

Neuberger Museum of Art
2003 Biennial Exhibition of Public Art
On the Campus of Purchase College
State University of New York
June 22 – October 19, 2003
Pg 14

Investigations: looking for a Negro wench named Dinah, a boy named John, one girl named Poll, 2003

Aluminum, iron, ground-penetrating radar scans, text

Gate: 90 x 56 x 2 inches

Courtesy of the artists

From 1734 until 1825, the land comprising Purchase College was owned by the Thomas family, whose burial ground is the focus of this work by Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry. Among the “property” Judge John Thomas, Jr. left to his family, six slaves are named in his will. In the 1800 census, there were thirteen slaves listed as belonging to John Thomas’s son, Major General Thomas Thomas. In spite of provisions made for these slaves in their old age, and the Thomas’s remarkable decision to bury the slaves in the family cemetery, questions remain regarding the slaves’ identity and quality of life. Plain flagstone markers in the graveyard’s northwest corner fail to name the slaves, and also lack the dates and familial descriptions that honor the Thomas family gravestones. “*Investigations* examines the unmarked and unknown quality that surrounds slave burial and uncovers how class dictates acknowledgement, memory and legacy,” note McCallum and Tarry. Using ground-penetrating radar to locate unmarked graves, McCallum and Tarry designated each with an iron post bearing its cross-sectional image, a singular identity matched to a slave’s name taken from the Thomas wills and the 1800 census. Some of the graves McCallum and Tarry discovered extend beyond the c.1840 walls, and were found under the adjacent field and handicap-accessible parking. The artists fabricated a new gate to the cemetery, making the passage into sacred ground and addressing the graveyard’s somewhat arbitrary delineation. A lyrical pairing of text and image, history and technology, *Investigations* introduces issues of ownership, perpetuity, and whether it is more important to honor the memory of the dead or the needs of the living.