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Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800 and Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England

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Review

Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800. Leland Ferguson, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C., 1992.

Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England. William D. Piersen, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1988.

A Review

Submitted by Rhett S. Jones, Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in American, Brown University

The silliest argument ever advanced by (some white) historians, put forth with the utmost seriousness before the 1960s, was that black Americans had no history. This common sense and anthropological absurdity -- How could a people have no history -- rested on the narrow practice of history which assumed that without a large body of documents for historians to interpret, a people had not history. African Americans, historians argued, had left no written records, and therefore they had no history, or at least none which profession scholars could explore. But when the historical profession went looking for documents in the late 1960s they found far more than they could handle. Most of these were, however, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The number of eighteenth century documents by Afro-Americans remains small, but as the works of Ferguson and Piersen make clear it is possible to examine eighteenth-century black American history by using the techniques of the archaeologist and the folklorist. Piersen (p x) turned to folklore to uncover this past because, "For too long the black men and women of history have been encased in the passive voice of what was done to them, while their own vision of their lives remained hidden." Ferguson (p xxxiv) believes that archaeology can help to understand early Afro-Americans, but only if it breaks "away from the power of commonly held and subtly racist views of history to find important truths about the past." Piersen and Ferguson are each clear about their goals. Piersen sets out to provide a window on the evolution of black life and culture in New England and to compare it to that of the larger corpus of scholarship on blacks in the South. Ferguson examines the beginning of African-American culture and how archaeology provides insight into it. Both succeed.

They are successful first because each understands the methodological limits of his discipline. According to Piersen (p x), "No matter what [folklore] sources we use, our knowledge of black life in the eighteenth century too often derives from white observers unfamiliar with, and indeed uninterested in, the African population." According to Ferguson (p 118), "So far, archaeology has been of little value in expanding our knowledge of African-American resistance."

Second, they are successful because in an era when there is much talk about multi-disciplinary and comparative approaches to the study of the black past, Ferguson and Piersen do not just talk, but draw on other research techniques in their analyses. Both make good use of the documents traditionally used by the historian to complement and lend insight into their data. Each believes comparing black experiences in various parts of the eighteenth-century Americas helps to better

understand the Afro-American past. Ferguson (p 58) writes that, "knowledge of African-American lifeways in the Tidewater region may be significantly expanded by excavating the camps and villages of the maroons," and comparing them to slave villages. In this way, he argues, it may be possible to disentangle the complex intermingling of black, white and red cultures in the colonial Americas. Throughout his book, but especially in Part 4, Piersen places black Yankee culture in the context of other eighteenth-century Afro-American cultures, demonstrating that knowledge of these cultures lends insight into black New England.

Despite their different approaches, the archaeologist and the folklorist reach similar conclusions. Ferguson (p 120) finds that while slaves "may not have overtly resisted their enslavement on a day-to-day basis, most . . . ignored the European American ideology that rationalized their enslavement." Piersen (p 160) concludes, "In their religious beliefs . . . in their work habits and crafts . . . black New Englanders remained their own people -- no longer Africans, but sure not second-class Europeans either." Ferguson and Piersen agree on the early emergence of a strong, independent and self-conscious black American culture distinct and different from that constructed by white Americans.

The silliest argument ever advanced by (some) black scholars, put forth with the utmost seriousness during the 1960s, was that whites could not do, nor could they understand, black history. Ferguson and Piersen are both white and their work clearly enhances our understanding of the crucial period when Africans were becoming African Americans.