The Contested Commons

Archaeologies of Race, Repression, and Resistance in New York City

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They hang the man and flog the woman
Who steals the goose from off the Common;
But let the greater criminal loose
Who steals the Common from the goose.
—(Anonymous Late Medieval Folk Wisdom)

INTRODUCTION: THE COMMONS AND THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

The Commons, the area surrounding and including the present-day location of City Hall in lower Manhattan, has been an intensely contested landscape since the seventeenth century. The non-elite inhabitants of New Amsterdam, and later New York City, claimed this unappropriated land as a Commons in the traditional medieval sense, as an area where subsistence activities such as cattle grazing and firewood collection could be conducted (Thompson 1993). By the end of the seventeenth century, a portion of the Commons was being utilized as an African burial ground and ritual space. By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the colonial government was attempting (with limited success) to restrict and regulate activities on the Commons, including burials. Reactions to recent excavations within the African Burial Ground and subsequent controversies regarding the project research design demonstrate that the contestation continues unabated. This project provides an ideal opportunity to address several aspects of the archaeology of capitalism, including the social construction of racial
categories, the formulation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic historical consciousness, the essentialist/social constructionist debate, and the role of descendent communities and their allies in archaeological, historical, and bioanthropological research (for general background on the project see Cook 1993; Coughlin 1994; Dunlap 1993; Harrigton 1993; Harris et al. 1993; Howard University and John Milner Associates 1993; Jorde 1993, and Howson and Harris 1992).

After a short historical overview, this paper examines four moments of cultural contestation on the Commons: the 1712 Rising, the 1741 “Great Negro Plot,” a 1757 Pinkster Day celebration, and a 1788 petition against the desecration of the African-American graves. In each instance these historical moments are linked with aspects of recent and ongoing struggles over the excavation, analysis, preservation, and commemoration of the African Burial Ground.

In October of 1697, as construction of New York’s first Trinity Church was nearing completion at the present-day intersection of Wall Street and Broadway, the following regulation was enacted:

Ordered, That after the Expiration of four weeks from the date hereof [10/25/1697] no Negroes be buried within the bounds & Limitts of the Church Yard of Trinity Church, that is to say, in the rear of the present burying place & that no person or Negro whatsoever, do presume after the terme above Limitted to break up any ground for the burying of his Negro, as they will answer for it at their peril, & that this order be forthwith published. (Stokes 1915: 403 quoting Trinity Church mss. minutes).

Interments within the 5- to 6-acre portion of the Commons subsequently recognized as the African Burial Ground probably began soon after enactment of this regulation. It is estimated that some 10,000 to 20,000 New Yorkers of African descent were buried in this area during the eighteenth century. At least half of the present African-descent population in the United States probably has at least one ancestor buried in this area (Michael Blakey, personal communication).

The location of the separate burial ground assigned to/appropriated by the enslaved and non-enslaved African community was later described as “unattractive and desolate” (Valentine 1847: 567). The earliest known documentary reference to African burials on the Common was provided in 1713 by the Reverend John Sharp (Chaplain to her Majesties Forts and Forces in the Province of New York in America):

In Religious respects there is but little regard had to them, their marriages are performed by mutual consent without the blessing of the Church and they are buried in the Common by those of their own country and complexion without the office, on the contrary the Heathenish rites are performed at the grave by their countrymen (Sharpe 1713: 355).