

The Sarah Whitby Site and African-American History

Rock Creek Park
District of Columbia

National Park Service
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Rock Creek Park

Sarah Whitby was an African-American woman whose family lived in Rock Creek Park between 1870 and 1900. The remains of her house were discovered by archeologists in 2005. Excavations of the Whitby house cellar, and documentary research done as part of the same project, have opened a window into Washington's African-American past.

The People of the Valley

Today Rock Creek Park is a wooded refuge within the crowded city of Washington, a place of recreation and relaxation. It is easy to imagine that this landscape is ancient, these trees a remnant of the primeval forest. But the park has a rich human history stretching back 10,000 years. When the park was established in 1892, the land was

not vacant, and dozens of people lived within its boundaries. The residents of the future park included property-owning farmers, tenants, and even a few pioneering suburbanites. The most prominent residents were the Shoemaker family, which owned Peirce Mill and took their legal battle against the Park Commission to the United States Supreme Court. Among the other residents were several African-American tenants. During a four-year archeological and historical study of the park, completed in 2007, these unknown African-American families were a major focus of the research.

A Diverse Population

Many records were made when Rock Creek Park was established that help us learn about the people

who lived there. Detailed descriptions were made of the properties purchased for the park, including the value of the buildings on them. Lists were also made of the tenants who leased land in the park. A few of the houses on land bought for the park were torn down within a few years, but many survived and were rented out until at least 1900. By comparing the lists of owners and tenants with the U.S. Census, we can discover the ethnic identity and occupations of the park's residents.

The census shows that the tenant population of the park was racially diverse. Samuel

Dominess, Louis Savoy, Fannie Bouldin, Charles and Jane Dickson, Elijah and Sarah

Whitby, and Hannah Williams were African-Americans. Hugh McMahon was an immigrant from Ireland and James Fegan was the son of Irish immigrants, while Mason Anderson and David Duley were white men born in the District. One segment of the 1880 census could represent a line of tenant houses along Blagden Road. It lists, in order, Robert Cross, Augustus Johnson, and Thomas Sharp, all

black, and then Hugh McMahon and Patrick Ryan, both Irish.

African American Migration to Washington

After the Civil War, many thousands of African-Americans left the South and moved north to Washington and other cities. Black Washington was booming in those years. The

options limited by racism. Thousands of women worked as domestic servants, many men as laborers.

Delancey Gill and Black Washington

Many of Washington's new African-American residents settled around the fringes of the city, including the heights overlooking Rock Creek. We have a good idea of the kind of houses occupied by black migrants to Washington in the 1880s because of a series of remarkable drawings by DeLancey Gill. Gill was an artist with the Smithsonian's Bureau of Ethnography, and his professional specialty was drawing Hopi pueblos, Navaho hogans, and other Indian structures from the southwest. But while he was in Washington, Gill made at least a dozen studies of the homes occupied by black migrants.

The Sarah Whitby Site

Among the many African-American families that moved to Washington were the Whitbys. In 1895 the Whitbys rented a house on a small parcel of land that had belonged to Isaac Shoemaker. According to the census, the family came from North Carolina. One part of the 1895 rental lists the family under the name Elijah Widby, but in the other part of the rental and in the 1900 census the family is headed by Sarah Whitby, probably Elijah's widow. According to the census, Sarah Whitby worked as a laundress. She had nine children, and although she was herself illiterate, all of her children could read. Because the property was small and included only one house, archeologists thought it gave them a good chance to find the home of an identifiable African-American family.



Historic Map Showing Peirce Mill, the homes of the Blagdens and Shoemakers, and the Mix of Farms and Woodlands along Rock Creek in 1860.



James Wormley's Hotel, One of Washington's Premier Black-Owned Businesses in the 1800s.

black population of the city grew from around 14,000 in 1860 to 87,000 in 1900, more than half of them immigrants from the South. Many African-Americans were able to move up the economic ladder, entering skilled trades, founding businesses, and owning their own homes. A few even got rich, like James Wormley, who built his famous hotel at 15th and H streets in 1871. But most African-Americans in Washington remained relatively poor, their economic



Drawing by Delancey Gill of one of the Houses on Washington's Outskirts where Black Migrants from the South lived, 1883.

The Sarah Whitby Site



Artist's Reconstruction of the Sarah Whitby House.

Archeologists also suspected that the Whitbys' house might be quite old. It was not small by the standards of the time, since it had two rooms and a stable, but its condition was listed as "poor" and it rented for the very small sum of \$3 a month. Using the archeological evidence from the excavation of the cellar, the description of the house given in the rental ("two-room"), and the DeLancey Gill drawings, an artist was able to reconstruct what the Whitby house may have looked like.

After taking a close look at the five-acre property where the Whitbys' house should have been, archeologists noticed a depression in the ground close to a large



Excavating at the Sarah Whitby Site.

walnut tree. They dug a small hole in the center of the depression, and underneath about half a foot of sod and recent fill they found bricks, corrugated roofing metal, and artifacts dating to around 1900. These finds encouraged them to go back to the site and do a larger dig. They uncovered a cellar hole measuring about 10x12 feet, with stone foundations and a stone floor. Most of the artifacts found in the cellar date to around 1900, but a few are older. These include two sherds of

colonoware, a kind of pottery made by slaves before the Civil War. The discovery of these sherds confirmed the guess that the Whitbys' house was quite old. It may have been built as far back as the early 1800s, and it was probably occupied by African-Americans for many decades. More than 500 artifacts were found in the cellar. One of the most interesting things about this collection was how many buttons were found: 52. It is very unusual to find so many buttons in such a small excavation, and the buttons may be related to Sarah Whitby's work as a laundress. One of the buttons was inscribed "Saville Row," the street where London's finest tailors plied their trade. If this button really came from Saville Row it shows that at least one of Sarah Whitby's clients was very well dressed indeed.



Some of the 52 Buttons Found in the Cellar of Sarah Whitby's House.

The Charles and Jane Dickson Sites

Of all the property owners who sold land for the park, only two were African-Americans: Jane Dickson and Charles Dickson. The two Dicksons (we are not sure



An Excavation Unit in Sarah Whitby's Cellar, Showing the Stone Floor.

how they were related) owned nearly identical lots, each consisting of a quarter acre of land, a small house, and a garden. These properties caught the eye of historians because they represent the type of provision some slave owners made for freed slaves, and it was thought that they might represent old slave quarter sites. But the name Dickson does not appear among the slaves of the Peirce family, which owned the surrounding land. Though the chain of title for these properties is obscure, it seems that the Dicksons purchased these lots in the 1860s. Since the park's property map gave nearly exact locations for these houses, archeologists found them easily.

The Jane Dickson Site is on a small wooded hilltop. Here archeologists dug shovel tests across the hilltop and found a scattering of artifacts: nails, brick fragments, window glass, bottle glass, a small china button, and a piece of a white ceramic plate.

The Charles Dickson Site is a few hundred yards away from Jane Dickson's home. Here archeologists found almost nothing in their first shovel tests, probably because the area had been graded with heavy machinery when the park was built. But they noticed a small depression at the edge of the grassy lawn, and a test placed in the center of that depression produced brick pieces and a handful of artifacts. The depression, like that at the Sarah Whitby Site, turned out to be the surface sign of an old cellar hole. That shovel test was expanded into a 3x3-foot excavation

and more artifacts were found, including bottle glass, pieces of ceramic dishes, a glass bead, and a railroad spike.

The Cart Driver

One of the artifacts that came out of the cellar hole at the Charles Dickson Site was an iron figurine of a man, about 3.5 inches tall. He wore a hat and held his hands in front of him. His very full lips suggested that he was intended to be African-American. One of the archeologists recognized that he resembled the negro cart drivers that were common figures in old metal toys (and in real life, as carting was one of the main occupations of black men in Washington). A bit of research led to an image of an antique mule cart toy for sale with a driver that looked very much like the one from the Charles Dickson Site. This little object provides a delightful glimpse into the Dicksons' home, where children played with the cart and imagined having mules and carts of their own.



Collectible Object.



Cart Driver Before Conservation.



Cart Driver After Conservation.

PROTECT OUR SITES

The Archeological Resource Protection Act makes it a federal crime to damage archeological sites on federal lands or to remove artifacts from federal property. Unauthorized metal detecting and artifact collecting are strictly forbidden in the park and on all other federal property.

Report Crimes and Park Emergencies to 1-866-677-6677 Toll Free