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Seneca Village and Little Africa: Two African American Communities in Antebellum New York City

ABSTRACT

African Americans in antebellum New York City followed several different residence strategies in the face of ongoing discrimination. Most lived in enclaves, dispersed throughout poorer neighborhoods that were by no means primarily black. One such enclave was Little Africa. Some lived separately in places like Seneca Village, an African American community just outside of town. This study compares the residents of these two neighborhoods and suggests that the members of these groups were quite different from each other in a number of ways. Aggregation of these differences suggests that the groups represent different socioeconomic classes. This finding runs counter to the views of many commentators and scholars (including archaeologists) who talk about the “African American community,” implying that the African American population formed (and forms) a homogeneous whole.

Introduction

When emancipation finally came to New York State on the Fourth of July 1827, it was a time of enormous hope for many African Americans in New York City. On that day, Reverend William Hamilton announced at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, “[n]o more shall the accursed name of slave be attached to us—no more shall *negro* and *slave* be synonymous [sic]” (Freeman 1994:3). That hope soon proved illusory. For the next generation, most aspects of African American daily life were heavily circumscribed by discrimination. As Samuel E. Cornish, editor of the *African American Weekly Advocate*, said, “‘Free man of color’ what an empty name. What a mockery! Free man indeed! When so unrighteously deprived of every civil and political privilege. Free indeed!” (Foote 1993:131). The forms of discrimination that free African Americans in

New York had to contend with ranged from the irritating to the degrading to the downright dangerous. Whites often refused service to African Americans in restaurants (Freeman 1994: 68–69), and African Americans could not count on being able to travel by public transportation on the new omnibuses, cross-country stages, or European packets. In fact, they could not use public transportation without discrimination until after the Civil War (Freeman 1994:75). Schools, churches, cemeteries, and even almshouses were all segregated. More stringent property and residency requirements for voting were introduced for African Americans than for their European American counterparts. In 1821, the second New York State constitution imposed a \$250 property suffrage requirement for African-American men in the state, while all property requirements for whites were gradually removed. In addition, African Americans had to fulfill a three-year residency requirement for voting, while European Americans only had to satisfy a one-year residency requirement (Freeman 1994:92).

Discrimination also extended into the workplace. Men found it hard to become trained in the skilled trades, and even when trained, they often could not find work because whites refused to work alongside them. Men tended to work as unskilled laborers, as service workers (barbers, waiters, coachmen, or porters), or as sailors. Women, too, faced discrimination in the workplace. Although African American women had traditionally found work in domestic service in colonial and federal times, many were forced out of this line of work by Irish women who refused to work in the same settings as black women (Freeman 1994:203–213).

Most dangerously, African Americans faced the constant threat of kidnapping, with blackbirders snatching people and selling them into slavery (Freeman 1994:52), a fear that only increased with the passage of the federal Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. In New York City, inter-racial animosity erupted into mob violence several times. First, there were the antiabolition riots of 1834, where the white “mob” went after the homes, businesses, and churches of white and black abolitionists as well as African Americans

in general. Although no one was killed, many African Americans were beaten, and about 500 people fled their homes (Burrows and Wallace 1999:558). Most serious were the draft riots of 1863, which raged for four days in July and resulted in the deaths of at least 119 people. Many of these victims were African Americans who were lynched, and their bodies mutilated. The riots only ended when regiments fresh from the Battle of Gettysburg were brought to New York to bring order to the city. The draft riots constitute the "largest single incident of civil disorder" in the history of the United States (Burrows and Wallace 1999:895). After the riots, approximately one-fifth of New York's African American population left the city (Rosenwaike 1972:36,77; Burrows and Wallace 1999:897).

One of the strategies that some African Americans used to contend with ongoing discrimination and threats of violence was to establish separate communities for their own people, along with a parallel network of separate institutions such as churches and schools. In the New York area, most African Americans lived in enclaves that were dispersed throughout poorer neighborhoods in the city (which was then confined to Manhattan), the then-separate city of Brooklyn, and several villages in Queens. These neighborhoods were by no means primarily black. Examples include Little Africa in New York City, the Black Belt and parts of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, and Liberty Street in Flushing and the Green in Jamaica, both in Queens.

Some African Americans formed separate communities just outside of town, where they could have physical, psychological, and social space. There, they could create their own institutions and supplement their living by farming. Furthermore, in communities right outside the city where real estate was relatively cheap, more African Americans could afford to buy land and own their own homes, which helped them meet the discriminatory property requirements for suffrage. These separate communities included Seneca Village, about three miles north of New York City at the time it was created, and Weeksville, about two miles east of the city of Brooklyn, beyond the village of Bedford.

This study examines and compares some aspects of the lifeways of those who lived in the separate settlement of Seneca Village,

beyond the city's limits, and in the dispersed community of Little Africa, within the city proper. The target period is 1850, almost a quarter-century after emancipation came to New York State. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the people who lived in these two different kinds of settlements and to explore the extent to which these groups were different from each other or were the same.

Seneca Village

Seneca Village was located between 81st and 89th streets and 7th and 8th avenues in what later became Central Park in Manhattan. It was established in the 1820s, just prior to emancipation, when some African Americans began to buy land there. Almost immediately, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church purchased land for a burial ground for its downtown congregation. Some of the village landowners built their homes in the village, while others continued to live downtown and either rented out their land or simply used it as an investment. The village grew in the late 1830s after the African American community of York Hill, just to the east, was destroyed by the construction of a holding basin for the new Croton water system (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992:66). Later, in the 1840s, some Irish immigrants moved into the village. By the 1850s, Seneca Village had more than 260 residents, two-thirds of whom were of African descent and one-third were European, mostly Irish (State of New York 1855).

As New York City began to undergo the dramatic growth that accompanied its burgeoning economy after the completion of the Erie Canal, its border rapidly moved north. By the 1850s, with its limits approaching Seneca Village, the city developed plans for the creation of a major park. After a great deal of political wrangling (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992), it chose the area known today as Central Park for its location. Using the right of eminent domain, the city seized the land to make the park, evicted all its residents, and razed their homes. Seneca Village was destroyed.

Little Africa

During the early-19th century, many of the free blacks who lived in New York City resided

in the developing Five Points neighborhood, which was then called Little Africa. Later in the 1830s, as this neighborhood was filling up with Irish immigrants and was on its way to becoming the city’s most notorious slum, many of its African American residents moved north and resettled in the area south of Washington Square, where a new Little Africa developed on MacDougal, Sullivan, Thompson, Minetta, and Bleecker streets and Minetta Lane. This neighborhood was close to the new wealthy suburb that had developed around the square. Here, African Americans lived in a place from which they could walk to their workplaces, either in the lower city or in the homes of the wealthy who lived nearby. African Americans continued to live here until incoming Italian immigrants and rising real estate prices displaced them in the late-19th century. Many moved further north again to the Tenderloin, in the west 20s and 30s between 5th and 7th avenues, and San Juan Hill, between 60th and 64th streets and 10th and 11th avenues (Jackson 1995:1161; Osofsky 1996:12).

The Comparison

Data from the 1850 manuscript federal census returns was used to compare aspects of the life-ways of Seneca Village and Little Africa residents at mid-century (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1850). To identify Seneca Village residents in the census data, the results of the authors’ earlier research on Seneca Village was used (Rothschild and Wall 2001). To identify those of Little Africa, all of the African Americans were included who were listed as living in households that were headed by African Americans in the returns from the western half of the Fifteenth Ward, the political division that encompassed Little Africa. Over all, the study suggests that the people of these two neighborhoods tended to be quite different from each other in a number of ways and that, in general, the people of Seneca Village were more established than those of Little Africa and may have been members of the African American middle class. As discussed below, during the early-19th century, “middle class” meant somewhat different things to African Americans and European Americans.

Although children made up roughly one-third of each of these communities, the adult popula-

tion of Seneca Village tended to be older than that of Little Africa (Table 1). Fully one-quarter of the village population could be described as old (over 49 years of age), while only a small

TABLE 1
AFRICAN AMERICAN AGE DISTRIBUTION
SENECA VILLAGE AND LITTLE AFRICA, 1850

Age	Little Africa		Seneca Village	
	No.	%	No.	%
0–15	100	33.7	43	39.8
16–49	180	60.6	39	36.1
> 49	17	5.7	26	24.1
Total	297	100.0	108	100.0

Source: United States Bureau of the Census 1850.

proportion of Little Africa’s population was in that age class.

The people of Seneca Village also had deeper roots in the State of New York than did the people of Little Africa (Table 2). Well over half of the adults who lived in Seneca Village had been born in the State of New York, while almost two-thirds of the people of Little Africa originated elsewhere. Many of the people of Little Africa came from New Jersey (where slavery had only recently ended) and the slave states of Maryland and Virginia. Although the census for 1850 unfortunately does not record how long people had lived in New York, it seems likely that Little Africa may have been a first stop for people moving to the city. Later on, they moved somewhere else.

Although by no means rich, the people of Seneca Village were also more prosperous than those of Little Africa. Well over half of the 22 heads of African American households who lived in the village in 1850 owned real estate (Table 3). There were 14 property owners in Seneca Village, forming one-fifth of the population of 71 African American property owners who were listed in the census that year for the entire city (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992:70). For those nine who were men and who also

TABLE 2
AFRICAN AMERICAN BIRTHPLACES
SENECA VILLAGE AND LITTLE AFRICA, 1850

Birthplace	Seneca Village		Little Africa	
	No.	%	No.	%
<i>New York State</i>	38	58.5	77	39.1
<i>Out of State</i>				
Middle Atlantic	6	9.2	52	26.4
New Jersey	5	—	40	—
Pennsylvania	1	—	12	—
Chesapeake	10	15.4	57	28.9
Delaware	2	—	5	—
Maryland	1	—	29	—
Washington, DC	1	—	2	—
Virginia	6	—	21	—
South and Midwest	2	3.1	4	2.0
Georgia	2	—	—	—
Louisiana	—	—	1	—
North Carolina	—	—	2	—
South Carolina	—	—	1	—
New England	8	12.3	7	3.6
Connecticut	5	—	4	—
Massachusetts	—	—	2	—
Rhode Island	3	—	—	—
Vermont	—	—	1	—
<i>Out of Country</i>	1	1.5	—	—
France	1	—	—	—
Total	65	100	197	100

Note: Includes those over 15 years of age.

Source: United States Bureau of the Census 1850.

owned real estate valued at more than \$250, these properties would have fulfilled the property requirement for suffrage. In Little Africa, on the other hand, none of the people in the sample were listed as owning any property. The people of Seneca Village were also much more likely to live in single-family homes than were the people of Little Africa. Almost all Seneca Village residents lived in single-family homes, while almost all Little Africa residents lived in multiple-family housing (Table 4).

Looking at the occupations of the men living in each of these two communities (and occu-

pations are listed only for men in the census for that year), it is evident that in spite of their greater wealth, the men of Seneca Village appear to be no more likely to work in skilled jobs than their counterparts in Little Africa (Table 5). In fact, proportionately more of the Seneca Village men are listed as being unskilled "laborers" in the census, while proportionately more of those who lived in Little Africa worked in service jobs. This discrepancy probably results, at least in part, because the men of Little Africa, unlike those of Seneca Village, lived close to the homes of the wealthy

TABLE 3
AFRICAN AMERICAN REAL ESTATE HOLDINGS: VALUE IN DOLLARS
SENECA VILLAGE AND LITTLE AFRICA, 1850

	\$0–100	\$101–250	\$251–500	\$501–1000	\$1001–5000
Seneca Village	1	–	4	4	5
Little Africa	–	–	–	–	–

Source: United States Bureau of the Census 1850.

TABLE 4
AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY RESIDENCE TYPE
SENECA VILLAGE AND LITTLE AFRICA, 1850

	Families in single-family homes		Families in multiple-family homes	
	No.	%	No.	%
Seneca Village	21	91.3	2	8.7
Little Africa	4	4.8	79	95.2

Source: United States Bureau of the Census 1850.

families that could employ them. It may be that the residents of Seneca Village were making a choice between occupation and a way of life, deciding that even if they worked as laborers, the atmosphere and conditions in Seneca Village made living there a worthwhile compromise. Other factors, discussed below, could also have had an influence.

One of the enormous costs that Seneca Village residents could have had to bear is that they, unlike the people of Little Africa, might not have had access to the African American churches and other institutions that provided social and political as well as spiritual sustenance for the community. At the time of the community’s demise, however, three churches that blacks could attend were located in Seneca Village. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was among the first purchasers of land in the village in 1825 and later opened a branch of the church there in 1853, the AME Zion Church Branch Militant. The African Union Methodist Church moved its York Hill branch

there in the late 1830s after the York Hill community was destroyed. Finally, St. Michael’s, an Episcopal church on 99th Street and Broadway, opened the integrated All Angels’ Church as a mission church in Seneca Village in the late 1840s.

At least one school operated in Seneca Village—Colored School No. 3, a primary school that opened in the basement of the African Union Church in the 1840s. The opening of another school in the AME Zion Church was also at least planned. Seneca Villagers, in fact, seem to have been in a better position to send their children to school than the parents of Little Africa (Table 6). Almost three-quarters of the children of Seneca Village had recently attended school. Only around half of those in Little Africa had attended school, even though there was a primary school for African American children on Amity Street (just a block south of Washington Square) and a secondary school on Laurens Street (today’s Wooster Street), just a few blocks to the east (Freeman 1994:244–248).

TABLE 5
MALE AFRICAN AMERICAN OCCUPATIONS
SENECA VILLAGE AND LITTLE AFRICA, 1850

Occupation	Seneca Village		Little Africa	
	No.	%	No.	%
<i>Unskilled</i>	15	65.2	25	41.0
Laborer	14		25	
Ragpicker	1			
<i>Skilled</i>	3	13.0	11	18.0
Carman/Cartman	1		4	
Cooper	1			
Gardener	1			
Grate setter			1	
Tailor			2	
Whitewasher			4	
<i>Services</i>	3	13.0	18	29.5
Barber	1		1	
Bootblack			1	
Coachman	1		3	
Cook	1		1	
Porter			3	
Waiter			9	
<i>Other</i>	2	8.7	7	11.5
Boatman	1			
Clergyman	1			
Sailor/Seaman			7	
Total	23	100	61	100

Source: United States Bureau of the Census 1850.

TABLE 6
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN
SENECA VILLAGE AND LITTLE AFRICA, 1850

	Little Africa		Seneca Village	
	No.	%	No.	%
Attended	43	53.1	25	71.4
Did not attend	38	46.9	10	28.6
Total	81	100	35	100

Note: Includes children older than 2 and younger than 16 years who had "attended school within the year."

Source: United States Bureau of the Census 1850.

There could be several reasons for this disparity. Children needed appropriate clothing to go to school, and the poorer families of Little Africa may have had more difficulty in outfitting their children. In addition, of course, many children of the poor, whether black or white, needed to contribute to their family income by working. More ominously, many African American families feared for their children’s safety after the riots of 1834 and are reported to have kept their children home, rather than sending them to school (Freeman 1994:245).

Interestingly, although the samples are small, the people of Seneca Village seem to have stressed education, even when having children attend school must have been quite difficult (Table 7). Three-quarters of the older children of Seneca Village attended upper school, whereas fewer than half of the older ones in Little Africa did. These figures are particularly striking because Little Africa had a public upper school for African American children nearby, but no such upper school existed in or near Seneca Village. The children there may have boarded downtown or perhaps commuted to a nonpublic school closer to home.

As might be expected, education seems to have been much more valued (or accessible) in some families than in others. In Seneca Village, for example, the Landin and the Wilson families together sent 12 children to school. They were in fact among the richer families in the

village, although the fathers of these families, Josiah Landin and William Wilson, were each described in the census as laborers. Education was not just confined to the relatively wealthy. Three of the Hinson children, whose father James was a cooper, and two of the Scudder boys, whose father was a laborer, attended school, although neither of their families was listed as owning any real estate. Gender may have played a role in some families as well. In the family of John White, there were five children, one boy and four girls. Only the boy was sent to school. In the family of Ishmael Allen, who was listed as a laborer and was the sexton of All Angels’ Church, none of the three school-age children was sent to school, and all of them were girls. The practice of educating boys before girls could have been a longstanding one in parts of the African American population, as it was in parts of the European American population; many of the married couples of Seneca Village (including the Allens, the Landins, and the Wilsons) consisted of a husband who was described in the census returns as literate and a wife who was not literate. This disparity in education according to gender was much more marked in Seneca Village than in Little Africa. Only about one-third of the women of Seneca Village were listed as literate, while fully half of the women of Little Africa were so described (Table 8). It is not clear why this is so.

TABLE 7
UPPER SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN
SENECA VILLAGE AND LITTLE AFRICA, 1850

	Little Africa		Seneca Village	
	No.	%	No.	%
Attended	5	41.7	6	75.0
Did not attend	7	58.3	2	25.0
Total	12	100	8	100

Note: Includes children older than 12 and younger than 16 years who had “attended school within the year.”

Source: United States Bureau of the Census 1850.

TABLE 8
AFRICAN AMERICAN ADULT LITERACY LEVELS BY GENDER
LITTLE AFRICA AND SENECA VILLAGE, 1850

	Little Africa				Seneca Village			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Can read and write	44	61.1	63	61.8	14	58.3	12	35.3
Cannot read and write	28	38.9	39	38.2	10	41.7	22	64.7
Total	72	100	102	100	24	100	34	100

Note: Includes "persons over 20 yrs of age who cannot read & write."

Source: United States Bureau of the Census 1850.

Discussion

Recently, historian Leslie Harris (2003) has written about attitudes toward work and education among the members of different parts of the African American population in antebellum New York. She points out that, because of discrimination, class differentiation was not based on the nature of work in this population as it was among European Americans. For European American men, middle-class status depended in large part on working in nonmanual occupations, while such status for women was defined by devotion to the home or domestic life (the cult of domesticity) and not taking part in the cash economy at all. On the other hand, most African American women had to work, but they were shut out of the nonmanual workforce, factory work, and skilled jobs along with African American men. Rather than being defined by the nature of their work, most middle-class black men were defined by their education and their participation in moral reform activities (Harris 2003:120). Men tended to work either in service jobs or as unskilled laborers, while their wives and sisters worked either as domestics or took washing into their homes. Many middle-class African Americans, however, frowned on domestic service jobs for men—the jobs that characterized most men of Little Africa—because whites looked on it as demeaning “women’s work.” Instead, middle-class men respected manual labor—the work that characterized the men of Seneca Village—and encouraged others

to do so too. This attitude suggests that the observed differences between the people of Little Africa and of Seneca Village may not be related simply to their wealth, age, or the amount of time that they may have lived in New York but was related, instead, to different cultural values. In fact, the members of these two different communities may have been members of two different classes. The middle-class men of Seneca Village may have preferred to work as laborers, which they may have believed to be “noble” work, rather than in service jobs. It may also have been very important to them that their children be educated so that they, in their turn, might become members of the black middle class. It should be noted, however, that because of the higher literacy rate for women, proportionately more of the adults who lived in Little Africa were listed as literate in the census records than those of Seneca Village (Table 9). The proportions of men who were literate were roughly equal.

Archaeological Excavation of Seneca Village and Little Africa

The next logical step is to conduct archaeological excavations in these two neighborhoods in order to explore possible class differences as they might have been expressed in material culture. Both of these projects are in their early planning stages. The main question to be asked in studying Seneca Village is whether the site was destroyed with the creation of the park a

TABLE 9
AFRICAN AMERICAN ADULT LITERACY LEVELS
LITTLE AFRICA AND SENECA VILLAGE, 1850

	Little Africa		Seneca Village	
	No.	%	No.	%
Can read and write	107	61.5	26	44.8
Cannot read and write	67	38.5	32	55.2
Total	174	100	58	100

Note. Includes “persons over 20 yrs of age who cannot read & write.”

Source: United States Bureau of the Census

century and a half ago. In fall 2004, geoarchaeologist Suanna Selby (2005) completed a soil study designed to determine if the village area contains intact deposits. After studying the results of almost 100 auger tests, she determined that several areas appeared to have intact soils containing 19th-century artifacts. More recently, in August 2005 geophysical archaeologist Lawrence Conyers conducted ground-penetrating radar tests in the areas that Selby had identified as having archaeological potential to see if he could detect the presence of archaeological features. Conyers (2005) was able to identify several possible house floors, middens, shaft features, and burials. With permission from the New York City Department of Parks and anticipated funding, limited archaeological testing in the residential parts of the village may be undertaken. In preparation for excavations in Little Africa sometime in the future, students have done preliminary historical research on the neighborhood, trying to identify intact backyards associated with houses where African Americans lived.

The questions that could be addressed through such excavations would be related to the constructions of race, class, and gender within these different groups of African Americans in New York in the mid-19th century. One might explore, for example, whether the people of Little Africa and of Seneca Village followed the same foodway customs. What kinds of dishes did they use? In terms of form, did one or both of these groups tend to use a higher

proportion of plates, like their middle-class white contemporaries in New York City, or did they use a higher proportion of bowls, like their enslaved contemporaries in the South? In terms of pattern, were the middle-class Seneca Villagers using the same china patterns to construct class as their white middle-class contemporaries (who were using matched sets of molded Gothic ironstone at mid-century), and were those in Little Africa using different patterns entirely, perhaps similar to their white working-class neighbors? Alternatively, do these distinctions extend to customs? What kinds of meat (in terms of both cuts and species) did the members of each group eat? Were their meats purchased at market already butchered, or did they butcher animals at home? Were Seneca Villagers procuring local wild species, such as fish, birds, and small mammals (squirrels and rabbits), while the residents of Little Africa were not? Unearthing fishhooks and sinkers as well as musket balls and gunflints would provide insight into foodways.

Another set of questions relates to the local economy in Seneca Village compared to Little Africa. Is there any evidence of the residents of either neighborhood producing goods for the wider market through sewing or any other kind of small-scale production? Is there any information on whether the villagers seemed to be isolated and self-sufficient; for example, did they repair their own tools? Other forms of connections to the dominant culture might be seen in the areas of health and medicine. Do glass

pharmaceutical bottles in the archaeological assemblages show that members of both groups used patent medicines, or did they get some of their drugs from dispensaries? Might the presence of medicinal herbs in flotation samples from either site imply folk remedies? Either of these neighborhoods might have been connected to the Underground Railroad, so researchers will want to investigate the possibility of unrecorded basements or large storage pits that could have served to hide people who were escaping slavery at either site.

Conclusion

It appears that the African Americans of Seneca Village may have been members of the black middle class, while those of Little Africa were working class. By settling in Seneca Village, the villagers probably did not have to deal with daily ongoing discrimination in their own neighborhood, as the people of Little Africa probably did. When the residents of the area that was to become the park were being evicted for the park's creation, the contemporary press dismissed them as squatters, and Seneca Village itself was denigrated as "Nigger Village" (*The New-York Daily Times* 1856)—a particularly ironic label in light of the fact that the village was a comfortable, established community. Although many of its residents apparently were members of the city's African American middle class, the community's stability did not protect it from being destroyed.

When the draft riots erupted less than a decade after the demise of Seneca Village, many of the city's African American residents fled. One of the places that they fled to was Weeksville, the separate African American community in Brooklyn. There, people took up arms and were successful in defending their community against the white mob (Ment and Donovan 1980:20). Seneca Village, during its lifetime, may have been perceived as a safe haven too. It must have been sorely missed during the riots, when people needed to find a refuge.

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