"WE WERE THERE, TOO":
ARCHAEOLOGY OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY
IN SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Cook and his wife escaped slavery by taking the Underground Railroad to Canada prior to the Civil War. In the early 1870s, the family pursued visions of a better life to California, eventually settling in Sacramento. In 1901 the Cook family lived on the alley at 1418-1/2 J Street; Thomas Cook and one son worked as barbers; a daughter worked as a dressmaker. Ninety years later, prior to the construction of an addition to the City’s Community/Convention Center, personnel of the Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University, excavated a privy filled with artifacts associated with the Cooks. This monograph presents all of the historical, archaeological, artifactual, and contextual information connected with this site, which is one of the first urban African-American sites excavated in California, if not in the western states generally. The goal of this report is to present the data as a comparative collection. The authors plan to publish further analyses of the Cook site in the future and welcome comments and suggestions on the avenues for this research.

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 the urban West 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. Archaeological evidence suggests that family members carried on their high status occupations at home during off hours, 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 shows similarities that mask the gulf that must have existed between these peoples’ lives in early 20th-century Sacramento. The effects of racism, as well as the family’s responses to it, can be seen in the archaeological remains left by the Thomas Cook family.
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James Faber of the Facilities Management Department coordinated our work with the demolition contractor and graciously extended the deadline when illness prevented us from completing the report on schedule.

To all who assisted, our thanks. To any we may have forgotten, our apologies. Any mistakes are our own.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

We have the record of kings and gentlemen ad nauseam and in stupid detail; but of the common run of human beings, and particularly of the half or wholly submerged working group, the world has saved all too little of authentic record and tried to forget or ignore even the little saved. W.E.B. DuBois

This report is one of three that describe the results of a program of archaeological excavation and historical research undertaken on the city block JK/14-15 in Sacramento, California (Map 1). The work was sponsored by the City of Sacramento in advance of the construction of an annex to the City Community/Convention Center. This report presents the results of the investigation of Feature 3, a backfilled privy behind the alley residence of the Cooks, an African-American family who lived at 1418-1/2 J Street in the early 20th century. The second report examines a small trash pit associated with the backyard chicken-raising endeavors of the Newman family, who lived at 1423 K Street (M. Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1992a). The third report describes the excavation of a low-lying area beneath the residence of Mrs. Hudson at 1408 J Street (M. Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1992b).

PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

During the past 25 years, Sacramento has been the scene of numerous large-scale archaeological excavations. Early archaeological investigations, in 1966, concentrated on Sacramento’s embarcadero and the associated commercial district in connection with the construction of Interstate 5 (Hastings 1968). This research focused on architectural reconstruction and recovery of artifact-rich deposits that were the result of city-wide fires in the early 1850s. From 1968 to 1978, the California Department of Parks and Recreation sponsored an intensive series of investigations on a half-block portion of Old Sacramento State Historic Park, just one block from the waterfront. Once again, architectural reconstruction was the principal rationale for this work, much of which -- although not all (e.g., Butler 1979; Pritchard 1972) -- was done using the arbitrary unit/10-cm level method devised for unstratified prehistoric sites.

Beginning in 1976, archaeological efforts shifted away from "Old Sacramento" and the embarcadero district with the excavation of the Hannon Saloon deposits at 4th and K streets (Schulz 1977) and the Sonoma State University Anthropological Studies Center investigations described below. These later investigations emphasized the stratigraphic excavation of discrete archaeological features that could be associated with documented activities and social units. All of these investigations were the result of government regulations that required the mitigation of impacts to historic archaeological sites prior to development.

The investigation of the Convention Center parcel is the fourth major archaeological examination of Sacramento’s historic period carried out by Sonoma State University’s Anthropological Studies Center (ASC). The first focused on a portion of the JK67 block in 1979 (Praetzellis, Praetzellis, and Brown 1980). This location was known as the Golden Eagle site for a hotel of the same name that had once stood there. In 1981 the ASC excavated portions of the city block bounded by IJ56 streets. Focusing on the center of Sacramento’s historic Chinese district, the IJ56 investigation produced a wealth of information about this ethnic enclave in the 1850s (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1982).
In 1988 work on the IJ89 Block, also known as the Library Plaza Block, yielded more than 60 discrete archaeological contexts -- both features and layers -- and more than 140 archive boxes of artifacts, containing literally hundreds of thousands of individual items. The features excavated during these investigations represented four themes, thus four monographs constituted the technical report on the investigations. These monographs presented the results of the investigation of the cellar of a rental cottage at 808 1 Street, filled in approximately 1905 (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1990a), and the backlot of the nearby San Fong Chong Laundry at 814 1 Street (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1990b). Other volumes reported on stratified deposits associated with a series of early merchants residing at 803 J Street and a contemporary baker at 823 J Street (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1990c), and the Pioneer Junk Store at 805 J Street (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1990d). These monographs were published as a series and are available at cost.

Households and businesses associated with individuals of divergent ethnic backgrounds have been studied in the archaeological work in Sacramento. These include the aforementioned Chinese merchants on the IJ56 block (see also, Praetzellis et al. 1987), Chinese laundrmen at 814 1 Street, a Prussian Jewish junk dealer at 805 J, German bakers at 823 J, and African-American barbers at the Golden Eagle Hotel site. Much of ASC's work in Sacramento has been recently synthesized by Adrian Praetzellis (1991a) in *The Archaeology of a Victorian City* and elsewhere (A. Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1992).

**PROJECT HISTORY**

The archaeological investigation of the JK/14-15 block resulted from the environmental review mandated by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and in compliance with the mitigation measures specified in the Environmental Impact Report (City of Sacramento 1988).

Prior to field testing, an archaeological research design and a testing strategy were prepared (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1991a). As there was no evidence of prehistoric occupation on the project site, the research design concentrated on resources of the historic period.

The occupancy history of the study area was reconstructed using official City records, census schedules, directories, historic maps, and other sources. The information potential of the various parcels was determined by assessing their potential contribution to research issues in the areas of consumerism, urban households, urban geography, and ethnicity, as well as their potential for public interpretation (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1991a:12-14). Next the archaeological (survival) potential of each parcel was assessed. Following the procedures established by Schulz (1979a), test excavations were recommended for parcels where high research potential coincided with high archaeological potential.

In this first phase of investigation, test trenches were positioned according to the criteria of archaeological sensitivity and research potential outlined in the project research design and testing strategy. For the sake of cost-efficiency, ground truthing and evaluation were accomplished in a single phase using criteria established in the research design.

The testing was carried out on May 1 and 2, and September 3 and 4, 1991. Test excavation was done with the aid of a John Deere 410 hydraulic backhoe-loader with a 36-inch bucket. The object of testing was to expose previous ground surfaces (interfaces) in plan view. Features discovered in this way were to be minimally examined for integrity, structure, content, and date of deposition.
A total of approximately 15,000 square feet (1385 square meters) was mechanically stripped. From 6 to 24 inches (15 to 61 centimeters) of soil was removed. The entire project area was found to contain a scattering of historic-period and modern artifacts dating from the middle of the 19th to the late 20th centuries. In accordance with the project research design, these materials were not considered legally important since they had very poor archaeological "focus" (Deetz 1977:94): that is, the behaviors that resulted in the creation of these patterns of materials could not be reliably deciphered. In addition, since artifacts with a wide range of dates all appeared on the same period interface; it would not have been possible to derive either behavioral associations among artifacts or true historical associations between assemblages and the actual inhabitants of the parcel in times past.

Seven archaeological features were found (Map 2). Four of these, Features A (a shallow, truncated pit), B (a lens of artifacts in sandy soil), C (disturbed layer with some 19th-century artifacts), and D (backfilled privy), were examined at the time of discovery and determined not to be legally important under the criteria established in the research design. The three remaining phenomena, Area 1 and Features 2 and 3, were determined to be sufficiently important to require more study (Praetzellis 1991b).

Feature 3, the subject of this report, was a square, wood-lined pit containing a large quantity of artifacts, including whole and fragmentary bottles, white improved and transfer-printed ceramics, much food bone, and ferrous metal. Leading into the pit was a narrow trench-like feature. Feature 3 appeared to have been backfilled in the late 19th century. The quantity and range of artifacts contained in the feature and its sealed context and unimpaired integrity made this a legally important resource with the potential to address many of the issues identified in the project research design. At the conclusion of this phase, the archaeological deposits were covered with woven plastic fabric and the trench backfilled with soil. Feature 3 was excavated on September 11 through 13, 1991, by Adrian Praetzellis, Field Director, and Susan Alvarez, Field Assistant.

Goals

When Feature 3 was discovered during field testing, a decision had to be made regarding its importance under CEQA guidelines. The feature appeared to lack the necessary antiquity suggested by CEQA, being less than 100 years old, but contained the focus, range, and quantity of artifacts necessary to provide information useful in addressing research questions of demonstrable public and scientific interest. Despite considerable prefield research, no residents had been associated with the property. The property's association with turn-of-the-century alley dwellers, it was felt, gave it considerable importance, as little is known about the way of life of these urbanites whose presence is dim in pictorial and historical records. Researchers eventually discovered the identity of the residents at 1418-1/2 J Street through painstaking city directory work, and the uniqueness of deposit became evident. As one of the first artifact assemblages excavated from an African-American site in the West, the importance of the Cook collection is very clear.

The archaeological, artifactual, and historical data are presented in Chapter 2 in such a way that they may be used and interpreted by other researchers. Interpretive approaches that may be productively applied to this collection are introduced in Chapter 3. These analyses are preliminary. Further development is beyond the scope of the present project, which did not anticipate a discovery of this research significance. The authors, however, plan to pursue their study of the Cook site in future publications and presentations, including some intended for the African-American community.
Further research directions might include documentary and oral historical research into food ways, the mechanisms by which racism operated, and the modes of resistance to it. With a greater understanding of the site's context, the assemblage could then be compared to other urban sites (as yet unexcavated) in the West, urban sites within the more crowded and populous African-American communities of the East and South, and rural sites wherever they may be found. Only then could patterns within the archaeological record be associated with region, ethnicity, or place within the rural-urban continuum.

Archaeologists have been admonished to take stock of their social responsibility to the people whose history they are reconstructing. This is particularly true on African-American sites, where racism undeniably structured many of the events and processes that occurred there. To focus solely on material remains in a context that takes racism for granted, or ignores the condition altogether, negates the experience of African Americans, past and present. Parker Potter (1991) criticizes archaeologists for a lack of self-reflection regarding their own constructs and conclusions, and how these may be used to promote social agendas at odds with those of the groups being studied. He challenges archaeologists to involve African Americans in framing their research questions and to give the African-American community historical knowledge that they can use as a basis for future action (Potter 1991:101). The history of the project, outlined above, limited the involvement of the Sacramento African-American community in our work. Nevertheless, we believe that this report and subsequent products will fulfill both of Potter's suggestions.

The Sacramento African American Historical and Cultural Society (SAAHCS) organized recently with the following statement of goals: "We are concerned about the absence of our story in local historical celebrations. We were tired of our children being deprived of the knowledge about our local history... We wanted Sacramento, our home, to know more about the major discoveries and contributions made by our forefathers, not only in Sacramento, but throughout the world" (Woods 1990). Recently, archaeologists working on an African-American site in Annapolis, Maryland, have used their on-site interpretive program to query African-American visitors for feedback on the research goals. The questions, which could be asked of any African-American site, included: "How were people living in this neighborhood part of the broader community in the late 1800s and the early 1900s?"; "To what degree did they participate in the local market economy?"; "Were free African Americans somehow limited in the ways they could participate and, if so, to what degree were they able to free themselves from those social and economic processes?" Positive visitor response provided evidence that these were considered socially relevant questions, of interest to the community (Logan 1992:11). African Americans from Sacramento, as well as from Annapolis or any other community, can see in the Cook site the successful struggles of their forefathers against and within the bonds perpetuated by racist policies and practices - policies and practices that can be traced to the present, unmasked, and challenged.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At the opening of the 19th century, Sacramento's aboriginal inhabitants, the Nisenan, still lived relatively unmolested by foreign encroachment, hunting and gathering from the land's abundant resources, as they had done throughout their history. The Nisenan way of life was abruptly transformed when John Sutter, a German-Swiss adventurer, arrived with his followers in 1839 to establish New Helvetia.

Sutter received legal title from the Mexican government to 11 square leagues of land and established a cattle ranch and farm that he ran in quiet obscurity as a feudal estate using Native American labor. Then, on 24 January 1848, while digging a tailrace for Sutter’s mill, James Marshall discovered gold on the American River. The news spread quickly, and by June, San Francisco stood deserted "as if an epidemic has swept the little town away"
(Bancroft 1888:59). Rumors of the great riches to be found in California caused little excitement on the East Coast, until the end of September and the publication of a number of fanciful and exaggerated articles on wealth being plucked from the ground. When a box filled with California gold dust was placed on exhibition at the War Office in Washington, D.C., many Easterners turned westward, resolved to make their fortunes. Sutter’s personal domain was trampled in the ensuing stampede.

Bancroft described the diversity of California society during the Gold Rush as "a gathering without parallel in history," "a Babylonian confusion of tongues" made up of a "medley of races and nationalities" (1888:221). The Americans formed the dominant group among this colorful array. Many of the foreign sojourners who arrived after the depletion of the "easy gold" went home empty-handed, for as it became evident that there was not enough gold for everyone, foreigners were discouraged from mining by both legal and illegal means.

Economic disappointment caused the first wave of anti-foreign agitation in the mining districts. This was directed against the Sonorans from northern Mexico and the Chileans, whose prior experience and greater skill at mining provoked jealousy among the uninitiated Americans. These miners successfully lobbied for a tax on foreign miners, which was passed in April by the State legislature in the form of a $10 monthly license fee. This excessive levy was repealed in 1851; by that time, the tax, in combination with threats and acts of violence, had caused the outmigration of many Latin-American miners. In 1852 the entrance of large numbers of Chinese miners into an already declining river-mining economy encouraged the legislature to pass a second Foreign Miners’ Tax, this time at a reduced rate of $3 a month, raised to $4 in 1853 (Bancroft 1888:404-406). Tax collectors traveled throughout the mining districts. This informal manner of collection led to an organized system of extortion, where "carpet baggers" toured an area impersonating the government official and collected money on their own behalf, issuing fraudulent receipts (Meek 1926:162). Contrary to popular opinion, the tax was not collected only from Chinese; tax collectors got their fee wherever they could: from Chinese, Mexicans, Frenchmen, Italians, and Portuguese, as well as African Americans, who were classed as non-citizens (Wheat 1929).

Thus, competition for mineral deposits and later for profitable employment expressed itself in racist policies and practices -- legal, illegal, and extralegal -- carried out by the white dominated power structure against all people of color (Latin Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans). The black population of California was numerically small in comparison to those of the other affected groups, increasing from around 1,000 in 1850 to 4,000 in 1860. As the overseas Chinese population grew from 10,000 to 47,000 during the same period, this group suffered the brunt of racist attacks designed to protect white labor from competition with "inferior races" (Heizer and Almquist 1971:120).

Although California had been admitted to the Union as a "free state" in 1850, and any slave brought into California should have been free, the legal status of African Americans was insecure. The California legislature passed a Fugitive Slave Act in April 1852, which was quickly tested and declared constitutional by the courts. The temporary residence of a slave in free territory was ruled to have no effect on the legality of the slave’s servitude. Likewise, as California had not emancipated slaves upon achieving statehood, the masters of those slaves were said to have had a right to their services. The fact that the state constitution prohibited slavery was not considered. The last fugitive slave case was tried unsuccessfully in 1858, when a federal court in San Francisco ruled that Archy Lee was a free man and could not be forced to return enslaved to Mississippi. Only with the arrival of the Civil War did African Americans obtain the right to testify in cases involving whites (Heizer and Almquist 1971:122-128).
From 1848 Sacramento grew and prospered as the gateway to the goldfields of the northern Sierra Nevada and soon became a center of African-American population in the state. The trail to Sutter’s Fort became J Street, the town’s main thoroughfare and center of trade, branching at the end of town into many roads to the mines. Before taking a crossroad, miners purchased supplies at general merchandise and specialty shops and found temporary lodging, food, and amusement in the many hotels, gambling halls, and saloons flanking J Street.

One block north, I Street served the same supply and service function for prospective Chinese miners and residents. In the 1850s numerous Chinese stores, gaming houses, and lodgings were located on I Street between 2nd and 6th streets. Bordering the slough on the north side of town and site of the 1852 levee (Brienes 1979:7), I Street was a less desirable neighborhood during Sacramento’s early period. Later, as Sacramentans raised the city streets to prevent further flooding, I Street frontage increased in value as property suitable for businesses that required space for storage and heavy traffic. With this increase in value of real estate, the Chinese section of Sacramento became smaller and more compact, located between the "China (formerly Sutter) Slough" and I Street from 5th to 2nd streets (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1982:21-22).

In contrast to the concentrated Chinese settlement pattern, the residences of African Americans seem to have been distributed throughout Sacramento (Brienes, West & Schulz 1981:37, Fig. 7). A similar pattern has also been observed in San Francisco where, prior to World War II, African-American inhabitants were "to some degree lost in the city’s population complex" (Daniels 1990:99). In contrast with the more recent past when African-American newcomers arrived en masse during the 1940s and settled in specific neighborhoods, those who migrated to the city individually or as families during the 19th century spread throughout Sacramento and San Francisco.

There is some evidence for a pattern of African-American residence along the city’s alleys, which was frequently the case in other urban centers (Borchert 1980). It may be that ethnic patterning in Sacramento operated on a scale smaller than the multi-block neighborhood. On the half block bounded by 6th, N, and 7th streets, for example, African-American families and individuals settled on 6th Street; Jewish families of eastern and central European descent settled on 7th Street; affluent professionals constructed large residences in the center of N Street; while renters resided in cottages and less substantial dwellings on either end of the street (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1991b). In 19th-century Sacramento, lettered streets seem to have been the most desirable addresses, followed by numbered streets, with alley addresses clearly indicating low status.

Sacramento African Americans founded churches, schools, benevolent societies, and other social organizations from the 1850s onwards. Established in 1850, St. Andrew’s A. M. E. Church constructed its own building at 7th between G and H streets in 1852; Shiloh (Silsoam) Baptist Church was founded in 1856, and the congregation purchased their own building on 5th between M and N streets three years later (Caesar 1985:37). For many years African-American children were excluded from public schools. Elizabeth Thorn Scott taught the first class of 14 African-American children in the basement of St. Andrew’s in 1854. The following year, the Sacramento County Board of Education provided a small stipend for the construction of a school building and its maintenance. Although official segregation of California schools was disallowed in 1877, integration of the school system moved slowly, and many African-American children attended segregated ungraded schools well into the 1880s (SAAHCS 1990:9).

St. Andrew’s served as the center of African-American political life throughout California. The Colored Conventions of 1855, 1856, and 1865 were held here to set the African-American political agenda in the struggle for civil rights (SAAHCS 1990:7-8). Many
black Americans who came to California as slaves had been able to purchase their freedom with gold-mining earnings. These people went on to secure the freedom of others brought into the state as slaves: An 1852 Sacramento newspaper advertisement offered a "Negro Man" for $300 at auction or for $100 to any of his "abilitation brethren" who sought the opportunity to release "said Negro from bondage" (Heizer and Almquist 1971:125, citing Democratic State Journal: June 1852).

The characteristics and experiences of the urban African-American communities of Sacramento and San Francisco differed from those of the ghetto dwellers of eastern cities and the tenant farmers of the rural South. Until the 1940s, the black communities of these two cities were small and made up primarily of service workers. There were few professionals or businessmen/women and few laborers, skilled or unskilled (Caesar 1985:100-110; Daniels 1990:xvii, 17). There was no real professional class here as in the Northeast and South, where African-American colleges and universities provided training (Caesar 1985:100). Throughout this period, urban African Americans in northern California worked as expressmen, porters, cooks, domestic servants, janitors, barbers, and construction workers.

In 1860, 155 African Americans lived in Sacramento, constituting approximately 1 percent of the population. By 1900 the relative number of this group had declined to 402, less than 1 percent. Following the completion of the railroads in the 1880s and the tarnishing of the Gold Rush luster, southern California became the most popular destination for African Americans relocating from elsewhere in the United States (Caesar 1985:74, 96). Racist union policies also discouraged African Americans from relocating to urban centers in northern California, where the small number of black Americans lacked the power and influence to promote change.

Clarence Caesar (1985:91) has characterized the decades between 1880 and 1940 within Sacramento's black history as "the settled community," noting a lack of growth and a period of stabilization. The level of political and social activism dropped off considerably from previous decades when civil rights victories had been won. Racism retreated into more subtle domains, harder to confront by the small black community faced with the indifference of the majority. Where in the South, racist doctrine was upheld by Jim Crow laws and terrorist activities, in the West it was supported by an "understanding" of the economic and social "place" of minorities (Caesar 1985:97-99). This understanding delayed further civil rights advances for decades in cities such as Sacramento and San Francisco.

Despite racism and prejudice, the African Americans who settled and found their niche within these northern California urban centers were often quite successful financially. Wages were higher here, prices were lower, fortunes could be made and lost. These "pioneer urbanites" developed a rich social and cultural world for their family and friends (Daniels 1990). Only one generation removed from the specter of enslavement, within the all-pervasive influence of racism, African Americans competed successfully within the arena where it was "understood" that they might operate.