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September 2011 Newsletter

The Seneca Village Archaeological Excavations, Summer 2011

By Diane diZerega Wall and Nan A. Rothschild*

This summer, the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History conducted archaeological excavations at Seneca Village, the 19th century community located in today's Central Park. Founded in the 1820s by African Americans, by 1855 the village was a thriving community with a population of over 260, three churches, and a school. Approximately two-thirds of those who lived there were of African descent, mostly middle class, while the remainder were Europeans, mostly Irish. In the 1850s, the City decided to construct Central Park in an area that included Seneca Village; it took the land through the right of eminent domain, evicted the residents, and razed their homes for the creation of the Park. Although landowners were compensated for their loss, many felt the compensation was inadequate, and renters of course received nothing at all.

This project has been a long time in the making. Preliminary research on the site began over a decade ago, and included a study of historical maps (which showed us where village houses had been located), a soil study (conducted by geoarcheologist Suanna Selby and which identified areas where 19th century soils were still intact), and a GPR study (conducted by geophysicist Lawrence Conyers). These studies allowed us to pinpoint locations where it seemed likely that archaeological traces of the village had survived. All in all, there were six such areas. Once we had gathered this information, it took us more than five years to get permission to excavate, a negotiation which was ultimately successful only because of the skill and dedication of some of our Advisory Board members.

When we began fieldwork, our research questions focused on several different levels of inquiry. We wanted to 'ground truth' the radar and see whether the GPR had been successful in identifying archaeological remains. If in fact we found archaeological remains related to Seneca Village, we would determine their extent and excavate a sample of them so we could explore the

material lives of the people who lived there. Finally, assuming we recovered enough material, we were interested in exploring what it meant to be a member of the black middle-class in New York in the 19th century. We looked forward to comparing our finds with those from other contemporary middle-class African American communities throughout the United States as well as with middle-class Euro-American sites in New York.

We received an REU grant from the National Science Foundation (#1062796), which supported the interns who worked with us throughout the field and preliminary laboratory phases of the project. We also received support from National Geographic, the Durst Foundation, the Friends of Cornell Edwards, and the Gilder Foundation.

Our eight week field program started in early June. We proceeded systematically, from area to area, evaluating whether the features that the GPR had identified were relevant to the history of Seneca Village. The excavations were extremely successful. Although as expected some of the features pinpointed did not relate to the Village, we discovered two that were very important. One was the foundation walls and associated deposits of the home of William Godfrey Wilson, a porter and sexton of one of the village churches, and his wife, Charlotte, and their eight children. These deposits contain both architectural and domestic materials which will allow us to explore the lives of the Wilson family. Particularly evocative finds included a child's shoe, a roasting pan, and a tea kettle. The other feature was made up of the deposits from a buried ground surface from a backyard behind houses in another part of the village. We plan to use the data from this feature to reconstruct the environment in this part of the site as well as the ways of life of the people who lived there. We are looking forward to the results of the analyses.

Note

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