



Unit: Slavery

Lesson 2.6: The Lott House – A History Mystery

Aim: To uncover the secrets of a historic Brooklyn farmhouse that kept slaves and later protected them as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Objective: Students read a newspaper article about the historic Lott House in Marine Park, Brooklyn, and learn about the history of slavery in New York.

Materials:

1. Overhead transparency of Lott House photograph
2. *Park Slope Courier* article, “Archaeologists Uncover Secret Lott House Rooms” by Helen Klein, May 14, 2001
3. Chart paper

Procedure:

1. Show the photo of the Lott House on the overhead. Tell class, “This house holds many secrets.” Ask them to guess what these secrets might be. Record guesses on board or chart paper.
2. Place article about the Lott House on overhead transparency for shared reading. Tell class they are about to read an article about an archaeological discovery in Brooklyn and early slave life. Ask students what sort of evidence they think might link a house to slavery or the Underground Railroad.
3. Teacher reads article to class, stopping frequently to share visualizations, questions, connections, etc.

A note about shared reading: During a shared reading session, the whole class is on the same “page”—everyone’s attention is focused on the same overhead transparency. The teacher models the initial reading in several ways. In addition to simply reading the passage aloud, slowly and clearly, he or she reveals thoughts and reading strategies for the group. Be it visualizing, making connections, or noticing new or interesting vocabulary, these thoughts are shared so that students see and understand what goes on in the mind of a good reader.

4. Class reads together before answering the following questions:
 - What are the two secrets the Lott House holds?
 - How can a slaveholding family also be a family of abolitionists?
 - What proof is there that the Lott House was probably a stop on the Underground Railroad?
5. Share answers as class.
6. Writing assignment - choose one:
 - a) If the Lott House could talk, what would it say about the Lott family and their slaves over the years?
 - b) Think about the rooms, furniture, food, and possessions in your home. What do they reveal about who lives there? If someone were to enter your home when you and your family were out, what could he or she guess about who lives there (the number of people, ages, occupations, habits, hobbies, etc.)? Explain.
 - c) The article mentions archaeologists, historians, and cultural anthropologists. Research these professions. Which would you like to be and why?

An excellent read-aloud about the Underground Railroad is *Trouble Don't Last* by Shelley Pearsall (Knopf, 2002). This title won the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction for its well-researched, fresh, and honest portrayal of the Underground Railroad, the passengers, conductors, and perils and conflicts they faced.



Hendrick I. Lott Homestead, erected 1800

From: *The Park Slope Courier*, May 14, 2001, p. 21.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS UNCOVER SECRET LOTT HOUSE ROOMS by Helen Klein

It takes care, patience, and more than a little passion to pry the secrets from an old house.

In the case of the Hendrick I. Lott House, a pre-Revolutionary homestead nestled on a quiet residential street in Marine Park, the secrets revealed through an ongoing investigation of the structure—under the auspices of the Brooklyn College Archaeological Research Center (BC-ARC), directed by Professor Arthur Bankoff—include not one, but two secret areas.

One is believed by archaeologists to have been old slave quarters. The other hidden room may have been used as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The news has reverberated through the archaeological world, clearly validating the heroic efforts by community members to save the structure, which, despite its designation as a landmark in 1989, had been precariously poised on the brink of destruction until 1998.

It was then that the Campaign to Save the Lott House, a public/private partnership of the Historic House Trust of New York City, New York City Parks and Recreation, and the Lott House Preservation Association, was launched with the goal of purchasing the house and restoring it as a community resource.

Even before the momentous discoveries had been made, it was clear that the Lott House, which is located at 1940 East 36th Street, was indeed a rare gem. Dating back in its oldest section to the 1720s, it is one of only 14 such structures surviving today in Brooklyn.

It is also incredibly pristine for a house that is approximately 280 years old. Because, over the years, little had been done to modernize the house, many layers of history still remain virtually untouched within the venerable dwelling which eight generations of the same family called home, until 1989, when its last inhabitant, Ella Suydam, a descendant of Hendrick Lott, died.

According to archaeologist Christopher Ricciardi, project manager at the Lott House excavations, the Lott family's ownership of the home represents "the longest continuous ownership of property in New York City by one family."

Now, the amazing finds at the house have focused the spotlight of attention on the efforts of the team working there, efforts detailed recently in the May/June issue of *Archaeology* magazine.

The Lott family certainly had slaves, as many as 12 at one point, according to Ricciardi. "This," he said, "made them one of the largest slave owners in the area."

However, added Ricciardi, "We know they freed most of their slaves by 1801, 25 years before New York State did away with slavery, so we can make the assumption that these are early abolitionists.

"They then hired their former slaves on as paid servants," Ricciardi continued, "who were still working for the family during the 1840s, when the Underground Railroad was at its height."

This information supports the theory that a tiny space—literally a closet within a closet, its door cunningly hidden behind coat hooks that would have held a curtain of garments—might well have been a way station for escaping slaves.

So does anecdotal evidence provided by family members. Ricciardi said that two different descendants of the Lott family, who didn't know each other, both recalled the same story when given tours of the old homestead. "They said this was where they kept their runaway slaves," he noted.

"We know," Ricciardi said, "that the Underground Railroad ran in Brooklyn. One branch ran from Staten Island to Brooklyn to Queens to the Bronx, then to Westchester, Albany, and further north. It avoided Manhattan island, because Manhattan supported the south for economic reasons.

"Any house in the north that existed prior to the Civil War claims to be a stop on the Underground Railroad," Ricciardi acknowledged. "It's sort of like saying, 'George Washington slept here.'

"But," he went on, "when you take the circumstantial evidence of two people who didn't know each other, and you take the fact that the family freed its slaves 25 years before they were required to, and that those people were still working here, in the 1840s, as paid servants, you can say, 'It might have been.'"

Another World

The old slave quarters—the forgotten second story of a lean-to on the eastern side of the home, accessible through a trap door in the ceiling—provides a myriad of clues to a long-ago way of life.

Worn stair treads leading upward to a boarded-up doorway which gave access to the main portion of the 1720s house were clearly heavily used, noted Ricciardi, “So much so that the nails are coming through.” These were probably the steps, he said, used by the people living in the rooms when entering the main building to serve the Lott family.

A blackened mortar-covered area on the chimney provides evidence of efforts to warm the space. It was likely, said Ricciardi, a beehive-shaped oven that was later filled in. Dried-up, blackened bits of wax from candles used for illumination spatter the floor.

Most exciting, however, is a cache of objects that appear to have ritualistic meaning, found when the floorboards were lifted. These include corncobs arranged in the shape of a cross or star, a pouch tied with a piece of hemp, a single shell, and a pelvis bone from a sheep or goat.

“In the Caribbean and the south,” explained Ricciardi, “it was common to put such things under the floor where you were living.”

In both the old slave quarters and the hidden room, history is palpable, so close that it can be touched. The past becomes startlingly vivid in these evocative spaces.

“That’s what we have tried to do,” noted Ricciardi. “Make the project alive for people. The amazing thing is that this house is in our own backyard. People still walk by and say, ‘It’s that old

house.’ They don’t realize that it’s no ‘that old house,’ but that it is a national treasure.”

The archaeologists’ discoveries at the Lott House are hardly recent. Rather, explained Ricciardi, they date as far back as 1999. “We sat on it for a year and a half,” he went on. “We did as much homework and background research as we could, and we brought in other archaeologists, historians, and cultural anthropologists. We asked them if our line of thinking was possible, because someone else could come in and interpret all of this differently. But, everyone said ‘yes.’”

Has the Lott House finished giving up its secrets? Ricciardi, shining a light on the old slave quarters to illuminate its shadowed corners, said he believed quite the opposite.

“I think the house has a lot more secrets all over the place,” he noted. “We didn’t know this was here. You can’t see it from the outside and it makes no sense that it’s here. We had been working on the house for two and a half years before we found it. That’s what makes this such a special house, why it is so vital that the project moves forward. There’s a lot more history here than any of us imagine.”