

ROYALL HOUSE & SLAVE QUARTERS

Fall 2013

News

Inside:

Exploring Parallel Lives

Archaeology Revelations

Upcoming Programs

Power of Art

Tours

Public tours will resume on May 25, 2014. In the meantime, please contact Director@RoyallHouse.org to arrange group tours for next spring.

Admission

FREE for members
Adults \$7
Seniors and Students \$5
Children \$4
Families \$16

Royall House and Slave Quarters

15 George Street
Medford, Massachusetts
RoyallHouse.org



Exploring Parallel Lives



On October 16 and 23, a total of forty-three fifth-graders from two local schools in Malden, Massachusetts, stepped off of their buses and into new roles as history detectives at the Royall House and Slave Quarters. Teacher Lisa Casaletto's class from the Forestdale School and Linda Patrie's class from Linden STEAM Academy were the first to participate in a pilot version of the organization's new interactive education program. Their participation provided the Royall House and Slave Quarters with the opportunity to put theory into practice and to learn from the students.

Olivia Searcy, who developed the program in collaboration with local teachers and the museum's education committee, welcomed students as they took their seats in the Slave Quarters. In addition to giving them an introduction to both free and enslaved people living on the site in the eighteenth century and aspects of their everyday lives, Searcy asked students to consider deeper and more complicated issues, particularly, what it meant to be enslaved. To help them make a more direct connection to the lives of people who lived centuries ago, students were introduced to two pairs of children. When John Singleton Copley painted their now famous double portrait, Mary and Elizabeth Royall were just about the same age as the fifth graders from Malden. However, Ms. Searcy remind-

continued on page 2



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ed the students that there were other children living here, children whose portraits were not painted. Joseph and Prine, children of Belinda, were represented in silhouettes. They may also have been around the same age as the Royall daughters but had a dramatically different experience of many of the same spaces on the estate. The students were asked to consider the perspectives of these two pairs of children as they toured the house and grounds.



Inside the house, the groups explored the diverse meanings of the spaces and objects. Students expressed surprise when Searcy unrolled a reproduction pallet on the floor and explained that when it was time for bed, this would have been the type of bedding Joseph and Prine might have slept upon. This revelation was likely on their minds when they saw the crimson silk damask on the bed in the Marble Chamber. In the Kitchen Chamber, students considered the concept that all residents of the house likely entered this room, either to work, sleep, or be dressed. Handling around samples of different types of fabric, they discussed the noisy “rustling” of material worn by Mary and Elizabeth and the lack of sound produced by the clothing that Joseph and Prine would have worn.

After their interactive tour of the house, the students returned to the Slave Quarters to talk as a group about what they saw and then turned their attention to analyzing other clues about the lives of the Royalls, Belinda, and her children. By looking carefully at primary source documents, maps, and the archaeological fragments, the students explored the similarities and differences of lives lived in bounty and bondage. Searcy also shared information about the games that enslaved children may have played, making an important point that although work was the major activity of their days, there was some time and a few unobserved areas for play, family time, and personal reflection.

Archaeology and the Unexpected Revelation

Archaeology is a dirty business. It's an uncomfortable business. An archaeologist is often either too hot, too cold, too insect-bitten, too sore, too tired, or too thirsty. It can also be a grind – exciting discoveries are separated by long stretches of meticulous paperwork, and many times you do not even know what you have until you get to the lab. Many of the best “discoveries” for me have come weeks or months after excavations have ended. So what keeps us digging?

As a historical archaeologist, who has a vast set of written documents to supplement my research, the question is even more pointed: why dig? What can we learn about these people that we didn't already know before? Aside from more obvious answers about “history being written by the winners” and such, it comes down to this: some of the most gratifying moments in scientific practice come when we have rigorously laid out, exhaustively researched, and contextually constructed a set of questions to go into a project with, only to be confronted with revelations about the past that are unexpected.

Data that won't go where we “wanted” them to can be even more gratifying than getting the answers we went in expecting. Surprise evidence and thwarted expectations force an archaeologist to open new avenues of inquiry. Historical archaeologists have multiple data sets of artifacts, landscapes, documents, and oral histories at their disposal. These separate lines of evidence do not all tell the same story, however, and are frequently contrastive. That is, there is often a “gap” between what documents will tell us about a site or a past historical phenomenon, and what oral histories, landscapes, and archaeological excavation will tell us about the same site or phenomenon, respectively. So while archaeologists go into a project with a certain set of expectations to guide their initial research, they must also “mind the gap” between and among their different data sets, for it is in that “gap” that many of the most interesting discoveries reside.

Let's take an example from the Royall House and Slave Quarters excavations from 1999-2001. Historical documents reveal that there were important social, economic, and demographic differences between systems of slavery in New England and elsewhere, like the South or the Caribbean. Enslaved people had greater legal rights in the

north; they were more likely to be in urban households than rural ones; more likely to be house slaves or skilled labor than field hands; more likely to be held in groups of three or four than scores or hundreds; and more likely to live and work in close proximity, often under the same roof or in the same business as, their masters. Unfortunately, these differences, while real, were often used to perpetuate a myth of northern slavery being a kinder, more family-like, form of servitude. Cotton Mather wrote in 1721, “Many of you would not Live near so well as you do.... Your Servitude is Gentle.” This characterized apologist attitudes of the day, and was carried on in modern historical scholarship about northern slavery through much of the 20th century.



A happy hunting party somewhere in New England, 1870-1890.

We had no such illusions at the Royall House, and in fact, entered in on the project in a myth-busting frame of mind. However, some of our expectations were still unwittingly colored by our research. Primary and secondary documents did seem to imply that enslaved people might have enjoyed greater autonomy and freedom of movement in the northern economy – the idea being that skilled labor had more “bargaining power” because it was less easily replaced. Also, the low number of Blacks in the community

was thought to be less “threatening,” and so surveillance might have been less rigid. The Royalls’ estate documents also indicated that one or more slaves there were “trusted servants” sent on independent errands, and sometimes carrying considerable sums of money.

Documents and archaeology conducted on slave sites in the South and Caribbean seemed to underscore the importance of this “free time” in the construction of identities and communities. Plantation sites are often characterized by an abundance of wild animal bones, indicative of clandestine hunting parties, to supplement diets, provide for families, and forge important social relationships. It is also typical of plantation sites to find wild and domestic plant remains, indicative of foraging and an intimate familiarity with the natural environment, as well as the maintenance of private gardens, yielding produce that enslaved women could sell at market for their own financial gain.



Domestic faunal remains similar to those found at the Royall House – representing basic New England farm fare.

We had originally hoped – and even expected – that the floral and faunal analyses at the Royall House, too, would fit well within a discussion of the creation and maintenance of “private personae” and black community life in the quarters. We had no reason to assume otherwise. All historical and archaeological evidence thus far had pointed to exactly this. If anything, we thought we might see the pattern exaggerated in the North.

But the plant and animal remains from this site suggest that the Royalls’ slaves were doing little or nothing to supplement their basic provisions, either through the exploitation of wild resources or the cultivation of domesticated ones. There was no evidence of a preference for stews or gumbos; no presence of small forest game, aside from a single rabbit; no evidence of fish-

ing; only equivocal evidence of shellfish gathering; and few plant remains – a few hundred wild berry seeds.



Raspberry and elderberry seeds were recovered from the Royall House Slave Quarters deposits.

What this means is that while the varied and dispersed nature of northern slave labor would have provided opportunities to become autonomous in ways unknown among slaves in other parts of the Americas, the close living quarters and relatively low density of blacks in the region also gave northern slaves less freedom of movement in their environs, which must have been a great loss in autonomy. Indeed, since African-American folk culture in other areas is known to have sprung up and flourished in physically marginal areas such as fields and forest clearings and depended largely on enslaved people’s ability to get away from the plantation, the possibility that the Royalls’ slaves were curtailed in that kind of movement has serious implications for their ability to create and maintain social, cultural, and economic ties outside the bounds of the Royall estate. Whatever the legal differences, the practical limits of slavery, even in the North, were manifold and sometimes unimagined. This is what archaeology is for, and this is exactly why we keep digging

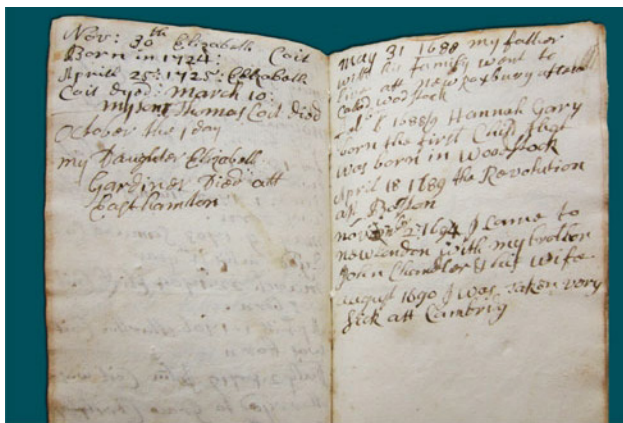
Alexandra Chan holds a PhD in Historical Archaeology from Boston University, based on her research and collaboration with the Royall House Association. She currently works as a private archaeological consultant in New Hampshire, and continues to be active in public outreach and education about the Royall House, archaeology, and the lives of early African Americans in New England.

Upcoming Programs

Exploring Life in Colonial New England

Our first two public programs this fall-winter explore the daily lives of women and of enslaved families in colonial New England through diaries written by next-door neighbors in eighteenth-century New London, Connecticut.

The November program featured historian Michelle Coughlin, author of *One Colonial Woman's World: The Life and Writings of Mehetabel Chandler Coit*. Coughlin's 2012 book is based on what may be the earliest surviving diary by an American woman. A native of Roxbury, Massachusetts, who later moved to New London, Connecticut, Mehetabel Coit (1673–1758), began her diary at the age of fifteen and kept it intermittently until she was well into her seventies. A previously overlooked resource, the diary contains entries on a broad range of topics as well as poems, recipes, folk and herbal medical remedies, religious meditations, financial accounts, and even some humor. An extensive collection of letters by Mehetabel and her female relatives has also survived, shedding further light on her experiences.

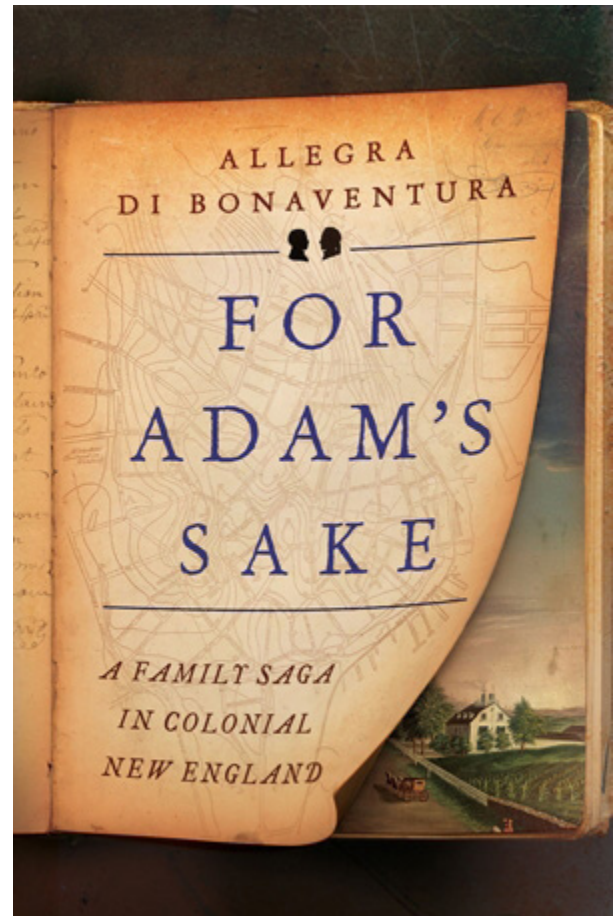


One Colonial Woman's World

The Life and Writings of
MEHETABEL CHANDLER COIT



Michelle Marchetti Coughlin



On Wednesday, January 15th, at 7:30 p.m., historian Allegra di Bonaventura will give an illustrated talk on her recent book, *For Adam's Sake*. Diarist Joshua Hempstead was a well-respected farmer and tradesman in New London, Connecticut. As his remarkable diary -- kept from 1711 until 1758 -- reveals, he was also a slaveholder who held Adam Jackson in bondage for more than thirty years. In this engrossing narrative of family life and the slave experience in the colonial North, Allegra di Bonaventura describes the complexity of this relationship between slaveholder and enslaved, and traces the intertwining stories of two families until the eve of the Revolution. The lines between slavery and freedom were blurred as colonial New England families across the social spectrum fought to survive. In this enlightening study, a new portrait of the era emerges. Admission is free for RH&SQ members, and \$5 for non-members.

ROYALL HOUSE & SLAVE QUARTERS

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Moved by the Power of Art

At the Royall House and Slave Quarters, we believe strongly in the power of history to help us understand and heal the tragedies of the past. On October 23, a small group from the site experienced the power of art to do the same thing, as they were immersed in the vision of artist Ife Franklin at an exhibition of her work at the Spoke Gallery @ Medicine Wheel Productions in South Boston. Perhaps most profound was the experience of an 8-foot structure made of planks covered with Aso Adire, a traditional Nigerian resist-dyed fabric that incorporates indigo, wax, and small found objects to create a “tie dye” effect. The result is a stunning, brilliant, blue patterned cloth. Franklin intended her indigo-wrapped building to provide a spiritual home for her ancestors who were enslaved in the cotton-producing South. The themes of family, love, and home, along with the pain of enslavement reverberated in her comments during a public conversation held in the gallery that evening between the artist, Royall House and Slave Quarters board member Jennifer Pustz, and an audience eager to talk about the thorny issues of race, history, and their impact on present-day lives and those of future generations. “It was an honor to be part of such an important and moving conversation,” Pustz reflected, “and it is one I hope we can continue through our work at the Royall House and Slave Quarters.”

