

# WHEN FANCY GETS THE UPPER HAND OF FACT

## HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND POPULAR CULTURE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

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Archaeologists are systematic seekers and finders of knowledge that maintains mass public appeal, which means they have an ethical responsibility to be conscientious purveyors of that information to ensure that lay audiences keep up with and remain critical of archaeological advances, especially given the accessibility of pseudo-archaeology. Given popular culture's penchant for archaeological themes, it is essential that archaeologists share sound and clearly presented research with the lay public to provide the latter with "well-founded information from ... empirical data as a brake against their own and the archaeologist's political zeal" (South 1997:55).

Popular culture includes the plentiful forms of cultural communication that have burgeoned since the beginning of the early twentieth century, such as newspapers, dime novels, comics, radio, movies, and television. While archaeology has surfaced in many segments of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century popular culture (e.g., Holtorf 2005), Sabloff (1998:869–870) reminds fellow archaeologists of the ways in which empirical archaeological investigations have "excited public interest" since the nineteenth century and calls attention to a communications gap that grew between the public and professionals when academic archaeology developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While making an argument to rebridge that gap, Sabloff emphasizes how popular writing should be part of an archaeologist's academic obligation, especially given the attractiveness of pseudoscientific approaches (Sabloff 1998:872–873). By doing so, archaeologists exercise their professional responsibility to present the relevance of their work and challenge widespread fictionalizations of the topics associated with their assorted areas of expertise.

In this case, the American West's historic period is the sample area of expertise. Archaeology in this area navigates popular culture's dual fascinations with the "Wild West" and archaeology. Newspaper articles, advertisements, and dime novels represent major forms of popular culture that conveyed news and stories about events in the American West to audiences within and far removed from that region (e.g., Brown 1997; *California Star* 1847a; James 1998a:143–166 *New York Herald* 1848). If one were to read numerous dime novels, as did many people during the late nineteenth century, then the "the overriding impression would be of a West where major and minor disputes were resolved violently, and the moral order was momentarily stabilized only by the superior strength and intelligence of a handsome, well-built hero" (Brown 1997, as cited in Vanasco 1997).

As a result, these media outlets transmitted this region's notorious tales to global audiences. Exaggerations emerged almost immediately. For example, when the Donner Party story became known, the media spread graphic and embellished descriptions about survival cannibalism associated with this wagon train that became snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Range of northern California (e.g., *California Star* 1847b). In another example, this one from a mining boomtown in Nevada, Mark Twain admitted that while he worked there in the early 1860s, he "let fancy get the upper hand of fact too often when

there was a dearth of news" (Twain 1985:112); Twain worked as an editor for the *Territorial Enterprise*, a Virginia City, Nevada newspaper. In the same confession, Twain expressed how his glee soared on a slow news day when a desperado killed a man in a Virginia City saloon. These are just a few examples of the ways newspapers and fiction writers sensationalized a wilder West than the one of reality, which they then disseminated to nineteenth-century media audiences. Their tales carried over into the twentieth century and were perpetuated not only by dime novels, but also by Hollywood and the Western film genre, providing mass audiences with a "powerfully imagined American West" (White 1993; see also West 1979: xi, xii, 143).

Because the human brain has the ability to intuitively create an entire reality from a few images, popular culture's visual presentations of saloons, cowboys, Indians, gunfighters, and other icons of the American West easily conjure images of fiction rather than fact. While Western history is much more complex than the artistic portrayals noted above, it is worth noting that Hollywood completed the work of entertaining, amplifying public interest in historic sites in the region. Tourists from around the world visit refurbished ghost towns and historic sites associated with Western lore to experience the authentic places where famous and notorious events occurred. The fact that those settings contain artifacts and other archaeological traces allows tangible contact with and physical evidence of the infamous events that captured the public's attention in the first place. This makes for a powerful gateway to present archaeological findings to a public eager to learn about the facts behind the entertaining fiction. Historical archaeology in this region is inevitably connected with the lure of fanciful accounts associated with the "wild" West, an observation made by historical archaeologists who investigated sites associated with subjects commonly appreciated by popular culture, including Pony Express stations, the Donner Party, mining camps, Chinatowns, saloons, and brothels (e.g., Costello 2000; Dixon 2005; Hardesty 1997, 1998; Meyer et al. 2005; Praetzelis and Praetzelis 2001; Spude 2005; Wegars 2001).

### The Boston Saloon Project

The medium and precedent of public archaeology among the ruins of saloons in Virginia City, Nevada conveys research beyond scholarly bounds (Dixon 2005; Hardesty et al. 1996). Archaeological investigations at one of these saloon sites, the Boston Saloon, will be briefly discussed as this paper's case study of the blending of two topics that captivate a broad spectrum of lay audiences: the legendary drinking house of the American West and the exciting field of archaeology. The Boston Saloon was an African-American drinking house that operated between 1866 and 1875 (Dixon 2002:16, 2005:36; see also Dixon 2006b). Research at the Boston Saloon site exposed one of several accounts of the American West, encouraging respect for the diverse cultures that created the recent cultural heritage of that region, paralleling the mission of the new Western historians (e.g., Chan et al. 1994; James 1998a; James and Raymond 1998; Murphy 1997). Given the persistence of racism in the modern world, such research helps combat this issue by highlighting the American West's complex, united history.

The Boston Saloon's owner, William A. G. Brown, was a person of color who was born in Massachusetts. He arrived in Virginia City during the early 1860s and was noted as a "bootblack," a street shoe polisher, in a directory of the Nevada Territory (Kelly 1863). Within a few years, Brown opened a saloon that operated from the 1860s to early 1870s. His saloon's existence and affiliation with people of African ancestry are among the chronicles of African-American heritage in the mining West, a story that is not commonly recognized in that region in general, with the exception of the Buffalo Soldiers and black cowboys (Taylor 1998:19). Historical sources described the Boston Saloon as "the popular resort of many of the colored population," and African-American writers lamented the loss of "a place of recreation of our own" in Virginia City after the Boston Saloon closed (*Pacific Appeal* 1875; Rusco 1975:56).

Excavations at the Boston Saloon turned up materials such as bottles, glassware, tobacco pipes, and faunal remains (Figure 1). Generally speaking, such objects were not at all unlike artifacts recovered during archaeological research at three other contemporaneous Virginia City saloons, including a German-owned opera house saloon and two Irish-owned establishments. At a basic, interpretive level, these items signify the types of food and beverages served, as well as the interior atmosphere of this establish-

ment. Upon closer inspection, however, it became clear that each saloon maintained both subtle and overt material distinctions. For example, when the Boston Saloon collection was compared with the collections from these other establishments, it became clear that it sported a rather upscale atmosphere, with elegant glassware (Figure 2), high-quality faunal remains, fancy women's clothing accoutrements, and innovative gas lights (Figure 3) (Dixon 2005:59–62; 87–95; 124–132; see also Dixon 2006a, 2006b). While some visitors to Western saloons indicate a stale, fume-filled, dimly-lit atmosphere (West 1979:42), the remains from the Boston Saloon suggest that someone developed a fashionable and well-illuminated setting. Ironically, a description of Brown's saloon uses rather negative terms, depicting it as “a dead-fall” (Hoff 1938:52). This was in reference to the first version of Brown's saloon; by 1866, Brown moved his establishment to a new location, the bustling intersection of D Street and Union Street, where the archaeological excavations indicate it was anything but a dead-fall (Dixon 2005:158–164).



Figure 1: Artifacts recovered from the Boston Saloon included objects such as those shown here, with ceramic serving and storage vessels, glass beverage bottles, crystal stemware, tobacco pipes, and faunal remains. Courtesy, Ronald M. James, photographer.

The Boston Saloon's rich archaeological record demonstrates how the recent past can be linked with social issues, such as the ways in which the elegant archaeological remains combat racist assumptions about the material components of African-American saloons elsewhere from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Duis 1983:160). Even visitors to the Boston Saloon site indicated that the sophisticated atmosphere being excavated challenged their pop-culture-inspired, stereotypical assumptions about saloons in general. Those individuals frequently expressed their surprise about the existence of archaeological remains of an African-American saloon and about the fact that the artifacts signaled a finely furnished establishment, especially given its historical context of America's post-Civil War Reconstruction era.

The notion of a relatively refined saloon also contradicts general stereotypes associated with popular saloon imagery, namely seedy atmospheres, outlaws, loose women, and brawls. Violence and vice did, on occasion, occur in saloons (James 1998a:154; West 1979). Nevertheless, they were, for the most part, public places where people went to relax and socialize as opposed to places where people sought certain death. Yet the latter has worked its way into a common association between saloons and violence. Hollywood portrayals and popular forms of Western historical literature tend to present saloons and mining boomtowns as sordid places populated primarily by European Americans, with Chinese and Native Americans on the margins. African Americans rarely enter this story. But they were there, and the Boston Saloon is one instance that provides an opportunity to learn more about their experiences in the American West.

New immigrants to the West sought to soften the anxiety and hostility associated with the transition to a new life in this region and actively expressed their identity through various leisure venues. Leisure studies call attention to the fact that people express their cultural, class-based, gender-based identity during their free time, especially when living in a prejudicial social and economic context (Duis 1983; Murphy 1997; West 1979). As leisure institutions, saloons represented physical places where people of similar backgrounds could socialize and relax. Saloons were places where people found refuge as an array of groups came into contact with each other in cosmopolitan



Figure 2: Glass serving ware from the Boston Saloon included elegant crystal stemware, such as the goblet base and stem fragment shown here. Courtesy, Ronald M. James, photographer.

Western boomtown settings, encouraging segregation and pluralism instead of a society of “indiscriminate social mixing” (West 1979:91). The individual saloon niches, then, reflected the diverse social, cultural, economic, and ethnic milieu of the West’s boomtowns. Saloons provide an example of how a shared heritage of many groups played itself out in the West and fueled cultural diversity. The archaeology of Virginia City saloons recovered thousands of artifacts and ecofacts that comprise the material vestiges of that diversity.

### Changing Public Attitudes

The iconic appeal of saloons, together with the tangible remains of those places, provides a gateway for presenting historical and archaeological interpretations to the lay public, that is, people who are neither participating in nor influenced by the work of the new Western historians and historical archaeologists in the American West. It is assumed that such members of the public would not, generally, be inspired to consider the multicultural dimensions of West if they continued to get their history from the popular, fictitious accounts of that region.

While the public was informed about and invited to the Boston Saloon excavation, outreach continues even though the field and laboratory work are complete. A traveling exhibit, *Havens in a Heartless World*, featuring materials recovered during historical archaeological investigations of boomtown saloons, recently premiered at the Nevada State Museum in Carson City (Figure 4). Also, a historical marker dedicated to the Boston Saloon currently hangs on C Street, Virginia City’s main thoroughfare, where it can be seen by anyone sauntering along the boardwalk (Nevada State Historic Preservation Office 2005). Finally, the book *Boomtown Saloons: Archaeology and History in Virginia City* (Dixon 2005), intends to appeal to scholars and the lay public.

Non-archaeologists ended up making their own significant contributions to the Boston Saloon project. For example, in addition to visiting and filming the excavation, the Reno-Sparks Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) incorporated the Boston Saloon project in Black History Month and Juneteenth celebrations and featured the project on a calendar commemorating Black history in Nevada (Miller 2006). In another example, one member of the public who spent time volunteering on the Boston Saloon came across someone peddling a one-of-a-kind historic photo of William Brown (Dornan 2006). This individual, realizing the significance of the photo after spending time volunteering on the Boston Saloon investigation, acquired it and immediately shared it with those involved with that project. In each of these examples, members of the public were inspired to continue collaboration with professionals long after the excavation pits had been backfilled.

Once archaeologists learn something about the human past, they are responsible for presenting their research. In this case, the Boston Saloon story underscored a shared heritage and had the potential to highlight a sense of mutual respect for the diverse cultures comprising the history and current character of the western United States (Asante 1998:xi). Given this, the project archaeologists and historians realized that it was essential to disseminate the findings from this project to various audiences, and this occurred at both national and international levels (e.g., Donaldson 2000; James and Escobar 2004; McIlhenny Company 2002). They were able to share knowledge of the Boston Saloon with lay audiences by tapping into the existing, dual fascinations with archaeology and popular culture’s iconic “Wild West.”

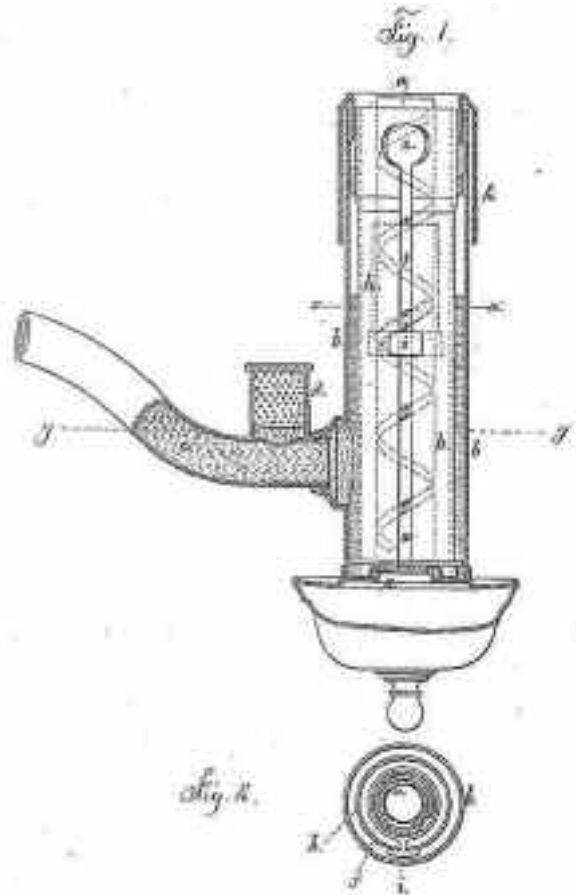


Figure 3: Patent information recovered from a copper-alloy fragment indicated that this gas light fixture was the style used in the Boston Saloon. The illustration is from the U.S. Patent Records, Patent No. 134,281, December 24, 1872. Courtesy, Getchell Library, University of Nevada, Reno.



Figure 4: One of several displays in the Havens in a Heartless World exhibit, dedicated to presenting the archaeological discoveries from Virginia City, Nevada saloons during the Spring of 2006. Courtesy, Nevada State Museum, Jeanette McGregor, photographer.

The repercussion of this two-fold appeal provided lessons in the complexities of American western history and that history's influence on our modern world—with figurative spoonfuls of sugar. Even the non-*Archaeology* magazine readers walked away with a revised view of the West.

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