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Archaeological analysis of the construction of identity in an African American activist community

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Archaeological Analysis of the Construction of Identity
in an African American Activist Community

by

Corey D. McQuinn

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ABSTRACT

The legacy of slavery in Albany created a racialized landscape and economy that marginalized African Americans in the years leading up to manumission in 1827 and beyond. A small enclave of African American families on Livingston Avenue provided a study group for how marginalized individuals create, maintain, and abandon urban communities. In addition, individuals in the group demonstrated well-documented involvement in the local Vigilance Committee, providing an opportunity to examine activism as a factor in the construction of racial and cultural identity. The study of identity construction on multiple scales has been pursued by anthropologists, but rarely in archaeology beyond defining sets of ethnic, gender, and racial characterizations. This study proposes examining individual and community identity through the structures of racism and resistance. Consumption strategies of African Americans manifest in individual choices at a household level, but are situated in a larger social structure of political and institutionalized racial and class oppression. By examining the Johnson house and ceramics found in an 1850s deposit at the site, the contradictory and creative elements of African American consumption practices provide useful insights into how this community formed. The material culture analysis demonstrates that African American consumption in this activist community involved demonstrations of status transformations and class solidarity. Political racism continues to affect the modern-day community where the site is situated, and indirectly threatens the cultural resources of the past activist residents.
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Introduction

In 1839, anti-slavery activists held the National Anti-Slavery Convention in Albany, New York, to call for immediate abolition and universal suffrage for all African Americans, both enslaved and free (New York Emancipator 1839:58). Local newspapers reported on the convention and listed the attendees not only in abolitionist periodicals but also in moderate mainstream newspapers. Similar meetings also occurred in Syracuse, Rochester, New York City, and Utica during the 1830s and later. The attendees at the Albany convention came from all over the Northeast and as far away as Michigan, though the majority hailed from New York State.

Four years earlier, an open letter appeared in the Albany Argus, a conservative newspaper where news of abolitionist activities was rare (Albany Argus 1835:3). The brief letter, in advance of another similar anti-slavery convention in Albany, stated that the upcoming meeting of abolitionists was a threat to security and an affront to society. The unnamed author described the mood of the convention as “inflammatory… seditious…and intermeddling” (Albany Argus 1835:3; Saratoga Sentinel 1835:3). Over 300 (presumably white) men signed the letter, representing businessmen and tradesmen from Albany and all over the Hudson and Mohawk River valleys. Comparison of the attendees with a typescript of Albany’s manumission records (Yoshpe 1941) and early 19th-century censuses (US Bureau of the Census 1790, 1800, 1810) revealed that at least 14 of these 300 men were former slaveowners from the city of Albany.

The public discourse between African Americans and former slaveowners and their supporters shaped race relations in upstate New York and most other Northeastern communities in the early 1800s. The gradual manumission period of 1799–1827 was
trying for New York’s African Americans, as thousands continued to be enslaved through their prime years and free men and women were repeatedly demanded to prove their free status (McManus 1969). For the men who signed the 1835 letter, the local economy still harvested the fruits of enslaved labor in the Southern states (Bailey 1998). Northern textile mills relied on Southern cotton and Northern farms continued to supply food and supplies to Southern plantations, maintaining a dependency on continued enslavement of African- and Native Americans. Additionally, a widely presumed white supremacism that took hold during New York’s enslavement and gradual manumission years was overtly challenged by African American resistance to continued enslavement in the South. While there are likely other enslavers on the 1835 list of signees, as well as other men who benefitted economically from enslavement, there were certainly others who saw increased rights and suffrage for African Americans as a threat to their own prosperity in the form of intra-class competition.

Similarly, the attendees of the anti-slavery convention could not easily forget how recently manumission came to enslaved people in New York. While available records (Yoshpe 1941) can confirm only one formerly enslaved man (Henry Ostrander, a grocer on State Street in Albany’s downtown) attended the convention, it is very likely that many other attendees were either once enslaved in New York or elsewhere or were the children of enslaved people. Moreover, as the 1835 letter demonstrates, African Americans in New York State, regardless of their legal status, continued to face racial discrimination and disenfranchisement. So, while the convention argued for emancipation of those still enslaved in New Jersey, the South, and abroad, the struggle must have also resonated with the intimate stories of each individual agent in this collective resistance.
This public dialogue provides an example and reminder of the legacy of enslavement and its basis in racial oppression. These events also establish that African Americans in Albany failed to be content with their own freedom. With roots in anti-slavery activism, it is therefore not a surprise that the history of Albany also includes well-documented participation in the Underground Railroad. Rather than treat the Underground Railroad as an isolated heritage topic and interpretive framework in this paper, it is viewed as part of a dynamic context that articulates anti-slavery activism with the creation of new African American communities in Albany and beyond. The above meetings took place as abolitionists argued over how best to accomplish their goal: moral suasion or immediate abolition by any means necessary (Sernett 2004). David Walker’s widely read 1829 Appeal forced the issue further and turned the tide for abolition activism (Turner 1993:14). As local businessmen and politicians in Albany rallied to quell the voice of abolitionists in their city, a small community of African American families came together on Livingston Avenue in the city’s rapidly expanding Arbor Hill neighborhood (Figures 1 and 2). Notably, among these families are documented anti-slavery activists and conductors of the Underground Railroad. Archaeological investigations were conducted at three sites associated with African Americans in this neighborhood during week-long public archaeology workshops for junior high students in 2010–2012. Data from the ongoing archaeological analysis of this Livingston Avenue enclave identify aspects of agency and resistance at both the personal scale as well as at the scale of the community as they negotiated a racialized historical landscape. The material culture demonstrates how the residents of this community constructed an
identity for themselves and others through consumption strategies and overt messages through material possessions.

Other archaeologists have examined how political, social, and economic aspects of racism and racial identity manifest in the material culture record (e.g., LaRoche 2004; Mullins 1999; Orser 2004, 2007). They point to evidence in the formation of the community, the construction of the built environment, and the use of material items to convey social messages, both within the community and to a broader audience. The use of these symbols and things factor into the creation of individual and community identity. Anthropologists such as Miller (1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2009) and McCracken (2008) demonstrate how individuals transform identities through both physical and social means, yet still reflect an aesthetic molded by a larger group. I follow the conclusions and suggestions of these examples to examine the historical archaeological record of the African Americans who lived on Livingston Avenue in the 1840s through 1860s to document the nature of their community and activism in the name of racial justice and how material culture reflects individual identity construction choices.

Project Background

This study focuses on a small community of African Americans living in a row of six houses on Livingston Avenue in Albany’s Arbor Hill neighborhood. Arbor Hill first coalesced as a community in the early 1840s and the African American enclave under study persisted into the late 1860s, although two residents may have lived there as early as the turn of the 19th century. Neighborhoods like Arbor Hill were typical for Albany and other Northeastern cities, where African Americans settled to take advantage of the growing opportunities of industrialization. It was not uncommon for African Americans
to gather in small enclaves of people with common skilled backgrounds (Bielinski 1996). Many of the men who lived on Livingston Avenue were involved in the city’s shipping industry, employed as boatmen and porters, skippers and captains. It is also known that many members of the group were anti-slavery activists. Many supported the local Vigilance Committee, the main arm of Underground Railroad resistance, and published their opinions in widely read abolitionist periodicals. All of the African-American residents of Livingston Avenue moved by the late 1860s, and the neighborhood continued as a mostly Irish- and German-American neighborhood with increasingly fewer African Americans. It was only after World War II, that the African-American population of Arbor Hill again increased. As in many urban areas in the North, this racial turnover co-occurred with a decline of the area’s standard of living and the Arbor Hill neighborhood is now one of the more impoverished quarters of Albany (Kennedy 1983:94).

To help to combat this decline and to provide resources for the community, the Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc. (URHPCR) has acquired six houselots, which include four of the known lots in the early 19th-century African-American enclave. The goal of this effort by URHPCR is to educate the public on local African American history and preserve the stories and material culture of resistance. Only three houses currently stand on the six lots that comprised the community; 194 Livingston Avenue was the former home of Johnson and Myers families who were prominent members of the local activist group (Figure 3). The URHPCR purchased the Johnson residence in 2004 as well as several of the other nearby lots. The mission of URHPCR is to “raise awareness of the Underground Railroad’s local context
in New York’s Capital Region and share the stories of the freedom seekers and African American abolitionists through preservation, interpretation, and community involvement” (URHPCR 2012). The organization hosts an annual professional and academic workshop and conference at Russell Sage College in Troy, New York, and participates in local arts and cultural activities. Since purchasing the Johnson house, URHPCR has secured grants and other funding to stabilize and rehabilitate the brick townhouse. They intend eventually to open the space as an interpretive center to explain the local mid-19th-century anti-slavery activism.

While the URHPCR’s situation with the Johnson house demands an interpretive focus on the lives of abolitionists and publishers Stephen and Harriet Myers, the organization understands the critical need for investigation into the other members of the surrounding community, whether they supported abolition or not. Accordingly, the URHPCR has hosted three annual youth archaeological field schools, facilitated by Hartgen Archeological Associates, Inc. (Hartgen) and co-sponsored by the Albany County Historical Association (ACHA). These archaeological studies have examined the Johnson House site at 194 Livingston Avenue as well as houselots at 196 Livingston Avenue and the home of Dr. Thomas Elkins at 186 Livingston Avenue. Looking beyond just the Johnson site, the URHPCR has engaged in a dynamic examination of how this small bloc of African Americans supported, maintained, and advanced their resistance of racial oppression and constructed individual and collective identities.

The partnership between the URHPCR and Hartgen archaeologists has been characterized by mutual support and a shared mission to examine the Underground Railroad as a dynamic social movement, rather than a fixed point in time with a list of
expected contexts. This relationship differs from other situations where the tension typically existing between mission-driven interpretation and the archaeological research process can cause friction. Archaeologists and site stewards have historically navigated this tension, sometimes with adverse effects, but often with great rewards, unexpected discoveries, and new angles of interpretations (see Delle and Levine 2004, Delle and Shellenhammer 2007, Delle 2008, Armstrong and Wurst 2003). Although the URHPCR is focused on a narrow window of history as its primary period of significance, archaeologists have been encouraged to examine how other residents and neighbors supported the movement and how the community changed.

**Racialization and Communities: A Dynamic Approach for Historical Archaeology**

This study focuses on two interwoven processes—racialization and community formation—in an effort to understand how the Livingston Avenue community shaped their individual and collective identities as (but not limited to) African Americans, activists, and families. Examination of race in archaeology has evolved over the past century or so, beginning with a 19th-century search for rationalization of political racism through phrenology and evolutionary studies. Since then, archaeological studies of race relations have benefitted from the examination of enslavement contexts, both on Southern plantations and in the Northeast. This study has branched out, appropriately, to examine other racialized relationships, and has departed from what had been in the past a search for essentialized categories of material culture emblematic of a particular racial group (Singleton 1999:6-7).

The historical anecdote provided at the beginning of this paper is more than just a narrative device. As discussed above, it is an attempt to present an example of the
struggle, racially, between two groups over political space and identity. At the time these conferences were held, the world had been changed by three centuries of a global enslavement system, focusing in the New World eventually on West Africans. The example of the dueling conferences provides a backdrop of the struggle between whites and nonwhites galvanized by enslavement.

Events such as these over the centuries contribute to a historical arc of racial relations in a place like Albany, with a little over two centuries of continuous Euroamerican habitation previously. Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus* has been very influential to historical archaeologists, but has its critics. Bourdieu (2002:88-93) suggests that the structural relationships in society are learned partly through embodiment and physical experience learned in several different relationships, such as family and school. Bourdieu (2002:90) speaks of the interaction between individuals and the house or domestic setting as a way in which people embody and learn the guiding structures. This establishes a strong role for the physical landscape, in this case, the Johnson house, as an essential piece of the identity puzzle for the Livingston Avenue community.

Constructing an identity for themselves, African Americans in this study were actively engaging in resistance to an established political structure. Foucault (1982:780) states that an examination of strategies of resistance and struggle are a potent way of understanding power relations. Resisters are actively engaged in asking “Who are we?”, acknowledging the ability of economic, political, and ideological power relations to diminish or negate the individual (Foucault 1982:781). In doing this, power relations establish individuals as subjects, assigning state-sanctioned identities and roles to people. This relation repeats itself throughout history and becomes part of the “structured
structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” evoked by Bourdieu (2002:72). Identity construction performed by African Americans can be seen as a resistance to established racial power relations, structures that historically limited the “possible field of action” (Foucault 1982:790).

Archaeologists understand more about construction of power and identity in the historic past and describe the dialectical relations of habitus and power as negotiated and nuanced depending on the context. Charles Orser is credited with mobilizing a critical study of racialization in historic archaeology, in which he describes racialization as “an ongoing process that creates a racially meaningful social relationship where one previously did not exist” (Orser 2007:9). This establishes publically accepted and embodied practices and beliefs that account for those social structures that become taken for granted as part of the habitus. As a dynamic, continuous system, racialization is best understood as something that requires constant negotiation between agents and frequent positioning and repositioning in a constructed racial hierarchy. By analyzing racialization as a formative process on American archaeological sites, historical archaeologists have a broader opportunity to understand how race was constructed and adapted to maintain a hierarchy and continue to marginalize African Americans and other nonwhite groups (Orser 2007:70). Based on Foucault’s (1982) description of the use of power, this limitation of African American freedom and political participation was precisely the effect (1982:790). Orser (2004:115, 143) also states that this discourse is necessarily dialectical, requiring opposing parties of whites and nonwhites to maintain this political tension. This translates into ideological struggles based on racial identity in nearly every arena of public life: economics, politics, geography, religion.
Anthropologists engaged in an analysis of the problem of identity in contemporary situations acknowledge the role of artifacts and material culture in the discourse. Daniel Miller (1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2008) has led the field in understanding how identity is shaped and broadcast via individual and social interactions with material possessions. Miller (1995:2) laments the historic absence of the primacy of material goods from past ethnographic studies and aims to push them to the fore as an integral piece in understanding identity through consumption. Consumption, in tandem with other social processes, contributes to the construction of identity, but does not stand as the sole manifestation of identity (Miller 1995:32). Instead, the act or performance of consuming stands as a contradictory dialectic specific to the particular context (Miller 1995:33-34).

Miller also states that constructing individual identity is situated in our understanding of the *habitus* (2009:4). The aesthetic or taste of an individual, while outwardly expressed as something unique, is a product of a social structure (Miller 2009:5). When dealing with archaeological assemblages, the aesthetic suggested by a suite of ceramic dishes, then, is partly a product of individual taste, but at its base, the selections are guided by larger social structures and limited to the existing possibilities. Miller applied this concept of aesthetics to a London city street in *The Comfort of Things* (2009:7) and found that a study of aesthetics was “not to examine what people no longer were, but to emphasize instead what they had become.” By stating this, the study of individual identity construction within a framework of a large social structure limiting aesthetics and taste placed more emphasis on aspirations. In the case of the Livingston Avenue community, the aesthetic displayed in material culture owes more to the aims of the group and individual and not the enslaved past.
The identity construction happening on Livingston Avenue, both at the individual and community level, are types of transformations. Grant McCracken (2008) analyzed how transformations of self occur in popular and contemporary culture. There are many forms or trajectories of transformation, but the Livingston Avenue families, as far as we can tell from the artifacts and documents, were most likely engaged in a status transformation process (McCracken 2008). While status positioning is learned through embodiment when we are children (following Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*), status transformations mostly occur later in life (McCracken 2008:57). McCracken (2008:60) suggests that even the quest for higher class status is ingrained as part of the *habitus*, and at least attempts at transformation should be expected at the individual level. When striving for status transformation, the easiest way to achieve this is with the curation of material possessions, which is typically the first step in the transformative process, followed by changes in comportment, language, customs, in an ascending hierarchy of social ability (McCracken 2008:67). This process is best facilitated in groups, such as social clubs, churches, and educational institutions, where the skills and social mastery are routinized (McCracken 2008:70). In the case of African Americans, McCracken states that historically this transformation did not equal assimilation (McCracken 2008:77-78). Instead, there is an ambivalent lateral transformation, described by some as “passing,” where African Americans, through the embodiment of “white” customs and affects, and aided by a lighter complexion, may “pass” in white society, but never be totally accepted (McCracken 2008:78). This process walks a fine line between “perfect(ing) the lie…and risk(ing) the ‘real’ self” (McCracken 2008:78).
Both Miller and McCracken show how material goods can be used to construct self identities, but the actions are inextricably tied to the larger social aesthetic or \textit{habitus}. Within the process of racialization described by Orser (2007), people are engaged in constructing identities for themselves and imposing them on others, as well as resisting identities forced upon them by the state (Foucault 1982:780). Paul Mullins (1999) shows through the archaeological record how this is accomplished in part through the consumption of often prosaic material goods. African-American consumption patterns were partly influenced or shaped by a politically racialized environment. Balance between an intended meaning of an object and the meaning constructed by African Americans thus factored into how objects could be used in the construction of a cultural identity (Mullins 1999:24–25). Above all, however, an examination of African-American consumption practices in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century is not meant to be a search for a universal pattern or essential African American identity (Mullins 1999:76–77, see also Singleton 1999:7-8). Instead, the discourse over identity and meaning of material culture is more active and complicated. The intended meaning of materials may even be upheld by certain power relations, which memorialize certain histories and deny others. Also, echoing Miller (1995), consumption patterns are played out within the \textit{habiti} of contemporary society.

An analysis of racialization should not rely only on the mechanisms of race power relations. Certainly, within particular racialized groups, whether identified internally or externally, there are additional social negotiations at play, such as class and capital (Orser 2007:59). Sherry Ortner (2006:73), in an ethnographic study of the middle and working class in modern New Jersey, argues that in the discussion and negotiation of identity,
culture, ethnicity, race and class are nearly impossible to isolate. She (2006:130) also states that individuals, or “agents,” “are always involved in, and can never act outside of, the multiplicity of social relations in which they are enmeshed.” McCracken (2008:78) states that the interaction of race and status is more complex when it comes to social mobility. Ortner’s version of practice theory integrates structure and agency, so that neither receives precedence over the other in cultural analysis. For the African-American community on Livingston Avenue, understanding the group solely as one of solidarity against racial oppression denies the nuanced and varied cultural, economical, and psychological histories of the individuals involved.

Community formation among African Americans has been a popular topic only recently for social geographers, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists (see Cha-Jua 2000:5–6). By far, the consensus now is that community formation, maintenance, and dissolution is a dynamic process. There can be no essentialist understanding of how an African-American community coalesces. Archaeologists now show that studies of communities in action can provide opportunities for public political discourse (Wall et al. 2004) and “bridge the comfortable but contrived distance between past and present” (Mullins 2004:61). Situated within a process of racialization, community formation can be viewed as the type of “serious game” envisioned by Ortner (2006:129) when she discusses the role of intentionality in a study of practice theory. The formation of communities thus becomes part of the reproduction and transformation of culture by social actors (Ortner 2006:129) and a dynamic part of identity construction.

The historical legacy of enslavement after emancipation provides an appropriate framework for understanding the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of African-
American communities. While these groups were geographically and economically marginalized in their early settlements, there was also a certain amount of self-determination that factored into the settlement choices. Several authors have noted that the availability of cheaper land outside of a city’s limits was appealing to marginalized groups (Wall et al. 2008:98; White 1991:173; Geismar 1982:11). Additionally, a desire for property likely stemmed from new black suffrage laws in the state of New York after 1821 that required ownership of at least $250 of real estate to vote (Wall et al. 2004:102). Others have taken the question of agency further, suggesting that the formation and maintenance of communities was grounded in resistance. Cheryl LaRoche (2004), Sundiata Cha-Jua (2000), and Gayle Tate (1998) all implied that the establishment of African American settlements during the antebellum period was at least partly based on resistance. Cha-Jua (2000:43) states that the geographic situation of Brooklyn, Illinois, in the late 1830s was a direct response to increasing political tension between pro- and anti-slavery camps in the old Northwest Territory. The community mobilized as one organization to provide services to freedom seekers in the decades before the Civil War. Judith Wellman (1998:391) suggests that the Underground Railroad would not have been possible were it not for well-positioned, sympathetic communities along the way. At times, this led to freedom-seeking families and individuals to settle south of the Canadian border and provide similar services and support for their new community (Wellman 1998:364). LaRoche’s analysis of five African-American settlements in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio just north of the slave-holding states determined that the positioning of communities uniquely situated people to provide support in out-of-the-way places to freedom seekers (LaRoche 2004:5). The widespread support within African-American
towns reflected the shared experience of enslavement and oppression and the liminal position of African Americans on the political and geographic landscape (see Tate 1998:767; LaRoche 2004:72).

The dissolution of these communities and the heritage of African-American landscapes are at stake in the discussion of community and racialization. These places of African-American heritage continue to be marginalized in public space as well as in the public memory. Each of the settlements studied by LaRoche are abandoned landscapes with no standing structures dating to the period of significance (2004:36, 38). Seneca Village in New York, the focus of studies by Diana Wall, Nan Rothschild, and Cynthia Copeland (Wall et al 2004, 2008), was razed in order to create a new stretch of white public space: Central Park. Studies by Mullins (2004) and Mullins and Jones (2011) of the near-Westside neighborhood of Indianapolis focused on a public archaeology approach to recovering African-American heritage and creating an objective, non-injurious history of that community, now absorbed by the downtown campus of Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis. Casting the neighborhood as an impoverished slum, the University initiated an urban renewal project to eliminate the perceived ills of this nearby community. Dissolution of the community took place through a process of “internal colonization” described by Cha-Jua (2000:27).

The study of racialization and the politicization of landscapes in archaeology has taken a decidedly dynamic approach to understanding how communities changed, adapted, and disappeared in the past. Community members on Livingston Avenue also shaped their individual and collective identities through the manipulation of material culture. It is important to note that the negotiation of class, age, and race on Livingston
Avenue took place at many scales and had complementary and contradictory results. Connections between people, seen here as discursive opportunities, occurred in many forms at the level of the community. Discourses that would have influenced the material worlds of the African-American families on Livingston Avenue would have occurred with Irish and German immigrants, other white families in Arbor Hill, the local government, and, perhaps most intriguingly, between the Vigilance Committee supporters and incoming freedom seekers from Southern enslavement. Just as others have noted that the kinetics of racialization and construction of racial and cultural identity remain ongoing, the Livingston Avenue community must also be understood as a dynamic population living in dynamic times. The historic trajectories of individuals and political realities both before and after the group coalesced certainly effected the construction of identity at several scales. To explore these dynamics, I will provide a historical context for the community, which relies on documentation of families and individuals at the site. This leads to a more particular discussion of artifacts from the Johnson site that point to identity construction and the sometimes contradictory meanings of cultural materials.

Arbor Hill and the African American Community on Livingston Avenue

Located on the south side of Livingston Avenue, the houselots overlook Tivoli Hollow and the Hudson River. Much of the neighborhood during the late 18th and early 19th centuries was considered a suburb of Albany. Locally known as Rensselaerswyck, it was owned and administered by Stephen Van Rensselaer, a very wealthy owner of hundreds of thousands of acres in the Hudson and Mohawk River valleys. A devastating fire in 1793 razed a large portion of Albany’s riverfront, leaving many of the city’s
wealthiest residents temporarily homeless (Colonial Albany Project 2012). One of these émigré families was that of Abraham and Elizabeth Ten Broeck, who relocated to the area under study after they built a new manor house in 1798. The Ten Broecks, like many of their class, were enslavers. Manumission records from 1810 state that Elizabeth Ten Broeck released four enslaved women and girls upon her death (Yoshpe 1941:513–514). Other elite residents also built estates within what would become Arbor Hill and elsewhere west of downtown around the turn of the 19th century.

The Arbor Hill neighborhood dramatically changed after the Erie Canal opened in 1825. With the eastern terminus of the canal at the bottom of Arbor Hill, a number of coal and lumber yards opened along the Hudson River changing the area from an elite retreat to a busy, hard-working riverfront. Through the 1830s and 1840s, the Arbor Hill community began to change as wealthier residents moved out. Estates were subdivided and a great number of two-family frame houses were built to house a growing working class population. The houses under study here were part of this mid-century building boom.

Analysis of tax assessment records and property deeds provides an outline of the development of the African-American community on Livingston Avenue. Ann Profit was the first to build a house, which was located at present-day 198 Livingston Avenue. Profit purchased the lot in 1839 and the tax assessment rolls from 1841-1843 describe her house as an “old wood house” on a lot 30 ft. wide and 130 ft. deep valued at $100.

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1 Livingston Avenue was formerly Lumber Street, named for the lumberyards at the bottom of the hill, until its name was changed in 1867. House numbers change over time as rear addresses were dropped from the consecutive street address list and designated with “half” addresses. Street addresses presented in this work reflect the current numbering system and street names.
(ACHOR 1839, 1841, 1842, 1843). There were only five houses on Livingston Avenue west of Ten Broeck Street at this time. The “widow” Profit’s house and a neighboring African-American resident, Adam Blake, had the lowest assessed values. The designation of the Profit house as “old” in 1841 suggests construction before the neighborhood filled in, perhaps during the early 19th century. Profit was described as a “mulatto” woman in the census born around 1777 (US Census 1850) and would have been a young woman during New York’s manumission period of 1799-1827. It is not known if she was ever enslaved, but manumission records hint at some of her earlier life. During a two-week period in April and May 1811, eight men came before local officials to present evidence of their status as free men. One of the eight men was named Abraham Profit, then 26 years old and “of a yellow color” (Yoshpe 1941:519). Given his age and surname, it seems very possible that Abraham may have Ann’s late husband. While only a conjectural connection, one of Ann Profit’s sons was also named Abraham, suggesting a possible link between Ann and the Abraham Profit listed in the manumission records.

Later tax rolls describe Ann Profit’s house as a single-story wooden structure. It was assessed at $200-500, though the value decreased after 1857, perhaps owing to the construction of new homes nearby and the increasing disintegration of the house. Profit’s home received one of the lowest assessments on the street, only higher than vacant land and the house of Adam Blake. By the 1870s, the Profit house was no longer listed.

Other African-American families came to Livingston Avenue by the mid to late 1840s. The most notable of these is the John Johnson house at 194 Livingston Avenue. Johnson was a sloop captain and skipper, born around 1805 in New York State. His work likely was limited to travel on the Hudson River from Albany to major ports, including
New York City. It is not known if Johnson was born into enslavement or as a free man, but he also came of age during the gradual manumission period. Johnson lived in the neighborhood beginning about 1843 and sold the property to Elizabeth Gippard in 1858, but continued to live in the house until sometime in the 1860s (ACHOR 1859, Hoffman 1843:160; Adams, Sampson & Co. 1859:64). Johnson appears to have occasionally lived elsewhere during the 1850s, leasing the house to others during his absence. For example, the 1850 census shows the Jackson family living there at the time (US Census 1850). The Johnson household grew to include John and his wife, Jane, as well as other boarders. African-American residents continued to rent apartments in the house after Johnson sold the house, including John J. Williams, also a boatman, and Diana Williams (US Census 1860).

Built in Greek Revival style, the Johnsons’ house was one of the only brick structures built in Arbor Hill in what was rapidly becoming one of the biggest concentrations of Irish immigrants in the city (Kennedy 1983:96–97). The Johnsons moved into the house in 1847 and during this time other houses were built along the avenue. Since many of the houses in Arbor Hill were vernacular frame houses common in Albany’s working class neighborhoods, the house truly stood out from those around it (Tilly 2009:6). Tax records list the Johnson house as the highest assessed value on the block, ranging from $700 to $2,000.

This Livingston Avenue enclave is connected not just through racially designated categories recorded in the census and directories, but also through the well-documented record of activism in the city’s wider African-American community. Perhaps the most recognizable residents of the Johnson house were Stephen and Harriet Myers. The Myers
were local abolitionists and publishers and the key agents for the local Vigilance Committee, an organization that headed up Underground Railroad activities (Tilly 2009:9; Siebert 1898:125–126). The Myers family lived at 194 Livingston Avenue in 1855–1858 and operated the house as the local headquarters for the Committee. During this time, the Myers and fellow Committee members provided shelter, clothing, food, and work for hundreds of freedom-seeking African Americans. Myers and the Vigilance Committee boasted of fostering 287 freedom seekers through Albany over a ten-month period in 1859. Another 121 people are documented to have passed through Albany in a five-month period in 1857–1858 (Tilly 2009:15). Myers spoke at rallies and conventions all over the state and sat with other prominent activists, such as Henry Highland Garnet and Frederick Douglass. Stephen and Harriet Myers also mobilized for education and labor rights for African Americans until their deaths in 1865 and 1870, respectively.

While the Myers family is the interpretive focus of the URHPCR, historical research has filled in missing information about many of the neighbors. Several residents, listed as officers or supporters of the Vigilance Committee, also lived in the community. These included Richard Harder, a boatman, who lived at 188 Livingston Avenue from 1846 until 1854, (Hoffman 1846:155; Munsell 1856:154); Abraham Johnson, another skipper, who lived at 190 Livingston Avenue from 1851 until 1859 (Munsell 1851:281; Adams, Sampson & Co. 1859:64); and Thomas Elkins, a dentist and apothecary at 186 Livingston Avenue from 1850 to 1864 (Hoffman 1850:143; Adams, Sampson & Co. 1864:47). In addition to their financial support of the Committee and election to the board, it is expected that these activists contributed in other ways, including providing
temporary employment and transportation on riverboats and administering medical care to sick freedom seekers.

By 1870, the presence of African Americans on Livingston Avenue diminished, as many residents moved to interior streets of Arbor Hill joining other African American enclaves. For example, Myers moved to 10 Lark Street, near Michael Douge, a well-known activist and educator of black children in Albany during the mid to late 19th century (Tilly 2009:20; Hughes 1998:32).

**Archaeological Methodology and Data**

The data for this study derive from a public archaeology program facilitated by URHPCR and Hartgen over the past three years. The program consists of a week-long “youth archaeological field school,” essentially a summer camp for junior high school students. The program benefits from volunteers and partnerships with other community organizations, such as local schools and the Albany County Historical Association, as well as interns enrolled a six-week program at Hartgen focusing on the field schools and analysis of the artifacts. To date, archaeological excavation has occurred at the Johnson site, known as the Myers Residence, (194 Livingston Avenue, 2010-2011), the rear of the Prophet lot (196 Livingston Avenue, 2011), and the Thomas Elkins lot (188 Livingston Avenue). In 2013, work will focus on finding evidence of the early 19th-century Prophet house.

The education program serves as a primer in archaeology for students and engages them in local history and culture. The program is an effort to take the students through the entire archaeological process, however abbreviated, in order to understand and appreciate the role of research, deductive analysis, observation, and scientific inquiry
in archaeology. The first day is spent getting to know each other and learning some of the basics of archaeology and local history. By reviewing historical maps and documents and examining artifacts from previous years, the students devise a series of research questions they hope to answer through the research. After learning excavation techniques and getting a sense of material culture identification, the students excavate 50 cm² units in a grid set at 5-m intervals with trowels. Archaeologists and interns assist the students in excavation and recordation. Thursday is spent finishing up excavations and cleaning artifacts. On the last day, the students revisit the research questions based on their findings and consider what they would do differently the following year. They also assemble a public exhibit of the artifacts and interpret the materials based on their research design. The event is well attended by the public and the display is shared with other local organizations and arts events.

Each of the field schools serves as a field reconnaissance survey for the particular lot. At the Johnson site, students excavated 14 test units in three transects running parallel with the property lines (Figure 2). Each of these test units was excavated to the sterile sandy clay subsoil and all soil was passed through 0.25-in hardware cloth to recover historic artifacts. At the Johnson site, students identified an extensive sheet midden, stratified in some places, as well as a stone walkway leading from the back of the house to the center of the yard. Deeply buried midden deposits at the back of the property in test units 5 and 10 found pearlware and creamware fragments, ceramic types associated more often with early nineteenth-century occupation and possibly consistent with the early presence of the Prophet family on the block.
One of the goals of the field schools is to identify contexts and materials that can be associated primarily with the Myers family, as the mission of the URHPCR focuses on the documented abolition history of the site. The Myers family only lived at the site for about three years, however, which, in an urban context, is a difficult goal to meet without some catastrophic formation process that would seal deposits from that time period. However, the field of inquiry can be expanded to include the Johnson family, who lived there frequently while they owned and rented apartments in the house. This provides a period of about 1847 until about 1860, during which the Johnson family owned the property.

The field excavations recovered 826 artifacts from the Johnson site. This analysis focuses on one feature or context in particular. During the 2010 field school, a trash pit (Feature 6) was found at the Johnson site, which was later sampled by a team of archaeologists from Hartgen. This pit was a straight-sided, rectangular trench, about 60 cm wide and at least 2 m long, running parallel with the property’s west boundary. It was filled mostly with coal ash and daily kitchen refuse. In addition to the discard of kitchen scraps, part of the context was created when several whole or nearly whole ceramic vessels were discarded at once, likely the result of a turnover in occupants. The ceramics mostly consisted of transfer-printed whitewares, dating from the 1830s through the 1850s. Date ranges for the transfer-printed vessels were mostly determined through the mean production date ranges provided by Samford (1997), who compiled beginning and end production dates for transfer-print patterns, colors, and techniques. Other dates for identifiable patterns or producers were ascertained where available. More frequently discarded items, such as pipe stems and bottle glass, were also found in the same context,
including “Peter Dorni” tobacco pipes and beverage bottles, dating to the 1850s and 1860s. As these trenches typically filled quickly with daily trash and coal stove refuse, we assume this deposit and the ceramics in particular were discarded in the late 1850s or early 1860s.

**Constructing Identity in the Community and in the Home**

This study of the construction of racial and individual identity considers two scales of analysis: the group and the individual. Many of the mechanisms for creating identities can be considered contradictory. Some statements made through material culture and personal acts may have intended to support and elevate the African-American community above the racialized landscape and society, while other meanings conveyed by those same artifacts also alienated some by positioning one group as superior to others. The Livingston Avenue community members examined here, especially John Johnson, created a public identity through the built environment and domestic material culture. To explain I look first at how the community itself, the neighborhood, its residents, and the buildings and landscape were the product of internal and external pressures and attractions. Second, I consider the consumption of particular household consumer goods to show how the Johnsons refuted certain racial stereotypes, created a sense of solidarity, and yet also alienated others in the community.

The cohesiveness of the Livingston Avenue community likely facilitated Committee activities. As the community was increasingly surrounded by Irish and German immigrants and second-generation Americans, external pressures on the group threatened to break up the enclave. Documents state that the hundreds of freedom seekers coming through Albany was a financial burden on the Myers family, though the
Vigilance Committee and sympathetic members provided assistance (Tilly 2009). Accounts of the Underground Railroad elsewhere stress the reliance on community ties and a cooperative spirit, so it is expected that the Livingston Avenue residents provided similar material or financial assistance to Myers and the Committee.

External pressures on the community included financial stress. Historical documents detail how members of the community assisted others and helped to keep the block together. In 1857 and 1860, the families of Helen Butler and Mary Harder, both recently widowed, defaulted on their mortgages (ACHOR 1857, 1860). In both cases, Thomas Elkins satisfied the bad loans and took ownership of the properties at 188 and 186 Livingston Avenue. He had previously been renting an apartment at 186 Livingston Avenue, living with the recently widowed Helen Butler, her five daughters, and an older woman, Susan Tonsine (Townsend?), who may have been her mother.

Elkins was one of the wealthier residents of the community and these actions can be partly understood as shrewd investments in real estate during a time of high housing demand. Alternatively, these transactions occurred at the same time that Myers was occupying the block and freedom seekers were coming in at a rate of one per day if Myers’s estimates are correct. Like many of the artifacts and historical occurrences in the Livingston Avenue community, it served several purposes, not necessarily mutually exclusive. Keeping these families in their homes may have been a strategy to insulate the Committee from the criticism of a new, unsympathetic landowner. Additionally, the Butler and Harder families may have been irreplaceable help in feeding and clothing the families and individuals traveling through Albany on their way to freedom.
The Livingston Avenue enclave is also important for conceptualizing the Underground Railroad on a longer timeline of African-American activism and resistance of racism. Ann Profit’s early settlement in the area may have been spurred on by marginalization of African Americans in a racialized landscape. However, inasmuch as Profit’s residency served as a catalyst for future settlement on Livingston Avenue, it is important to consider her agency in these early years and later (Wall et al. 2008; Cha-Jua 2000; LaRoche 2004; Geismar 1982). When considering the Underground Railroad in a longer time scale, a closer look at the families living in the community is beneficial. While the enclave split up by the end of the 1860s, the mission of activism and resistance did not stop. Individuals continued to appear in newspapers as key figures in black suffrage and equal rights. For example, Samuel H. Mando spent part of his childhood at 188 ½ Livingston Avenue (ACHOR 1858, US Census 1870, Munsell 1853:190, Adams, Sampson & Co. 1858:70). Mando became a noted leader in local black activist circles, participating in conventions and social circles not only with his peers, but also with the elderly Dr. Elkins and Stephen and Harriet Myers’s son, Abram (New York Globe 1883:1; New York Freeman 1886a:4, 1886b:4). This multi-generational heritage of the Livingston Avenue community brought together individuals who were formerly enslaved, like Myers, with others born free and created a dynamic population with shared interests and experience rooted in local anti-slavery activism. After the dissolution of the Livingston Avenue enclave, there was a continued association both socially and geographically between residents and activists. There was likely also a preceding network that led to the creation of this group perhaps originating during enslavement.
Archaeologically, the Johnson Greek Revival house demonstrates the grandest manifestation of identity in the Livingston Avenue enclave. One of the first structures in the community, and one of the only brick structures on the block, Johnson’s house was a recognizable local landmark. Its brick gables and chimney were reminiscent of the elite profile of the Ten Broeck family’s manor house. Tax assessors recognized the value of the house, consistently valuing the home at the highest level on the block. The interior of the Johnson home was not ostentatiously furnished, but it matched the Greek Revival details of the exterior with high ceilings and modest ornamentation (Tilly 2009:41–43).

LaRoche (2004:103–105) states that the formation of an African-American community did not occur without some consideration of the structures of racism. Given this, the appearance of the Johnson house was not likely accidental, and thus takes on new meaning as a focal point for the new community. It also hints at some pre-emptive planning of community resistance in the form of the Vigilance Committee. The Greek Revival design and brick construction sent powerful messages to the surrounding city and may have been a clear sign to freedom seekers. Johnson was also conveying a sense of class and distinction. Whether intentional or not, the similarity of his house other fancier houses seems like a clever attempt at irony. While some Albanians may have considered the Livingston Avenue corridor a marginal environment, Johnson’s house brought a note of refinement to the neighborhood and set the pace for future development. This remains true even as later construction adhered to a more modest, vernacular architecture, almost entirely frame structures, flanked by barns and sheds. Notably, the style of the Johnson house may be part of a wider pattern. Another African-American ship captain, Samuel Schuyler, built a similarly grand house overlooking the Hudson River on the other side of
Albany’s downtown. Schuyler’s house was also near to several elite mansions, including the Schuyler Mansion, the 18th-century home of a wealthy white family and perhaps dozens of enslaved African Americans.

Miller (2001a, 2001b) discusses the role of the house as material culture. He states that the home cannot be simply described in oppositional terms of public and private (2001a:4). Instead, “within the home there are equally complex relationships, because we cannot equate the private with the personal” (Miller 2001a:4). Miller’s examination of the home’s role in these negotiations of identity squares with the complex history of the Johnson house. Part of the difficulty in interpreting the Myers family archaeologically is the very short tenure at the site. Miller (2001b:107) acknowledges that part of the symbolic power of the home is its longevity relative to the short lifespans of its denizens. While others may examine the home as an expression of self, Miller (2001b:112) warns “that quite often we are not the agents that create the material environment that becomes the medium of representation.” This statement suggests that the best way to situate the house in terms of identity construction is with the community and the private/public discourse between the builder, owner, tenants, and neighbors.

The construction of identity on Livingston Avenue often also utilized contradictory discourses that helped to group some people and isolate others. Eric Larsen (2003:112–113) recognized such duplicity in analyzing identity as expressed in the landscape and stated that perhaps these contradictions contribute to a better understanding of how different racialized perceptions articulated. Johnson’s house can be understood as a refutation and rejection of the racialized stigma of African-American inferiority that may have been placed on this landscape. On the other hand, the stark
difference between this house and the surrounding structures made a clear class
distinction. Literally elevating his house above the surrounding rooflines, Johnson also
raised himself and his family above his neighbors. This statement of class, whether
overt and conscious or an accident of poor foresight, must have had an impact on the
ways neighbors perceived Johnson. This discourse would not have been limited to
Johnson and his white neighbors but also a discourse within the Livingston Avenue
community itself.

Other manifestations of identity were seen in elements of the material culture
found during the field schools. Mullins stresses that consumption of material goods is not
undertaken simply to fulfill a physical need (1999a:24–25, 31). Instead, consumption is a
performance in which “consumers use material culture to imagine new social possibilities,
mediate lived contradictions, and envision new personal pleasures, posing new
relationships between consumers and society and portraying who we wish to be” (Mullins

The individuals in the Livingston Avenue community represent a special case of
people who were actively resisting slavery and racial oppression. Obviously, this
extended beyond the messages hidden in artifacts’ meaning and the politicization of
consumption that Mullins describes. Many of the families invested hard Earned money in
the Vigilance Committee and the activities of Myers and others. Others may have
invested capital by housing freedom seekers or employing them onboard a ship.
Archaeological evidence at Johnson site suggests that in addition to funding abolitionist
activities, the Johnsons and other residents of the house were engaged in another form of
agency as racialized consumers.
The items recovered from the Johnson site trash pit at Feature 6 contribute to a new interpretation of the site. Fifteen different refined earthenware vessels were identified (Table 1). This included several transfer-printed vessels with some evidence of matching sets. In particular were two plates, a rectangular serving platter, and a teacup with a blue, matching Classical pattern. The matching designs, including a specialized serving form likely only used for formal dining, were not mirrored at other sites tested within the community. In addition to the blue set, two other plates from the Johnson house site had similar design themes of a Classical scene and vividly decorated borders, one in dark blue and the other a Davenport plate in brown dating to the 1830s and 1840s.

Two contexts were identified at the Elkins house site at 186 Livingston Avenue that could be dated to the occupation of that home by Elkins and the Butler family in order to compare with the Johnson assemblage. The first context derived from Unit 1 (Figure 2), where cellar ejecta from the construction of a rear wing filled the adjacent yard. Based on the material present in the level, this likely occurred during the 1860s or early 1870s. This covers a short period of nearly a decade when the families were no longer living in the home. Another context in Unit 5 (Figure 2), located near the rear of the lot, consisted of another buried deposit from about the same time period, which was covered over when the rear dwelling was built at 188 ½ Livingston Avenue sometime between 1866 and 1876, based on historical maps (Beers and Beers 1866; Hopkins 1876). This deposit appeared to be a trash pit of an unknown size containing apothecary bottles and very delicate medical glassware, consistent with Elkins’s known occupation as a dentist and apothecary. It also included a glass inkwell made by A.D. Rosecrantz, an
Albany ink dealer on Exchange Street during the same time the community occupied the block (Adams, Sampson & Co. 1863:177).

TABLE 1. Ceramic vessels from selected contexts with date ranges, Johnson site, Albany, New York.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean Production Range</th>
<th>Total Production Range</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1137.1</td>
<td>Blue transfer-printed teacup, Romantic scene</td>
<td>1831-1851</td>
<td>1793-1870</td>
<td>Samford 1997:13-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.2</td>
<td>Blue hand-painted pearlware vessel.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1779-1830</td>
<td>Miller et al. 2000:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.3</td>
<td>Black transfer-printed platter, American Historical view</td>
<td>1826-1839</td>
<td>1810-1854</td>
<td>Samford 1997:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.4</td>
<td>Blue transfer-printed vessel, British Scenic view</td>
<td>1813-1839</td>
<td>1793-1868</td>
<td>Samford 1997:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.5</td>
<td>Blue transfer-printed saucer.</td>
<td>1833-1848</td>
<td>1818-1867</td>
<td>Samford 1997:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.6</td>
<td>Brown transfer-printed plate, Florentine Fountain pattern from Davenport</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1820s-1860</td>
<td>Godden 1964:189-190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.7</td>
<td>Blue transfer-printed platter.</td>
<td>1833-1848</td>
<td>1818-1867</td>
<td>Samford 1997:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.8</td>
<td>Molded whiteware plate rim.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.9</td>
<td>Blue transfer-printed plates, Exotic scene</td>
<td>1820-1842</td>
<td>1793-1868</td>
<td>Samford 1997:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.10</td>
<td>Banded whiteware plate.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.11</td>
<td>Banded whiteware bowl.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.12</td>
<td>Undecorated whiteware plate, heavily scratched by utensils.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.13</td>
<td>Whiteware plate, Wedgwood.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1841-1860</td>
<td>thepotteries.org 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.14</td>
<td>Whiteware vessel fragments.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.15</td>
<td>Porcelain plate.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1137.16</td>
<td>Porcelain saucer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Investigation of the Elkins lot is ongoing at this point and includes contexts from both the Elkins and Butler family at 186 Livingston Avenue as well as their neighbors, the Harders, at 188 Livingston Avenue. There was little evidence of matching vessels at the Elkins site, although several vessels had similar blue transfer-print patterns (Table 2).
Within the two contexts, there were 14 different vessels, including two matching hand-painted saucers. One pipe stem, similar to a molded briar stem design found at the Johnson site was found in Unit 5 at the Elkins site. Otherwise, the ceramic assemblage held a blue edge-decorated plate, one Chinese-export porcelain, and five different blue transfer-printed designs.

Diana Wall (1994) and Robert Fitts (1999) discuss the messages of gentility, respectability, and class conveyed by the material culture of the dining table. Displaying a matching set of ceramic dishes at a dinner table for guests demonstrated the taste and aspirations of the family; for the family it set the standard and expectations of respectability. The assemblage suggests that the Johnsons were participating in the ritual of dining described by Fitts (1999) and Wall (1994), one that Fitts (1999:57–58) describes as a move towards conformity and uniformity. While African Americans engaged in resistance and activism disagreed over matters of segregation and integration (Hughes 1998), the Johnson family appeared to construct an identity centered on genteel practices and symbols initiated by white reformers and social critics. While Elkins and the Butler and Harder families were also participating in consumption of similar ceramics, they may have done so on a “catch-as-catch-can” basis, aiming for similar looks in a single color to give the appearance of matching.

The matching plates, cup, and serving dish and the scenic platter provide additional clues into the construction of identity in the Johnson household. These carefully selected wares served to elevate the status of the Johnsons as a respectable family, yet also distance them from other families in the neighborhood. While most of the
Livingston Avenue community engaged in abolitionist activism, the rest of the corridor was rapidly filling in with Irish and German immigrants, as well as first-generation white

**TABLE 2. Ceramic vessels from selected contexts with date ranges, Elkins site, Albany, New York.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean Production Range</th>
<th>Total Production Range</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1203.1</td>
<td>Whiteware vessels, untyped, 3 MNV</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.2</td>
<td>Whiteware saucer.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.3</td>
<td>Molded whiteware plate, wheat pattern.</td>
<td>1850s-1870s</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Wetherbee 1980:69-77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.6</td>
<td>Molded and blue transfer-printed whiteware vessel, floral pattern</td>
<td>1833-1849</td>
<td>1784-1869</td>
<td>Samford 1997:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.7</td>
<td>Blue transfer-printed whiteware pitcher or tureen, American or British view</td>
<td>1813-1845</td>
<td>1793-1868</td>
<td>Samford 1997:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.8</td>
<td>Blue transfer-printed whiteware plate, Chinoiserie pattern</td>
<td>1816-1836</td>
<td>1783-1873</td>
<td>Samford 1997:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.9</td>
<td>Blue edge-decorated whiteware plate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1820-1860</td>
<td>Miller et al. 2000:13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.10</td>
<td>Whiteware plate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.11</td>
<td>Green and black hand-painted and sponged saucer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1845-1930</td>
<td>Miller et al. 2000:13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.15</td>
<td>Yellowware vessel, Rockinghamware style</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.16</td>
<td>Black-glazed redware</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1203.18</td>
<td>Medicine bottle with open pontil scar</td>
<td>Pre 1861</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>SHA 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1220.1</td>
<td>Whiteware vessel.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1220.2</td>
<td>Pearlware vessel.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1220.3</td>
<td>Blue transfer-printed whiteware soup plate.</td>
<td>1833-1848</td>
<td>1818-1867</td>
<td>Samford 1997:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1220.4</td>
<td>Molded and blue hand-painted whiteware vessel.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>thepotteries.org 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1221.1</td>
<td>Whiteware vessel, J. Wedgwood</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1841-1860</td>
<td>Samford 1997:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1221.2</td>
<td>Blue transfer-printed whiteware</td>
<td>1833-1848</td>
<td>1818-1867</td>
<td>Samford 1997:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1221.7</td>
<td>Pale aqua glass inkwell, A.D. Rosenkranz, Albany</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Americans. The experiences of these groups in urban America, especially the Irish, were shaped by similar essentializing stereotypes as those applied to African Americans. In fact, the Irish were frequently compared to African Americans in order to denigrate the Irish as a lower class or race of people by nativists (Orser 2007:96–98). While Bielinski (1996) notes that African-American communities in Albany were never ghettoized until the mid 20th century, they were most often found in neighborhoods that swelled with poorer Irish immigrants after 1840. Considering just table settings as an arena of social meaning, where consumers “negotiate desire and social position” (Mullins 1999:29), the artifacts found at the Johnson site contrast with archaeological evidence of Irish immigrant consumer habits from the same time period. Irish immigrant households in Albany demonstrate an eclecticism of design choices that was occasioned by purchasing individual dishes at second-hand shops rather than in whole sets. Locally, this was observed at the Sheridan Hollow Parking Facility site (Hartgen 2005:95). This allowed the family to participate in the increasingly elaborate dining and tea ritual unfolding in working class and middle class homes (Wall 1994), but also met the demands of their working class budget. The Johnson assemblage, on the other hand, demonstrates the means and desire to display a whole, unified matching set, striking up an image of class and sophistication not seen or attainable in many of the neighboring households, African-American or white.

One other artifact found within the context suggests a strong affiliation with the Johnson family at a personal scale. A black transfer-printed whiteware platter was represented by two fragments of the base and footring (Figure 4). This small dish had a molded beaded rim and a scene of at least three sailing ships in a harbor with a church
steeple and house on the shore. The scene resembles a pattern described by Halsey (1974:68) as “City of Albany,” manufactured between 1823 and 1842. Johnson’s occupation as a “skipper” on the Hudson River draws a close association with this platter and suggests a personal meaning for this artifact beyond just a conveyance of class status. Additionally, at the Elkins site, a fragment of blue transfer-printed whiteware was recovered from Unit 1 with a similar maritime theme. This vessel, likely a soup tureen or ewer based on the profile of the fragment, showed three masts with sails, pennants, and rigging, and the rigging of a fourth (Figure 5). Comparison of this vessel with known patterns draws similarities with a mid-19th-century pattern called “Commerce” made by several British potteries, which depicts a British frigate alongside a Chinese junk at port (Williams and Weber 1978:481–482; Williams and Weber 1986:448).

The maritime-themed platter at the Johnson site and the tureen at the Elkins site were not parts of matched sets based on the recovered artifact assemblage. Rather, the singularity and eye-catching patterns suggest the acquisition and display of these vessels was a pointed, perhaps purposeful addition to the households. Johnson was a skipper, and several of his neighbors were employed as “boatmen”, including Richard Harder, who lived next door to Elkins, and Sarah Butler’s late husband, John (US Census 1850). Myers himself was often employed on Hudson River day steamers as a steward. Freedom seekers likely took advantage of this resource in their travels through the Northeast, relying on sympathetic rivermen for transport to places like Albany. The selection of this design bears several related meanings for the families. As a skipper from Albany, the image bore connection to place and occupation for Johnson and would have served as a reminder to the family and visitors of Johnson’s place in society. Following Mullins
(1999), this refutes an imposed identity of black or African American and claims an important position as an essential part of Albany’s economy. This platter, then, becomes an element in Johnson’s construction of his own identity as a productive and successful worker.

The platter has other, indirect, political connotations for Johnson and his comrades in not only contributing to the construction of individual identity, but also collective identity. The years leading up to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act witnessed increased political denial of freedom and liberty for thousands of African Americans, both enslaved and free. Once the 1850 law was enacted, additional challenges were met by the African-American community, which restricted what little freedom of mobility and assembly they had. An article in the *Albany Evening Journal* from 1850 detailed the congressional debate over the treatment of “colored seamen” as they pertained to the new Fugitive Slave Act, which was still in deliberation at the time (*Albany Evening Journal* 1850). Proponents of the bill proposed the incarceration of free black seamen at port in the South and subsequent sale to private slaveholders. The author not only decried the proposed law, but also hoped that arrested fugitives would be granted a jury trial when captured under the new act.

In several well authenticated instances, Sailors thus imprisoned have been, under this law, sold into perpetual Slavery. The law itself is clearly unconstitutional, and has been so decided by eminent Southern as well as Northern lawyers. It is in direct conflict with that clause which provides that “the citizens of each State shall be entitled to
all the privileges of citizens in the several States.” (Albany Evening Journal 1850)

This threat to free blacks on seagoing vessels also stressed what may have been a fruitful avenue of communication and escape between the North and South. Freedom seekers relied not only on safe overland travel to the North and Canada, but also along the shore both to Canada and to friendly nations in the West Indies.

There is no argument that the limitations to occupation for African Americans after manumission were a striking manifestation of violent economic racism. However, it is tempting to suggest that the occupations of African Americans may have held some advantage for activism-minded individuals. Myers served as a steward for some time in the 1840s on the Hudson River. This job, likely on a dayliner, would have put him in touch with other abolitionist communities in New York. He also spoke at meetings, conventions, and fundraisers up and down the Hudson River Valley. Travel for some of these engagements may have been facilitated by acquainted rivermen.

The harbor scenes on the vessels take on deeper significance when considering this history. Abolitionists within this community relied in part on their ties to shipping and river travel both as a way to make a living and as a vector to forward their mission. Within this framework, the imagery becomes a symbol of solidarity and a shared struggle. This places the artifact not only within Johnson’s own personal identity, but also within a wider construction of identity in the broader activist community, perhaps marking the two identities as indistinct from each other.

Whether these artifacts represented solidarity or just ownership of a public history denied to African Americans, it suggests a transformation of the public historic narrative.
Patricia Baquedano-López (2009) provides an enlightening example of this in linguistic anthropology. Baquedano-López studied the narrative teaching of Catholic *doctrina* to Mexican-American schoolchildren in Los Angeles. She found that the act of narrating and listening was a collective activity that both related personal experience of all participants to a community history (2009:364). The Roman Catholic Church controls the catechistic curriculum guiding *doctrina* teaching, but dissemination of the lesson is often augmented by local culture and community (Baquedano-López 2009:367). Listening to the story, students actively engage in identity construction as they internalize the story and relate it to their own lives as the *doctrina* raises issues of both ethnic identity and oppression (Baquedano-López 2009:368-369). Baquedano-López (2009:375) states that the retelling of *doctrina* creates “a collective version of the narrative (which) not only promotes recall of information, it legitimizes the experiences of the then and now – both the experiences narrated in the story and those which include the teacher’s and students’ present lives” (emphasis in original). Although this example deals with the verbal retelling of a religious story, if we consider the power in material culture as symbols and messages, as Mullins (1999) suggests, this concept of a subverted or relative collective narrative becomes a powerful tool for understanding activism in the archaeological record.

Explaining the artifact in this light suggests a subversion of meaning that occurred in the construction of identity. Mullins (1999:76–77, 165–166) described this in other contexts as a defiance of racialized consumer space, and an attempt by African Americans to put their own stamp of meaning and significance on material culture. English potters did not create this imagery with Johnson and his associates in mind. For
most, the images conveyed a sense of the triumph of capitalism and a memorialization of this sort of landscape in the nation’s history. Through these same ports depicted on the serving dishes came thousands of enslaved Africans, underlining a painful subtext in the commemorated history. In the hands of Johnson and his abolitionist neighbors, it may have become a politically and personally charged symbol.

Conclusion

The African-American members of the Livingston Avenue community in the 1840s and 1850s were active in constructing multiple identities as African Americans, some of whom were members of the middle class, and as activist abolitionists. They created these identities in part by subverting the intended meaning of some artifacts and by making overt statements of community solidarity and class status with others. As members of a recently emancipated African-American community, the residents were situated in a rigidly racialized landscape that went beyond black and white and categorized people in relation to the local white elite. Within that landscape, however, the residents established and maintained a community that stood out from their neighbors and fostered an activism and resistance among African Americans supporting the broader goal of ending slavery in the United States and abroad.

The discourse that played out while the enclave was in full swing was not an isolated incident, nor can it really be understood as a movement with a clear beginning and end. In fact, this project is part of an ongoing revitalization of the Arbor Hill neighborhood.

Discourses of racialization continued after the last African-American resident left the enclave. The neighborhood became known widely by its Irish and Irish-American
majority, a population group that was widely vilified in the mid-19th century as new immigrants to the country but later accepted once they filtered into mainstream business and politics (Orser 2007). As a marginalized neighborhood, Irish immigrants were steered towards neighborhoods like this and away from the wealthier districts. Today, the neighborhood is better known for its high crime and vacancy rates and equally low employment and owner–occupant rates than its unique history as an Underground Railroad hub. The URHPCR recognizes the potential the site has for public education and empowerment, but it has been an uphill battle.

Racialization still shapes the landscape in some ways; as Orser (2007:36) states, “where racialization is concerned, the line between past and present is difficult to draw.” The establishment of a city-wide trolley system in 1911 in Albany bypassed Livingston Avenue and much of Arbor Hill (Kennedy 1983:104). Kennedy (1983:97) also described the hill as physically isolated from the rest of the city until the construction of the Hawk Street Viaduct in 1890, accessible previously only from the lumber yards and residential streets uptown. The present state of the neighborhood has contributed to the destruction of cultural resources. As mentioned above, the six houselots in the community once hosted up to ten houses. Since the 1980s, houses in Arbor Hill have repeatedly been the victims of “demolition by neglect.” Today, the Johnson house is the only house still standing on URHPCR property. There are two other houses still standing within the Livingston Avenue study area; one of those has been vacant for several years and the other was rehabilitated and is currently rented out to families.

In addition to the destruction of the neighborhood’s architectural fabric, there are continued threats to the archaeological resources. Two privies at 198 Livingston Avenue
(the Profit house) and 186 Livingston Avenue (the Elkins house) were found to have been looted by “treasure hunters.” In both cases, modern trash was found in the upper layers of the disturbed privy vault, suggesting that after the privies were opened and looted, the shafts remained open and trash accumulated in the excavations. Neither of the privies have been fully examined by archaeologists, but researchers remain hopeful that these contexts may still hold valuable information for interpreting these sites. Artifact samples have been recovered from both in a small exploratory excavation. While treasure hunters may have taken away the whole, saleable artifacts, there appear to still be thousands of nearly complete ceramic and glass vessels to examine in the future.

The continuing discourse over racial identity and racialized landscapes still shapes the way people experience Livingston Avenue. Razed houses have been replaced in several instances with rows of public housing, which are typically made to complement the historical built environment, but often derive from municipal aesthetics rather than community input. One way in which residents engage with the landscape is by establishing informal paths – shortcuts – between blocks through vacant lots. The vacant lots are also used by children as well as for illegal activities. One of these shortcuts passes from Second Street two blocks south of the site to Third Street and through the Johnson house lot to a small grocery store on the opposite side of Livingston Avenue. The URHPCR has wrestled with this issue in the past, acknowledging the liability issue for the landowners, but also cognizant of the meaning of this path to the community. Police officials lament the paths since they are difficult to monitor, which in turn serves to criminalize the ways in which the residents interact with the landscape.
The archaeology and interpretation discussed here provide a dynamic stage in which to engage people about resistance and racism. Dean Saitta (2007:91) states that archaeology can be a powerful tool for social justice by connecting present-day activism with the collective activism of the past. Engaging public memory, the memorialization in the present of an act or people the past provides links for people to react to past events and relate them to their present-day lives (Saitta 2007:98). Paul Shackel (2001:3) argues that “…objects and landscapes have different meanings to different people at different times,…the memories associated with highly visible objects are always being constructed, changed, challenged, or ignored.” The construction of memory, or past identities, as described by Shackel (2001:1), is a dynamic and tense exercise in the making and control of meaning. Reflexivity in archaeology can lead to a more meaningful dissemination of knowledge to vulnerable and stakeholding communities (Orser 2007:35). Just as residents and officials negotiate over the identity and meaning of present-day Livingston Avenue landscape, activists associated with Johnson and Myers also engaged in discourse over the personal and collective identity of their home and community. While the archaeological investigation and the memorialization of the Livingston Avenue enclave is just starting, a dynamic analysis of the community has potential to bridge the gap in public memory about the neighborhood and illuminate how construction of racial and cultural identity for the sake of community empowerment continues today.
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FIGURE 1. Site Location, Albany, New York.

FIGURE 2. The Livingston Avenue sites in 1892 and archaeological results from 2010–2012 field schools, Albany, New York. Map courtesy of Environmental Data Resources, Inc.