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Elizabeth D. Meade

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“A Free Church for the People”: The History of the Spring Street Church and Its Burial Vaults

Elizabeth D. Meade

The Spring Street Church was constructed in the early 19th century to accommodate worshipers in what was then the unsettled area north of the developed portion of New York City. Burial vaults were constructed alongside the church by circa 1820 and were in use for more than 20 years, when changing legislation regarding human burials in Manhattan forced the church to close the vaults. During the period of the vaults' use, the Spring Street Church members participated in the Abolitionist movement and, as a result of the congregation's promotion of anti-slavery ideologies, the church was demolished by an angry mob during the Anti-Abolition Riots that terrorized New York in the summer of 1834. The church was rebuilt after the riots and would remain active for more than 150 years, despite periods of financial turmoil. However, through the actions of its loyal congregants, the church persevered until 1963, when reduced attendance and increased expenses forced the church to close. The property on which it stood was converted to a parking lot shortly thereafter, covering the burial vaults and those interred within them. This paper reviews the history of the Spring Street Church and discusses the role of both the church and its members in the abolitionist movement of the early 19th century.

La Spring Street Church a été érigée au début du XIXe siècle pour accueillir les fidèles dans le secteur nord de la ville de New York, alors peu peuplé. Vers 1820, des caveaux ont été construits autour de l'église et ont été en utilisation jusqu'à ce que des changements législatifs concernant les sépultures à Manhattan aient forcé leur fermeture, quelque vingt ans plus tard. Durant la période d'utilisation des caveaux, des membres de la Spring Street Church ont participé au mouvement abolitionniste et, en raison de sa promotion d'idéologies antiesclavagistes, l'église a été démolie par une foule en colère pendant les révoltes antiabolitionnistes qui ont terrorisé New York au cours de l'été 1834. L'église a été reconstruite après les émeutes et est restée active pendant plus de 150 ans, malgré des périodes de difficultés économiques. C'est grâce aux actions de ses loyaux fidèles que l'église est restée ouverte jusqu'en 1963, alors que la fréquentation réduite et l'augmentation des frais de maintenance ont mené à sa fermeture définitive. L'emplacement de l'ancienne église a été converti en un stationnement peu de temps après, recouvrant les caveaux ainsi que ceux qui y sont inhumés. Cet article résume l'histoire de la Spring Street Church et se penche sur le rôle de cette église et de ses membres dans le mouvement abolitionniste du début du XIXe siècle.

Introduction

In 2006, human remains were unearthed during construction in a former parking lot located near the corner of Spring and Varick Streets in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan. One of the first tasks for the archaeological team was to research the property to identify the context for the remains and to outline the events that led to their burial beneath an asphalt parking lot. This research revealed that the site was formerly the home of the Spring Street Presbyterian Church that was founded in the early 19th century and had a long history that was deeply intertwined with that of the surrounding city.

The congregation remained on the property for more than 150 years despite the violent destruction of the church building,

personal conflicts among the congregants, and fiscal ruin. Its longevity and constant reinvention, however, likely resulted in the unintentional abandonment of the burial vaults, which contained the remains of some of the church's earliest members. The following discussion documents the long history of the church and its use as a place of interment, outlining the events that established the church and its burial vaults, the church's role in New York City history, and the events that led to the sealing of the vaults beneath an asphalt parking lot as well as their subsequent rediscovery nearly two centuries later. The historic context presented below serves as the background for the archaeological investigations and interpretations of the site that are discussed elsewhere in this volume.

The Origins of the Spring Street Presbyterian Church

During the early 19th century, settlement in New York City was confined largely to the southern tip of Manhattan. Today, the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan is a fashionable shopping district with bustling sidewalks crowded with tourists and locals alike. At the turn of the 19th century, however, the area was on the outskirts of the city and early 19th century maps depict tree-covered hills and swamps covering the countryside while streams and brooks travel crookedly through the landscape.

Beginning in the 19th century, settlement of the city slowly expanded into the undeveloped farmland to the north of Lower Manhattan. As a result of this population shift and the establishment of communities in previously unsettled areas, the political and municipal boundaries of New York City were reconfigured and the area surrounding the future location of the Spring Street Church was designated as the Eighth Ward of Manhattan. Despite the surge of development in the Eighth Ward at this time, few new churches were constructed and many worshipers in the rural portions of the city traveled south to attend religious services (Halsey 1886). Local prayer meetings were organized to allow Presbyterians in the Eighth Ward to worship near their homes (Moment 1877). These meetings were held in private residences, possibly near what is now the corner of Spring and Thompson Streets (Works Progress Administration [WPA] 1940). These in-home prayer gatherings were “not thought favorable”, however, and the Presbyterian residents of the Eighth Ward sought a proper place of worship (*New York Times* 1874: 2).

At an unknown date, the meetings were relocated to a wood frame building that was either the home or grocery store (the two may have been one and the same) of a woman recorded only as “Jane” (WPA 1940). This property occupied by Jane appears to have been located at or near the future site of the Spring Street Presbyterian Church (WPA 1940). Jane, who like many of the church's founders was also a member of the First Presbyterian Church on Wall Street (Halsey 1886), does not appear to have owned the land on which the

church was later built. Instead, the site was part of the massive property holdings of Trinity Church, which had become a major landowner in Lower Manhattan as a result of land grants from the English crown during New York's colonial period.

Conveyance records show that Samuel Osgood, Henry Rutgers, John R.B. Rutgers, and John Mills purchased the land from Trinity Church on behalf of the new Spring Street Presbyterian Church congregation in 1807 (Office of the City Register 1807). These men were members of the congregation of the Wall Street Presbyterian Church in Lower Manhattan (Halsey 1886). The purchase included four lots encompassing an area measuring 100 by 100 ft. (Halsey 1886). The cornerstone was not laid until July 5, 1810, several years after the land was acquired (Stokes 1915–1928).

The construction of the new house of worship on Spring Street cost more than \$10,000, and, as a result, the congregation was in debt from the start (Halsey 1886). The shingled wood frame structure was large enough to hold 126 pews as well as 50 more in an upstairs gallery and was “crowned with a graceful cupola” (Halsey 1886: 9). The church was constructed, in large part, of materials recycled from the recently dissolved Wall Street Presbyterian Church, including timbers, pews, and pulpit (WPA 1940). The church was formally incorporated and recognized by the Presbytery in 1811 (Moment 1877). By 1818, a lecture, or session, room had been constructed on the eastern side of the church, and the entire property was surrounded by “an old fashioned picket fence,” thus completing the church's initial development (Halsey 1886: 9).

Human Interments at the Spring Street Church

Churchyard cemeteries often arose out of society's need to maintain physical and cultural links between the dead and the living (Mytum 1986). By keeping both living and deceased members of kin or religious groups in the same physical space, the dead might continue to participate in their cultural networks. The Spring Street Church was no exception, and the congregation maintained their own vaults on the church property.

It is unclear if the church was initially constructed with burial vaults or if the vaults were added at a later date. Comparison of the vaults' location as revealed by the archaeological excavations with that of the church's location as seen on historic maps (e.g., the maps of New York City published by William Hooker in 1824, J.H. Colton in 1836, and William Perris in 1852) suggests that the vaults were located in a side yard to the east of the church. Therefore, it is possible that the vaults were added after the church's original construction.

A small number of the church's unpublished records have survived and are on file at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. While the earliest "Trustees' Minutes" (dating from 1811 to 1825) do not mention the burial vaults, financial accounts preserved in a ledger of the church's "Treasurer's Minutes" (1818–1828) record payments made to the church for each interment and indicate that burials occurred in the vaults as early as 1820. The treasurer's accounts recorded information for financial purposes only. Therefore, with the exception of the name of the individual who paid for use of the vaults, little information regarding the identities of the deceased was included in the records.

The church's "Trustees' Records" (1826–1841) note that on October 16, 1827 the trustees passed a motion that required the church's sexton, who would have overseen the maintenance of the church and its vaults, to:

furnish the board [with] an account of all interments during the last year up to the first of November and from that date to render a monthly account with names, dates of interments [hereafter] and that the treasurer keep an account of the same for the information of the board.

If such a list was ever prepared, it appears to have been lost.

Burials were still taking place in March 1830 when the Trustees appointed a committee comprised of William Shay and William Beach (and any other individuals whom they might have hired) to "regulate" the vaults (Trustees' Record 1826–1841). The definition of "regulate" in this context is not known; however, the rearranging of bodies and coffins within burial vaults to generate additional burial space has been observed at other churches, and it is

likely that this occurred at Spring Street Church as well (Cox 1996). In April 1830, the trustees reported that Shay and Beach had paid a certain "Mr. Day" \$25 "to do all that was necessary in the business" (Trustees' Record 1826–1841). It is unclear if Mr. Day was a member of the Spring Street Church congregation or if he was simply hired to perform the labor.

In February of 1831, the "Trustees' Record" shows that a committee consisting of W.H. Elting, R.B. Wynant, William Johnson, and Horace Southerwayd was appointed to determine the costs of constructing additional burial vaults. By March, the committee had determined that at least two additional vaults should be constructed on the church property (Trustees' Record 1826–1841). The record also shows that the trustees ultimately hired R.B. Wynant to build the additional vaults "at the lowest terms offered and as large as the ground will admit without detriment to the foundation of the church and the building [illegible] one other vault" (Trustees' Record 1826–1841). An entry in the "Trustees' Record" dated May 18, 1831 noted that the vaults had been completed. On May 25, the trustees established a price list for interment in the vault, which was adjusted several months later and revised again in 1835. The burial price for an adult was approximately \$10.00, while the price for burying a child ranged from \$2.00 to \$8.00 depending on age (Trustees' Record 1826–1841).

Around the time that the church constructed additional vaults, the city's regulations regarding human burials in Manhattan were becoming more stringent. The Minutes of the Common Council, the city's governing body during this time, shows that burials were banned south of Canal Street in 1823 (The Common Council of the City of New York [12] 1917) with the exception of private vaults. The City continued to govern the use of burial vaults, however, and the Minutes of the Common Council make reference to the Duane Street Methodist Episcopal Church—to the south of the Spring Street Church and south of Canal Street—having been fined in 1829 because the church's sexton, William M. Carter, interred his daughter, Mrs. Hyer, within that church's vaults after the ban was in effect (The Common Council of the City of New York [17] 1917).

Burials south of 14th Street were banned in 1832 and south of 86th Street in 1851 (Borrows and Wallace 1999 and Inskip 2000)

The trustees of the Spring Street Church were aware of the changing nature of the laws regulating human interment in Manhattan and stipulated in their "Trustees' Record" on June 15, 1831 that there existed a possibility that future burials in the vaults might become impossible. The record notes that R.B. Wynant was to be paid \$274.00 for constructing the vaults. While the trustees intended to pay Wynant with money generated by the sale of burial space, they stated in their record that, in the event of the closure of their vaults by the city, they would have to pay Wynant with money from another source. It appears that the trustees were able to pay Wynant as intended as the vaults were still in use in March, 1835 when the church adjusted the price for interments (Trustees' Record 1826–1841). While no additional references to the burial vaults appear in the original church records after 1835 when the church was rebuilt, coffin plates, which record the dates of death of the deceased, were recovered from the site during the archaeological investigation, confirming that the vaults were in use (illegally) through the early 1840s (Mooney et al. 2008).

The Church's Role in the Abolitionist Movement

The church did not get a pastor of its own until October 31, 1811 when Reverend Dr. Matthew La Rue Perrine was installed as the leader of the congregation (Halsey 1886). He remained pastor until 1820 when he was replaced by Reverend Dr. Samuel Cox (Halsey 1886). Dr. Cox was extremely popular among his congregation and became a well-known member of the city's clergy. He quickly developed a reputation as an ardent abolitionist and publicly preached in favor of the emancipation of the nation's slaves. Slavery was not abolished in New York State until 1827 (Burrows and Wallace 1999). Despite this, the admission of free individuals of African descent into the congregation became a key, albeit controversial, issue for the Spring Street Church. As a result, the church's abolitionist reputation increased throughout the 1820s.

In the 1820s, the church established a multi-racial Sunday school (Halsey 1886). In addition, 11 African American congregants were listed "in the first published manual" (of unknown date) of the church and "there were always...a number of [African Americans] among its members" (Halsey 1886: 26). The church's "Session Minutes" note that, on September 27, 1820, "Phebe, a free woman of colour was admitted to full communion as a member of this church" (Session Minutes 1811–1835).

Dr. Cox was an influential preacher, and the Spring Street Church thrived under his leadership until dissent fractured his congregation (Halsey 1886). In 1822, Dr. Cox proposed that a new, larger church be constructed further downtown. While many congregants were in favor of the move, some who lived near the existing church did not wish to travel the extra distance. This debate continued for several years until 1825 when Dr. Cox and many of his followers seceded from the congregation (Halsey 1886). Dr. Cox went on to establish the Laight Street Church at the corner of Laight and Varick Streets, six blocks to the south of the Spring Street Church (Halsey 1886). Officially, the Spring Street Church congregation was transferred to the new location and the old church and what remained of its congregation were no longer recognized in the eyes of the Presbytery of New York (Halsey 1886). Forty-three worshippers chose to remain at the old Spring Street Church and they re-organized themselves as the "New Spring Street Presbyterian Church" and set about finding a new pastor (Moment 1877). As a result of ideological differences within the Presbyterian Church during the early 19th century, a new organization known as the Third Presbytery seceded from the Presbytery of New York in 1831 (WPA 1940). The New Spring Street Church ultimately was accepted by the Third Presbytery.

The Spring Street Church property was purchased from the Presbytery of New York and re-organized as a "free church for the people" by Brick Presbyterian Church member George P. Shipman (Halsey 1886: 12). An 1825 deed indicates that the property and the church edifice were transferred from the Presbyterian Church on Spring Street to Abijah Fisher. The congregation was led by

temporary pastors for more than a year until Reverend Henry G. Ludlow was officially installed as pastor on Christmas Day, 1828 (Halsey 1886). In November 1828, Ludlow wrote to his sister, Caroline Ludlow Frey, that the church's congregation numbered more than 330 individuals, "most of whom belong to that class of person who cannot afford to purchase or hire a pew in our city churches" (Ludlow 1828). Ludlow had great success as the head of the congregation and the church thrived under his leadership.

Reverends Cox and Ludlow "were very different men, but warm friends" (Halliday 1889: 4). Like Dr. Cox, Dr. Ludlow was a staunch abolitionist and used the pulpit of the Spring Street Church to preach in favor of emancipation. Although slavery had been outlawed in New York State in 1827, the abolition of slavery was still a heated national issue. Dr. Cox continued to preach his anti-slavery message despite the fact that this position was "opposed by most of his congregation" at the Laight Street church (Lossing 1884: 335). Reverends Cox and Ludlow joined several organizations devoted to ending slavery, including the American Colonization Society and the American Anti-Slavery Society (Ludlow 1865). The latter organization, which was devoted to ending slavery and the slave trade in America, was founded in 1833 and established its headquarters in New York City (Lossing 1884).

In addition to Reverends Cox and Ludlow, many individuals within the Presbytery made great efforts to change the organization's attitude towards African Americans in the early 19th century. Arthur Tappan, a member of the Laight Street Church and one of New York City's most well-known abolitionists, used his connections within the Presbyterian community of New York to aid in his fight against slavery (Burrows and Wallace 1999). The actions that Tappan and his brother Lewis took to facilitate the end of slavery enraged many in New York at the time. This included former Mayor Philip Hone who wrote that meetings organized by the Tappan brothers and attended by individuals of many races "were attended with tumult and violence" (Hone 1989: 4).

Peter Roe, a grocer in the Eighth Ward in the early 19th century, was a member of the Spring Street Church (Ruttenber and Clark

1881 and Spring Street Church Treasurer's Minutes 1822) and another outspoken abolitionist. A coffin plate bearing the name of Roe's young son Oscar was recovered during the archaeological investigations of the Spring Street Church burial vaults (Mooney et al. 2008 and Ruttenber and Clark 1881). Finally, Reverend Samuel Cornish, a member of the Spring Street congregation who at one time presided over the First Colored Presbyterian Church, was a founding editor of *Freedom's Journal*, a newspaper that supported an abolitionist message and specifically denounced the New York City Presbyterian community for their treatment of African Americans (Burrows and Wallace 1999). Cornish's position as reverend may not have earned him the respect of all Presbyterians in New York City, however, as some Presbyterian schools in the area refused admission even to the children of African American Presbyterian ministers (Burrows and Wallace 1999).

The contradiction between the efforts of Presbyterians in New York City to improve the lives of both free and enslaved individuals of African descent and their feelings towards African Americans is revealed by the fact that even churches that promoted abolitionism, including the Spring Street Church, maintained segregated seating facilities. In 1831, the Trustees of Spring Street Church voted to provide gallery seats for African Americans (Trustees Minutes 1826–1841). It is unclear if this resolution reflects a new practice or if the 1831 vote was merely an official resolution of a previously established practice.

After slavery was abolished in New York State, racial tensions ran high, with the city's African American population subject to discrimination and violence (Wall, Rothschild, and Copeland 2008). The early to mid-19th century was a time when New York was already plagued by dramatic riots and angry mobs that took to the streets (Moment 1877). Three months after the "Election Riots" brought violence to the streets of New York, the Anti-abolitionist Riots occurred in the summer of 1834 (Headley 1873). These hostilities were fueled in part by a speech given by Reverend Cox at the Laight Street Church. Prior to Dr. Cox's sermon, Arthur Tappan, a wealthy white citizen (see above), invited African American Presbyterian Reverend Samuel Cornish to share his pew

during services at the Laight Street Church (Burrows and Wallace 1999). Many church members were infuriated when Cornish accepted Tappan's invitation and the men sat side by side during church services. The Reverend Cox appeared to support Tappan's attempt to promote church integration by declaring that Jesus Christ was "probably of a dark Syrian hue" (Burrows and Wallace 1999: 556). Other reports indicated that Dr. Cox stated that "the savior of mankind was a Negro" (Fowler 1856: 374).

Word of Dr. Cox's statement spread throughout the city and an angry mob attacked the homes of many abolitionists, including those of Arthur Tappan and Dr. Cox, as well as churches with abolitionist reputations, including both the Laight and Spring Street Churches (Burrows and Wallace 1999). Dr. Ludlow was also the target of the anti-abolitionist mob, in part due to rumors that he had conducted interracial marriage ceremonies (Reitano 2010). The Spring Street Church was attacked on July 11, 1834 by a crowd shouting "let's wipe out the Presbyterian barn!" (*New York Times* 1956: 27). The length of Spring Street between Varick and MacDougal "was barricaded with carts, barrels, boxes, ladders, etc...[B]rick-bats, stones, and missiles of various kinds were flying from all quarters... [and]...prominent politicians were haranguing the maddened rabble to go on with their work of destruction and demolish the obnoxious building to the ground" (Moment 1877: 15).

Contemporary articles published in various local and national newspapers—including the *Salem Gazette* (July 15, 1834) and the *Newport Mercury* (July 19, 1834)—stated that the riots involved a mob of anywhere between several hundred and several thousand individuals. The *Commercial Advertiser* (1834: 2) said of the riots, "the excitement nourished by the Abolitionists has burst into a flame and they are now in danger of being consumed by fires of their own kindling." To the rioting mob, the abolitionists in question included both Reverends Cox and Ludlow and their churches. The mob approached the Spring Street Church after demolishing the church at Laight Street and began "by pulling down the fence which surrounded the church and they demolished the windows, broke into the house, and

demolished the interior" (*New York Courier* 1834). The mob, which "instantly filled [the church] to overflowing," destroyed the interior of the church and "were in the act of tearing down the galleries" when the National Guard arrived (*Newport Mercury* 1834). The crowd took the remnants of the demolished organ, pews, and galleries and carried them outside to create barricades against the approaching National Guard. To taunt the approaching troops and attract additional rioters to the scene, the mob continued to ring the church's bell throughout the ordeal (Stone 1872).

Although it took them a "considerable amount of time" to breach the barricades, a National Guard unit succeeded in breaking up the mob and cutting the bell's rope to silence it (*New York Courier* 1834). The mob then moved to the home of Reverend Ludlow, the windows of which were shattered with stones and the interior destroyed (*New York Courier* 1834). Fortunately, Ludlow, whose house was located near the church at 148 Thompson Street, was not home at the time of the riots and was therefore unharmed (Ludlow 1865). As described by Ludlow's son, FitzHugh Ludlow, upon the family's return the next day:

[t]heir home was quiet as a fortress the day after it has been blown up. The front-parlor was full of paving stones; the carpets were cut to pieces; the pictures, the furniture, and the chandelier lay in one common wreck and the walls were covered with inscriptions of mingled insult and glory. Over the mantelpiece had been charcoaled "Rascal;" over the pier-table, "Abolitionist" (Ludlow 1865: 504–505).

The violence raged over the course of the weekend. By the following Monday, peace had been restored by "a force of two or three thousand uniformed militia with a strong body of citizens organized as special constables" (Hone 1989: 45). While the Spring Street Church was never again the target of an attack by an angry mob, the events of the summer of 1834 had a profound effect on its history during the middle of the 19th century.

Rebuilding and Growth after the Riots

After the attacks, the congregation proceeded with the difficult task of rebuilding. Church members and leaders had talked for several years about expanding the structure,

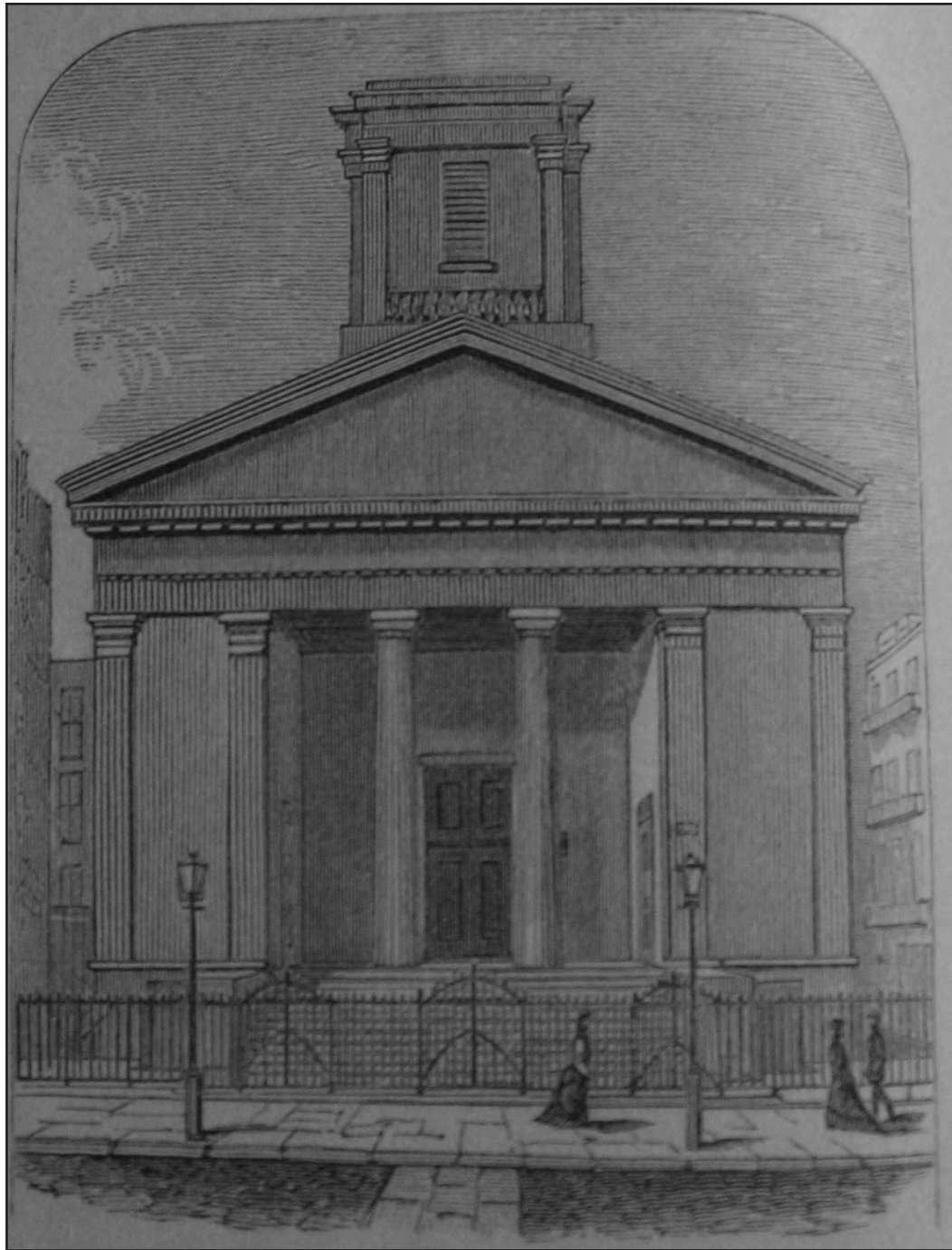


Figure 1. The second Spring Street Church, constructed circa 1836. The burial vaults were located in the side yard to the east of the church, on the left side of the image. From Reverend A.H. Moment's *Old Spring Street Presbyterian Church, New York City: The Sixty-Fifth Anniversary* (1877).

with suggestions regarding the construction of a new church appearing in the Trustees' Record as early as 1830. Additional property adjacent to the church had been purchased and plans for a new façade had been drawn up by the early 1830s; however, until the church's destruction in the 1834 riots, none of these improvements were made, probably due to a lack of funding. After the devastation of the riots, the congregation was able to raise \$10,000 for the construction of a new, larger brick church (FIG. 1) that was completed in June 1836 (Halsey 1886). It appears that the new church was intentionally constructed to the west of the burial vaults, which were still in use at the time of the church's redevelopment (Mooney et al. 2008).

After re-establishing themselves on the site, and perhaps in an attempt to prevent future attacks, Ludlow and many others in the congregation and throughout New York City publicly rejected the idea of interracial marriage (Harris 2003); however, the church continued to support the abolition of slavery and promoted civil rights. In 1837, Ludlow allowed the Grimké sisters, noted abolitionist speakers, to lead meetings and lectures for female parishioners in the church (Sterling 1991). In 1839, the "Trustees' Minutes" record that meetings of the Spring Street Church Anti-Slavery Society were taking place at the church. After Ludlow departed the congregation and the City of New York in 1837, he continued to preach in favor of abolition and, as a result, was attacked by mobs on other occasions. His son would recall that around 1840, his father "combined the two functions of preaching in a New England college town and ticket agency on the Underground Railroad" (Ludlow 1865: 505).

The newly-constructed Spring Street Church grew significantly throughout the 1830s and 1840s. The number of congregants also increased considerably after the closing of the Laight Street Church, bringing many worshippers back to Spring Street. Throughout the decades that followed, however, membership declined, and, by the early 1850s, the church was drowning in debt (Moment 1877). As a result of these financial struggles, in 1857 the church began to consider the sale of the property. Other interested churches, including the Duane Street Methodist Episcopal (M.E.) Church and the Thirteenth Street Presbyterian Church, offered bids for the property (Halsey 1886).

Conveyance records show that in 1862 the Thirteenth Street Presbyterian Church agreed to purchase the property for \$11,000, the same amount for which the Spring Street Church had been mortgaged in 1859 (Office of the City Register 1862). It is unclear if this transaction was meant only as a loan to the struggling Spring Street congregation or if the Thirteenth Street Church intended to relocate to the property. The Spring Street congregation, however, soon wanted to regain ownership of their church but it appears that the Thirteenth Street Church held the property hostage and only would agree to transfer the property back to the Spring Street Church for an additional sum of \$5,000 (Halsey 1886).

During this ordeal, the Thirteenth Street Church may have gone so far as to place the church for sale, as a newspaper article allegedly published on April 21, 1862 advertised that the Duane Street M.E. Church would move into the church edifice on Spring Street (Moment 1877). Contemporary reports from the *New York Times* document the Duane Street Church's sale in 1860 and the congregation's subsequent relocation to the corner of Hudson and Spring Streets, one block to the west of the Spring Street Church, by May 1863. Therefore, it is clear that the Duane Street congregation was seeking a new house of worship at that time and it is entirely possible that they were interested in purchasing the Spring Street Church property. There is no evidence, however, that the land was ever transferred to or occupied by the Duane Street M.E. Church, or by any church other than the Thirteenth Street Presbyterian Church. According to church histories, the members of the Spring Street Church eventually raised the money to repurchase the church in 1863, and the Thirteenth Street Church returned the deed for \$8,001, without having been paid the extra money (Moment 1877).

During Spring Street Church's financial troubles in the early 1860s and the clash over the ownership of the property, there was not enough money to pay a pastor to preach to the congregation. From these troubles, however, arose what former pastor Reverend A.W. Halsey considered "the most fascinating story in...[the]...church's history," during which the congregants banded together to keep their church going any way that they could (Halsey 1886: 21).

“Aunt” Nancy Henry, was an elderly, free, African American woman, who, on account of poor health, attended services at Spring Street Church for approximately 20 years rather than the Greene Street M.E. Church, where she was a member (Halsey 1886). New Year’s Day, 1863, two Spring St. Church congregants asked Aunt Nancy if church members could hold prayer meetings in her basement apartment on Van Dam Street and she agreed as, once again, Presbyterians found themselves attending local prayer meetings in the homes of their peers (Moment 1877).

Meetings continued to be held at Aunt Nancy’s home until March or April when she went to live in a home for the elderly (Halsey 1886). Afterwards, meetings were held in the homes of other congregants or in the lecture room of the vacant church. Another elderly African American woman, “Aunt” Sarah Cornell, was also a key member of the congregation in the second half of the 19th century. It was said that she “prayed more for Spring Street Church than any other person” (Moment 1877: 21).

The Decline of the Congregation

The meetings held at Aunt Nancy’s home allowed the members of the Spring Street Church congregation to remain a cohesive unit, and, as a result, “a new heart was put into the discouraged people” (Halsey 1886: 22). The congregation eventually was able to generate enough funds to hire a new pastor, and by 1867 the church was free from debt, albeit temporarily. The congregation was plagued by debt throughout the rest of the 19th century, and by 1877 the building was described as being in a “dilapidated and dirty condition” (Halsey 1886: 27). Despite its troubles, the congregation remained strong, and, as a result of changing demographics in the neighborhood, by the turn of the 20th century, the church was offering Sunday school classes in both Chinese and Italian in addition to English (*New York Times* 1956: 27). At times the church found itself financially self-sufficient, and it purchased additional lots adjacent to the church property. Additional facilities were opened on the new land, including a “neighborhood house,” a dormitory, and a gymnasium.

The Spring Street Church remained active until the mid-20th century when the congregation was dissolved by the Presbytery in 1963 due to low attendance, lack of funds, and the recent death of its reverend (Montgomery 1963). The church, which by that time had become “threadbare and musty,” was designed to hold 530 individuals but had only 49 regular attendees (Montgomery 1963: 16). The church was closed and in 1966 the land was sold to the Salvation Army, which had plans to demolish the structure. The church was burned down in a fire, however, presumably caused by “derelicts” who may have been living there (*New York Times* 1966: 59). What remained of the church was torn down and the property later was converted into a parking lot. The parking lot would be located on the site for another 40 years, protecting the vaults hidden below the surface as well as the individuals resting inside them.

Conclusion

By the time the burial vaults of the Spring Street Church were buried beneath a layer of asphalt in the 1960s, they had been out of use for more than a century. Many of the descendants of the individuals interred on the site were themselves deceased. Many others had moved away long before the church closed, reflecting the neighborhood’s shift from a residential area at the northern end of the developed city to a heavily-developed and densely-populated commercial and industrial district. Despite the efforts of the church leaders and congregants to keep the church active throughout periods of violent riots and financial turmoil, the once-influential group finally was forced to disband.

Many of the deceased interred in the church’s burial vaults were buried with care by grieving families, and the vaults survived the church’s tumultuous early years during which the edifice was destroyed and rebuilt; however, the death or relocation of the descendant community of the early Spring Street Church congregation essentially severed the link between those interred below the parking lot and the living world above it. As a result of the growing distance—both physical and temporal—between the interred and the Spring Street Church congregation with which they

once worshipped, the individuals buried on the site and the families they represented were simply forgotten. The Presbytery of New York currently represents the descendant community and has been involved with the project since the discovery of the remains. The human remains discovered beneath a parking lot are a tangible link to the early congregation of the Spring Street Church, a dynamic group of devoted and passionate individuals who played a role in many of the key events of New York City’s history.

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Elizabeth D. Meade is an archaeologist with AKRF, an environmental planning and consulting firm in New York City. She received a bachelor's degree in anthropology from New York University and a master's degree in anthropology from Hunter College of the City University of New York.

Elizabeth D. Meade, RPA

AKRF, Inc.
 440 Park Avenue South, 7th Floor
 New York, NY 10016