

A PLACE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE: THE LIVES AND LANDSCAPES OF THE POWELL FAMILY OF WATERVLIET

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The Powell family story is one filled with triumph, pain, joy, and loss. Like most African Americans living in New York during the late 18th century, Thomas and Elizabeth Powell were enslaved at birth. The couple were members of the Dutch Reformed Church at Boght north of Albany where their children and grandchildren were baptized. The couple purchased an initial 5 acre farm in 1818, eventually expanding their holdings to 40 acres by 1850. The ruins of the Powell family farmstead remain today as a scarce extant reminder of New York's rural African American heritage. Limited archaeological excavations to document its significance and ongoing efforts to preserve the farmstead in perpetuity as a tangible African American heritage place on the land for future New Yorkers are important steps toward acknowledging what we have already lost and what we might still recover.

Introduction

The 2022 *Black Heritage Resources Task Force* recommendations to State Historic Preservation Offices clearly articulate the immediate need to document and preserve African American heritage sites (Franklin *et al.* 2022). Rural landscapes were made and maintained primarily through the labor of enslaved and free African Americans in New York as throughout the South and Middle Atlantic and these sites are continually threatened. Much of this threat can be traced back to the loss of ownership. Around 60 percent of all African Americans in the United States were employed in agriculture toward the end of the 19th century and even in the South had acquired 15 million acres of farmland by 1910 (Browning 1982:1; Hinson 2008:288). This rate of ownership plummeted during the 20th century as many pressures, including systemic racism, forced African Americans off the land with profound and lasting consequences (Gilbert *et al.* 2002; Hitchner *et al.* 2017; Lee 2020; Merem 2006; Reynolds 2002). African American farmland ownership in the United States fell by 64% between 1910 and 2002 (Pierre-Lewis 2009:187). As a result, most African American farmsteads have vanished from the landscape through benign or willful neglect. The historical trajectory of the Powell family farmstead is an instructive case study of the triumphs, struggles, and losses experienced by one African American farming family in upstate New York.

The ruins of the Powell family farmstead and cemetery are in a wooded area in the Town of Colonie, just north of Albany, New York. Thomas and Elizabeth Powell established the farmstead in 1818 as the first African American-owned farm in the expanse of land from Albany north to the Mohawk River (Figure 1). Three generations of the Powell family lived and worked on the farm until the early 1920s, and the arc of the family's story is written in the house they built and occupied for over one hundred years.

Jennie Powell was alone when she died in 1926. She was the last family member to live in the house where she was raised by her parents, Paul and Hannah. Jennie, like her brother, Thomas D. Powell, never married and thus retained the family name. She was fortunate enough to have lived with her paternal grandfather, Thomas, who died around the time she became a teenager. Perhaps he told his young granddaughter about her grandmother, Elizabeth, who passed long before she was born, or her uncle, John, who died before reaching his teenage years. The elderly patriarch may have told her about his days as a young man enslaved by the Fonda family, how he and Elizabeth grew up in neighboring houses and attended the Dutch Reformed Church at Boght Corners. How they fell in love, struggled to gain their freedom, and built a successful farmstead through hard work and keen management. Thomas and Elizabeth's small wooden house would have been scarcely recognizable to the expanded two-story home Jennie had always known. Perhaps her father, Paul, would cut in to explain how they fared during the

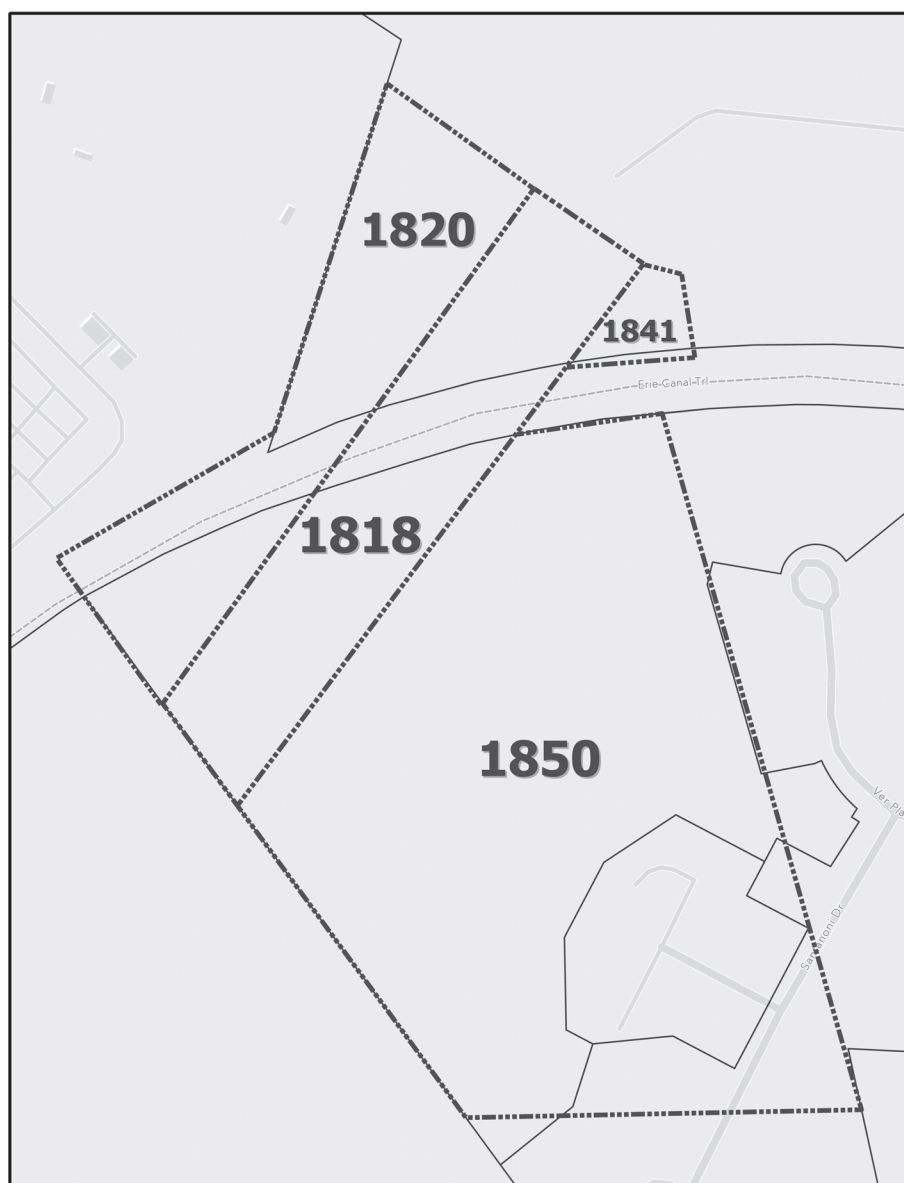


Figure 1. Powell family land purchases by year.

bitter New York winters, how he and Jennie's Aunt Jane would play with their friend, Albert Thompson, in the creek bed on the western edge of the property, or how Thomas and Elizabeth would speak Dutch when they wanted to prevent their children from understanding an adult conversation.

We can only speculate about what stories were handed down through the Powell family. No family papers, letters, or even photographs have survived, and there are no descendants remaining to tell the tales. Thomas D. Powell's death in 1917 left Jennie as the only African American still living in her rural district of the Town of Colonie. Jennie was able to hold on to the cherished homestead, in its 40-acre entirety, until her death ten years later. With no one remaining to pay the taxes, the property was forfeited. It appears that the house was abandoned after Jennie died and either burned or was demolished sometime before 1950. The Powell homestead was largely ignored until avocational archaeologist Arthur Johnson identified the remains of the house in 1978. Johnson's (1978) notes and maps show the general layout of the house and farm. One of his most important discoveries was the general location of the Powell family cemetery.

Johnson learned about the existence of the cemetery from the landowner, who remembered several standing headstones along the western edge of the property. No standing headstones were found but Johnson did find several small headstone fragments scattered about and what he believed to be a disturbed grave. The largest stone bore the initials “THO...,” most likely the remains of Thomas Powell’s headstone. In 2014, the Powell house and cemetery were recorded with the New York State Historic Preservation Office based on Johnson’s observations.

Like so many other African American farming families, the Powell family fortunes illustrate the promise and eventual loss of opportunities to build generational wealth. The route to prosperity, or loss, involves many factors that are not always readily apparent. It is true that landowners normally have a legal right to sell their real property, but the factors leading up to that sale can be multiple and overlapping. Years of systemic inequities and racism have a cumulative effect that may have weighed on the decisions of some of Powell’s African American neighbors to sell. The Powell family withstood these pressures, including the untimely death of family members and higher taxes. Yet, in the end, the family was still unable to pass their property down to a fourth generation. Fewer opportunities for marriage may have limited Thomas and Jennie’s ability to raise their own families who could continue with the farm.

In late 2021, the New York State Museum’s Historical Archaeology staff learned that the property containing the Thomas Powell farmstead was being considered for development. The primary concern was that this important historic landmark would be threatened by the proposed development. The museum staff asked the landowner for permission to gather information about the Powell farmstead through targeted excavations around the ruins of the house. In granting the permission, the landowner acknowledged the potential importance of the resource and was eager to preserve the site, if possible. Initial field excavations were completed in the spring and fall of 2022 with the goal of gathering information about the lives of the Powell family, while documenting the archaeological integrity of the site.

What follows is a summary of the intersections between initial archaeological research on the house and documentary evidence about the Powell family. Documenting the history of the site through primary research is merely the first step. Preserving the Powell family farmstead and cemetery as public parkland would ensure that the resource survives as an African American heritage site for present and future New Yorkers, rather than a footnote in the history of Colonie. This is the clear final goal of the project in working with the landowner, Town of Colonie, and other interested parties.

African American Farmers: Heritage and Loss in Watervliet

Northeast Albany County’s economic development was dominated by the Fonda, Lansing, Van Den Bergh, Witbeck, and a handful of other land-owning families. These white families relied heavily on enslaved labor to operate their farms, build wealth, and maintain their status in the community centered around the Dutch Reformed Church at Boght. The Van Den Bergh family were the first to establish a lasting foothold in the area with their acquisition of the 870-acre De Haas patent in the 1690s. This land was situated along the Mohawk River north of the patroonship of Rensselaerswijck and, thus, beyond the control of the Van Rensselaer family. The De Haas patent was handed down through the Van Den Bergh family throughout the 18th century (Albany County Wills 1805). Peter Van Den Bergh built a house along the river sometime in the latter half of the 18th century but much of the land was not resettled until the early 19th century (Albany County Wills 1795).

The Lansings and Fondas were the next families to establish homes on the patent when the Van Den Berghs decided to partition and sell large portions of the land. These two families would continue to control much of Albany County north of Rensselaerswijck through inheritance and marriage until the latter half of the 19th century. They were also the largest enslavers in the area. White residents of Watervliet held more people in bondage than any other rural township in Albany County. Less than 10 percent of the total population of 457 African Americans in Watervliet were free in 1800 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population, 1800). At this time, African Americans represented over 9% of the total population. This was one year after the passage of “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery” that effectively kept people in bondage for a few more decades with the support of rural farmers in the Hudson River Valley. A review of the 1820 census shows that the Lansing, Leversee, and Witbeck families were particularly brutal in their

refusal to free those they enslaved. Roughly 43 percent of all enslaved people were living with one of these enslaver families in 1820 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1820a). Only 58 African Americans remained in Watervliet by 1840, comprising just 1 percent of the total township population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1840). A third of this small community were members of the Powell, Thompson, and Jackson families who maintained close kinship ties.

By the time legally codified slavery was abolished in 1827, a few African Americans began operating their own farms in Watervliet. A small group of families were able to acquire land through various means with all but two of these farms containing less than 5 acres. Thomas Powell was the first to acquire land which he purchased outright in 1818, followed by Michael Thompson, Prince Jackson, Betty Thompson, Mary Jackson, and Jeremiah Thompson, and Albert Thompson (Table 1). All these farms, except the Powell farmstead, had been sold by 1890. These few families who were able to acquire land, gave themselves an opportunity to provide a stable future for their descendants.

TABLE 1. AFRICAN AMERICAN FARM OWNERS IN WATERVLIET, 1818-1926

Name	Acres	Value in 1860	First Purchase	Loss
Prince Jackson	2	400	1834	Sold 1872
Thomas and Elizabeth Powell	40	4000	1818	Forfeited 1926
Albert Thompson	7	1000	1844	Sold 1857
Betty Thompson/Jeremiah and Mary (Jackson) Thompson	4	400	1843	Sold 1888
Michael Thompson	3	600	1819	Sold 1861

There were political as well as economic advantages of owning land. Land ownership had always been an entry point for participating in the political process. In 1821, the New York Legislature eliminated the land ownership requirement for voting with the notable exception of the \$250 threshold for people of color (New York State Archives 1821). By 1860, a few African American farmers in Watervliet owned land valued at greater than this amount.

African American farmers established diversified farms like those of their neighbors with a variety of grains, vegetables, and orchard products. The smallest farms were as productive as their larger contemporaries in terms of output per acre, but were unable to produce lasting wealth like the larger farms. Farms smaller than 10 acres were subsistence oriented, and the land itself was by far the most valuable asset. Figure 2 shows the comparison of several key production levels of African American farmers in contrast to the average of all farms in Watervliet.

There were 559 working farms in the town of Watervliet in 1860 with an average size of about 60 acres (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Agriculture 1860). Data for the Thomas Powell, Jeremiah Thompson, Albert Thompson, and Prince Jackson families are available for that year. Thomas Powell fares well in total output of several categories represented in the figures and exceeds the simple average production in a few categories including market produce, fruits, and butter. Overall output is generally a measure of scale as the Powell farm is near the average size whereas the Thompson and Jackson families relied on much smaller acreage.

Very small farms, like Prince Jackson's, provided little opportunity for diversification. The Jackson's did not own livestock and instead focused on truck crops supplemented with a small harvest of corn, oats, and buckwheat (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Agriculture 1860). The other farms differ from Jackson's in their reliance on animal husbandry. Each of these farms manufactured butter and raised swine for meat production. The clear takeaway from these data are that the few African American farmers who operated in Watervliet, were able to create productive farms at differing scales, while confronting the challenges of land ownership, capital, and systemic racism that surely limited their opportunities more than their white contemporaries.

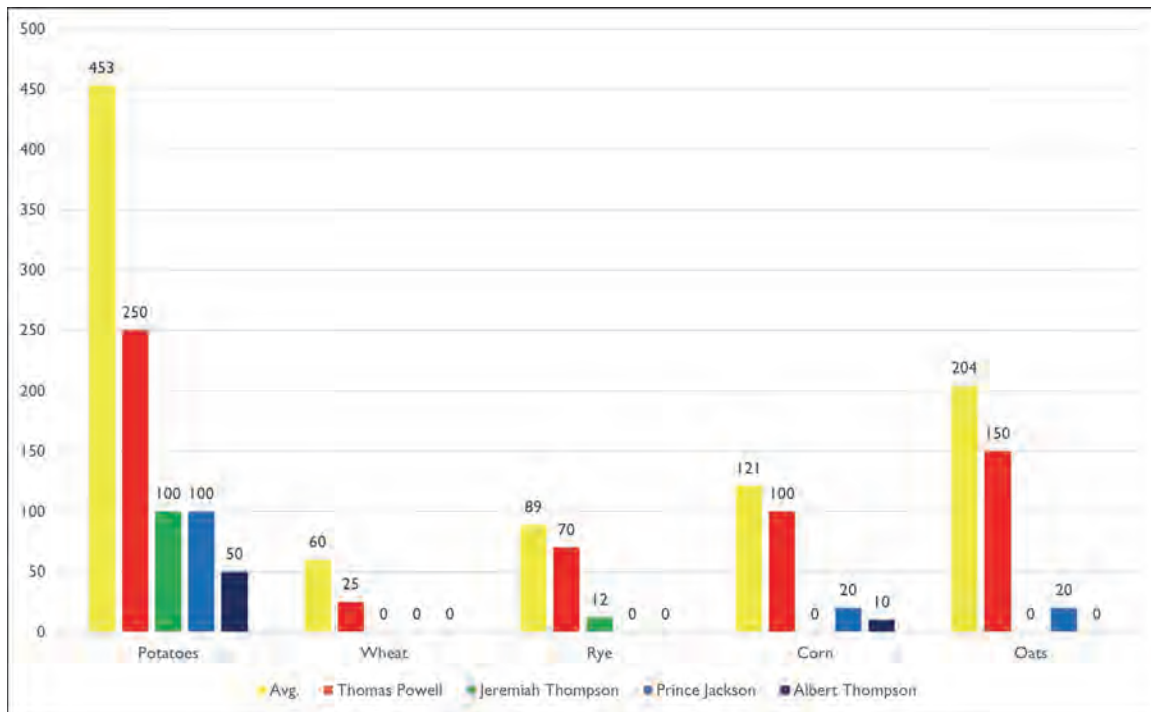


Figure 2. Agricultural production on African American farms in Watervliet in 1860.

Each of these families struggled through enslavement to become somewhat economically independent. Yet, all these stories end with each family relinquishing ownership of the land through various means. Real property ownership was a foundational means of building generational wealth in the 19th century, as it is today. The Jackson and Thompson families sold their land, perhaps out of necessity, before the turn of the century. With little opportunity to increase the size of their farms, liquidation may have been the best option for these families at the time. Future generations were denied the opportunity of land ownership as a result.

The Powell family assembled a much larger farm and struggled to pay the property taxes through the early 20th century. Thomas' granddaughter, Jane, found a way to pay these taxes and retain the property until her death. If there had been a surviving heir, then the Powell's may have held onto the property well into the 20th century and perhaps until today. This story of the Powell family is multifaceted with many successes, struggles, triumphs, and tragedies. The archaeological record coupled with the few government documents related to the family, provide a rough sketch of the Powell family that can be expanded as new information is discovered. This is the beginning of retelling that story.

The Powell Family: From Enslavement to Freedom (1780-1840)

Thomas Powell was born enslaved sometime around 1788. His enslavers, Abraham D. and Henrike Fonda, were influential in the Watervliet community and founding members of the Dutch Reformed Church at Boght (Shaver 1985). The Lansing family was also foundational to the community. Abraham and Henrike Fonda's son, Douw A. Fonda, and Jacob F. and Jane Lansing's daughter, Dirckje, were married in the Boght church in 1802 (Cook 1954:6). The two had been close neighbors and knew each other all their lives as did the enslaved people living in the two households.

Dirckje had inherited an enslaved woman named Bett when her father died sometime around 1797 (Albany County Wills 1819). Douw A. Fonda inherited his father's estate around that same time (Albany County Wills 1802). The marriage of Douw and Dirckje would have likely brought Thomas Powell and Elizabeth under the same roof by the first decade of the 19th century.

Thomas and Elizabeth's relationship blossomed and the two were married on August 18, 1808 at the church near Bought Corners (Cook 1954:7). Church records list them as servants of Douw A. Fonda and

the widow (Jane) Lansing (Cook 1954:7). Douw and Dirckje Fonda's 1810 household included three enslaved people (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1810). One of the enslaved was certainly the 22-year-old Thomas Powell, and the other two people were likely Elizabeth and their infant daughter, Jane.

It is unclear precisely when Thomas and Elizabeth gained their freedom. Powell's confession in the Boght Church is registered in September of 1812, so it is likely he was free sometime between 1810 and 1812 (Shaver 1985:6). Elizabeth's confession is listed in 1814, so both were likely free by 1815 (Shaver 1985:6).

Douw A. Fonda purchased a 5-acre tract of what would become the Powell family homestead from Harmon Fonda in 1809 (Albany County Land Records 1809). This purchase was shortly after Thomas and Elizabeth were married and Fonda subsequently sold the property to the couple for \$300 in 1818 (Albany County Land Records 1870a). It is possible that Powell, and perhaps others, were already living on this lot between 1809 and 1818.

The Powell homestead lot was a roughly 220-ft wide by 1220-ft long, 5-acre tract designated subdivision 5 of Lot 2 of the De Haas Patent. Thomas Powell (listed as Powers in the census) was the head of household in 1820 along with 1 man over 45, 1 young woman 14-26, and another woman 26-45 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1820a). We know from later surveys that the two women were Thomas' wife, Elizabeth, and his daughter, Jane. The identity of the older man in the house is unknown, but it is possible that he was previously enslaved in a Lansing or Fonda household and a relative of Thomas or Elizabeth.

An adjacent 3-acre parcel was purchased from Douw A. Fonda's cousin, Douw J. Fonda, in 1820 for a settled price of \$147 (Albany County Land Record 1870b). This parcel, located to the west of the 5-acre farm, extended the potential arable land to just over 8 acres. It remains unclear how Powell was able to raise the \$450 in capital necessary to purchase the properties. Either, or both, of these purchases may have been contingent on an unstated labor or future earnings agreement. Such a cash-in-hand sale would seem unlikely otherwise. Regardless of the capital source, the Powell family would own these properties outright for the next 100 years.

Powell Dwelling in 1818

There are no records about the production on the farm between 1820 and 1840, but we have a preliminary impression of what the original house looked like from the archaeological record.

Arthur Johnson's 1978 drawing of the foundation shows the general layout of the house containing an eastern section with the large 20 by 32-ft stone-lined cellar and a western section without an underlying basement. He also indicated that the front of the house was to the south based on the owner's recollection of the porch being on that side.

The ruins Johnson observed were clearly visible in the fall of 2021 when staff from the New York State Museum visited the site. There was also an apparent brick chimney fall located roughly 15 ft to the east of the cellar section of the house and some evidence of additional foundation stones (Figure 3). These were all features that Johnson had not mapped or discussed. Five units (2, 7, 10, 11, and 12) were excavated around the perimeter of this section of the structure that measured roughly 16 by 16 ft.

A 1-m square (Unit 1) was placed on the interior of the foundation stones near the northeast corner. This unit contained roughly a foot of brick and other destruction debris overlaying what appeared to be the remnants of north to south running floorboards. Three, 1.5-m units placed over the southern foundation confirmed the size of the structure at 16 ft square with a substantial stone foundation (Figure 4). The aggregate data suggest that this was the original house constructed by Thomas Powell and not an addition.

First, the architectural evidence supports a stand-alone building constructed in the 19th century. Structural nails were almost entirely machine-cut, and the only wire nails found in volume were roofing nails. The presence of a substantial chimney and floorboards indicate an important living space. The front door of this structure was likely on the southern side with an eastern gable side chimney. Second, a Canton style porcelain saucer, creamware, an Aaron Benedict button (1823-1849), a complete thimble, and other artifacts found beneath the floorboards, suggest an early occupation and primary living space (Figure 5). Finally, this would have been a sufficient size for the small Powell family, without the need for

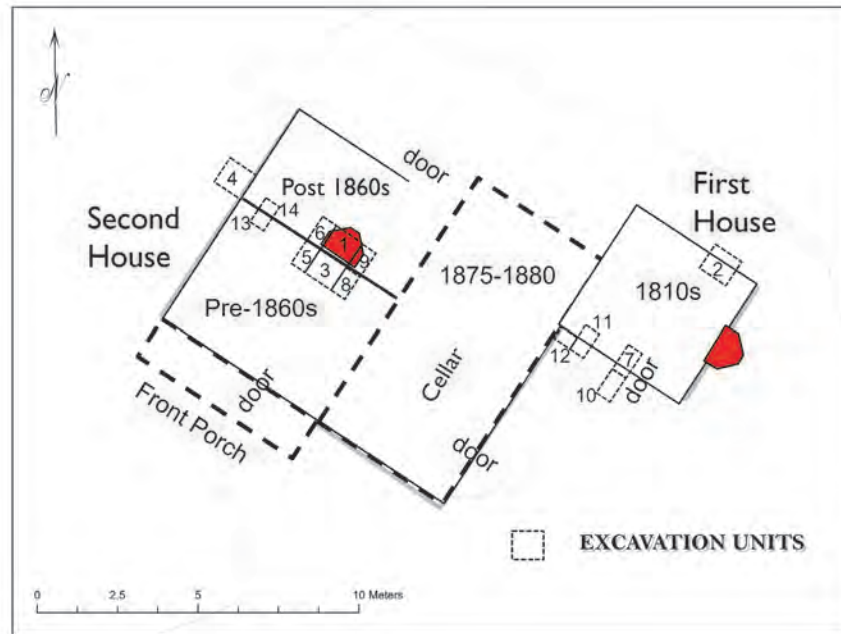


Figure 3. Plan of the Powell family house with excavation units.



Figure 4. Stone foundation of the first Powell dwelling.



Figure 5. Early 19th century artifacts from the first Powell House. Top: from left to right, Chinese porcelain tea saucer and pearlware tea bowl. Bottom: from left to right copper thimble and glass decanter stopper.

larger accommodations. A 16 by 16-ft house is similar in size to outer kitchens that Thomas and Elizabeth may have lived in during their enslavement. The smaller footprint would have also allowed the family to devote more resources to the construction of other farm buildings and the purchase of necessary supplies and equipment.

Expanding the Farm, Strengthening the Community: 1840-1865

A tremendous amount of change occurred on the Powell homestead in the 15 years between 1840 and 1865. Things were looking promising for the Powell family during the early 1840s. By November of 1840, they were able to save enough to add a 4-acre parcel at the southern end of their homestead lot (Albany County Land Records 1870c). This \$400 purchase would expand their agricultural lands bringing their total farm to around 12 acres. Some of their land was sold in February of 1841 when the Schenectady and Troy Railroad Company purchased roughly 2 acres for a right-of-way just to the south of the dwelling for \$235, thus separating the north and south sections of the farm (Albany County Land Records 1841). This may have proved a net positive for the Powells as 5 months later they used \$35 to purchase a half-acre lot adjoining their homestead to the east (Albany County Land Records 1870d). These transactions left them with \$200 in reserves and an area adjacent to the house for keeping livestock. Thomas and Elizabeth welcomed the birth of their third child, John, around the same time as their farm was growing. The family fortunes soon changed for the worse as Elizabeth passed sometime after 1841. Elizabeth's untimely death would have cast a pall over the Powell household. Yet, their resilience, and likely support from the community, allowed them to persevere and expand both their family and livelihood.

Paul was already an active farmer by 1850 and with the addition of John, Thomas likely saw the need to further expand the farm if the family was to carry on for future generations. To this end, Thomas made a final addition of 31 acres adjacent to the southern half of their property (Albany County Land Records 1870e; Figure 1). At \$1100, this was by far the largest monetary outlay Thomas had ever made on the farm. This gamble would eventually pay off, but not until tragedy struck again. Young John Powell appears to have succumb to some unknown fate during the early 1850s and vanishes from the record.

In 1855, 79-year-old Joseph Fonda was brought on to help Thomas, Paul, and Jane run the farm (New York Census, Population 1855). At 35, Paul was ready to take more responsibility for the financial well-being of the family. He had also begun a relationship with Hannah Kilbourn and the two were married sometime between 1855 and 1860. The couple celebrated the arrival of their first child, Thomas, in 1864 and their daughter Jane (Jennie) in 1868. Thomas D. and Jane E.R. Powell were both baptized in the Boght Reformed Church, continuing the family's longstanding membership (Shaver 1985:17; Cook 1954:50).

The establishment and growth of Paul and Hannah's family reinvigorated the homestead. Hannah and her widowed mother, Betsey Adams, moved into a house with Betsey's sister, Dinah van Shaack, along with two other families in Troy's 3rd ward sometime before 1855 (New York Census, Population 1855). Hannah was working as a dress maker while Betsey was employed as a nurse. The 1855 New York census lists the pair as landowners, though not head of the household. The record also indicates that they had lived in the city all their lives, and therefore it is likely that they owned this house outright. Hannah had moved onto the farm by 1860 while Betsey was still living in Troy in the house headed by James Reid (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1860b). Curiously, there was an 84-year-old woman named Dianna Killburn living in the Troy house as well. Perhaps this was Hannah's paternal grandmother or great aunt who was living in the city as early as 1820 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1820b).

A growing family and expanded arable land may have convinced Paul and Hannah to bring more people to the homestead to help on the farm and care for the children. This was a natural progression as Hannah's mother and Paul's father were both getting older. As a result, the household went from 4 in 1860 to 10 in 1865 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1860a; New York Census, Population 1865). Betsey Adams and James Reid moved from Troy probably as a couple, though they are not listed as married. Two young boys, named Arthur and James Jameson, were also listed on the farm and may have been orphaned. This was by far the largest recorded occupancy of the house.

Another interesting aspect of this census is that it lists two separate dwellings at the farm. The first house included everyone except the elder Thomas and his second wife Maria (Mary). The occupants are listed in separate dwellings rather than simply separate household units. Thomas's marriage to Mary while they were both in, or approaching their 70s, seems puzzling at first glance, but becomes clear when considering the circumstances leading up to their union.

Mary and Thomas would have known each other early in the 19th century and were most likely enslaved on farms in the area near the Abraham D. Fonda homestead. It was near this Fonda land that Michael Thompson purchased 3 acres from Isaac Mark in 1819 for \$150 and married Mary sometime shortly after (Albany County Land Records 1861a). Thompson was the second African American farmer to purchase land in Watervliet, preceded only by Powell. A small frame house was built on the property and there were at least 6 people living with the Thompson's by 1830, including their only child Dinah (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1830). Mary continued to live on the property with various boarders following Michael's death in 1842 (Shaver 1985:5).

Patrick Ryan was the last boarder living with Mary when she married Thomas Powell sometime between 1860 and 1861 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1860a). This marriage was at least somewhat pragmatic. Mary's only child, Diana, had died sometime before 1860, leaving Mary the sole owner of the 3-acre farm purchased from Marks. In February of 1861, the newlyweds sold the small frame house and land to Ryan for \$500, and Mary moved to the Powell homestead (Albany County Land Records 1861b). The union between Mary and Thomas provided capital for household and farm improvements and further social security for the aging couple.

Powell Dwelling, 1840-1865

The dramatic expansion of the farm after 1840, coupled with the increased occupancy, appears to have resulted in the reconfiguration of the house and homelot as suggested through archaeology. Initial investigations indicate two contemporaneous dwellings prior to 1860. Figure 3 shows our current interpretation of the structure based on architectural and material culture evidence. Archaeological excavations were undertaken on the western side of the dwelling ruins to further determine the construction sequence of the building. Units 1 and 3 were 1x1 m squares placed over top of visible shale

stones near the center of the western section of the building (Figure 6). Two major conclusions were drawn from these units. First, the foundation stones appear to form a chimney base. This conclusion is supported by reddened clay uncovered in unit 3 that likely resulted from the hearth on this side. No such reddening was observed in unit 1 suggesting that the hearth was located on the southern side. Four 1 x.50 m units (5, 6, 8, and 9) were placed around units 1 and 3 to better delineate the chimney base. These small units were only taken down a few cm to expose the foundation stones.



Figure 6. Stone chimney foundation for the second Powell dwelling.

A second finding was that the area around the hearth was secured with a thick layer of displaced clay subsoil. This clay was found elsewhere on the west side and was clearly added to elevate the interior and likely provide a stable surface for constructing a wooden floor. Artifacts recovered from these soils include a few nails, occasional plaster fragments, and a small quantity of other architectural debris, but no domestic or diagnostic materials.

Some artifacts were recovered from the thin layer of soil lying over the subsoil, but again these artifacts were almost entirely architectural. The only domestic artifacts recovered in volume were 54 pieces of modern colorless bottle glass that likely post-date the occupation of the building. No domestic artifacts dating to the building's occupation were recovered in the hearth area.

Two additional 50 cm units (13 and 14) were placed 1 m directly to the west of the hearth units to determine if there was an east-west running foundation wall extending to the western foundation (Figure 3). These two units uncovered a substantial stone foundation perfectly aligned with the hearth foundation. Similar artifacts as those found in the hearth area were recovered above the layer of displaced subsoil. Two pieces of early 19th-century polychrome painted pearlware, along with nails and other small

architectural fragments were uncovered from the displaced subsoil. The substantial stone foundation suggests an exterior east to west running wall.

A subsequent 1-meter square unit (unit 4) was excavated along the western foundation wall to determine if a break in the north-south running building foundation was visible at the intersection with east-west wall. A break in the wall was found near the southern extent of the unit and in alignment with the east-west running wall (Figure 7). This evidence led to the conclusion that a separate dwelling almost identical in size was constructed 16 ft southwest of the original dwelling, with a northern 10-ft addition constructed later. The expansion of the second dwelling may have been necessary to accommodate the larger family listed in the 1865 New York Census.



Figure 7. Western stone foundation for the second Powell dwelling and clay borrow pit.

Another piece of evidence uncovered in unit 4 was a clay borrow pit (Figure 7). This pit was discovered in the northwest corner of the unit and extending beyond the unit boundary to the west. Some of the clay to shore up the interior of the second dwelling almost certainly came from this pit. Considerable brick rubble and other architectural debris recovered from the pit are probably related to the later addition on the second structure. The domestic refuse recovered from the pit consistently date to the late 19th century. A silver spoon recovered from this fill is particularly telling. The initials “H.E.K” are engraved on the handle of the spoon (Figure 8). Hannah Elizabeth Kilbourne’s arrival to the farm after 1855 clearly indicates that the improvements were made after her arrival and a Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound bottle provides a 1873 TPQ for the fill (Fike 1987:85). Over 1200 artifacts were in unit 4 representing 40% of all artifacts from the 2022 excavations.



Figure 8. Silver spoon with the initials H.E.K. engraved on the handle.

The discovery of a second small dwelling is consistent with what we know about the development of the Powell family and their farm operation, but there are two puzzling questions. When was this dwelling built? And why is it offset from the original 16x16 structure? These questions wait to be answered but some possibilities are suggested.

If the stone chimney base is original and the hearth is facing south, then a gable ended chimney would likely indicate an entrance on the eastern side of the house. Second, the two dwellings are similarly oriented, but the second dwelling is offset to the south. This alignment makes sense if both dwellings are opening into the same yard area. Perhaps this yard served as a communal space where people living on the farm gathered.

The date of the house is less clear. A builder's trench that might provide a relative construction date was not identified, and the interior displaced clay appears to have been deposited when the structure was erected. Two fragments of dipped pearlware found in the lower level of unit 14 suggests that this building was constructed after the eastern dwelling, and the historical record indicates a pre-1860 date coinciding with the marriage of Paul and Hannah. It is also possible that this building served another purpose before being converted to a dwelling. More archaeological work will be needed to confidently date this structure.

Struggle, Resilience, and Loss: 1870-1926

The arc of the Powell story ends with more loss than resolution. There were many external forces acting against them in continuing their farm as a successful venture. Most of these are suggested, yet undocumented. Systemic racism was surely an issue that weighed on African American families throughout the region, and the Powell family would not have been immune from this regardless of their status in the Boght Church or the community at large. The Powells were clearly successful at raising the necessary capital to expand the farm, where all other African American farmers in Watervliet were not. Yet, this was a product of farm size more than anything else. That said, the Powell family still needed to find landowners willing to dispose of their property and continued to take advantage of opportunities as they arose.

At no point was success and loss on the Powell farm more clearly on display than during the 1870s. Thomas Powell, Jane Powell, Betsey Adams, and James Reid all passed during this decade. Mary Powell preceded these deaths sometime before 1870. James Reid was the only one of these individuals to leave a will containing further clues about the family (Albany County Wills 1871).

Reid was born in the West Indies sometime around 1793. He likely began his life enslaved in the Caribbean, but precisely when he arrived in New York is a mystery. By 1860, he was living in Troy with real estate valued at \$2,000 and personal property worth \$500 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1860b). His wife is listed in the census as "Betsey" although "Betsey Adams" is also listed as a cook in the house. It seems probable that there was an error in the census and that Betsey Adams was in fact married to Reid. Whatever the formal relationship, there was a close affinity between James Reid, Betsey Adams, and her daughter, Hannah Powell.

James Reid still owned an estate worth several hundred dollars when he died at the Powell farm in 1871. The disbursement of the estate is telling (Albany County Wills 1871). First, he bequeathed to Paul and Hannah's daughter, Jane Eliza "Reid" Powell, a marble topped table among other items at the Powell house. The fact that their child was given the Reid name may be from Hannah's fondness for James as a stepfather. The remaining household furniture was bequeathed to Hannah Powell along with \$360. The residue of his property was to go to his grandson, William James Reid. Paul Powell was further instructed to act as guardian to William and provide the necessary capital and guidance for him to learn a trade of his choosing.

Paul's sister, Jane, died sometime before 1875, but the homeplace was still quite full, with Betsey Adams, Nancy Therry, and the five remaining Powell members. It was at this time that Paul made the final family land purchase of the Godfrey parcel along Loudon Road containing 4 acres, a house, and a family cemetery (Albany County Land Records 1875). Powell saw an opportunity to add acreage to the farm as well as another dwelling as either a rental or for housing farm laborers. Yet, at \$2500, the transaction would take years to turn a profit. Improvements to the Powell house were also made at this time.

A diversified blend of crops and livestock was the norm for Watervliet farmers throughout the first three quarters of the 19th century. This began to change rapidly in the final decades of the 19th century as the construction of the Erie Canal led to increased competition from grain producers to the west (McMurtry 1995:10). New York was far and away the largest dairy producer in the United States by 1870 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Agriculture 1880). While New York farmers continued to produce a diversity of crops, milk production became an economic pillar of agriculture in New York by the late 19th century. Between 1870 and 1880, the amount of milk produced in the state more than doubled, while butter production increased by a mere 7% in a startling demonstration of the switch to wholesale distribution (Department of the Interior 1883). Production on the Powell farm mirrored this trend.

A rapid transition took place at the Powell farm between 1875 and 1880. The most notable change was the increase in milk cows from 3 to 11, and the concurrent transition to bulk milk production (New York Census, Agriculture 1875; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Agriculture 1880). By 1880, the farm was producing more than 7000 gallons of milk a year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Agriculture 1880). It appears that Canadian immigrants, Julia and Louis Provoust, were living in the Godfrey house and helping on the farm by 1880. As the production ramped up, Paul's son, Thomas D. Powell, assumed the role of milkman distributing the family's milk throughout Watervliet. This hopeful trajectory of the farm was tempered by several deaths in the family.

Within a few short years Paul lost his father and sister while Hannah suffered the loss of her mother Betsey Adams. This left only 4 members of the Powell family by 1880 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1880).

A crippling blow was delivered with the death of Paul Powell in 1884 (Rensselaer County Wills 1884). Paul and Hannah had attempted to situate the next generation for financial stability, but his untimely death would prove too much for the family to overcome. Thomas D. and Jennie Powell were still too young to take on more responsibility for the farm, Hannah turned to others to try to sustain the family. This was the beginning of the end for the Powell's fortunes.

Hannah sold the 4-acre Loudon Road property to Julia Provoust in 1884 for \$1500. This sale raised some immediate capital, but the more pressing long-term problem was securing a tenant to let the farm while property taxes continued to accumulate. Hannah had moved the family across the Hudson River to 245 Fifth Street in Troy by 1887 (*The Daily Times* 1887). From here, she placed adds in the local paper hoping to find a tenant for the farm. An ad in the Troy *Daily Times* (1887) offered "A most desirable farm of 60 acres to let" with the land being "used as a milk farm for the last five years" and boasting a "good house and new barns in excellent condition." William M. Johnson replied to the offer and entered a contract secured with \$80 in January of 1888 (Albany County Mortgages 1888).

If Johnson did farm the land and live in the house, it was only for a few short years as the family was back on the farm by 1892 with Thomas listed as a farmer (New York Census, Population 1892). This must have been a tenuous undertaking as Hannah was again offering the farm in 1893 (*The Daily Times* 1893). This time, however, she was including an option for sale. The Powell's are not listed in the 1900

census, so it is unclear if they were still in Troy or back on the farm. It seems likely that someone else was living at the farm in 1900.

A household headed by Job Russ rented a house and farmland in the immediate vicinity of the Powell farm in 1900 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1900). There are a few reasons to suspect that the Russ family was farming the land and occupying the Powell house for a few years between 1893 and 1905. The Russ family immigrated from England in 1893 and would have jumped at the opportunity presented in Hannah Powell's advertisement of that same year. In January of 1905, the family purchased a farm of their own on Dunbach Ferry Road south of the Powell farm. If the Russ family was living at the Powell farm, then it would have been between 1893 and 1904.

Hannah, Thomas, and Jennie Powell were back on the farm by 1905 with Thomas D. Powell listed as a barber (New York Census, Population 1905). It appears that the family made a final attempt to revive the farm under their own management. Thomas brought in Fonda Lansing as a hired farm hand to help with the milk production by 1910 and Jennie began working at a collar factory to bring in more income (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1910). Hannah Powell died in May of 1910 leaving her two children as the last remaining family members (*The Argus* 1910). Jennie was named executor of the will, and it appears that she was entrusted with the financial management of the farm.

Efforts to improve the output on the farm failed to improve the economic standing of the family, and by 1912 the estate was in arrears on their tax bill (*The Argus* 1912). Jennie implemented several measures to ensure the survival of the farm and was able to settle the family debt by 1915 (Albany County Mortgages 1915). Thomas D. Powell was still listed as a farmer in 1915, though the extent of his output is unknown. He died on the homestead two years later, his obituary recalling "Mr. Powell was 50 years old and for many years conducted a milk route in Cohoes" (*Schenectady Gazette* 1917). It is unclear who farmed the land and perhaps used the Powell milking facilities after Thomas's passing, but it may have been either Joseph Reed or Samuel Wilson who was located on either side of Jennie Powell in 1920 and were both listed as dairy farmers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population 1920).

Jennie Powell was the last African American living in the immediate area around Boght Corners in 1920. With her income from the collar factory and the proceeds from the farm rental, Jennie was able to keep paying the taxes until her death in 1926 (Albany County Tax Assessments 1925, 1926). At that point the Albany County treasurer began paying the taxes and the property was eventually sold at auction. If someone did live in the house after Jane Powell, then it was likely no later than the 1940s. Arthur Johnson related several pieces of information from his conversation with the landowner in 1978 that provide some context for the latter occupancy and decline of the house (Johnson 1978).

The landowner said that he remembered the last family who lived there was the Moore or Spaas family. Neither of these families show up in the 1930 or 1940 census, so either the landowner was mistaken, or the family tenure was quite short. He also told Johnson that the house had been abandoned for several years prior to being burned down probably in the 1940s.

The Powell Dwelling, 1865-1926

The starkest visual feature of the Powell homestead is the partially exposed cellar lying between the two earlier dwellings. So why did the Powell family decide to make such a dramatic addition to the property? Cellars were a necessity for storing potatoes, butter, or other perishables, so some cool storage would have been warranted and sometimes numerous specialized cellars were needed (Sopko 2000; Cohen 1992:62). Given what is known about the dramatic changes to the Powell farm, the addition of a substantial cellar corresponds with an expanse of root and fruit crops and a later commitment to milk production.

The first change at the Powell farm that might have prompted the cellar construction was the increased production of perishable field crops. In 1855, the Powell farm produced 15 bushels of potatoes and no apples. Ten years later the farm yielded 450 bushels of potatoes, 145 bushels of apples, and a small amount of cider. All these products would have required cool storage. The second change came roughly a decade later.

Hannah Powell's 1887 (*The Daily Times* 1887) advertisement calls the homestead a "milk farm" with "new barns." Her subsequent 1893 posting offers "a farm equipped for dairy purposes" (*The Daily*

Times 1893). Both ads suggest the capital improvements necessary to make the switch to wholesale milk production were in place by 1880. The large 32x16 ft stone-lined cellar would have provided the necessary space for separating and storing the milk prior to distribution.

Arthur Johnson (1978) completed limited non-systematic testing in the southeast corner of the cellar in 1978. His observations provided some preliminary clues about this space. He identified what he believed was a bulkhead entrance on the east side a few feet from the southeast corner. A window was located in the southern wall approximately 5 ft west of the southeast corner and roughly 4 ft above the cellar floor. He also indicated that the cellar was approximately 6 ft deep and noted 16 in of ash and destruction debris from the fire. The one dated artifact he mentioned was a 1942 dime possibly associated with the last occupation of the house. Johnson also speculated that there was an interior entrance to the cellar on the west side.

Two excavation units (11 and 12) were placed at the juncture of the southern wall of the first dwelling and the eastern wall of the stone cellar. Unfortunately, this area was disturbed to a large extent by rodent activity, slumping, and possible grading associated with the burned superstructure over the cellar. These post-occupancy processes made the separation of the various strata difficult to reliably sort. Also, it was not determined how the two buildings articulated with each other because the cellar wall had completely collapsed or was removed.

The archaeological data tentatively suggest the cellar and the small dwelling were constructed at different times. All evidence gathered thus far points to the cellar being much later than the first dwelling. The sequence and dating remain inconclusive pending further excavation. Clearly the dwelling had reached its final configuration by the 1880s. As the hope of successive generations of the Powell family operating the farm faded, the size and functionality of the layout of the house and farm would have proved difficult to maintain. Rental of the farm including the house would have been the most economically viable solution for retaining the land following the death of Thomas D. Powell.

Future Research Program

The next phase of the Powell Family Farmstead Project will address research questions that place the family within the larger framework of agricultural development in the Middle Atlantic and Northeast. The data gathered thus far suggest some promising avenues for future research. Archaeologists and historians are keenly interested in the transition from subsistence to market-dominated production on American farms (Huey 2000:31). The transition from near-subsistence to participation in the market economy in New York, and elsewhere, was neither temporally homogeneous, nor fully realized on every farm (Sopko 2000; Parkerson 1995:80; Groover 2008:70-71). The small number of early 19th century artifacts recovered from the Powell farmstead suggests that the family was, perhaps, more focused on conserving capital for the purchase of land than material goods (cf. Barnes 2011). The apparent expanded production capacity at the Powell farm by 1865 suggests a greater participation in the commercial marketplace by 1865. How does the timing of this expansion compare to other farms in Watervliet and the region? The summaries listed in Figure 2 show that the Powell family fared better than other African American farmers in their overall production, while still falling below the average output for the town. More substantial conclusions may be possible when the Powell farm is compared to a larger set of township agricultural data. Does an expansion of material culture acquisition coincide with changes seen in the buildings and the agricultural census data? How do the economic strategies used by the Powell family compare with other farmers in Watervliet and elsewhere?

Another group of questions addresses the entangled relationships between the Powell family and the rest of the community around Boght Corners. The Powell and Thompson families had close kinship ties and were both long time members of the Dutch Reformed Church. At the same time, African Americans families formed a small percentage of the overall Watervliet population and the Reformed Church. Our ongoing research is looking at the overlapping identities negotiated by the Powell family as land-owning farmers and Dutch Reformed Church parishioners. These multiple entwined identities speak to the core “double-consciousness” experienced by African Americans as outlined by W.E.B. DuBois (1903:3), and the embedded contradictions of capitalism and race in American society. Historical archaeology has long explored these complexities manifested in material culture as central to

understanding the experience of African Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries (Mullins 1999; Gall *et al.* 2017). How might such multiple identities present in the archaeological record at the Powell farm? What role do kinship relations play in the community at Boght Corners? How strongly did the Powell family adhere to the teachings of the Reformed Church? For example, preliminary data suggest that the Powell family were not consuming alcohol and using tobacco only sparingly. If this is supported through further testing, then how do the Powells compare with other parishioners and rural households in the region?

Broader contextual questions will be addressed as the project continues over the next few years. We will be comparing our findings at the Powell site with other farmsteads throughout the Middle Atlantic region to gain a wider perspective on the farmstead. Systemic racism, temperance, transition to the market production, and other topics will be explored through this comparative analysis.

Conclusion

Archaeological and historical research at the Powell farmstead has documented the site as a rare example of a 19th century owner-operated African American farmstead in the Capital Region of New York. The archaeological integrity of the site is remarkably well preserved, and there is sufficient governmental documentation to re-construct a diachronic understanding of the economic fortunes of Powell family. But the Powell family farmstead and cemetery are profoundly more important as a place than the sum of the research and narrative presented in this article. The goal of the project moving forward must be to preserve and protect the site as a public place and lasting site of an important American story.

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