

BR 40 ~~described in Brooklyn 1916~~
FCM 70 114 THE GRAVESEND PROJECT: ARCHAEOLOGY IN BROOKLYN
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The Gravesend Settlement and Its History

Gravesend is located in southern Brooklyn. In its widest sense, the term comprises modern neighborhoods more commonly known as parts of Bensonhurst, Midwood, Parkville, Highlawn, Sheepshead Bay, Manhattan Beach, Gerritsen Beach, Brighton Beach, Coney Island and Sea Gate, as well as Gravesend proper. Its center is the original village of Gravesend, at the crossroads formed by Gravesend Neck Road and MacDonald (formerly Gravesend) Avenue. The square bounded by Village Road North, Village Road East, Village Road South and Van Sicklen Street (formerly Village Road West) still preserves the original outline of the settlement on the map of Brooklyn. Unlike Topsy, Gravesend did not "just grow"; it was designed according to a coherent plan from its inception as a settlement.

Although there was a village of the Canarsee Indians located on Gravesend Bay (Massabarkem), the site of the future village was not actually inhabited by these Indians. It was apparently the crossroads of two paths which led from Gravesend Bay towards the Mechawanienk Trail (later Kings Highway) and the interior of Brooklyn. It was probably the desire of the first Gravesend settlers to remain at some small distance from the Indian settlement, while still utilizing similar resources (the sea and the fields), as well as the communications with other settlements in Brooklyn offered by the paths, which led them to choose this crossroads location for their new home.

Alone among the seventeenth century settlements in Brooklyn, Gravesend was settled by English rather than Dutch settlers. Although Anthrony Jansen van Saale received a patent in May 1643 for 100 morgen (200 acres) of land over against Coney Island, the patent from Governor Kieft to Lady Deborah

Moody which marks the true founding of the village is dated December 19, 1645. This patent grants to the "Honorable Lady Deborah Moody, Sir Henry Moody, Baronet, Ensign George Baxter, and Sergeant James Hubbard and any that shall join in association with them, a tract bounded on the creek adjacent to Coney Island ... the power to erect a town and fortifications, and to have and enjoy free liberty of conscience according to the manners and customs of Holland, without any molestation from any magistrate or magistrates, or any other ecclesiastical minister that might pretend jurisdiction over them, and the liberty to constitute themselves a body politic as freemen of the province and town of Gravesend."¹ This patent is remarkable not only in the inclusion of a woman as primary grantee, but also in the stress it lays on "free liberty of conscience" and the lack of ecclesiastical controls.

The original settlers were not a unified group. Although all English, they came from different backgrounds. Some of them had earlier lived in Hopton, near Turtle Bay in Manhattan, where they grew tobacco. Led by Nicholas Stillwell, they moved into the shadow of the New Amsterdam fortifications out of fear of reprisals to the ill-considered anti-Indian policies of Governor Kieft in the early 1640's. The second group came with Lady Moody in 1643 from various English settlements in New England, especially Salem and Lynn. This group was composed of various sectarians, including Anabaptists and possibly Quakers, at odds with the strict Congregationalism of New England. The Dutch seem to have been more than willing to get all of these foreigners off into the wilds of Brooklyn. The English themselves may have had ulterior motives for preferring the remote site of Gravesend.²

Village Plan

Gravesend village was laid out as a square by surveyor James Hubbard.

Two main roads bisected it into four quadrants. The center of each quadrant was reserved as common land for pasturage of cattle during troubled times. Forty house plots were laid out within the village fortifications, ten around the periphery of each quadrant. Farm plots, corresponding to the house plots within the village, extended radially around the village center. To receive and hold a plot, the settlers had to agree to erect an habitable dwelling on it by a specified time, and to maintain the fencing that separated the common land from the gardens or orchards around the houses.

Gravesend lay in flat, well-watered wooded country. To the west and south were the sea and marshes which supplied an almost unlimited amount of marsh grass for cattle fodder. One road led towards New Utrecht to the north, another towards Flatbush to the east. The other two roads which crossed in the settlement led south to the marshes and fields and west to the mill and Gravesend Bay. This small community was limited by plan to about forty families (around 200 people, to judge from the 1698 census).³ Although communication with other parts of Brooklyn was not too difficult, Gravesend was an isolated, rural settlement. Some of the Gravesend settlers, especially the Dutch who began moving in soon after the foundation of the settlement, had relatives in other Brooklyn villages, and on occasion they shared preachers or went to church in Flatbush or New Utrecht.

The Gravesend Project

Gravesend offers an almost ideal opportunity to illustrate how archaeologists, acting as paleo-anthropologists, can approach the study of such a community and can add to our understanding of its people. This approach, which seeks to document behavioral regularities and their relation

to the spatial and cultural contexts in which they occur, is not antipathetical to that of history, but complementary to it, and uses historical data to provide another perspective. While closely related to the culture-historical approach used in some studies of colonial New England,⁴ it partakes equally of the nomothetic aims of ethnoarchaeology.

Ethnoarchaeology may be defined as the study of peoples specifically for the information they can give on archaeological matters.⁵ Studies of living peoples carried out by archaeologists have concentrated on residence patterns and use of space among the Fulani of the Cameroons, living compound size and social structure in an Iranian village, manufacture, use and disposal of stone tools among an Eskimo group, and the conclusions drawn from the excavation of a modern Indian campsite or the settlements of the Kalahari Bushmen.⁶ These studies have provided sets of solid data which are of use in determining the limits of archaeological analogy and interpretation. In most cases, their lessons are cautionary, pointing out factors which, although normally invisible in the archaeological record, produce a patterned behavioral set which the archaeologist must interpret. In some ways, the goal of the Gravesend Project is to extend the frontiers of archaeology through the documentation of change in an historic context.⁷

Historic archaeology offers fascinating prospects when it can rely on eyewitness documentation of the archaeological data. On the whole, historic archaeology is finely focused "personal" archaeology, with the potential to capture remarkably specific details and to weave them into a surprisingly full and compelling fabric. If that potential for bringing the past to life is seldom realized, it is because the written records themselves are often inadequate. The documents that survive mostly concern important personages:

the few leading inventors, traders, statesmen, courtiers and churchmen of the day. Too often, historic archaeology becomes the archaeology of the historic, concerned with the pompous and monumental. Preserved documents tend to be incomplete, or biased, or simply unconcerned about the problems of greatest interest to us. But given a sufficient number of suitable texts to place a well-dated closely spaced sequence of events in the context of their times, the historic archaeologists have the greatest potential for the study of innovation, acculturation and cultural process.⁸ This potential is just beginning to be realized in some periods of Near Eastern history, and in places such as colonial New England. On a small scale, it forms another goal of the Gravesend Project.

Gravesend was selected as a study area because it existed as a community for a long enough time to allow good diachronic data on a number of aspects of urban (sensu lato) life. One of the primary considerations was the existence of records in English, rather than Dutch. The town records of Gravesend, from the inception of the settlement, are stored in the J. Kelly Collection of Local History at Saint Francis College. Microfilms of these records were procured by Brooklyn College in the course of the Project. The Surrogate's Office of Kings County has records of probated wills. The County Clerk's Office has land transfer and conveyance records, back to the original Indian purchases in many cases. These are resources which are public documents, available to all thanks to the City of New York.⁹

The project has proceeded along two fronts: excavation and "paleoethnography". Actual excavation was begun during November 1976 in the northeastern corner of the schoolyard of P.S. 95, on the corner of Van Sicklen Street and Village Road North.¹⁰ The site, now an unused "Victory Garden", was a house plot until the expansion of the schoolyard in the early 1930's.

From the approximately 35 cubic meters of earth which has been removed in exploratory trenching, the following stratigraphic picture emerges: Modern topsoil, a dark active humus layer, extends some 25 - 35 centimeters below the surface. This is filled with expectable modern debris. The redder stratum below this, widening from five centimeters in thickness in the northern end of the garden to 85-90 centimeters in the southern part, consists of similar older topsoil which was moved into the northern part of the schoolyard at the time that the annex to the school was built and the schoolyard expanded (about 1939). This layer includes bricks and material from the older houses and the old schoolhouse on Van Sicklen Street, which were demolished at this time. It also includes much constructional debris and trash from the building of the new school. There are indications of earlier material in this mixture, including a series of twelve pipestem fragments which give an approximated date to the beginning of the eighteenth century. These fragments, and other older material, occur in secondary context, mostly mixed with a mass of rubble filling a linear trench which runs north-south through the central part of the site. This trench, which was dug at a time when the site surface was rubble-filled, apparently carries a gas pipe south from Avenue U. Other datable artifacts from within this trench rubble include a Bromo-Seltzer bottle (1893-1907) and a McKesson and Robbins [Drug Co.] bottle (1880-1890). These may have formed part of the assemblage left in the demolished houses. The lowest stratigraphic unit, representing the original ground surface, is sandy with many embedded clam shells. Almost certainly this formed a part of a garden plot around the house. Foundation walls from the mid-nineteenth century which are dug into this sandy layer attest to the site's continued use as a house plot until the construction of the

modern schoolyard.

Given the mass of written records and the ignorance with which we began this project, we are still only at the beginning of the "paleoethnographic" part of the work. The following examples are merely indicative of some of the aspects of life in the Gravesend settlement which are in the process of investigation. One major question concerns community composition and mobility. Of the original patentees of 1643 [39], only 21 remain in Gravesend until 1657, and no more than two are still living in the community or have descendents in Gravesend in 1698.¹² This is a significant turnover, whose reasons are being investigated. Present hypotheses connect it with the English acquisition of New Amsterdam and concurrent loss of smuggling revenues and piracy, as well as the opening of land in New Jersey to the disaffected members of the community. After 1660, the new settlers were predominantly Dutch, possibly moving towards the periphery of English power, a process which seems to have been accelerated by the movement of the capital of English Brooklyn ("Yorkshire") from Gravesend to Flatbush in 1685. Indeed, its selection as "shire town" in 1664 reflects the changed community status under the English, but obviously runs counter to the accepted patterns of information flow and economic networks long established in Brooklyn. The relocation of the governmental seat in Flatbush is a reaffirmation of that town's importance as the old central place in the Brooklyn market network.

Interesting information is found in a census of Gravesend dating from 1698, which gives a list of freeholders by name and ethnic affiliation [Dutch or English], and further information as to the family and household composition of the village at that time.¹³ The total population of Gravesend

at this time was 210. This compares with 509 in Brooklyn, 301 in Bushwick, 259 in New Utrecht, 256 in Flatlands, and 476 in Flatbush. In Gravesend there are 34 households, of which 20 are identified as English, while the remainder are Dutch. Five of these households are headed by women freeholders. Exclusive of women freeholders without children, the mean number of children per family is 3.56 ($s=2.28$) for English and 5.15 ($s=3.05$) for Dutch. This difference is not significant; both English and Dutch families fall within the same population, and family size agrees well with the figures from neighboring Dutch Flatlands and New Utrecht. One peculiarity of the Gravesend census is its designation of several women freeholders as "The Widow [X]", while other women freeholders are referred to only by first and last name. Two possible hypotheses may be offered in explanation for this difference in designation: (1) since the women noted as "The Widow [X]" are Dutch and those without designation are English, perhaps this is an ethnic distinction; or (2) since the "Widows [X]" all have dependent children and the others do not, perhaps the fact of parenthood was more important in determining designation than the fact of widowhood. It is interesting to note that the designation "The Widow [X]" is found only in Gravesend among all the Kings County towns listed in the 1698 census. In all other cases, the women freeholders, whether with or without children, are denoted by name only. It would seem that Gravesend retains this form of address, possibly connected with its English heritage, while the other towns do not.

Another point of departure is the number of apprentices. Six apprentices are listed in Gravesend, three with Dutch and three with English families. If apprentices actually were youths attached to tradesmen or craftsmen to

learn a trade, we are investigating other documentation, such as land records, to determine whether families with apprentices actually were engaged in primarily non-agrarian pursuits. It may be of interest to note in this context that the town of Brooklyn, with 2.83 times the population of Gravesend, had 4.33 times the number of apprentices, while the farming communities of New Utrecht and Flatlands had none at all.

In 1698, Gravesend had 17 slaves. While there appear to be significant associations between large families and ownership of slaves, the pattern of slave-owning cannot be explained by any single hypothesis. In Gravesend the only multiple slave-owners in the community are English; the Dutch who owned slaves had only one per family. Comparing the data from Gravesend with those from other settlements in Brooklyn, we find that in the Dutch settlements (excluding Gravesend) there is a linear correlation between the number of slaves per settlement and the number of children per settlement (r^2 [coefficient of determination]= .91). Adding the Dutch families from Gravesend makes the correlation somewhat less strong ($r^2=.83$), while the addition of the English families lowers it significantly ($r^2=.68$). This may indicate a possible ethnic difference in the use of slaves: the Dutch may use slaves for domestic purposes primarily, while the English do not. It may indicate a Dutch preference for having land worked by family members, rather than slaves. The Stillwells and the other English who came with them were tobacco farmers before coming to Gravesend and continued this occupation at the new settlement. Perhaps the use of slaves as fieldhands may be associated with the crop and the methods of growing tobacco.

Implications and Summary

As befits a progress report, this paper would be premature in

stating conclusions. There is much more that might be said about various aspects of this "paleoethnographic" research. Anthropologists are often connected in the public mind with the study of curious marriage customs. As in other small, rather isolated communities, we might expect to find the marriages in Gravesend reflecting changing status and wealth within the changing composition of the community. The modes of social control and conflict resolution in this colonial setting are under investigation. The relationship of land-holding or mercantile ventures to political position and community leadership also forms a part of the proposed long-term study. On another level, Gravesend might serve as a warning for historians, especially those who deal with local problems. It is ethnocentric to assume that our ancestors, whether biological or cultural, shared our attitudes or reactions. It is a massive undertaking to try to explore the minds of the settlers of the seventeenth century. We are just at the beginning of the understanding of how different from ourselves they actually were. We have mentioned some aspects of these possible differences in terms of attitudes towards land-holding, use of family labor, tenant farming, slave labor or the like. Other aspects include the literary and religious concepts which shaped their world-view, and their concepts of wealth and material possessions.

The excavation has enabled us to check the constructional history of the schoolyard as shown in the county and school records with the stratigraphy of the trenches. In itself this is a valuable demonstration of the use of archaeological reasoning to reconstruct the prior states of a site. It has served as practical experience in excavation and laboratory technique for students who would otherwise not get a chance to dig. It has provided information concerning the depth and type of deposit in this part

of the settlement. Finally, by our presence and work, we have reinforced the self-awareness of the Gravesend community.¹⁴

1

Jerrold Seymann, ed., Colonial Charters, Patents and Grants to the Communities Comprising the City of New York (New York: Board of Statutory Consolidation of the City of New York, 1939), pp. 494-498.

2

A full treatment of the colonial history of Gravesend, as well as the other towns of Brooklyn, may be found in Henry R. Stiles, The Civil, Political, Professional and Ecclesiastical History and Commercial and Industrial Record of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, N.Y. from 1683 to 1884 (New York: W. W. Munsell, 1884), 2 volumes.

3

E. B. O'Callaghan, ed., The Documentary History of the State of New York (Albany: Weed, Parson and Co., 1850), vol. 3, pp. 133-138.

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cf. John Demos, A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

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Frank Hole and Robert Heizer, Prehistoric Archaeology: A Brief Introduction (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1977), p. 23.

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Nicholas David, "The Fulani Compound and the Archaeologist," World Archaeology 3 (1971):111-131; Carol Kramer, "Ethnoarchaeology of an Iranian Village," paper delivered to the Anthropological Section of the New York Academy of Sciences, November 1967; Lewis R. Binford, "Methodological Considerations of the Archaeological Use of Ethnographic Data," in R. B. Lee and I. DeVore, eds., Man the Hunter (Chicago: Aldine, 1968), pp. 268-273; R. Bonnicksen, "Millie's Camp: An Experiment in Archaeology," World Archaeology 4 (1973):272-291; John Yellen, "The !Kung Settlement Pattern: An Archaeological Perspective" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1973).

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Robert Schuyler, "Historical and Historic Sites Archaeology As Anthropology: Basic Definitions and Relationships," in Mark Leone, ed., Contemporary Archaeology (Carbondale, Ill.: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1972), pp. 118-124.

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L. Freeman, "Anthropology Without Informants," in S. Tax and L. Freeman, eds., Horizons of Anthropology, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1977), pp. 132-150.

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Published documents, such as O'Callaghan, Documentary History of the State of New York and Seymann Colonial Charters... also contain much pertinent information.

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The author acknowledges the cooperation of Mrs. C. Silverman, Principal of P.S. 95, for obtaining the necessary permission to excavate in the schoolyard.

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For the use of pipestems in Colonial site dating, see Lewis R. Binford, "A New Method of Calculating Dates from Kaolin Pipe Stem Fragments," Southeastern Archaeological Conference Newsletter 9 (1962):19-21; J. C. Harrington, "Dating Stem Fragments of Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Clay Tobacco Pipes," Archaeological Society of Virginia Quarterly Bulletin 9 (1954).

12

Information from O'Callaghan, Documentary History, pp.133-138; also Town Records (Gravesend) in County Clerk's Office, Kings County.

13

Ibid.

14

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