

FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM:  
Archaeology of an African-American Family in Sacramento, California.

(Paper presented at 1994 Annual Meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology)

Adrian Praetzelis, Ph.D.  
Department of Anthropology  
Sonoma State University  
Rohnert Park, CA 94928

and

Mary Praetzelis, M.A.  
Anthropological Studies Center  
Sonoma State University  
Rohnert Park, CA 94928

ABSTRACT

Archaeologists have added a great deal to our understanding of the grim history of enslaved African Americans in the antebellum South. However, the story of blacks who traveled to the cities of the Far West - both free and as escaped slaves - has yet to be told. Although the advancement of African Americans in Western cities was limited by a racist structure, they nonetheless created a sophisticated and urbane culture.

The archaeological remains left by Thomas Cook and his family reflect the household members' daily lives. Cook and his eldest son were barbers; while daughter Virginia worked as a dressmaker. Archaeological evidence suggests that family members also carried on their high status occupations at home, thereby circumventing the public ban on serving both black and white clientele. A comparison of the Cook assemblage with that of a nearby white household of similar income shows similarities that mask the gulf that must have existed between these peoples' lives in early 20th century Sacramento, California. The effects of racism, as well as the family's responses to it, can be seen in the archaeological deposits created by the Cook family.

=====

Richard Jones, who was said to be over 100 years old, related this, his grandmother's, story:

Granny Judith said that in Africa they had very few pretty things, and that they had no red colors in cloth. In fact, she said they had no cloth at all. Some strangers with pale faces came one day and dropped a small piece of red flannel down on the ground. All the black folk grabbed for it. Then a larger piece was dropped a little further on, and on, until the river was reached. Then she said a large piece was dropped in the river and on the other side. They were led on, each one trying to get a piece as it was dropped. Finally, when the ship was reached, they dropped large pieces on the plank and up into the ship until they got as many blacks on board as they wanted. Then the gate was chained up and they could not get back. That is the way Granny Judith said they got her to America [Yetman 1970:192].

Later, during the decade that preceded the Civil War, 75,000 slaves escaped to freedom. Baltimore, Maryland with both an antislavery society and an auction block, was a pivotal junction on the Underground Railroad. With the help of a "conductor" or

following the path encoded in spirituals of the Underground Railroad, such as "Following the Drinking Gourd" which was a metaphoric allusion to the Big Dipper and North Star, we believe that the Cook family made their way from Maryland to Canada. Following the Civil War, Mr. and Mrs. Cook and at least two young children made the second long journey, this time to California. From 1901 to 1909, the family rented a small alley house at 1418-1/2 J Street, Sacramento. When their house was demolished in 1908, the Cooks moved a few blocks away, but not before discarding unwanted household items into their abandoned backyard privy. During archaeological testing in advance of construction in 1991 we discovered this backfilled privy, which is labeled Feature 3 on the map.

Mrs. Cook had died before the move to J Street, but four of her children lived there with their father. Thomas Cook was an independent businessman and managed a barbershop in the center of town, where his eldest son, Thomas, Jr., also worked. Daughter Virginia was a dressmaker. Two teenage sons, Clarence and Ernest, lived at home; Ernest, the youngest member of the family, attended school.

Barbers and dressmakers were the elite amongst those enslaved in the antebellum South. They worked in the main house rather than the fields or the kitchen, and were responsible for the impression the family made in public. African-American dressmakers commonly reproduced stylish European fashions for their mistresses with only a picture to guide them. This labor was highly valued and house servants were treated well in comparison with field workers. The house servants, as a class, had the easiest transition to financial independence following emancipation.

Nationwide, until the late 19th century, barbers were the most prosperous class of African Americans. However, from about 1890, competition from European immigrants and the exclusionary policies of white labor unions began to make serious inroads into the success of these independent businessmen. According to W.E.B. DuBois, the decline of barbering as an occupation for African Americans also came about because [quote] "it had so long the stigma of race attached, and nearly all barbers were Negroes, and especially because the Negro barber was compelled to draw the color-line" by not serving blacks as well as whites (DuBois 1899:10).

It is more difficult to reconstruct the successes of African-American dressmakers, who were female and usually worked in their homes or in the homes of others and, until recently, have gone unrecognized. We can point, however, to Elizabeth Keckley, an African-American dressmaker, who created Mrs. Lincoln's dress for her husband's inauguration. More recently, an African-American woman designed the gown for the wedding of Jacqueline Bouvier and John F. Kennedy.

First as house servants and later as independent barbers and dressmakers, African Americans groomed and dressed their masters and clients. They were clearly skilled in the grammar of apparenial ordering and familiar with the subtleties of style within society at large. Ironically, it was often black Americans who managed such features as skin color, hair texture, and style for members of the very group who excluded them from full participation in society because of these same characteristics.

African Americans made up about 1 percent of Sacramento's population in 1900. Within this group, barbers were the most prosperous and influential section. Although economic success was possible for some, racism permeated this business in which a black American entrepreneur, as DuBois pointed out, had to enforce the color-line in order to survive, where land ownership was discouraged, and where occupational advances were barred.

Now, in the booming economy of the early 20th century, an enormous variety of consumer goods was available to any family that could afford to purchase them. The comparison that I will present now draws upon a contemporary Irish-American

archaeological site just seven blocks away, to show the Cooks' use of the material culture of the times, their purchasing ability and strategies, and some of their consumer choices.

This comparative collection derives from the Collins family. As late as 1902, Mrs. Mary Collins, a widowed Irish woman, lived seven blocks to the west of the Cooks at 808 I Street. Her 19-year-old son, James, who worked as a carpenter, and teenaged daughter, Catherine, who went to school, also lived in the home. Like the Cooks, Mrs. Collins also rented a cottage that backed up on a wood and coal yard. The Collins house was demolished in 1905. In 1988 archaeologists excavated a refuse-filled pit beneath the rear extension of the Collins' house (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1990a).

If we take the artifacts associated with these families as being representative of the material culture present within their homes, the Cook and Collins households were very similarly appointed. Both families set their tables with popular, mass-produced ceramics decorated with a variety of designs of the types marketed by local merchants and through mail-order catalogues. Consumers of the early 20th century were faced with a dizzying number of permutations of gilded, handpainted, printed, and shape decorations. While the Cooks chose a dinner pattern similar to Glenmore Rose, the Collins' tableware included many pieces very similar to Sears, Roebucks' "high grade" dinner set with "handsome free hand finish, filled in color decoration, which we furnish in combination of green, blue, and pink,... a new, dainty, beautiful floral design" (1902:790, 2R318). The Cooks' set with its gilding would have been more expensive. A Glenmore Rose set cost \$8.45, while a free-hand colored set cost \$7.90 (Sears, Roebuck & Co. 1902:789-790). The two sets were very similar, however, with bright floral designs on relatively poor-quality white earthenware bodies.

The toys in the two households were also almost indistinguishable. The Collins' bisque porcelain doll's head (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1990a:Fig. 2c) is similar, if not identical, to the mold "390" doll discarded by the Cooks. Both doll heads were very similar to ones sold by the Sacramento mail-order and department store of Weinstock, Lubin & Co. (1891:83). Both families stocked their medicine cabinets with patent medicines from the most widely distributed and advertised brands, yet the presence of unembossed proprietary bottles suggest that they bought "store brand" concoctions more often, presumably because they cost less (e.g., Sears, Roebuck & Co. 1902:29).

The commonalities between the Cook and Collins collections are signs of the success of mass marketing. Until the 1860s and 1870s, retailers did not mark prices on their goods, which would fluctuate in cost depending upon a customer's regularity, credit worthiness, and gullibility (Carson 1954). In rural areas, where competition was limited, this system continued until the end of the century. In the cities, innovative merchants like Sacramento's David Lubin began to advertise fixed, standard prices much earlier. Lubin's "Mechanics Store" opened in 1874 and by 1891 was the "largest general retail establishment on the coast" (Weinstock, Lubin & Co. 1891). The firm's over-the-counter trade was now supplemented by a catalogue business that was said to reach over 250,000 households. The department store one-price system and mail-order marketing would have made it easier for African Americans to shop for goods that they might otherwise have been denied or overcharged for in small local marketplaces.

The Cook's disused outhouse was also a convenient receptacle for the disposal of kitchen waste, such as the 37 bullhead catfish heads that were found there. The history of the faunal remains excavated from the Collins' refuse is less clear. Both households consumed more beef than mutton or pork, and both purchased retail cuts most often in the form of steaks. Both households purchased over 50 percent of their beef cuts in the moderate price range; the Collins family bought slightly more expensive beef cuts than the Cooks (Figure 9). When viewed in terms of net meat yield per cut

(Lyman 1987; Huelsbeck 1989, 1991), however, the majority (39%) of the Cooks' cuts had low meat yield compared with 23 percent from the Collins; the majority of the Collins' cuts, 41 percent, had high meat yield in comparison with the Cooks' 23 percent with high yield (Figure 10). This may indicate that the Cooks ate less beef than the Collins family and supplemented their diet in other ways. More significantly, however, although they spent similar portions of their beef budget on moderate as opposed to expensive or cheap cuts, the two families were making different choices. In the high price range, the Collins family purchased more loin steaks, while the Cooks purchased more ribs. In the medium range, the Collins purchased round steaks and pot roasts, but chuck cuts were their most used cut. The Cooks also purchased a moderate amount of chuck, which has the highest net meat yield, but crossribs with only a moderate meat yield, was their most utilized cut. The choices may indicate ethnic preferences; ribs are a southern favorite, while the Irish historically prefer roasts and stews.

Thus it appears while both families had comparable material goods and spent their money for food in similar ways, there were differences between the meals served to the two families -- if not in the plates from which they ate.

The differences between the artifact collections of these families are relatively small in comparison with the similarities: They ate their meals from similar tableware, purchased their meat at local markets, and owned fashionable attire for special occasions. But we feel that these surface similarities mask profound differences in their lives: for although their plates were similar, the Cooks and the Collinses would not have eaten at the same table; nor would they have had the same expectations or the same opportunities. In short, archaeology tells only part of the story.

Historian Clarence Caesar has written that in the callous indifference of its population toward the African-American community, [quote] "Sacramento was a true reflection of the racial attitudes prevalent throughout America at the turn of the century" (Caesar 1985:97). Although segregation in housing, education, and employment was no longer upheld by law, it continued on the basis of "an understanding" of the social and economic "place" of black Americans and other non-white minorities (Caesar 1985:97). African Americans were systematically excluded from housing, employment, and education, as well as many public places.

Sacramento's African-American community lead the struggle for basic civil rights at the Colored Conventions of the 1850s and 1860s. Once these rights had been established by law, the focus for activism became less clear and the struggle less intense. According to Clarence Caesar, In 1910, the black community of Sacramento was in many ways an invisible one, he writes. No real political waves were made during these years because the small population was simply too vulnerable to the economic whims and woes of the white majority. A black man who raised and supported his family doing menial but honorable work was considered somewhat of a success. To rock the boat politically was a risky proposition at best. Discrimination in public places was bad enough, but to challenge the system head on was folly in the racist atmosphere of pre-World War I America. It was best to follow the line that Booker T. Washington expounded at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895 [1985:111].

Washington's address in Atlanta set the national African-American agenda for decades; the tone was accommodating and the spirit optimistic. Washington (1900:217,221) desired to "cement the friendship of the races and bring about hearty cooperation between them," "to make the interests of both races one." Washington firmly believed that if African Americans worked hard to better themselves, equal rights would follow: "No race" he said, "that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized" (1900:223). The battle for social equality would

be won by long and constant struggle, not by agitation or force. "The opportunity" said Washington, "to earn a dollar in a factory" was worth infinitely more than the "opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house" (Washington 1900:224). Washington's speech was acclaimed nationwide, although some African-American newspapers felt it was too generous to the southern whites and too soft on civil rights.

Black Sacramentans seem to have accepted Washington's prescription for the times (Caesar 1985:111). But while they gained some material rewards for their hard work, African Americans were ignored by, rather than accepted into, the wider community.

We can read the effects of racism, as well as one household's responses to it, in the history and archaeology of the Cook family. In early 20th century Sacramento, with its small African-American community, even black-owned barbershops could not serve black customers. Like most barbers at this time, Thomas Cook's shop was small with his son as his only co-worker. The discovery of 40 Vaseline jars among the family's refuse suggests that Cook and his son engaged in barbering at home, perhaps on Sunday afternoons when their shop was closed by City ordinance (Ulhorn 1873:102). Vaseline was a relatively inexpensive hair jell with which to create the short cropped, slicked-down hair styles popular at the time. Given that Cook could not have served blacks in his shop and survived as a business, his home customers were probably African Americans who could not be accommodated during normal business hours.

Hair had special significance at this time. Hair type had been used to identify an individual's African origin for the purposes of legal discrimination. In a case that was far from unique, the testimony of a black man who wished to give evidence against a white charged with killing a prominent black barber in San Francisco was ruled inadmissible because the witness was deemed to be one-eighth African by a supposed "expert" on the basis of the man's hair and nails (Daniels 1990:129).

Turn of the century photographs show African-American men with short cropped hair, parted in the center or on the side, and with the distinctive sheen produced by hair preparations. To maintain this style required frequent attention from a barber, such as Thomas Cook.

The presence of an apothecary scale weight and numerous generic homeopathic medicine bottles and vials suggest that the barbers may have been preparing medications for their clients as well. Although strongly disapproved of by the medical profession, barbers were still advertising their expertise at "cupping and leaching" in the 1890s (Pitti 1980:24). Curing without the benefit of a physician was common during this period. African Americans, who did not have had equal access to conventional medical care may have looked to barbers, as traditional practitioners and community leaders, for their attention. Archaeological deposits from the 1860s associated with two African-American Sacramento barbers -- including Isaiah Dunlap -- contained many proprietary medicine bottles, homeopathic vials, and syringes (Praetzellis et al. 1980:128).

African-American dressmakers also worked for a white clientele. It seems likely that the seven dolls found among the Cook's refuse are associated with this activity as either teaching or display aids or both. The 1893 Youth's Companion advertised a doll very similar to those found with "sleeping" eyes. This doll came without clothes:

We think it better to furnish a fine doll and let her new little mother have the pleasure of fitting her out.... By means of our directions any little girl can soon make up an extensive and handsome wardrobe for her doll. In addition, she gains a pretty good idea of the art of dressmaking [Coleman et al. 1965].

Virginia Cook, the dressmaker, may have been teaching her trade to young girls in her care. Although the census does not list any females in the household besides Virginia, the presence of numerous fasteners for feminine attire, two toy wash tubs, and toy tea sets suggests otherwise. The dolls, once dressed, could have displayed and advertised the dressmaker's ability. Fashion dolls with adult features were commonly used to create and market stylish women's apparel. The dolls in the Cook collection have idealized children's faces reflecting the preferences of the times and the importance of children to the "cult of domesticity." Although one could purchase dolls with various ethnic and racial features, the dolls in the Cook household reflected work, we feel, not play. The "390" model displayed by Virginia Cook was available in tinted skin colors, dressed as black American or Chinese children (King 1977:90). Virginia Cook likely tailored garments for white women and children; these finely dressed, idealized, sweet-faced, blue-eyed, light-skinned dolls would have reproduced and reinforced this worker-client relationship.

Having been prevented from learning to read and write during enslavement, often on pain of death, African Americans placed a high value on education. Although the California State Supreme Court ended the official segregation of public schools in 1877, Sacramento continued to segregate well into the 1880s (SAAHCS 1990:9, 20). The ungraded segregated school on 5th and O streets constructed in 1856 was integrated by the middle 1890s (Sacramento Observer November 1973:LL-29). The importance of literacy to the Cook family is shown by the numerous writing associated artifacts found among their discards and by the continued school attendance of youngest son Ernest at age 15, in an era when most youths of all races were out at work. Although it eventually became more difficult for racist practices to stop African-American children from getting an education, discriminatory hiring practices prevented many people from attaining the types of employment for which they had been prepared. Despite his education, Ernest Cook was an unemployed laborer in 1910.

Following nearly three decades of active civil-rights agitation, with numerous successes in the legislative and judicial fronts, the African-American community of Sacramento focused on improving their condition by following the model of Booker T. Washington and other leaders. They concentrated on working hard in whatever positions could be obtained, emphasizing education for their children, and elevating themselves as a group. According to Washington's doctrine, social equality would surely follow from perseverance. But here as elsewhere, racist attitudes were not swayed. African Americans reaped some material rewards for their work, but social equality remained distant. The early leaders had miscalculated the tenacity of racism.

The Cook family members are good representatives of this "settled" period in black history. They worked hard, but never owned their own home. Their dwelling was comfortable and decorated with popular knick-knacks, but didn't have indoor plumbing. Although their avenues for advancement were blocked, education was a high priority. There is very little recorded in historical documents about the Cook family and their life. But the archaeological record hints at the importance of family and community, and an everyday variety of heroism.