

Acculturation in an Urban Setting

The Archaeology of a Black Philadelphia Cemetery

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Archaeologists have traditionally been interested in the excavation of cemeteries, an interest spurred by the rich grave goods found in many burial sites. Grave goods represent an expression of the feelings of the living at the time of death, and also the burial customs prevalent in a particular society. Interpretation of the significance of burial offerings and customs may give an insight into the beliefs and world views of a society. The First African Baptist Church Cemetery site in Philadelphia, dating to the first half of the 19th century, afforded an opportunity to study these factors and the question of acculturation among urban free blacks.

Historical Background

The cemetery was first discovered by archaeologists from John Milner Associates, who were monitoring excavation work being carried out for the construction of a commuter tunnel in center city Philadelphia in November 1980. When the end of a wooden coffin was exposed by an earth-moving machine, the site was sealed over with concrete to prevent looting and further damage to the burial. Subsequent historical research established that the site had been used as a burial ground by a black church from 1824 until



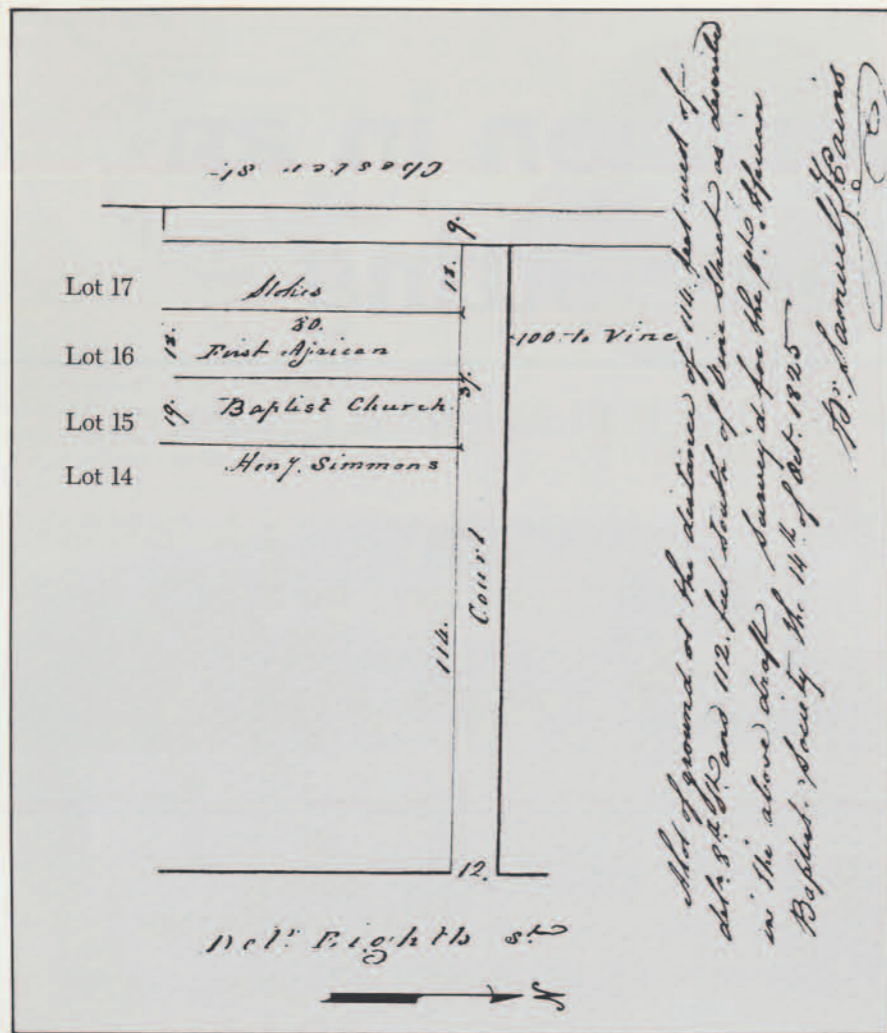
1
View of Gradall being used to clear the site.

1842. Research into Board of Health records revealed the names of over 70 individuals who were interred at the burial ground, which was associated with the First African Baptist Church, a group formed in 1809. There were many gaps in this information, however, as the Board of Health death records for this period are fragmentary and incomplete.

After the initial historical research was completed the cemetery site was declared eligible to the National Register of Historic Places. As such, this determination afforded the site legal protection from any damage or destruction caused by federally funded redevelopment. When it became apparent, in 1982, that proposed improve-

ments to the Vine Street Expressway and a proposal to build a high-rise office building would destroy the burial ground, it became necessary to excavate the site to prevent its destruction without an adequate record being made. The owners of the property, the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia, entered into a contract with John Milner Associates to carry out this work. Funding for the project was provided by the Redevelopment Authority, the Federal Highway Administration, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, the William Penn Foundation and the Barra Foundation.

On most sites, because of time or financial restraints it is only possible to excavate a sample of the ar-



2
Location of the First African Baptist Church in 1825. Redrawn from deed map in Philadelphia City Archives, 3rd Survey District, MS. Survey p. 22, 14th October 1825.

archaeological deposits. At the First African Baptist Church site, however, because of the sensitive nature of the archaeological deposits, i.e., human burials, it was necessary to excavate the site completely and to remove all of the burials. In order to carry out this task efficiently, historical research was needed in order to pinpoint the location and parameters of the cemetery. A deed survey of 1825 is the first document to show a clear association between the First African Baptist Church and the Eighth and Vine Streets site (Fig. 2). This map shows the church located on two lots (lots 15 and 16), with Henry Simmons, who was the pastor of the church, in possession of the

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property to the east (lot 17). Thirty-five years later, in 1860, the Hexamer and Locher map of Philadelphia shows no trace of the First African Baptist Church. The eastern of their two former lots is occupied by a safe factory, and the western lot has become the back yards of houses that front onto Chester Street (Fig. 3).

This cartographic evidence showed clearly the location of the church property and its subsequent use as a safe factory. Over the course of a century and a half, however, modifications were made to the location of features such as

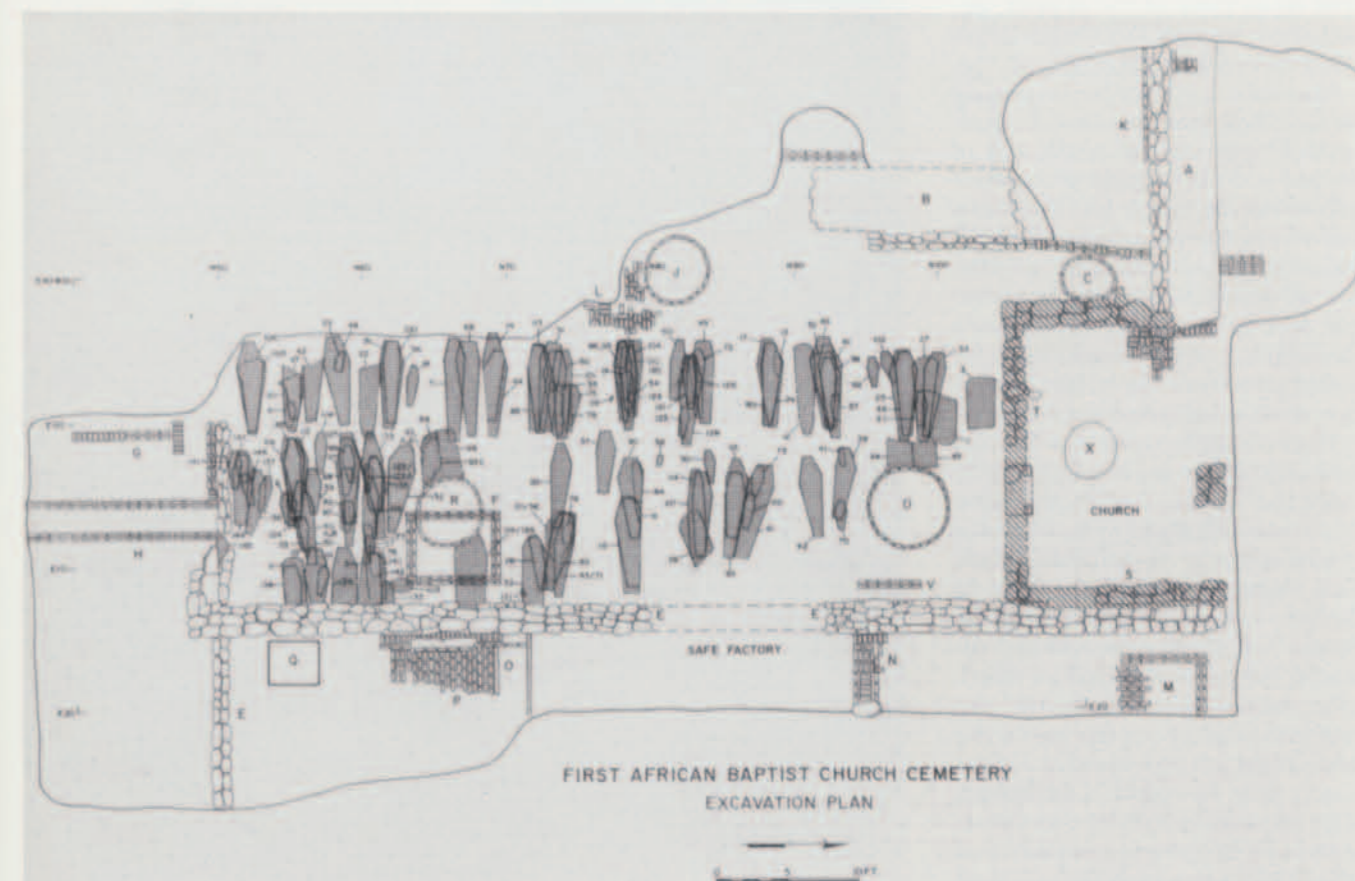
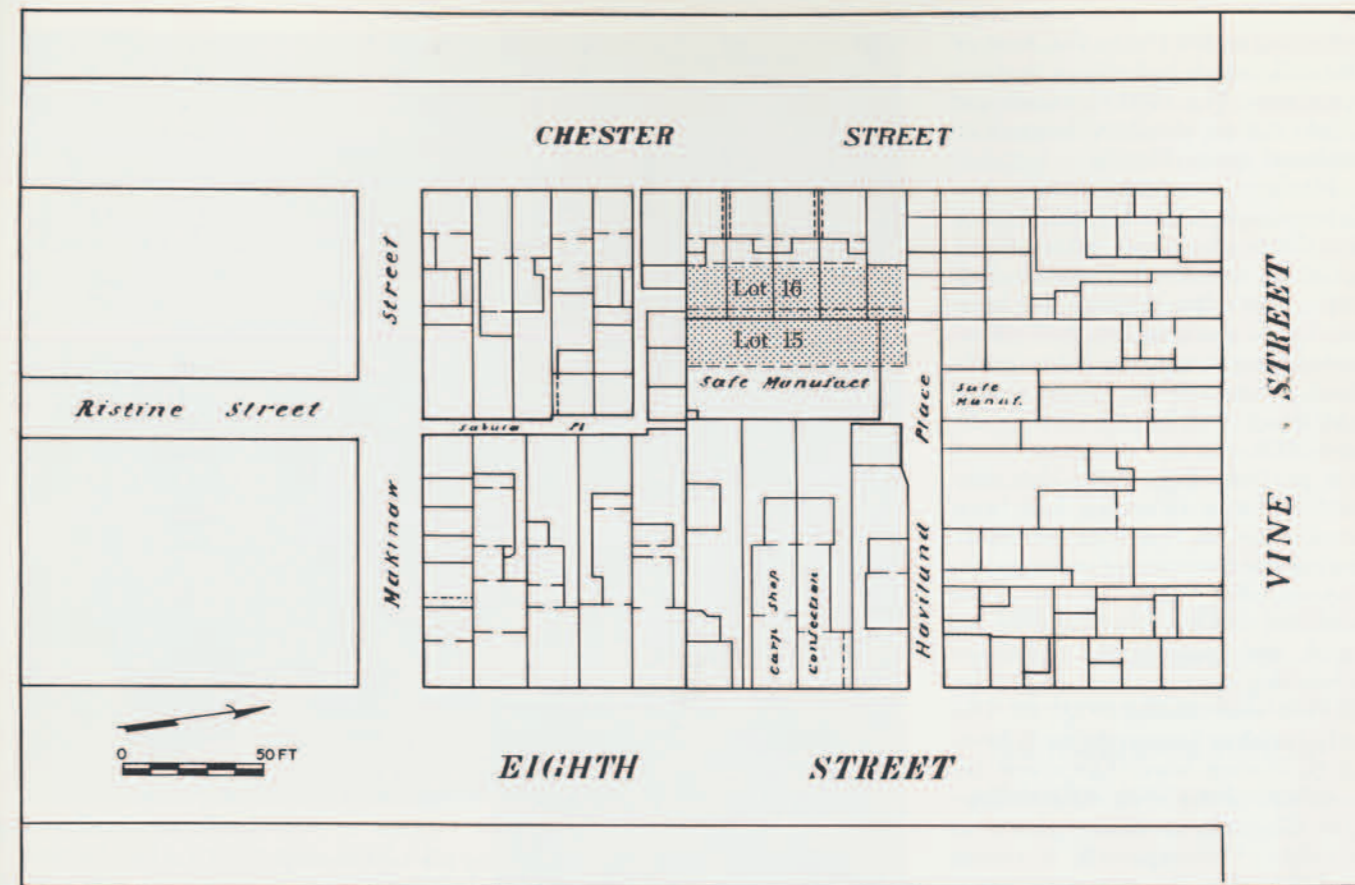
streets, and it was difficult to relate the position of historic sites to the cartographic evidence. This was the case at Eighth and Vine Streets, where the entire area had been disrupted successively by the laying out of Ridge Avenue, the widening of Vine Street, and more recently the work of building the commuter tunnel. While the approximate location of the cemetery was indicated by the burial found in 1980, there was no way of knowing how much of the burial ground had been disturbed by the construction work for the tunnel, and by the various construction-related activities that had taken place there since it ceased to be used as a cemetery in the 1840s.

Excavating the Site

In order to define the extent of the cemetery it was necessary to relocate some of the later historic features of the area. Using heavy machinery to strip off the blacktop which covered the site and to remove the layers of fill beneath (Fig. 1), a substantial stone wall aligned north-south was uncovered. The location of this wall coincided with the postulated position of the west wall of the safe factory. The discovery of this wall provided the datum point that enabled the precise location of the lots occupied by the First African Baptist Church to be determined. Comparison of the west wall of the safe factory was aligned along the boundary between the two lots occupied by the First African Baptist Church.

Further machine excavations demonstrated that the area to the east of the wall was the basement of the structure, and it had been deeply disturbed. No burials had survived in this area, if indeed any had ever been made there. The presence of the basement did, however, prove that the wall was the west wall of the building and there was a good possibility of burials

3
First African Baptist Church site in 1860. Redrawn from Hexamer, Ernest and William Locher "Map of the City of Philadelphia" (1860) Vol. 2, Plate 15, published by the Surveyors, Philadelphia, PA.



4
Plan of the excavated site.

surviving in lot 16, to the west of the wall, which had always been an open area. The 1860 Hexamer and Locher map shows this area as backyard space (Fig. 3).

Machine excavations in what was determined to be lot 16 showed that the northern part of the lot was relatively disturbed. Concrete bollards, from when the area had been used as a parking lot, had penetrated three feet or so below grade level. There was also a great deal of building rubble mixed with mid-19th century ceramics over this portion of the site. This suggested that a structure had been demolished in this area, probably during the time period indicated by the ceramics. When the rest of the building rubble was cleared by hand, the remains of a structure measuring approximately 15 feet by 20 feet were found (Fig. 4). The only building known to have been in this area was that used by members of the First African Baptist Church as their place of worship. Consequently it seems probable that the remains uncovered were those of the church, demolished in the 1850s when the safe factory was built.

Machine excavations revealed further structural remains that effectively defined the south end of the lot, and the portion of the west side of the lot which had been disturbed by the tunnel cut. The remains of some disturbed burials, one of which was only one-and-a-half feet below grade level, were also found. At this stage machine excavations were halted and all further work was carried out by hand.

These burials were the first of over 140 which were subsequently excavated on the site, many more than were indicated by the Board of Health records. Some of them had been disturbed when the wall of the safe factory was built (Fig. 5). Others had been removed and reburied when three privies were constructed on the site in the mid-19th century for the use of the inhabitants of the Chester Street houses (Fig. 6). A few of the burials had suffered because of their proximity to the ground surface, and others had been partially removed when the tunnel cut was excavated along the west side of the cemetery.



5
Burial disturbed by the construction of the safe factory.



6
Burial disturbed by the construction of a mid-19th century privy.



7
Excavation of a burial.

The majority, however, were reasonably intact, although the friable condition of the bones in many cases made excavation difficult (Fig. 7).

Other problems were caused by the nature of the soil matrix in which the burials were made. During the 18th century the Eighth and Vine Streets area was part of an industrial site where ceramics and bricks were manufactured. The cemetery site itself was a clay pit until the late 18th-early 19th century, when it was filled in and the land reclaimed. The material used to reclaim the area was heavy clay fill, with an ample admixture of mid to late 18th century trash. As a consequence of this, the excavators removing the burials had the problem of exposing and defining bones that were encased in a matrix of dense packed clay much harder than the bone. Despite these difficulties, it was possible, with painstaking effort, to define and then record and remove the bones successfully.

The excavation of the cemetery produced a valuable set of data on factors such as health and mortality among 19th century blacks in Philadelphia. The analysis of human remains by a physical anthropologist can provide information on the health and nutritional level of an individual, and also in some cases the



8
View of a burial interred according to the prevailing Christian tradition.

probable cause of death. Initial work of this kind was carried out by Stephanie Pinter in John Milner Associates' Philadelphia lab. More detailed research on the remains was undertaken by Dr. Lawrence Angel and his colleagues at the Smithsonian Institution. Of equal value is the information on burial customs forthcoming from the work. This aspect of the study produced some significant insights into the survival of African customs among free blacks in Philadelphia, and forms the focus of the remainder of this paper.

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The Question of Acculturation

The excavation of the First African Baptist Church Cemetery offered a rare opportunity to study a segment of Philadelphia's population which had been neglected until fairly recently. One area of research that immediately suggests itself is that of acculturation. As Robert Schuyler has pointed out, one of the most interesting themes in Afro-American archaeology concerns “the survival of Africanisms in material culture” (1980:1). In many cases it is difficult to distinguish between the culture of ethnicity and the culture of poverty. Burial practices, however, tend to be stable and persistent in most cultural systems. Consequently, the excavation of a cemetery associated with a particular ethnic group should provide evidence for the survival of traditional customs.

Ethnographic evidence provides a wealth of information on African burial customs. Many of these stem from the notion of death as a gateway to the domain of the

spirits. Since the human soul is thought to be immortal, death is conceived of as the beginning of the journey of the soul from the physical body to the all important spiritual realm (Mbiti 1969:149–165). This ideology is based on the belief that within every object dwells an individual force or 'spirit' that governs its existence. This indwelling force or soul cannot be reduced to mechanistic laws of physics or chemistry, but is conceived of as being separate and distinct from matter. Concern with the welfare of this 'vital force' or soul is focal to an understanding of traditional African attitudes towards death. Although this concept has been found in various parts of the world and in diverse cultures, it apparently reached its highest elaboration on the continent of Africa.

Enslaved blacks retained the burial customs of their ancestors without the benefit of an academic construct with which to analyze the religious or philosophical ideology on which these customs were based. Material objects were used to honor the spirit in the earth, guide it to the other world, and prevent it from wandering or returning to haunt survivors. These objects mark a persistent cultural link between Africa and the New World, and between enslaved and free blacks.

Despite the attempts of slave holders to destroy all vestiges of retained African culture, it is clear that traditional customs survived the impact of slavery in the New World. For example, the practice of grave decoration at ground level is widespread in the United States, and has been noted by historians, ethnographers, and archaeologists (Blassingame 1979:33, Jordan 1984:21, Combes 1974:53–58). In this custom personal items and the last vessel used by the deceased are placed on the grave. It is commonly accepted that this is an African custom that has survived in the New World, and in some instances it may have been transmitted to other cultural groups by blacks. Jordan, for example, shows a picture of a white cemetery in Texas where a child's grave is decorated with toys and furniture (1984: Fig. 2.7).



9
Burial of a middle-aged woman with a Chinese porcelain plate.



10
Burial of a middle-aged man in a semi-prone position.

The Archaeological Evidence

In an urban environment, grave decorations are unlikely to remain sacrosanct. At the First African Baptist Church Cemetery, the graveyard area had been disturbed in the 1850s when houses and a factory were built there. In the second half of the 20th century the area became a parking lot, further disturbing the site. No evidence for the practice of grave decoration survived these impacts. What evidence was found for African burial practices was all found at the level of the actual burial, either in or outside the coffin.

Traditional European and American Christian burial customs are relatively simple in comparison to some of those documented for

other cultures. Normally, the interment is made in a wooden coffin in which the deceased is laid out supine, with the hands near the thighs, and the head to the west. The majority of the burials at the First African Baptist Church Cemetery were consistent with the Christian tradition outlined above (Fig. 8). In a number of the burials, however, there were departures from this norm. In eight cases a single coin had been placed in the coffin (usually a penny near the head). In six instances a single shoe had been placed on the coffin lid, and in two other burials a ceramic plate was buried with the deceased in the stomach area (Fig. 9). There was also one example where an individual appeared to have been buried on his side, and then slumped into a face down or semi-prone position (Fig. 10).

The practice of placing coins over the eyes of a dead person to keep them closed is well documented in many cultures. The fact that only a single coin was found in each burial would seem to preclude this explanation, however. In the classical world, a single coin was customarily placed in the mouth of the deceased in order to pay Charon's fee for ferrying the dead across the River Styx. How this custom relates to the First African Baptist Church Cemetery is uncertain. What is clear is that a widespread belief in the concept of death as a journey existed amongst blacks (Mbiti 1969:149–165; Handler and Lange 1978:183). In this context it may be that a single coin in a grave represents the fee for the return of the spirit to the African homeland or possibly to keep the spirit from bothering the living.

Shoes too can be seen in this symbolic light, as items required for this journey. Shoes also have connotations of power, as represented by a black folk belief that the burial of a shoe (especially on a Monday) will keep the devil away (Puckett 1926:555). The shoe is also a good luck symbol, and assumes this role at weddings. Alternatively this custom could be seen as a symbolic attempt to hobble the dead and prevent their return to the land of the living.

The burial of a ceramic plate on the stomach of the deceased is a practice that appears to be relatively widespread in other cultures. Several examples of this custom are reported by Fremmer (1973:58–62). In this paper three archaeologically recorded instances of plates with burials are discussed, one in London, England, and two in Jamaica, all of which were white burials. A black burial with a ceramic saucer was reported from the late 19th-early 20th century Cedar Grove cemetery in Arkansas (Rose 1982:188), and a large fragment of a redware bowl found beneath the pelvis of slave burial at Newton Plantation, Barbados, may be another example of this phenomenon (Handler and Lange 1978:136).

Various explanations have been offered for this practice. It has been suggested that the custom was designed to prevent the body swelling

after death and that salt was placed on the plate to accomplish this end. The salt may also have served to keep the devil away from the deceased (Fremmer 1973:60–61). It seems clear that the custom was relatively well known in England (Noel Hume 1974:169–172), and if the explanation offered above is accepted, it is not hard to imagine that it could have been transmitted to blacks by English settlers in the West Indies and the United States.

An alternative explanation to the above is suggested by a variety of ethnographic sources, folklore, and oral histories. Among West Africans it was common to place artifacts in the grave with the deceased to be used for various purposes in the afterlife (Handler and Lange 1978:199–201). One function of this practice was to prevent the spirit of the dead from harming the living. This was achieved by placing the vessel last used by the deceased

“a significant number of non-Christian burial customs are evident in the archaeological record”

on the grave as it was thought that such objects contained the energy or essence of the departed (Thompson 1984:134).

Folklorists reiterate the idea that the vessel used by the deceased should go to the grave with them (Puckett 1926:104), as do oral accounts of black funerals recorded in the 1930s. In one account it was stated that guns were fired over the grave and then the body was lowered in with “some food and a cup of coffee maybe” (Yetman 1972:84). Archaeology is unlikely to recover ceremonial aspects of human behavior such as firing a gun over a grave. The placement of dishes in a grave, however, is an aspect of human activity that manifests itself unequivocally in the archaeological record. Two possible explanations for this action are suggested above. In the light of our present knowl-

edge it is uncertain if the custom represents a borrowing of English customs, a survival of African tradition, or perhaps even a combination of the two. Whatever the explanation, it is certainly an example of acculturation in action.

Although the precise function that this custom served is uncertain there is added interest in the fact that in one case (Fig. 9) the plate buried was a Chinese export porcelain plate. This type of ceramic was a high status luxury item during this period, and not the kind of artifact that might be expected to be associated with the individuals buried in the cemetery. A small portion of the plate was missing, however, so it may be that it had been discarded by some more prosperous Philadelphian and was reused in the burial ritual carried out for the individual.

Another aspect of the cemetery site which requires discussion is the burial that was in a semi-prone position. It is uncertain whether this individual was deliberately interred in this position, or if the remains were dislodged from the customary supine position on the way to the burial ground, or during the act of lowering the coffin into the grave. Prone burials are recorded in other excavated black cemeteries (Handler and Lange 1978:198; Rose 1982:113). The mundane possibility of post-mortem disturbance of the corpse is offered above as a possible explanation for this burial position. Another possibility which was also suggested for such a burial at Newton Plantation is that individuals who possessed supernatural powers were buried face down (Handler and Lange 1978:198–199). This was apparently the practice among the coastal Bantu of the Cameroons in West Africa, where those thought to have such powers (*nyongo*) were buried in the prone position (Ardener 1956:90). Another explanation which comes from black folklore is that a murdered person should be buried face down in order to prevent the murderer from leaving the scene or, alternately, to prevent the dead from haunting the living (Puckett 1926:96,107). Whichever of these explanations is deemed correct, notwithstanding the possibility of

an accidental cause for this deviant burial, it would appear to indicate the further survival of an African cultural tradition.

What is clear from the study of the First African Baptist Church cemetery is that a significant number of non-Christian burial customs are evident in the archaeological record there. Although we are somewhat hampered by our lack of knowledge of contemporary African practices, in most cases these customs can be linked to an African parallel, suggesting the survival of Africanisms in urban Philadelphia. Acculturation has been defined as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield et al. 1936:149-150). The impact and influence of Christianity on urban blacks is obvious in the conformity of most of the graves to the Christian tradition. The African influence is apparent in the non-Christian traits discussed above. The physical evidence from the excavations illustrates the degrees of mingling of the Anglo-Christian and African traditions among this group in 19th century Philadelphia. Herskovits produced a great deal of historical information to dispel the notion that the African in the New World was "a man without a past" (1958:1-3). It is clear from the cemetery excavations that urban blacks in early 19th century Philadelphia withstood the attempts of whites to dispel their culture, carried it with them through the impact of slavery into freedom, and retained significant aspects of their "past."

The former members of the First African Baptist Church discussed above have made a valuable contribution to the history of blacks in Philadelphia. Upon completion of the analysis of the remains of these individuals, they will be reburied with due reverence at Eden Cemetery in Delaware County, Pennsylvania. There the grave site will be commemorated with a suitable memorial to the memory of these long dead Philadelphians who are gone but not forgotten.

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