

# Introduction

American racism is a tenacious phenomenon that must in some significant measure be attributed to the long history of racialized slavery in North America. While it is generally understood that plantation slavery was widespread in what would become the US South, what is less widely known is that race-based slavery began in what is now the northeastern United States and persisted there for the better part of two centuries.

The purpose of this book is to review the material evidence of how African American people in the northeastern United States struggled against the racist ideology that has largely defined American culture from its inception. In doing so, I will present evidence of three case studies. The first concerns the expansion of plantation slavery in New York at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the geographical limits of American slavery were still fluid. The second concerns an act of self-emancipation and the violence that surrounded the implementation and enforcement of laws concerning racialized slavery. The third explores the life of an African American woman who was close to the center of federal power and how she used her position both to symbolically demonstrate racial equality and help those seeking refuge as they fled north to escape the oppressions of slavery. I have contextualized each of these case studies with a review of African American archaeological sites that have been excavated in similar contexts, creating the first synthesis of the contributions that African American archaeology in the Northeast has made to our understanding of race, slavery, and freedom in the United States.

This book focuses on the part of the North where slavery was once legal, primarily New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, generally referred to as the Northeast. Although enslaved people did toil in parts of the Old Northwest, including the territories that would become the free states of Iowa and Minnesota, the story here focuses on the

eastern seaboard, where slavery began and where it remained persistent. This book is organized by five themes that have emerged from the past eighty years of research in the archaeology of the African American experience: the problem of northern slavery, bondage, struggle, liberty, and commemoration.

The first section of this book explores the problem of northern slavery. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the history of African American archaeology in the Northeast and a review of several key sites that helped shaped the archaeological discourse about the African American past in the so-called free states. This chapter also discusses several key trends in archaeological theory that informed the interpretation of some of the important African American sites excavated in the region. Chapter 2 presents a historical overview of the African American experience in the Northeast, providing context for the themes and sites explored in later chapters.

The book's second theme, bondage, is explored in Part II, which considers the condition and extent of slavery in the Northeast. Chapter 3 provides a review and consideration of the archaeological work that has been conducted on sites associated with enslaved workers in the Northeast and how this work has helped shift traditional narratives on northern slavery. Historical scholarship into the question of northern slavery traditionally held that captive labor existed on a limited scale in this region and that where it did exist, enslaved people tended to work in the households of elites (Fitts 1996). While this form of domestic servitude certainly was the experience for many, enslaved workers often did the manual labor involved in clearing forests for farmland, tilling the soil and reaping its crops, loading and unloading ships, and making wood charcoal to fire iron furnaces (Litwack 1961; Murray 2012; Osborne 2005; Wax 1967). Perhaps surprisingly to some, many people in the North were also enslaved on agricultural plantations.

Chapter 4 considers a case study on the archaeology of northern bondage at a plantation located in upstate New York known as Rose Hill. While historical and archaeological scholars have increasingly recognized the scale of northern slavery over the past two decades, much of the narrative has focused on modes of labor that differed from the plantation societies of the US South. Plantation slavery was not unknown in the North, however, and was not extinguished with American independence. Archaeological projects in what were Dutch and British colonies have demonstrated that

gangs of enslaved laborers toiled on large agricultural estates that were in form and substance very little different from the contemporary tobacco and rice plantations of Virginia and the Carolinas. As counterintuitive as it may seem, plantation slavery expanded in New York State following the American Revolution. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, southern planters who had migrated to New York with scores of enslaved laborers established new slave-based plantations in upstate New York. Several of these extended households were established in and around the city of Geneva, at the northern end of Seneca Lake, and in a variety of townships located in neighboring Seneca, Ontario, and Wayne Counties. Among these planters was Robert Selden Rose, who in 1809 established Rose Hill, a slave-based plantation on the outskirts of Geneva.

Part III examines how archaeologists have confronted the struggle against slavery in their work. Near the turn of the nineteenth century, people in the northern states began a slow process of bringing about an end to slavery, not only in their own states but throughout the union. As Frederick Douglass famously characterized it, the struggle to end slavery had both moral and physical dimensions. On one level, it was clearly a struggle to turn white people's minds to abolitionism—that is, to accept the idea that slavery must be ended. On another level, the struggle manifested in a series of violent confrontations against the oppressions of slavery. The struggle to end slavery in the North was multifaceted (Delle 2015a; Douglass 1857) and was a central issue driving American political debate from the outbreak of the American Revolution to the end of the Civil War. The moral struggle was expressed in many ways, including new federal policies that largely sought to appease slaveholders, the agitation of abolitionists who demanded an immediate end to what they saw as an immoral social system, and the daily work routines of tenant farmers who labored to secure their own economic freedom. The physical struggle was expressed through the actions of thousands of enslaved people who fled to the northern states, seeking to attain and maintain their freedom from the oppressions of slavery. Others took more direct action, raising their hands—often their weapons—to strike blows against those who would enslave them.

Chapter 5 examines the variety of ways the struggle against slavery was expressed and how archaeology can be used to interpret these manifestations of struggle. From the very beginning of European settlement in North America, African Americans were either transported to or born

into slavery in the North. In the first half of the nineteenth century, during the arduous process of emancipation in the North, numerous African American families migrated from the southern to the northeastern states. While many settled in cities, many also sought to establish their freedom in rural areas, often as tenant farmers. In many cases, rural African American communities sprang up on the edges of the white world, sometimes in segregated neighborhoods near white villages, sometimes in new villages of their own establishment, often on land they did not hold title to. Many such communities existed throughout the rural Northeast into the twentieth century, often existing only until the Ku Klux Klan and similar white supremacist groups drove out the residents through violent attacks on their communities (Craig 2015; MacLean 1994).

Freedom for rural African American tenants was tenuous in the antebellum years, not only because of the widespread and often-violent racism they endured, but also through the legal limitations various northern states, townships, and municipalities placed on African Americans. The experience of northern freedom in the antebellum years existed in the shadow of slavery, particularly after Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Chapter 6 explores the dynamics of struggle as residents in free African American communities experienced it through the case study of the William Parker House, the home of self-emancipated migrants who fled slavery in Virginia and Maryland to settle as tenant farmers in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and who engaged in an act of armed resistance against slavery in 1851.

The fourth theme addressed in this volume is liberty. From nearly the beginning of the American colonial experience, many African Americans who were not held in bondage lived in the northern states. Chapter 7 provides a review of free African American sites excavated in the Northeast and examines the strategies people adopted to overcome the difficulties free people of color faced while living in the shadow of slavery.

Chapter 8 further examines the concept of liberty through an archaeological examination of the house lot of Lydia Hamilton Smith, an African American woman who is thought to have been born into slavery but who died as a free woman. Lydia Hamilton, who was born in the small borough of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was eventually employed in nearby Lancaster by Thaddeus Stevens. Stevens was a radical abolitionist who rose to political power in the federal government and eventually challenged the power and authority of the president of the United States. Lydia

Hamilton Smith, who as a Victorian housekeeper served as the hostess for social events held by Stevens, circulated among the wealthy and powerful in Pennsylvania and Washington, eventually becoming a significant landowner. Archaeological evidence suggests that she promoted the blessings of liberty not only through her example as a woman who raised herself to social and economic prominence but also by assisting others seeking refuge from the condition of slavery.

The volume ends with a concluding chapter that addresses the theme of commemoration. Archaeological projects are fleeting; the very process of excavating an archaeological site destroys it. Using archaeology as a form of public commemoration requires significant effort. The conclusion reviews three cases where this has been done successfully in places associated with key moments in the African American experience: slavery at the first executive mansion in Philadelphia, known as the President's House; the homestead of famous black abolitionist Harriet Tubman; and the boyhood homesite of one of America's greatest anti-racist intellectuals, W. E. B. Du Bois.

## **Conclusion**

Northern slavery is a key part of the story of the American experience. Archaeologists have been working for over seventy years to locate, excavate, and interpret sites associated with northern slavery and freedom. For many this has been a difficult story to tell, one that requires contradicting much received wisdom about slavery in the northern states. Archaeology has made key contributions to our understanding of the conditions under which enslaved people lived in the North and continues to shed light on the African Americans who have always played a part in the story of the American experience.