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## **Pioneer's Life is Dug Up at Independence Hall: New Archaeological Approach Focuses on a Freed Slave.**

**By Stephan Salisbury, Philadelphia Inquirer Staff Writer**

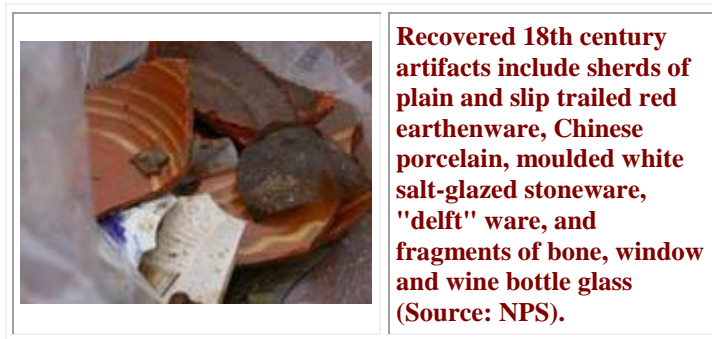
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**Less than three years ago, the name of James Oronoko Dexter was virtually unknown, lost in the recesses of late-18th-century Philadelphia.**

**A slave who bought his own freedom, a coachman, and a confidant of some of the city's wealthiest families, a husband who bought his enslaved wife's freedom, a father and church-goer who took upon himself the task of helping to build a life for Africans in the New World -- Dexter was surely someone to be reckoned with.**

**Yet his name had vanished from memory.**

**Now this man -- a founder of the city's first black church, the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, and a founding member of the nation's first black self-help organization, the Free African Society -- is the premier focus of a unique public program mounted by the National Park Service, the National Constitution Center and Once Upon a Nation, the new nonprofit organization.**

**The program, which constitutes a seismic shift in the approach to -- and presentation of -- recent archaeology at Independence National Historical Park, marks the opening of the Independence Living History Center, carved from what was once the park's cavernous Visitor Center at Third and Chestnut Streets.**

**At the heart of the retooled facility, which opened this month, is a working archaeology laboratory open to the public.**

**Visitors can observe ongoing research and the reclamation of ancient tools, everyday housewares, clothing remnants, weapons -- a dizzying array of artifacts pulled from beneath the surface of Independence Park.**

**And the first project being tackled by the professional archaeologists from the Philadelphia firm of Kise Straw & Kolodner is a detailed analysis of more than 30,000 artifacts excavated in February 2003 from what was once the Dexter homesite on Fifth Street between Race and Arch Streets.**

**The park service was at one time determined to leave those artifacts untouched in the ground, beneath a planned park bus depot.**

**But public controversy caused officials to rethink that approach. Now the artifacts are the centerpiece of an innovative public project reminiscent of the popular public paleontology lab at the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History near the La Brea tar pits.**

**"It's really a Cinderella story," said park service archaeologist Jed Levin, who is overseeing the work.**

**"We're open for business and relatively cool," Levin said. "Actually way cool, as a group of kids just told me."**

**As he spoke, Levin stood in the lobby of the new history center, facing a bank of windows that looked into a vast room flooded with light from a glass ceiling.**

**Two enormous tables covered with ceramic fragments stood within, a team of archaeologists bent over them, painstakingly fitting shards together. Here a brown tankard grew from a welter of pieces; there, a delicate child's teacup was coming together from bits and slivers. Bowls, storage vessels, plates were emerging from the carefully laid out chaos of broken redware pottery, an inexpensive local ceramic.**

**Much of the material currently being pieced together, photographed and dated is consistent with the things a family of modest means might possess, the archaeologists said. That makes Levin and his colleagues hopeful that artifacts can be tied to Dexter.**

**Throughout a recent morning a trickle of visitors stopped by the lab.**

**Mellissa Smythe, 26, visiting from West Virginia, just wandered into the lab. She had no idea what it was, but within a minute she was hooked.**

**Levin explained some of the ways archaeologists can distinguish African American sites from, say, adjacent European sites by using bones discarded in garbage piles or privies.**

**Early black families tended to follow West African culinary practices, which emphasized stews and highly seasoned one-dish meals, Levin told Smythe. Europeans, on the other hand, tended to go for roasts and chops.**

**Large whole bones, then, tend to be found in European garbage; but chopped up bones are a feature of early African American refuse.**

**Similarly, ceramic bowls that are well-marked with streaks and scuffs probably were used for heavily stirred dishes -- a feature of African cooking.**

**"I find it very interesting," she said. "Dexter, yeah, but also the process of archaeology itself. It amazes me how all the clues fit together."**

**Visitors to the lab, Levin emphasized repeatedly, are not seeing a show. They are watching "real work."**

**The Dexter project will continue into the fall, officials said. It will then be followed in the lab by work on more than one million artifacts pulled from the ground in 2000 before construction of the National Constitution Center on the northernmost block of Independence Mall.**

**The National Park Service, steward of the ground, is overseeing the project and is responsible for the artifacts.**

**When work on that is completed in several years, Independence Park will be able to paint a portrait of one of the most interesting neighborhoods in the early city, a place where free blacks lived next door to wealthy Quaker merchants, Irish laborers, German shopkeepers and Welsh clerks.**

**Early African leaders such as Richard Allen and Absalom Jones visited there. The block shows how deeply rooted the nation's cultural diversity actually is. And the remaining artifacts will convey a detailed portrait of ordinary life as vivid as any such portrait anywhere, archaeologists hope.**

**Arthur Sudler, a historian and leader of St. Thomas' Church, said the Dexter story in particular "speaks to people" directly.**

**"He was a coachman," Sudler said. "He had a house. He had a job. He had a family. People can relate to that. It's the common man's story. For so many people that's what keeps them interested, and they can see that there are always people who rise to the occasion, like Dexter. People see that and they think, 'If he can do it, I can do it.'"**

**If You Go: The Independence Living History Center is at Third and Chestnut Streets. The archaeology laboratory is open seven days a week, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free. For information, call Independence National Historical Park at 215-965-2305.**

**Related news: Last fall, the William Penn Foundation awarded a grant to David Orr and Anthony Ranere of Temple University's Department of Anthropology to produce a documentary on the excavation at the site of the James Dexter House in Philadelphia's Old City district.**