

## CHAPTER 4

# Relative Dating

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This chapter describes the rationale and methodology for dividing the burial population into temporal groupings. It is emphasized that the chronological sequence developed here is a relative one and the dates assigned to each grouping approximate. Burials are assigned to broad temporal groups on the basis of (1) location and stratigraphy relative to nonburial features at the site, (2) artifacts found in direct association with the deceased or in the grave fill, (3) stratigraphic relationships to other burials, and (4) coffin type. In many cases, the parameters support each other, strengthening the assignments, although in other instances, evidence is ambiguous.

### Site Features Relevant for Chronology

Nonburial physical features within the excavated site that are relevant for understanding the cemetery's use over time include:

- the remains of fences that once crossed the site from southwest to northeast along the boundary between the Van Borsum Patent and the Calk Hook Farm (see Chapters 2 and 3);
- ditches found in Lot 12 that trend in the same direction as the fence;
- the scatter of animal bone and cattle-horn core fragments that may represent waste dumping (possibly from tanneries) over a portion of the north part of the excavation site;
- the stoneware waste dump associated with potteries that stood on and/or adjacent to the cemetery.

### The Fence Lines

Historic maps from 1754 and 1767 depict lines running diagonally from the southwest starting at Broadway

to northeast across the area of the cemetery, along or very near the alignment of the Van Borsum patent's northern boundary as it would be established in the 1780s–1790s (see Figures 22 and 24 in Chapter 2). On the 1754 Maerschalk map (see Figure 19 in Chapter 2 and Figure 33 in Chapter 3), the line is dashed and the “Negros Buriel Ground” is clearly labeled to its south. The fact that the mapmaker depicted a line suggests, at least, that the boundary somehow was physically marked on the landscape. There may have been a fence dividing the Calk Hook Farm from the burial ground at the time, or perhaps a path ran along the boundary, leading from the structure depicted on Broadway eastward to the “Pot Baker” near the Little Collect Pond. On the Ratzer plan of 1767 (Figure 45; see Figure 20 in Chapter 2 and Figure 34 in Chapter 3), a similarly placed line runs along the south side of three buildings: one on Broadway, shown with a second structure to its east, and the presumed pottery building farther east, shown within a rectangular lot (which itself may have been enclosed by a fence). Again, the line extending east from Broadway may represent a fence, dividing properties on the Calk Hook Farm (some of which was developed and had presumably been leased) from land to the south that is depicted as undeveloped (the cemetery).

Further evidence for the existence of a fence in the 1760s can be found in court records of 1812–1813 relating to the ownership of the former cemetery. The heirs to the Van Borsum patent had the land surveyed in 1784, but arguments arose as to the legality of possession of certain parcels during the period following the War for Independence. Proceedings included testimony of a number of witnesses as to the boundaries of the burial ground or patent and verification of tenancy during the period from the mid-eighteenth century through the 1790s. The summary of the case (Johnson 1853–1859:10:355) reads in part:

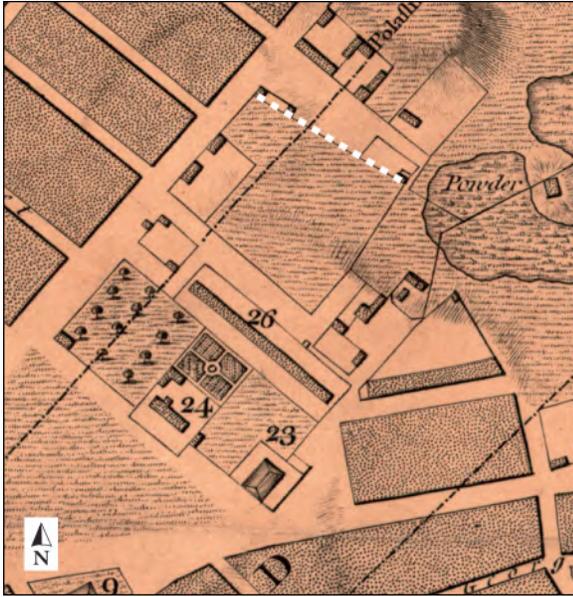


Figure 45. 1767 Ratzer Plan (see Figure 20 in Chapter 2 and Figure 34 in Chapter 3) showing a possible fence along the north side of the cemetery (dashed white) (Geography & Map Division, Library of Congress).

[The plaintiffs] showed that in May 1768, J. Teller, their ancestor, entered into possession of a house which he had built two or three years before on the negroe’s burying ground, and which had, previously to his entrance, been occupied by his tenant. *That he had a fence enclosing the burying ground, and claimed it as his property, and pastured it, and kept the key of the gate leading to the ground, and took payment for the use of the ground, and that it was known and called by the name of his land and fence.* That he continued in possession until his death in June, 1775, and his family continued in possession afterwards, and until . . . the invasion of New-York in 1776; and that then the family left the city and retired into the country; and the British army took possession of the house and lot, and during the course of the war, and *while under the dominion of the British, the house and fences were destroyed* [emphasis added].

It is possible the Ratzer Plan depicts the fence that Teller had erected along the north side of the cemetery. It is doubtful the “Teller-phase” (ca. 1765–ca. 1776) burial ground was fully enclosed; the Broadway lots and the northern boundary may have been fenced. As the palisade, which once ran along the top of the rise on the south side of the burial ground, was no longer in place at the time of the Ratzer Plan, it is possible

that the cemetery had spread southward again. We can only speculate on the placement of a gate—Broadway seems the most likely location, although access from behind the barracks or the through the potteries may have been possible.

Archaeological evidence for fence alignments takes the form of filled-in postholes. A series of these features was recorded within the excavated site, roughly along the alignment of the patent boundary (Figure 46). The irregularity in the pattern of recorded postholes, as well as the variation in profile among those that were excavated, suggests that more than one fence is represented.

One iteration of the fence may date to the period from 1787 to ca. 1800, when the building lots on Duane (then Anthony) Street were initially laid out and developed, as discussed in Chapter 3. If the 1787 partition of the Calk Hook lots on Block 154 was physically marked out in some way—with a fence or even just with posts—burials in this area would have been discouraged or prohibited. Lots 12–16 were initially sold off with rear property lines that ran diagonally along the “Negroes Burying Ground” boundary (as shown in Figure 22 in Chapter 2). From Lot 17 eastward, however, properties were consolidated with the triangular gore of ground to their rears before being sold as building lots, so there may not have been a 1787 fence behind these properties. It is also possible that a fence was put up only as construction actually began on the lots, which was not until 1794.

Moving back in time, the evidence cited above suggests that John Teller constructed a fence in 1765 or 1768. An earlier fence, the one possibly depicted on the 1754 map (see Figure 19 in Chapter 2 and Figure 33 in Chapter 3), might have been taken down sometime before Teller took possession. It is also possible John Teller’s fence was already partially in place when he came to live on the property, erected by a previous Van Borsum claimant or by the Rutgers to delimit their property to its north.

Finally, it is possible there was a fence along the patent boundary earlier in the eighteenth century, although none is depicted on any map. In 1723, Jacobus Kip, one of the heirs to the Van Borsum patent, petitioned the Common Council to assist him in surveying the property (New York City Common Council 1905:3:335). It is at least possible that he was successful in having the bounds of “his” land surveyed and then erected a fence to separate it from the Calk Hook Farm.

There is little doubt that the northern portion of the excavated cemetery was used differently than

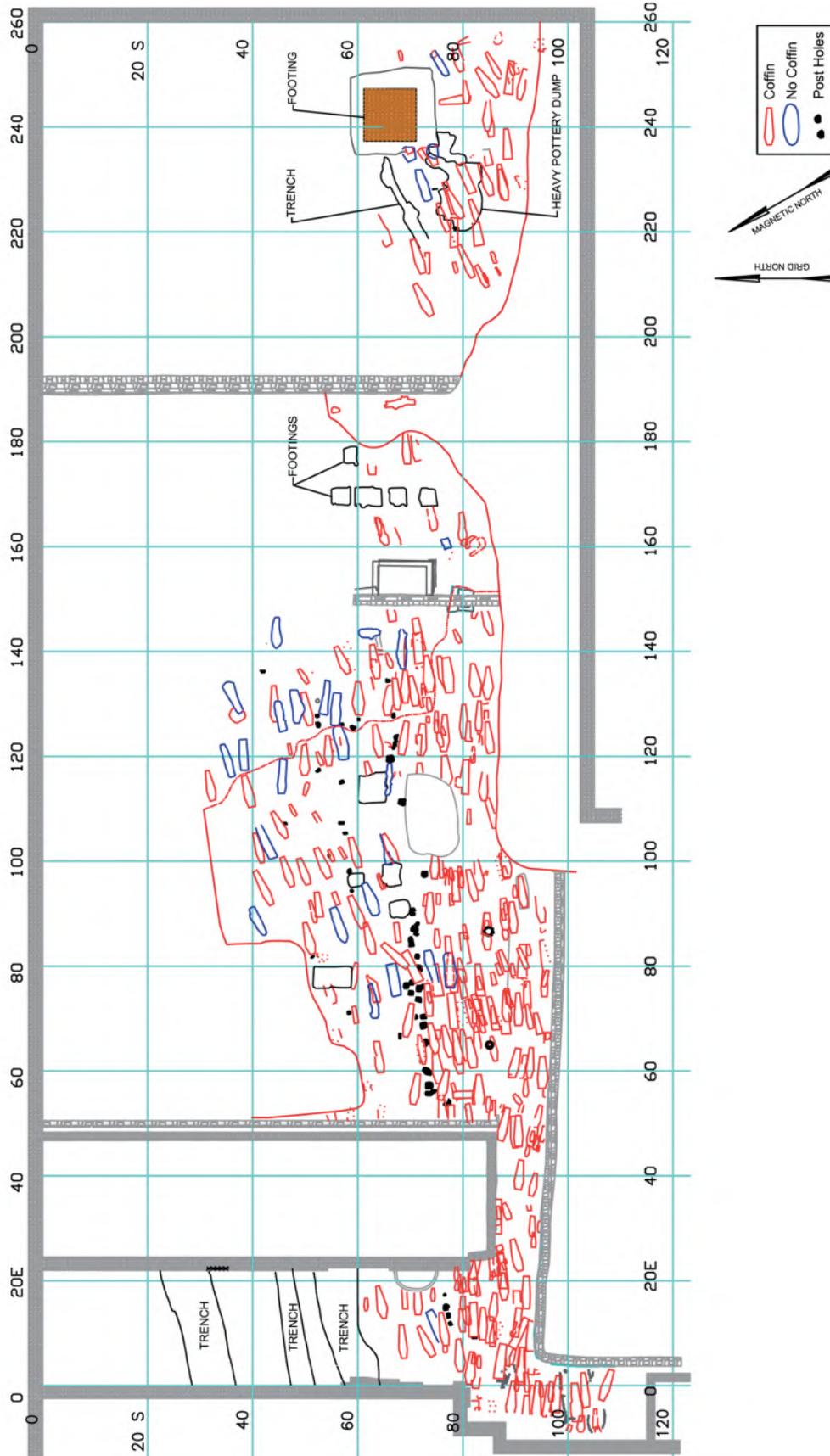


Figure 46. Site features and burials, African Burial Ground archaeological excavation (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).

the portion south of the fence line. Interments in the northern area are sparse compared to the southern area, where intensive use and reuse resulted in a dense concentration of graves (see Figure 7, pocket map). Other distinctions of the northern area include a higher frequency of domestic refuse in the soil matrix, evidence for a higher frequency of weedy plants, a more regular and more southerly orientation of burials, and the presence of most of the site's coffinless graves.

The domestic refuse that found its way into northern grave shafts includes ceramics that were common from the seventeenth century on, suggesting the northern area was used more than the south for scattered refuse disposal. There is also a slightly higher incidence of weedy taxa—aster relatives, goosefoot relatives, and chicory relatives—from analyzed burials in the northern portion of the excavated site (see Appendix G, Part 3 of this volume). There is no similar increase in ragweed type, suggesting that the increases in the other weedy types were not caused by cultivation or continuous soil disturbance. Noncultivated plants related to asters, goosefoot, and chicory are waste-ground plants and may reflect the use of landfill containing these plants (see Chapter 3 on the filling of the Calk Hook lots) or perhaps the neglect of this property beginning with the British occupation.

Divergent nonburial land use aside, north of the fence line, the graves themselves are distinct. The scarcity of burials in the northern area allows regularities in the horizontal placement of graves to emerge so that it is possible to discern rows oriented roughly north-south, probably along contours in the hillside. In addition, at least in the western half of the northern area, graves are angled fairly uniformly south of grid west; burial orientation in the area south of the posthole alignment is much more variable (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of burial orientation). Finally, 21 graves without coffins were located clearly to the north of the fence line, out of the 32 coffinless graves at the site (see Figure 46). Put another way, 33 percent of the burials that were clearly to the north of the line were without coffins, compared to only 4 percent of those clearly south of the line.

If we thus accept that the northern area represents a distinct pattern of use, the question arises as to how the burials to the north of the posthole alignment are related temporally to fences. Were these burials interred:

- before any fence was built, in which case interments were made in the area for a brief time (given their

relative sparsity) early on and subsequently were restricted to the area of the Van Borsum patent to the south;

- prior to the Teller phase, but while an earlier fence (possibly as early as 1723, and depicted in 1755) was standing and thus deliberately outside the main cemetery;
- during Teller's tenure, and thus deliberately outside the gated cemetery for which a fee was charged (ca. 1766–1776); or
- after the British destroyed the fence (i.e., during the occupation and after the war, 1776 through the development of the lots and the effective closing of the African Burial Ground)?

Artifact analysis, discussed in the section “Artifact Dating,” indicates that at least some of the northern burials postdate 1760. As the low density of burials suggests a limited period of use for the northern area, it is most likely datable to either the Teller phase or the post-1776 phase, or possibly to both. We believe the post-1776 hypothesis is best supported by the evidence, as discussed in the section titled “Results of Analysis: The Temporal Grouping of Burials” and in Chapter 9.

## The Ditches

Physical boundaries may also be created by ditches. There were three southwest-northwest-trending ditches recorded archaeologically within Lot 12 (see Figure 46). According to Cheek (2003:Chapter 4) the fill in the ditches has been dated: the two northernmost contained material from the 1760s and later, and the southern ditch yielded artifact types from the 1780s and later. Cheek has mentioned several possible functions for the trenches, from drainage features, to dumping features, to boundary ditches or fence-post trenches. The northern ditch feature was some 9–10 feet wide and the middle one was 3–4 feet wide; each was 2.5–3 feet deep. In cross section, the middle ditch had a straight northern side, such as would be found in a “ha-ha,” a landscape feature meant to keep animals out of gardens. The southernmost ditch was 7–7.5 feet wide and shallow—just 1.5–2 feet deep—and it appears to have been open for a longer period of time than the others, based on its fill layers.

If one or more of the ditches functioned as a cemetery boundary, this would mean that during the period when the interments located northward of the fence

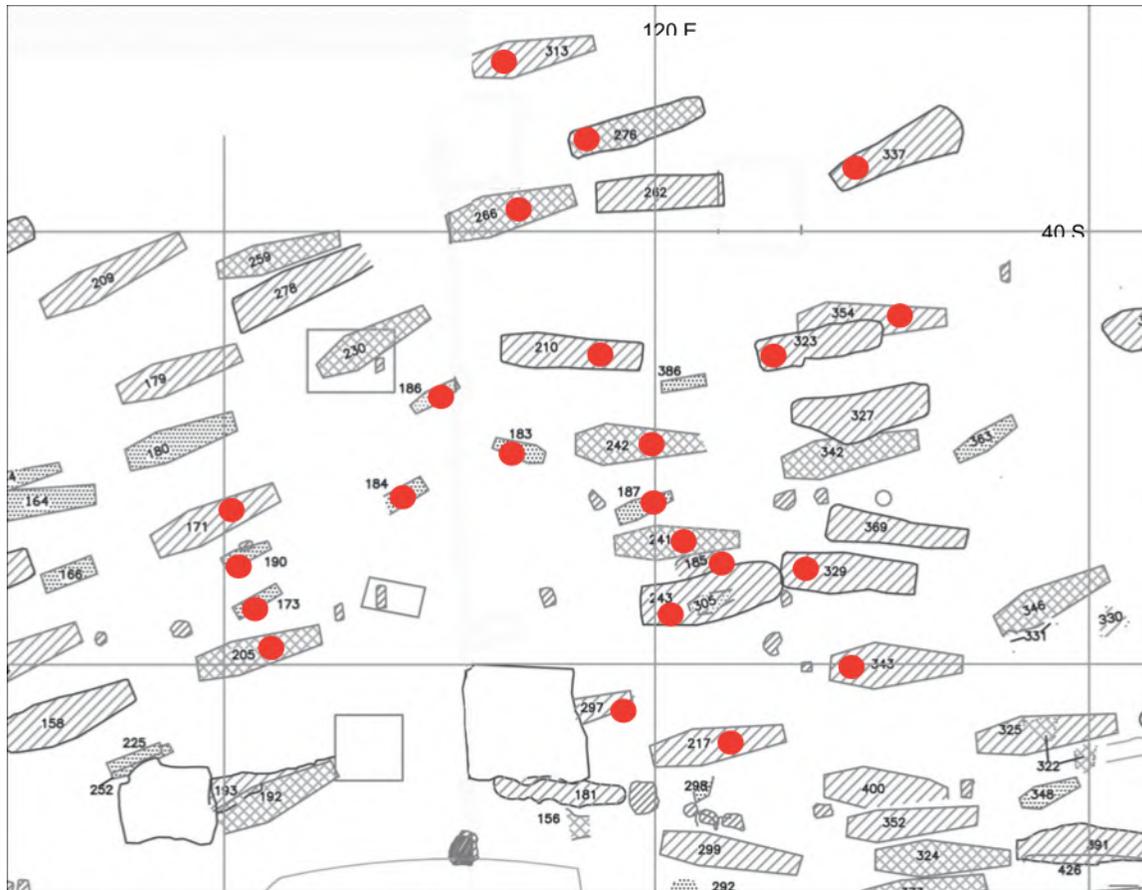


Figure 47. Burials in the vicinity of the tannery dump in the northern part of the excavated site. Burials with significant cow hoof, horn, and bone material in the grave shaft are indicated with large dots.

line were being conducted, either the cemetery's users or its putative property owners saw fit to mark its extent or perhaps to protect it from grazing animals. No burials were located to the north of the southernmost trench within Lot 12. However, the alignment of this trench, if projected northeastward beyond Lot 12, falls within areas of the site that were not excavated, so it is not possible to determine whether any graves were located outside it.<sup>1</sup> As Cheek has pointed out, the southernmost trench feature is the most likely candidate for a cemetery boundary. It is doubtful that any of the ditches represent an early, pre-fence boundary, as there is no evidence that early burials extend this far north.

Another possibility is that the trenches mark edges of or beds of roadways or paths that once led from Broadway eastward to the pottery kiln(s) located near the Little Collect Pond (see maps in Chapter 2).

<sup>1</sup> Cheek (2003:Chapter 4) has suggested that there were burials north of the alignment, but this is not apparent from the site mapping.

## Animal-Bone Dumping

The frequency of animal bone and horn in grave shafts and in other excavated features (for the latter, see Cheek [2003]) has been plotted over space, and it seems clear that within one area of the site—between grid coordinates 135 and 195 East to the north of the fence line—dumping of animal bone took place at some period (Figure 47). The faunal remains in the dump include high relative frequencies of horn, hooves, etc., suggesting that this subarea was used for waste from tannery operations (see Appendix E, Part 3 of this volume). However, within this subarea, there are some interspersed graves with little or no animal bone.

It is possible that the dumping area was very irregular, so that its edge might fall between adjacent graves. But another reasonable explanation for the pattern of presence-absence is that some of the burials here predated the bone dump, although others were dug into it, with the animal bones then back-filled into their grave

shafts. For this small part of the site, then, it may be possible to date graves relative to one another according to the presence or absence of animal remains. If the dump represents a single event or a brief period of time, the interval of time between burials with and without bone may be small. The burials within the dump are discussed further in Chapter 9.

## Pottery-Waste Dumping

Stoneware pottery manufacturers were located immediately adjacent to the excavated portion of the cemetery from the 1730s on, and for at least part of the period, these industries used the area of the cemetery for dumping kiln waste (broken stoneware vessels, clay waste, and kiln furniture—see Appendix F, Part 3 of this volume). The ceramic material would have lain on the surface of the ground or in shallow pits. When graves were dug in these locations, the sherds were back-filled into the graves. Thus we hypothesize that in the areas where ceramics were ubiquitous (i.e., the dump areas), any grave shaft that did not contain these materials probably predated the dump. In addition to the stoneware operations, earthenware was being produced by the Campbell pottery, located just across Broadway from Block 184, during the eighteenth century. Redware waste sherds from this pottery were also scattered over the ground, although not concentrated in defined dumping areas.

Kiln waste was concentrated in the southeastern area of the excavated cemetery. The material may have been from either or both of the kilns that stood nearby (one to the southeast and one closer by, near Duane Street). It should be remembered that the northeastern part of Block 154 was never fully excavated and may have contained pottery middens as well. A particularly dense dump, which appears to have been on the surface rather than in an excavated pit, was designated Feature 139 during fieldwork. It covered an irregular area that overlapped with several burials. A scatter of stoneware waste sherds and discarded kiln furniture came to be spread over a much larger area, however. Such material was recovered from grave shafts at the far west end of the site, although concentrations drop off markedly to the west of the 200 East grid line. (It is likely at least some of the stoneware sherds recovered were from vessels that were in use, rather than kiln wasters.)

The commencement of the stoneware operation on “Pot Bakers Hill” (in the southeast part of the Van Borsum patent and to the southeast of the excavated

site) can be placed as early as 1728, when it appeared on the Lyne survey (see Figures 15 and 16 in Chapter 2). William Crolius, the presumed proprietor of the works, was registered in the city as a potter in 1728, although he had immigrated here by 1718 (see Janowitz and Cheek 2003). The second, northern kiln, associated with Crolius and/or Remmey, may date to somewhat later, probably ca. 1740 (it was depicted on the Grim map, which was drawn in 1804 but represents 1742–1744, and appeared on contemporary maps by the 1750s).

We do not know, however, when the potters dumped kiln-waste material in the archaeologically excavated portion of the African Burial Ground. Analysis of the ceramic materials themselves suggests that very few kiln firings, perhaps even just one, are represented by the most concentrated dump (Feature 139; see Appendix F, Part 3 of this volume). This analysis also indicates that the wares at the New York African Burial Ground are dissimilar to those from other New York sites that date to after the Revolution. We consider it likely the dumping would have stopped during the period when Teller fenced the land. Therefore, we date the stoneware kiln dump to somewhere in the period from ca. 1728 to ca. 1765. Some burials in the southeast subarea of the excavated cemetery are clearly datable to after the dumping began, since they were placed in the middle of the midden and their shafts were literally filled with sherds and kiln furniture. Others, with smaller amounts of stoneware waste in the shaft fill, were located outside the edge of the dense midden. In some cases, burials with little or no ceramic waste are thought to have been interred prior to the time of the heavy dumping.

The Campbell earthenware manufactory on Broadway, which produced redware vessels and pantiles (roofing tiles), probably commenced operation in the late 1750s (John Campbell first appears in the records as a potter at age 20 in 1759 [see Ketchum 1987:42–43]). Frequencies of redwares in grave shafts are low, however, and no localized dump area similar to those for stoneware or animal waste can be mapped within the excavated cemetery.<sup>2</sup> Dumping seems to have occurred within Lot 12 to the north of the graveyard, and the only burial with a high frequency of redware, Burial 313, is the northernmost excavated burial at the site. This burial can confidently be placed in time after the beginning of redware manufacture. Otherwise, only the presence of redware kiln furniture, pantiles, or

<sup>2</sup> A nonburial feature in Lot 12, dated to the period 1760–1780, was filled with redware kiln debris (Cheek 2003).

kiln wasters can be used to place burials in the second half of the eighteenth century, and there are very few with such items in their shafts: Burials 185, 186, 213, 217, 242, 266, 276, 323, and 354.<sup>3</sup> The absence of redware kiln items cannot be used as a terminus ante quem (TAQ), the date before which deposition must have occurred, to place burials in the first half of the century, because overall frequency is so low.

## Artifact Dating

Where possible, artifacts found in direct association with skeletal remains or coffins as well as artifacts from the grave-shaft fill have been used to assign a terminus post quem (TPQ), the date after which deposition must have occurred, for a burial. A grave that, based on superposition, clearly postdated a burial with dated artifacts was given that burial's TPQ (unless it had a later one of its own). It should also be remembered that if an interment cut into an earlier grave, an item that was recovered along with the later burial might actually have come from the earlier grave shaft. Because there is no way of determining when such mixing occurred, however, such items can only provide a TPQ for the later burial. Most of the graves that were disturbed as a result of construction activities, either historically or recently, have not been assigned TPQs owing to the likely presence of intrusive material. Artifact-based TPQs are listed in Table 13.

Stoneware and redware kiln furniture have not been used as datable types in this analysis; the wares, which in themselves have wide time ranges, have instead been used as time-markers for the dumping from local potteries, which we choose to keep as a separate variable.

Because so many burials contained no datable items at all, and most datable artifacts from the New York African Burial Ground have very broad manufacture dates, only a few burials can be assigned to temporal periods on the basis of datable items alone. However, when combined with data on coffin shape, stratigraphic sequence, and relationships to other site features, the artifacts are helpful in developing the chronology.

Many grave shafts contained artifacts that were first manufactured in the seventeenth century (e.g., slip-

ware or white delft) and are devoid of items that are clearly of later manufacture. However, over the southern part of the excavated cemetery, the distribution of artifacts overall was very sparse, and it is likely the absence of later artifacts reflects a relatively “clean” surface. When evaluating domestic sites, the absence of artifact types that were ubiquitous can be used to assign TAQs (dates before which depositional events occurred, in other words, latest likely dates) for archaeological deposits. However, artifact types, especially ceramics, which are typically ubiquitous on sites with domestic components, cannot be used in this way at the New York African Burial Ground. Although dwellings stood adjacent to the cemetery during the eighteenth century, associated domestic refuse may not have been quickly scattered over the area of the excavated interments. Thus the absence of creamware, a type imported in quantity in the 1760s, cannot be taken to mean that a burial predated that decade (although the presence of creamware, of course, indicates that the burial cannot have been made prior to its importation). Nor can the presence of creamware and the absence of pearlware bracket a burial within the 1760s–1770s period, because there is no reason to expect pieces of ceramic to be present in the first place. If crockery were being deliberately placed on the surfaces of graves, as has been documented at African American cemeteries elsewhere, the presence/absence of datable types might be useful for dating. There is no evidence from the New York African Burial Ground for this practice, as on most of the site the original surface was not present or had been mechanically stripped (for a possible instance of crockery placed on a coffin lid, see Chapter 14). The items providing the early TPQs listed in Table 13—for the most part ceramic types—all may have been in use well into the eighteenth century and, in some cases, were still being manufactured. The fact that the graves in which they were found contained no items manufactured later does not mean that they were early interments, although it does raise that possibility. In fact, graves believed to be the earliest in our sample based on other criteria typically contained no datable artifacts at all in the grave fill, which suggests to us that the ground was “clean” in the early years and acquired a sparse accumulation of refuse material over time. It should also be noted that there were 16 burials that we believe to be later than 1776 (based on other criteria) whose only grave-shaft artifacts were of types manufactured beginning between 1640 and 1744.

<sup>3</sup> Redware sherds identified as fragments of dishes, pots, or bowls that may represent domestic refuse rather than kiln waste are *not* taken as proof the pottery was in operation at the time of their deposition.

**Table 13. Artifact-Based Termini Post Quem**

Terminus Post Quem	Artifact	Burial No.
1640	plain white delft	191
1660	Chinese export	192, 402
1670	slipware	9, 50, 57, 60, 67, 171, 194, 245, 414
1680	light-blue painted delft	37, 63, 72, 158, 180
1720	white salt glaze	25, 35, 55, 205, 268, 276, 278, 286, 419
1727	coin	214, 259
1740	agate ware	4A
1740	pipe	217
1740	Whieldon ware	297
1744	scratch blue	135, 328, 366, 379
1750	Fazackerly palette delft	5, 30
1760	creamware	40, 172, 196, 224, 228, 236, 242, 266, 313, 323, 333, 337, 354, 362, 413
ca. 1760	iron tacks	101, 176
ca. 1770	buttons	6
1780	pearlware	1, 12, 14, 204, 207, 208, 241, 257

Items placed directly with the deceased (as opposed to being mixed into the shaft fill) also cannot be used to assign any date other than the TPQ. In the case of the New York African Burial Ground, items placed with or worn by the deceased included such things as beads datable only broadly to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, numerous buttons with broad manufacture dates, a pipe datable only broadly to the eighteenth century, and so forth. Fortunately, some items (buttons and coins) do have beginning manufacture dates that fall within the eighteenth century, and these, along with similarly datable grave-shaft material, can be used to place some burials more precisely in time.

## Burial Stratigraphy and Spatial Patterning

Superimposed burials provide an opportunity to sequence interments from earlier to later, even without being able to date them. All burials that overlapped with others were organized into “series,” arbitrarily numbered groups for which stratigraphic relationships could be examined. It is important to emphasize that the series we used for relative sequencing

do not necessarily or even typically reflect clustered or related burials, terms which refer to burials that may have been intentionally placed in relation to each other. Many of the series included only a pair of overlapping burials, whereas a few, in the more densely occupied areas of the cemetery, consisted of 20 or more graves. The term “isolates” was used to refer to burials that do not overlap with any others, and again, it is emphasized that a stratigraphically isolated burial was not necessarily spatially or socially isolated from others.

The relative positioning of overlapping burials within a series was reconstructed through analysis of field notes, drawings, site maps, and photographs. All recorded depths had to be converted to absolute elevations. Sometimes the order of interment was apparent upon first examination, especially when just two or three burials were involved, but in the more complex cases, the sequence often had to be derived from multiple lines of evidence. Although individual burial drawings are in the main excellent, stratigraphic relationships were only occasionally shown, with each burial recorded as though in isolation. A series of field maps, created during the excavations by tracing or transposing burial or coffin drawings cumulatively onto larger sheets (at a scale of 1 inch to 1 foot),

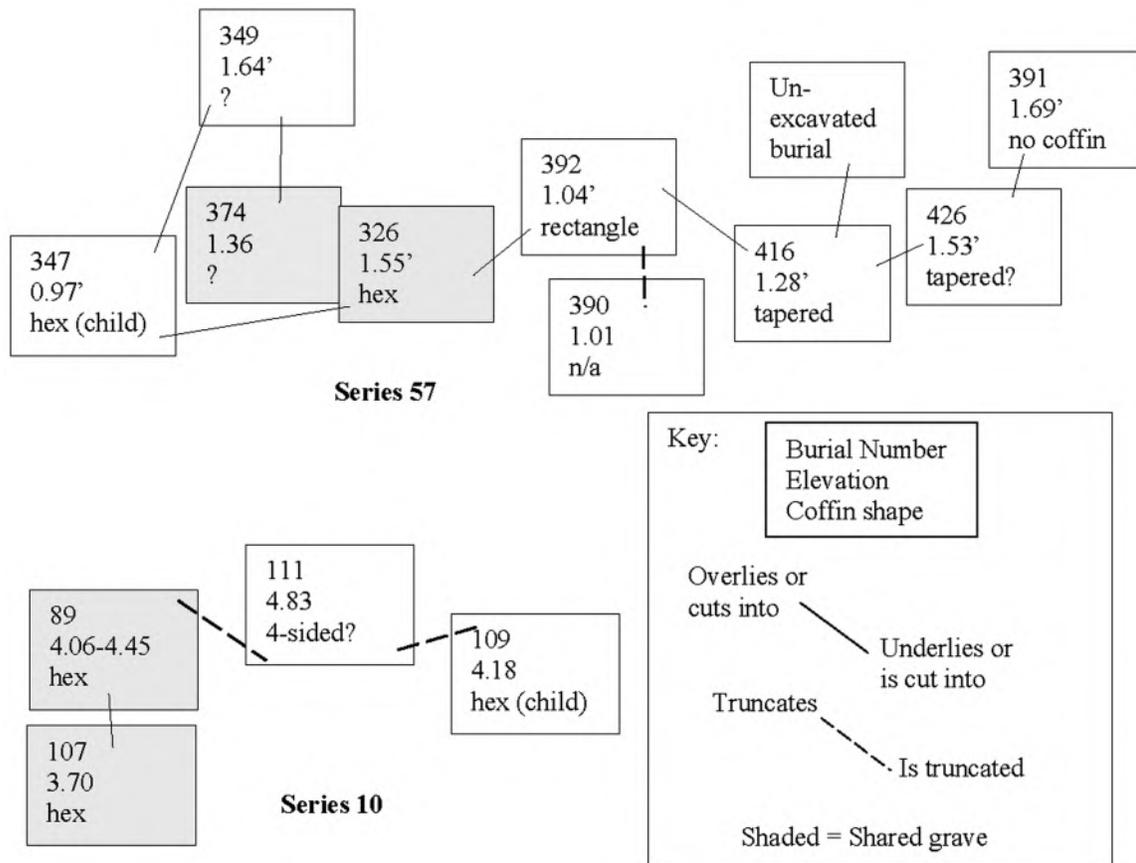


Figure 48. Examples of diagrammed stratigraphic series. The positions of the rectangles represent the relative positions of the burials (to the extent possible in a two-dimensional diagram).

was very helpful but not always conclusive as to the sequence of superposition of the most crowded burials. There are also a few maps drawn prior to the excavation of graves within excavation shelters, which sometimes clarify relationships, but these exist only for a few locations. The field notes, which were recorded burial by burial, rarely directly address issues of stratigraphic relationships to other burials, and the descriptions of grave-shaft and overlying, underlying, and surrounding soils are somewhat sporadic. As is always the case when analyzing a site subsequent to the actual fieldwork, much time and effort had to be spent reconstructing the archaeological excavation before the virtual reconstruction of the original site could begin.

Reconstructed stratigraphic relationships were diagrammed for ease of analysis. Examples are reproduced in Figure 48, and the full set is in Appendix I, Part 3 of this volume, along with a list of the burials in each series analyzed. Prose descriptions of the stratigraphic relationships of each burial are provided in Part 2 of this volume.

The “earlier than,” “later than” order of interment arrived at through the stratigraphic and site map analysis does not, of course, provide information regarding the span of time involved overall or the intervening time between individual burials, and much less regarding the absolute date of any interment. Inferences have been made for specific types of stratigraphic sequences, however: In cases where a later burial actually truncated an earlier one—that is, destroyed all or part of the prior burial—it is hypothesized that a relatively lengthy period intervened between the two. This is predicated on the assumption that the later interment in these cases showed a disregard for the earlier, either because the grave diggers had no knowledge of, or no concern for the preservation of, an existing grave. The truncation of one grave by another is not, in fact, all that common at the New York African Burial Ground, even though there are locations where burials are quite densely crowded.

The task of placing burials in temporal groups is complicated by a practice we believe to have been

common at the cemetery, the placement of young children within, above, or in close proximity to adult graves (see discussion in Chapter 5). We recognize our own bias toward assigning child burials to the same temporal groups as the adults but do not have a means to straightforwardly correct it.<sup>4</sup>

There is one group of cases where the elapsed time between a later disturbance and a burial or between superimposed burials can be better estimated. The degree of disarticulation of the disturbed burial can suggest how long it was in the ground before it was displaced. Sometimes it is clear that the remains were fully disarticulated prior to the disturbance, as bones were either placed in a neat pile or scattered. In these cases, the minimum length of time necessary for full fleshy decomposition provides a minimum interval between events. This interval may have been approximately 2–3 years, although coffins, shrouds, and clothing may have reduced the decomposition rate somewhat (Rodriguez 1997:460–461).<sup>5</sup>

In other cases, the span of time encompassed by a stratigraphic sequence can be deduced only with reference to other factors, such as spatial considerations (e.g., apparent groups or rows) or to independent variables such as TPQs or relationships to other site features. Likewise, isolates can be temporally related to other burials only by reference to such variables. In this type of analysis, the danger of tautology must always be avoided: another variable can provide a hypothesized date range for one or more of the members of a stratigraphic series, but only if stratigraphic position has not been used to assign a date range to that variable. However, if stratigraphic position tends to co-vary with another trait, such as coffin shape or the nature of grave-fill contents, then chronological distinctions are strengthened, and periodization becomes more feasible.

One factor that must be examined in relation to stratigraphy—and especially to the assignment of isolates to strata—is elevation. Sitewide, absolute elevation itself cannot be used to determine earlier and later burials. This is because the original ground

surface of the cemetery sloped downward from the west, near Broadway, to the east, near the Collect Pond (see Chapter 3). Thus, most of the westernmost burials were originally at higher elevations than those in the eastern part of the site. It is only within limited areas that absolute elevation might be a clue as to sequence of interment. However, even this would presume that the ground surface in any given location remained constant over the life of the cemetery. Such a presumption is untenable. In fact, there is evidence that the ground surface in some places eroded away in the interval between interments, although in other areas, it was raised. Given the uneven terrain, it is likely that the hillsides eroded and the flatter areas came to be covered over as the seasons passed. Hence, there are instances, not infrequent, where a burial has clearly been damaged by a later burial, but the earlier of the two has a higher cranial elevation than the later (e.g., Series 10, in Figure 48). This indicates that an isolate burial cannot simply be placed temporally with others nearby that have similar elevations. Instead, its alignment, soil description, grave-fill contents, and any other available evidence must be considered. In many cases, it was necessary to simply leave isolates in the default Middle Group.

It should also be remembered that the depth below the ground surface of even the uppermost burials cannot be reconstructed in most cases. This is because a ground surface was intact in only one small area of the site, the western end of Republican Alley (see Chapter 3). Thus the depths of grave shafts relative to shifting surfaces cannot be used to gauge the likelihood that interments were from the same period. Where the ground surface was recorded, grave shafts apparently were no more than 2.5–3 feet deep. It may be possible through further analysis, using this depth as the norm, to postulate changes in the ground surface at various locations in the cemetery where burials overlap.

The inability to use absolute elevation to reconstruct relative chronology does not mean that the use of the higher part of the cemetery and the use of the lower part coincided. In fact, one or the other area may have been used first, and there are good historical arguments for either scenario. One or more other time-sensitive variables would have to covary with east-west coordinates in order to begin to test which area saw earliest use. No such covariance has been discerned in the data thus far.

<sup>4</sup> This bias is apparent when we look at the child/adult ratios for each temporal group (see Chapter 5)

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes a later action displaced bones from an earlier burial, but some of the earlier bones remained articulated. Research at ossuary sites has led to the development of a sequence for skeletal element disarticulation, which helps us to recognize that remains that were displaced from their original burial position might display partial articulation (Ubelaker 1974:28–31).

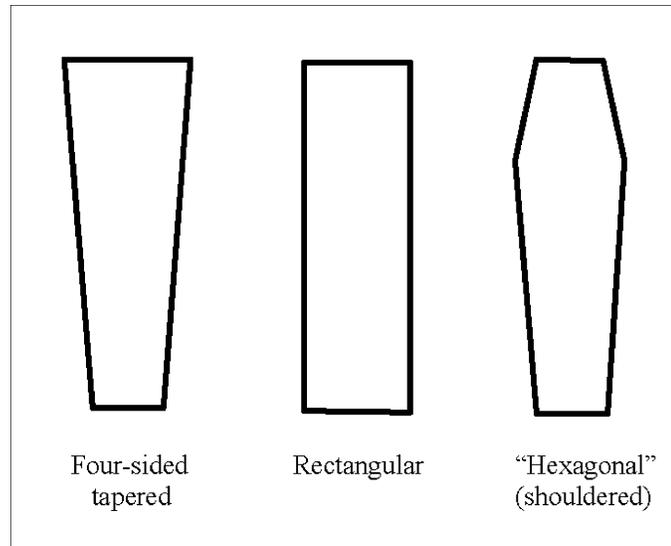


Figure 49. Coffin shapes represented at the African Burial Ground.

## Coffin Shape

The New York African Burial Ground sample includes four-sided tapering, rectangular, and shouldered or “hexagonal”<sup>6</sup> shaped, coffins (Figure 49). From the outset, we considered the possibility that this variability is temporally diagnostic. The documentary and material record for change over time in coffin shape is confusing, but in general, a change from four-sided tapering coffins to the shouldered variety is supported (coffins are discussed in Chapter 10). The preponderance of stratigraphic relationships at the New York African Burial Ground point to this sequence. The issue is complicated because of the large number of infants and young children interred here. It is very clear on the basis of burial stratigraphy and other dating factors that many very small coffins were made in the four-sided shapes (tapered or rectangular) throughout the period that the cemetery was in use. Only the “full-sized” coffins were therefore considered candidates for temporal sequencing.

Four-sided adult coffins at the cemetery were of two types, those that tapered toward the foot and those that were rectangular. Initially, both were grouped together as possible indicators of early burials. Subsequently, stratigraphic and artifact analysis produced contradictory evidence for this, and the rectangular-shaped, full-

<sup>6</sup> The term “hexagonal” was used throughout the analysis and in the database but is perhaps technically a misnomer. The angled shoulder of these coffins was formed by bending a single side board and can be slight or pronounced. See Chapter 10.

sized coffin—found in any case in only two burials—is now considered to be nondiagnostic.

There is evidence that four-sided tapered and hexagonal coffins overlapped in time at the New York African Burial Ground. However, the tapered coffin type appears to provide the greatest degree of confidence for generating an early analytical cohort (see discussion of the Early Group in “Results of Analysis: The Temporal Grouping of Burials”).

Attempted seriation of coffins based on other characteristics, such as size, material, and construction details, has not been fruitful. None of the basic parameters of variation other than shape appear to be time sensitive. One possible instance of change over time is decreased use of spruce, but the sample number is too small for confidence. See Chapter 10 for detailed data on New York African Burial Ground coffins.

## Results of Analysis: The Temporal Grouping of Burials

The assignment of burials to temporal groups is presented in Figure 50a–50d and Chapters 6–9. A complete list of burials that includes temporal assignments is in Appendix C, Part 3 of this volume; the burial descriptions in Part 2 of this volume include the temporal group assignments and the supporting evidence where appropriate. The Early Group and the Late Group are derived based on the analyses described previously in this chapter. The Middle



Figure 50a. Western area, African Burial Ground excavation (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).

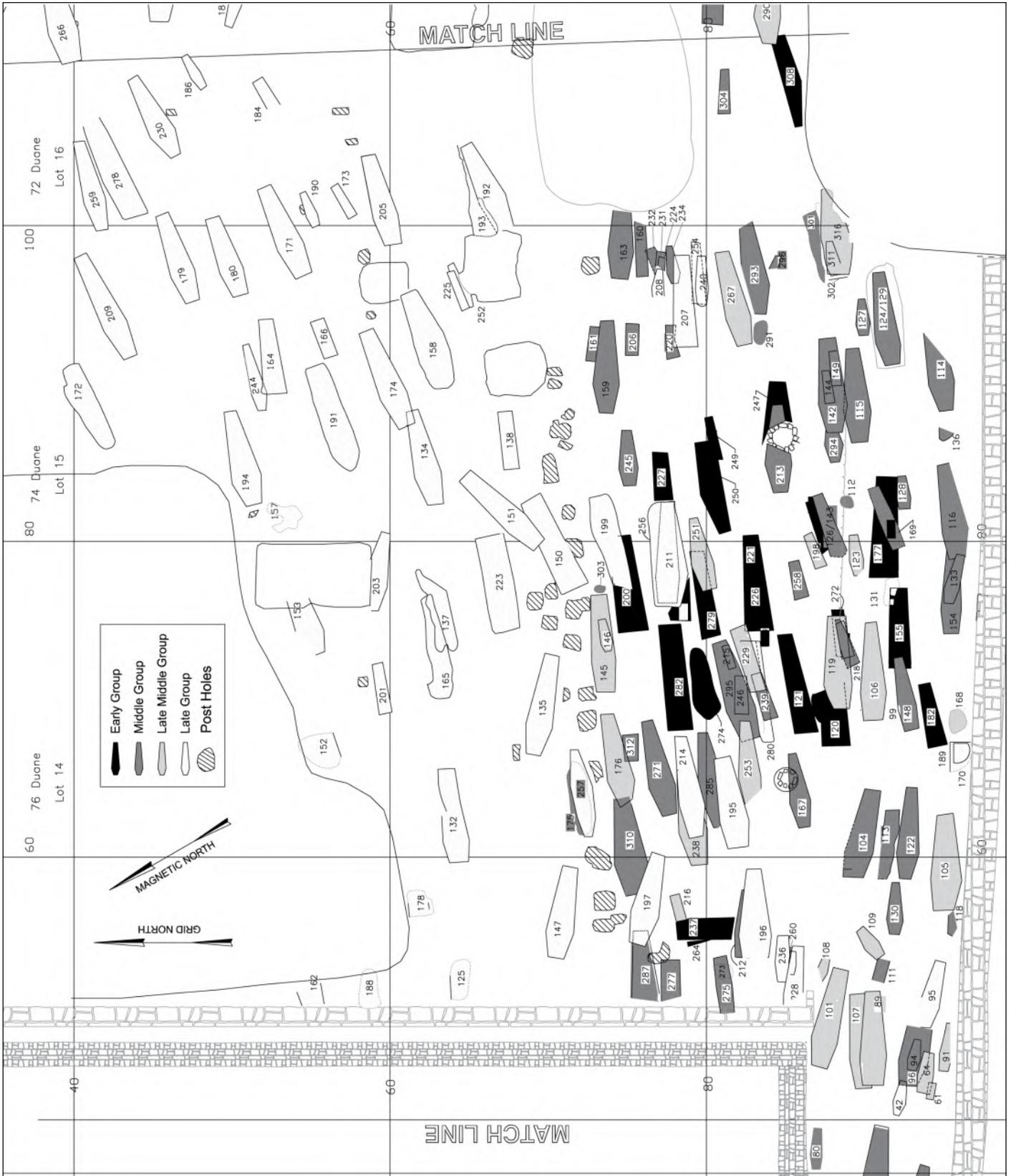


Figure 50b. Western-central area, African Burial Ground excavation (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).

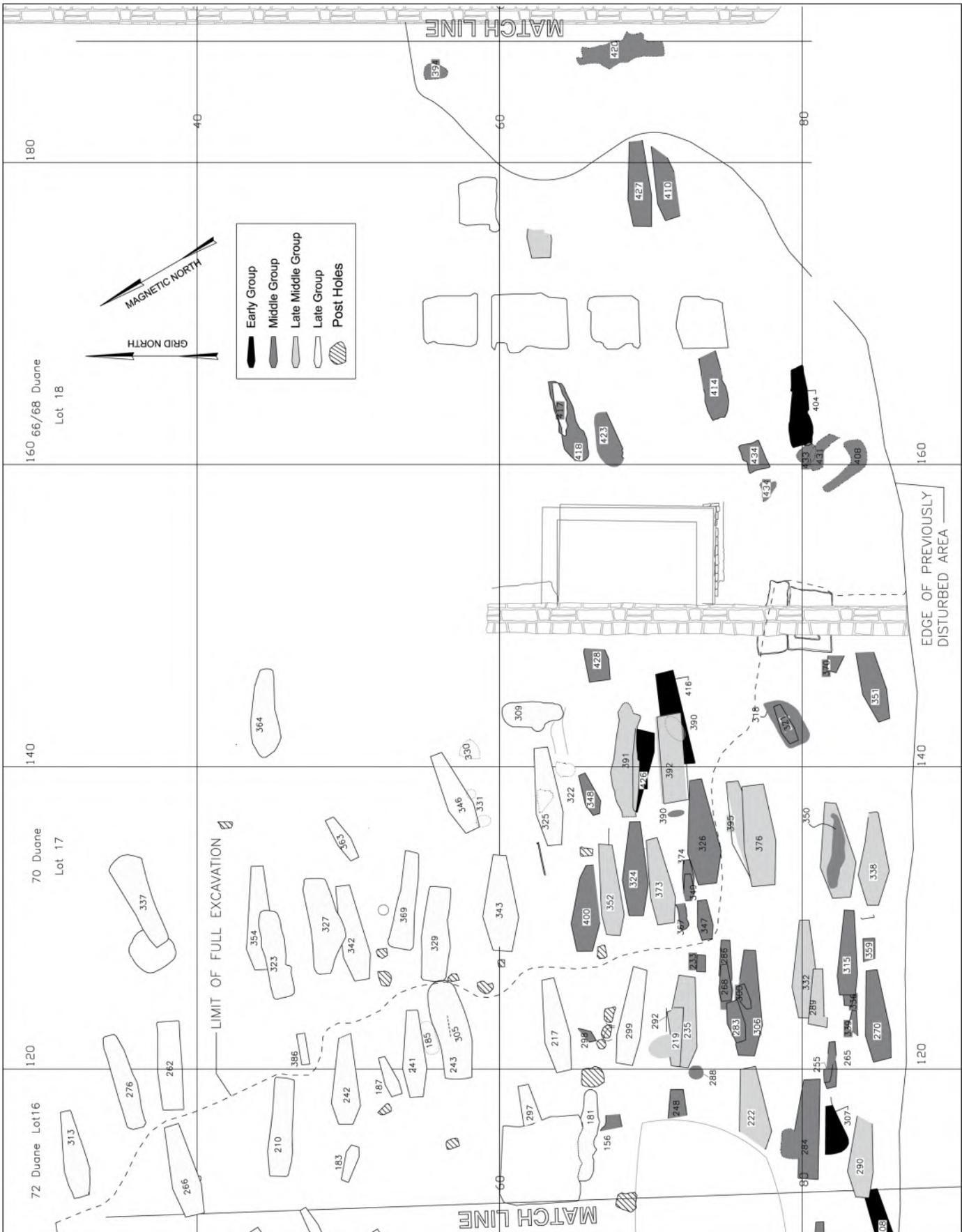


Figure 50c. East-central and Lot 18 areas, African Burial Ground excavation (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).



Figure 50d. Eastern area, African Burial Ground excavation (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).

Groups comprise all remaining burials—the majority of those excavated at the New York African Burial Ground—and within it a Late-Middle component is identified based on stratigraphic relationships and, in some cases, artifact dating. It is likely the Middle Group overlaps at one end with Early Group burials and that the Late-Middle Group overlaps in time with the Late Group. It is emphasized that no burials are dated absolutely. In the following discussion we first address the Late and Early Groups, which are most clearly defined.

## The Late Group

The Late Group (114 graves) was first postulated on the basis of burials' spatial and stratigraphic relationship to the posthole alignment that is believed to represent the Calk Hook Farm–Van Borsum patent boundary. Eight of the northern-area burials have TPQs of ca. 1760 (creamware in the shafts). Two have TPQs of ca. 1780 (pearlware in the shafts; see Table 13). It is posited on the basis of this and spatial patterning (i.e., relatively sparse burial distribution), that this area was in use relatively late in the life of the cemetery. But was it a 30–40-year span encompassing the Teller and postwar periods, or was it a shorter span limited to one or the other period?

Possible evidence for the use of the northern area during the Teller phase, 1765–1776, includes the presence of most of the coffinless burials in the area. Those who buried their dead north of the fence may have included people unable to pay the “fee” that Teller was supposedly charging and who, by extension, also may have been unable to afford coffins.

Three kinds of evidence argue against the correlation of burial-without-coffin and Teller's imposed fees. For one thing, there are coffinless burials in which the deceased were interred with objects of value, suggesting that those without coffins were not necessarily the poorest of the cemetery's population. Forty-five burials had items of clothing or jewelry (discounting problematic associations as discussed in Chapters 12 and 13)—6 of these were among the 32 coffinless burials. These 6 include 2 with enameled cuff link or button faces and 1 with a set of matching gilt cuff links. It does not appear likely that extreme impoverishment correlates directly with coffinless burial, although we note the small numbers in the sample. Second, in at least one case, there is an apparent north-south row of coffinless burials (Burials 223, 150, 199, and 211, approximately at

grid line 75 East) that spans the fence-post alignment, suggesting that this type of interment was being conducted at a time when the fence was not standing (and thus no fees were being extorted by Teller). Finally, there is the simple fact that throughout the course of the cemetery's use, most African New Yorkers buried there were very poor, yet their survivors almost always managed to provide a coffin, either through the household head (the “master” in the parlance of the time) or through contributions from kin and community. The provision of a coffin, we argue, was likely considered one of the very basic components of a proper burial (see Chapters 5 and 10). Why then, would poverty be marked by lack of coffins only during the Teller phase? It is possible, and perhaps likely, that the frequency of coffinless interments north of the fence line has an explanation other than a purely economic one.

There is some circumstantial historical evidence for the use of the northern area only after 1776. Why, we might ask, would the Rutgers/Barclay family (proprietors of the Calk Hook land) allow burials on their property in the 1760s? They had leased out some of this property (apparently to potteries and a potash manufacturer), and structures stood on it adjacent to the burial ground. During the occupation, however, property boundaries were more easily ignored, and proprietors were subject to encroachment with little legal recourse. With the destruction of the fence, the Calk Hook property may have lain open for usurpation by cemetery users. It is possible, too, that British use of the southern part of the cemetery for barracks and other military uses and for burying its army dead and prisoners (see Chapter 2) effectively “pushed” the African Burial Ground northward. The animal-bone dump identified north of the fence also may be evidence that this part of the Calk Hook property was encroached upon during and after the war.

In summary, the burials to the north of the alignment of the patent boundary are assigned to the late cohort within the cemetery population. The actual time period—after ca. 1765 or after 1776—is not certain, although there are historical reasons to select the later date. In brief, the presence of most coffinless burials to the north of the fence line can be linked to its use during the British occupation of New York. Demographic evidence supports this dating, a point taken up in Chapter 9.

In three cases, northern burials were truncated by other interments, and the bones were redeposited in such a way as to prove that they were completely

defleshed by the time of the second interment. These cases are Burials 76, 185, and 193. We do not know the precise length of time it would have taken for the bones to be completely disarticulated. All three were without coffins, which may have led to quicker decomposition.<sup>7</sup> Assuming the northern area became available for burials in 1776 and was in use through at least 1787, the interval between superimposed burials could have been a maximum of 11 years. Decomposition may have taken only 2–3 years, so the assignment of even the disturbed burials to the Late Group is justified.

It is assumed that burials continued south of the fence line during the time the northern area was used, as there is no evidence (archaeological or historical) to indicate they did not. Those burials to the south of the fence line that have been placed in the Late Group have been assigned on the basis of stratigraphy, spatial alignment, and artifacts. There are a number of burials, notably toward the western end of the excavated site, whose elevations are considerably higher than others in the immediate area. It appears the area saw a last phase of use after earlier graves had been covered over, possibly owing to development on Broadway.

As noted, there are some cases where a row of interments appears to span the line of fence posts. Some such rows include burials whose grave shafts cut into postholes and thus clearly postdate at least one fence. Rows, of course, may include both pre- and post-fence burials, but where other factors suggest a burial is relatively late (e.g., it overlay several others), its location in a row with northern ones can support the dating.

## The Early Group

We have seen that artifacts can provide dates after which burials must have taken place, but the lack of datable artifacts in most burials makes it impossible to know the earliest possible dates of interment. Analysis of coffin shape, stratigraphy, and relationships to the pottery dump, however, has led to the generation of an early grouping of burials consisting of 51 graves,

<sup>7</sup> Burial 185 definitely was interred after the period of animal-bone dumping, and there was much animal bone in its shaft fill. The waste material in the soil may have affected taphonomic conditions for Burial 185, causing an even speedier decomposition of the flesh. The presence of tanning materials, such as leather scrap and tree bark, would have increased preservation of flesh, but there is no reason to believe such materials accompanied the animal bones to the dump (Rodríguez 1997:463).

although 8 of these are considered only probable.

The hypothesis that four-sided coffins at the New York African Burial Ground were earlier than hexagonal coffins (see Chapter 10) was tested by examining stratigraphic relationships. In 26 cases, graves containing four-sided adult coffins were overlain or cut into by other graves, and in 10 cases, four-sided coffins were actually thoroughly truncated by later graves (see Appendix I in Part 3 of this volume). Five burials with four-sided coffins were isolates, and one was an isolate except for a co-interred child burial. Only three graves with four-sided coffins, Burials 207, 392, and possibly 388, overlay other burials.

Burial 207, an adult grave with a tapered coffin, overlay numerous child and infant burials. Cleaning of the cranium of Burial 207 in the laboratory yielded a tiny piece of hand-painted pearlware, datable to the 1780s or later. Based on this sherd, which probably was in the soil matrix at the time of the original interment, Burial 207 appears to be a Late Group interment.<sup>8</sup>

The burials with four-sided coffins were also examined in relation to other site features. None appears north of the fence line. Burials with four-sided coffins in the area of the stoneware dump were next examined. The grave shaft of one with a rectangular coffin, Burial 333, contained massive amounts of stoneware waste (from Feature 139) and thus had to be placed later in time than the kiln dumping. It also contained a piece of creamware (dating it to after ca. 1760). However, other four-sided-coffin burials within the vicinity of the dense kiln dump contained only small quantities of ceramic waste material relative to the midden density and no other temporally diagnostic artifacts. These included Burial 340, an isolate burial with a tapered coffin, which had no stoneware in its grave shaft. The grave was located just to the south of Feature 139 and therefore outside the concentrated dump. However, it seems highly unlikely that no sherds would have found their way into the grave shaft if the dump was already in place here when the woman in Burial 340 was interred (shafts of other

<sup>8</sup> For purposes of the chronological analyses in Chapters 6–9, Burial 207 has been placed with the later group. There were disturbances in the immediate area, including the area above this burial. Because the sherd of pearlware was actually in the cranium, however, it seems prudent to assume it was not intrusive. If we were to consider it as intrusive and place Burial 207 with the Early Group, then all of the underlying subadult interments would also need to be assigned to the Early Group. This reassignment would substantively alter the demographics of the earlier group. See Chapter 6 for further discussion.

burials near the edges of the dump contained at least some stoneware).

Burials 387 and 389 had four-sided, tapered coffins and were located beneath burials with hexagonal coffins. They contained some ceramic waste but nowhere near as much as their respective overlying burials or the midden itself. The field records are not specific as to where sherds were recovered within a given grave, but there is a possibility that the ceramics in these two burials came from the intruding later graves. Yet another grave with a four-sided, tapered coffin, Burial 388, contained much more kiln waste (over 400 pieces) than did Burials 387 and 389. Although Burial 388 did not have a later burial intruding into it, the area surrounding and overlying the grave was disturbed, so the possibility that the ceramics were intrusive cannot be ruled out. If the ceramics in their shafts were not intrusive, these burials suggest that the midden was formed during a time when four-sided, tapered coffins were still in use. In this case, the lowered frequencies of stonewares in these graves may be due to the fact that their grave shafts were truncated, and thus the sheer amount of fill sampled was greatly reduced, and/or to the fact that they were located at the edges of the dense midden feature.

Burial 333 was distinct from all of the other burials with four-sided coffins in the southeast area of the site because of the huge amount of stoneware waste material in its shaft fill (over 3,000 pieces) and the TPQ of ca. 1760. Because of this, we wondered whether rectangular coffins should be grouped together with tapered ones or considered separately as temporal indicators. One other clearly rectangular adult coffin, that of Burial 392, appears to be a later burial and, in fact, overlay a burial with a tapering coffin. Burial 432, also located in the southeastern part of the excavation (not far from Burial 333), also had an apparently rectangular coffin. Unfortunately, it was not fully excavated, and there is no record of material from the grave with which to independently date the burial. Also, because excavation was incomplete, the assignment of the coffin shape should be considered tentative.

If we tentatively identify tapering coffins as early, it does not follow that graves with six-sided coffins are all later than all of those with tapered coffins. It seems likely that for a number of years, both styles would have been in use. Adjacent to the area of the dense stoneware midden, there was one intact burial (Burial 384) with a hexagonal coffin but no stoneware at all in the grave shaft. This burial may have predated the midden; otherwise, we would expect at

least a few sherds to have found their way into the grave shaft. In the excavated cemetery as a whole, there were 94 burials with hexagonal coffins from which no stoneware was recovered. All of these except Burial 384, however, were located far away from the midden (the closest was Burial 351, about 80 feet to the west), and therefore the absence of the waste material cannot be used to place them earlier in time than the dump. The graves with tapered adult coffins that contained stoneware in their shafts included the burials mentioned above that were located immediately adjacent to the midden and had later intrusions, as well as two that were far from the midden, Burials 404 and 416, both also disturbed by later interments.

Because there are tapering coffins in graves with stoneware, and hexagonal coffins in graves without it, we had to make a decision as to what to use as a temporal diagnostic. We can use either coffin shape, or the absence of stoneware, or a combination of both factors to identify the earliest graves. The preponderance of spatial and stratigraphic evidence supports the general use of four-sided, tapering adult coffins to identify early burials (questionable assignments are indicated in Chapter 6). For the analysis in this report, hexagonal coffins have been placed in the Middle Group or later. Burial 384 probably predated the midden, but it was still placed in the Middle Group—it was probably among the earliest burials in that cohort, however, and it may in fact have been contemporary with adjacent Early Group Burial 361.

In some cases, once the early adult burials were identified, other burials could be grouped with them. Child Burials 121 and 226, for example, were co-interred with Burials 202 and 221, respectively, and therefore have been placed in the Early Group (see Chapter 6). In other cases, stratigraphic relationships indicate early burials even where coffin shape is not determinable owing to poor preservation.

The absolute dating of the early burial cohort is problematic. There is no firm date for the stylistic change to hexagonal coffins. The general absence of pottery waste may provide a TAQ for the burials (a date before which they must have been interred), but we do not know when dumping began. Assuming that the potteries were in operation by 1728 and that they began dumping their waste on the burial ground shortly thereafter (although this cannot be verified), Early Group burials are probably pre-1730 and/or from the very early period of the potteries.

Early burials are located in every area of the site except north of the fence line. It is therefore posited

that there was no sequence of use from east to west (or vice versa) within the portion of the African Burial Ground excavated archaeologically. Although this project appears to have exposed the latest portion of the historic cemetery, it may not have exposed the earliest area used. There is no way to date the earliest of the early burials excavated, although a general assignment to the early decades of the eighteenth century is safe, with the understanding that earlier interments certainly may be included. In terms of datable material, only a few sherds of imported ceramics (delft and Chinese porcelain, providing TPQs in the mid-seventeenth century) were found in two of the Early Group burials; the remaining burials contained no datable items other than the local stoneware.

### The Middle and Late-Middle Groups

Having identified an early burial cohort on the basis of coffin shape, grave-shaft material, and stratigraphy, and a late cohort on the basis of artifact dating, site location (north of the fence), and stratigraphic/spatial relationships, the majority of burials (256 graves) was assigned by default to a main, middle temporal group. These burials were then checked for TPQ and analyzed stratigraphically to extract possible earlier and later subsets. In the main, an adult burial was assigned to the Late-Middle Group if it overlay others and especially if it truncated another burial. Child burials, more often than not found overlying adults, were considered for inclusion in the Late-Mid-

dle Group if they truncated underlying interments, or if they appeared to be associated with later adult burials, or, occasionally, if they were thought to be later based on overall stratigraphy. The stratigraphic series charts were used in assigning relative chronological placements. Isolate Middle Group burials were more difficult to assign and were placed in the Late-Middle Group only if they appeared to be spatially related to others (e.g., aligned adjacent and parallel) or had artifacts with beginning manufacture dates later than ca. 1760. There are 58 graves that have been assigned to the Late-Middle Group.

It is emphasized that the Middle and Late-Middle cohorts of burials are, as groups, more strictly relative than are the early and late cohorts. There may be much overlap between the Middle and Late-Middle Groups in the dates of individual interments. Likewise, Late-Middle Group burials may overlap in time with the Late Group. Although some variables, such as orientation, and some artifact distributions show a distinction or perhaps a trend occurring between the two groupings, none is strong enough to be used as a temporal indicator.

For some purposes, the Middle Group can be seen as the “main” group rather than as a temporal cohort. As it is presumed to include the broadest temporal span of interments (with early and late graves included inadvertently in the absence of temporal evidence), it can serve as a proxy “median” or “average” sample in terms of demography and material-culture distribution. Thus, deviations from this average can be discerned and examined.



## CHAPTER 5

# Overview of Mortuary Population, Burial Practices, and Spatial Distribution

*Warren R. Perry and Jean Howson*

This chapter presents an overview of the archaeological evidence for population, burial practices, and spatial arrangements at the New York African Burial Ground. After providing a demographic profile of the population whose graves were disinterred, we turn to the overall evidence for burial practices, viewing the evidence from the site as the physical signature of the repeated performance of funerary ritual. Seven material aspects of mortuary practice are examined: coffins; grave orientation; body position; individual and co-interment; burial attire, such as shrouds, winding sheets, and street clothes; adornment and other goods in direct association with the deceased; and grave marking. In subsequent chapters, we will look sequentially at the four temporal groups of burials, noting possible evidence for change over time. As will be seen, however, continuity overshadows change with regard to burial patterns.

## The Mortuary Population

This section contains basic information on the age and sex profile of the mortuary population. Demographic data based on analysis of the skeletal remains are presented in Chapter 7 of *Skeletal Biology of the New York African Burial Ground* (Rankin-Hill et al. 2009). Here we provide basic information on the age and sex distribution within the excavated sample as a whole—the same information is presented for burials in each temporal group in Chapters 6–9.

Throughout this report, when referring to a specific individual, age is given in terms of an age range, from the lowest estimate to the highest estimate. However, there are several other ways to refer to age. There are three age categories: “infant” (6 months old or younger), “subadult” (under approximately 15 years of age), and “adult” (15 years or older). This tripartite

division is used, for example, when distinguishing between those who could be sexed using standard metric parameters (adults) and those who could not (subadults). A composite “age” was also derived for each individual, a single number reflecting the statistical age based on numerous parameters measured. For purposes of analysis, this age was used to assign individuals to age groups, so that the demographic distribution data can be presented more clearly and so that counts would be sufficient to discern any patterning of traits (such as pathologies). Age groups for subadults are in half-year increments for the first year of life and thereafter in 1-year increments. Age groups for adults are in 5-year increments. Age groups are used in the age and sex distribution graphs here (Figures 51 and 52) and in Chapters 6–9.

The individuals interred in the excavated portion of the cemetery represent the entire life cycle (see Figure 52). Preservation of infants’ and children’s remains was probably not as good as preservation of adult remains, but the under-15 cohort ( $n = 157$ ) nevertheless represented 39 percent of those for whom at least an age category (if not an age range) could be determined ( $n = 402$ ). Unlike the burial ground for enslaved workers at Newton Plantation in Barbados (Handler and Lange 1978:285–287), the young were interred along with the old in New York’s African cemetery.

Of “adults” (i.e., those approximately 15 and over) for whom sex could be determined, there were more men than women (see Figure 52). This demographic may have to do with the area within the historic cemetery that was archaeologically excavated. As will be discussed in Chapter 9, the northernmost portion of the burial ground may have been in use during the British occupation of the city at the time of the Revolution, and it is possible more men than women were buried in that period. Additional discussion of the sex ratio

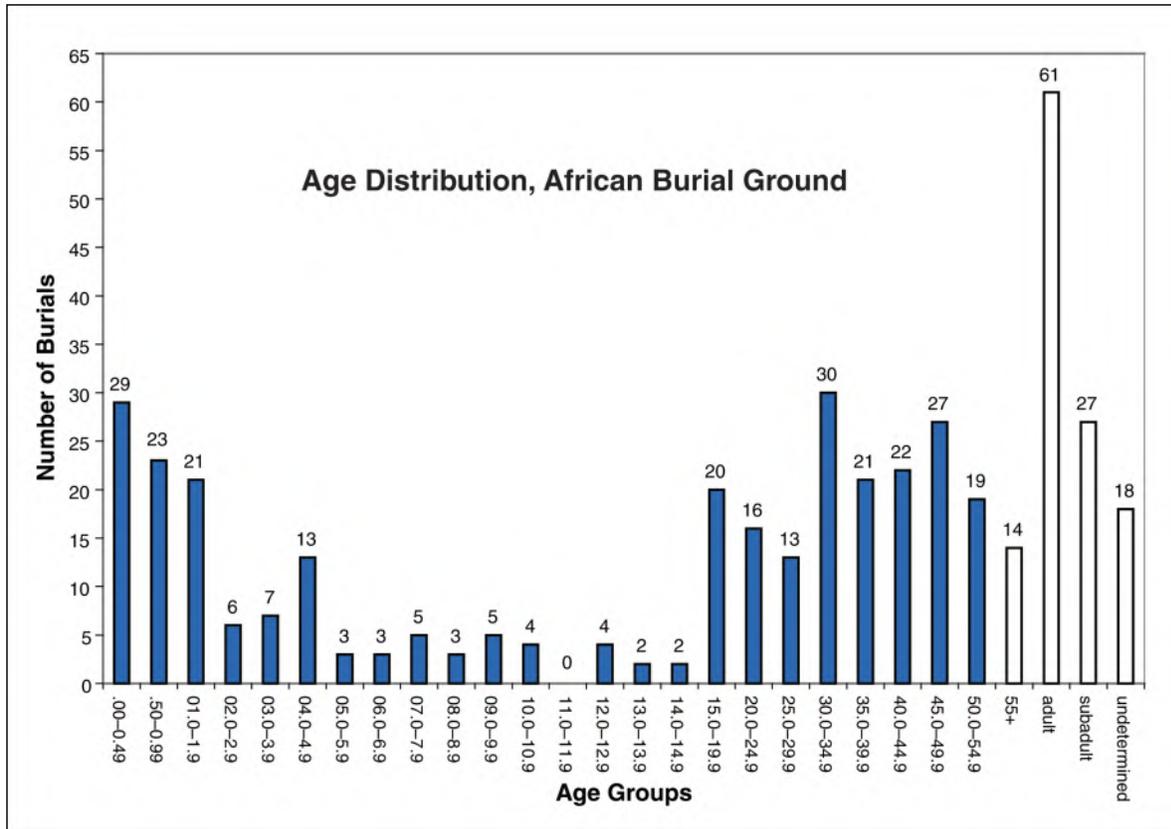


Figure 51. Age distribution. The white bars at the right indicate individuals for whom a more precise age could not be determined.

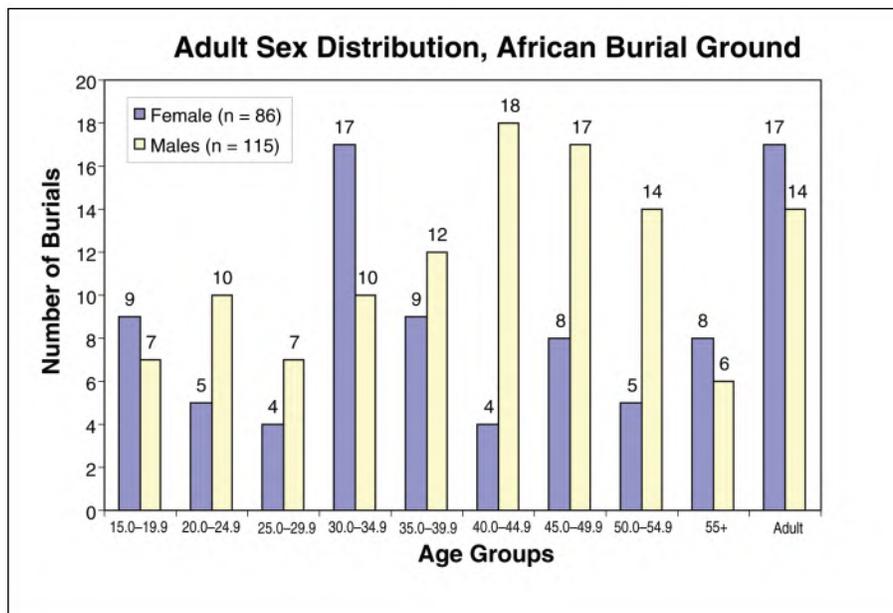


Figure 52. Adult sex distribution. The “adults” represented in bars at the far right of the graph are individuals identified as adults but for whom age could not be determined.

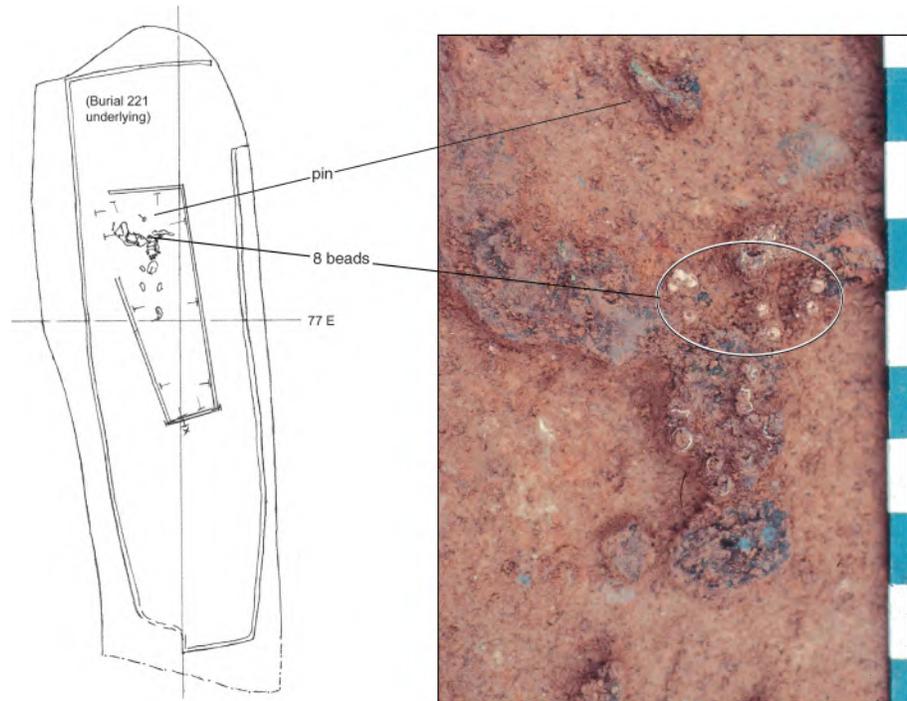


Figure 53. *Left*, in situ drawing of Burial 226 atop Burial 221; and *right*, in situ photograph, showing the scant remains of the infant with a pin and eight fired-glass beads that were worn at the neck (drawing by M. Schur; photograph by Dennis Seckler).

in relation to the mortuary population is provided in Chapter 13 of *Skeletal Biology of the New York African Burial Ground* (Blakey, Rankin-Hill, et al. 2009).

## Burial Practices

Figure 53 illustrates several of the aspects of burial practice that we discuss. The infant in Burial 226 was interred in its own coffin, but within the grave of Burial 221, a man between the ages of 30 and 60. The coffins were placed with the heads to the west. The infant wore a strand of fired-glass beads that were probably made in West Africa, and copper-alloy straight pins apparently fastened the winding cloth.

The use of individual coffins, the head-to-west orientation, and shrouding are all typical of burials within the excavated portion of the African Burial Ground. On the other hand, the shared grave and the adornment of the child with beads are unusual, for most of those interred in the burial ground had separate graves and lacked personal possessions or adornment.

An extraordinary degree of homogeneity is found in four parameters of potential variability examined

at the New York African Burial Ground. Coffin use, body orientation with head to west, and extended supine body position characterize the vast majority of interments. The preference for individual interment is also very evident, and even where graves were shared, separate coffins were typically provided. It is also very likely that shrouding was the prevailing practice, although evidence of shroud fastenings in the form of pins was present in only half the graves; those without pins probably were wrapped. Variation emerges in evidence for clothing, personal adornments, and other items recovered in direct association with skeletal remains, all of which were few and far between, and their stylistic and material range was limited. It is not possible to determine whether grave markers, which were preserved in very few cases, were typical. The spatial relationships among graves were variable, but not strikingly so, as though a limited syntax guided grave placement.

How do we explain the overall lack of variability at the New York African Burial Ground? Poverty can account for the limited presence of items placed with the deceased. The sumptuary aspects of funerary rituals and the disposition of the corpse, which might have signaled differing ritual programs and beliefs, were severely constrained. Other mortuary patterns

are more surprising. Given the diverse geographical and ethnic origins of black New Yorkers during the eighteenth century, why do we not see more variation in a range of attributes?

The portion of the cemetery that was excavated may represent only a portion of the community. As we discussed in Chapter 3, we believe the excavations sampled only a small percentage of the graves in the historic cemetery as a whole. The excavated sample might represent only an ethnically or religiously distinct segment of the African population. As the burials apparently span a long period of time, and because infusions of captive Africans both from the continent and via the Caribbean would have joined New York's black community periodically and sporadically during the eighteenth century, it seems unlikely that the sample includes only one distinct group. Still, this possibility should be kept in mind, despite the lack of clear material evidence, such as distinct burial positions or grave goods or a cross or other religious insignia, to identify any specific ethnic or religious group. We also lack documentary evidence. Surviving church records, for example, do not provide an adequate profile of the Christian affiliations of New York's Africans, although to be sure, the Dutch Church had black members from at least the 1640s, Elias Neau drew blacks to his school beginning in 1704, and Methodists and Moravians counted black members later in the century. Shipping records, which often cite only "Africa" or "Coast of Africa" as points of origin, are not specific enough to identify the ethnic groups that were represented in the town's population (Medford, Brown, Carrington, et al. 2009d:48–49).

Another possibility is that the physical signature we are examining represents aspects of funerary ritual (i.e., digging of individual graves, coffin use, or orientation) that were under the control of some sort of management that would have proscribed ethnically distinct types of graves. There is no documentary evidence to suggest that the cemetery was ever regulated in this way. Grave diggers serving at the African Burial Ground, however, may have influenced the development of a general mortuary program.

## Coffin Burial

There can be little doubt that black New Yorkers considered coffins as a *sine qua non* of a proper burial. At the New York African Burial Ground, there were 385 graves (some without extant human remains) for which the presence or absence of a coffin could be definitively determined. Of these graves, 353, or

91.6 percent, had coffins.<sup>1</sup> Coffins were provided for all age categories (Table 14). The use of a coffin was the norm during most of the period represented archaeologically in most of the cemetery, as seen on

**Table 14. Presence or Absence of Coffins**

Coffin	Subadult	Adult	Undetermined	Total
Present	152	186	15	353
Absent	0	31	1	32

the site plan (see Figure 7, pocket map, and Figures 50a–50d in Chapter 4). The wood used to make the coffins was generally inexpensive cedar, pine, or fir. Coffin hardware consisted almost exclusively of nails (see Chapter 10).

Considering the overwhelming frequency of coffins, it is worth exploring the possible circumstances under which coffinless burials occurred. The adult burials without coffins may reflect the inability of the family of the deceased to afford a coffin or the refusal of an enslaved person's household head to provide it, it may be indicative of burial under some kind of special circumstance, or it may represent a distinctive burial custom. The spatial distribution of burials without coffins is very skewed, as discussed in Chapter 4, as most were located in the northern part of the excavated cemetery, and this points to an explanation. We will further analyze the coffinless burials, which appear to be from the latest period of the cemetery's use, in Chapter 9.

## Head-to-West Orientation

A burial orientation with the head to the west seems to have been one of the first mortuary practices to become standardized in the African Diaspora (Jamieson 1995:52). The New York African Burial Ground bears this out. There were 375 burials for which the general orientation of the body can be determined. This includes cases where precise angle of orientation could not be measured owing to very partial preservation but for which enough bones were in situ

<sup>1</sup> At Newton Plantation cemetery in Barbados, another large burial place for enslaved Africans that overlaps in time with the African Burial Ground, only 29 of the 92 excavated burials had coffins, a much lower frequency (31 percent). Disturbances to the Newton burials made determination of presence/absence difficult, however (Handler and Lange 1978:191, 231–250). Coffin use at Elmina, Ghana, on the Gold Coast, appears to belong to the nineteenth century (DeCorse 2001:101).

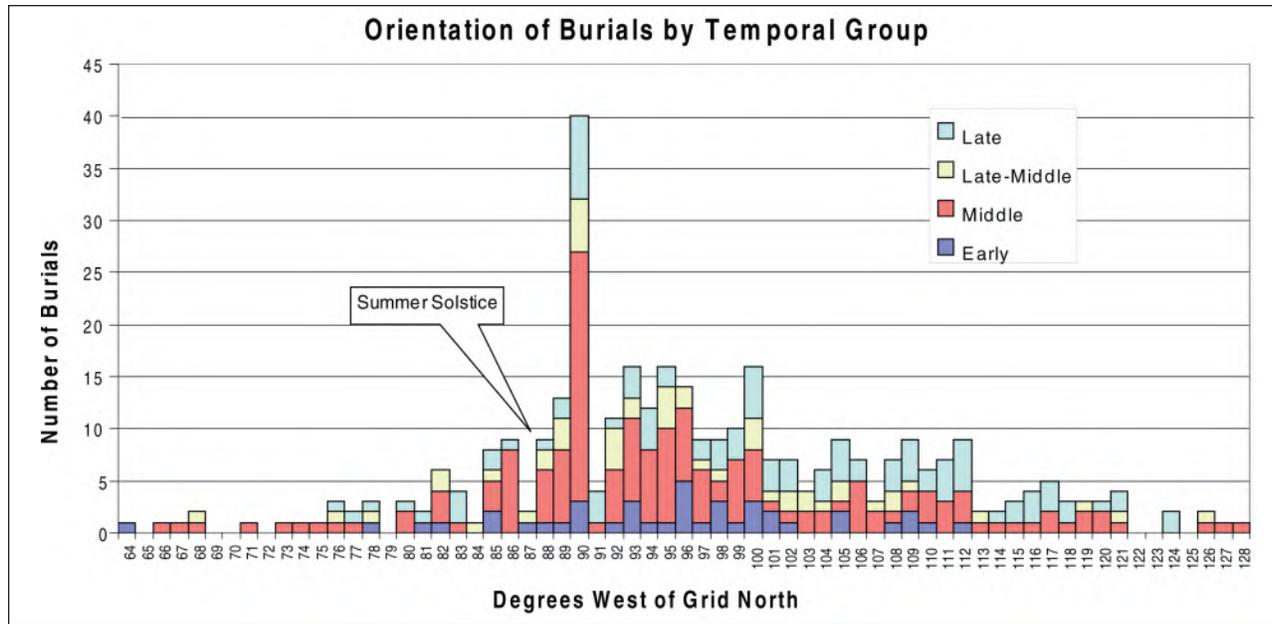


Figure 54. Distribution of burials with heads oriented to the west at the African Burial Ground, by temporal group.

to determine general placement. Of these 375 burials, 367, or 97.8 percent, had the head in a westerly direction. Figure 54 summarizes information about burials with heads oriented to the west for which the angle of orientation could be measured in degrees west of “grid north.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the most frequent head orientation is at 90° west of grid north, head orientation of head-to-west burials ranged from 64° to 128° west of north. Fully two-thirds were angled at greater than 90° west of grid north, a skewing that can be seen on the site maps in Figures 7 (pocket map) and 50a–50d (in Chapter 4) and in Chapters 6–9. This southward trend is most marked in the Late Group burials. Other orientations (not graphed) include head to east ( $n = 4$ ), head to south ( $n = 3$ ), and head to north ( $n = 1$ ). These are discussed further here and in Chapters 6–9.

How was the orientation determined when a grave shaft was dug and the coffin (or coffinless body) placed in it? Obviously, cemetery users would have known

<sup>2</sup> “Grid north” is based on the grid that was used for the field excavations, which in turn is based on the alignment of the buildings and streets surrounding the archaeological site. It is 30° east of magnetic north. Burials for which the head can be presumed to have been in a westerly direction, but which were too disturbed for exact measurement of the angle, are not included in this figure. Comparative archaeological examples are less uniform than orientations observed at the New York African Burial Ground. The Newton cemetery had 58 burials for which orientation could be determined, and of these, 38, or 65 percent, had the head oriented to the west.

which way was west, but the variability within the west-oriented graves is worth examining, especially because the New York African Burial Ground offers a unique opportunity to examine this kind of patterning. Three possibilities were considered: (1) use of the path of the sun, at sunset in particular; (2) use of landmarks or physical features in the vicinity to orient burials; (3) and alignment with neighboring graves.

**Alignment to the Path of the Sun:** Orientation with reference to sunset would account for variability because the sun sets at different points on the horizon over the course of the year (Figure 55 and Table 15).<sup>3</sup>

The 90° west-of-grid-north position, the most frequent orientation, corresponds to the position of sunset at either late May through mid-June or the first part of July. A total of 45.5 percent of burials are oriented to where the sun would have set from about mid-May to mid-August. The azimuth angle at the summer solstice is 87.59° west of our grid north (i.e., very close to our grid west). The burials oriented with the head further southward (33 percent) may correspond either to February through April or to August through October (no burials were oriented extremely southward,

<sup>3</sup> The source for this information is Gronbeck (1997). We used the twenty-first of each month to calculate sunset. The azimuth angles over the course of the year would not have changed noticeably over the past 300 years.

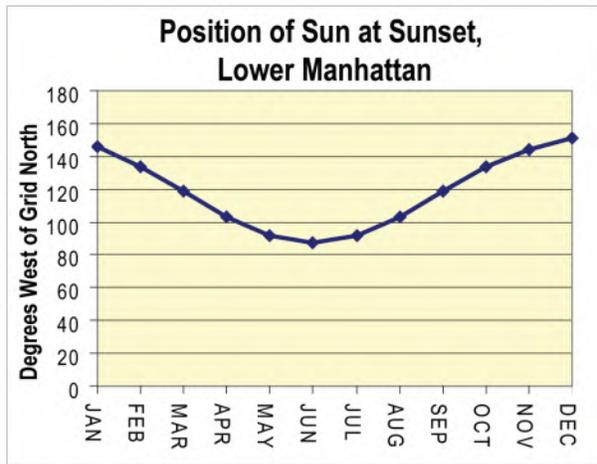


Figure 55. Position of the sun on the horizon at sunset in lower Manhattan over the course of a year, relative to the African Burial Ground site grid.

**Table 15. Angle of Sunset for Each Month of the Year**

Month	Angle (degrees)
January	145.98
February	133.27
March	119.02
April	103.48
May	92.14
June	87.59
July	91.78
August	103.26
September	118.53
October	133.58
November	144.48
December	150.90

*Note:* Degrees west of grid north, using the twenty-first of each month.

where the sun set from approximately mid-November through early February). The rest of the measurable orientation angles fall northward of where the sun set at the summer solstice.

The highest numbers of deaths among Europeans in colonial New York tended to occur during the “disease season” from August to October. Eighteenth-century burial registers for New York’s Reformed

Dutch Church and Trinity (Anglican) Church have been tabulated by month as shown in Table 16. The peak death months overlap in both samples. The Dutch Church data are probably most reliable because of the large sample size.

Klepp (1994:478) has shown, however, that in Philadelphia the pattern of seasonal mortality was quite different for Africans. There, although Europeans had higher death rates in summer and fall just as in New York (owing to malarial and diarrheic diseases), for Africans, it was late fall and winter that brought the highest mortality, probably as a result of respiratory ailments. It is possible that death rates for blacks in New York climbed in the winter, as they did in Philadelphia.

The orientations at the New York African Burial Ground, however, suggest fewer burials in winter than in other months and a high frequency of burials that, if sunset was in fact used as a guide, took place during the early summer. If burials were postponed during the winter, we would expect high frequencies in early spring when the ground first thawed, rather than early summer.

We suggest that if bodies were being oriented with reference to the sun, the actual path of the sun on the day of interment was not always, or even typically, used. The digging of the grave probably did not occur at the interment itself, but earlier in the day, so that where the sun set on the funeral evening would not have dictated the precise orientation. Instead, perhaps a convention based generally on sunset was used for westward orientation. The summer solstice is close to the peak in frequency (90°) seen at the New York

**Table 16. Deaths Recorded for Reformed Dutch Church and Trinity Church in the Eighteenth Century, by Month**

Month	Reformed Dutch Church		Trinity Church	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
January	307	6.41	39	8.84
February	239	4.99	25	5.67
March	296	6.18	35	7.94
April	262	5.47	40	9.07
May	282	5.89	32	7.26
June	249	5.20	20	4.54
July	426	8.90	46	10.43
August	751	15.69	49	11.11
September	723	15.10	49	11.11
October	525	10.96	39	8.84
November	378	7.89	40	9.07
December	350	7.31	27	6.12
Total	4,788	100.00	441	100.00

*Note:* Dutch records from 1727 to 1775 (New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, Burial Register of the Reformed Dutch Church in the City of New York, 1727–1804), Trinity records from 1703 to 1785 (Trinity Church n.d.).

African Burial Ground and may have been a referent. Burials angled with the head well northward of the solstice (more than 5° off), numbering 22, seem anomalous but may have been summer interments for which the path of the sun was estimated.

The season of death can also be addressed through pollen data that have been analyzed for a small set of burials, although these data are themselves quite problematic, as discussed in Appendix G, Part 3 of this volume. Table 17 lists possible season of interment for 14 graves based on pollen and head orientation. There is broad general agreement in most cases, but for Burials 147, 151, 192, 210, and 415, the two possible lines of evidence appear to diverge.

**Alignment to Physical Features:** Variability might be accounted for by use of different physical features for different interments. Such features may have included a fence, a street, the slope of a hill, the palisade, or even visible buildings such as the Almshouse, pottery factory, or dwellings. The spike in orientation at 90° west of our grid north at first may seem surprising, as the archaeological site grid can have had no meaning for those using the cemetery. But the site

grid corresponds to the street grid, and one street, Broadway, had been laid out during the eighteenth century. Therefore, it is believed that at least some burials were aligned with reference to Broadway as a physical landmark. That is, in order to place burials on an east-west axis, they were placed perpendicular to Broadway, which was used as a convenient north-south axis. Broadway was laid out northward along the west side of the burial ground in 1723 and was shown on the Lyne-Bradford Plan surveyed in 1730 and on all subsequent maps (see Chapter 2 chronology entries for the years 1723 and 1730 and Figure 15). It is also possible that some of the 90° west-oriented burials, using a similar “shorthand” reckoning of the east-west axis, were aligned with later buildings in the immediate vicinity, which themselves would have been aligned with the street.

The burials with orientations similar to that of the patent boundary line may have been aligned with a fence or a road or path that paralleled it. The number of graves located to the north of the projected fence line that appear to share that boundary’s general southwest-northeast alignment, especially noticeable in the area to

**Table 17. Comparison of Potential Seasonality Data from Pollen and Burial Orientation**

Burial No.	Possible Season(s) of Interment Based on Pollen Analysis	Orientation (Degrees West of Grid North)	Possible Season(s) of Interment Based on Angle of Sunset
6	June through August	91	May through July
45	June to September	86	June
115	June to September	94	May through early August
147	fall	81	June
151	June to September	138	October through November or February through March
155	June through August	92	May
192	May through August or fall	116	March through April
194	May to September	104	April or August
207	June through August	93	May
210	fall	88	June
270	June to September	97	April through May or July through August
366	summer or fall	118	March or September
392	May through August or June to September	head to east	
415	fall	99	late April or early August

the west of the 110 East grid line, is intriguing considering our hypothesis that these graves are post-fence. Either the fence was in fact still in place when these graves were dug, or the burials were oriented to something else, either the sun (in which case the interments were in spring or fall) or another feature. As noted in Chapter 4, the ditches visible at the westernmost end of the site in Lot 12 also shared a similar southwest-northeast alignment. It is possible they represent the remains of another boundary or roadway leading from Broadway along the south edge of the Calk Hook Farm and that this served as a visual marker for aligning graves west to east. Finally, as we also noted in Chapter 4, these graves may have been arranged in “rows” along the contours of the hillside, and their orientation may simply reflect the direction of the slope.

Burials in the southeast portion of the excavated cemetery also may have been oriented with reference to the town palisade, a prominent feature from 1754 to 1760. The palisade raked southwest to northeast just south of this portion of the ground (see Figure 19 in Chapter 2).

**Alignment to Neighboring Graves:** Many burials may have been aligned with reference to the nearest known or visible graves. This seems most likely in cases where burials were simultaneous or very close in time and/or were marked and were of individuals for whom some kind of close relationship was being acknowledged or expressed. Well-marked graves may have been visible for many years and thus could be used for orienting nearby burials. Pairs and groups of parallel graves are noted in Chapters 6–9.

If several burials, unrelated to each other or to existing clusters of graves, were being conducted at one time (perhaps in the space of 1 or 2 days), it is quite possible a grave digger would have made the graves parallel and near to one another for convenience. This may have occurred at the spring thaw, if the burials for those who died in the coldest part of winter had been postponed.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, deaths during an epidemic may have occasioned the preparation of

<sup>4</sup> We thank Robert Paynter for suggesting this as a possible explanation for burials in apparent parallel alignments.

several graves at once. Noël Hume (1982:36–37) has proposed this as an explanation for precisely parallel adjacent graves at Carter’s Grove, reasoning that if graves were not simultaneous, there would be little likelihood grave diggers would be able to make them so perfectly aligned.

It should also be remembered that if particular individuals had responsibility for digging graves, change in this personnel could account for variation. The possibility of orienting burials to other features or to the sun would still apply, with the reference point selected by the grave digger. If the sunset was used, variation in types of grave shaft should not correspond to variation in orientation. If a physical feature selected by the grave digger was used, however, we might expect grave shaft “style” or shape to co-vary with orientation. Analysis of grave shafts by shape has not been attempted but is suggested for future research.

### Supine Extended Body Position

Of 269 burials at the New York African Burial Ground for which the position of the body could be definitively determined, 100 percent were supine—that is, the deceased had been laid on their backs. For 204 of these supine burials, the position of the arms and hands has also been determined (Table 18). When excavated, the hands were usually resting on the pelvis or upper legs of the deceased. The next most common arm/hand position was at the sides, although in some of these burials the person may have been placed with the hands resting on the pelvis, and they later fell to the sides. Arm positions in general were consistent with what would be expected for a wrapped/shrouded corpse.

Not surprisingly, leg position is much less variable. In nearly all cases, the legs were extended straight down from the hips. In two cases, the ankles were crossed, and in a few burials, one or both legs were slightly bent at the knee. These individuals may have been laid in the coffin with bent legs. Alternatively, the shifting of the coffin during interment may have caused the bending.

Data on head position have been collected but are not believed to be diagnostic, because given the supine position of the body, the head would have rolled to one side or the other, back or forward, during interment or decomposition.

The supine extended body position is so uniform at the New York African Burial Ground as to constitute,

**Table 18. Arm Position**

Arm Position	Number of Burials
Resting on pelvis	93
Both at sides	47
Right at side, left on pelvis	9
Left at side, right on pelvis	8
Both flexed at sides	7
Crossed right over left	3
Crossed left over right	6
Left flexed, right at side	1
Right flexed, left at side	1
Right at side <sup>a</sup>	7
Left at side <sup>a</sup>	4
Right flexed <sup>a</sup>	3
Left flexed <sup>a</sup>	4
Left on pelvis <sup>a</sup>	2
Over head	1
Crossed over chest	1
Other <sup>b</sup>	7

<sup>a</sup> The position of the other arm could not be determined.

<sup>b</sup> The arms were flexed and lying across the body in various positions.

along with coffin burial and orientation, part of an accepted mortuary program. This position was typical of European Christian burial, but supine extended burial was just one of a wide range of positions used in African societies from which captives were taken (Handler and Lange 1978:198, 318 n. 28). Other diaspora examples, however, show a similar preference for the supine extended position.

### Shrouding

Cloth was seldom recovered at the New York African Burial Ground, and fragments were preserved only when in association with metal artifacts. In the absence of cloth or any evidence for clothing, shrouding or clothes without durable fasteners may be inferred. Small copper alloy straight pins with wire-wound heads were observed in and/or recovered from 213 burials, representing approximately 65 percent of those burials that appeared to have adequate

preservation for pins to have survived ( $n = 327$ ).<sup>5</sup> This may be an underrepresentation of the total number of burials that originally contained pins, because where preservation was especially poor or the burial was disturbed, these fragile items may have been lost. Pins may have been used to fasten cloth in which the deceased was wrapped or partially wrapped, but it should be remembered that they might also represent clothing fasteners, especially for women. In most cases, young children and infants appear to have been more fully wrapped, although many adults had pins on the cranium only. Pins are present in all age groups, but they were observed in a higher percentage of children's graves than adults. Pins and shrouding are discussed further in Chapter 11.

Shrouding was documented at Elmina, in Ghana, prior to the introduction of coffin burial in the nineteenth century (DeCorse 1992:183) but was not in evidence at the Newton Plantation cemetery in Barbados. Handler and Lange (1978:185) have hypothesized that most enslaved Africans were buried clothed, although shroud pins or winding cloth may not have survived to enter the archaeological record.

## Individual Interment and Shared and Clustered Graves

The overarching mortuary program as performed at the cemetery called for individual interment. Shared graves are exceptional, although they appear in all temporal groups. By shared, we mean burial in the same grave (see Figure 53), rather than burial in close proximity. There were 27 instances of shared or possible shared graves. In some of these cases, the individuals were apparently interred at the same time. In other cases, there may have been an interval after which a second burial was placed in a grave shaft already in use. Family relationships can only be hypothesized at this point, although future DNA analysis may confirm consanguinity in some cases. A mother-child relationship can be assumed with

<sup>5</sup> All burials were assessed for the likelihood of artifact preservation (see Chapter 3). The burials without pins from which the cranium was missing are not included in the total burial count here, as pins are most often found on the cranium. However, two burials without crania that did contain pins, Burials 67 and 81, are counted in the total. Six severely disturbed sets of remains had pins or pin staining: Burials 20, 131, 175, 189, 303, and 319; these are included in the total. However, two burials for which there was no way to assign pin fragments to an individual owing to redeposition, Burials 398 and 403, are excluded from the count.

some confidence in the cases of Burials 335 and 356, where the woman cradled the newborn in her arm, and Burials 12 and 14, where the infant's coffin had been placed on the woman's torso. In other cases, we are reluctant to assume parent/child relationships, since other types of relatives may have been seen as appropriate to share the grave.

The shared or possibly shared graves are listed in Table 19. Most involve infants or children buried together ( $n = 12$ ) or with an adult ( $n = 12$  or 13). In many other cases, we believe individuals were placed deliberately in relation to each other, although not in the same grave. Among these, one pattern is of infants and young children being placed above or immediately adjacent to the graves of adults (see site maps in Chapters 6–8 and Part 2 of this volume). Examples of these grave clusters are Burials 29 (Early Group) and 46 and 22 (both Middle Group); Burials 67 and 60 (Late-Middle Group); Burials 42, 61, and 64 (Late-Middle Group); Burials 101 and 108 (Late-Middle Group); Burial 280 (Early Group) and Burials 295, 246, and 215 (Middle Group) and 229 and 239 (Late-Middle Group); and Burials 300, 306, and 283 (Middle Group).

In a number of cases, an infant was found interred at the foot end of an adult's grave, overlapping and/or offset to one side, its coffin parallel. These burials represent Early, Middle, and Late-Middle temporal groups, and include one adult (first burial number given) and one or more children. Some examples are Middle Group Burials 46 and 22; Late-Middle Group Burials 67 and 60; Middle Group Burials 69 and 53; Middle Group Burials 90, 79, and 8; Late-Middle Group Burials 101 and 108; Middle Group Burials 159, 161 and 206; Early Group Burials 250 and 249; and Early Group Burial 177 and Middle Group Burial 128.<sup>6</sup> The adults in this type of burial included three men, two women, one probable woman, and two whose sex could not be determined; they were all approximately 30 years old or older.

There is an "excess" of children in the main Middle Group, but there is no reason to believe that child mortality was greater during the middle of the time period represented at the site than during others (Figure 56). We believe more children appear in the middle grouping because children's burials from the later periods of

<sup>6</sup> These cases are all located in the western half of the site, although this distribution is not considered significant, as the eastern half of the site was never fully excavated. Burials 177 and 128 are placed in the Early and Middle Groups respectively, but the child may still have been placed deliberately at the foot of the earlier adult grave.

**Table 19. Shared Graves and Possible Shared Graves at the New York African Burial Ground**

Burial No.	Map Location	Comments	Adult/ Child	Children	Adults
12 and 14	S 89.5, E 12	Woman aged 35–45 with a newborn; the infant appeared to have been in its own coffin but within the coffin of the woman; interred at the same time; Late Group	X		
25 and 32	S 87, E 20	Woman in her early 20s stacked atop a man 50–60 years old; the woman had suffered trauma and had a musket ball lodged in her rib cage; possibly interred at the same time; Middle Group			X
72, 83, and 84	S 87.5, E 34	Possible shared grave; two very young children placed above a young woman 17–21 years old; burials were disturbed by a later foundation; Early Group	X	X	
79 and 90	S 82, E 5	Possible shared grave with an infant placed above the foot end of a burial of a woman in her late 30s; soil intervened; the woman's coffin was hexagonal, the child's tapered; not buried at the same time; Middle Group	X		
89 and 107	S 90, E 48	Possible shared grave; a woman in her 50s placed above a woman in her late 30s, both in hexagonal coffins; the top coffin was offset to the south but apparently in the same grave; possible interval between burials; the younger woman had a cylindrical red bead near her ear; Late-Middle Group			X
94 and 96	S 94, E 47	An infant centered precisely above a young man 16–18 years old; both in hexagonal coffins; possible interval between interments; these burials were part of a cluster with additional child burials; Middle Group	X		
121 and 202	S 86, E 70	A child 2.5–4.5 years old placed atop an adolescent (a probable female) 12–18 years old; both were in tapered coffins; Early Group		X	
126 and 143	S 88.5, E 80.5	Two children, one 3.5–5.5 and one 6–10 years old, shared a single coffin, with the younger child placed atop the elder; the coffin was hexagonal and deep in construction; Middle Group		X	
142, 144, and 149	S 88, E 90	A woman of 25–30 years with an infant/newborn and a child of 6–12 months placed directly atop her coffin; the woman's coffin was hexagonal and the two babies' four sided; Middle Group	X	X	
146 and 145	S 73.5, E 74	An infant under 6 months old in a coffin placed atop an empty adult coffin; located along south side of posthole alignment; Late-Middle Group	X?		
159 and 161	S 73.5, E 90	An infant or young child placed adjacent to the coffin (near the foot end) of a woman 25–35 years old; the grave may also be shared with Burial 206, another infant or child grave adjacent on the opposite side; all are in coffins, the woman's hexagonal, the children's rectangular; Middle Group	X		

**Table 19. Shared Graves and Possible Shared Graves at the New York African Burial Ground (continued)**

Burial No.	Map Location	Comments	Adult/ Child	Children	Adults
Burials 224, 231, and 234	S 77.5, E 97	Three infants in a likely shared grave; Burial 224 was of a child between 6 and 16 months old, Burial 234 of an infant less than 6 months old, and no age can be assigned for Burial 231, but the coffin was infant-sized; all of the coffins were probably four sided, possibly tapering toward the foot; Middle Group		X	
219 and 235	S 71.5, E 123	Possible shared grave; a child 4–5 years old placed above a woman aged 28–42 years, apparently in the same grave shaft but with an interval of time between interments; both in coffins; severe disturbance to the grave from construction; Late-Middle Group	X		
225 and 252	S 64.5, E 95	An infant between 6 and 15 months old placed above a child of 1–2 years; the upper coffin was offset slightly to the north; Late Group		X	
226 and 221	S 83.5, E 77	An infant of 2 months or less placed atop a man of 30–60 years, both in tapered coffins; the infant had a string of fired-glass beads at the neck; Early Group	X		
255 and 265	S 82, E 120	Two infants, one less than 2 months old and one 6–12 months old, in coffins placed one atop the other in a shared grave; poor skeletal preservation; Middle Group		X	
263 and 272	S 88.5, E 74	Infant burials placed one atop the other in the same grave; both were in four-sided coffins; probable Early Group based on stratigraphy		X	
268 and 286	S 75, 126 E	Infant of 6 months or less, placed above a child between 4 and 8 years old; both in coffins, probably hexagonal; Middle Group		X	
293 and 291	S 82.5, E 94	An adult man (age undetermined) and child 3–5 years old may have shared a grave; the burials were disturbed by a later grave, and some skeletal remains of the adult and those of the child were displaced into the later grave shaft; Middle Group	X		
311 and 316	S 88.5, E 99	An infant 3–9 months old placed in the corner of the grave of a woman 18–20 years old; the woman's coffin was hexagonal, the infant's tapered; not buried at the same time; Late-Middle Group	X		
314 and 338	S 82, E 134	Possible shared grave, with a man of 40–50 years and a woman 33–65 laying side by side, both in hexagonal coffins; Late-Middle Group			X
318 and 321	S 79.5, E 144	Possible shared grave; bones of a child 7–14 years old, apparently in place, within the upper part of the grave of a child 1–2 years old; possibly isolated from other burials; Middle Group		X	
320 and 334	S 89, E 251	Possible shared grave; child of 2–4 years and another young child, in immediately adjacent, aligned coffins; disturbed by construction; Middle Group		X	

**Table 19. Shared Graves and Possible Shared Graves at the New York African Burial Ground (*continued*)**

Burial No.	Map Location	Comments	Adult/ Child	Children	Adults
326 and 374	S 75.5, E 135	An infant of 3 months or less was placed adjacent to left side of a man of 45–55 years, near the head, in the same grave shaft; they appear to have been buried at the same time; both in coffins; Middle Group	X		
335 and 356	S 84.5, E 248	A woman 25–35 years old and a newborn buried together in a hexagonal coffin; infant lay within the woman’s flexed right arm; Middle Group	X		
341 and 397	S 87.5, E 229	A man of undetermined age and a woman 30–40 years old; the man’s coffin had been placed atop the woman’s in a shared grave; cuff links were found with the man; the woman’s teeth were modified by distal chipping; Middle Group			X
393 and 405	S 84, E 211	An infant or newborn placed with a child 6–10 years old; both in narrow coffins of undetermined shape; not buried at the same time; Middle Group		X	

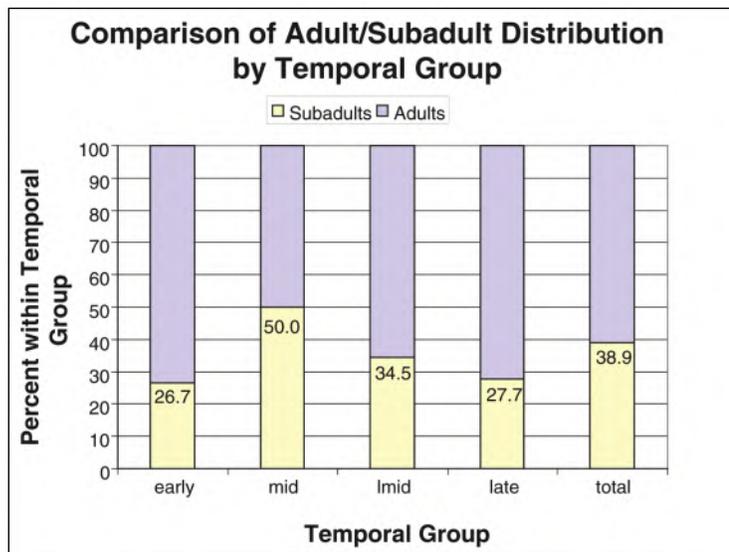


Figure 56. Adult/subadult distribution by temporal group.

the cemetery were placed in, above, or near existing graves from earlier periods, but these children’s burials cannot be otherwise distinguished as later. The early group’s low frequency of child burials is probably a result of reduced preservation. Thus, the subadult age profiles broken down by period (Chapters 6–9) must be considered provisional.

Another type of cluster includes several child burials in close proximity to each other, such as Burials 98, 100, 102, and 103; and Burials 224, 231, and 234 (a shared grave), 232, 254, and 240. The latter type of spatial grouping may reflect the setting aside of

specific locations for child burials at particular times during the cemetery’s history or may indicate that the deaths of numerous children took place in a short period of time, as could be expected to occur during an epidemic.

There were no mass graves, in which a number of individuals would be stacked in a single large opening at one time. Such interments would have been expected only in the case of epidemics, war, or mass executions. Although all of these events occurred during the period the cemetery was in use (see Chapters 6–9), there is no evidence of mass interments within the area excavated.

Such graves may exist elsewhere within the cemetery, but the evidence in the excavated burial ground clearly shows that New Yorkers living under slavery called attention to the uniqueness of each individual when they buried the dead.

Only in the northern cemetery area were most burials spatially separate from others. We think this lower density of graves reflects a shorter period of use, as discussed in Chapter 4. But it may also represent a response to demographic shifts during the Revolutionary War and its aftermath. Fewer co-interments (shared graves and deliberately proximal graves) and a rise in graves spaced in rows may have been a grave digger's respectful solution to two kinds of predicaments: a spate of burials on a single day or in a short span of time, or an increase in burials of recent arrivals without relatives or friends in the cemetery. The special circumstances of the Late Group of burials are explored in Chapter 9.

Individual burial, then, did not mean isolated burial. Although actual shared graves are relatively uncommon, most burials overlap or are within a foot or two of others. Although we do not know whether the management of the African Burial Ground was centralized or dispersed; as explained in Chapter 2, there is no reason to suppose that it was not African controlled. In this scenario, we should expect burial grouping. In order to conduct a systematic spatial analysis, one needs to devise a spatial syntax that can help organize the material; the key tactic is the search for patterns. Burials occurred in chronological sequences and were more or less isolated or arranged in larger concentrations, into clusters, and, finally, into more or less discrete groups, sets, or pairs.

There was a range of opinion among the researchers regarding our ability to define burial groups and subsets, but because it is unlikely that people buried their family and neighbors in a geographically random way, we consider the existence of groupings almost certain. We have tried to recognize them archaeologically or at least to present the site data in a manner open to interpretation by others. Spatial analysis is one way to allow the burial ground, as we encounter it archaeologically, to “speak” to us of its use and of the historical community. To the extent that viewers (whether archaeologists or others who encounter the site records) perceive spatial relationships among interments, ideas can be generated about how the ritual space was constructed over time and about social relationships among the deceased. We raise additional possibilities about the

internal geography of the excavated cemetery in the section entitled “Additional Observations on Internal Geography.”

## Clothing, Personal Adornment, and Other Items

Distinguishing between “grave goods” and items of clothing/personal adornment that can be categorized as dressing the dead is problematic. The dressing of the deceased can be seen as one aspect of their preparation for their new state of being, and therefore, in a sense, the distinction is moot. Items that cannot be categorized as clothing or adornment but are likely goods meant to guide, equip, or accompany the deceased in the world of the dead—tools, items for personal use, or talismans—might include a knife, a smoking pipe, a piece of coral or shell, or an item held in the hand or placed around the neck.

Items other than pins found in direct association with the skeletal remains included buttons, beads, rings, cuff links and other miscellaneous jewelry, and remnants of cloth, shell, smoking pipes, knives, metal, coins, and possibly floral tributes. Any of these items may have been the personal property of the deceased, and any of them may have had symbolic or spiritual significance. Clothing, adornment, and other miscellaneous items placed with the dead are described in Chapters 12–14. Clothing fasteners were reliably associated with 33 burials and other adornment items with just 13 others. Other kinds of objects (not considered clothing or jewelry) were found with an equally small number of burials. It is certain that some items placed with burials were not preserved, particularly those of cloth, wood, or plant materials.

Thus it appears that street clothes or adornment and/or the placement of grave goods in the grave was not considered a necessary component of the mortuary “program” as it was typically enacted at the African Burial Ground. We hasten to point out, however, that dressing the dead or including items in the grave certainly may have been an integral part of death ritual performed for particular individuals.

## Grave Markers

In the part of the New York African Burial Ground where the old ground surface was recorded, at least some of the graves were marked with stones (Figures 57–61). In addition, one coffin (in Burial 194) had



Figure 57. Burials at the southwest corner of the excavated cemetery that were marked with cobbles at the surface. This style of grave marking has been observed throughout the African Diaspora over a broad temporal span (Thompson 1983:137; Vlach 1978:139-45) (photograph by Dennis Seckler).



Figure 58. Excavated grave of Burial 18 with stone marker in place at its west (head) end. Arrows point to the coffin outlines of Burial 7, cutting into the north profile, and Burial 11, at the lower left. Both of these graves lay above the coffin in Burial 18 (photograph by Dennis Seckler).



Figure 59. Vertical slab of stone found above Burial 47 and the line of cobbles along the north side of the grave. The stone and cobbles were designated "Features 1 and 2" during the excavation (photography by Dennis Seckler).



Figure 60. Stone that appears to have been a marker for Burial 23. At the time the photograph was taken, Burial 23 had not been defined, and the stone had been removed when the grave was excavated and recorded. North is to the right (photograph by Dennis Seckler).



Figure 61. View of larger excavation area with the same stone shown in Figure 60, in relation to nearby lines of cobbles (photograph by Dennis Seckler).

a vertical post attached to its headboard, presumably meant to extend above the ground surface to mark the grave. The presence of marked graves suggests that the cemetery was visited—perhaps for the performance of “second funerals” or periodic postinterment rituals—and that subsequent graves could have been sited with reference to the marked ones.

The stone grave markers were of two types: rectangular slabs placed vertically near the head of the grave and rows of small cobbles arranged so as to outline a grave or possibly a group of graves. The preservation of the markers indicates that these graves were covered over with fill when their surfaces were still intact.

Because markers were found in the one area where their preservation was possible, we think it is likely

that such markers were also used elsewhere at the cemetery. Archaeologists who were present during the mechanical clearing of the site did not observe grave markers, and it is possible they had been removed during the early phases of development and filling of the property.

## Additional Observations on Internal Geography

Graves were not distributed uniformly across the archaeologically excavated burial ground. From a bird’s-eye view of the site (represented by the site maps in Figures 7, pocket map, and 46 in Chapter 4), at least three spatial patterns or features are visible:

areas of relatively dense and relatively sparse graves, possible rows of graves, and, in the less densely used areas, grave spacing.

As discussed in Chapter 4, graves in the portion of the cemetery to the north of the alignment of post-holes were relatively sparse compared to the area to the south. This is probably attributable to a shorter period of use. But within the area south of the former fence line, there are also areas that were more densely packed with graves than others. In Chapter 3, we hypothesized that the original topography may account for this, with the flatter areas used more than the slopes (see Figure 44 in Chapter 4). It is also possible, however, that the densest areas of the excavated cemetery had a sociological basis, and perhaps social, ethnic or religious groups used particular corners of the burial ground repeatedly to bury their own. The early coffin type (tapering) clusters in two of the denser areas of the cemetery (see Chapter 6), and it is possible that the concentrations we now see result from the reuse of particular “plots” over longer periods of time than others.

There are a number of possible “rows” of graves aligned roughly north-south across the excavated site, which may correspond to contours in the original hillside (Figure 62). These are easiest to discern beginning in the northern part of the site, such as between grid lines 80 and 140 East. It is possible some of these rows extend all the way to the southern edge of the site. In this case, it is possible that rows of graves were in place prior to the use of the area north of the fence line and were extended northward after the fence was demolished. Chapter 9, which discusses the Late Group of burials, addresses the question of rows and grave siting.

In places where there were adjacent graves with few or no superimposed burials, such as in the rows, a kind of spatial syntax is hinted at, with burials spaced deliberately apart. This is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Was there any patterning of graves by age or sex? There are a few places where numerous children’s and infant’s graves seem to cluster, usually with one or more adult graves included. One cluster is beneath Burial 207, mentioned in Chapter 4 and discussed further in Chapter 6; others are discussed in Chapter 7. Sex distribution is skewed, with a preponderance of men in the northern part of the cemetery (see Chapter 9). Otherwise, men, women, and children are distributed more or less evenly across the entire excavated site, relative to overall density.

## Distinctive Women’s Graves in the Southeastern Area of the Site

There is one area, in the far eastern part of the excavated site, where distinctive women’s burials were found (Figure 63). There are a number of possible “rows” of graves aligned roughly north-south across the excavated site, which may correspond to contours in the original hillside.

Middle Group Burials 365 and 383 were highly unusual in that they were oriented with their heads to the south rather than the west. The two burials were 10 feet apart. No age could be calculated for the woman in Burial 365; the young woman in Burial 383 was determined to be between 14 and 18 years old. Burial 365 was truncated, with only the legs, feet, and portion of the left hand remaining, although these elements were articulated. It is unlikely that the entire burial had been displaced into a north-south orientation, as a grave-shaft outline was recorded, and the extant portion of the coffin appeared intact. Upon the lid of the coffin, an oyster shell and an artifact made from shell and metal were found (see Chapter 14).

Middle Group Burials 371 and 375 and Late-Middle Group Burial 377 were of women with no coffins but with unique personal effects. Although the grave of Burial 371 (Figure 64) had been partially destroyed by construction of a massive concrete footing in February 1992, the surviving portion (the upper body) was relatively intact. The grave, which held a woman between 25 and 35 years old, had a remarkably straight-sided shaft, which tapered toward the head end. The grave was considerably deeper than others excavated in this area, and another grave had been dug into it, well above the woman’s remains. Two turquoise enamel cuff-link faces, each decorated with a squat, white-and-pink V and two dots, were found beneath the woman’s left upper arm. Given their location and the lack of a connecting shank or link between them, it is unlikely that they fastened a shirtsleeve. These items were unique within the assemblage from the cemetery; how they were worn or used is not known (see Chapter 13).

Only two other coffinless graves were assigned to the Middle Group, Burial 375, also of a woman, and Burial 434, of undetermined sex. The 16–18-year-old woman in this grave had been buried with her arms crossed above her head, a unique position at the New York African Burial Ground (Figure 65). The east end of the grave had been disturbed by construction

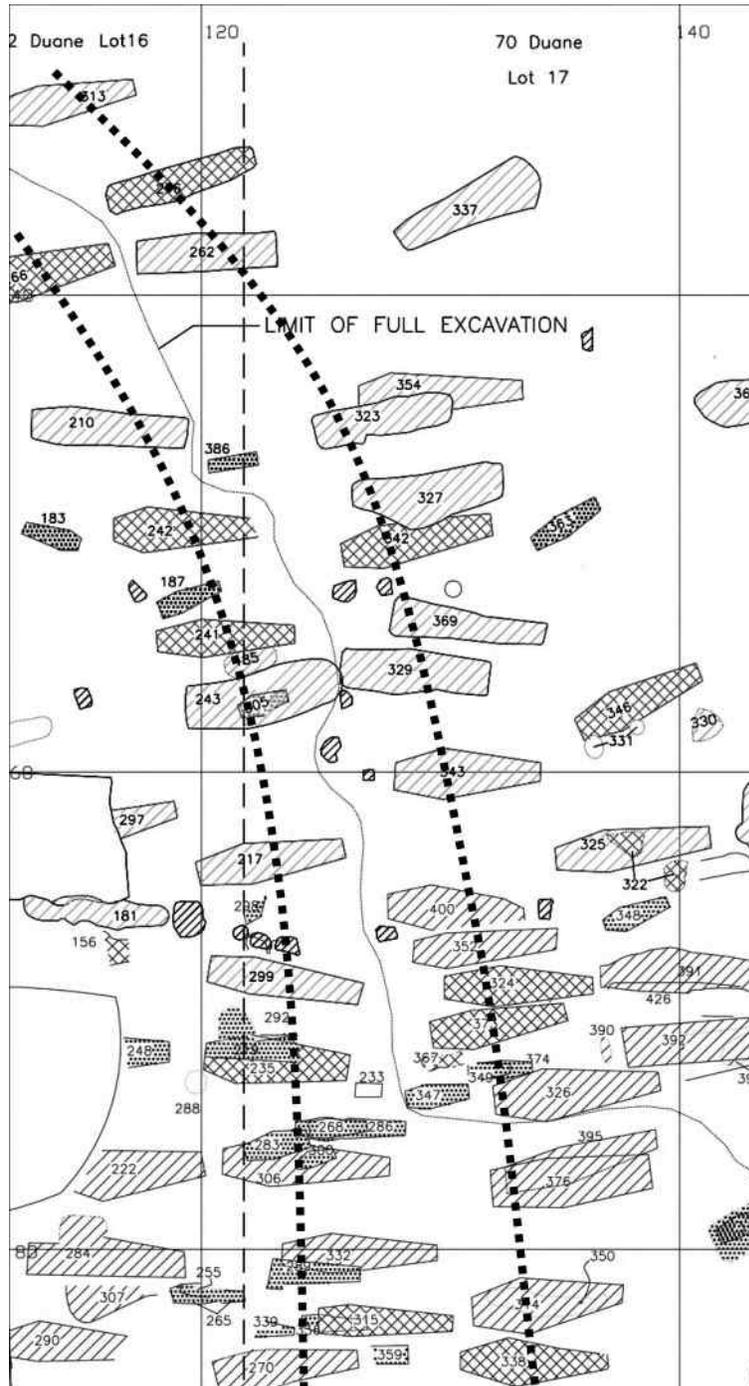


Figure 62. Detail of the site plan (see Figure 7, pocket map). Row-like alignments of graves spanned the site from south to north. These may reflect the contours of the hillside.

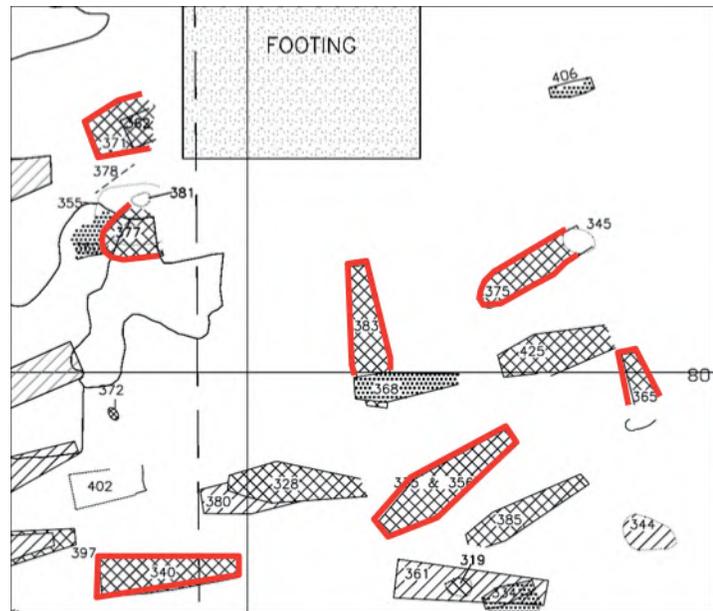


Figure 63. Detail from site plan (see Figure 7, pocket map) showing locations of distinctive women's graves in the southeast corner of the excavated site.

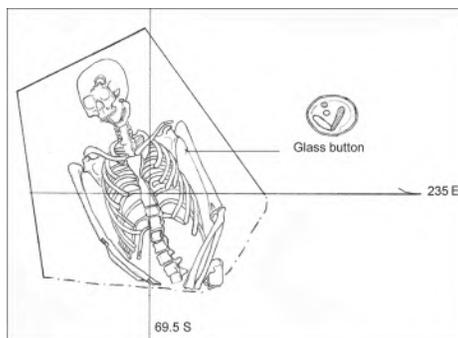


Figure 64. In situ drawing, Burial 371. Remains are shown here at a scale of 1 inch = 2 feet. The button or cuff-link faces were 14 by 11 mm (drawing by W. Williams).

activity (although the feet appear to be missing in the photographs and drawings, foot bones were present when archaeologists exposed the burial).

The idiosyncratic arm position suggests that no winding sheet wrapped the arms at the time the woman was placed in the grave—bearers may have carried the corpse by the arms and legs. A ceramic ball with a copper alloy band encircling it, surrounded by an organic stain, possibly representing cloth or leather, was found at the right hip, adjacent to the right femur head (Figure 66). The object is described in full in Chapter 14.

Burial 377, assigned to the Late-Middle Group, held the remains of a woman 33–58 years old who had three rings at her throat, possibly with a bit of associated thread (these items were never received in

the laboratory but were documented in the field—see Chapter 13). This woman also had been buried without a coffin, although possible wood staining was noted above and below the skeletal remains. Excavators suggested that boards might have been placed above and below the body, although the residue could have been from the coffin of a prior burial that was disturbed by Burial 377. A substance that excavators believed to be red ocher was observed on the possible wood remains and on the head, ribs, and scapulae.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of three burials of women in coffinless graves close to one another and that contained distinctive personal effects is noteworthy. Most burials without coffins are of men and are in the Late Group, mainly in the northern part of the excavated site. The women's graves may be incorrectly assigned to the Middle temporal groups and could belong instead with the majority of other coffinless burials in our Late Group, although the stratigraphic position of Burial 371 argues against this.

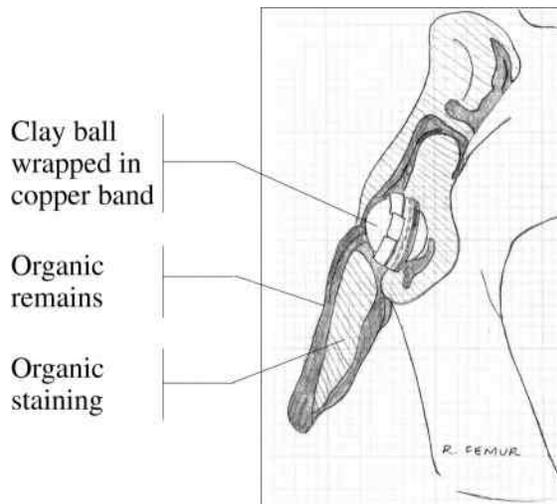
The final distinctive woman's grave in this area of the site, Burial 340, had a coffin, was oriented with the head to the west, and lay in the typical position,

<sup>7</sup> Red ocher (a pigment made from iron oxide) was used by Native Americans from the early Archaic (the Lamoka period in New York, ca. 4,500 years ago), was a component of elaborate burial sites of the Orient peoples (ca. 3,000 years ago) on Long Island, and continued to be used into late prehistoric and historic times. Recent scholarship has explored the possible symbolic significance of the color red among Native Americans (see Cantwell and Wall 2001:69–70; Ritchie 1965).

Figure 65. In situ photograph of Burial 375, with arms crossed above head (photograph by Dennis Seckler).



Figure 66. In situ drawing of artifacts at the hip of the woman in Burial 375 (drawing by M. Schur).



supine and extended. Burial 340 was nevertheless unique and is one of the most extensively described interments at the New York African Burial Ground. It held a woman between 39 and 64 years who had been buried wearing a strand of beads and cowrie shells at her hips and a bracelet of beads on the right wrist (Figure 67), as well as an unused smoking pipe. The coffin was four sided and tapered toward the foot and although located near the pottery midden, the grave predated that feature and was placed in the Early Group.

Most of the beads were found in a line that circled once around the woman's hips, although most of the beads were recovered from the sides. A total of 112 glass beads were ultimately recovered, along with 1 amber bead and 7 cowries (9 cowries were recorded in the field, but 1 of the cowries was later found to be a fragment of bone). Another cowrie was not recoverable and may have been an impression of a shell in the soil (LaRoche 1994a:19). The waist beads varied in color. With the exception of two specimens with adventitious decoration, the beads were simple, drawn types (see Chapter 13 for descriptions).

Excavators originally believed that some of the beads (a line of tiny, alternating blue-green and pale

yellow beads) were worn on the woman's right wrist but later decided that all beads were probably from the strand at her waist because no hand or wrist bones underlay the in situ beads. Yet the interpretation of the distinct strand of alternating blue-green and yellow beads as a bracelet is compatible with its location beneath extant hand/wrist bones and seems much more plausible than their interpretation as part of the waist beads. There were 15 of the yellow beads and 26 of the blue-green beads recovered, 15 of which were found aligned and in an alternating pattern (the others were scattered in the general pelvic area).

Eleven straight pins were found in place, most on the cranium, suggesting the woman had been shrouded. A kaolin pipe bowl and joining stem were recovered from beneath the woman's pelvis (this item is described in Chapter 14). The pipe had not been smoked. The skeletal remains from Burial 340 were poorly preserved, which accounts for the wide range of the woman's estimated age. Her incisors had been altered to hourglass and "peg" shapes.

One other woman's grave in the same small area should be mentioned here: Middle Group Burial 335 belonged to a woman between 25 and 35 years old



Figure 67. In situ photograph of the pelvic area of Burial 340, showing beads. The top arrow points to one of the cowries, the bottom arrow to the strand of alternating blue-green and yellow beads at the right wrist. See Chapter 13 for a drawing and additional photographs of the individual beads recovered. Ruler is marked in inches; north is to the right (photograph by Dennis Seckler).

with an infant (Burial 356) held in the crook of her arm. This is the only burial in the excavated sample where an infant was so placed (in the case of Burials 12 and 14, another woman with an infant, the infant was in its own coffin).

We consider it possible that the proximity of these distinctive women's graves to one another was deliberate, which in turn raises the possibility that a special area of the cemetery existed for women who shared one or more kinds of social distinction. There is no way to know whether any such distinction was negative or positive or whether it was formalized in the management of the cemetery or tacitly agreed upon by the women's mourners or the community.

## Conclusion

It is likely that one of the most important things enslaved people did on their "own" time was participate in wakes, funerals, and grave-site gatherings. Funeral labor involved preparation and transport of the body, digging the grave, participation in funerary rituals, closing and marking the grave, and whatever subsequent actions were necessary to maintain proper relations with the dead and among living relatives. By

participating in burial-related activities on behalf of departed loved ones and community members, Africans acted for themselves and each other, reclaiming their own labor from those who purported to own it. Labor also extended to the work needed to obtain the necessary accoutrements of proper burial. The coffin was a key component. Even when household heads or the Almshouse wardens supplied them (see Chapter 10), such a custom can be viewed as the result of struggles over the terms of bondage rather than as a paternalistic gesture. Typical accoutrements appear to have also included, at a minimum, the shroud or cloth with which to wrap the body or the limbs and chin, with or without pins (see Chapter 11).

Other material goods found with the deceased also can shed light on how Africans acted on their own account. When a person was buried wearing jewelry or clothing, or with other objects that belonged to them in life, a claim was made about the inalienability of their possessions. Those possessions were likely obtained through own-account activities. Africans in colonial New York, including those who were enslaved, created opportunities to earn money of their own to purchase small luxuries. Goods within easy reach may have been vended on the sly or fenced at well-known taverns and the proceeds spent on personal

items—or personal items may themselves have been stolen goods.<sup>8</sup> The burial of possessions took them out of circulation and fixed them to the deceased, symbolically defying a system that denied property to, and defined as property, an entire people.

The richness of the nonmaterial aspects of African funerals (rituals that do not enter the documentary or archaeological record) is lost to us. But based on the material record, it is reasonable to propose that an insistence upon the full humanity of the deceased might well have been at the spiritual and political heart of burial at this cemetery. Most individuals

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<sup>8</sup> Laws passed to stifle the enterprise of bondmen and bondwomen provide a glimpse of some of the revenue-generating projects Africans undertook after work or on their masters' time. Africans were banned from selling independently grown crops and livestock; gathered fruits; home-made commodities and crafts, such as soap; and oysters gathered from beds in New York waters. Colonial Manhattan's unfree African workforce encompassed the skilled as well as the unskilled. Africans labored in city homes and on nearby farms but also in the warehouses, workshops, and markets that provisioned a bustling port. African blacksmiths, coopers, cord makers, brewers, butchers, and tailors may have profited from their skills, as suggested by legislation forbidding Africans to hire out as day laborers without their masters' consent. On own-account economic activities of New York's Africans, see *Historical Perspectives of the African Burial Ground* (Medford et al. 2009h:63–64; see also Linebaugh and Rediker 2000:181–182). Some of the restrictive legislation that gives us a glimpse of economic activities includes colony-wide laws (New York State 1894:1:157, 761–767, 845, :2:679–688) and city ordinances (New York City Common Council 1905:1:232, :4:497–498). The variety of occupations of Africans is learned from sale and escapee advertisements and from the censuses of 1703 and 1790.

were buried without any personal goods, some even without a coffin, yet the digging of an individual grave for the deceased, care in the orientation of the grave, and the placement of each body in a specific position (supine and extended) and probably wrapped, testifies to a degree of attention and respect accorded to all.

The acts of interment that we are able to witness at a historical distance speak most importantly of the individual's relationship to others—to family but also to a larger community. The “conformity” that the record implies should be seen in this context. We think the cemetery provided a way for a community to form through the communal performance of a fundamental rite of passage. If via the archaeological record we are seeing mainly the shared aspects of mortuary behavior, then we have a remarkable window on a critical historical process. It is possible the common burial practices that are so evident within the excavated site took root during the beginning years of the burial ground, perhaps even earlier, when New Amsterdam's first Africans were interred in the West India Company's common cemetery. Because the African Burial Ground subsequently would have been one of the few sites where black men, women, and children could act communally and on each other's behalf, it would have been a key place and institution for the continual incorporation of diverse newcomers into the fold.

## CHAPTER 6

# The Early Group

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Burials are assigned to the Early Group on the basis of coffin type, relationship to site features, and stratigraphy (see Chapter 4; problematic assignments are noted below). Burials placed in this group appear to predate the use of the eastern part of the cemetery by nearby pottery factories, in place ca. 1730, for dumping of kiln waste. Absolute dating is not possible, however. For convenience, we give the Early Group a hypothetical end date of 1735.

A sketch of the town and its population precedes the tabulation of the Early Group mortuary sample. The material culture and spatial distribution of the burials are then discussed, followed by a description of unique and unusual interments.

## The Town

New York grew considerably during the first four decades of the eighteenth century, but the burial ground was still outside the developed portion of the town. The southern shore of the Fresh Water (or Collect) Pond was considered the edge of the town proper.<sup>1</sup> The northern extent of development at the end of the period was at present-day Park Row and Franklin Street on the east side of present-day Broadway, and at present-day Liberty Street on the west side of Broadway (see the Lyne-Bradford Plan in Figure 15 in Chapter 2). The “Negro Burying Place,” as it was labeled on Mrs. Buchnerd’s hand-drawn plan of the town in 1735 (see Figure 17 in Chapter 2), was in the northern part of the Common. The Common tradition-

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<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in laws of the time, which typically state that provisions apply to the area south of the Collect or Fresh Water. As noted in Chapter 3, the pond was fed by deep springs and was used by the general public for fishing and for drinking water and later would be used by private industries such as tanning.

ally was open space that townspeople could use for pasture and for digging sod and burning lime, although the latter activities were barred in the area south of the Collect in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. The town used the Common as a parade ground for troops, for celebrations and bonfires, and for executions. The municipal powder house was built in 1728 on a small island between the Collect and Little Collect, just east of the African Burial Ground.<sup>2</sup>

A number of churches had been established in New York by the end of our early period, some of which had African members, but it appears they were not burying blacks in their cemeteries. In addition to the Dutch Reformed, Anglican, French Huguenot, Lutheran, and Quaker churches and the Jewish synagogue established in the seventeenth century, by 1728 there were two additional Anglican and Dutch Reformed congregations, as well as Baptist and Presbyterian churches, all located within the town proper (Rothschild 1990:47). French Huguenot Elias Neau had begun a school for Africans in 1704.

Regulation of the activities of enslaved people grew extremely restrictive in this period. English rollback of the margin of freedom allowed under Dutch rule culminated in 1702 with *An Act for Regulating Slaves* (New York State 1894:1:519–521), and from then on both the colonial government and New York’s Common Council continued from year to year to legislate social control over blacks, enslaved and free. The 1702 law was renewed in 1705 and again in 1719.

Enslaved people were brought to New York City directly from Africa and via the Caribbean. For New

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<sup>2</sup> See historical summaries of the vicinity of the African Burial Ground in each chronological period in Harris et al. (1993); for detail on specific structures in the area throughout its history, see Hunter Research (1994).

**Table 20. Sources of Imports of Enslaved Africans into New York Colony, 1701–1726**

Year	West Indies	Coast of Africa
1701	36	—
1702	165	—
1703	16	—
1704	8	—
1705	—	24
1710	—	53
1711	—	55
1712	—	77
1714	53	—
1715	17	38
1716	19	43
1717	68	266
1718	447	70
1719	104	—
1720	81	—
1721	76	117 <sup>a</sup>
1722	106	—
1723	82	—
1724	61	—
1725	54	59
1726	180	—
Total	1,573	802

*Note:* From “Account obtained from the collector of the customs,” December 16, 1726, in Brodhead (1853–1887:5:814).

<sup>a</sup> “Entered from the Coast of Africa but found afterward to have been from Madagascar.”

York Colony as a whole, the importations in the period of the Early Group are listed in Table 20. There is no way of knowing how many of and which of these captives remained in the city of New York, but the preponderance of those who had spent time in the Caribbean was probably reflected in the town’s enslaved population. It is also likely that the importations directly from Africa resulted in intermittent infusions of African-born individuals into the local

community, as town residents would have had a ready opportunity to acquire captives at the docks.

Tensions between Africans and Europeans flared with the 1712 Uprising (Governor Hunter to the Lords of Trade, June 23, 1712, in Brodhead 1853–1887:5:341–342; Scott 1961). African-born captives (along with diverse others) appear to have played a role in the insurrection, and participants are thought to have used African practices to bind each other’s

loyalty. It is possible that those executed were interred in the African Burial Ground, although authorities may have kept some of the bodies from burial as a further retribution for the uprising (as would be the case in the executions of 1741). No burials that appear to have been mangled or otherwise buried inauspiciously were assigned to the Early Group.

The revolt led to the colony's most restrictive and punitive legislation to date, *An Act for Preventing Suppressing and Punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negroes and other Slaves* (New York State 1894:1:761–767). It reiterated the 1702 law and added clauses meant to reduce interaction between free and enslaved Africans and to prevent ownership of property by free “Negro, Indian, or Mullato” persons. It curtailed manumission by setting high bond prices (although the latter were removed in 1717).

Restrictions were placed on African funerals as well (see Chapter 2). Some of the archaeologically recovered burials in the Early Group might have been interred during the years after night funerals (1722) and large corteges and pall-draped coffins (1731) had been banned.

Some might also have been interred in 1731, when a devastating smallpox epidemic struck New York. This is the only time for which bills of mortality listing blacks were published. Of 79 deaths reported, at least 50 were probably from the disease. As shown in Table 21, in any given week, the maximum number of deaths never rose above 14. Implications for burials at the African Burial Ground are discussed in the section entitled “Mortuary Material Culture.”

## The Population

### Census

Census figures for Africans in this period are contained in Table 22. The sex ratio fluctuated, from a preponderance of men and male children in 1703, an equal proportion in 1712, more women than men in 1723, and back to near parity in 1731. We have interpreted the increasing numbers of girls and women to be indicative of the growing demand for domestics as the European residential population grew.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> For discussions of overall demographic patterns see Rankin-Hill et al. (2009; Chapter 7 of *Skeletal Biology of the New York African Burial Ground*).

number of children per woman was approximately one throughout the period. The proportion of the population that was labeled as “Negro,” “Black,” or “Slave” (note that this category included Native Americans) remained fairly stable, at around 18 percent, throughout the period.

### Mortuary Sample

Early Group burials, numbering 51, are listed in Table 23. In the table, head angle is the orientation in degrees west of north (discussed in Chapter 5). Preservation codes are explained in Chapter 3. Problematic assignments, such as those for which the coffin shape was not determined but stratigraphic considerations point to early burial, are noted on the table. The distribution of Early Group graves at the excavated site is shown on Figures 68a–68e. Age and sex profiles are graphed in Figures 69 and 70.<sup>4</sup>

The small number of subadults ( $n = 6$ , or 13 percent of the group) can probably be attributed to poor preservation, but other possibilities should be considered. Infant and child mortality may have been lower for some reason in these years, but this is highly unlikely. It is possible that a separate area of the African Burial Ground was being used for children in the Early Group, although there is no clear evidence of this. Moreover, in two cases, a toddler and an infant were deliberately buried with adults. Although we cannot extrapolate a general rule from these examples, they at least suggest that children were not segregated in death. Still, inauspicious deaths of infants or stillbirths may have required different types of burial or burial in a different location, so this possibility cannot be ruled out. A hypothetical alternative assignment of a concentration of child burials to the Early Group is discussed in the section entitled “Spatial Distribution.”

### Mortuary Material Culture

Early Group burials were all in coffins except for Burial 307. It is possible that other burials without coffins have not survived from this period, as the length of time in the ground and the possibility of disturbance from later interments would have affected preservation. As noted, early coffins by definition

<sup>4</sup> Aging and sexing methods are described in Blakey, Mack, et al. (2009; Chapter 4 of *Skeletal Biology of the New York African Burial Ground*).

**Table 21. Deaths Reported for Blacks,  
August to December, 1731**

Date	Deaths	Deaths from Smallpox
August 23	—	—
September 6	6	3
September 13	8	7
September 20	6	4
September 27	7	6
October 4	14	10
October 11	9	8
October 18 <sup>a</sup>	12	—
October 25	—	—
November 1	7 <sup>b</sup>	—
November 8 <sup>c</sup>	—	—
November 15	2	—
Total when smallpox reporting ceased	71	—
November 22	4	—
November 29	1	—
December 5	1	—
December 13	—	—
December 21	2	—
Total reported	79	—

*Note:* From *New-York Gazette* August 23–30 through December 13–21, 1731.

<sup>a</sup> Cause not specified from this date on, although the report indicates “most of smallpox.”

<sup>b</sup> Includes preceding 2 weeks.

<sup>c</sup> The *Gazette* reported that no new cases of smallpox had appeared in the preceding week.

were four sided and tapered toward the foot. Very few of the early burials had items in the coffin with the deceased, but again, poor preservation owing to the extended length of time in the ground may be a factor in the low frequency of burial artifacts. It is possible that decomposition claimed all traces of some pins, buttons, or cloth in some of these burials.

Fourteen individuals had copper-alloy straight pins. The pins were mainly on the crania, with some in the

neck area. One person, the infant in Burial 226, had a pin on the innominate or hip. The exception is in keeping with the overall findings on pin placement: young children were most likely to have been wrapped and pinned all along the body (see Chapter 11). Burial 361 had a pewter button that might have fastened a shirt collar. Burial 250 also had a button, of copper alloy, that was found in the pelvic area along with an iron mass and a bead, suggesting a talisman or memento

**Table 22. Black Population by Age and Sex, 1703–1731**

Year	Label in Census	Adults		Children		Age for Children	Total
		Male	Female	Male	Female		
1703	“Negroes”	298	276	124	101	≤15	799
1712	“slaves”	321	320	155	179	≤15	975
1723	“Negroes and other slaves”	408	476	220	258	not given	1,362
1731	“blacks”	599	607	186	185	11	1,577

*Note:* Information from Green and Harrington (1932) and U.S. Bureau of the Census (1909).

rather than clothing. A textile pseudomorph (a corrosion product that permeated the fibers and replaced them, creating an exact replica) was recovered from Burial 121, the only evidence of cloth from the Early Group. It is likely most individuals were shrouded.

Most of the beads recovered at the New York African Burial Ground belong to this period: two of the individuals at the cemetery who were buried wearing strung beads, Burial 340 (112 beads at the waist and wrist) and Burial 226 (8 beads at the neck), are in the Early Group, and a single bead was found with an adult of undetermined sex in Burial 250. Because beads are unusual in graves at this cemetery, their presence in three Early Group interments is significant. The beads recovered with the infant in Burial 226 are unusual for yet another reason: they were characteristic of West African manufacture. The bead from Burial 250 was recovered from the central part of the coffin, possibly near the pelvis, in association with an iron mass, a pewter tack, and a copper-alloy button. The beads are discussed in Chapter 13.

## Spatial Distribution

In this section and the corresponding sections of Chapters 7–9, we discuss burial distribution and spatial groupings that we have discerned. No attempt is made to discuss the location of each individual burial. Early Group burials were distributed over the entire site from east to west (see Figures 68a–68e). They were missing from the area north of the fence line, which we believe was not in use until the final quarter of the eighteenth century (see Chapter 9). All but two Early Group burials (Burials 237 and 264, which might represent the same individual) were interred with their heads to the west, and all were laid supine.

A concentration of burials that is assigned to the Early Group is located in the western part of the excavated site, extending from the north-south leg of former Republican Alley eastward to the alley behind Lot 13. The distribution of the concentration was relatively loose, and the concentration itself may well be “false” because building construction obliterated so much of this part of the cemetery. The most clearly defined concentration within the Early Group is located approximately between grid coordinates 65 and 90 East. We refer to this as the central concentration. The third area considered is on the far eastern part of the excavated site. It is likely that early burials originally extended to the west and north of this area but were either destroyed or not excavated archaeologically. The eastern group is treated separately here because these burials are in a defined area that subsequently became a dump for pottery-waste material.

Between the central and eastern concentrations, from grid coordinates 110 to 160 East, there were only five Early Group burials. However, excavations were not complete in the area north of grid line 75 South and east of grid line 130 East, and it is possible additional early interments are still in place. Also, based on the stratigraphic relationships reconstructed in the vicinity, the area south of grid line 75 South and between grid 130 and 150 East may have been eroded or leveled at some time in the past, resulting in a loss of early burials that may have been situated on the hillside. Graves that were placed here subsequently, however, survived.

Burial orientation in the Early Group was uniformly west-headed with one exception, Burial 237/264 (probably a single individual—see the section on unique and unusual burials). The distribution of precise orientation angles within the west-headed early burials differs from that of later groups (see Figure 54 in

Table 23. Early Group Burials

Burial No.	Age Category	Low Age	High Age	Sex <sup>a</sup>	Head Angle (degrees)	Grid South (feet)	Grid East (feet)	Preservation Code	Coffin
18	adult	35	45	female?	93	81.5	12	y	tapered
23	adult	25	35	male	85	87.5	8	y	tapered
26 <sup>b</sup>	subadult	8	12	undetermined	78	83	20	y	four sided
29	adult	35	45	male?	82	97.5	0	y	tapered
33	adult			undetermined	93	87.5	10	n	none (redeposited bones)
34	adult			undetermined		87.5	15	n	rectangular?
38	adult	12	18	female	90	86	10	y	tapered
44 <sup>b</sup>	subadult	3	9	undetermined		85.5	21.5	y	four sided
48	adult			undetermined	97	87.5	20	y	tapered
52	undetermined			undetermined	18	87.5	25	n	rectangular
68	adult	21	25	male	87	91	3.5	y	tapered
72 <sup>b</sup>	subadult	1	2	undetermined	90	87.5	34	y	rectangular
78	adult	16	19	undetermined	64	91	10	y	tapered
83 <sup>b</sup>	subadult			undetermined	95	87.5	31	y	rectangular
84	adult	17	21	female	89	87.5	35	y	four sided
88	undetermined			undetermined	81	93.5	-4	n	unidentified
120	adult	25	34	female	93	88.5	70	y	tapered
121	subadult	2.5	4.5	undetermined	98	86	70	y	tapered
155	adult			undetermined	92	92	75	n	four sided
177	adult	30	60	undetermined	88	91.5	80	y	tapered
182	subadult	7.5	12.5	undetermined	102	94	69	y	tapered
200	adult			male	98	75.5	77	y	four sided
202	adult	12	18	female?	108	85.5	70	y	tapered
221	adult	30	60	male	96	83.5	77	y	tapered
226	infant	0	0.17	undetermined	105	83	77	y	tapered
227	undetermined			undetermined	96	77	84	n	four sided
237	undetermined			undetermined	183	80	55.5	n	four sided?
247 <sup>b</sup>	adult	35	49.9	male?	90	84.5	90	n	unidentified
249 <sup>b</sup>	subadult	0.67	1.33	undetermined	101	81	87	y	tapered
250	adult			undetermined	98	80.5	84	y	four sided
261	n/a			no skeletal remains		87.5	80	n	unidentified
263	subadult			undetermined	105	88.5	74	y	tapered

**Table 23. Early Group Burials (continued)**

Burial No.	Age Category	Low Age	High Age	Sex <sup>a</sup>	Head Angle (degrees)	Grid South (feet)	Grid East (feet)	Preservation Code	Coffin
264	adult			undetermined		80	55	n	unidentified
272	subadult	0.25	0.75	undetermined	100	88.5	74.5	y	four sided
279	adult			undetermined	99	76.5	75.5	n	four sided
280	adult			female?	96	83	70	n	four sided
281	adult			male?	90	79.5	75	y	four sided
282	adult	32.5	42.5	male	96	77.5	71.5	y	four sided
307 <sup>b</sup>	adult	45	55	male?	88	82.5	116	y	no coffin
308	subadult			undetermined	109	84.5	109	y	four sided
340	adult	39.3	64.4	female	94	88.5	237	y	tapered
361	adult	33	57	male	85	88.5	249	y	tapered
382 <sup>b</sup>	subadult	4	5	undetermined	110	71.5	215	y	four sided
387	adult	34	44	male	109	78	227	y	tapered
388	adult	29	57	female	112	75.5	222	y	tapered
389	adult			female	100	82	220	y	tapered
402	adult			undetermined	100	84.5	235	n	tapered
404 <sup>b</sup>	adult			female	96	79.5	165	n	tapered
416	adult			undetermined	101	71.5	142	y (no cranium)	tapered
426	undetermined			undetermined		69.5	141	n (not excavated)	tapered?
432	adult			undetermined	90	78	220	y	rectangular?

<sup>a</sup> In the Sex column, a question mark indicates a probable assignment.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates a problematic temporal assignment.

Chapter 5). There is no peak frequency at grid west (90° west of grid north) as there is for later groups. The most frequent orientation (n = 5 burials) is at 96° west of north, but the rest of the graves were fairly evenly distributed at more northerly and more southerly orientations.

## The Western Concentration

The western early concentration (shown on Figure 68b) includes 14–16 burials: Burials 18, 23, 29, 33, 34, 38, 48, 52, 68, 72, 78, 83, 84, 88, and possibly 26 and 44.

Burials 18 and 23 are notable because grave markers associated with them were recovered archaeologically. As we saw in Chapter 3, this is the part of the

site where the early ground surfaces were preserved beneath the fill. The grave markers consisted of flat, squared stones that appeared to have been placed upright at the heads of the graves.

The flat, rectangular stone associated with Burial 18 was still in place, vertical and perfectly aligned with the grave and coffin (see Figure 58 in Chapter 5). The deceased was between 35 and 45 years old, probably a woman (the sex could not be determined with full certainty owing to the deterioration of the bones). Other than the coffin nails and a remnant of coffin lid identified as red cedar, no other artifacts were recovered from the burial. No engraving was observed on the stone. Had the stone ever been engraved, some trace might have survived because the stone was covered with soil rather than exposed to the air. The



Figure 68a. Excavated Early Group burials (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).

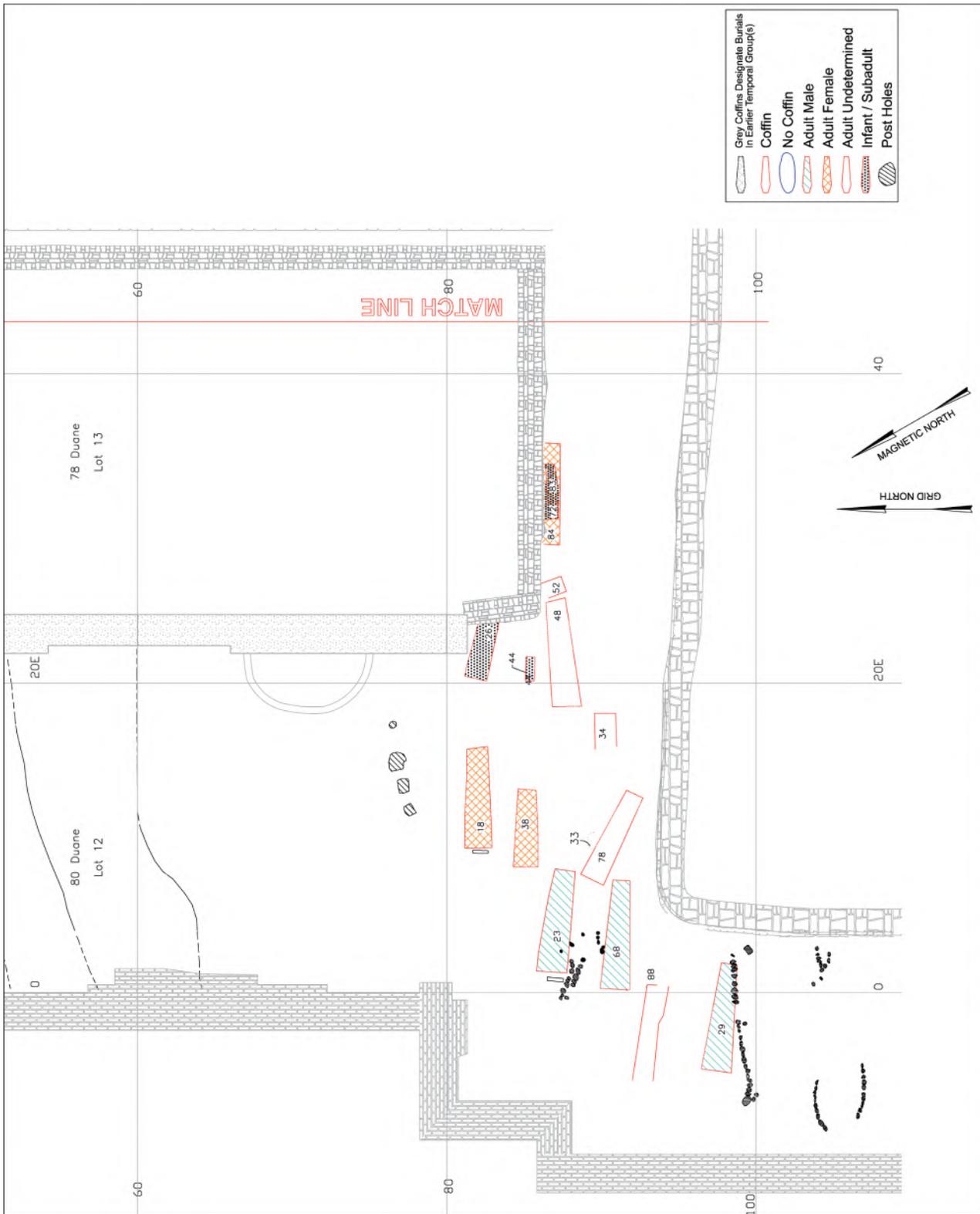


Figure 68b. Early Group burials, western area (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).

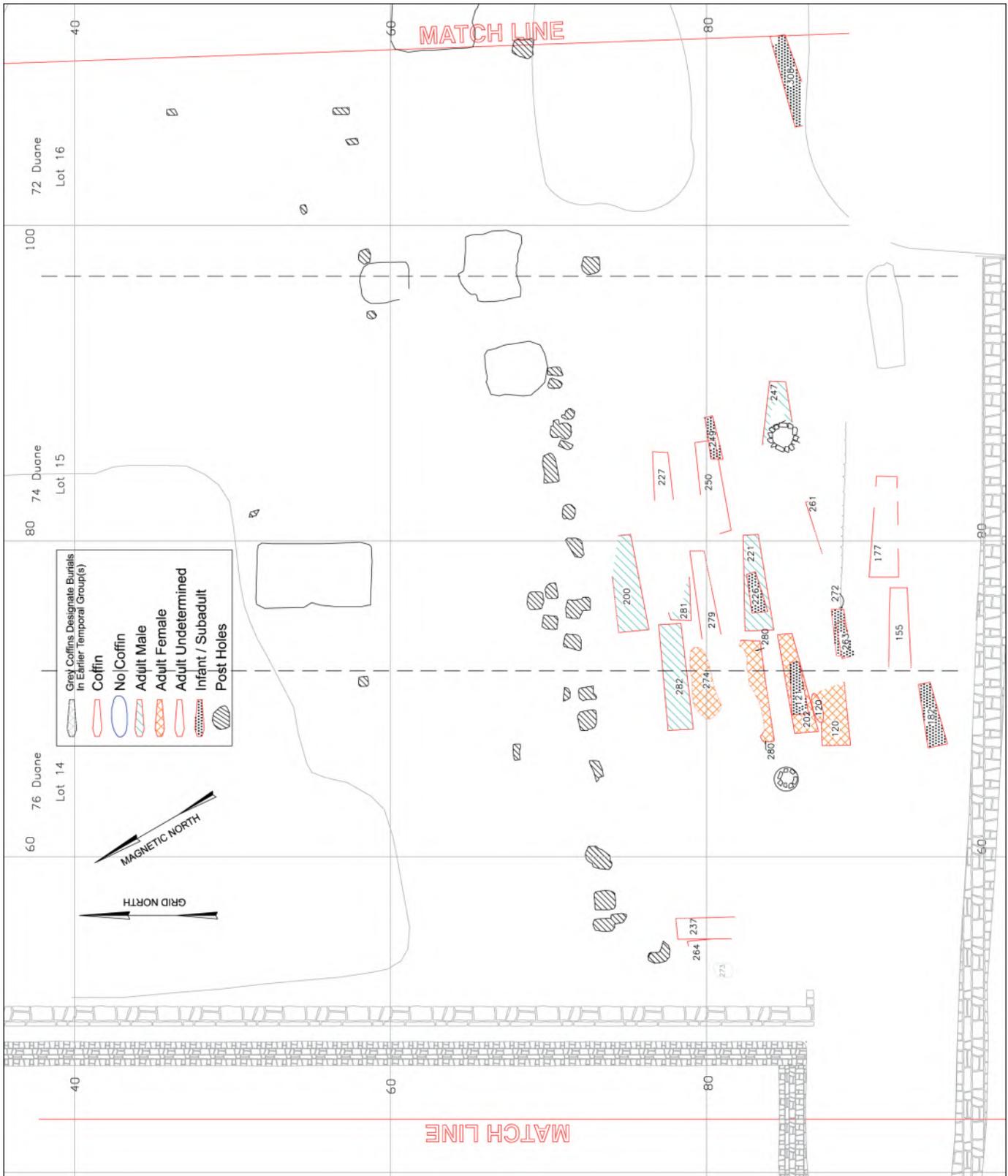


Figure 68c. Early Group burials, west-central area (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).

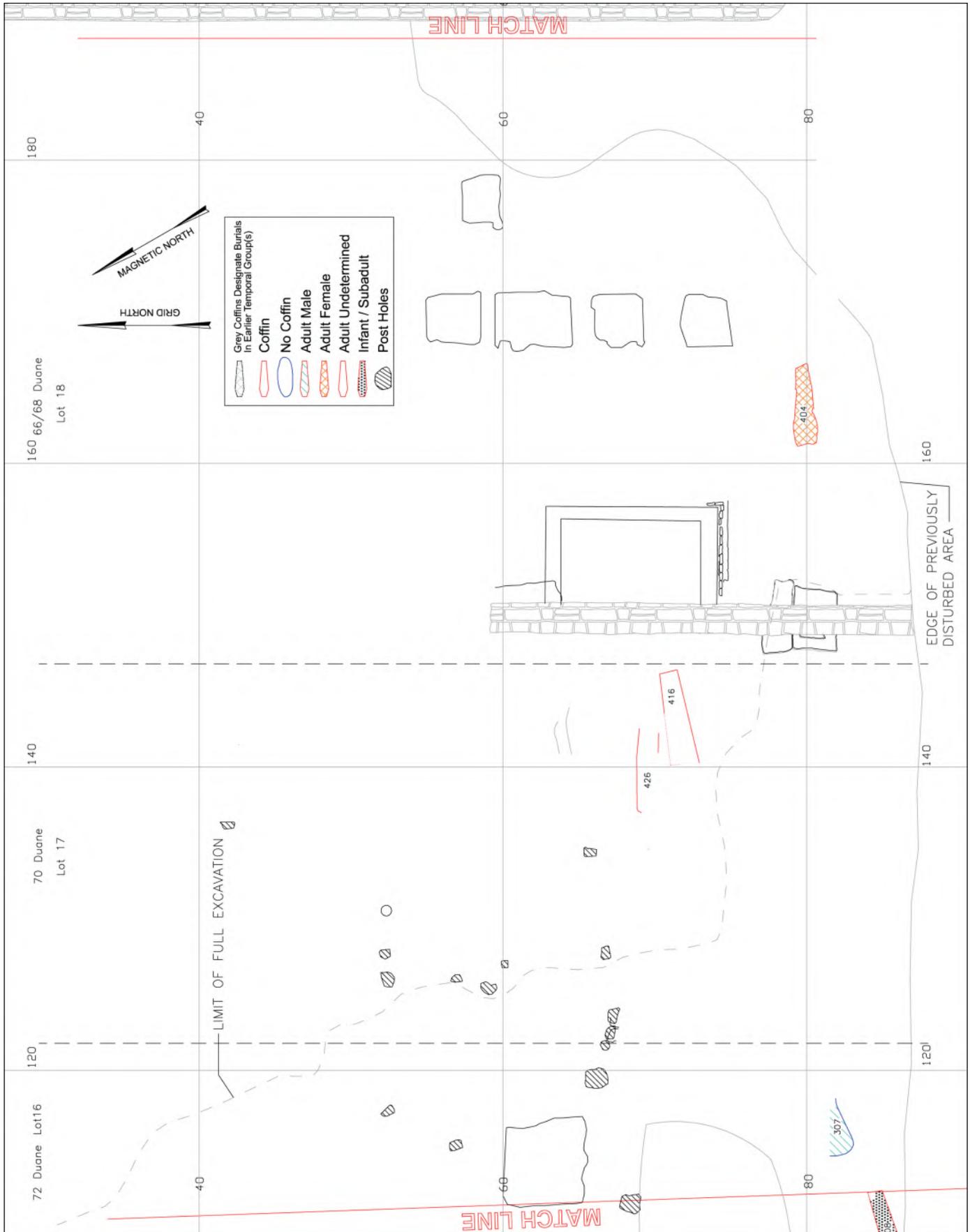


Figure 68d. Early Group burials, east-central and Lot 18 areas (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).

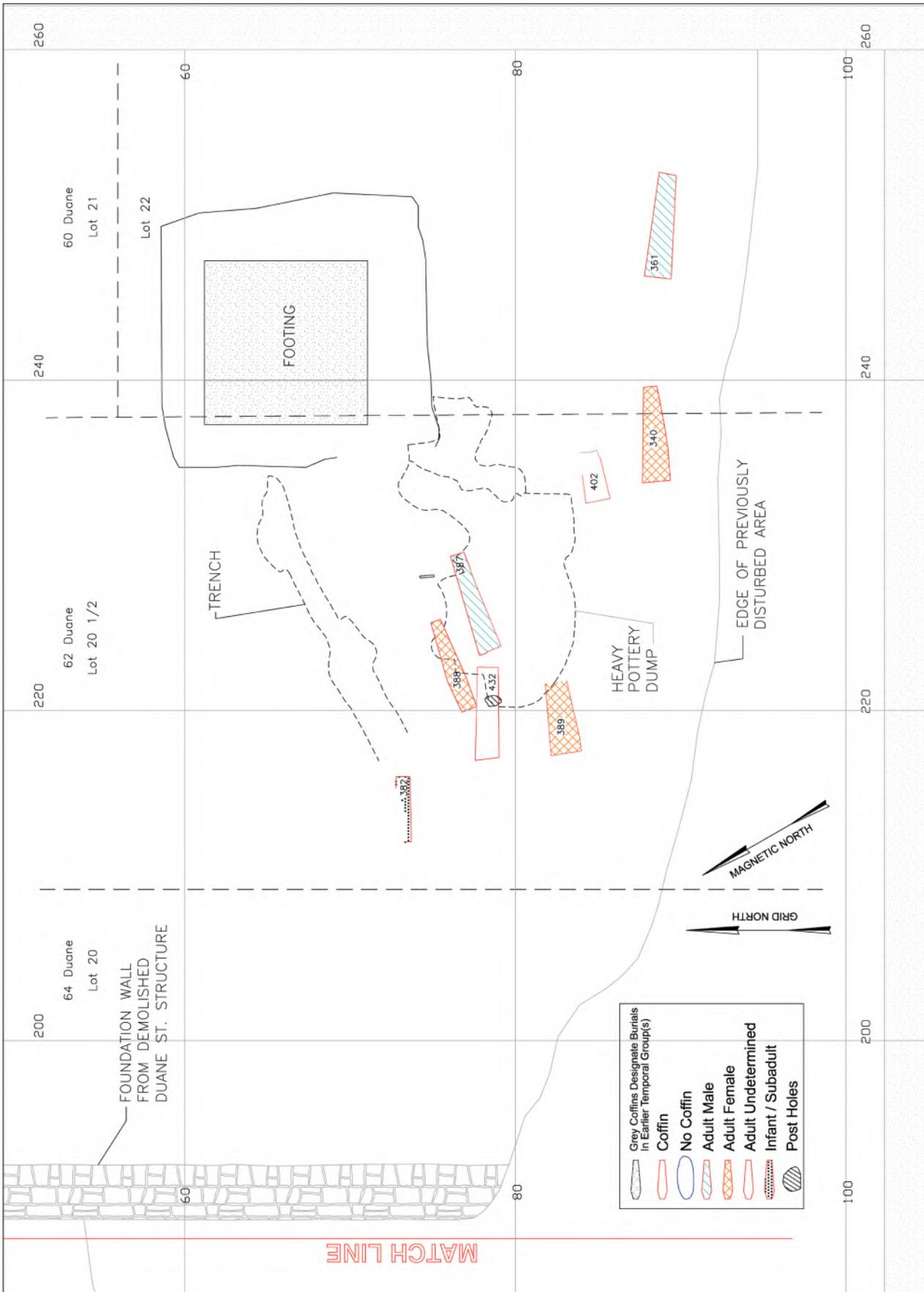


Figure 68e. Early Group burials, eastern area (prepared for the United States General Services Administration).

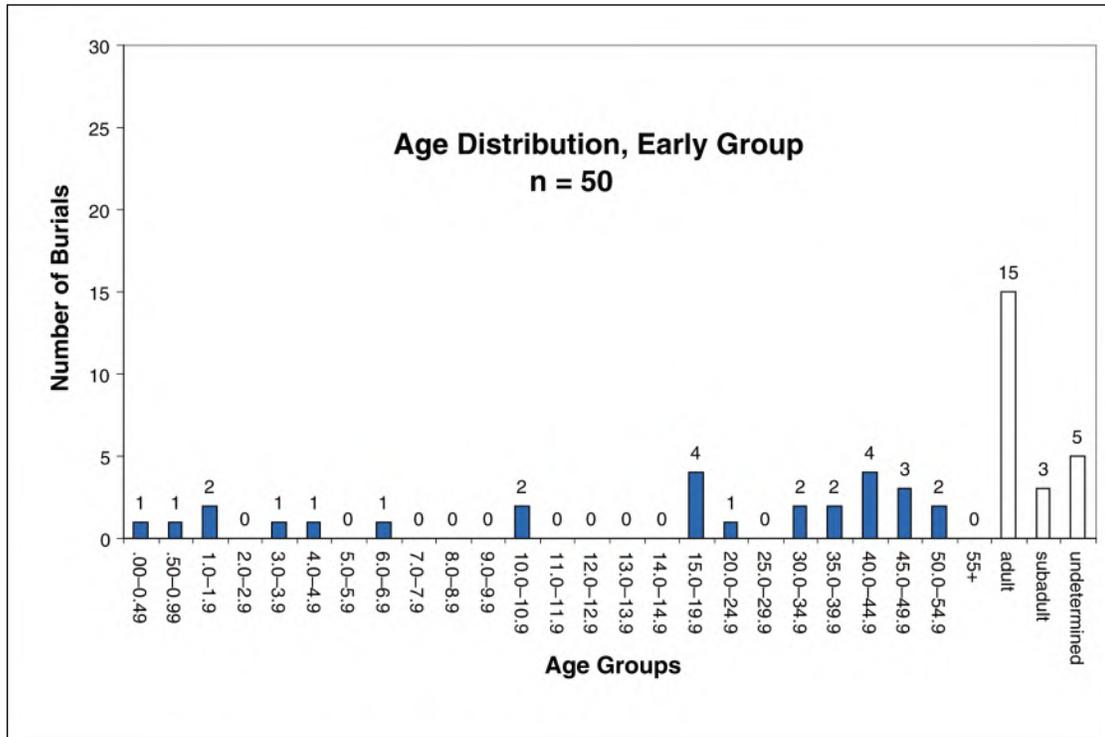


Figure 69. Age distribution, Early Group. White bars indicate individuals whose age could not be determined (includes only burials from which remains were recovered).

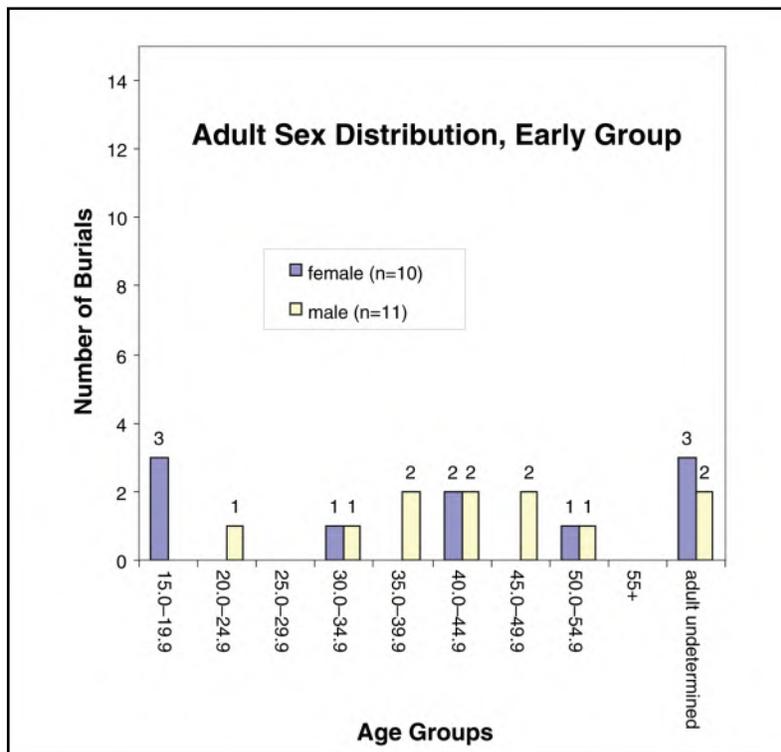


Figure 70. Adult sex distribution, Early Group.

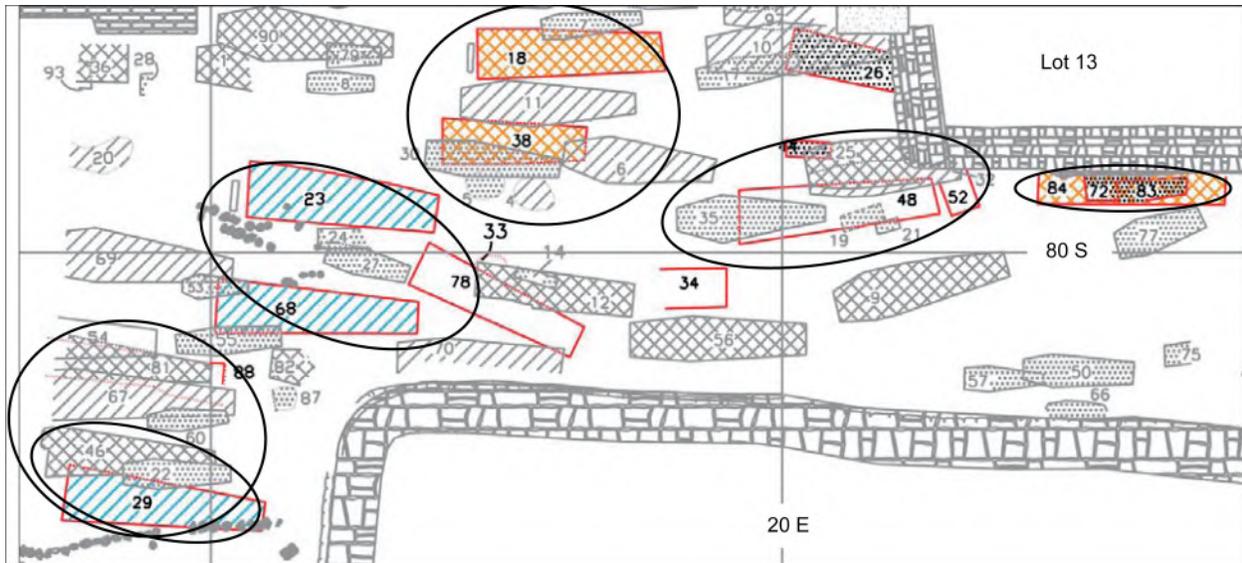


Figure 71. Detail (5 West to 30 East) of the southwestern portion of the site plan (see Figure 7, pocket map), showing all temporal groups. Early Group burials are shown in color. Possible clusters mentioned in the text are circled.

stone was not salvaged after the collapse of the World Trade Center, and it was never measured or identified as to type of stone or geologic provenience.

The stone that is thought to be associated with Burial 23 (see Figures 60 and 61 in Chapter 5) was askew but otherwise appeared to have been in place at what turned out to be the head of the grave. A line of cobbles, also possibly marking the grave at the surface, was recorded just to the south (see Figure 68b). Burial 23 held a man between 25 and 35 years old. This burial and the adjacent Burial 68 (of a man between 21 and 25) had virtually identical coffins, probably from the same coffin maker (see Chapter 10).

Burial 38, which held a young woman between 12 and 18 years of age, may have belonged to a grave grouping that included Burials 18, 23, and 68. The cluster also may have included Burial 78, which held the remains of an individual of undetermined sex, between 16 and 19 years of age. Burial 78, however, was distinct in that it had a much more northerly orientation than the others. Indeed, it was the most northerly skewed of the head-to-west burials from the site. Burials 33 and 34, very partial and disturbed burials (possibly representing a single individual), may have originally been part of the group, but their condition makes assignment to the Early Group tentative.

The presence of grave markers raises the possibility that later interments were deliberately placed with reference to these early graves. Therefore, burial groupings that span time periods must be considered,

not only here, but also in other locations at the site where surface markers might once have been present but did not survive archaeologically. Figure 71 shows burials from all temporal groups and should be compared to Figure 68b.

Burials 24 and 27 (young children) have been assigned to the Middle Group but might have been positioned deliberately between Burials 23 and 78 (see Figure 71, center left). Burial 27 had a very northerly orientation, as though it were aligned with Burial 78. Burials 53 and 55 may have been placed deliberately among existing Early Group burials as well.

Later burials overlying Burials 18 and 38 included Burial 7 on the north side of Burial 18 and Burials 11, 5, 6, and 30, which clustered above Burial 38 (upper center in Figure 71). All of these later burials may have been added to a group anchored by the Early Group Burials 18 and 38. Burial 6, however, which is offset to the east of the others, has been assigned to the Late Group and may have been aligned with other late interments rather than with underlying early graves.

Burials 54, 81, 67, 60, 46, and 22 may have been deliberately placed above Early Group Burials 29 and 88 (at left in Figure 71). Burial 29 held a man between 35 and 45 years of age; Burial 88 held an individual of undetermined sex and age. Prior to uncovering Burials 22, 46, and 29, excavators had recorded a line of small cobbles, which ran east-west just south of the burials. The line was 3–4 feet above the Burial 29 coffin.

The grave marker may be associated with Burial 29 (or alternatively with Burial 47 to the south; the latter association was assumed in the field) or may have formed a boundary marker between two grave groups. It is possible Burial 46 was deliberately placed next to the man in marked Burial 29, and that Burial 22, a child between 2.5 and 4.5 years in age, who was interred later, was deliberately placed immediately above the two without disturbing them at all.<sup>5</sup>

An apparent cluster of burials at the southwest corner of Lot 13 (see Figure 71, upper right corner) includes burials from our early and middle temporal groups. Burials 25 and 32 (described in Chapter 7) were placed above Burials 44, 48, and 52, and Burial 35 overlay the west half of Burial 48. Highly disturbed graves of young children or infants, Burials 19 and 21, were also found with the cluster, although perhaps these were interred later.

Of course, the intensive reuse of the cemetery in this area may account for the overlapping graves, and the interpretation that perceived groupings were deliberate, spanning long time periods, is tenuous. Still, the stone and cobble grave markers provide added support for such an interpretation.

## The Central Concentration

Approximately between the east-west grid coordinates 65 and 90 East a concentration of early burials has been identified (shown on Figure 68c), consisting of Burials 120, 121, 155, 177, 182, 200, 202, 221, 226, 227, 249, 250, 261, 263, 272, 279, 280/274, 281, and 282. “Gaps” in the overall distribution of burials that may have been caused by construction disturbance lie to the east and to the west of this concentration, but nevertheless, it appears to be real. In general, the central cluster has a coherence to it, attributable to a fairly regular arrangement of graves with little variation in orientation.

The significance of the concentration is a matter of conjecture. One possibility is that the distribution simply reflects the topography of the cemetery. This area was apparently relatively flat, forming a small “terrace” on the hillside that sloped down toward the east. Burials continued to be concentrated in this general area in later periods. Figure 44 shows the distribution of burial elevations across the site, and the “flat” area between approximately 50 and 100 East is apparent.

<sup>5</sup> See the burial descriptions in Part 2 of this volume for additional detail and alternative sequences for all burials.

We do not discount, however, the possibility that this group represents ties of kinship, religion, or ethnicity. No common attributes other than burial orientation, time period, and burial location left behind any trace; a function, perhaps, of the general lack of preserved material culture.

The burials include 12 adults and just 5 children, or 6 if Burial 249 is counted,<sup>6</sup> but early child and infant graves may not have survived. In several cases, co-interment of children with adults was suggested by the arrangement of burials. The most likely pairs are Burials 121 and 202, Burials 226 and 221, and Burials 250 and 249.

Burial 121, which held a child between 2.5 and 4.5 years old, was buried above the 12–18-year-old individual in Burial 202, identified as a probable female (Figure 72). The two burials either were interred at the same time, or Burial 121 was deliberately placed within the Burial 202 grave at a later date. The coffins were essentially aligned, the child’s centered atop the adult’s. The grave shaft of another early burial, Burial 120, was directly adjacent to the south of the grave shaft of Burial 202, and although the two did not share a grave and were aligned slightly differently, it is possible this placement was deliberate, also. Burial 120, which held a woman between 25 and 34 years old, was disturbed when a later grave was dug (Burial 119), at which time long bones from Burial 120 were placed in a small pile against the south side of the Burial 202 coffin (Figure 73).

The infant in Burial 226 was interred atop Burial 221, which held a man between the ages of 30 and 60. It is possible that Burial 226 had a grave shaft of its own within that of Burial 221, in which case it was interred at least slightly later in time. Alternatively, Burial 226 was interred at the same time as Burial 221, and the soil distinction was the result of the decay of Burial 226. The infant, as noted in the section on mortuary material culture, was buried wearing a strand of fired-glass beads that were probably made in West Africa.

Burials 250 and 249 may also form a deliberate pair; in this case, however, the infant (Burial 249) was

<sup>6</sup> One burial in the cluster, Burial 261, consisted only of coffin remains, and no skeletal remains were recovered. Burials 126 and 143, representing a later interment of two children in the same coffin, truncated the majority of Burial 261. The excavators of Burial 261 believed that all three individuals were interred in the same grave shaft, and in fact, the coffins seem to have been oriented exactly parallel to each other. It seems clear, however, that Burial 261 predated Burials 126 and 143, and apparently no effort was made to preserve the former when the second burial took place.

Figure 72. In situ photograph of Burial 121, which held a child, within the grave shaft of Burial 202. The Burial 202 coffin outline is barely discernible to the left of the child's coffin (photograph by Dennis Seckler).



Figure 73. In situ photograph of displaced bones from the woman in Burial 120. They had been disturbed when a later grave was being dug, and the gravedigger had placed them in a small, neat pile alongside the coffin of neighboring Burial 202. North is to the right (photograph by Dennis Seckler).

placed above the foot of the adult's coffin, slightly to one side. Burial 250 held an adult of undetermined age and sex; the infant in Burial 249 was between 6 and 16 months old.

It is also possible that the infants in Burials 263 and 272 were placed deliberately near the woman in Burial 120. The only other child, between 7.5 and 12.5 years old, was in Burial 182; the grave was separate from any adult's.

The above cases indicate that the burial of young children within or adjacent to the graves of adults

was preferred during the period in which the Early Group was interred. As discussed in Chapter 5, we have identified this as a mortuary practice that was common, although not universal, at the New York African Burial Ground. The relationships between the young woman and child in Burials 202 and 121 or between the man and the infant in Burials 221 and 226 can only be guessed at. However, we interpret these co-interments as evidence that burial with some kind of kin was preferred, however "kin" might have been defined.

As in the western concentration, the possibility that grave clusters spanned time periods was explored. In cases where early graves were truncated and partially destroyed by later interments, we are less inclined to posit a deliberate grouping. Burials 120, 155, 261, 279, and 280 were all partially destroyed by later burials. Burial 227 was truncated on the west, probably during the interment of Burial 256, from the femur heads up, but the skull had apparently been replaced within the coffin, suggesting some measure of regard for the earlier burial.

Only Burials 250 and 177 were left undisturbed by later interments. Burial 249 lay immediately above the southeast corner of Burial 250, and the two have been discussed above as a possible paired interment. Burial 177 was overlain by two later children's graves with hexagonal coffins (Burials 128 and 169), and a string of other children's graves (including Burials 123, 126 and 143 [in a shared grave], 198, and 258) lay to its north (Figure 74). Highly disturbed children's remains also lay nearby (Burials 110, 112, 117, and 131), probably from the latest period of the cemetery. It is impossible to know whether this concentration of children's graves had any reference to the early Burial 177 or other early graves nearby.

**An Anomaly and a Possible Burial Cluster: Burial 207.** We noted in Chapter 4 that Burial 207,

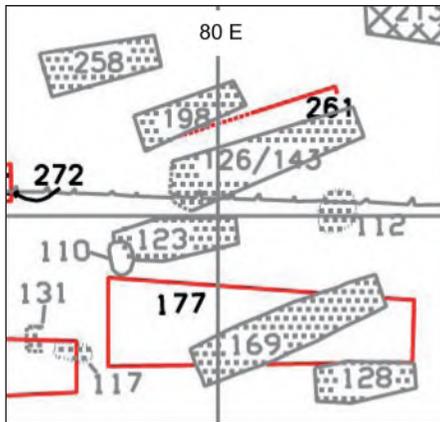


Figure 74. Detail (90 South and 80 East) of site plan (see Figure 7, pocket map) showing later child burials near Early Group Burial 177.

which held a probable woman between 25 and 35 years old, was anomalous in that the coffin was apparently of the tapering shape, although the grave appears to be late. The Late Group assignment of the burial is based on a single tiny piece of pearlware found in the soil within the cranium and on its position overlying numerous child burials. Field records indicate that the top of the burial was somewhat disturbed, and we consider it possible that the pearlware sherd was

introduced into the cranium through silting of soil from an overlying midden.

It is possible to discern an east-west line of adult burials that includes Burial 207 and Early Group Burials 250, 221, 202, and 120 to its west (Figure 75). This possible alignment, along with the tapered coffin type and the possibility that the late artifact in the burial soil may be intrusive, points to a possible early assignment for Burial 207.

The burials that underlay the edges of Burial 207 included Burial 220; Burial 232; the shared grave of Burials 224, 231, and 234; Burial 240; and Burial 254. These were all graves of children and infants. Immediately to the east was a large area of construction disturbance that must have obliterated numerous additional graves.

If Burial 207 is actually from the early period, then all of the underlying children's burials also would be early. In this case, the mortuary demographic profile for the period could be modified to include seven additional subadults (with ages ranging from infancy to 4 years), and their spatial concentration might point to a special, separate placement of at least some children within the cemetery (in an area that may have extended eastward, where graves have been obliterated). Only one of these children had an associated

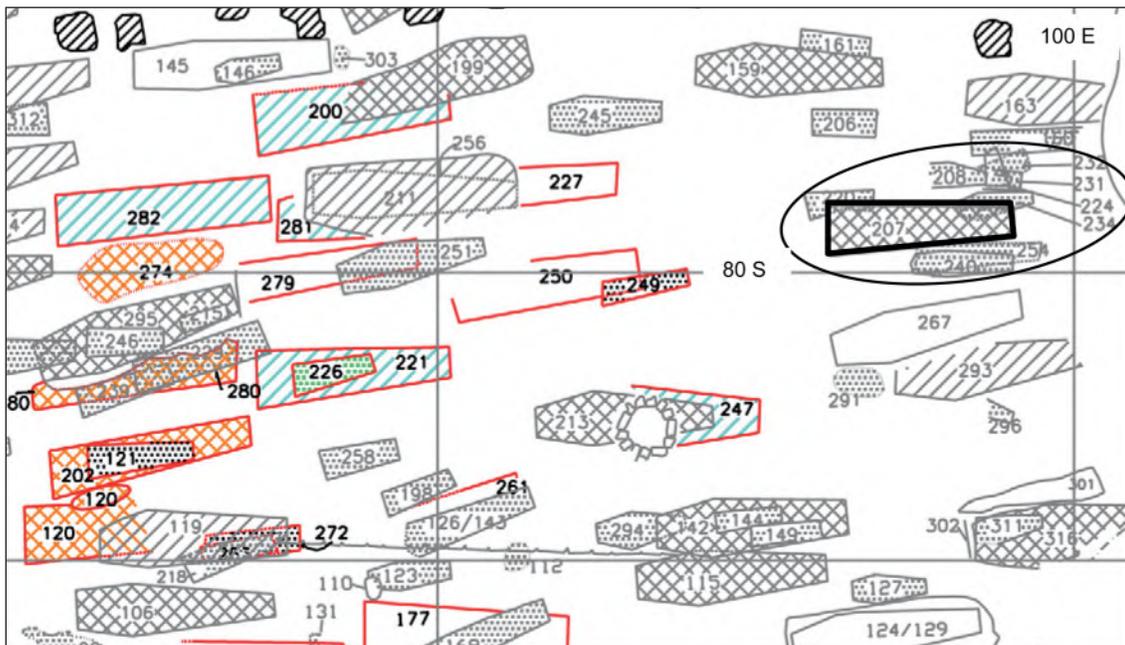


Figure 75. Detail (73–92 South and 70–100 East) of west-central portion of site plan (see Figure 7, pocket map) showing all temporal groups. Early Group burials are shown in color, with Late Group Burial 207 shown with coffin outlined in black. The cluster of children's burials beneath Burial 207 is circled.

artifact: Burial 254, a young child, had a silver pendant at his or her neck (see Chapter 13).

There is one other piece of evidence that may indicate an early date for Burial 207. Oak pollen made up 7 percent of the pollen types on the coffin lid, just nine-tenths of a percent in the grave fill, and 1 and four-tenths of a percent in the stomach of Burial 207. It is possible that the “grave fill” sample is from the later midden that overlay this area, but the “coffin lid” sample is derived from the original soil into which the grave was dug. This soil contained an early pollen spectrum in which oak was prominent (i.e., prior to the clearance of lower Manhattan; see Appendix G, Part 3 of this volume, for the pollen analysis).

This alternative chronological interpretation of Burial 207 and surrounding graves should be considered when analyzing change over time at the cemetery. However, in this report, we have assigned Burial 207 to the Late Group and have placed the children’s graves in the middle groups.

## The Eastern Concentration

Eight early burials were identified in the southeastern corner of the excavation site (shown on Figure 68e), Burials 340, 361, 382, 387, 388, 389, 402 and 432. As noted, these do not necessarily represent an original concentration of graves, because the limited preservation and excavation in the eastern part of the site make it impossible to gauge the actual distribution. In this area, stoneware pottery waste was dumped on the surface of the cemetery beginning sometime after about 1730 (see Chapter 4). Some of the burials assigned to the Early Group here contain these sherds and pieces of kiln furniture, although not in the same high concentrations as later burials that were clearly dug into the midden. It is possible that the waste material is intrusive into these graves from later dumping; alternatively, they represent interments that overlap in time with the dumping. Burials 387, 388, and 389 may postdate the beginning of the stoneware accumulation and thus fall late in the early group. Each had stoneware within the grave shaft, although not the high volume of others to their south and east—they appear to have been at the edge of the dumping area or, alternatively, they were interred before the stoneware was dumped but had debris mixed into upper layers through later disturbances.

The discernment of burial clusters in the eastern area is impossible because of the partial excavation. There is one possible north-south alignment of graves run-

ning from Burial 382 on the north southward through Burials 388, 387, 402, and 340, which might reflect a contour in the slope. Otherwise, the proximity of Burials 389, 432, 388, and 387 is noted as a possible cluster, with the latter two considered a pair. Burials 388 and 387 were nearly identical in terms of grave-shaft shape and coffin style (see Chapter 10). Burial 388 was of an adult woman between 29 and 57, Burial 387 of a man 34–44 years old.

## Unique and Unusual Burials

There are many distinctive interments at the New York African Burial Ground, and most are described in this report in one place or another. Early Group Burial 340, for example, was described in Chapter 5. Here and in Chapters 7–9, burials that warrant special mention and/or are not discussed elsewhere are described under this heading.

### South-Headed and Coffinless Burials

To the west of the central concentration (see Figure 68c), there were two very poorly preserved interments identified as Burials 237 and 264, which are probably the remains of a single burial. This grave appears to have been oriented with the head to the south. Burial 237 consisted of partial remains completely truncated above the pelvis. Burial 264 was immediately adjacent to the west and parallel; this burial consisted only of partial right leg bones oriented exactly the same way and coffin wood remains.

As we discussed in Chapter 5, head-to-west burial was clearly the typical orientation at this cemetery. The deceased was probably an adult, but sex and age could not be determined from the surviving bones. No artifacts other than coffin remains were found with the burial. The other south-headed burials at the cemetery are in the far eastern area and have been placed with the middle rather than the earlier temporal group. No explanation for the unusual orientation can be offered at this time. Although it is possible this was a Muslim burial, with the deceased originally placed on the side and meant to face east, the presence of a coffin makes such an interpretation less tenable.

Burials 307 and 308 were located to the east of the central concentration, in a very disturbed part of the cemetery (see Figures 68c and 68d). It is not possible to say with certainty that they are isolated from other early burials; this apparent spatial separation may be

Figure 76. In situ photograph of Burial 247. The bones had been placed at the foot of the grave, presumably at the time Burial 213 was interred. The position of the foot-end of the Burial 213 coffin (which had been removed when the photograph was taken) can be seen at the bottom of the photograph (where the label “B247” was placed). Ruler is marked in inches; north is to the left (photograph by Dennis Seckler).



a function of the area’s disturbance. They may have been aligned with each other, although the head of one was about 3 feet from the foot of the other. One, Burial 307, was buried with no coffin, and it was the only coffinless grave in the Early Group. It had been truncated by a later interment and contained only a cranium and right shoulder and arm. The remains were identified as those of a probable male between 45 and 55 years old. It is possible that he was a stranger and newly arrived in the town and no one provided him with a coffin when he died; or, alternatively, that his survivors or his household could not afford a coffin.

The presence of the coffinless burial and of the south-headed burial(s) in the Early Group raises questions about whether social characteristics or types of death left distinctive material signatures. The fact that these graves were located somewhat apart from the concentration in the central area might lend support to an interpretation that the deceased buried in this area were different in some way.

### Burial 247: A Secondary Burial

Burial 247 is a possible early interment that lay immediately beneath Burial 213. The skeletal remains were identified as those of a probable man from 35 to 50 years old (Figure 76). The bones were completely disarticulated (with the possible exception of a few vertebrae) and had been placed in a small pile in the east end of the later grave of Burial 213. It appears that the Burial 213 grave digger removed and stacked the bones with care, as was also observed in the case of Burial 120, as noted in our discussion of the central concentration. Excavators suggested that some remnants of the Burial 247 coffin might have been

moved to surround the bones, as if to maintain an enclosed effect.

Burial 247 simply may have been an early grave that was inadvertently disturbed. But the later Burial 213 was so precisely aligned as to appear deliberate. This may have been a case of deliberate, rather than chance, secondary burial. (See Chapter 7 for a similar case from the Middle Group, Burial 175.)

### Burial 404: Empty Coffin

Burial 404 was located in a very disturbed area at the rear of Lot 18, but excavators believed that the coffin was empty prior to the disturbance. Several fragments of skeletal remains, identified as those of a woman, were found in the surrounding grave-fill soil. Although the coffin had collapsed, it appeared to be complete. Drawings indicate it was probably four sided and tapering toward the foot, although excavators’ notes state it was hexagonal. Disturbances were observed at the foot end and also on the south side adjacent to the head of the coffin. Nails were recorded around the perimeter of the coffin, mainly at the bottom. Excavators emphasized that the coffin bottom was represented by the in situ nails as well as an “extremely thick” organic stain. It was their opinion that the body had been removed from the coffin at some time prior to its decomposition. Although we should keep in mind the possibility that the burial had been disturbed from above during a construction episode in the past, it is difficult to envision the complete removal of the remains with so little disturbance to the coffin.

In this and other cases of empty coffins (from later temporal groups), there are two possibilities: the deceased were removed from their coffins after

interment, or empty coffins were interred intentionally. The first possibility points to *at least* two scenarios: secondary burial and grave robbing. The second possibility (empty coffins interred intentionally) also points to at least two scenarios, one alluding to religious

sensibilities and practices, the other to deception and stealth. A ritual burial, with the coffin representing an individual whose body could not be recovered, is possible. A sham burial, to mark a death that did not occur, is also possible.