

Life on the Farm - Excavating Kings County's Rural Past: the Hendrick I. Lott Farmstead Archaeological Project

Christopher Ricciardi

Sunday October 7, 2001

The term “farm study” usually brings to mind images of wide-open spaces, acres of land, and a rural setting. One rarely thinks of urban cities as an arena for research oriented farmstead studies, as urban areas often provoke images of crowded streets with steel and concrete. However, it is becoming evident that farmstead studies can, and should, be undertaken in the cities that were once rural towns. New York City, or more specifically its outer boroughs, is one such area.

Many attributes that define a city as a city, for example concrete streets, sidewalks, skyscrapers, and a large concentrated population, are the very attributes that hinder archaeologists from conducting large-scale studies in urban areas. The very nature of cities makes many standard research questions, specifically those relevant to farmsteads, difficult to explore. Yet, our knowledge of past settlement patterns cannot be based solely on historical documents, and past lifeways cannot be fully examined without the support of archaeological evidence.

The “so-called” concrete jungle of New York City does not afford archaeologists the luxury of typical widespread archaeological investigation. Most excavations are tightly confined in terms of space and time, and the majority of archaeological work within New York City falls under the realm of Cultural

Resource Management studies. Additionally, the site formation processes of New York City, and the “tear-it-down...build-it-up” attitude has been prohibitive for archaeologists. New York has undergone numerous phases of landscaping, and the City is a prime example of a man-made landscape. Currently there are few obvious remainders of early- or pre-19th century surfaces.

During Brooklyn’s historic period a majority of its area was composed of rural farms and open fields. Many of Brooklyn's farms and rural areas were still present until the first quarter of the 20th Century. It was not until the large scale development projects, undertaken in the first quarter of the 20th century, that Brooklyn was transformed into the borough that today houses approximately one third of New York City’s population. The borough was originally comprised of six independent towns. The Dutch, beginning in 1636 founded five of the original towns. The southeastern portion of Brooklyn contained the towns of Flatbush and Flatlands, and was the farthest from Manhattan, both physically and culturally, according to 19th Century historians. It is said that Flatbush and Flatlands retained its Dutch character even after the British takeover of the Dutch colony of New Netherland beginning in 1664. It has also been said that many Dutch residents of Manhattan evacuated the island and moved to Brooklyn, where Dutch culture was reported to have remained active, in some form, until the turn of the 20th Century. Even today elderly residents insist that some people still spoke Dutch at the turn of the 20th Century.

Since the 1970s, the Brooklyn College Archaeological Research Center (BC-ARC) has been excavating within New York City, and specifically focusing

our attention on the outer boroughs. Our current project is at the Hendrick I. Lott farmstead, in the Marine Park section of Brooklyn, the southern-most point of the former town of Flatlands. The property housed several large-scale barns, outbuildings, and other supporting structures, none of which, except for the main house, survive today. Currently the house sits on a 3/4-acre plot of land. This current space may not seem like a lot of land, but for a residential section of Brooklyn, where row houses measuring 20 feet by 100 feet are standard, this much open property provides a plethora of research opportunities that are not readily present in the majority of the City.

The Lott project seeks to address several issues including the everyday lifeways of the Lott family, the relationship between the Lott family and enslaved persons and paid servants, and issues of market economy and consumer choice. We also are investigating the physical and cultural issues associated with the transformation of the farm landscape from a rural enclave to an urban suburb within the brief 10-year period in which it occurred.

The Lott House's history began around 1720 with the construction of a three-room house. This house was moved and married to the present house in 1800. During the time of the farm's greatest success, the first three quarters of the 19th Century, the Lott's owned over 200 acres, half of which were improved for farming according to agricultural censuses. The Lotts farmed wheat, corn, potatoes, peas, and string beans and raised dairy animals, selling their goods at the nearby Wallabout Market during the early part of the 20th century.

Although today the Lott House appears to be a dilapidated and abandoned wood frame house, it was, according to the late 19th Century historian Charles Ditmas, one of the grandest homes in all of Kings County. Early historical documents and maps have allowed BC-ARC to begin reconstructing the landscape in which this 200+ acre farm once existed. The 1800 Lott House was constructed on a north/south orientation facing the Atlantic Ocean and parallel to Gerritsen's Creek, a tidal creek approximately three city blocks away. At the Creek there was a large gristmill where the Lotts maintained a house and storage facility for their grain that was milled at Gerritsen's Mill.

Excavations in 1998 focused on the east side of the property where old photographs and maps showed another freestanding structure near the east side of the main house. Historians have called this structure everything from the slave quarters, to a servant's house, to a stone kitchen. Today, there are no remainders on the surface to indicate that a building once stood there. Approximately 3/4 of a meter beneath the surface the foundation walls of this structure were uncovered. Beginning with the appearance of mortared stones in one excavation unit, we proceeded to uncover approximately three-quarters of the structure's foundation which measured 4 1/2 by 3 1/2 meters excavated or an interior excavated area of 12 square meters.

Our excavations did not confirm any of the hypotheses that had been drawn from documentary sources. We often found ourselves saying, "What have we 'unlearned' today?" Our first lesson was related to the construction of the stone structure. As more of the foundation was uncovered, we realized that it was

at a much lower level than the Lott House. This was unexpected, since all the photographs showed the house and the stone structure to be at the same level. At approximately 1 meter below ground level, evidence of a doorway was uncovered. Though we originally believed this to have been a one-story structure, the doorway indicates that the structure had a step-down feature or basement. We later uncovered family stories that indicated the structure had a loft. In the early 1910s, John Lott and his cousin would launch themselves out of the loft window, using umbrellas as parachutes. This stunt left John with a broken arm, twice.

The remains of a hearth was the only interior feature uncovered within the structure. Since historical records most frequently defined the structure as a kitchen, we were surprised to find limited evidence of cooking or other kitchen related activities. Such activities would have been evidenced by a significant representation of utilitarian wares or storage containers. Instead there was a wide range of other domestic items recovered in this area, including shell buttons, tortoise shell hairpins, shards of fine china, marbles and assorted children's toys. The wide range of material remains suggests that the structure served as some form of living quarters in addition to a food preparation area. We now consider, based on this evidence and a construction date of post 1800 that the structure also served as housing for the Lott family's domestic servants.

Excavations revealed distinct stratigraphic levels or ground surfaces both exterior and interior to the foundation walls. The exterior stratigraphy differs at the west, north and south of the structure, providing a glimpse of a complex landscape that has been modified. The light colored soil along the western wall

represents the remains of Lott's Lane. This one time Carriage Path separated the house and the stone structure and extended beyond the property to connect the house with the Kings Highway to the north and Gerritsen's Creek to the south. Based on excavations adjacent the lean-to of the main house, it appears that at least 3/4 of a meter of soil was added to the original surface signifying a major grading of the area occurred some time between 1800 and 1900. The stratigraphy along the north, east and west walls revealed two layers of clam and oyster shells. These layers appear to have been deliberately laid prior to the construction of the stone structure, as the foundation walls intersect the shell layers. We assume that the shells served as some sort of path or drainage, though we cannot account for their varying depth below surface as of yet. Between these layers were cultural deposits and refuse that dated from the early- and mid-19th Century, thus providing a time frame for the upper shell deposit. Based upon the stratigraphic evidence and the materials from within and below the bottom shell layer, it appears that this layer was deposited prior to the construction of the 1800 house.

We currently hypothesize that this layer relates to the 1720 structure prior to the joining of this building and the newly constructed 1800 sections. Early 20th century Flatlands historians have debated the original location of the 1720 house, most claiming it was 7 blocks east on Kimball Street. The original address of the Lott House was 120 Kimball Road. However, it should be noted that the current East 36th Street was originally called Kimball Road and Kimball Street was not named until the 20th Century.

In 1999, our focus shifted to uncover more information about the lifeways of the Lott family. Historically we knew them to be a wealthy family. At this time we began to explore the north and west areas of the property. The back porch is on the north of the house, which faced the property's barns. Based upon other archaeological excavations, this private area would likely have only been used by the family and should have revealed evidence of family activities. However, there was not a significant representation of material remains and all the remains uncovered, including children's toys such as marbles and doll pieces and pipe stems were close to the surface. There was little evidence of landscape modification in the northern area of the house. The materials recovered dated to the latter part of the 19th century and mostly to the early 20th century.

In the western areas of the property there was greater evidence of activity. One of the more prominent features of this area was the abundance of large clam and oyster shell deposits. Over 12 thousand clam and oyster shells were recovered in this area and many of the shells were over 12 inches long. It appears that these shell deposits served more than one purpose. Some were clearly refuse. Mixed in and below the shell layers were early 19th Century ceramics and other materials. Blue and green edgedware shards along with transfer decorated pearlware, annularware and flow blue shards were recovered. A U.S. penny dating to 1817 was recovered at the bottom of the shell layer. Aside from refuse materials, the shells in this area may have been purposely deposited around the house to serve as paving material. Though layers of clam and oyster shells were also recovered on the east side of the property they were not as dense. Finally, the

shells may have also been used in some areas of the western field as fertilizer. None of the shell concentrations uncovered could be deemed Native American shell middens as historic materials were always found in association with the shells.

As part of the reconstruction of the many phases of the farmhouse landscape we have uncovered several paths on the property. In addition to the shell paths a brick pathway was also uncovered on the western side of the property. Based on the bricks, this path appears to date to the early late 20th Century. It extended from the western door that leads down to the basement of the house, ending approximately 20 meters northwest of the house. Just below and to the left of this path was another brick pathway, which also extended from the back entranceway and stopped in the same general area as the path above it. The bricks date this second path to the early to mid 19th Century. Below both of these brick paths was another shell path. Based upon the materials found in association with this path it appears that the shells were laid during the late 18th to early 19th Century. Although not fully excavated, it appears this path also led to the same general area as the brick paths.

These paths led to the privy. Excavations and analysis have concluded this feature, with wood-lined walls and a sand floor, most likely dated to the late 19th century. Among the materials recovered were near complete chamber pots and cut glass serving items as well as a small number of plain ceramic whitewares, marbles, pipe bowls and stems (including a salt-glazed stoneware pipe and a redware pipe) a female denture plate, a portion of a copper wall clock and pieces

of 5 porcelain doll heads. The abundance of chamber pots, in the upper levels, led us to believe that they were discarded in a single dumping episode when some form of plumbing entered the house. The dates of the materials recovered from within the privy date between the 1850s and the 1880s. Although running water, from the City water system, was not available in this area of Kings County until 1927, gravity-fed indoor plumbing was in place by the last quarter of the 19th Century according to family oral history. This concurs with secondary sources, such as Gertrude Lefferts accounts of Dutch farming families in Kings County during the last half of the 19th Century. Miss Lefferts reported that the “new” invention of indoor bathrooms was very popular during this time period.

Unfortunately wells and privies from the first half of the century have not been found on site. It is likely that they lie to the north of the modern day property beneath the neighbor’s backyards.

Throughout the excavation one of our main goals has been to document the rapid transformation from farmland to suburban sprawl. The Lott property was an active farm in 1925 and by 1930 the landscape had completely changed. We have asked ourselves how did a family who’s entire social and economic make-up related to farming since 1719 adjust, when with in a very short time, less than 25 years the very fabric of their culture changed?

The Lotts began to sell off parts of the their land in the mid- 19th Century. The family used their newfound liquid wealth to re-landscape the property immediately surrounding the house with ornamental paths and gardens as well as a full size tennis court. There were several flagstone paths from the early 20th

century uncovered archaeologically just below ground surface. The family's means had changed and their landscape demonstrated this. However this did not mean that they completely abandoned their farming mentality as an interview in the New York Daily Eagle with the family in 1925 demonstrated. In the words of the reporter "this is probably the last year for George B. Lott to farm the place. George Lott must farm; so George Lott must move; but Jennie Lott, who now is Mrs. Suydam, is loath to go. The place is in her blood and she is somewhat at a loss now how to proceed."

The last piece of information into the everyday lifeways of the Lott family relates to the family's enslaved persons. It is known from documentary sources that the Lott family was one of the largest slave owning families in Flatlands during the 18th Century. They owned 12 enslaved persons. Evidence has been recovered at the Lott House that may link recovered materials to some of these enslaved persons. If our theory is correct, it will be the first time that archaeological evidence, from a domestic setting within New York City, has been linked directly to enslaved persons.

A recent architectural survey of the house revealed a trap door in a closet in the 1720s lean-to wing which once opened, revealed a stairway that led to the second floor of the circa 1720s portion of the house. Off to each side of the stairway were doors with window slats cut out. In each of these "rooms" were floorboards that spanned an area of 2 meters square. Candle wax drippings are present on the floorboards and on the stairway treads. There also appears to have

been a whole cut out, in the shape of a beehive oven, in the chimneystack in one of the rooms. No windows to the outside were present however.

Investigating the rooms we discovered that underneath the floorboards were a series of dried corncobs that were laid out in a geometric pattern, as well as dozens of scattered corncobs. The corn does not appear to have been burned, and dried kernels still remain on the stalk. Underneath the floorboards in the opposite room a pelvis bone of a sheep or goat and a cloth pouch tied with hemp string, more corncobs and needles and small glass beads were also recovered. Although we *do not* say with 100% certainty that enslaved persons resided in, and placed these items under the floorboards, when compared to other sites along the east coast of America, and taking the physical attributes of the area into account, the possibility exists that this was an area where enslaved persons may have resided.

Much of the information with regard to slavery in New York City has, until recently, been left to the historical record. From the historical record we know that the Lott family freed all but one of their enslaved persons, a woman over 45 years of age, by 1805. This is more than 20 years prior to New York State abolishing the institution of slavery. One can only speculate why they did this. We know that the Lott family's formerly enslaved persons remained on site as paid servants until the 1850s. One explanation for the Lotts having freed their enslaved persons may be that they were early abolitionists. The Protestant Dutch Reformed Church began preaching the evils of the institution of slavery just prior to the American Revolution. According to family oral tradition, historical

documentation and architectural evidence it appears that a closet within a closet located on the second floor of the house may have been used as a stop on the Underground Railroad. The circumstantial evidence is keeping in line with the family's earlier actions at the turn of the 19th Century. Research into this particular aspect of the project continues.

Currently, based on the study of the material remains and documentary sources it appears that the Lott family did not adhere to stereotypical ideas of what has been defined as the middle to upper class material culture. Even though the Lotts monetary wealth is well documented little in terms of fine earthenware or porcelain has been recovered. No teawares were found on site. Although the Lotts were a wealthy family, based upon their material culture one would think otherwise. This conclusion or revelation was also found at two other Dutch-American farm site excavations conducted by BC-ARC in this area of Kings County at the Pieter Claesen Wyckoff house and the Christian Duryea house. Does the lack of fine materials indicate a resistance to the Anglicized American marketplace of the 19th Century? Were these materials not available in this particular area of Kings County? Or was it just a case of rural persons not following what late 20th Century Historical Archaeology has come to regard as typical for persons of this economic class? As our project winds down, we are now piecing together a broader picture of what the daily lives of everyday farmers in the Town of Flatlands was like. Our goal will be to then take this information and apply what we have learned to other sites in the outer boroughs. Only then

can we truly understand what life was like for the majority of residents in these areas outside of Manhattan.