest that the African American residents of 44 Joy consumed a diverse diet, rich in fruits.

Above: The flotation tank for recovering small seeds from soil samples collected during the excavation. The seeds recovered from the privy soil show that people ate many types of fruit and berries.

Women's Work Opportunities

African American women undoubtedly prepared and served food at both the Meeting House and at 44 Joy Street, and the cooking vessels recovered in the excavations played an important role in women's daily work. Little is currently known about how fresh fruit and produce circulated in the city, or about the preparation and sale of pies, jams, or fruit preserves. It is likely that preparing jelly, preserves, and similar products provided a small entrepreneurial opportunity for women to make and sell products from their homes, or through African American-owned groceries in the neighborhood. Some women also turned their domestic skills into economic opportunities by taking boarders into their households or by running boarding or lodging houses.

Above: A very distinctive pottery fragment from a woven ceramic creamware basket. Baskets of this type often held fruit.

Health in an Urban Neighborhood

Community Health

The health of a community is influenced by many factors: diet, disease, access to medical care, and the environment in which people live. Archaeological data, though often incomplete, provide clues to these factors: plant and animal remains tell about diet; pollen and insects tell about the urban environment; and medicine bottles and plants tell about illness and healing practices. Piecing together the information from these varied sources helps create a fuller picture than any one source alone.

The African American residents of the Meeting House neighborhood worked to create a healthy environment by building drains to take away water and dry out the land, and digging privies to properly dispose of their waste and trash. Sick members of the community purchased medicines from doctors and apothecary shops, but generally seem to have avoided 19th-century patent medicines. Remains of medicinal plants in the privy show knowledge and use of healing plants for herbal remedies. These indications of community health, like the foodways and artifacts, suggest a successful middle-class community. Detailed information about the pollen, insects, and parasites supports this idea.

Pests in the Privy

The privy attracted rats and bugs that ate discarded food and other waste. Some of the animal bones in the privy show marks of gnawing by rats; and several rat skeletons were recovered, suggesting that these pests lived in and around the privy. Insects also invaded the privy, including a variety of beetles with specialized diets. Beetles in this deposit show consumption of meat, fruits, and grains, probably discarded spoiled food and kitchen waste. Urban privies were always like this, which is why they were built at the rear of lots, away from the houses.

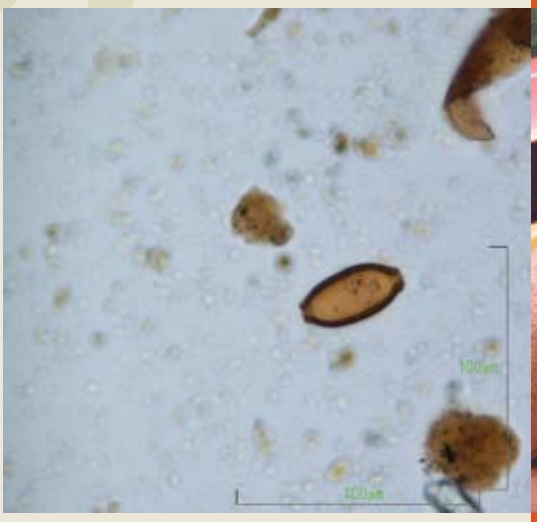
Above: A view of the privy bottom after excavation. Left: A marked medicine bottle from the "F. A. BARTEAUX" pharmacy, dating to 1876–1886. This shop would have been near Boston's present-day Government Center. Far upper left: A piece of a medicine bottle marked "Balm of Gilead," a name from the Bible (Genesis 37; Jeremiah 8, 46).

Pollen and the Changing Urban Environment

The different types of plant pollen trapped in the archaeological sediments show changes in the vegetation of the local environment and the area beyond it, as well as some dietary and health-related use of plants. Older deposits have a higher incidence of weeds that colonize disturbed soils, a reflection of the rapid urbanization of the north side of Beacon Hill in the early 19th century. As the urban landscape became more settled, the pollen evidence shows that first grasses and then greater numbers of trees replaced the earlier weeds. The pollen also points to a variety of dietary uses of plants, including common cereals, which are not represented in the seed assemblage and were probably acquired already ground into flour. Also reflected is the medicinal use of plants: among those present is common polypody, a fern used to treat stomach ailments.

Intestinal Parasites: Evidence of a Past Stomach Ache?

The nightsoil layers in the privy also contained eggs of both roundworm and whipworm. These two human intestinal parasites were very common in the 19th century, and some of the 44 Joy Street tenants apparently had them. The parasite densities seem to be greater than those in deposits left by wealthy households in Newport, Rhode Island, but lower than those left by poorer people in Newport and by some households in Albany, New York. The presence of the polypody fern in the nightsoil is relevant here, as this fern was used to treat intestinal worms, among other conditions. In fact, several of the pollen types from potentially medicinal plants are from plants used to treat intestinal worms. This very direct insight into the health of some members of the African American community suggests that problems with intestinal parasites were not as severe as those at some other Northeastern sites, perhaps as a result of successful use of herbal remedies.



Above: Photograph of a whipworm egg from the privy, taken through a microscope. Studies of soil samples from urban sites suggest that intestinal parasites were very common in 19th-century cities.

Scientific Clues to Past Lifeways

Pollen and parasites are both microscopic, and not visible to the eye during an archaeological excavation. Identifying these remains at a site thus requires the collection of soil samples for processing in the lab. The fieldwork at the African Meeting House included a systematic plan for collecting soil samples throughout the excavation. First chemical procedures were used to separate the pollen or parasites from the surrounding soil; then pollen and parasite samples were placed on slides and identified under a microscope using high-power magnification. This type of scientific research provides detailed information about the past environment around the Meeting House and the health of members of the African American community.

Above: Analysis of microscopic parasite eggs and pollen grains underway in the UMass Boston laboratory.

Symbols of Community Action

Institutions of Change

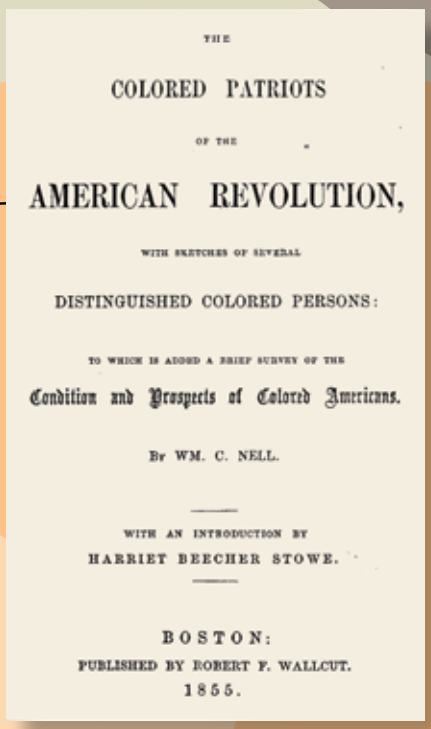
In 1835 the Abiel Smith School opened next door to the African Meeting House. It was the first building erected in the country for the sole purpose of housing a black public school. The African Meeting House and the Abiel Smith School were community institutions that helped to build the strength and independence of Boston's free blacks by interlinking strong ethics of community uplift and self-sufficiency. Emblematic of similar fights across the country, these two institutions mounted very public and successful battles against discrimination and for equality: they became a center of the abolition movement; a center of the fight for educational equality and against school segregation; and a center of the movement to challenge discrimination in the military. The stories of the African Meeting House and the Smith School are stories of institution-building, social power, and action. Certain artifacts recovered in the Meeting House backlot and the Joy Street privy connect us to these stories and symbolize the community's efforts to change the educational system and the military.

Educational Equality

A fragment of etched slate and two pencils connect us to the community action for educational opportunity and equality that were centered at the Meeting House and the neighboring Smith School. Their use in the early 19th century places them at a time when most African American children were systematically denied any equal opportunity for education. The African School was already ten years old when it moved into the African Meeting House in 1808, and these very early schools are a sign of the educational and economic aspirations of parents for their children.

Teaching children quite literally replicates and creates culture, and the emphasis on education in Boston's black community created a very literate adult population. The high degree of literacy helped the community engage the concerns of the day: African Americans wrote for, worked at, and subscribed to the anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator,* and read books such as William Nell's *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*. The artifacts of the school also connect us to a powerful community mobilization to improve educational opportunity and integrate Boston's schools. The Meeting House and the Smith School were central to these accomplishments, and small artifacts remaining from them speak to us about large social issues.

Above: Two slate pencils and a fragment of etched slate (center). The African Meeting House and Smith School were centers of community organization for educational opportunity and educational equality.



THE

COLORED PATRIOTS

OF THE

AMERICAN REVOLUTION,

WITH SKETCHES OF SEVERAL

DISTINGUISHED COLORED PERSONS:

TO WHICH IS ADDED A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE

Condition and Prospects of Colored Americans.

By WM. C. NELL.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE.

BOSTON:

PUBLISHED BY ROBERT F. WALLCUT.

1855.

Left: The title page of William C. Nell's book, The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution. *Nell interviewed black military veterans and other community members for his book, and is considered one of the first African American historians.*

Military Desegregation

Other small artifacts that can be similarly connected to larger issues are the military buttons found at the site, which include a naval officer's uniform sleeve button from the 44 Joy Street privy (shown to the right). This button, with an eagle perched atop a fouled anchor with the thirteen-star surround, matches officer's-dress regulations of 1813. The button came from a deposit dated from 1811 to roughly 1838. While this style of Navy button was in use for a long time, the dating suggests that it could be associated with the War of 1812. While we cannot identify the owner with certainty, Robert Curry is listed as a tenant at 44 Joy Street from 1826 to 1828, and identified as a mariner, which was one of the most common occupations for African Americans in antebellum Boston.

Boston's black community clearly recognized both the symbolic and actual power of military service. William Nell wrote about African American military participation as a way of highlighting the community's patriotism—reporting that during the War of 1812 black seamen accounted for 15 to 20 percent of enlisted men on all ships and stations in the U.S. Navy—and assisted with construction of the fortifications at Castle Island. More than any other artifact, a military uniform is a symbol of male strength and patriotism, and a uniform button may have been valued for its intentionally symbolic and visible message about rank or pride of service.

In the period leading up to the Civil War, black Bostonians intensified their efforts to establish a military company, ultimately gaining support for the raising of the Massachusetts 54th and 55th Infantry Regiments, which fought as part of the Union army. A naval military button from the War of 1812 reminds us of this broader story. Boston's African American community used military participation to show their strength, highlighted this participation to build pride in their accomplishments, and challenged authority for the right to fight in the Civil War. This example, as do the school artifacts, shows us how the smallest of artifacts can symbolize the most important actions of the community.

If you're interested in learning more...

These books and websites offer fascinating information about the African American experience and about historical archaeology:

- De Cunzo, Lu Ann, and John H. Jameson Jr. (editors). *Unlocking the Past: Celebrating Historical Archaeology in North America*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press (2005).
- Deetz, James. *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday (1996).
- Ferguson, Leland. *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press (1992).
- Horton, James, and Louis Horton. *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*. Holmes and Meier, New York (1999).
- Landon, David B. (editor). *Investigating the Heart of a Community: Archaeological Excavations at the African Meeting House, Boston, Massachusetts*. Andrew Fiske Memorial Center for Archaeological Research, Cultural Resources Management Study 22 (2007). Available on the web at www.fiskecenter.umb.edu/Projects/African_Meeting_House.html.
- Singleton, Teresa (editor). *"I, Too, Am American": Archaeological Studies of African-American Life*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia (1999).
- The Museum of African American History's website, www.maah.org.
- The National Park Service's web pages on the Boston African American National Historic Site, which offer much information. Visit www.nps.gov/boaf.
- The African Diaspora Archaeology Network, which hosts a website with newsletters, links, and other resources. Visit www.diaspora.uiuc.edu.
- The website of the Society for Historical Archaeology, the main professional society with this topical focus, which offers many resources. Visit www.sha.org.

About the Project Director

David B. Landon led the archaeological work described here, and is also the author of this publication. He is the associate director of the Fiske Center for Archaeological Research and an adjunct associate professor of anthropology at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Previously he was an associate professor at Michigan Technological University and a research fellow at the Smithsonian Institution. He received his PhD from Boston University. Among his research interests are the archaeology of historic and industrial-period sites, environmental archaeology, zooarchaeology, and public archaeology. He has published in more than a dozen journals and received project funding from the National Science Foundation and a variety of other government and private sources.

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About the Museum of African American History

The Museum of African American History, founded in 1963, is New England's largest museum dedicated to preserving, conserving, and interpreting the contributions of African Americans. The Museum oversees four historic sites and two Black Heritage Trails® that tell the story of organized black communities from the Colonial Period through the 19th century. In Boston, the African Meeting House (1806) is the oldest African Meeting house in America, and the adjacent Abiel Smith School (1835) is the first building in the nation constructed solely to house a black public school. At the Smith School, the Museum now offers rotating exhibits and a museum store open year around. On Nantucket, the Seneca Boston/Florence Higginbotham House (c. 1774) sits next door to the pristinely restored African Meeting House (1820's). The Museum's exhibits, programs and education activities showcase the powerful stories of these communities of conviction who gave birth to the abolitionist movement, provided refuge on the Underground Railroad, organized politically, and advanced the cause of freedom. Further information is available from:

The Museum of African American History
14 Beacon Street, Suite 719
Boston, MA 02108
Phone: 617-725-0022
Email: history@maah.org
Web: www.maah.org

About the Fiske Center at UMass Boston

The Andrew Fiske Memorial Center for Archaeological Research was established at the University of Massachusetts Boston in 1999, through an endowment from the late Mrs. Andrew Fiske as a living memorial to her husband, Andrew. The center supports interdisciplinary archaeological research, applied public archaeology projects, and educational programs for students. Center projects study the last thousand years in the Americas and Atlantic World, investigating processes of colonization, urbanization, and industrialization. Among the center's major initiatives is the long term-investigation of Sylvester Manor on Shelter Island, New York, a project examining the foundations of plantation life and slavery in the North. The center also has a commitment to local archaeology in New England. The Fiske Center has special expertise in environmental archaeology, and is a national leader in applying these perspectives to recent sites.

Further information is available from:
The Fiske Center for Archaeological Research
University of Massachusetts Boston
100 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, MA 02125-3393
Phone: 617-287-6850
Web: www.fiskecenter.umb.edu.

Archaeology project crew in front of the African Meeting House.

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