Privy to Their Secrets: A Discussion of Fetal Remains from a New York Privy

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Introduction

During the excavation of a privy shaft in upstate New York, archaeologists discovered the remains of a 36-week-old fetus. An unusual archaeological find, this discovery led to discussions of 19th century America and the experience of both women and children during this time. Though prominent players in society, conceptions of children vary in different cultures and time periods: the way American society conceives of children is vastly different today than in the early 1800's. The literature on children in the archaeological record is scarce due to minimal data and the difficulty of finding indicators of children and their value. Potential sources of information concerning the value and conceptualization of children include artifacts, primary historical documents, and burial patterns, each of which give different information on the function and status of children in society. Burial patterns provide an opportunity to understand the lives, behaviors, and identity of children, specifically how they were valued and conceptualized by their families and society and insight into the choices of their mothers. Through burials, child behavior can be examined in a thought-provoking way, giving archaeologists an opportunity to explore all facets of life and identity.

The excavation of the privy represented one such opportunity, as the fetal remains in the privy was surrounded by domestic, personal, and food artifacts. Excavated from a late 1800 privy shaft in a town filled with textile workers, these remains provide insight into the lives and choices of working-class families. This context raises questions about how the circumstances of women at the time might lead to placing a fetus in a privy. Additionally, uncovering this skeleton provides a unique path to understanding how children and fetuses were visualized by their society and families: how did working class Americans conceptualize children in the early 1800's?

In this paper, I will focus on the lives and identity of children during the late 1800's in America and how they were conceptualized by their culture. The history of the town itself is integral to this work, as Cohoes exemplifies an industrialized town of the late 1800's, where children's labor in factories ties into their value. The town of Cohoes offered hundreds of jobs and significant housing for families, creating an environment of working-class individuals. In a working class society, access to proper burials and expensive ones were out of reach for these inhabitants of Cohoes, which may account for the unusual placement of these remains. This paper analyzes firstly the history of women in the specific town where the remains were discovered, working class women, sexuality, and reproductive rights. Next, it moves into

children, looking at their experience in the workforce and the relationships between child and parent. Looking at both women and children will help give broader social context to these remains and a better understanding of the circumstances that led to such a burial.

Theoretical Foundations

To approach the analysis of the fetal remains, gender theory and childhood theory were employed. In this unusual burial of fetal remains, the conceptualization of both children and women during the 19th century are at play and tie heavily into the choices and opportunities given to these groups. Children and women were previously marginalized in literature and only recently have historians and archaeologists begun to study them in depth (Agarwal and Glencross 2011).

Gender theory, the founding theory of childhood studies, contributes to the framing of this archaeological discovery. The status of women, their rights and options in the late 1800's, and expectations surrounding motherhood and womanhood would have had an impact on decisions like the one that led to the unusual placement of these fetal remains. Early anthropologists treated women as invisible in the historical record, ignoring their position in society until the rise of feminist movements in the 1970's, which altered this research bias (Mascia-Lees and Black 2000). The rise of feminist anthropologists and historians aided this movement, allowing for past women to be accurately represented in the archaeological record (Rosaldo 1974). Perspectives shifted at this time away from treating women as a male counterpart to understanding their individuality, agency, and status in culture (Reiter 1975).

The study of childhood, previously imbedded in gender theory, progressed with the realization of children as active agents in history (Lewis 2007). As researchers gave more attention to the status and agency of gender in culture, the concept of age arose with it, leading to a more attentive look into age as it pertains to identity and a focus on childhood as a distinct category. Previously, the literature on childhood portrayed children as invisible characters with little agency, valued little by their parents and expected to perform as adults in society (Aries 1960). As archaeology progressed, a debate emerged questioning the truth of this portrayal. In the 1970's, archaeologists began to broach a different understanding of children and challenged past understandings of childhood: rather than a stagnant stage in life, childhood came alive and further research and showed a deep value of children, seen predominantly in burials and coming of age ceremonies (De Mause 1974; Shorter 1976). The progression of gender theory in the 1990s impacted childhood theory and studies, with a specific focus on archaeological evidence of children (Lillehammer 1989). The value of children is called into question in such studies: is there a stark contrast between the conceptualization of children today as compared with previous years? Many archaeologists in the 1990's argued otherwise, stating that parents had a deep connection to their children, primarily studying burials and texts to understand how parents, families, and societies viewed their own children (De Mause 1974; Shorter 1976; Lillehammer 1989).

In past research, fetal remains from privies have been examined in terms of infanticide, abortion, and stillbirth/miscarriage, tying heavily into gender theory on the rights of women at that time. Thomas Crist's (2005) article looked at the skeletal remains of two full term neonate

and one fetus discovered during the excavation of New York City's Five Point district, in the context of a brothel. Crist employed gender theory to examine the status and viewpoint of the mother in such a situation: what were her options in this case, and what were some possible explanations for the choices of the mother? In this specific case, Crist explored the status of lower class women working as prostitutes and possible answers to the unusual burial context; he answered such questions through an analysis of the laws governing reproductive health and women's rights in this time period. Additionally, he discussed abortion and prostitution. He explored the impact of socioeconomic status and acknowledged that these problems were more impactful in the lives of working-class women than upper class women. Crist discussed the role of sexuality for these women and how a fear of women's perceived promiscuity led to abortion and infanticide.

Sharon Burston (1982) discussed the skeletal remains of one neonate and one fetus discovered in a privy during the excavation of Head House Square in Philadelphia. The remains existed in a limited archaeological context as the remains had been transferred from another area to fill in the abandoned privy and had no connection to the lot in which it was found. Here, Burstein also discussed the remains in terms of women's rights and opportunities during the 1800's, including abortion, contraception and reproductive rights. Her article looked at the status of women and the historical context surrounding the remains, concentrating on the role of religion, burial patterns, and potential motives that tied into this unusual deposition.

John Mccarthy and Nicole Kirby (1997) represent the third and final example of published literature on fetal remains discovered in a privy. Their piece looked at a 6-month-old fetus discovered in a privy at the Bridgewater site in Minneapolis. These remains were discovered in connection with a saloon, though the context was similar to the Head House Square as the site was ill defined. Again, the remains were connected to the social connotations of a saloon and the history of reproductive rights in America.

Previous literature discussed fetal remains in terms of women's rights and reproductive history. To understand the fetal remains discovered in Cohoes, this paper will look at the background of women and reproductive rights in the 1800s as well as push the analysis further into the experience of children in this time period. The remains discovered on Sargent Street provide an opportunity to take a closer look at the child and how the view of children impacted this burial.

Historical Background

The fetal remains were discovered in Cohoes, New York, a town rich in the history of working-class individuals, industrialization, and capitalism. Cohoes was a farming community until the 1800s when the impact of industrialization led to the formation of the Cohoes Company, transforming the small town into a manufacturing community. The town was situated next to a water source which was used by early inhabitants to create a grist mill, representing one of the first examples of industrialization in Cohoes. Early influences of industrialization attracted capitalists who stimulated the towns industry and economy with the settlement of companies and industries in Cohoes (Munsell 1877). The town progressed in industrial ventures and shaped the population into a working-class body. Specifically, the town supported textile

mills that employed a majority of the inhabitants, including women, who played a large part in the textile mill industry. Textile mills included cotton mills and knitting mills, such as Harmony Mills, which represented the largest cotton mill of its time and was known for the production of calico and muslin (Munsell 1877). Women compromised around 60-70% of employees in the textile mills, even supporting immigrants from Ireland and Canada who flocked to Cohoes seeking employment in the textile mills (Sargent St., Personal Communication 2019). Though the town in suffered a brief depression in the early 1800's, the Civil War stimulated the economy and fostered the population: the war invigorated the need for cotton and wool, provided to the war front by textile mills. Not only did the war cause rapid growth in terms of industrialization, it nearly doubled the population by the late 1860s.

The house associated with the privy was located in the north half of a large working-class neighborhood that lined the streets west of the Cohoes Company Canal. The dwelling was built by 1866 and inhabited by two widows, one of whom raised her 5 children in the home. These women also had two teenage daughters and worked at the textile mills during their time in the house, as did their daughters.

Women

Working Class Women

The status of the mother, whether she played a part in the deposition of the remains or not, influenced her choices and options during her pregnancy and/or birth. In a working-class town, where the local mills employed a majority of the inhabitants, the rights of working-class women would have applied to the mother of this specific fetus. The 1800's marked a period of change for women in terms of work and family life; the Industrial Revolution, heavily influenced by capitalist ideology, altered not only the workforce, but gender roles and family life, with the development of technology increasing life expectancy and decreasing family size (Dublin 1994).

In particular, the development of textile mills gave women an opportunity to join the workforce and alter their gender role in society; paid labor, previously assigned mainly to men, was now offered to women, though on a much smaller scale. Gender roles pressured women to work in the production of clothes and women transferred this work from the domestic sphere to the textile mills (Pinchbeck 1985). Entering into the workforce marked a change in the way women perceived themselves: women began to question their traditional role in the home and desired work outside of motherhood. Thomas Dublin, in his book, The Lowell Mills commented, “[t]hat they came to challenge employer paternalism was a direct consequence of the increasing opportunities offered them in these years... Mills both exploited and liberated women” (Dublin 1994). Despite progress in women's working rights, there was still concern and critique surrounding women who worked, specifically by progressive movement (Weiner 2016).
To justify women's work, Progressive ideals introduced the concept of work preparing single women for future domestic roles (Weiner 2016); even though women were partially liberated in their labor, social connotations surrounding this labor remained stuck in gender roles of previous years.

This new experience of labor was mostly limited to white women: immigrant women and minority women inhabited the labor force for many years before whites, and dealt with even

more social stigma (Lamphere 1987). Their experience included racism, poverty and alternative social stigmas. Few at the time worried about the mothering status of immigrant or minority women, the focus rather was on white women who chose to work. Though we are unsure of the mother of this child, it is important to understand the different impact that race and immigrant status has on the social pressures for women during this time period and place.

Shifting gender roles impacted both women and their families in 19th century America. The development of textile mills encouraged families to leave their farms and congregate around the factories which led to the creation of cities, such developments impacted the family, as the change in space supported a smaller family rather than a large one. Historians debate the impact this had on child life: some argue that children represented an asset on farms which did not transfer to the city, as young children performed less work in the mills and instead represented a mouth to feed (Reiss 1974). Other historians argue that working class children participated heavily in the factory work force and represented a valuable asset in cities as well (Casebeer 2011).

Though home on Sargent Street housed two widows, working class women represented both married and single women. Many men and husbands died in the Civil War, making it necessary for women and mothers to enter the workforce as the main breadwinners of the family; one such example was the Maltese family in New York City, whose father died during the war, leaving his widow and her two daughters to work in the local textile mills to support their family financially (DeVault 2013). Desperate times placed many women in the workforce, yet once they were given this opportunity, they were loath to return to their gendered role as exclusively mothers. The financial responsibility of several children encouraged these mothers to remain in the workforce and potentially influenced their decision to limit their births.

The women of this home on Sargent Street, the two widows and their two teenage daughters, represented working class women with the responsibility of both motherhood and financial providers. This entrance into the workforce for women in the United States marked a significant social change and a difference in the role of women in society. Gender roles shifted and allowed more freedom for women, with new technologies impacting the control over family size (Pinchbeck 1985).

Sexuality/Protestant Influence

Sexuality in the 19th century is often described as repressive and has its roots in Puritan belief systems; as such, the sexuality of both men and women were often scrutinized and criticized if seen as anything but utilitarian. Puritanical traditions rooted in self-control encouraged sexuality that fulfilled the purpose of sex, namely, to reproduce. Those who migrated from Europe to America brought religious ideals shaped by the Protestant Reformation concerning concepts of sexuality. Such ideals often including a distinction between proper sexual relations, inside marriage, and unacceptable ones, such as sex outside of marriage and sex for reasons other than reproduction (Brodie 1997). Men emphasized the chastity of women to confirm the legitimacy of their own children, putting special focus on women to remain loyal to their partners before and during marriage (Brodie 1997). Brodie commented on this relationship between sex and reproduction, stating, “Americans had to cope with the implications of a

separation between sexuality and reproduction. The promise was liberating yet disquieting. To some it was a religious issue. Did not God condemn such a separation?" (Brodie 1997,88). This accepted form of sexuality, purely utilitarian, assumed both parties participating in sex would be married; any form of relations outside of marriage was severely critiqued, both socially and legally. Many women employed abortion and contraception to conceal an illicit relationship, such as adultery or fornication, and infanticide represented perhaps the last attempt to conceal a socially unacceptable relationship (Engelman 2011).

During the late 1700s and early 1800s, Enlightenment views pushed society to focus more on individuals and gave more room for pleasure in sexuality, shifting traditional societal views on marital relations. However, while this resulted in an emphasis on love within marriage and choice in picking partners, similar social disapproval remained in terms of illegitimate relationships. Society discriminated against women in particular for indulging in societal unacceptable relationships.

Adultery represented an illicit relationship that was punishable by the Church and the law. Such punishments ranged from death, to paying fines, or enduring whipping; Adultery often led to divorce, separation, violence, and public shame. By the 20th century, social stigmas remained and adultery led to “divorce, social ostracism, and a loss of custody over her children” (Freedman 1982, 82). Fornication, the term used to describe sex outside of marriage, also had severe consequences in the 19th century. Emilio and Freedman commented on the consequences of fornication, stating, “Fornication carried heavy penalties, including fines, whipping, or both... Throughout New England the find of nine lashes awaited both parents of a child born too soon after marriage” (Freedman 1982, 22). Women who became pregnant as a result from such a relationship often feared the social stigma and burden of raising an illegitimate child and would commit infanticide or abortion. Performance of such actions led to a concealment of the remains, as the law convicted mothers as guilty of murder if infant remains were discovered (Crist 2005). One such example was Elizabeth Emerson, an unwed mother living with her parents. Emerson killed her child and buried it in her garden in an effort to conceal her child resulting from a socially unacceptable relationship (Freedman 1982). Examples such as these, which mirror the context on Sargent Street, give more insight into possible explanations surrounding the concealment of a fetus or infant body.

Reproductive History in the United States

Women in 19th century America had limited access to birth control. The impact of industrialization altered gender roles and removed women from their exclusive role as mother, yet still prevented the restriction of family size. As previously discussed, society promoted sexuality as purely utilitarian for women and any engagement of sex without the motivation of children was shameful, tying into the development of reproductive control. Brodie related the comments of a New England doctor, who stated, “-the New England Family,' stated, “The “arts of prevention' which are also being extensively employed are a far more dangerous foe, not only to the family, but to the virtue and the purity of the community” (Brodie 1997,98). This quote illustrates the societal outlook on birth control and aptly demonstrates societal reaction to women who performed control over their family size: to conceal the use of birth control reflects society's views and approval of such actions. Prior to modern contraception technology,

abstinence and withdrawal represented the most common forms of birth control, though vaginal sponges and douches developed in America in the 19th century as a form of birth control that women had power over (Engelman 2011). However, these methods of birth control and attempts to limit family size were unreliable and often resulted in pregnancy, leading mothers to seek out abortion or infanticide.

Family size declined 50% from 1800 to 1900, with historians citing the emergence of women from the exclusive role as mother and into a more authoritative figure in the family (Engelman 2011). Society viewed controlling family size as negative and women often concealed their use of birth control and aborted their children after becoming pregnant. Legalization of birth control in the 1870 altered family life, motherhood, and conceptualizations of children, however, this legalization likely did not have significant impact on the choices of the mother in this specific context, which likely occurred in the late 1860s.

Women employed abortion, induced miscarriages, and infanticide when they did not want their child. In early months of pregnancy, women often used drugs and herbs to end their pregnancy and took more interventional measures when such medication was unsuccessful (Brodie 1997). Infanticide in American dates back to the 1600's and often resulted from illicit relationships. In legal terms, there is often an, “association between infanticide and illegitimacy.” (Kellett 1992), and the main agents in such examples were often single and widowed women (Swartz and Isser 2000). Common motives included bastardy, and, as Hoffer and Hull stated, "Inleonaticide was a deliberate form of delayed abortion. It involved concealment and probably was the most common among poor, unwed mothers" (Hoffer and Hull 1981, 130). The context of a child found in a privy as a result of infanticide is not unheard of as the privy represented an ideal hiding spot for a mother to conceal her crime. One such example was Ann Trabern, a working-class girl who threw her newborn into a privy in the late 1600's and was sentenced to death (Hoffer and Hull 1981). Often, women blamed accidental death, such as stillbirth or miscarriage for the placement of the remains in a privy and argued that the child "fell from them when they sat upon the vault and they did not know or were too weak to save the infant.” (Hoffer and Hull 1981, 70) One such woman, Ann Jones, argued that she was unaware of her labor when her bastard son fell into the privy vault. Examples such as these depict the privy as a common place to deposit the remains of a child killed by its mother, and potentially act as an explanation for the remains discovered at Sargent Street.

The historic record of abortion is muddled and lacking in data, as much evidence of abortions has been destroyed or kept concealed; hiding an abortion and any information pertaining to it reflects the social and legal consequences of the 19th century. The majority of primary documents on abortion come from legal cases, when law enforcement caught abortionists performing illegal acts, or when the mother passed away. Engelman, in his book, A History of the Birth Control Movement in America, stated, “...most poor and working class women had to resort to inferior birth control and disreputable and unsafe abortion providers.” (Engleman 2011, 18). In the 19th century, many women would attempt to perform an abortion on themselves or employ the assistance of a midwife or doctor illegally; urban women in particular accessed 'female physicians,' the colloquial term for abortionist. Brodie, in her book, "Contraception and Abortion in 19th Century America,” stated, “In the cities of New England and of the Middle Atlantic states, women could find a variety of offices, clinics, and

boardinghouses offering lying-in services and illicit abortions" (Brodie 1997, 228).

Women often dealt with other reproductive struggles, such as miscarriage and stillbirth. Data on stillbirth burials is scarce: the legal responsibility of recording the dead was not established until the mid 20th century, resulting in a lack of data on fetal mortality rates and burial records (Woods 2009; Mooney 1994). Sharon Burston looked at stillbirth burials in a town where fetal remains were discovered, looking to see if mothers often buried their children (Burston 1983). The results showed that many parents in from the 1600s leading into the 1800s did bury their children, though occasionally in unmarked graves. Such burials reflect the attachment of many parents to their newborn/fetus: parents often cared for their children. Romola Davenport, in her work, "The Relationship between Stillbirth and Early Neonatal Mortality: Evidence from Eighteenth Century London," also looked at stillbirth burials and discovered that parents often buried their stillbirth children (Davenport 2010). The number of stillbirth burials occurring around the time period of the fetal remains at Cohoes suggest that many parents did value their children emotionally and buried them to reflect such value. However, contradictory evidence exists Shannon Witcombe's recent book (Witcombe 2018) narrates mixed experiences of miscarriage and stillbirth, as some women do not conceptualize their fetus as a child and have little emotional connection to miscarriages, while some have a strong connection to it. In future research, I hope to look at the burial records in Cohoes, NY and gain a clearer understanding of the context in which the remains were deposited.

Children

19th Century Children

The 19th century, with the development of industrialization in America, changed the perception and lifestyle of children, impacting their work, education, and family life. Children represented a vital aspect of the American labor force: mines employed 14,000 children legally in the late 18th century and 10,000 illegally, illustrating the usefulness of children in American labor. Early labor reform, though not outlawing child labor, differed from state to state, with some states enacting education laws to go along with labor, or decreasing the workday of children from 12 hours to 10 (Abbott 1908). Eventually, Connecticut and Massachusetts enacted laws that prohibited children under 9 to work in the mines, though likely this was often ignored to meet the needs of the family. By 1880, 20% of all children in America were employed (Abbott 1908). Through such data, it is clear that 19th century children held value in terms of labor; they made up a large part of the labor force and assisted their families in difficult times.

Ideals on children shifted in the 19th century, with the impact of European Enlightenment ideals shifting focus to the individual and the proper raising of children, with authors like John Locke and Rousseau showing the effort that society put into caring for children. Such conceptions of childhood transferred to America, impacting the treatment of children. Mortality rates of children stagnated, remaining as they had for the past several centuries and influencing the attachment of parents to their children.

Parents and Children

Different classes had variable respective relationships to their children, yet the historical record shows a strong relationship between parents and children in every class. When referencing the pet names and fondness with which mothers describe their children, one scholar wrote, “Is such detailed description of children's behavior and the many expressions of affection that fill these writings attest to the richly textured emotional bonds between middle-class women and their children” (Dye and Smith 1986, 334). One mother, when discussing the recent death of her infant child, wrote, “I seem to have lost all interest in the future and can enjoy my children only from hour to hour. I feel as if my lost darling were drawing me to her--as I controlled her life before birth so does she me now" (Dye and Smith 1986, 333). Stories such as these, though from higher classes rather than lower, shows a strong bond between mother and child.

Working class families who were unable to feed or house their children often sent them to poorhouses as a way to provide for their children and relieve a financial burden. Children born as a result of intimate relationships were often placed in poorhouses to avoid the shame that accompanied their birth, reflecting social stigmas surrounding children born outside of wedlock and the treatment of such children. The government and social reforms instituted poor houses with good intentions, namely, to, “educate and redeem destitute children” (Katz 1998, 103). Children were often separated from their family in an attempt to remove the child from an undesirable family situation. In the historical context surrounding the fetal remains, placing children in poorhouses was a viable option for mothers who were impregnated under financial or social pressure, though the treatment of children was unsuitable in such establishments. By the late 1800's, the welfare system recognized the weakness in the poorhouse system and the treatment of children which led to changes in the social welfare programs with an emphasis on saving the children from poorhouses (Katz 1998). The status of poorhouses shows the impact that social stigmas had on mothers as well as the financial difficulty that led mothers to place their children in such establishments.

The relationship between mother and fetus evolved in the late 19th century with the development of embryology and the expansion of knowledge surrounding the fetus. Such developments emerged from the progressive era movement which encouraged social activism to combat issues that arose with industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. Technological advances accompanied social change and gave mothers a deeper, scientific look into the status of their unborn child. Within the progressive movement, the social role of motherhood was emphasized, specifically for middle class women; working class women were targeted as unable to fulfill their role and duty as mother properly which led to middle class women imposing social mothering upon these working-class mothers. Social mothering focused on the perceived problems with working class families and mothers: mothers refused to fulfill their exclusive role as mothers and worked, while their children participated in work as well. Part of this concern for motherhood and children stemmed from perspectives on children during the 19th century. The influence of Calvinism and romanticism changed perceptions of childhood in the 19th century, leading mothers to view their children as innocent and to look to preserve their time as children. Lengthening of childhood occurs in the 19th century for middle class children, yet working class children joined the workforce early in an effort to assist their families economically (Broder 2002). The contrast between middle class children and working-class children was significant

and reflected the social luxuries that economically stable families were able to produce for their children. Child welfare reformers represented societal concern for children that appreciated the age and vulnerability of this age group; this is not to say that working class families did not associate with these ideals, but rather that they did not have the luxury of treating their children with such appreciation. Broder commented on motherhood for working class women, stating, "[t]he need for women to work, coupled with the low wages of women's work; the precariousness of the family economy, particularly for widowed, deserted, and single women with children; the stigma of illegitimacy and the shortage of appropriate childcare all pointed to the increased likelihood of child abandonment or abuse" (Broder 2002, 158). Motherhood for the working class differed from upper classes: economic deprivations prevented lower class women from giving their children the same social experience as upper-class women.

The need for fetal bodies that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to embryology studies and the desire to understand unborn children also impacted working class mothers. Fetal bodies were sought out by doctors and sourced both ethical and unethically; doctors often procured such skeletons from lower class and racially marginalized women (Muller and Butler 2018). Such procurement reflects how the status of a mother can influence the burial of a stillbirth. The structural violence perpetrated on these women prevented them from giving their child a proper burial and instead used their status against them, pressuring them into giving their child to science rather than burying them. Embryonic collectors sourced their bodies through doctors who dealt with fetuses; doctors would take fetal remains from stillbirth, miscarriages, and abortions to supply such collectors. Muller and Butler commented on this supply and demand, stating, "procedure-related pregnancy terminations, or therapeutic abortions, provided a significant source of fetal remains" (Muller and Butler 2018, 12). Women who previously would have given their child a burial or disposed of the child themselves were prevented from such with the creation of laws in the early 20th century that prohibited personal burial of stillbirths and miscarriages. Muller and Butler stated, "By the early 20th century, laws required the reporting and proper disposal of miscarriages, stillbirths, and infants. This provided ample opportunity for physicians, and then embryologists, anatomists, and anthropologists to obtain their specimens' from miscarriages, stillbirths, and deceased infants" (Muller and Butler 2018, Morgan 2009; Wilson 2015). Such laws encouraged families to turn their stillbirths over to the doctor, assuming that the doctor would bury it. Often unknown to the parents, the doctors would supply the stillborn to embryologists; there is little to no evidence of informed consent. Muller and Butler commented on this, stating, "Records from anatomical collections (e.g., the W. Montague Cobb Skeletal Collection) indicate that families turned the bodies of infants and stillbirths over for disposal by the state, county, or district. However, they do not indicate that women were aware that the remains of their infants and fetuses were to be dissected, macerated, and kept in skeletal collection" (Muller and Butler 2018, 13). This quote illustrates the status of working-class women and their choices when it came to the burial and deposition of their deceased children.

The Excavation

The archaeological excavation of Sargent Street was completed by Hartgen Archaeology in September 2017, excavating seven trenches and two features using mechanical trenching. The two features were discovered in trench 6 and identified as privy structures. The first feature held

mostly domestic artifacts, architectural artifacts, and personal artifacts, with ceramics making up a majority of the artifacts found. This second feature, a privy vault, contained an array of artifacts used to date the construction. Two stratigraphic levels were identified in the second feature, the first being a layer of coal likely used the fill in the privy after abandonment and the second being a cultural bearing strata of night soil. Seven hundred and thirty-six artifacts were recovered from this particular privy vault, with the vast majority of cultural materials representing domestic artifacts that included kitchenwares and tablewares used for the consumption of food and drink. Archaeologists used the artifacts found to date the privy, dating the construction to during the Civil War Era and the abandonment to the late 1870s. The night soil was screened for artifacts, revealing a multitude of ceramics, pipe stems, etc; it was also in this layer that the skeletal remains were recovered.

Figure 1: South profile of privy after partial excavation.

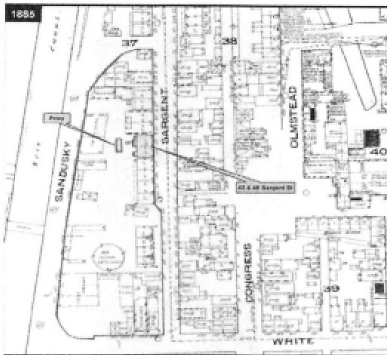

Figure 2: 1885 Sanborn Fire Insurance map showing location of the privy.

After excavation, the remains were analyzed at SUNY New Paltz to determine the elements and the age of the fetus. The bones were laid out on inert polyethylene foam to prevent breakage and identified as a right femur, left tibia, right radius, and right humerus.

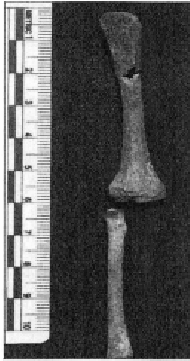

Figure 3: Anterior view of right humerus and right radius.

Figure 4: Anterior view of right femur and left tibia.

After the initial examination, the bones were measured to calculate the age of the fetus. Maximum diaphyseal lengths were used to estimate the age based on formulae published by Scheuer et al. (Scheuer et al 1980), which give an average age of the fetus based on the measurements of the bones. These formulas approximated the age of the fetus between 33-38 weeks. The mean age of the individual was between 35 and 36 weeks (Table 2). These ranges lead to two possibilities: firstly, on lower end of the range, the skeleton possibly represents an unborn developing fetus (approx. 33 weeks). This age would correspond better with the context of miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion. Secondly, on the higher end of the range, (approx. 38 weeks) the fetus would be viewed as “full term’ and possibly a neonate, which would imply the child died after its birth and potentially represents a case of infanticide.

Element	Measurement	Length
Right humerus*	Maximum width at distal extremity	14.14 mm
	Maximum diameter at midshaft	5.92 mm
	Maxiumum diaphyseal length	58.70 mm
Right radius	Maxiumum diaphyseal length	48.05 mm
	Maximum diameter at midshaft	4.13 mm
Left tibia	Maxiumum diaphyseal length	59.46 mm
	Maximum diameter at midshaft	6.47 mm
Right femur	Maxiumum diaphyseal length	69.38 mm
	Maximum diameter at midshaft	6.49 mm
	Maximum width at distal extremity	16.42 mm

Table 1. Measurements taken of remains based of description in Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994)

Element	Formula	Age estimate
Humerus	0.4585 (HUM) + 8.6563	35.57 ± 2.33 weeks
Radius	0.5850 (RAD) + 7.7100	35.82 ± 2.29 weeks
Tibia	0.4207 (TIB) + 11.4724	36.49 ± 2.12 weeks
Femur	0.3303 (FEM) + 13.5583	36.47 ± 2.08 weeks

Table 2. Age estimate in weeks

Discussion

The inhabitants of Sargent St., the two widows and their daughters, potentially represent the mother of the fetus and give insight into the experience of working-class women supporting their families during the late 1800s. It is unlikely we will ever uncover the specific context and agents in the deposition of the remains in this privy, however, knowing the context and individuals involved in this house gives some viable ideas. Previously considered exclusively mothers, the impact of industrialization opened up doors for women and allowed a gradual shift into the workforce; the time period in which the privy was active, 1850-1870, represents a period of transition, where women were just beginning to work and the beginnings of the women's suffrage movement. The Civil War, with the majority of men fighting, allowed women a place on the farm and forced them into intense manual labor as well as mothering children. This shift created a culture that discriminated against women who chose to work instead of pursuing motherhood; in a social context as this, it is clear how these social concepts surrounding motherhood and womanhood could have influenced the placement of these remains. The status of working-class women left these women with a perceived need to limit their family size; financial reasons motivated women to prevent the birth of children, as did the departure of women from their traditional role. Exploring the context and broader themes that influence the decisions of these women gives an opportunity to explore possible factors that influenced the placement of these remains.

Potentially, the remains represent abortion, infanticide, stillbirth, or miscarriage. Pregnancy resulting from an “illicit" relationship additionally influenced women, as both societal and legal consequences met women pregnant as a result of adultery or fornication. Abortion came with consequences as well which often resulted in the concealment of procedures and remains. Such societal and legal outlooks on abortion led to the concealment of abortions or infanticide; potentially, the remains found at Sargent Street fall into this category and represent a hidden abortion. Stillbirth represents a potential explanation for the placement of the fetal remains in the privy, with a mother depositing the remains of her child born dead in a convenient place. However, the emotional attachment to the child often leads to a burial, as mothers feel the loss of their children deeply and honor them with a burial in modern day. Minimal data on stillbirth in 19th century America includes both a deep emotional connection to stillbirths and infants and mothers without such connection. Without conclusive data, it is difficult to assume the emotional connection between this specific mother and fetus.

Many working-class parents in this time period, however, did have a deep relationship with their children and often grieved at stillbirths or infant death. Scholars have discussed the impact of mortality rates and found that mortality rates have little relation to burial patterns of upper class parents, but have a significant impact on lower class parents (Cannon and Cook

2015). This is not to say that lower class families did not have an emotional connection to them, but rather that their economic status could have impacted the manifestation of this connection because their children died more often. Mothers in the 19th century held a close relationship to their children despite high mortality rates: diaries and journal entries show a connection and closeness to children that evolved in the 19th century. In terms of the infant at Sargent Street, potentially the mother felt unable to experience a connection due to economic or societal pressures.

Though the assumption is often that the mother herself deposited the remains in the privy, it is possible that she had minimal or no involvement. Potential agents include other family members and medical persons; the father of the child could have deposited the remains and forced the mother into an abortion or infanticide, or perhaps other family members provided similar pressure. In a medical setting doctors and midwives often had the responsibility of depositing of the remains; ethically or unethically, a medical individual could have been tasked with depositing of the remains, to either conceal an illegal abortion or to dispose of a stillbirth.

Conclusion

The context of the fetal remains in the privy at Sargent Street will likely never be fully discovered and leaves a large question mark on the potential explanations. Despite the ambiguous nature of this archaeological context, the remains offer insight into the larger historical picture for working class women in 19th century America. The impact of social norms and legal systems influence the choices and options of working-class women: the consequences of puritanical, repressive sexuality led to discrimination against pregnancies that occurred out of adultery, fornication, or other seemingly illicit relationships. Working class women, specifically, felt both financial and social pressure; the changing ideologies surrounding working women shifted and placed women in both the domestic realm and the labor force, creating a contrasting outlook on where women belonged and how she related to her children. Working women employed both themselves and their children in the workforce and had not the luxury of creating a childhood environment that upper classes had access to. The status of a working-class woman in the 19th century impacted the way she related to her children.

Potential explanations for the deposit of remains at Sargent St. range from natural causes to interventions, from stillbirth to infanticide. Women reported mixed feelings on the relationship to their fetus during the 19th century: some felt a close connection to both their fetus and their infant, yet many did not recognize a stillbirth as a child yet and had little attachment. However, this case at Sargent Street does not represent the way in which mothers viewed their stillborn children, but the mammoth societal and financial issues that impacted their relationships with their children.

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