By DAVID S. ROTENSTEIN

The indigency of slavery and economic discrimination against African Americans is a blight on our past. Some might argue that archaeology helps to shed light on misunderstood and obscured parts of history like the social behavior of enslaved African Americans or their descendents. But when disenfranchisement follows a person through life and into the grave only to re-emerge under the guise of archaeology some centuries or two later, who's to say where scientific propriety ends and desecration begins?

These sentiments were echoed by Rep. Gus Savage (D., Ill.) after the excavation of a colonial-era slave cemetery in New York City was halted by the federal government last Thursday.

"So often, African Americans have their peace in life disturbed by government," Savage told reporters last week after the General Services Administration responded to a lawsuit from African Americans and announced its decision to stop archaeological excavations at the construction site of a proposed office on Broadway in Lower Manhattan.

Hearings by a special advisory committee are expected to debate the future of the project.

Chances are, if your ancestors were poor — slaves, tenant farmers or textile mill workers — their final resting place and skeletal remains are fair game for grave robbers. Archaeologists, if your ancestors were African American or Native American, the likelihood of them being excavated is greater than if they came from middle class white backgrounds. Poverty and racial bias combined with the decay and neglect of cemeteries lacking those ornate marble monuments marking the graves of the elite — can eradicate the modest memorials erected by the poor for their loved ones. Like the people buried in them, the cemeteries of the poor are lost and forgotten.

In 1990, Congress debated several bills dealing with the repatriation of Native American skeletal remains and artifacts. The result was legislation protecting Native American burial sites.

According to Clark Spencer Larsen, an anthropologist at Purdue University, the graves of African Americans aren't protected by federal laws. "The law states that all institutions receiving federal funding must inventory collections of Native American remains, assess who they are and contact descendants," Larsen explained. "But that federal law deals only with Native Americans."

But as Singleton points out, "I guess disenfranchised groups are getting more attention. These poor people, black or white, are in the cemeteries that are getting excavated."

Nearly 150 African American graves from the First African Baptist Church were excavated in 1983 due to construction of the Vine Street Expressway in Philadelphia. In southwest Arkansas, 79 black graves were excavated in 1982 by the Arkansas Archeological Survey to make way for construction along the Red River.

After a cemetery is identified by archaeologists, the agency sponsoring the project must decide on a way to deal with the find. This might involve selecting a different alternative or location for the project, or outright cancellation or excavation of the site.

Singleton stresses that while she doesn't believe there's any conscious bias on behalf of the archaeologists to dig African American cemeteries, "I wonder if that bias does occur on some decision-making level. I don't know."

Says Larsen, "Most states, if not all, have some sort of legislation dealing with human remains regardless of who they are."

But most state laws, like their federal counterparts, are designed to protect Native Americans because of their passionate Indian-rights lobbying. Perhaps now, with the outrage in the South, the same might be forthcoming for African Americans.

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