

Excavation of sites such as Timbuctoo, N.J., is helping to rewrite African American history

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TIMBUCTOO, N.J. -- In Timbuctoo lies a hill. Underneath that hill lies a house, or what archaeologists think might have been a house once upon a time. The silver clasp of a woman's handbag, piles of Mason jars, chips of dinner plates and an empty jar of Dixie Peach Pomade lie among the bricks that have broken away from the foundation. These are crushed fragments of a past life when free black people lived in this New Jersey community almost 200 years ago -- free even then, 45 years before Emancipation. "



"Most of the history of this country is in that house, says David Orr, a classical archaeologist and professor of anthropology at Temple University. Orr is standing at the site down a gray road in Timbuctoo. A hot wind is blowing.

Orr said that the buried community has the potential to be a very important find in African American history. "Timbuctoo is great in a larger context because it lasted, some of it, into the 20th century," he said. "It also has a very large descendant community, so ethnographically it is important."

Timbuctoo was founded by freed blacks and escaped slaves in the 1820s. It was probably named after Timbuktu, the town in Mali near the Niger River, although researchers are still trying to find out how and why it got its name. The neighborhood still exists in the township of Westampton, N.J., about a 45-minute drive northeast of Philadelphia, an enclave of many acres, so tiny and tucked away that when you ask someone at the store two miles away, he tells you he has no idea where it is.

Timbuctoo has always been a secret kind of a place. Had to be, because it was part of the [Underground Railroad](#). There are newer houses here now where some descendants of original settlers still live. But much of the physical history of Timbuctoo is buried underground. Based on a geophysical survey, archaeologists believe that foundations of a whole village of perhaps 18 houses and a church dating back to the 1820s lies beneath layers of dirt.

In June, those archaeologists from Temple University in Philadelphia began unraveling Timbuctoo's secrets, excavating the hill next to a Civil War cemetery where African American troops are buried. The discoveries are fragile and ordinary artifacts of everyday life -- jars for medicines and cosmetics, pieces of shoes, dinner plates -- but to the people unearthing them, they are invaluable.

'Story of the oppressed'

Archaeological excavation of African American communities such as Timbuctoo is booming across the country, spurred by an increasing number of prominent black academics and politicians and a proliferation of museums dedicated to African American history, whose curators are eager to display the artifacts. (Archaeologists had known about the hill in Timbuctoo for years, but it wasn't until a recently appointed black mayor of the township of Westampton, Sidney Camp, pursued a geophysical survey did the excavation begin.)

"It is very important that these excavations take place," said Rex Ellis, associate director of curatorial affairs at the [Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture](#), which is [scheduled to open on the Mall in 2015](#). "The tradition has been to overlook these things in the past. There have not been archaeologists specifically searching for these kinds of treasures. For us, this activity will contribute appreciably to our understanding of African Americans as builders and contributors to this nation."

Archaeologists involved in the excavations say they are helping to rewrite an incomplete history -- adding evidence of resistance, not just physical oppression; evidence of integration, not just segregation. They are, they say, unearthing evidence not only of lives endured in slavery, but also of whole communities of escaped slaves hiding in small, self-sufficient communities.

"Historical records are biased and written from a certain perspective. People we are working with haven't had control over the narrative of the past," said Paul Shackel, professor of anthropology at the University of Maryland. "People wrote about them, but wrote from their perspective. If you read the diary of what people thought of African Americans, it is atrocious. It's racist. . . . We are . . . helping to provide the story of the oppressed and helping to make it public."

Aside from researching their own questions, some of the archaeologists are asking descendants and communities what *they* want to know. This practice spread after the 1990 passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation, which required archaeologists to repatriate human burial and funerary objects, prompting consultation with descendants, Shackel said. A Temple student working with Orr is conducting interviews with Timbuctoo descendants to help guide the dig.

Christopher Fennell, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois, says communities connected to old black towns are saying: " 'Don't tell us about brutality in the past. Tell us about how African Americans overcame racism.' There is much more focus on free African Americans like Timbuctoo." Researchers are focusing, for example, on how blacks participated in the Underground Railroad. "The untold story," Fennell says, "is that it was really run by free and enslaved African Americans helping slaves to escape."

A key development came in the early 1990s as archaeologists began working on what has become known as the African Burial Ground in New York. During excavation for a new federal office building, construction workers discovered remains of 419 men, women and children buried during the 17th and 18th centuries in a six-acre burial ground in Lower Manhattan, records show. The cemetery had been covered over for years by buildings and landfill.

Researchers discovered that the burial grounds included slaves as well as free blacks. Scientific studies of the remains at the burial ground brought home the physical atrocities of slavery -- tooth defects caused by malnutrition, anemia, high infant mortality and evidence of "impact trauma." Studies found "abnormal outgrowths of bone tissue in response to stress," Fennell says. "The analysts identified this malady as the result of the individuals having been forced to lift and carry very heavy loads."

But they also found other details: a belt of blue beads around the waist of a man buried in a coffin with inlaid tin matching the burial customs in Ghana. These findings suggested that the connection to Africa had not been severed as cleanly as tales told in some history books.

At the Hermitage in Tennessee, which was the home of President Andrew Jackson, archaeologists are excavating the slave quarters to find out more about how the slave population survived oppression. In New Mexico, archaeologists are unearthing a town called [Blackdom](#), which was founded in 1901, by Frank Boyer, a black man who was said to have walked thousands of miles from Georgia to New Mexico to establish a town for black people.

"He wanted to create a place he could be free and he got other families to come join him," says Juanita Moore, president and CEO of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, the largest museum dedicated to African American history in the country. "The town existed for about eight years until the artesian spring vanished. They ran out of water, then they dispersed and went to other cities. Now there are foundations of some of the houses."

Some sites offer evidence of the business acumen of freed black men. In Illinois, archaeologists are unearthing [New Philadelphia](#), one of the earliest towns in the country founded by a black man. In 1836, Frank McWorter, who was born into slavery, purchased his wife's freedom for \$800 with money he earned from extra work in a mine. He then purchased his own freedom at \$800 and went on to buy 42 acres of land in Pike County, Ill. McWorter subdivided the land, sold lots and used the proceeds to buy the freedom of 16 more family members.

New Philadelphia, which had an integrated school, faded after 1869 when a new railroad bypassed the town, an act some researchers attribute to racism. In 2004, Shackel and archaeological students began digging to investigate issues of race and class in New Philadelphia, which was recently listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Even the most ordinary items, such as the early-20th-century jars that once contained Vicks VapoRub and Dixie Peach Pomade now being unearthed in Timbuctoo, are significant to archaeologists. They tell "a lot about how people lived," Moore says. "They are not gold or jewels, but they say how important lives of everyday people are. That will tell the story of the majority of people as opposed to the few."

The lives of free blacks

Timbuctoo was founded in the 1820s when Quaker abolitionists sold land to black men. In 1860, according to the census, Timbuctoo had 150 residents and 37 dwellings. The excavation "documents an unappreciated and poorly represented aspect of American history because we are talking about lives of free black people when the current narrative is [that] we didn't exist," said Guy Weston, whose ancestor was one of the original settlers in Timbuctoo. "There were black people who hadn't been slaves in a lifetime, like my great-grandmother."

The community thrived until about 1930 when people began moving away to find jobs during the Great Depression, researchers say. The houses deteriorated over many years and were eventually razed, leaving behind underground foundations. Archaeologists are unclear about how some structures ended up covered by the hill at the end of the road.

"No other structures, apart from the cemetery, still stand" that date to Timbuctoo's founding, says Christopher Barton, a doctoral student in archaeology who is the site manager at Timbuctoo. The last original structure "was the church AME Zion. That was torn down about 10 years ago," he says.

The artifacts found indicate how people survived despite racism and discrimination. Archaeologists have found flatware and other items that were not purchased in local shops but likely through catalogues. "If they bought something national," Barton said, "they didn't have to deal with racism on local levels."

Donald Nixon grew up in Timbuctoo, and never knew something more was beneath it, buried within. "We used to hunt rabbits here," he says.

Sophonria Boyd Demby, 82, whose parents bought land here in 1936, is standing outside the excavation site. Shaded by a white straw hat, she points to a round object sticking out of a layer of dirt. "You think that is a piece of leather?"

Patricia Markert, 21, a field assistant, reaches for it. "I think it's a ceramic bowl," she says.

Mary Weston, 74, lives in a house down the road from the site. Her great-great-great-grandfather bought a lot in Timbuctoo in 1829 for \$38. "What they find there helps me understand who we were then," she says, sitting in her living room. She has seen the recovered artifacts, and they remind her of her childhood and stories her grandmother told about living in Timbuctoo.

Weston opens her family Bible on her lap and gingerly turns its fragile pages. The Bible is held together by a brown leather belt. Within its pages are recorded the births, the marriages, the deaths of her ancestors in Timbuctoo.

"How can you know who you really are if you don't know from whence you came?"