

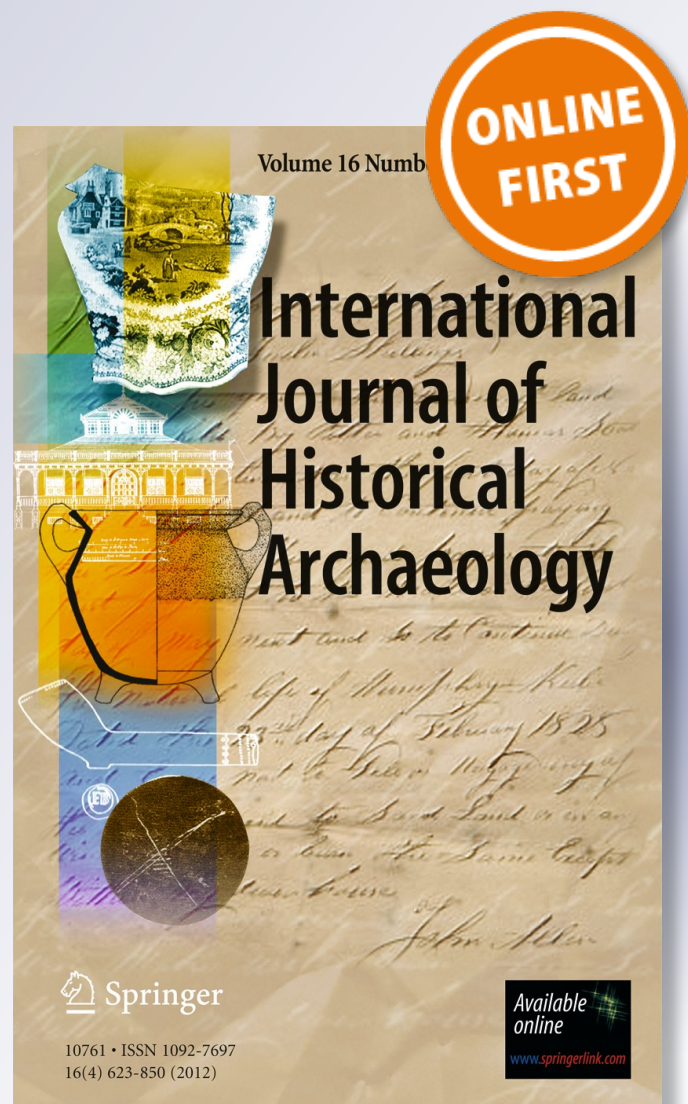
# *Constructing Community: Experiences of Identity, Economic Opportunity, and Institution Building at Boston's African Meeting House*

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**International Journal of Historical  
Archaeology**

ISSN 1092-7697

Int J Histor Archaeol  
DOI 10.1007/s10761-012-0212-z



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# Constructing Community: Experiences of Identity, Economic Opportunity, and Institution Building at Boston's African Meeting House

David B. Landon · Teresa D. Bulger

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**Abstract** The African Meeting House in Boston became a center of the city's free black community during the nineteenth century. Archaeological excavations at this site recovered material from the Meeting House backlot and a neighboring apartment building occupied by black tenants. These artifacts reveal strategies the community used to negotiate a place for themselves, create economic opportunities, and build community institutions. The Meeting House helped foster community success and became a powerful center for African American action on abolition, educational equality, and military integration. The present study argues that the archaeological and historical evidence from the African Meeting House demonstrates the power of the actions of individuals in the black community to counter widespread racial inequality with personal and community success.

**Keywords** African Meeting House · Church · African diaspora · Craft work · Social institutions

## Introduction

Finished in 1806, the African Meeting House is the oldest existing African American church in the United States constructed through the collaboration of African American and white artisans (Fig. 1). The building is a National Historic Landmark and a key site of the Museum of African American History, Boston's Black Heritage Trail, and the Boston African American National Historic Site. Archaeological

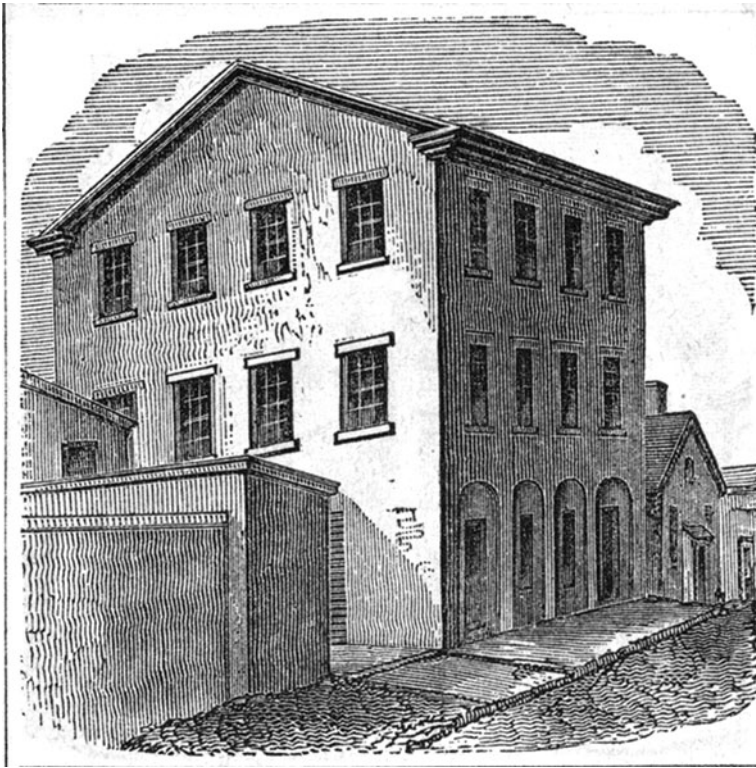
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**Fig. 1** View of the African Meeting House northeast corner and front façade from an 1843 Boston almanac (Dickinson 1843)

excavations at the African Meeting House began in the mid-1970s, with additional projects in each following decade (Bower 1977, 1986, 1990; Bower and Charles 1982; Bower et al. 1984; Bower and Rushing 1980; Mead 1995; Pendery and Mead 1999). The most recent investigations, which are the focus of this paper, took place in 2005 in advance of restoration work for the Meeting House's Bicentennial (Landon 2007).

Since the initial excavations at the African Meeting House in the 1970s, the study of African Diaspora archaeology has grown to be a major focus in historical archaeology (Fennell 2011; Franklin and McKee 2004; Leone et al. 2005; Ogundiran and Falola 2007). In New England, researchers such as Fitts (1996) and Garman (2004) have explored the material and spatial dimensions of African and European interactions under slavery, especially in rural landscapes. Other studies in the region have emphasized creolization through interactions in multi-cultural spaces (Mrozowski 2010), changes in spatial organization and work practices under slavery and freedom (Matthews 2010), and closely contextualized interpretations of the lived experiences of enslaved people (Chan 2007).

The early excavations at the Meeting House focused on the recovery of some of the buildings' architectural details (Bower and Rushing 1980) as well as the community activities that took place in the building, such as communal dinners (Bower 1990). Other early research on free African American communities and homesites in

the North sought to understand hybridized African-American worldviews and/or the material evidence for economic status within African American households (Baker 1980; Bullen and Bullen 1945; Deetz 1996; Geismar 1982).

Although the range of African Diaspora archaeology continues to expand, we have learned the most about southern plantations and the lives of enslaved people (Agbe-Davies 2007, p. 417; Singleton and de Souza 2009, p. 450), and issues of cultural heritage, race, racism, and resistance (Brandon 2009; Orser 2001, 2007). Some more recent archaeological explorations of nineteenth-century free African American communities in New England and the mid-Atlantic region have pursued questions of cultural heritage and the modes of collective social action (Lewis 1998; Beaudry and Berkland 2007). Researchers have also focused specifically on race and the processes of racialization that operated in everyday life for both black and white people in the nineteenth century (Benard 2008; Mullins 1999, 2008; Paynter 2001) while others focus on class divisions within and between African American communities (Wall et al. 2008). For all approaches, as well as the search for the middle ground between them, African Diaspora research is shifting toward a more pointed focus on how archaeology can work for the present—denaturalizing notions of race, gender, and class as well as dominant historical narratives (Franklin and McKee 2004).

The archaeology of the African Meeting House and Joy Street tenement builds on some of these themes. The Meeting House was an urban church in the North, was the home of institutions organized by free blacks, and as we argue in this paper, was a manifestation of community-based initiatives and achievements more than just a reaction to racism and oppression. Oppression and freedom form a complex dialectical opposition, and community organizations arose in part to provide mutual support against forces of repression. As Franklin (2001, p. 90) has pointed out, “dominant racial ideology...has served as an impetus for group formation among peoples of the African Diaspora in furthering their own interests.” In Boston, however, discourses within the black community emphasize themes of possibility and achievement, which suggest that dominant white culture framed a constraint on everyday life but did not act as a determinant of black experience. All of these attributes shaped in unique ways the lived experiences of the African American community that coalesced around and within the Meeting House.

In early nineteenth-century New England, an ideology of whiteness and justness developed that excluded people of African descent and ignored their history in the region (Paynter 2001, p. 128; Melish 1998). Scholars such as Melish (1998) have documented the nineteenth-century manufacture of narratives of New England that overlooked the contributions of black residents while also using popular media to propagate images that were hostile to black culture and humanity. While many historical and archaeological projects have worked to alleviate this willful lacuna, we must be vigilant about deconstructing the stereotypes of nineteenth-century African America and the vestiges of these stereotypes that persist today.

An archaeology of the presence and persistence of African American and Native American communities serves to counter this narrative and raise alternative histories (Paynter 2001). Following Leone et al. (2005), our study undertakes an archaeology of an African Diasporic community that is not only focused on the mechanisms of racism, but on the materiality of freedom. In Boston, community action and institution building were modes of anti-racist activism which countered the entrenched

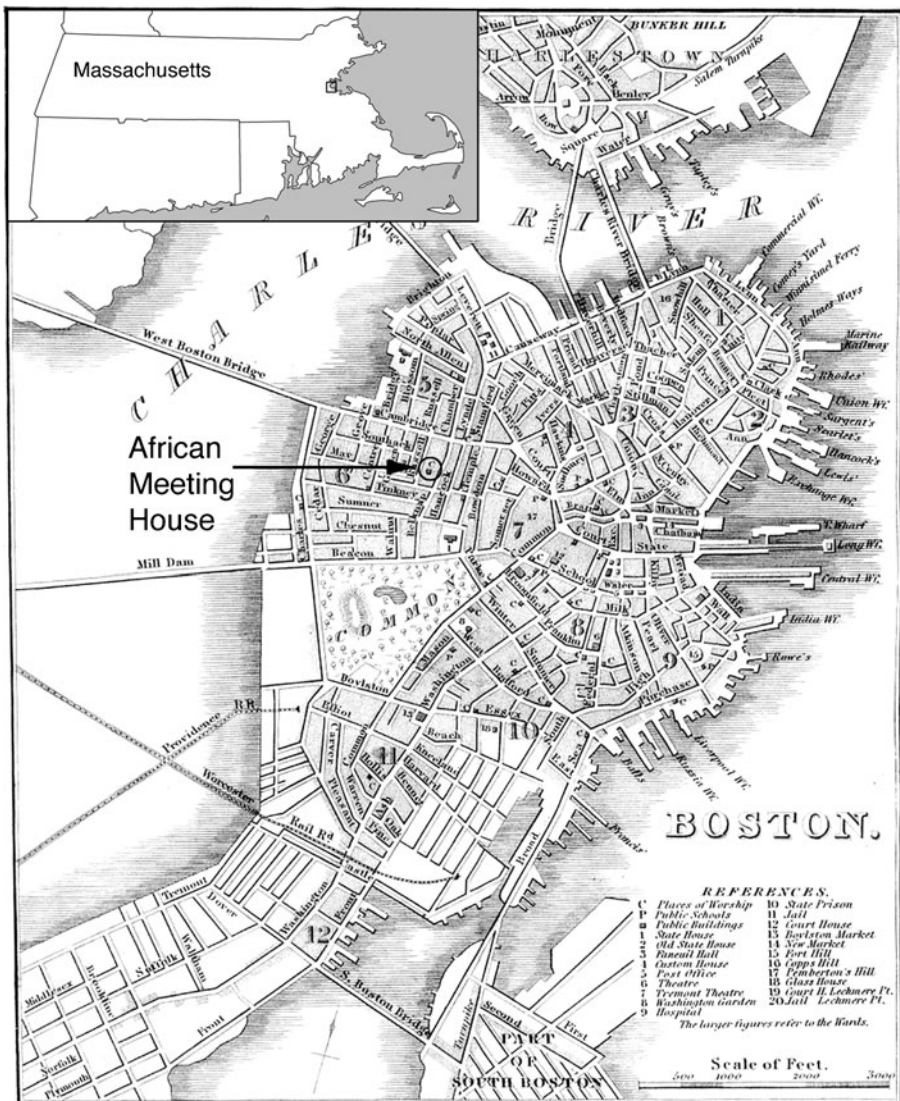
notions of difference, exclusion, and inequality that characterized the social and civic landscapes of nineteenth-century Boston. This narrative of Black Boston stands in contrast to those histories that put black citizens in a secondary role in the herculean efforts taken in the nineteenth century toward abolition and equal rights.

The free black community around the Meeting House contained many well-educated, prominent, and successful people who worked to fight oppression and build a strong, independent, and forceful community (Cromwell 1994, pp. 34–37). At the same time, the African American community as a whole in Boston was not affluent; most members of the community were working as “hairdressers barbers, laundresses, waiters, clothiers, mariners, and laborers” (Bower and Rushing 1980, p. 71). The African Meeting House (1806) and the adjacent Abiel Smith School (1835) arose from efforts for community uplift and self-sufficiency, and were in turn two institutions that helped to build the strength and independence of Boston’s free black community. These institutions were at the center of very public battles for abolition, educational opportunity, and military integration. The focus here is thus on the African American community’s social institutions and action in the context of the broader society’s systems of racism, discrimination, and slavery.

This project was undertaken as a collaborative effort with the Museum of African American History, which preserves and interprets the Meeting House and the Abiel Smith School building next door as well as the Nantucket African Meeting House and the Seneca Boston-Florence Higginbotham House on Nantucket Island (Landon 2007, 2008). The interpretive narrative employed by the Museum focuses on the efforts on the part of community members to create strong institutions and support networks in the face of nineteenth-century racial discrimination, rather than retreading acts of discrimination and oppression that were experienced on the everyday scale. Our interpretive approach is shaped by our collaborative work with the Museum and likewise highlights action and achievement while putting these accomplishments into the context of the opposition nineteenth-century African Americans were up against. This work represents a counter-narrative to those versions of African American history in the North that overlook the contributions of African Americans or focus on the negative impacts of racism on the part of the white majority. This narrative is borne out by historical and archaeological evidence and serves to balance this history.

## Building a Community

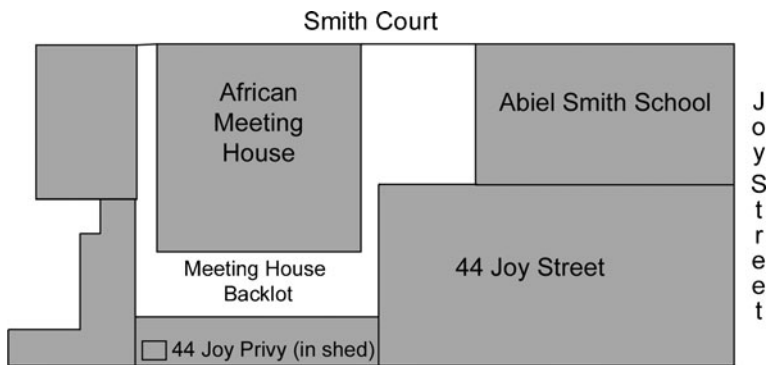
The Meeting House is a three-story brick structure that stands at 8 Smith Court, on the north side of Beacon Hill, in Boston’s West End (Fig. 2). The land it sits upon was initially associated with a Joy Street residential structure occupied by African American tenants in the late eighteenth century (Bower 1990, p. 44). The plot behind the residence was purchased in 1805 from Augustin Raillion and construction of the Meeting House began early in 1806. Archaeological evidence reveals that the slope of Beacon Hill required the north side of the plot that the Meeting House sits on to be filled, creating a level grade for construction (Bower 1984, p. 26). A variety of African American and Euroamerican craftsmen constructed the meetinghouse, including an African American head mason on the project (Yocum 1994, p. 14). The



**Fig. 2** Location of the African Meeting House in Boston, shown on an 1843 map of the city. *Inset*, State of Massachusetts

project was completed by December of 1806, the property consisting of the north-facing meetinghouse itself, narrow east and west alleys, and the backlot yard (Fig. 3). The present-day yard includes an 8-ft-wide (2.4 m) strip of land at the southernmost border of the property that was the property of 44 Joy Street until the twentieth century. Details of the architectural history of the structure have been documented by a number of scholars (Bower 1990; Detwiller 1975; Pearson 1982; Rosebrock 1978; Waite Associates 2004; Yocum 1994).

The space at the Meeting House was constructed with community needs in mind. In addition to the sanctuary that occupied the first and second floors, the basement



**Fig. 3** Map of the African Meeting House and neighboring buildings, based on the 1885 Sanborn map. North is to the top. The shed behind 44 Joy Street was ultimately torn down and became part of the African Meeting House property

was divided into a schoolroom and a small apartment intended for the pastor (Bower 1990, p. 23). Though there is no evidence that Thomas Paul, nor any of the subsequent pastors, lived in the basement apartment, the space was rented out to various members of the African American community throughout the nineteenth century, often accommodating several people at once (Bower 1990, pp. 24–25). The domestic nature of this space stands in contrast to the public nature of the schoolroom on the northern side of the basement and the sanctuary above. These spaces would have each had separate exterior entrances (Pearson 1982). The sanctuary was designed as a large two-story room with a main floor and a balcony that could accommodate upwards of 600 people.

The location of the Meeting House on the north side of Beacon Hill is also significant. Although the Beacon Hill area is currently one of the most gentrified sections of Boston, in the early nineteenth century the poor sun exposure, intrusively high water table, and relatively steep terrain had left the north side of Beacon Hill relatively open for settlement. This space would become the center of Boston's African American community as people migrated from the South and parts of New England. Although some African Americans and European Americans had already begun to settle on the north side of Beacon Hill before 1800, the Meeting House would be influential in the large-scale migration of the black community to Beacon Hill throughout the nineteenth century. Horton and Horton (1999) have calculated that Ward 6, which included much of Beacon Hill, boasted 44 % of Boston's black residents in 1840 and 61 % in 1860, somewhere between 1,000 and 1,400 people. This area remained the center of the African American community until people began to relocate to Roxbury in the early twentieth century. The social history of this community is chronicled in detail in Horton and Horton's (1999), *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*.

The design, layout, and location of the Meeting House point to the important role it played in the construction and maintenance of Boston's African American community. This role has been illuminated by a number of studies. Bower's (1990) historical and archaeological report took a comprehensive look at the Meeting House as well as the surrounding buildings and tenants in the neighborhood, focusing specifically on land use history, house occupation sequences, and estate inventories. Bower also

compiled an historical timeline (1788–1974) based on a variety of newspapers, books, dissertations, reports, and other sources. The historical timeline indicates many activities that took place at the Meeting House, including political addresses, meetings, and possible community dinners (Bower 1990). Grover and da Silva's (2002) historic resource study gathers evidence on the life of Thomas Paul, the first minister at the church, and tries to reconstruct the controversy that rent the congregation in the 1830 s. Historical research undertaken by Pendery and Mead (1999) offers important information on the history of the Meeting House with specific reference to its relationship, both physical and social, with the Abiel Smith School. The Meeting House is also explored in several books (Cromwell 1993; Horton and Horton 1999; Levesque 1994; Stapp 1993) that attempt to reconstruct the history of the church and the surrounding community on various scales. Our archaeological and historical research builds on this rich foundation.

The nature of the Meeting House as a religious institution was central to its role in the community. Many scholars have discussed the vital role the church took on in early African American community life (Bower 1977, 1990; Bower and Rushing 1980; Curry 1981; Horton and Horton 1999; Levesque 1994). Horton and Horton (1999, p. 55) point out that in Boston, “the church was the major black institution outside the home for most black people of all ranks and all stations.” Levesque (1994, p. 270) underscores the distinct character of the African Church in Boston. He suggests that African churches were centers of spiritual celebration, standing in contrast to the drier ceremonies at white churches. African churches offered a spirituality and sense of belonging that fostered community pride and perhaps emotional immunity in an oppressive and racist society. The history of the Meeting House reveals that this institution was no exception.

The social atmosphere in Boston was such that segregation or outright exclusion of African Americans characterized the policies of many institutions. This included trains, entertainment halls, hospitals, churches, and social societies (Horton and Horton 1999, pp. 73–86). In this racialized landscape of nineteenth-century Boston, African Americans were forced to rely upon their own resources to maintain their physical, mental, and spiritual health. Discourse among African American activists in Boston and throughout New England emphasized a strong doctrine of self-reliance and a rhetoric of racial uplift in the building of an “African American moral community” (Bethel 1997, p. 55; Melish 1998). This discourse defined precedents for speech, community action, and everyday life choices. Activists such as Maria Stewart, Prince Hall, David Walker and James Freeman Clarke exalted the benefits of community interdependence and self-help, education, and temperance. The values of morality, honor, and responsibility—the basic tenets of respectability—underwrote this discourse and manifested themselves in the everyday lives of Boston's black residents in mutual aid organizations, religious institutions, and family structures.

The African Meeting House was a venue where the values of the larger black community were performed on the scale of one pastor and one congregation trying to make a difference (Daniels 1968, p. 363). As a center for religious gatherings, political speeches, and abolitionist meetings—the most famous being the formation of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in January 1832—the African Meeting House became the center of community activism in the first half of the nineteenth century. The culturally, economically, and regionally diverse African American

population in Boston constructed a community that would negotiate the conditions of a racialized society and create for itself a distinct African American identity. The Meeting House was at the heart of this process of creation.

## The Archaeological Contexts and Assemblages

The excavations described in this article took place in 2005 in advance of planned restoration work at the Meeting House. Since the site had been extensively investigated in previous years, our work tested remaining unexcavated areas, and reopened and fully excavated some features that had previously only been sampled. Although the excavations recovered a range of features and deposits, the focus here is on two specific analytical contexts: the 44 Joy Street privy and the Meeting House backlot midden. These two contexts both date to the first half of the nineteenth century and contain artifacts deposited by members of the African American community. The Joy Street privy is associated with a tenement house, which housed primarily African American families and individuals, and the midden is associated specifically with the Meeting House.

The 44 Joy Street privy was on a thin strip of land that belonged to a property fronting east onto Joy Street (see Fig. 3). Ann Collins, a white spinster, constructed a building on the lot around 1811. Collins apparently made her living as a landlady, renting to black tenants in the 1820 s and 1830 s according to tax records (Grover and da Silva 2002, p. 85). The lowest levels of the privy contain artifacts and nightsoil related to these tenants, some of whom have been identified (Table 1). In the

**Table 1** African American tenants residing at 44 Joy Street (Bower 1986)

| Name                | Occupation  | Dates of residency |
|---------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Augustus, Elinor    | Unknown     | 1826–35            |
| Brown, ?            | Laborer     | 1832               |
| Carter, Daniel      | Laborer     | 1820–30            |
| Curry, Robert       | Mariner     | 1826–28            |
| Harrison, John      | Unknown     | 1820–21            |
| Innis, Thomas       | Hairdresser | 1818–21            |
| Jefferson, Jane     | Widow       | 1825–33            |
| Leffage, Henry      | Laborer     | 1810–29            |
| Long, James         | Laborer     | 1819–39            |
| Morris, Robert      | Waiter      | 1826–30            |
| Barret, Cyrus       | Cordwainer  | 1828–33            |
| Colburn, Ann        | Unknown     | 1820               |
| Gardner, Samuel     | Laborer     | 1833               |
| Paterson, William P | Tender      | 1832               |
| Sherman, ?          | Laborer     | 1829               |
| Thomas, Samuel      | Laborer     | 1832               |
| Thompson, Joshua    | Laborer     | 1830               |
| Williams, Joseph J  | Tailor      | 1828–33            |

mid-1830 s, Collins sold the lot for the construction of a stable. The upper levels of the privy are primarily construction and destruction fill, apparently related to the changing configuration of the stables over the rest of the nineteenth century. The privy artifact assemblage contains a wide range of household and kitchen trash related to the pre-1835 occupancy. The ceramic assemblage is dominated by pearlware, creamware and redware, with small numbers of a variety of other types. Most of the ceramics are tablewares, though teawares are also present. There is limited evidence for matched sets of vessels, likely a reflection of the multiple households and individuals living in the building.

The privy assemblage contains a range of decorated types of tablewares and teawares, including hand-painted cups and transfer-printed saucers (Table 2). A variety of vessel forms are present, including serving platters and plates, and numerous cups. The ceramic assemblage from the privy is not quite as fancy as that from the Meeting House backlot and contains about twice the proportion of coarse earthenwares, primarily redwares. These are also more utility pieces—pots, jugs, and large pans—which might reflect some functional differences in the assemblages, with more food storage and preparation pieces in the privy assemblage. The assemblage from the Meeting House backlot, by contrast, contains more tablewares and serving pieces, and fewer storage and preparation vessels.

The depositional context in the backlot of the Meeting House is complicated, with many people potentially contributing trash to the assemblage. Trash could be associated with the students attending the basement school; the residents of the basement apartment; and the many people visiting the Meeting House for community events, services, classes, and organizational meetings. The backlot is a very small space, 15 m × 6 m, with poor drainage and clayey soils. Several early nineteenth-century drains crisscross the lot.

The vast majority of artifacts from the backlot date from the first three and a half decades of the use of the site, from about 1806–40. Most of these are concentrated in

**Table 2** Ceramic assemblages from the Joy Street privy and Meeting House backlot midden

| Ware Type       | Joy Street Privy |     | Meeting House Backlot |     |
|-----------------|------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
|                 | Sherds           | MNV | Sherds                | MNV |
| Porcelain       | 18               | 8   | 104                   | 31  |
| Creamware       | 237              | 43  | 698                   | 58  |
| Pearlware       | 311              | 68  | 1,263                 | 107 |
| Whiteware       | 15               | 7   | 157                   | 46  |
| Ironstone       | 1                | 1   | 2                     | 1   |
| Redware         | 115              | 21  | 177                   | 23  |
| Stoneware       | 4                | 4   | 113                   | 37  |
| Yellow ware     | 3                | 1   | 12                    | 3   |
| Tin glazed ware | 14               | 2   | 8                     | 2   |
| Black Basalt    | 1                | 1   | —                     | —   |
| Bone China      | 6                | 2   | —                     | —   |
| Indeterminate   | 14               | 8   | 4                     | 1   |
| Total           | 739              | 166 | 2,538                 | 309 |

a trash-rich midden layer that is found across much of the backlot. Bower (1990) interpreted this layer as the result of earth-moving in the backlot in the mid-nineteenth century wherein contents of an earlier privy or trash pit on the west side of the property was spread across the backlot. Our findings support this, although some of the trash disposal may have been simply associated with the backlot being a largely utilitarian space that was not tightly enclosed in the first half of the nineteenth century. After this time, although some deposition of trash in the backlot continued, it was greatly reduced.

The artifact assemblage in the Meeting House backlot can be broadly divided into two major categories: architectural materials related to the construction and remodeling of the Meeting House and adjacent buildings, and artifacts related primarily to the preparation, serving, and consumption of food. Other materials, such as pipes and personal artifacts, are present only in small numbers. The ceramic assemblage from Meeting House backlot midden is dominated by pearlware and creamware, with stoneware, porcelain, and redware well represented, and smaller quantities of other ware types (see Table 2). The pearlware is present in a variety of decorative types; including shell-edge decorated, blue transfer prints, and hand-painted blue and polychrome pieces. A large number of green shell-edged pieces are present, presumably representing purposeful choice of these pieces based on their color scheme. The creamware, by contrast is mostly undecorated, while the whiteware is mostly transfer prints in light blue and other colors. While this is not an elite ceramic assemblage, it does contain many decorated earthenwares and some porcelain.

The dates of the bulk of the ceramics in the midden level correspond to the early decades of the Meeting House. The first several decades of the Meeting House's life were clearly an important period, when the church had a long period of prosperity under Thomas Paul's leadership (Levesque 1994, p. 271), and it appears that some community dinners at the Meeting House occurred during this time. Some of the ceramics could be trash from these community events. In addition, one of the prominent tenants of the basement apartment of the Meeting House was a caterer named Domingo Williams, who lived there from 1819 to 1830 (Bower 1986). Williams might have helped arrange some of these church dinners, and many of the ceramics are also likely the trash from his successful business. Rev. Paul's departure from the church in the late 1820 s and his death a few years later in 1831 is the start of a period of turmoil in the church, with little stability in the pastor, and conflict in the congregation (Levesque 1994, pp. 271–274). This conflict ultimately led to the formation of another church, the Twelfth Baptist Church in 1840, which was aligned with more militant anti-slavery tactics, as opposed to Garrisonian, "moral suasion," modes of resistance. Interestingly, this is about the same time Domingo Williams' departure from the Meeting House apartment. The confluence of these events appears to end the major deposition of ceramics in the Meeting House backlot. More is said about this assemblage below, in terms of its implications for understanding economic activities in the African American community.

The personal artifacts from the Meeting House backlot include a range of buttons, pins, beads, and similar objects. Some of these objects likely belonged to women and children. While most are relatively common forms, the backlot assemblage does include both a fan strut and a wig curler. The fan would have been a woman's

accessory, and was typically a marker of gentility and high status (White 2005, p. 59). The wig curler, by contrast, was likely a man's, possibly used in work as a hairdresser. Most black men in nineteenth-century Boston were laborers or seaman; hairdressers and barbers were among the more skilled or entrepreneurial occupations, and were professions of people of high standing in the community (Horton and Horton 1999, p. 8). Both these artifacts testify to the economic position of some members of the Meeting House congregation.

## Negotiating Identities

The Meeting House was a physical space and an institution that helped create a center for Boston's African American community and in the process became part of the community's visible public identity. The leaders of Boston's black community worked to shape that public identity in myriad ways, including identifying and promoting community ideals for standards of behavior through mass media and oration. The practices associated with these standards have material correlates. Dujnic (2005) analyzed all of the vessel glass from the earlier excavations (1977–99) and found that tablewares, beverage bottles and pharmaceutical bottles dominate the glass assemblage. The high number of glass tablewares coincides with the high number of tableware ceramics, and again reflects community functions at the Meeting House and Williams' catering business. The number of liquor bottles is relatively small and the consumption of alcohol at the site seems limited, a pattern also identified at the African Meeting House on Nantucket (Beaudry and Berkland 2007, p. 408). The pharmaceutical artifacts are largely professionally prepared medicines from apothecary shops and doctors, with little evidence of the many alcohol and opiate-filled patent medicines common in the later nineteenth century. One notable exception is a "Balm of Gilead" bottle (manufactured 1797–1830), a patent medicine that could have been chosen for its reference to a popular Bible story or its professed cure-all properties. Pipes are also poorly represented in the Meeting House assemblage, suggesting little public smoking took place at the site and most residents of the basement apartment were not smokers. Based on the public nature of the Meeting House, and its primary function as a church and community center, this is perhaps not surprising.

The Joy Street privy assemblage, on the other hand, is from a private disposal area of a rental residence. As a result, it provides insight into private versus public behavior by members of the African American community. In this case, there again appear to be relatively few liquor bottles, few pipes, and mostly professional medicines. Together, these characteristics suggest a similar pattern of moral behavior, with limited smoking and alcohol consumption. As Horton and Horton (1999, p. 29) have suggested, "moral living, temperance, self-improvement, and education were important themes," espoused by Boston's black leaders and community organizations. Bethel (1997, pp. 26, 55) has suggested that these values were part of the purposeful creation of African American moral community which eschewed cultural differences, demanded "natural rights," and was focused on "racial uplift and racial unity." The people whose trash we are studying appear to have largely subscribed to these community messages. The limited drinking, smoking, and choice of professionally

prepared instead of patent medicines appear to reflect purposeful actions to uphold the standards put forth by black community leaders and present an image of a moral and upstanding behavior. While this appears to be the case at the Meeting House, it is not clear how these standards were perceived or acted on elsewhere in the community.

Some of the Joy Street privy remains hint at practices of object-curation undertaken in private that may be linked to the reiteration of African American identity. A pair of raccoon lower canines was recovered from the nightsoil layer of the privy. No other raccoon bones were part in the assemblage and raccoon bones overall are uncommon in Boston faunal assemblages, with none found in the earlier collections from the Meeting House, the Smith School, or the Wilkinson Backlot or Paddy's Alley backlot sites (Andrews 1999; Bowen 1986; Landon 1996). The teeth are unmodified, but appear to have been purposefully separated from the jaw only to be later lost or discarded in the privy.

One possible interpretation is that these teeth could have been related to diet. Raccoon was a part the diet in southern and Mid-Atlantic African American contexts (Franklin 2001; McKee 1999), and it is possible that this animal was eaten. If so, perhaps these teeth had been curated by a southern migrant who once enjoyed raccoon in his or her home community, or by a person who kept the teeth as a trophy from a meal caught and cooked.

It is also possible that these teeth could have been used as part of a charm or amulet. In the Mid-Atlantic and South, there appears to have been a well developed tradition of incorporating a wide range of material into protective charms, based partially on the West African traditions of *minkisi* (Fennell 2003; Leone and Fry 2001; Wilkie 1997). Piersen (1995) argues that some aspects of these beliefs continued as folk practices amongst African Americans in New England, at least into the eighteenth century, and Chan (2007) suggests similar practices among enslaved African Americans at the Royall House in Medford, Massachusetts. In West African traditions items were added to protective charms for symbolic associations that connected them to the spirit world; for example animal claws and teeth could be used at “metaphors of the power and forcefulness of particular spirits” (Fennell 2003, p. 14). Leone and Fry (2001, pp. 148–150) surveyed widely to identify items historically-used in such charms in the American South, and although they did not specify raccoon teeth, a variety of bones and teeth were frequent components (Leone and Fry, 2001, pp. 148–150). Russell (1997, p. 67) also suggests a potential spiritual use for raccoon penis bones from both the Hermitage and Mount Vernon, a use that has some precedent in African American folklore (Hyatt 1978, p. 4391).

Raccoons and other New World wildlife turn up in a variety of African American animal folktales that have roots in African folklore traditions; sometimes as clever or even-tempered characters and at other times as foils for a trickster character (Courlander 1976, pp. 466–497). What is clear about the raccoon teeth from the Joy Street privy is that they were purposefully curated. It is possible that these teeth are the remnants of a protective charm, a token that reminded an individual of life in the South, or that they held some other meaning that will continue to remain personal and private for them.

The detection of meaningful actions is often complicated on archaeological sites, with context sometimes providing the only hint at the significance of an object. In the

case of the 1854 builder's trench for the neighboring building at 2 Smith Court, such context is evident. The builder's trench for this structure was largely devoid of artifacts in its lowest levels. At the very base of the trench, however, two artifacts were recovered including a cowrie shell and a fragment of a stoneware jug engraved with the initials "FTE." These finds point to one person's desire to leave their mark on the construction and perhaps gesture toward their heritage in the West Indies or Africa. Ogundiran (2002, p. 20) notes in his study of the history of beads and cowries in Yorubaland, that cowries "still form part of the paraphernalia of a number of deities and the ingredients of a number of potent medicinal potions, mainly to ward off 'evil eyes'." Cowries also continue to be used in Guinea as decorative objects worn by infants to protect them against harm (Stine et al. 1996, p. 55). Ogundiran (2002, pp. 12–15) suggests that between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, cowries took on many of the same symbolic meanings as beads and were incorporated into dress and spiritual life in many of the same ways. Perhaps the presence of a cowrie shell suggests that some members of the African American community actively maintained symbolic ties to African, West Indian, or Southern African American cultural heritage. While the Meeting House helped create a public community identity, the examples of the raccoon teeth and the cowrie suggest that members of the community could have continued some traditional practices in more private ways, a reflection of the fluid and situational aspects of identity construction.

### Craftwork and Economic Opportunities

Members of Boston's black community worked hard to find opportunities for employment and economic success. In the eighteenth century, white society resisted economic advancement for free blacks, who were considered a threat to the existing caste system (Piersen 1988, p. 47). Similar practices continued into the nineteenth century, with limited occupational opportunities for African Americans. One strategy to combat this was the widespread advocacy for better education in the black community of both children and adults and this issue was taken up at events such as The Annual National Convention of Coloured Citizens (Bell 1969). While the convention aimed to make a variety of improvements in the lives of African Americans, in 1831 the convention was specifically trying to organize a college for "Manual Labor Systems" in New Haven, Connecticut, to give black men a venue for practical education (Bell 1969). While African Americans in Boston were employed in a number of pursuits, the jobs they most often had in the early nineteenth century were in unskilled labor (Horton and Horton 1999, pp. 10–11). At the Meeting House and the neighboring property of 44 Joy Street, the archaeological record contains materials linked to other occupations for black men. Some of this evidence is very fleeting: a wig curler at the Meeting House is possibly from a hairdresser, and a folding ruler in the Joy Street privy is likely the lost tool of a skilled carpenter. We get a slightly more detailed picture of the work of two other men, a cordwainer at 44 Joy Street and a caterer at the African Meeting House.

One of the notable residents of the basement apartment at the Meeting House was Domingo Williams, who lived there with his family from 1819 to 1830. In the city directories he is enumerated as a "waiter" (Boston City Directories 1822, 1831), but

his business probably took care of the suite of responsibilities we entrust to caterers today. In his obituary his job is described as “the post of Attendant General to fashionable parties, assemblies and social entertainments, both public and private” (*The Liberator* 1832). The ceramics from the Meeting House backlot suggest that this praise was built upon the large-scale business that was based at his home.

The ceramic assemblage from the Meeting House is incredibly large. The previous excavation recovered over 1,900 vessels, and the 2005 excavations recovered more, making the total assemblage close to 2,000 ceramic vessels (Bower 1986, 1990; Landon 2007). Previous investigators have focused primarily on the interpretation that these vessels are the remains of community dinners at the Meeting House based on the vessel forms present and the fact that the Meeting House was the largest public space controlled by the black community in the early nineteenth century (Bower 1990). While this is no doubt part of the story, we view this assemblage as largely the remains of Domingo Williams’s catering business. Bower’s (1990) study of the probate inventories of a variety of African American Bostonians of the period suggests that even the wealthiest households had few ceramics. The exceptions were those households where members held food service occupations—in these households there were high ceramic values enumerated in the inventories (Bower 1990, pp. 58–59). As the basement tenant in the Meeting House and a prominent African American waiter, Williams was likely involved in organizing some of the community dinners, drawing on his stocks to help lay the table. The date range of the ceramics from the backlot falls primarily in his tenure, with relatively few pieces post-dating his move out of the Meeting House in 1831. The combination of community dinners at the Meeting House and the trash from a caterer together explain the size of the ceramic assemblage.

As the assemblage of a caterer, the ceramics reflect the tableware styles and decorative types deemed appropriate by the larger discerning public (see Table 2). There is limited evidence for matched patterns on the refined earthenware, which suggests that the aesthetic of the dinner table did not require patterns to match. What we do see are complimentary patterns that would have been assembled from a suite of ceramics with colors or designs would be visually pleasing together on the table. The incredibly large number of ceramics, and the regular need for new purchases to replace broken stock both suggest Williams made a significant investment in the tools of his trade. As a successful public entertainer, Williams would have gained an uncommon visibility and status within the Boston community, black and white. His successful business likely put him in the upper echelon of Beacon Hill’s African American community, an idea reinforced by his lengthy obituary in *The Liberator* (1832) where the writer laments that “it will be difficult to find a [factotum] to fill his place.”

The property of 44 Joy Street also housed a number of skilled individuals between 1806 and 1860, including a cordwainer and several tailors, waiters, and hairdressers (see Table 1). Excavations in the deepest levels of the privy recovered a number of fragments of leather, welts and sole fragments, and an entire men’s leather shoe with a worn out sole. The anaerobic context of the water logged privy bottom helped prevent attack from bacteria and the attendant decay, and thus preserved the leather. These fragments in the 44 Joy Street privy potentially point to the work of Cyrus Barrett, a cordwainer at the property from at least 1825–31 (Boston City Directories 1825,

1829, 1831; Bower 1986). Additionally, in 1829, his Joy Street address is listed as his business address (Boston City Directory 1829). Barrett's use of 44 Joy Street as a place of business underscores the nature of the neighborhood as an economic center. The complete shoe that was recovered is a common worker's shoe, a style also used for soldiers, called a brogan (Stevens and Ordoñez 2005, p. 18). This man's shoe is hand-made of leather, has a square toe and two rows of eyelets for laces (Fig. 4). While brogans are common shoes, the cordwainer likely also produced or repaired more expensive shoes as is suggested by the welt fragments found. These strips of leather were used to sew together the insole and outsole by hand and would have been associated with "finer and costlier shoes" after 1815 when pegs became the common means of fastening together shoes (Stevens and Ordoñez 2005, p. 14). The disposal of these shoe parts may suggest the prosperity of his business, allowing for some waste or the move of his business to a new location.

Domingo Williams and Cyrus Barrett are two examples where a skilled craft or ability to invest in the tools of a trade led to economic opportunity in early nineteenth-century Boston. The material remnants to their efforts connect us to their work. The maintenance of businesses were an integral part of building the community in the early nineteenth century, when this African American neighborhood was still coming into its own. The struggle for a livelihood and success in work was also one of the basic daily tasks facing the members of the African American community. While many people accomplished this through unskilled labor occupations, some were successful businessmen and skilled craftsmen and their stories have been largely overlooked.

## Building and Changing Social Institutions

The stories of Domingo Williams and Cyrus Barrett demonstrate the efforts of individuals to prosper despite social contexts where African Americans were discriminated against. On the scale of the community, such efforts took the form of institution building—the organization of people around common interests and causes for their mutual benefit. The documentary traces of this process take the form of

**Fig. 4** Photograph of a man's brogan shoe recovered from the Joy Street Privy



abolitionist society rolls, church logs, mutual aid society records and a variety of similar documents created and kept by groups directed at racial uplift in the black community. In Boston the black community created many of these organizations beginning in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; including Prince Hall's Masons, several Baptist and Methodist Churches, a school for black children, Anti-Slavery Societies, The Home for Aged Colored Women, and mutual aid societies. While some of the papers tracing the histories of these institutions survive, the documentary record remains incomplete.

The material traces of institution building come in a variety of forms. As with the case of the construction of buildings for specific institutions, these material traces stand as stark symbols of community organization and economic power. Sometimes institution building is undertaken in more subtle ways, however, as the strength of these institutions is underwritten by middle class values. Everyday practices that reference and reinforce these values form the foundation of community relationships, accountability, and interdependence. On Boston's Beacon Hill, the African Meeting House and the Abiel Smith School stood as physical embodiments of black institutions just as the medicinal practices and personal dress of the people who used these spaces embodied middle class values.

The African Meeting House and the Abiel Smith School were both public spaces representing church and school, two important institutions for the black community. In the racialized social environment of the nineteenth century, the African American community was actively establishing itself as self-sufficient and independent. These institutions required active participation and protection, as the black organizations sometimes became the target of attacks from the white community, in both discourse and practice (Curry 1981; Litwack 1961, p. 100–103).

As physical structures, the Meeting House and the Abiel Smith School are perhaps the most obvious linkage to the community's efforts at institution building. The Meeting House functioned as a school, a church, and the largest meeting place controlled by the black community in the first 30 years of the nineteenth century. As such, this institution was a space for the creation of a sense of community, a distinct group identity, and emotional immunity from the negativity seen in white-dominated spaces. As the first black church on Beacon Hill it became a pull to settlement in the area, with the black community surrounding it constituting 60 % of Boston's black community by 1860 (Horton and Horton 1999).

In addition to this, the structure served as a visible material response to the oppressive aspects of Boston's racist society. At the time it was constructed in 1806, before the north side of Beacon Hill was built up, it would have stood out in the landscape. Its four-stories, architectural details and all-brick appearance would have commanded attention in a neighborhood of ropewalks and low-rise wooden buildings. It would have also been a clear sign of the economic power of the African American community, built at a cost of \$7,700, with \$1,500 from a single donor, Cato Gardner (Fig. 5). In modern terms, if we calculate them relative to the cost of unskilled labor, we could estimate the costs in 2009 dollars as \$1,540,000 total construction costs, with \$299,000 from Cato Gardner (Williamson 2010). Clearly the message would not have been lost on anyone viewing the Meeting House, black or white.

**Fig. 5** The plaque over the front entry to the African Meeting House. (Courtesy of Chandra Harrington, Museum of African American History)



The Abiel Smith School, built next door in 1835, would have commanded similar attention. This building came to house the black school that had once resided in the Meeting House basement and had grown to need a larger facility. The creation of this institution, well before the Civil War, was undertaken at a time when most African American children were systematically denied any opportunity for education, and embodies the importance of education in Boston's black community, which boasted a very literate adult population (Horton and Horton 1999, p. 12). The high degree of literacy helped the community engage the issues of the day, subscribing to the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, and thus supporting it financially, and purchasing local books by black authors, like William Nell's, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Horton and Horton 1999, p. 12). It also helped create economic opportunities for the community, as reflected in works like Robert Roberts's publication of *The House Servant's Directory* in 1827, which went through three editions, and capitalized on Roberts' position as a "gentleman's gentleman" (Cromwell 1994, p. 37). Like Domingo William's work as a caterer, Roberts turned service work into a major entrepreneurial opportunity.

The archaeological traces of institution building at the Meeting House and Abiel Smith School are difficult to discern. In both the Meeting House backlot and the Joy Street privy are some small artifacts related to the school—a fragment of etched slate and two styluses (Fig. 6). These artifacts of the educational process have the potential to evoke a sense of connection to the community action for educational opportunity and equality that were centered at the Meeting House and the neighboring Smith School. The artifacts of the school can also connect us to the incredible efforts in the community to improve educational opportunity and integrate Boston's schools. The Meeting House and the Smith School were central to the debates over an integrated

**Fig. 6** A piece of etched slate and two styluses recovered in the excavations



versus separatist school policy and many members of Boston's African American community took legal action to establish integrated schools (Horton and Horton 1999, pp. 79–82; Kendrick and Kendrick 2004).

Some archaeological traces related to dress and personal adornment shed light on the values of the black community through their involvement in institutions. A Navy button from the Joy Street privy and an Army button from the Meeting House backlot (Fig. 7) connect us to discourses on class, masculinity, and citizenship. The Navy uniform button recovered from the 44 Joy Street privy depicts an eagle perched atop a fouled anchor with a thirteen star surround. This button style was in use from about 1802 until the 1850 s (Albert 1969, pp. 101–102; button type NA 102). This button was from the nightsoil layer at the bottom of the privy, in a context dated to 1811–ca. 1838. The second button was recovered immediately adjacent to the Meeting House, in a context that had been mixed by twentieth-century foundation repairs. This button is an Army general service enlisted men's uniform button, with a spread eagle and lined shield (see Fig. 7). This button design was standardized 1854 and continued in use until the early twentieth century (Albert 1969, pp. 39–40; button type GI 94). This button was the most common enlisted men's uniform button during the Civil War, and is still manufactured today for Civil War re-enactors.

Admittedly, a military button does not necessarily imply the presence of a particular uniform, or a sailor or soldier of a certain unit, as buttons can enter sites via multiple different pathways. In Annapolis, Maryland, there was a market in second hand clothing that sometimes included cast-off clothing from the Naval Academy (Mullins 1999, pp. 140, 143). Similar exchanges took place in Boston, and it is possible that these buttons were detached from uniforms and reused in some fashion before being discarded at the site. A tailor is listed among the residents of 44 Joy Street, and it is possible that his work, or that of a similar person, is the source for this item.

It is equally possible, however, that the buttons are from uniforms of local black residents. While we cannot identify the owner of either button with certainty, Robert Curry is listed as a tenant at 44 Joy Street from 1826–28, with his occupation identified as a mariner (see Table 1). The Navy button and Curry's occupation



**Fig. 7** Two military buttons recovered in the excavations. Left, Army General Service enlisted men's uniform button from the Meeting House backlot. Right, a Naval uniform button from the 44 Joy Street privy

connect us to work of seamen and mariners, one of the most common occupations for African American's in antebellum Boston (Horton and Horton 1999, p. 8). Bolster (1997, p. 158) has argued that participation in maritime occupations was a point of pride for free African American men as it allowed one to provide for a family on a relatively steady income.

The Civil War uniform button cannot be directly connected to an individual, but it could be from an African American veteran of the Massachusetts 54th or 55th Volunteer Infantry Regiments, both black units that fought in the Civil War. In the late nineteenth century, the neighboring Smith School building was used as a veterans' post for the Grand Army of the Republic (Cromwell 1994, p. 35), especially members of the black Massachusetts units that had fought in the Civil War, and the button could have belonged to one of these veterans.

Whether the button of a soldier or a re-used item that was part of the tailor's handiwork, this button would have referenced discourses on manliness within dominant culture which framed an ability to protect one's family as a marker of manhood and civilization, characteristics which were explicitly linked with whiteness (Bederman 1996). Frederick Douglass was one of the public figures who emphasized that participation in military service was an active exercise of one's rights and responsibilities as a citizen while also countering racialized stereotypes (Martin 1984, p. 62–65). This type of manliness had implications for everyday life, such as the patriarchal organization of the home and family. Practicing patriarchy was arguably an exercise of freedom in a context where black women were excluded from the cult of true womanhood and black men were often denied opportunities to provide for their families (Adams and Pleck 2010; Yee 1992).

Boston's African American community had a long history of service for their country and recognized the social power associated with military service in the assertion of middle-class identity and in the fight for civil rights. Public figures such as William Nell and Robert Morris highlighted the importance of Crispus Attuck's death in the lead-up to the American Revolution as a symbol of the commitment of African Americans to their country (Bethel 1997, p.13; Horton and Horton 1999, p. 61). In the years before the Civil War, black Bostonians intensified their efforts to establish a military company, unsuccessfully petitioning the state legislature on several occasions, and finally forming a drill company of their own (Horton and Horton 1999, pp. 103, 136). Ultimately, with the outbreak of the Civil War, continued pressure from the black community, and the support of Governor Andrews and white abolitionists, the Massachusetts 54th and 55th Infantry Regiments were raised and allowed to join the Union cause (Horton and Horton 1999, pp. 137–138). These two nineteenth-century uniform buttons help connect us to this broader story. Boston's African American community used maritime occupations and military participation to show their strength and equal citizenship, highlighted this participation to build pride in their accomplishments, and challenged their exclusion from fighting in the Civil War.

The archaeology of the African Meeting House is a study of a free black community and of the way people use material culture to negotiate issues of power and identity, moving the “focus away from enslavement and oppression to resistance and freedom” (Leone et al. 2005, p. 590). Singleton (2001) has studied free blacks in the

antebellum South, encouraging the interpretation of the ways material culture symbolized strategies to resist racial subordination. Boston's African American community worked to resist racial subordination in myriad ways, many of which have material dimensions. These actions were not uniform or homogenous, but complex and situational, reflecting the complexities of community and personal identities, economic constraints and opportunities, and strengths and weaknesses of social institutions.

The African Meeting House was a public church and community center, with leaders who promoted a strong message of racial uplift through practices such as temperance and moral behavior. Some members of the community living in the area apparently embraced these ideals. At both the Meeting House and neighboring Joy Street apartments there seems to be relatively limited evidence for drinking, smoking, or consumption of patent medicines. At the same time, some members of the community may have continued practices that referenced their African American heritage, as suggested by the curated raccoon teeth in the Joy Street privy and the cowrie from the 2 Smith Court builder's trench. These different practices reflect the negotiation and construction of African American identity at both community and individual levels.

While systematic discrimination imposed some occupational boundaries on the black citizens, some people achieved economic success through learning skilled crafts or specialized services. The archaeology provides specific evidence of the work of a cordwainer, Cyrus Barrett, and a caterer, Domingo Williams. In the antebellum South catering was a profession dominated by free blacks who monopolized this business in several cities (Singleton 2001, p. 196). Black catering work was likely viewed as non-threatening to the broader white economic order, as it replicated a kitchen service role, common work for enslaved African Americans and servants. This occupation at once reflected a system of constraints on the entrepreneurial activities of free blacks and an area of opportunity where some individuals manipulated these constraints to achieve success.

The study of free black communities in New England has enhanced our understanding of the African American past, emphasizing the importance of institutions and leadership to community stability and identity (Beaudry and Berkland 2007; Geismar 1982). While the role of the Meeting House in the abolitionist movement is central to its history, community efforts to build and change other institutions—the church, the schools, and the military—are key themes of the archaeology. The materiality of institution building in Boston's nineteenth-century black community is visible both on the monumental scale of structures and the micro-scale of individual efforts through everyday practices. When we look at the free black community around the Meeting House we look at a place where people were at their most powerful. Members of the neighborhood worked hard to create entrepreneurial and economic opportunities for themselves and their children, pushed for educational opportunity, and worked to build a strong interdependent network of responsibility and mutual support. These efforts would lead in later years to reform in educational, social, and civil rights in broader society. Through their efforts at building and supporting community-based religious, educational, and military institutions, nineteenth-century African Americans also reshaped the institutions in the society around them.

**Acknowledgments** This article is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0243593. Thanks to all of the students who participated in the project, especially the field crew of Joe Bonni, Kate Descoteaux, Darios Felix, Tim Hollis, Jennifer Malpiedi, Shantu Salvi, and Tom Witt. Dr. Cheryl LaRoche assisted with the research design and helped the project greatly by sharing her detailed understanding of African American History and African Diaspora archaeology. The Museum of African American History supported this project throughout, and we are especially grateful to Chandra Harrington, Diana Parcon, and Executive Director Beverly Morgan-Welch. Thanks also to Christopher Matthews, Jodi Barnes, and our other colleagues for suggestions to help clarify the article. The authors are responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation.

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