

LONG-FORGOTTEN BURIAL GROUND

Rio aims to recover interred Africans

By Peter Muello
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RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil — The remodeling project at a 19th century home in Rio's old Gamboa district came to an abrupt halt. Laborers digging in the yard to check the foundations had found human bones. Thousands of them.

The homeowner, Ana de la Merced Guimaraes, soon discovered that her house was sitting on the Cemeterio dos Pretos Novos - Portuguese for Cemetery of New Blacks - a crude burying ground for African slaves that historians had thought was lost.

Ten years later, the city wants to preserve the find as a rare window into Brazil's colonial past - and one of the darkest pages of its history.

"It's certainly one of the city's most important discoveries," said Andre Zambelli, head of the Rio's Cultural Heritage Department. "It shows how the slave trade happened, confirms what's in textbooks, puts history in our hands."

Workers have recovered 5,563 bone fragments and teeth, some rounded or carved in styles characteristic of people that lived along the Congo River in Mozambique and South Africa. They also found pieces of fine English china, stoneware and African clay pipes, dishes and metal ornaments dumped in the graves as trash.

Rio consulted experts from New York, where the African Burial Ground was discovered in lower Manhattan during construction of a skyscraper in 1991, with the remains of at least 419 slaves or free blacks buried in colonial times. The U.S. government designated the site a National Historic Landmark in 1993.

"It's the same connection, a re-encounter with African history, labor and culture," Zambelli said.

Rio believes its cemetery was bigger. More than 20,000

bodies probably were buried there between 1769 and 1830, Zambelli said, but no one knows exactly because no records were kept. They were the bodies of slaves who died before they could be were sold.

Brazil was the New World's biggest market for African slaves. Of an estimated 10 million Africans brought to the Americas, nearly half came to Brazil, where they worked in gold and diamond mines or on coffee and sugar plantations.

When Rio became Brazil's capital in 1763, residents soon began objecting to the squalid slave market in downtown streets, near the palace where the Portuguese royal family took up residence after fleeing Portugal ahead of Napoleon's invading army in 1807.

So the market was relocated to the marshy Gamboa district, which became the unofficial graveyard for slaves after a Franciscan churchyard filled up. Bodies were piled in stacks on the street and often burned before burial under a few shovelfuls of soil.

The treatment still rankles rights activists.

"It was Rio's holocaust," said Marcelo Monteiro at the Municipal Council for the Defense of Black Rights. "Few people know about it. We're rediscovering a story that was erased from history."

Haidar Abu Talib, of the Muslim Charity Society, said many of the slaves buried in the cemetery were Muslims. He said former slaves remained "invisible" even after slavery was abolished in 1888 and some Brazilians would like to keep it that way.

"When slavery ended, the government - run by the elites that always benefited from slave labor - wasn't concerned about making ex-slaves full citizens," Talib said at a ceremony for Black Consciousness Day. "Even today, their descendants are

victims of social injustice."

Although nearly half of Brazil's 183 million people are black or mixed-race, the country's cherished self-image as a "racial democracy" is a myth. Most of the poorest Brazilians are black.

Blacks comprise 70 percent of the poorest tenth of Brazilians and just 16 percent of the wealthiest tenth, the United Nations Development Program said recently. Afro-Brazilians earned an average of 173 Brazilian reals (US\$74) a month in 2000, less than half the pay for whites in 1980, it said.

"The data merely corroborate what is already visible to any observer: The farther one goes up along the power hierarchy, the whiter Brazilian society becomes," the U.N. report said.

Rio officials want to bring black history more in the open by creating a walking tour and putting the cemetery on tourism routes.

"We want to make an open-air museum, with a tour from the docks to the cemetery, with bilingual folders and a map showing where slaves were displayed and sold," Zambelli said. "Africa contributed to the founding of the city."

But Guimaraes is skeptical the city will invest in the cemetery that her workers stumbled on. Officials have done little to preserve the bones, she said, and rains washed away some of the exposed remains. Her neighbors resent that she told the city about the cemetery.

"I don't have anybody's support," she said. "People ask me why I'm doing this, but the more I learn about how the Africans were abused and realize it's been forgotten, I swear they won't forget it here, not while I have the strength."

On the Net:
Pretos Novos cemetery (in Portuguese):
www.pretosnovos.com.br

Progeny of former slaves gather

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names of 973 slaves who once helped clear the land, harvest the tobacco and design the buildings of Stagville. She has pulled information from tax records, bills of sale and personal letters of Stagville owners Duncan Cameron and Richard Bennehan. She's also had help from several descendants who still live in Durham.

The first phase of the work started in the 1980s at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A student who interned at Stagville sifted through all the Cameron-Bennehan papers on campus and documented the name of every enslaved black he came across. The thick binder filled with pages of names such as Orange, Toast, Mittie, Solomon, Moses and Little Lot sat unused until Farley arrived.

"I thought it was amazing that nothing was being done about it," she said.

The work is difficult, hindered by a lack of birth certificates, which often were not issued for slaves. When a birth record existed, it usually did not include the father's name, said Tony Burroughs, a genealogist whose company specializes in tracing the roots of black Americans.

"Plantation owners did not keep records on enslaved blacks for genealogical purposes," Burroughs said. "The records owners kept were for business purposes, either as profits or sale or taxes. Each (slave) had a value on them based on a property value."

Farley has had an easier time than other plantation researchers because Cameron and Bennehan - early trustees at UNC-Chapel Hill - kept meticulous records of the plantation.

Farley also has benefited from the proximity of Stagville's black descendants, many of whom live within 10 miles of the site.

Ricky Hart of Durham is one of them. His

father and other family members lived on the Stagville plantation as sharecroppers until the 1950s. Hart grew up a few miles away on land that had once been part of Stagville.

Hart had heard rumors that his family worked on the plantation, and after his father died in 1986, Hart said he felt drawn to learn more about his family.

"One thing that got me is, is it real?" he said. "Is it true what they are talking about that there is a slave plantation in Durham?"

During a visit to Stagville later that year, he found the cabin that he later learned his family had lived in from 1812 until the 1950s. His Stagville roots go back to the 1780s with the sale of his great-great-grandfather to the plantation.

Hart worked to piece together his family tree. When he got stuck, he approached Farley hoping to trade information.

Other ancestors now come to Farley with photographs, names to add to the links, oral histories and information about other people who may help fill in blanks. She shares with them what she knows.

But there are hundreds of names in the binder that she has not yet connected to the web of family members and there are probably others she will never know about.

Farley hopes her work will personalize the plight of slaves, as is evident when she picks up a black and white photograph of a somber woman. Her name was Amy Shaw and she was born into slavery at Stagville.

"If this were my grandmother and I knew someone treated her that way, I would ache," Farley said. "I want people to understand the sheer number of people who were owned by these two families. I want it to hit them in the face."

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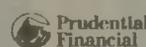
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