Chapter 10
HW: Epitaph for a Working Man

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H W. The letters were formed from small iron nails hammered into the lid of a wood coffin uncovered in May 1992 during archaeological excavation of the African Burial Ground. If, as we believe, these are initials, then they are as close to a name as we shall get for any of the individuals whose graves were revealed at the cemetery. The coffin's lid (Fig. 10.1) had split lengthwise during the time in which "Burial 332," as it was designated in the excavation record, lay beneath the ground in lower Manhattan, but the pattern in nails was intact enough to read.[1] Beneath the letters were numerals, reconstructed as a 3 and an 8 and interpreted as the deceased's age.

The archaeological record of the African Burial Ground grants us glimpses of individuals who cannot now be connected directly to the common forms of record keeping on which biographies are typically built: church rolls; litigation and census records; correspondence, daybooks, and household diaries; newspaper notices; property and probate documents. Genealogists and historians of early black New Yorkers under Dutch and English rule have used such records to good effect (Goodfriend 1978, 1984, 2003; Hoff 1988, 1990, 1997, 2000; Swan 1995); the remains unearthed in 1991 and 1992 offer a different pathway, fraught with special challenges, to narrating the lives of individuals.

In this paper I begin with the skeletal remains unearthed in Burial 332 and offer a biographical sketch of a working man "documented" only with a pattern of nails. After describing his remains and their analysis, I use information from his bones, his grave, and the wider African experience in New York to place HW's life in context. Drawing on population statistics and data on the trade in captives and the changing face of slavery in the city, I ask when, where, and how he may have spent

[1] Excavation records kept by the field teams of Historic Conservation and Interpretation, John Milner Associates, and the Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team anchor the site report (Perry et al. 2009a), on which this chapter draws.

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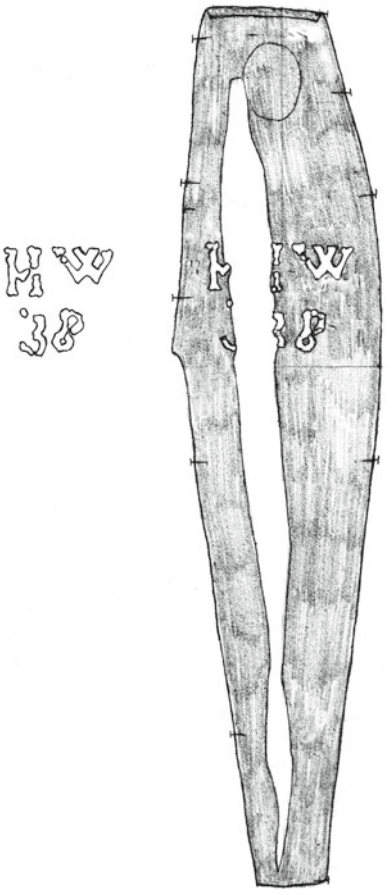

Fig. 10.1 Field drawing showing the "Burial 332" coffin lid (Perry et al. 2009a)

his childhood, his young adulthood, and his mature years. Finally, I return to HW's grave, reflecting on his coffin and reconstructing the efforts of his mourners to provide him with a proper burial.

When first exposed in the field, HW's skeletal remains held the position in which the body had been laid to rest—supine, arms extended (Fig. 10.2). The bones, however, were soft and poorly preserved.[2] The cranium was intact except for the right parietal bone, which had broken as the coffin and overlying soil settled over the

[2] Copies of field assessment forms (completed by Leslie Eisenberg of the Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team) were provided to the author by the Institute for Historical Biology (IHB), College of William and Mary. The IHB also provided the recordation forms completed by the osteological team at the W. Montague Cobb Biological Anthropology Laboratory at Howard University, including skeletal and dental inventories; dental morphology, wear, and pathology assessments; anthropometric records; age determination scoring reports; and the assessment of non-metric skeletal indicators (see description of laboratory methods in Blakey et al. 2009b). The skeletal biology team members who worked on Burial 332 under the direction of Scientific Director Michael L. Blakey were Mark L. Mack, M. Cassandra Hill, Rachel Watkins, Keisha Hurst, Kenya Shujaa, and Allison Davis.

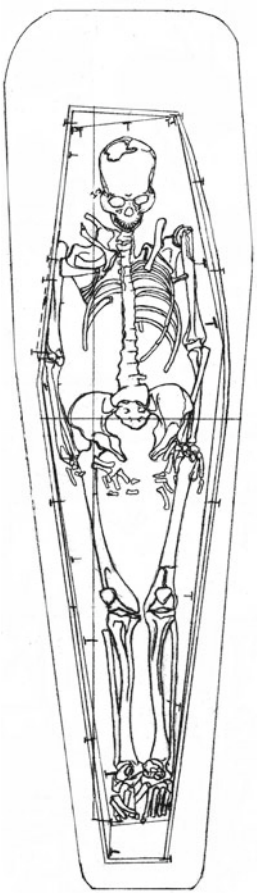

Fig. 10.2 Field drawing of skeletal remains (Perry et al. 2009a)

remains, and the mid facial area was crushed and eroded. Most other skeletal elements were also eroded or crushed to some degree, the extremities, ribs, clavicles, and vertebrae badly. Assessing the remains while still in the ground, the field team tentatively assigned male sex, based mainly on cranial features because the pelvic bones (which are the most sensitive indicator of sex) were so soft and damaged. The eroded bones also made age determination difficult in the field, though the erupted third molars and dental wear indicated an adult. A hardened mass on the right femur (thigh bone) suggested some type of injury that had healed during the man's lifetime, but further analysis would have to await laboratory examination.

The condition of a person's skeleton delimits the number and kind of observations that can be made, and hence the range and specificity of the individualizing details—sex, age, diet, injury, disease—that can be known about their life. A systematic assessment of the degree of preservation of each skeletal element preceded all further work on African Burial Ground remains once under the wing of the laboratory team. In HW's case, preservation scores were generally poor; measurements

were taken only where a high degree of precision was possible.[3] A single precise cranial measurement could be taken, and in the axial skeleton only the diameters of the humeri (upper arm bones), right radius (forearm bone), and femurs (thigh bones) were measurable.[4] All of HW's teeth were present except for an upper left premolar and lower right incisor, and because teeth are more durable than bone, most could be measured. No less than 63 individual measurements were taken, though enamel, roots, and alveolar regions were extremely poorly preserved, and damage prevented recording data such as crown height for some teeth.[5]

Laboratory assessment of sex had to be based on cranial morphology, the femurs, and overall robusticity (the pelvis, as noted, being inadequately preserved). A total of nine indicators differentiating males and females could be assessed, and of these five were scored as male and four as probable male.[6] As for age, tooth eruption and epiphyseal unions were sufficient only to indicate that HW was an adult. Based on an examination of 15 cranial suture closure sites, and the fact that all teeth showed significant wear, his age could be narrowed to between 35 and 40. This assessment was made independently of the identification of a possible age ("38") on the coffin lid, and supports our interpretation of these numerals as HW's age.

As it happens, HW's age, 38, was the mean age at death for males who survived past the age of 15 in the excavated sample. The individuals who were disinterred at the African Burial Ground in 1992 included 102 males and 69 females age 15 or older, along with 157 infants and children.[7] Twelve men and 9 women could be reliably placed in the same age group (35–40 years old) as HW. Life expectancy at birth for the African Burial Ground population, however, was only 24.2 years, so HW

[3] A score of 1 indicated good preservation (>75% present); 2, fair preservation (25–75% present); 3, poor preservation (<25% present or complete but only partially observable or unobservable); and 4, missing. The average cranial preservation score for the burial was 2.65, the average postcranial score 3.02 (Mahoney and Null 2009). Most elements of HW's skeleton were too eroded or fragmentary for accurate measurement.

[4] On the skull only the frontal chord, which is the distance from the junction of the sagittal and coronal sutures at the top of the skull (the bregma) to the point where the frontal bone meets the nasal bones (the nasion), could be measured precisely. Craniometric analyses aimed at identifying population affinities in the African Burial Ground utilized complete adult skulls with between 5 and 12 precise measurements, so HW was not among the 20–28 skulls in that sample (Jackson et al. 2009).

[5] The detailed tooth measurements recorded for African Burial Ground individuals are essential for certain kinds of analysis. For example, though human populations have similar ranges of tooth cusp variation, some traits appear more often in particular regions and ethnic groups. Aggregate data therefore can be used to look for population affinities (Jackson et al. 2009).

[6] Mastoid length, occipital region, mental eminence, femur circumference, and linea aspera were scored as male; the gonial region, temporal line, overall robusticity of the cranium, and overall robusticity of the postcranial skeleton were scored as probable male.

[7] Remains of 419 individuals were recovered. The total number of adults (15 or older) identified was 244, the total number of subadults 157. One hundred and seventy-one of the adults could be assigned both age and sex, and 130 subadults could be assigned age. There were 18 individuals who could not be identified as either adult or subadult due to extremely partial, poorly preserved remains.

most definitely was a survivor. And as a man, having survived to adulthood, his life expectancy was better than for a woman: at the African Burial Ground, 45% of the men had died by age 40, compared to 62% of the women (on demography see Rankin-Hill et al. 2009).

The cause of HW's death is uncertain, but at the base of his skull there were fracture lines suggesting a possible perimortem fracture (unhealed, having occurred around the time of death). A head trauma may have caused or contributed to his death, or his body may have been injured for some reason after he died. There were 14 other adults in the African Burial Ground population with evidence of perimortem cranial fractures (Wilczak et al. 2009).

Most skeletal pathologies tell us about the quality of HW's life rather than about the manner of his death. Consider the condition of his teeth. One of HW's upper premolars and one lower right molar had caries (cavities), and another of his lower right molars had both a caries and evidence of an abscess. As noted, he had lost two of his permanent teeth, a premolar and an incisor, at some time in his life. Caries, abscesses, and tooth loss are typical among populations with high carbohydrate diets and no dental care, such as in colonial New York. Over 77% of the adults identified in the African Burial Ground suffered from caries, and most adults had lost three or four teeth (Mack et al. 2009). Eighteenth-century newspaper advertisements for "runaways" often mentioned missing front teeth as a way to help identify and apprehend an escaped captive.

Enamel hypoplasia (grooving or pitting of teeth from an interruption of enamel formation due to malnutrition and/or disease during growth) was noted on HW's lower left canine tooth. His age at the time the hypoplasia occurred was calculated at 3.42 years. While this may indicate he was weaned around age 3, causing an interruption in nutritional intake, Blakey has argued that weaning does not explain the overall distribution and chronology of hypoplasias in African American enslaved populations, and that many possible sources of stress, including infectious disease and dietary insufficiency not related to weaning, need to be taken into account (Blakey et al. 2009a).

Ample evidence of disease is in fact present on HW's bones. Periostitis lesions (from infections that give the bone surface a woven appearance) were observed on the cranium, along with cranial vault thickening; periostial striations were also present on the femurs and tibia (shin bones). Periostitis, widespread in the African Burial Ground population, is a general indicator of systemic infection. Contagious disease or bacterial infection secondary to injuries might be indicated.[8] HW's skull also revealed possible evidence of a specific commonplace ailment: tiny areas of bone resorption on the temporals suggested to one osteologist that he had suffered middle ear infections.

[8] Injuries were common among the enslaved, judging from the day book kept by a physician/druggist who attended to numerous "Negroes" in the city in 1743–1744. Dressings were by far the most frequent treatments recorded, with 33 entries, followed by phlebotomy and inducing vomiting, with 16 entries each (New York City physician 1743–1744).

Fig. 10.3 Close-up of skull showing porotic hyperostosis (porous bone on the cranial vault). (Courtesy of the Institute for Historical Biology, William and Mary)

HW's skull (Fig. 10.3) also exhibited porotic hyperostosis (porous bone on the cranial vault), including trace healed "cribra orbitalia" lesions (porotic hyperostosis in the eye orbits), along with moderate thickening of the diploe (expansion of the spongy bone layer between the inner and outer plates of the skull in an effort to increase red blood cell production). These bone conditions probably formed in response to chronic iron-deficiency anemia, though they have also been a result of infection (see discussion in Null et al. 2009). Chronic anemia can develop from an iron-poor diet or a diet that inhibits iron absorption, or severe illness.[9] HW had both healed and active porotic hyperostosis, showing that he had had bouts of severe anemia and was anemic when he died.

Over half of the African Burial Ground individuals whose bones could be assessed had evidence of infection, and almost all of them, like HW, had more than one locus of infection.[10] Nearly half of the individuals whose skulls could be adequately assessed showed evidence of chronic anemia. Poor nutrition renders people more susceptible to illness: like HW, almost three quarters of those with anemia also had suffered from infection. The numbers only hint at the diet and health conditions of New York's African population, because poor nutrition and disease often leave the skeleton unaffected. HW was one of the people who were sick enough for it to be registered on their bones. His tell of his own affliction, but also remind us of the living conditions and disease environment to which so many in his community succumbed.

[9] The high mortality rate associated with genetic, sickle cell anemia precludes this as a diagnosis for HW, as eighteenth-century sufferers are unlikely to have survived to adulthood. In addition, there is a low incidence of the disease in West African and Afro-Caribbean populations, suggesting that it was also rare in African Burial Ground population (Null et al. 2009).

[10] The summary of indicators of disease and nutrition in the African Burial Ground population is based on Null et al. (2009).

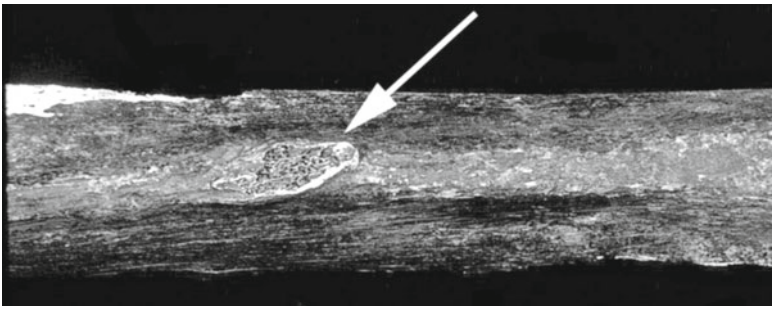

Fig. 10.4 Enthesophyte (bone spur) on the right femur. (Courtesy of the Institute for Historical Biology, William and Mary)

HW's skeletal remains also bring home the fact that slavery in New York, no less than elsewhere in the Atlantic world, was first and foremost about work. The strain of the "debilitating routines of slavery"—the one reality of enslaved people's lives that is nearly impossible to portray or narrate[11]—is sometimes traced on bone. Markers of musculoskeletal stress (visible where muscles would have attached to bone) were found on HW's arms and legs. Enthesopathies (scarring caused by extreme stress) were recorded on the upper arm bones at attachment sites for the deltoid and latissimus dorsi (shoulder and back) muscles; pronounced gluteous maximus attachments and linea aspera (the ridges on the back of the femurs to which muscles attach) were noted for both femurs; and there was an enthesophyte (bone spur) on the right femur (Fig. 10.4). HW was typical—his stress markers were at the four skeletal locations where they were most common among men at the African Burial Ground. Years of work involving heavy lifting is a likely cause, though it is impossible to say precisely which repetitive, arduous physical activities HW's bones record (Wilczak et al. 2009).

The physical clues provide dots to connect in sketching HW's life: He underwent a difficult period around age 3, perhaps due to a drop in nutrients when he was weaned; perhaps due to a year when crops failed in an African drought or a war or slaving expedition displaced his people; perhaps due to a harsh winter in New York when food was scarce in the city and an enslaved child had to survive on whatever his mother could scrounge. He survived his youth and early teen years, when, if enslaved, he would have been put to hard physical labor. HW's bones attest to his life as a working man, but the nature of the work that built up his shoulder, back, and leg muscles remains a mystery—he might have been anything from a day laborer to a cooper. He rarely had enough healthy food, carbohydrates providing most of the calories that kept him fit for work. Despite a poor diet, he managed to keep almost all of his teeth, perhaps due to hereditary factors. He was susceptible to infections, but was able to fight them off; he may have fallen ill in one or more of those New

[11] The phrase was used and the point made by Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace in a panel discussion on portraying the history of slavery, Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, November 2–4, 2006.

York summers when infectious disease spread through the town, while those with the means to do so escaped to the country. At age 38, weakened by anemia, he died not of disease but of injuries—an accident or an act of violence.

When did HW live and die? The African Burial Ground was in use for at least 100 years, but it is possible to narrow the period of HW's death. His coffin, along with the location of his grave, provides the evidence. The tacks forming the initials were a type manufactured in the later eighteenth century, the first patent (for "A method of Casting and Making of Coffin Nails and Tacks…from Pig Iron…and the Tinning of same") recorded in England in 1769 (Moseley 1968:31–36; Lenik 1977). An earliest-possible date in the late 1760s is reasonable for HW's coffin. The Revolutionary War period is unlikely. Graves from the war years when the British occupied the city either held plain wood coffins or were without coffins, and HW's, unusual to begin with, would have been extraordinary during that time of privation (see Bianco et al. 2006; Perry et al. 2009c, and Chap. 9 in this volume). HW's grave was located in a part of the cemetery that was densely used throughout the eighteenth century prior to the war. The coffin and the location of the grave within the cemetery point to a plausible date of death sometime from the late 1760s to 1776, though a death between the late 1780s and 1795 cannot be ruled out.

The African population in New York City was quite large around the time HW was buried. In 1771, "blacks" (the term used in censuses) numbered 3,137—932 men, 1,085 women, 568 males under 16, and 552 females under 16 (Green and Harrington 1932; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1909). These men, women, and children represented 14.3% of the city's inhabitants. In 1746, when HW would have been in his teens, blacks had numbered 2,444, accounting for over one fifth of New York's population, their peak proportion. During the intervening 25 years, importations accounted for the rise in the number of blacks; it was very unlikely that Africans managed to achieve natural increase in colonial New York (Blakey et al. 2009c). The falling percentage of Africans reflects European immigration and natural increase, which outstripped importations of captives.[12]

The censuses also reflect changes in the demand for captives, changes that in turn have implications for HW's origins and biography. The same 1746 count that registered New York's highest-ever proportion of black residents also recorded a decrease in the proportional demand for adult men. Though in that year black men outnumbered the women (721 to 569), young girls far outnumbered the young boys (735 to 419), and men would not outnumber women again in New York's enslaved population.[13] Young girls increasingly were in demand to work as domestics, and human cargos from Africa fed that demand.

[12] There is no doubt that the vast majority of Africans in HW's city was enslaved. The British had enacted effective disincentives to manumission in 1712 and again in 1730, laws requiring slaveholders to pay a £20 annuity and a £200 bond in order to free a captive (New York Colony 1894:1:761–767; 2:679–688). There is evidence of a free black presence in the eighteenth century, but prior to the Revolution it consists mainly of laws restricting their activities and prohibiting property ownership, as well as a court references to their participation in criminal activity such as serving or harboring other Africans. The black population recorded in the censuses thus reflects the regime of unfree labor in this northern city.

[13] In general, low sex ratios (more adult women than men) characterized urban slavery in the Americas.

The turn to Africa marked a shift in New York's trade. Until the 1740s, transshipments from the Caribbean and Southern colonies had furnished the majority of captives to the city. Investing in direct shipments from Africa allowed New York merchants greater control over the age and sex of captives, so that they could better respond to the local market. In addition, changes in international trading contracts led to reduced prices and increased supplies of captives on the African coast beginning in the 1740s (Kruger 1985:84; Lydon 1978:387). But it was not just the need for domestic laborers and the availability of ready shipments that turned New York slavers to Africa and to ever-younger captives.

In 1741, a rumor of revolt had spread along with a rash of fires, leading to arrests of over 100 Africans and executions of 30 men by gibbeting or burning at the stake (the full account is in Horsmanden 1971; for analyses see Davis 1985; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000:174–210; Foote 2004:159–186; and Lepore 2005). New York merchants thought that the West Indian and Southern colonies had been transporting troublesome captives to the north, and they sought to curtail the practice after the events of 1741.[14] Traders and slaveholders also believed that youths, especially newly captured, could be conditioned into a more docile work force than adults, even though they might lack the skills and strength of older men and women. The preference for young captives from Africa became the norm in subsequent decades. In March 1762, merchant John Watts wrote that captives for the New York market "must be young the younger the better if not quite Children, those advanced in years will never do…," and an advertisement for the sale of "negro boys and girls from nine to twelve years of age" appeared in June of 1760 (Watts 1928:31; *New-York Mercury*, June 16, 1760).

How does the broader history of New York's slave trade inform us about HW's life? Though many captives were brought from Africa in the 1760s and 1770s, they probably would have been much younger than HW.[15] By then, he was too old to be a prime commodity. And too, when he died he probably was not a stranger in town—not a recently arrived captive; not a sailor tasting city life between voyages; not an escapee from some rural district seeking anonymity in the bustling streets of the port.[16] HW's coffin was an unusual one that suggests he had attachments in the local community, that he had lived in New York for some time.

HW would have been about 10 years old in the year of panic, 1741. If he was born in Africa, it is likely he was captured and sold to New York traders who were

[14] There is evidence that seasoned insurrectionists from the islands did actually play a role in the 1741 New York conspiracy (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000:193–203). Lydon (1978:378, 387–388) compiled data showing that 70% of captives brought to New York Colony prior to 1742 were imported from American sources rather than Africa, with the ratio reversed subsequently.

[15] The 1760s and 1770s saw the greatest volume of direct trade between New York and Africa. Two large shipments of captives direct from the continent, a total of 196 persons, arrived at the city docks in 1763 and at least 59 more African-born captives were recorded coming in between 1768 and 1772 (Lydon 1978:378–383).

[16] On black sailors, see Bolster (1997) and Linebaugh and Rediker (2000). For examples of advertisements for Africans who escaped from holdings in New York and New Jersey counties, see Hodges and Brown (1994).

in the market for young victims in the early 1740s. Perhaps HW survived the horrors of the Middle Passage in a post-1741 shipment, arriving in a still-paranoid city, its African community still reeling from the terror of the arrests and executions.[17] If so it would be impossible to pinpoint his ethnic origins. British colonial imports of humans came from five main parts of the continent: Senegambia, the Sierra Leone area, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, and the Niger Delta. Organized warfare, banditry, and kidnapping, whether exacerbated by or caused by the Atlantic slave trade, kept up a flow of captives from many ethnic groups to the coast. The greatest percentage of direct imports to New York came from the Senegambia, with the Gold Coast second, but in the 1740s and 1750s British shipments from the Bight of Biafra increased and may have supplied captives to New York (Medford et al. 2009a:46–49; Kruger 1985:84).

The Caribbean is a less likely place of birth for HW than Africa, since by the time he was of "marketable" age the shift to direct trade from the continent had begun. It is possible that the slaving ship that carried him may have stopped to sell captives in the islands before continuing north (Medford et al. 2009a), but HW is unlikely to have spent time living under the horrific conditions of the sugar colonies.

It is possible, of course, that HW came from neither Africa nor the Caribbean; he may have been brought to Manhattan from another part of New York or one of the other North American colonies, or he may have been born into slavery in the city. If so, he would have experienced the terror of 1741 as a young boy—would have seen, while passing the town Common near the African Burial Ground, the rotting bodies of convicted men hung in chains, or watched among the crowd while the accused were burned to death at the stake.

By the time HW took in these events, he already would have been sold away from his mother. Women were not able to keep their children with them once their labor was worth something and they could bring a price. The enslaved normally lived under the same roof as those who held them in bondage, so most holdings were kept quite small (just one, two, or three), as was typical in an urban setting.[18] HW would have been put to work as soon as he could fetch and carry, moving on to more demanding tasks as he grew into adolescence and adulthood in the household of whoever held title to his person.

Whether he arrived in New York as a recent captive or was born in town, whoever purchased him may have hired him out by the day to tradesmen, builders, or ship owners. The Common Council designated the market at the foot of Wall Street as the place where enslaved men were to go to find day labor (New York City Common Council 1905:2:458); their earnings, of course, went to the slaveholders. Perhaps HW spent his days on the docks, performing the heavy and dangerous labor of loading

[17] If so, it was a shipment that, like many, went unrecorded in the Naval Office accounts (Lydon 1978:382–383).

[18] As Wall (2000) has pointed out, though slavery was ubiquitous in New York, it has been a challenge to find New York's African presence in the archaeological record from domestic sites due to the shared residences.

and unloading cargo. He may have spent part of his life working seasonally on farms on the outskirts of the city. It is also possible that HW plied a specific trade. Slavery was pervasive in the city, in all branches of industry, artisanal trades, domestic labor, and transport. Advertisements for "runaway" men from New York households sought return of Andrew Saxon, a carpenter and cooper; James Richards and Harry Robbins, wagon drivers; Jasper, a silversmith, and Duke, a goldsmith; Caesar, a sailmaker; another Caesar, a glazier; Jem, a house servant; Syme, York, and Bolton, chimney sweeps; Prince and Tone, butchers; Dick, Tony, and Wan, bakers; and Prince, a ship carpenter (Hodges and Brown 1994:Nos. 17, 432, 163, 140, 552, 418, 642, 75, 342, 494, 95, 399, 57, 437, 595, 659). Men also worked as porters, joiners, ropemakers, and in tanneries and sugar refineries (see Medford et al. 2009b for a discussion of the work regimes of colonial New York). From his bones we know only that HW performed physical labor, probably for years, over at least part of his working life; few occupations in a pre-industrial city can be ruled out.

HW probably spent over a quarter-century working for someone else's profit in colonial New York. But what can we know of his own family—did he have siblings, perhaps a wife and children? Or of his religion—were his beliefs rooted in African traditions, nurtured anew by the many newly arrived Africans in the city; or was he a Christian, a churchgoer? Or of his social network—did he mingle at unauthorized taverns, risking public whippings for being out after hours, or did he forge his strongest ties in the workplace?

We can guess that HW's family life was fraught with difficulty, kinship a thing to achieve rather than a simple genealogical fact. It would have been a challenge to formalize, maintain, sometimes even consummate a marriage, but Africans did manage to form families.[19] Those families were typically sundered by sales, bequests, or removal from town, but people kept track of each other. Some went so far as to escape to reunite with family, risking severe punishment. A 24-year-old man referred to simply as Joe fled the city just before Christmas in 1762, heading for Raritan, New Jersey, where he had relations; in August of 1750, one Phoebe escaped her Manhattan slaveholder bound for Long Island, where she was "well known"; and in mid-winter of 1778 a 13-year-old boy ran off to find his mother somewhere near the north edge of town (Hodges and Brown 1994:Nos. 217, 84, 137). Individuals were sometimes able to obtain permission to attend to family matters, such as a birth or a funeral.

Many of the churches anchoring Manhattan's neighborhoods had small numbers of African congregants by the time HW died, and the Anglican Trinity Church in particular, having begun proselytizing among the enslaved early in the century, had many black members. Methodism arrived in New York in the late 1760s, professing anti-slavery and welcoming blacks. A handful of enslaved men and women joined at first, but by the early 1770s many were coming to hear the Methodist preachers. HW may have been among the black Christians of the city, sitting at the back of the church or in the gallery on a Sunday, unable to participate fully in church life but

[19] Kruger's massive compilation of data (1985) remains the most thorough source on family life among the enslaved in eighteenth-century New York.

finding spiritual and intellectual nourishment nonetheless—and forging bonds with sisters and brothers in worship. HW may have had other brothers, too, the men with whom he worked or socialized, and who, like co-religionists, might see to his proper burial when he died.[20]

HW did receive a proper burial. In most ways his grave was typical, as all men, women, and children, strangers or not, received much the same treatment at the African Burial Ground.[21] Like most, he was laid in the ground so that his head was to the west and feet to the east. There were 375 burials for which the orientation of the head could be determined, of which 367 were oriented head-to-west. Coffin burial was also typical. Of the 384 graves where presence or absence could be determined, 352 had coffins.[22] HW's coffin was similar in shape to most others found. While straight-sided coffins are thought to have been used early in the eighteenth century, and later continued in use for children, by the time of HW's death the six-sided "shouldered" form was nearly universal for adults at the African Burial Ground.

Coffins with decoration, however, were exceptional. Only a handful with decorative metalwork was found among the 352 recorded coffins in the excavated portion of the cemetery. HW's was one of three that had tinned cast iron tacks, preserved in place, adorning the lids. All three belonged to adult men. The other two, known simply as Burials 101 and 176, had coffins in quite different styles. The man in Burial 101 had a coffin with a heart-shaped design on the lid, a design that has also been interpreted as a Sankofa symbol. It may have included initials, age, and date, but the tacks were displaced and corroded beyond legibility. The man in Burial 176 was laid to rest in a coffin with dozens of tinned tacks lining the edges of the lid, as well as six handles (it was the only handled coffin found). Burials 101 and 176 were not located near each other, nor were they near HW, but the interments all probably took place sometime in the 1760s or early 1770s.[23]

Who made these coffins and the hundreds of others found at the African Burial Ground? A man would have needed at least the basic skill set of a joiner, carpenter, or cabinetmaker to fashion the shouldered type, not to mention adequate tools and materials (ruler, square, saw, plane, hammer; boards, and nails).[24] The location and orientation of nails from the majority of recorded coffins, including HW's, appear consistent

[20] The Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts had organized a school for enslaved Africans as early as 1704 (Butler 1983:166–169), and Trinity saw fit to establish its own "Negro Burial Ground" in 1773. Black Anglicans would emerge after the Revolution as community leaders. On churches in eighteenth-century Manhattan neighborhoods see Rothschild (1990:25–80). On the early history of Methodism in the city see Walls (1974:39–40). On social and subversive activities, men's associations, and tavern life see Linebaugh and Rediker (2000:174–210); Wilder (2001:9–35); Medford et al. (2009c:70–76); LePore (2005:150–157).

[21] On the conformity that characterized the cemetery see Perry and Howson (2009:128).

[22] Graves without coffins are believed to date to the Revolutionary War period, when wood was scarce and there were many strangers in the occupied city (Perry et al. 2009c).

[23] There were only two other adorned lids. One, that of a child, may have had a small breastplate, noted on field records but never accessioned in the laboratory; another, of a probable man, had iron tacks but if they formed a pattern it was destroyed when vandals disturbed the partially excavated grave.

[24] According to Rauschenberg (1990:26), after about 1760 "cabinetmaker" came to refer to men who made furniture and coffins.

with a standard construction method: A template would have been used to size and shape the top and bottom boards. Head and foot boards, the head 2 or more in. wider than the foot, were then nailed to the bottom. The two side boards were soaked, and while still damp they were kerfed (crosscut) on the inside at the shoulders, with as many as six or seven cuts sawn almost through. They were then bent around the bottom board and nailed in place, or sometimes screwed for added strength. The bottom, head, and footboards were set inside the sides, corners butt-jointed. The lid spanned the sides and when the coffin was sealed it was nailed down from the top (Howson and Bianchi 2009:222; Litten 1991:90–92; Salaman 1997:150).

In colonial New York, the household head customarily provided coffins for family and servants who died. The 1753–1756 day book of New York cabinetmaker Joshua Delaplaine attests that this extended to the enslaved in at least some cases—11 orders were placed by slaveholders for coffins for their "Negroes" (Delaplaine 1752–1756). Two additional orders were placed by the Almshouse warden for deceased black inmates. That the city paid for these as a matter of course suggests that a coffin was the *sine qua non* of adequate disposition of the dead, no matter the circumstance, in colonial Manhattan. There is no reason to assume, however, that slaveholders or wardens provided all or even most of the coffins in the African Burial Ground, and HW's in particular, adorned with such individualizing details as initials and age, raises questions about the limits of paternalism.[25] For many of the enslaved, and for free blacks, it would have fallen to family and friends to see to the coffin. They would have collected the money to pay the coffin maker, or procured wood and nails and donated their skills. Africans worked for and as cabinetmakers and carpenters in New York, and the community may have relied on their abilities and access to tools and materials. It is also possible that secret burial societies predate the formal establishment in early Federal New York of African mutual aid societies.[26] HW may have belonged to such a society, his coffin built or procured by the collective.

The coffins made for adult Africans by Delaplaine's shop typically cost 11 or 12 shillings, the price difference perhaps based on size.[27] Black paint added a shilling to the cost; screws and rosin added 1 or 2 shillings each; and an extra-large size also increased the price by a shilling. The most expensive of the "Negro" coffins listed in Delaplaine's ledger went for 14 shillings; it was for a woman, and included screws, rosin, and paint. By contrast, one "rough coffin" built for an African man

[25] African Burial Ground researchers have suggested elsewhere that the custom of providing a coffin be viewed as the result of struggles over the terms of bondage rather than as a paternalistic gesture (Perry and Howson 2009:127).

[26] The New York African Society for Mutual Relief was not officially founded until 1808, but collective action regarding burials began 20 years earlier. A February 14, 1787/1788 petition of free and enslaved Africans to the Common Council pleaded for the city to take action to protect their community's graves from grave robbers (New York City Common Council 1788).

[27] Rauschenberg (1990:34) reproduces a coffin price list from 1796 with 6-in. size increments; the cost rose 1 shilling 6 pence per 6 in. of length up to 5 ft, and was 15–18 shillings, depending upon the wood, for those 5 or more ft in length.

cost only 9 shillings. The two African children's coffins listed cost 5 shillings and 4 shillings 6 pence for one that was painted black.

These "Negroes" coffins were at the bottom of Delaplaine's pricing. Handles, breastplates or other lid decorations, fancy metalwork, linings, and special wood embellished many of the coffins furnished for deceased white New Yorkers. A child's coffin lined and "struck with name & age" brought 14 shillings; one for a man that was built of "bilsted" (sweet gum) boards with a heart, name, age, and date "struck" on the lid cost £2.2; a child's coffin covered and lined in Holland cloth and "trimmed with polisht nails" (possibly brass tacks) sold for £3.10; a man's that was covered, lined, and had a breast plate was £3.15; and a very high-end coffin for a woman was covered, fully trimmed (i.e., with metalwork known as "lace"), and lined, costing £5. Using Delaplaine's rates as a rough guide, HW's coffin—"struck" only with initials and two numerals (not a full name, not a date); unlined (no cloth fragments adhered to wood or nails); and built of ordinary wood (cedar)—might have cost about £1 if purchased to order from a cabinetmaker. But perhaps his mourners procured a plain coffin and added the lid decoration themselves.

The specificity of that decoration, whether stipulated in an order or hammered in by a friend, raises the issue of literacy among African New Yorkers. Whoever designed or fashioned the lid had command of the alphabet and numerals, and all of the mourners would have been able to view the "HW 38" during the procession to the cemetery and at the graveside—no pall would have covered it, for palls were outlawed for Africans in 1731 (New York City Common Council 1905:4:88–89). The presentation of initials and the deceased's age on a coffin acknowledges literacy, if not on the part of HW then at least on the part of some in the community who mourned him.[28] Literacy conferred status in the eighteenth century, especially among Africans, and it is worth wondering whether HW's coffin points to a connection with community leaders. More importantly, though, the initials and age paid homage to the man whose body lay inside the coffin by individualizing him in a way that belied the dehumanization of slavery just as it belies the anonymity of the cemetery today.

Perhaps the men talked about HW, speaking his name, recalling his life and how they came to know him as they hammered in his initials and age, while women in attendance managed to obtain a length of cloth to use for a shroud and prepared his body. The latter office typically fell to women, though practices vary among religions that may have been represented in New York's African community.[29] A copper-alloy straight pin adhering to a lock of hair was found under the right side of HW's skull. That pin would have fastened his shroud or perhaps a strip of cloth

[28] Some literate Africans would have been among those captured and brought to New York. In addition, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel continued to sponsor its "Negro school," where literacy was taught alongside Christianity, throughout the colonial period. It is likely those who were able to attend the school shared their skills with others. For a summary of the work of the SPG in New York up to 1741 see Lepore (2005:184–188). The school was offering places to 30 Africans in 1760 (*NY Mercury*, 4 August, 15 September 1760).

[29] In strict Islamic tradition, for example, men wash and cover men, and women wash and cover women.

holding his chin. Shrouding, like head-to-west orientation and the use of coffins, seems to have been typical at the African Burial Ground. Only 33 burials had evidence for clothing, while fully half contained pins. For graves where no pins or clothing items were present, the use of a shroud probably can be assumed, since burial cloths often were closed only with knots.[30] During laboratory cleaning of the thoracic (chest area) vertebrae, a tiny copper-alloy object, much like a pin fragment but curved, was found adhering to a fragment of HW's coffin wood. It was too small for a finger ring, but may have been an earring, a personal possession kept with his body when he was wrapped and placed in the coffin.

The news of HW's death would have spread quickly through the community. New York was small, after all, though densely populated, and both women and men would have had chances to pass the word during their work days, meeting at the markets and wells, on the docks, or in the streets. Perhaps a young child was sent on this saddest of errands, to tell the close kin. Those who made the coffin and prepared the body would have been joined by others who knew him for the funeral. HW's coffin would have been carried to the cemetery on the shoulders of his friends, or perhaps in a borrowed wagon if a driver was able to obtain permission to use his rig for the occasion. Funerals of "Negroes," as stipulated by a 1722 law, had to take place at or before sundown (New York City Common Council 1905:3:296). The enslaved worked all day, so those who gathered to accompany HW's mortal remains to the cemetery would have met close to dusk. The funeral procession probably would not have been large. According to another city law, passed in 1731, the master of the deceased was held responsible for "admitting" enslaved Africans to a funeral, and no more than 12 could attend (New York City Common Council 1905:4:86–87). But the gravedigger and the coffin bearers were excluded from this count, allowing for perhaps 16–18 legal attendees. Doubtless this limit was sometimes flouted, but at the risk of public whipping.[31]

HW's grave would have been dug ahead of time so as to be ready to receive his coffin. Though the names of African gravediggers or sextons are known from records of early Federal New York (Howson et al. 2009:64–65), we do not know to whom this duty fell in the colonial period. It may simply have been a friend or family member, but a designated gravedigger is also possible. The spot chosen for HW's final resting place was in what would have been the far northern part of the cemetery at the time, about 15 ft south of the fence that marked the cemetery's edge during the 1760s and early 1770s. In the archaeological excavation, many other graves surrounded his, and it is likely many of them were already in place when HW was buried. In particular, both to his north and to his south there were dense clusters of

[30] Poor preservation probably also accounts for burials lacking any sign of clothing or shroud. Of those burials considered to be preserved adequately enough for pins to have survived ($n = 325$), 65% had pins. In the practice of shrouding, European and African traditions overlapped. The dead often were wrapped in cloth in regions of Africa from which captives were taken (Medford et al. 2009d).

[31] The laws restricting Africans' funerals were meant to curtail large gatherings of Africans.

graves, containing adults and several children. We do not know whether HW was given a grave site here in order to fill in a gap between existing clusters, or was placed deliberately in association with one or both of them.

Of the rituals, prayers, lamentations, or songs that accompanied HW's burial we know nothing. There was no clue in his grave as to his spiritual beliefs, no religious insignia of any kind. Here the material and documentary record for New York is silent, and though funerals of the enslaved in other colonies and later periods were sometimes described, a fictional account of HW's does not seem warranted. A film created for the Interpretive Center at the African Burial Ground National Monument, however, includes a fictional funeral scene in which a man and a child are being buried. As imagined for that sequence, a woman elder leads the mourners in a loose call-and-response format. As friends and family sing, weep, pray and call out in several European and African languages, testifying to their love and respect for the deceased, the elder consigns their spirits to the ancestors.

After being filled with earth, was HW's grave marked in some fashion—with a line of cobbles, a vertical stone, or a board? Cobbles and stones marked a few graves in a small part of the excavated cemetery where the original ground surface was present. There was also one coffin with a vertical post attached to its headboard that would have extended above the ground surface. Because markers were found in the one preserved area, it seems likely they were common at the African Burial Ground. The cemetery must have been visited, graves tended by mourners long after the funeral, and subsequent burials could have been placed deliberately above or adjacent to earlier ones for as long as their specific sites were known.[32]

There is reason to believe that HW's grave site was in fact revisited, and sadly, for another's funeral. A second burial ("Burial 289") lay above HW's, overlapping though offset to one side. It held the remains of a child between 5 and 9 years old. The outlines of the grave shafts recorded by the archaeologists indicate that the child was buried separately and after HW. No later graves would touch these two, so they seem to form a pair within the mapped cemetery. Was this child a relation? HW may have been an uncle (biological or not). He may have been a father.

One day it should be possible to use the DNA samples taken from each skeleton prior to reburial to test for a genetic relationship between these two individuals, and among other apparent groupings of individuals at the African Burial Ground (Jackson et al. 2009:207–211). But familial relationships among the enslaved, especially in an urban setting where separation was the norm, had to be created and nurtured beyond the merely biological—and in death as much as in life. When the child in Burial 289 was laid to rest, mourners may have looked for protection and guidance from the man who had gone before, HW.

Perhaps his name was Harry. Combing the records has failed to turn up an HW, and this is not surprising because surnames for Africans were rarely recorded prior

[32] In one instance, a stone marker had been placed at the head of one of the earliest graves at the site, and this marker apparently guided the placement of two later interments alongside the early one (Perry and Howson 2009:121; Perry et al. 2009b:142).

to the 1790 census. But there were many men whose first names began with H, and Harry was the name used most often, at least by the record-keepers. Among the accused named in Horsemanden's journal of the 1741 trials were two Hanovers, three Harrys (of whom one was executed and one transported), a Dr. Harry (executed), and a Hereford (Lepore 2005:252). Advertisements for Africans who escaped from New York households included a Hannibal, a Harmon, four Harrys (one with the surname Robbins), two Hectors, a Holliday, and a Hulse (Hodges and Brown 1994:Nos. 160, 435, 505, 432, 266, 183, 86, 657). Of course, the authorities and whoever held him in bondage may have known HW by a completely different name than his friends and family.

His true and full name eludes us today, but HW's physical remains indelibly preserve some of his childhood and adult experiences. His teeth and bones tell of nutritional privation, infections, and the strains and injuries of physical labor. His coffin and grave tell us still more—of the time in which he lived, of the respect shown the dead in his community, of grieving friends, of their attention to HW's individuality as they saw him into the next life. I chose to write about HW mainly because he is the only one among those whose graves were excavated who can be referred to by something other than a mere number. But of course every man, woman, and child at the African Burial Ground had an identity, and the remains of each have a life story to reveal, in greater or lesser resolution. The contrast between the intimacy of our knowledge of their bones and the necessarily speculative nature of our reconstructed life histories is frustrating. Nonetheless, a focus on individuals within the African Burial Ground population offers a way to understand how people shaped and were shaped by the realities of the early city, including its 200 years of legal slavery.

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