

## **Excavations at the Thompson House Site in Setauket, New York**

### **Introduction**

The Thompson House project is an ongoing historical and archaeological investigation of an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century farmstead in Setauket, New York (Figure 1). The house was a plural site, where diverse people interacted and shared objects, practices, and space as they lived and negotiated a daily existence. Historical research revealed the home's plural origins while archaeological excavations recovered materials related to daily activity. Two objectives directed the design and implementation of this research. First, to determine how the transition from enslaved to wage labor unfolded in practice and affected the relations between white families and nonwhite laborers. Because people of African and American and mixed-heritage ancestry have faded from public memory, the second objective of this project is to bring to light the contributions of nonwhite residents and laborers to the making of the Thompson House site. Grants from the National Science and Wenner Gren Foundations funded this research project.



Figure 1 - Thompson House

### **Site Background**

Five generations of the Thompson family occupied the house between the time it was built in the early eighteenth century and 1885 when it was sold outside the family. Surviving documents and records tell us that the Thompsons were profitable farmers, and many used their prominent positions in the community to pursue successful

careers in medicine, law, and politics. We learn from many important family papers that the Thompsons maintained a surplus-producing farm that generated a wide array of raw and manufactured commodities. Tending the fields and maintaining the house required a substantial amount of seasonal, monthly, and daily labor that exceeded the family's capacity. To meet their needs, the Thompsons relied on the coerced labor of enslaved men and women.

Twenty-five individual men, women, and children were bonded to the Thompsons between 1745 and 1826, with as many as ten individuals at once, a very large number of laborers for one Long Island household (Moss 1993:72; Table 1). The enslaved would have likely occupied the lean-to attic and garret when they were not laboring in the fields, maintaining the house, or serving the Thompson family (see Fitts 1996; Garman 1998). Samuel Thompson (1738-1811), the third generation owner, recorded in a journal how enslaved laborers, whose work was often overseen by a family member or neighbor, shouldered most of the agricultural and domestic activities. The same journal has the earliest reference of remunerating workers in 1803, while the family employed waged workers exclusively after emancipation in 1827. Newly freed people of color constituted a bulk of this workforce and, because access to property remained limited to members of the nonwhite community, many workers continued to board with the Thompsons.

### **Methods**

Excavations at the Thompson House began in 2013 as part of a larger community-based project known as "A Long Time Coming." A collaborative effort between academics, a local heritage organization, and members of the descendent community, ALTC aims to raise awareness about the history and heritage of Setauket's mixed heritage Native and African American community in the wake of recent and continuous efforts to gentrify their culturally and historically significant neighborhood.

Two seasons of excavations at the Thompson House site recovered 18,000 macro (>1/4") artifacts from 53 shovel test pits and 40 one-meter square excavation units across the house yard (Figure 2). We also collected soil samples for micro and soil chemical analyses. Studies indicate that microartifacts better represent in-situ activity and can delineate activity areas in the absence of macro remains. Soil chemical analysis is a broadly-applicable technique that is suitable for a wide range of archaeological needs, but for the purposes of this project, chemical measurements are used to help locate and identify activity areas. Microartifact analyses are being conducted at

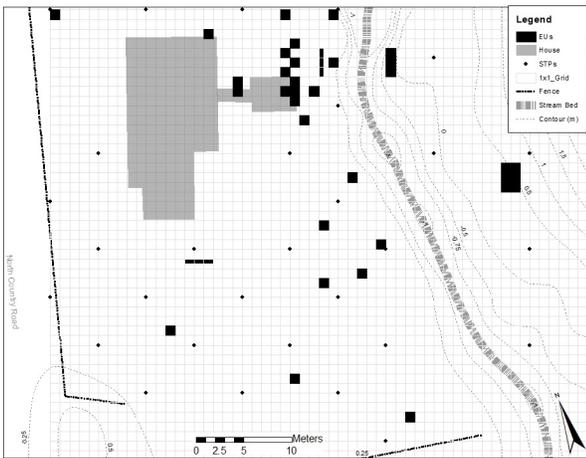


Figure 2. Plan of excavations at the Thompson House to date. The footprint of the attached kitchen was estimated using historical photographs and in situ foundation (Illustrated by author, 2014).

Northwestern University's Archaeology Teaching Laboratory and Dr. James Burton has graciously undertaken the soil chemical analyses at the T. Douglas Price Laboratory for Archaeological Chemistry at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. All analyses are ongoing, but the following discussion draws from multiple lines of data to map the architectural biography of the house and to track the location of daily and seasonal activities in light of these changes, including cooking, gardening, and fertilizer production.

**Findings**

The documentary record indicates the Thompson House underwent two significant alterations within a relatively short period of time. First, the family added a wing to the south end of their house, complete with a private hearth, cellar, and separate entrance (Figure 3). We know this phase of construction was completed shortly before

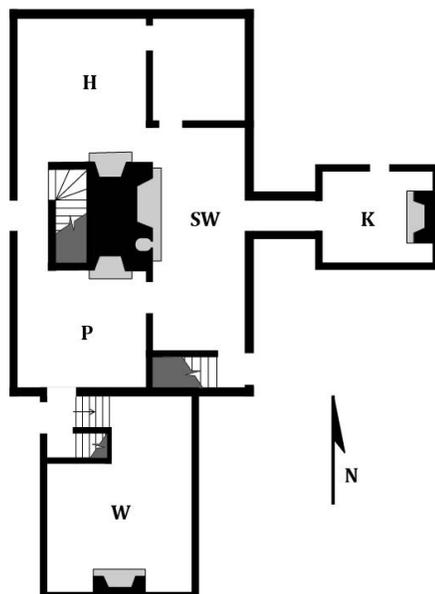


Figure 3. Plan drawing of first floor of Thompson House showing ca. 1800 additions. (P) parlor; (H) hall; (SW) service wing; (K) kitchen addition; (W) wing addition. Not to scale. (Drawing by author, 2014)

1807, the year Samuel Thompson referenced it as the "new room" in his last will and testament. Historical photographs collected for the Historic American Buildings Survey in the 1930s indicate that yet another building was constructed and eventually attached to the service wing of the Thompson house. This addition was razed during restoration in the 1940s, but excavations in

2013 uncovered the buildings' stone foundation and diagnostic artifacts narrow the date of construction to sometime between 1790 and 1820. The high number of kitchen-related artifacts confirmed our initial belief that the building functioned as an external kitchen. Associating the objects with the architecture, then, means that food preparation and cooking were removed from the original service wing and relocated to the attached kitchen after it was built around 1800.

Archaeological data suggests additional activities were relocated to other areas of the property around the same time the kitchen and wing were built in the early 1800s. One such activity is fertilizer production, represented archaeologically by a series of shell dumps dating to the 1700s. Shell fertilizer production is a practice well documented on Long Island historically (Livingston 1794; Pell 1846) and archaeologically (Ceci 1984; Lightfoot et al. 1985). Farmers and workers mined Native American shell mounds along the Long Island coast and "pulverized" the shell before spreading it with manure as a composite fertilizer for their crops. Gardening is another activity represented by a pre-emancipation feature consisting of a series of alternating deposits of very dark brown loam found within the surrounding lighter colored matrix. These are interpreted as the rows of a kitchen garden for provisioning the Thompson family (Figure 4). The narrow, irregular deposits, the feature's close proximity to the house, and references to a house garden in family papers support this conclusion. Evidence for fertilizer production and gardening were absent in nineteenth-century contexts.

**Discussion/Implications**



Figure 3. Plan drawing of first floor of Thompson House showing ca. 1800 additions. (P) parlor; (H) hall; (SW) service wing; (K) kitchen addition; (W) wing addition. Not to scale. (Drawing by author, 2014)

The transition from enslaved to wage labor is depicted in the archaeological record as distinct strategies for imposing different forms of labor. The archaeology and

architecture associated with the pre-emancipation period convey an image of surveillance and control. Enslaved laborers performed their daily, monthly, and seasonal activities such as cooking, fertilizer production, and gardening in close proximity to the house presumably so the Thompsons could oversee their labor force. Close observation of the enslaved workers by a family member or neighbor minimized unwanted impediments such as work slowdowns, overt sabotage, theft, or absconding. Physical surveillance inside the house certainly continued during times of rest, as laborers would have retired to the lean-to attic where they spent their nights under the same roof and just one room away from their owners.

The gradual- and post-emancipation era conveys a much different image, one with increased physical and social distance between white family members and nonwhite waged workers. While slaves would have prepared meals in the service wing, nonwhite waged workers undertook the same work in the new external kitchen. Shell fertilizer production and household provisioning persisted well into the nineteenth century, meaning the Thompsons likely relocated these activities to new areas beyond the yard. The physical distance the Thompsons created between themselves and their laborers was facilitated and embodied by the new relations of wage labor.

Nonwhite workers did take advantage of their new status as wage laborers and the physical distance the systems afforded. For example, waged workers laboring in the external kitchen threw out refuse from the backdoor of the structure. A shell midden composed of relatively small (1-5cm) kitchen-related artifacts like ceramics and faunal remains represents this practice archaeologically. This practice was absent from earlier contexts outside the rear door of the lean-to service wing, indicating this activity was adopted under wage labor. Throwing trash out the backdoor could be interpreted as an act of resistance as it occurred during the same period the Thompsons attempted to transform the utilitarian yard by removing signs of labor. However, laborers may have simply used the practice as a way to cope with the material conditions of existence and to ease their heavy workload. Evidence of stone tool production was also recovered in later contexts coinciding with and postdating the construction of the kitchen. Quartz flakes and two finished tools provide the evidence. The tools suggest workers used the physical distance allowed by wage labor as an opportunity to express their cultural identity. These expressions, in turn, would have been material markers of inclusion into their community.

The documentary record tells us that the Thompsons continuously relied on the labor of nonwhite workers during their tenure in the home. The archaeological and architectural record, however, indicates that people of color became less and less conspicuous in the landscape over time. Prior to emancipation, enslaved laborers would have interacted in close quarters with the Thompson family on a daily basis as domestic servants traversed the house while caring for and serving the Thompson family. The close proximity of the service wing to both the hall and parlor meant visitors would have seen enslaved workers performing their daily routines and perhaps engaged with them directly. Domestic servants, and the sights, sounds,

and smells of preparing and cooking meals were effectively removed from the house after adopting wage labor and constructing the attached kitchen. Domestic servants continued cooking for the Thompson family, but they now performed their task in a space beyond family members' and guests' senses. Attaching the wing to the south gable also coincides with the period of emancipation. The leasing of this space to non-white laborers would not have been unprecedented, as stories abound of free families in New York renting housing and property from their white employers (Moss 1993:176–179; Gellman 2006:196–197). The same expectations underpinning the removal of black laborers from areas inside applied to areas outside the house as some of the activities workers conducted in the yard as slaves are absent in the period after emancipation. In sum, the Thompsons used wages to hide the work of their laborers and mask the space as homogeneously white.

#### Conclusion

Residents take pride in Setauket's historical sites and the heritage they represent. While white families like the Thompsons remain vivid in public memory, the many nonwhite workers who lived and labored alongside prominent families continue to fade from historical memory (see Melish 1998:210–237). Put in a different way, they have fallen victim to historical amnesia. Many factors contribute to this erasure, no least of which is their under-documentation in history and their continued omission from historical representations like local narratives and museums.

Archaeology is well equipped to repopulate historical landscapes from which marginalized groups have been forgotten and erased (Paynter 1990). Unfortunately, the pluralistic settings of historic sites like the Thompson House has presumably discouraged archaeologists from seeing the archaeological potential of these sites as opportunities to learn about African American life in the North (see Silliman 2010 for an insightful discussion of plural sites and their unrecognized potential). These plural sites, where white families and black workers lived under the same roof, should be considered a chance to learn about the varied lived experiences of black men and women in North America, not a constraint that leads to their continued invisibility. Labor brought these people together, and it seems appropriate to examine the labor relations that directed their movements, activities, and interactions as they created and gave meaning to these sites. Masters and employers may have purchased the commodities, but workers used, broke, and discarded them on a daily basis. It can be said that what we excavate at these intimately shared sites is just as much (if not more) the result of workers actions as it is the white family who imposed their labor.

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TABLE 1.  
Occupation Periods and Laborers

Period	ThompsonFamily	Laborers
-1749	Samuel and Hannah	Sharper (E), Sylvia (E), Priscilla (E), Jenny (E), Frank (E), Tony (E)
1749-1786	Jonathon & Mary	Sharper (E), Priscilla (E), Mingo (E), Cato (E), Bette (E), Andrew (E)
1786-1811	Samuel & Ruth	Dol (E), Lue (E), Cuff (E), Robin (E), Mima (E), Huldah Ann (E), Simon (E), Killis (E), Amy (I), Hannah (I), Sharper (E)
1811-1865	Samuel L. & Sophia	Rose (E), Harriet (I)b, Hannah (I), Sharper(I/W), Five "Free Colored Persons" (U); Three "Free Colored Persons (W)
1865-1885	Mary L. & Thomas Strong	Jeremiah Oaks (W), Rachel Woodhull (W), Tama Davis (W), David Williams (W)

- a (E) enslaved; (I) possibly indentured; (W) waged. Laborers were possibly indentured if born after 1799.
- b Harriet, born 1811, would have been indentured until 1838 if she served the twenty five years of servitude stipulated in the gradual emancipation act. The last of the indentures recorded at the Thompson House.

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