

# 19th-Century Skeletons Reveal Clues to Life of Free Blacks

by Henry Duvall

A city that can boast of being the birthplace of the nation's Constitution, Philadelphia has also been touted as a Black-American haven for freedom during the era of slavery.

But just how did free Blacks fare in the City of Brotherly Love? If their skeletons are any indication, their lives didn't escape the harsh realities faced by those who were under the yoke of bondage.

A recent archaeological study reveals that the quality of life and health status of free Black Philadelphians in the early 19th century and various slave populations were similar.

These unskilled free Blacks, who were among the nation's earliest Black urban wage earners, suffered a high incidence of diseases associated with poverty, with tuberculosis being the most prevalent.

But what really surprised some of the researchers was that Philadelphia Black children, most of whom were born free, appeared to have been highly stressed, pointing to conditions similar to those suffered by slave children.

The health problems tended to begin during the fetal development, which is linked to maternal health, and considerable evidence of malnutrition was found, says Dr. Michael L. Blakely of Howard University's department of sociology and anthropology, co-coordinator of the skeletal project.

These recent discoveries giving clues to the life of free Blacks come as a result of a study of skeletons unearthed from a Philadelphia cemetery that was a burial ground for free Blacks between 1823 and 1843. Most studies of Black cemeteries have largely been confined to the South.

The more than 140 adult and child skeletons are believed to be the most significant skeletal sample of free Blacks ever discovered archaeologically.

Now four years after the skeletons were excavated from the long-abandoned cemetery of Philadelphia's First African Baptist Church, the remains are being reburied.

The First African Baptist Church (FABC) cemetery was discovered in 1980 during construction of the Philadelphia Commuter Rail Tunnel, according to an "Archaeology" magazine article co-authored by Michael Parrington of Milner and Associates, the archaeological firm responsible for the excavation.

In 1984, the skeletons were shipped to the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., to be studied under the direction of Dr. J. Lawrence Angel, the late curator of physical anthropology.

Several of the nation's leading physical anthropologists have been engaged in a variety of specialized studies to determine the diets, nutrition and health of the FABC population, hoping to ascertain the social conditions experienced by these early Northern Black wage earners.

The skeletal project is currently coordinated by Prof. Lesley Rankin-Hill of the University of the District of Columbia and Blakey in conjunction with the Smithsonian's anthropology department and the archaeological firm of Milner and Associates.

Blakey is among a cadre of researchers applying state-of-the-art methods in skeletal biology. He has introduced a new method of dental-defect analysis that measures the defects in the dental enamel of skeletons to determine the duration of stress, particularly from fetal life to 6 1/2 years of age. This method sheds light on health conditions by way of general stress indicators.

"In any archaeological excavation, the teeth are the most likely to be preserved. It's very fortunate because teeth have some of the best data," he explains in an interview.

Data collected in the study were compared with data on slave and other skeletal populations, providing "hard biological evidence on the relative status and quality of life experienced by free Blacks," the researcher emphasizes.

The research findings on the free Black children caught Blakey by surprise. "I thought these children would've had somewhat better health than the slave children. But the dental-defect analysis provides no evidence in support of better health, either as fetuses or children."

Some of the data from other researchers in the project are still out, he quickly points out, and they show improved health among the adults.

What Blakey finds really ironic is that while only about 9 percent of Black Philadelphians during 1823 to 1843 were born into slavery, 30 percent of Black Philadelphia Baptists were born into slavery, he says, citing census data.

He notes that Black Baptists may have been on the lowest rung of Philadelphia's social ladder, which may explain why the free Blacks buried at the First African Baptist Church suffered from conditions similar to slavery.

Although the Liberty Bell city was a major center for abolitionist activity and a refuge for run-away slaves, census and other historical records appear to support the skeletal project's findings, says Blakey, indicating that many free Blacks were engaged in strenuous work conditions and were victims of severe acts of discrimination.

Between 1829 and 1843, the homes and churches of free Blacks were subject to mob attacks, and these Blacks were stoned in the streets, he says records show.

Students from the predominantly Black University of the District of Columbia as well as Howard University played "an integral role" in the skeletal project, Blakey points out.

Sean Jenkins, a Howard senior majoring in anthropology, says he found malnutrition was one of the causes of extreme levels of stress that led to a high death rate among the free Blacks, particularly among children. Their dental defects were equivalent to those found in North America and West Indian slave populations, Blakey's student explains.

The study, says Jenkins, "had a profound effect and influence on me." He now plans to develop a senior thesis focusing on oppression among Black people from the perspective of physical anthropology.

"We're trying to fill in some of the gaps in our understanding of Afro-American history," Blakey stresses. "One can talk about impressions of what life was like for slaves and for Blacks of the North, but the skeletal studies gave us a relatively objective basis for making comparisons."

"This project helps the public understand the significance of discrimination apart from slavery in American history," he adds, noting that there's a growing interest in Afro-American biohistory among today's physical anthropologists.

## Lincoln High School Classes of '47 Plan Reunion

The January and June, 1947, graduating classes of Lincoln High School, Portland, OR, will have a 40-year reunion Saturday, October 31, with cocktails, dinner and dancing at the River Queen Restaurant on the Portland waterfront. Class members who have not been contacted are asked to mail their names, addresses, telephone numbers and, if applicable, maiden names to Lincoln Hi - Class of '47, P.O. Box 06247, Portland, OR 97206.



The signing of the Constitution on Sept. 17, 1787, is depicted in a 1940 Howard Chandler Christy painting located in the U.S. Capitol.

## We The Men

by David M. Maxfield  
Smithsonian News Service

"We the People"—a phrase that once really meant "We the Men"—begins the Preamble to the Constitution.

"Virtually nothing in the original constitution text and debates directly addresses the situation of women and families . . ." Sylvia A. Law, a New York University professor of law, explained at a recent Smithsonian symposium on the Constitution. At that time, the "dominant conceptions of families denied the liberty, equality and even personhood of women," she said. And so the "original intent" of the Founding Fathers "does not provide answers for today's problems." On the other hand, Law offered, the men intended the constitutional "spirit of experimentation to continue and grow."

Correspondence between John and Abigail Adams in 1776 reveals that this "deafening silence" was certainly no accident. From Braintree, Mass., on March 31, Abigail wrote John, who was serving in the Continental Congress in New York:

"I long to hear that you have declared an independency—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited powers into the hands of the Husbands."

John was not at all sympathetic: "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. . . . Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine system."

Adams' snippy response reflected the intellectual tradition of the time. The founding families were profoundly different from today's nuclear unit. Then, a woman's place was in the home. "Women were assigned, on the basis of status, to perform the essential work" of the household, from child-rearing to soap and candlemaking, Law said. The average white woman of the era bore more than seven children, black women 10 or 11.

And yet, Law told the audience, it is possible to tell another, very different, lesser-known story about families of this era. As men went off to revolutionary battle, the women assumed responsibility for maintaining home and property. They quartered soldiers and provided refuge for displaced friends and relatives.

Women also played political roles during the Revolution—boycotting British goods and sometimes physically attacking the property of merchants who stocked enemy imports. They turned in lead weights from windows to be melted down for bullets. The war also generated the nation's first women's proclamation and political organization when Benjamin Franklin's relatives petitioned door-to-door in support of the American cause. The signatures were then sent to Gen. Washington.

When active fighting subsided, women managed farms and businesses and dealt with the dangers of epidemics. Courts began to recognize married women's property interests. Both men and women were allowed greater latitude in selecting their mates.

Although women were excluded from the constitutional debates, "just as plainly, women have always played a vital role in constructing our nation," Law stated. The challenge for the coming century is "to promote the liberty and equality of all people."

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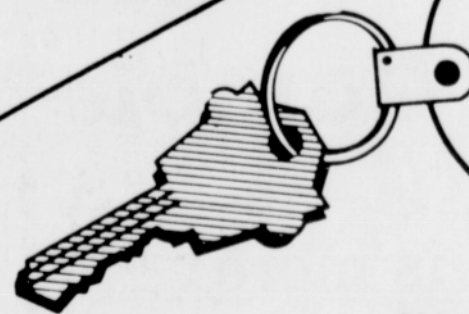
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