



Remembering Africa

AS KIDS, WE RODE OUR BIKES through the quiet streets of the Marine Park section of Brooklyn, New York. We didn't know each other then, but we each recall pedaling past the Hendrick I. Lott house, whose gracious porch, peeling white paint, and ample grounds overgrown with tall weeds set it apart from the street's cookie-cutter houses. The roads and homes surrounding it, we later learned, stood on land that was once the Lott farm. Years later, as archaeologists, we finally understood the importance of this place. Occupied across three centuries by the same family, the Lott House is a microcosm of New York's evolution from the 1720s to 1989, when its last occupant died. With a team from the Brooklyn College

Archaeological Research Center, we came back to explore the house that had fascinated us as children.

For three years, we have investigated the ways in which the Lotts responded to their changing landscape, excavating around the house, examining the structure itself, perusing archives, and tracking down Lott descendants. The site, which the city is in the process of acquiring, has been designated an official Save America's Treasures project and a federal and local landmark. We have chronicled our work on ARCHAEOLGY's website, reassembling jumbled stratigraphy to better understand the construction sequence at the house. A privy revealed dolls, pipes, a gold pocket watch, and the upper plate of a woman's false teeth. We recovered



Through a trap door, three tread-worn steps lead to a boarded-up door that once led to the main house. To each side is a garret room that housed slaves. Inset: The house and lean-to, in which the rooms were found

endless quantities of clam and oyster shells and ceramics. Through it all, one question haunted us. During the eighteenth century, according to census data, the Lotts owned more slaves than most other families in the town of Flatlands, now Marine Park. We had found no direct evidence of where—or how—those slaves might have lived.

Finally, this past winter, we found it: a forgotten room that would reveal key evidence of the persistence of African religious rituals among slaves in New York—the only evidence for it, in fact, beyond the eighteenth-century African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan (see *ARCHAEOLOGY*, March/April 1993, pp. 28–38), where some graves reflected con-

tinued adherence to such ritual symbols and traditions. It is unusual to uncover in New York City undisturbed archaeological deposits that date prior to the turn of the nineteenth century. The urbanization that has changed the face of this metropolis since the mid-nineteenth century has obliterated evidence of slave life, whereas on the large plantations in the rural South, slaves were typically housed in separate quarters whose archaeological remains still exist today.

Recently, archaeologist Diana Wall of City College of the City University of New York reexamined artifacts from many eighteenth-century sites excavated in New York City from the late 1970s through the 1980s. By looking more closely at these material remains in light of new information based on recent work done in the South, the Caribbean, and on the West Coast of Africa, she hopes to identify artifacts that enslaved Africans used or owned. Among her discoveries is a pewter serving spoon, recovered in 1984 from a Lower Manhattan landfill and inscribed inside its bowl with three “X”s. When first excavated, the “X”s were overlooked, but Wall believes the marks—reminiscent of those found on ceramic objects excavated outside New York—were made by African slaves to mark it as theirs.

FROM THE EARLY 1790S, debate over abolition raged in New York’s legislature. While slavery wasn’t officially abolished in New York until 1827, by the turn of the nineteenth century, its end was in sight. Census records reveal that, in the early 1800s, the Lott family owned at least 12 slaves. But within the first ten years

Under the Eaves

A forgotten room in a Brooklyn farmhouse bears witness to the spiritual lives of slaves.

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photographs by CHESTER HIGGINS, JR.



Authors Loorya, Ricciardi, and Bankoff study the arrangement of corn cobs found beneath the floorboards in a garret room.

of that century, during the construction of the main portion of the present-day Lott House and two decades before New York abolished slavery, Hendrick I. Lott freed all but one of his slaves, an elderly woman. Perhaps he knew what was coming. Or perhaps, as family oral tradition recalls, he did it to demonstrate his support of the abolition movement. The Lotts were members of the Flatlands Reformed Dutch Church, which, beginning in the late eighteenth century, preached that all people should be free. Federal census records seem to indicate that, after freeing his enslaved laborers, Lott hired them back as paid workers; the number and ages of free blacks corresponds to the register of slaves ten years earlier.

By 1800, the Lotts had outgrown the small, salt-box-style house with attached lean-to the family had lived in for almost a century. In 1800, they moved their house from an unknown spot elsewhere on the property to its current location and joined it to a grand, new house. We had always thought of the lean-to as a single room tacked on to the original house to provide extra kitchen or work space, but in late 1999, while surveying the interior architecture of the lean-to, we noticed a small trap door in the ceiling of a closet. Rounding up a ladder and a couple of flashlights, we climbed up through the door. When our eyes adjusted to the dark, we saw we were facing three tread-worn steps leading to a boarded-up door. To each side of the steps we saw a doorway leading to a windowless, cramped garret room roughly ten feet

square. We were standing in a forgotten second story of the lean-to. We noted that the steps had likely once continued down to where we had positioned our ladder.

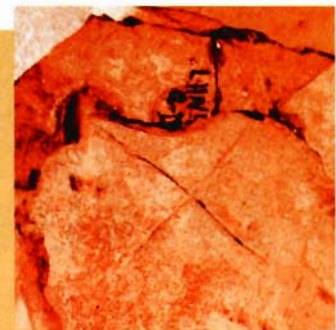
We stooped to explore the four-foot-high space. Re-used boards, some with bits of wall-paper from a former incarnation, make up the floor, secured in place by rose-headed square-cut nails, suggesting pre- or early-nineteenth-century construction. Candle drippings speckle the floorboards by the stairs.

The room to the left has a chimney slathered with mortar to seal a hole—apparently once a beehive-shaped oven to heat the room or warm food. Dark soot stains are still visible on the brick. On the floor we found a door—a perfect fit to the doorway—with a

rectangle cut out, most likely for ventilation. The room to the right of the stairs is slightly smaller, with no source of heat; its door also now lies within the room, a perfect match to the room's doorway. This second door has no cut rectangle. Perhaps without a chimney, this room had no need of ventilation. The third, boarded-up door would have led to a Lott-family bedroom in the adjoining salt-box.

We had finally found the living quarters for at least one of the Lotts' slaves. It would have been an inhospitable place to live, close and dark without natural light or fresh air; in short, hardly the sort of place one would expect liberal-minded abolitionists to house anybody.

IN BOTH THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH, slaves assigned domestic responsibilities often lived within the household. Diaries, letters, and contemporary histories indicate that in the North, even field workers frequently lived in the main house. It is doubtful that all 12 of the Lotts' slaves



Above: Red slip ware plate inscribed with "X" on reverse side. Left: Floorboard finds, including cloth bag, oyster, and sheep or goat pelvis; Right, spoon with "X" recovered from Manhattan landfill. Slaves inscribed objects with "X"s to mark them as theirs.



Courtesy of the South Street Seaport Museum, New York



The Lott farm in 1900, before the area was developed; Field hands are joined by a Lott family member, far left, to pick string beans.

lived in these small rooms. Judging from the proximity of the garret rooms to the family bedroom on the other side of the now boarded-up door, it seems likely that the slaves residing in these rooms were assigned domestic responsibilities. Perhaps, in accordance with the southern model, the Lotts' farmhands lived in separate quarters.

We are left wondering what it might have meant for the enslaved Africans who did call the garret rooms home to live in the lap of the family. Archaeologists have argued that the layout of the typical plantation—with the big house high on a hill overlooking a cluster of shabby slave quarters—served to cow slaves into intimidated submission, hammer home a stratified social vision, and deter mingling. On the flip side, that separation may have fostered the development of a community of slaves with its own cultural tradition. Perhaps slaves living within the household would have felt doubly isolated, cut off not only from the family with whom they shared a roof, but also from the community of slaves. The forgotten room under the eaves makes it difficult to argue that any moral opposition to slavery the Lotts felt translated into exceptional treatment of their slaves.

As surprised as we were to discover the rooms, nothing prepared us for what we uncovered beneath the floorboards. In the southwestern corner of the larger room were four intact corn cobs and a fifth apparently gnawed into three parts by rodents. The five full corn cobs may have comprised a geometric figure when laid down, possibly a five-pointed star. There may have been a similar arrangement of the dozens of cobs in the northern room as well, but rodents have disturbed any pattern beyond recognition. Corn cobs were also present under the floorboards near the chimney. Corn cobs were used as kindling in colonial times, but these cobs were not burned. Stripped cobs were used as bedding, but kernels were intact on these, suggesting that they were placed beneath the floorboards whole. Ritual placement is the most likely explanation.

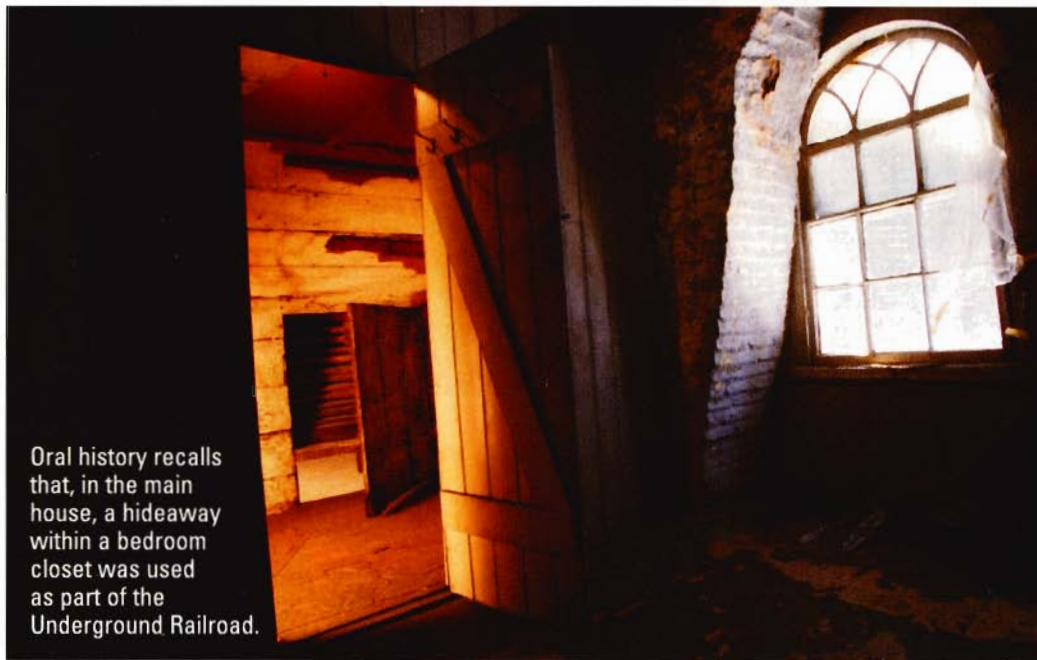


Courtesy Catherine Lott-Davis

Yet another exciting find came from beneath the floorboards of the smaller room: a cloth pouch—its contents, if there were any, disintegrated beyond recognition—tied with hemp string, half the pelvis of a sheep or goat, and an oyster shell.

Ritual items have been uncovered beneath floorboards at several sites in the South and relate to the Hoodoo or Voodoo practices that derive from West African cosmology, in which objects were buried beneath the floor as protective talismans. The Lotts' slaves themselves most likely came from West Africa, whose population was depleted as captives were taken to northeastern America as slaves. And although no direct parallel to our corn cobs has been found, we feel certain that these items may have had some ritual use for the slaves living at the Lott House. Shells, bones, and pouches have been found under floors and in walls of rooms where slaves lived or worked in Maryland and farther south, as well as in South American and the Caribbean, clearly suggesting the continuation of African practices beyond African soil (see *ARCHAEOLOGY*, May/June 2000, p. 21). As in this case, caches were typically clustered around doorways and fireplaces where spirits were thought to enter and exit.

The placement of ritual items under floorboards does not necessarily indicate that enslaved Africans were practicing their beliefs covertly. In some West African cul-



Oral history recalls that, in the main house, a hideaway within a bedroom closet was used as part of the Underground Railroad.

tures, objects were secreted under entrances to buildings to keep evil out. On the other hand, we cannot rule out the possibility that religious activity took place only out of sight of slave owners.

Debris from above the floorboards in the garret rooms, including a scrap of newspaper dating to the time of the Spanish American War (1898–99), suggests reuse of the space at the turn of the twentieth century, perhaps for storage. Wooden latches still in place would have held the door to each room shut from the outside.

OUR EXCAVATIONS HAVE ALSO TURNED UP an item offering another link to enslaved Africans. Recovered outside the foundation of an old, detached stone kitchen on the property—in a deposit dating to between 1775 and 1850—were sherds of a decorated red slipware plate made of locally mined clay. The bottom of this plate, which we have almost completely reconstructed, exhibits an incised “X”—carved sometime after firing—similar to that on the Manhattan spoon Wall examined.

Common slipware plates, readily available among European colonists during the eighteenth century, went out of fashion soon after the Revolutionary War. Such an ordinary item is an unlikely Lott-family heirloom. Why then was this plate—manufactured between 1730 and 1770—found in an early nineteenth-century deposit? Perhaps it was discarded by the family, then claimed and marked by the newly freed Africans. Inscriptions like this, sometimes accompanied by a circle or rectangle, have been found marking artifacts elsewhere, including at several South Carolina plantation sites. For the Bakongo, a group living along the lower Congo River, the “X” is a cosmogram representing the boundary between the living world and the world of the dead, with water lying in between. One study in South Carolina found a number of “X”-inscribed objects under water. In our con-

text, is the “X” simply a mark of ownership, or do objects so inscribed carry a ritual meaning?

THERE IS STILL another thread in this story of enslaved Africans, and it comes from the Lotts themselves. Two Lott descendants, Catherine Lott-Divis and Carol Lott McNamara, who did not know each other as children, grew up hearing stories about a second-floor room in the main section of the house with a door leading to a storage space in

the eaves of a gambrel roof. The space, more a discreet nook than a room, is accessible only through a bedroom closet. Catherine and Carol separately recalled a family legend that the room was used as part of the Underground Railroad in the 1840s.

Archaeologists around here joke that every pre-Civil War House in New York City claims to have been part of the Underground Railroad. Yet when one takes into account that the Lott family freed its slaves almost 25 years prior to the abolition of slavery in New York State, and, in turn, hired them as paid workers, it is possible the house really was used as a stop on the Railroad. It is known that the Underground Railroad did run through Staten Island, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx to circumvent Manhattan, where strong economic and social ties to the South made it less hospitable to runaway slaves.

Today, the huge basement of the Lott House is piled high with paint cans, beautiful old lamps, bottles, an enormous old washtub, and even a cast-iron stove. Recently, poking around, we found a pitchfork branded with the initials JHL—Johannes H. Lott, Hendrick’s son. There’s an early-twentieth-century photograph showing a Lott woman gaily picking beans in the sun with field hands, black and white. We try to imagine a young Johannes, pitchfork in hand, sweating happily alongside his father’s soon-to-be-freed slaves, but the picture painted by our discovery under the eaves is more ambiguous. ■

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