

# EXCAVATING STRATA OF MEMORY AND FORGETTING

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**A**s a historical archaeologist, I have encountered the privilege and challenge of working on a number of research projects that revealed aspects of both forgotten and invented histories. One's ability to engage in such subjects is directly enhanced when archaeology is pursued in the spirit of civic engagement, with researchers working from the outset to collaborate with members of a diversity of interested communities. In this brief essay, I will highlight such experiences from projects located in Loudoun Valley, Virginia and Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

## Enslavement and Witchcraft in Loudoun Valley

The Demory house site in the Loudoun Valley of northern Virginia is located just six miles south of the Potomac River and the Blue Ridge Gap at Harpers Ferry. The shell of a log house stands on the Short Hill Mountain several hundred feet above the valley floor. Documentary and archaeological evidence indicate that this house was constructed by a family of German-American heritage in the last decades of the eighteenth century on land that was leased and then purchased by Peter Demory. The Demory family was of Anglo-American and German-American heritage, and owned several neighboring farmsteads in the Loudoun Valley through the late nineteenth century.

When I undertook excavations of the remains of this log house on one of the Demory parcels, I worked from the outset to broadly disseminate information about the project and the types of research questions I was considering. Utilizing internet web pages and communications by telephone, letters, meetings, and internet exchanges through genealogy forums, I was able to correspond with many members of the local and descendant communities who were interested in the project. Many aspects of my questions, methods, and interpretations of data were significantly shaped by those discussions.

The core research questions I developed in regard to the Demory house site can be described in the following, fairly academic-sounding terms. The study addressed the unfolding and interaction of three cultural processes in the ethnically diverse upper Potomac and northern Shenandoah region surrounding Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, during the period of 1750 to 1865. One process involved the dynamics with which distinct social groups and networks formed, solidified, and dissipated over time. Such social group dynamics included a second process of communication through the stylistic shaping and display of material culture. These two in turn impacted a third set of dynamics that involved regional exchange systems and competing socioeconomic interests deployed across the North Atlantic and within the mid-Atlantic region of America. I explored the ways in which these three processes intersected one another as members of varying social groups created, obtained, used, and displayed objects that exhibited stylistic patterns that could be employed to communicate a person's affiliations with those groups or to express more individual interests. In the course of this study, I examined the influence of elements of German-American, African-American, and Anglo-American cultural traditions in this



*Figure 1. Remains of the log house on a Demory parcel in Loudoun Valley, Virginia (Photo credit: Christopher C. Fennell).*

region and time period. Particular forms of material culture of religious beliefs, architecture, and housewares were analyzed within this theoretical framework (Fennell 2003, 2007).

In more compelling terms, however, which are relevant to this commentary about aspects of forgotten histories, the research focused on that log house in Loudoun Valley also revealed instances of witchcraft and enslavement. Documentary evidence of census lists and tax records indicate that Peter Demory and his adult sons operated their farming operations during the antebellum with the labor of enslaved African Americans. Unfortunately, I was not able to uncover detailed life histories of those laborers, who were reflected in such documentary sources with the limited information of first names, age groups, and property valuations. The fact of their past lives and work on the Demory farms, however, was a revelation to a number of Demory family descendants.

I led a tour of the archaeological site for over 40 members of the Demory descendant families in 2003, an event which corresponded with a family reunion and a wedding nearby. This site is in a remote, barely accessible location, so conducting such a tour was no easy feat. After clearing away a number of fallen trees from a dirt track on the Short Hill Mountain that morning, I returned to a spot on the valley floor to talk with the assembled group about their family history. We later traveled to the site with three generations of family members piled into a caravan of four-wheel drive vehicles bouncing over mountainside tracks. It took all day and three trips of that caravan for all family members to have a chance to tour the site and discuss their heritage.

Many had previously learned of a history of frontier pioneers and the tough, frugal lifeways of German immigrant families and their subsequent successes as Virginia farmers. Their view of family heritage and history grew more complex, however, as I described the details of the schism of Union and Confederate sympathies within Loudoun County at the start of the Civil War, and the investment of their forebears in the institution of slavery. Confronting facets of history that had been forgotten by many, they now engaged in a more nuanced and complicated reckoning



Figure 2. This excerpt from a photograph taken in the autumn of 1862 shows St. Peter's Church and School House in Harpers Ferry. The roof-top cupola of the School House is visible immediately behind the Church. Larger versions of this photographic record, which provide a panoramic view of the town, are available in the Library of Congress' "American Memory" archives.

of their family heritage. Yet, as a number of them expressed to me, they found a complex truth far more valuable and compelling to their sense of moralities than a history reduced by elisions.

The archaeology of the log house on the Demory parcel revealed another aspect of forgotten histories. A small, sculpted figure of a skull, with cross marks and inscriptions of initials upon it, was located under the floorboards of the structure, half-way between the north and south doorways. After years of extensive research to determine the context, function, meaning, and significance of this artifact, I found the most persuasive interpretation to be that this object was a material composition as part of a malevolent curse in the German-American practice known as *hexerei* (Fennell 2003, 2007). This curse was likely composed in the antebellum decades by a German heritage resident of the vicinity and was intended to target one or more members of the Demory family. Such artifacts of malevolent spiritual invocations are rarely uncovered, because they were typically created and deployed in secret.

The histories of German Americans and Anglo-Americans in Virginia usually focus upon the religious belief systems that fit within one of the dominant Christian denominations of the day. The robust history of an independent belief system among many residents, employing non-Christian traditions of spiritual invocations, is far less of an ingredient of local and state heritage. Yet, in an astounding development, the Virginia Historical Society Museum in Richmond now presents this skull figure in a custom display case, just feet from the portraits of Jefferson and Washington, in a permanent exhibit entitled "The Story of Virginia: An American Experience." Moreover, the display is not intended to exoticize German-American heritage, but rather emphasizes the pervasiveness of such belief systems among numerous European-American and African-American ethnic groups, and highlights the multivalent character of the symbolism deployed in such compositions.



*Figure 3. Armory wall capstone on the ground outside the west doorway of St. Peter's School House in Harpers Ferry, next to its original position (Photo credit: Christopher C. Fennell).*

### **Legends of the Civil War in Harpers Ferry**

St. Peter's Catholic Church, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was built in the early 1830s and has been an important religious institution and social center within Harpers Ferry for over a century and a half. The site includes a standing Church, Rectory, nearby privy structure, and the surrounding grounds. The Rectory building was originally a School House which served as a nondenominational educational center from 1854–1889, when it was converted into use as housing and offices for the clergy and their staff. Harpers Ferry had been established in the 1790s as a site for a federal armaments facility, which became the target of John Brown's failed raid in 1859.

From the 1950s through the mid-1990s, the National Park Service conducted extensive archaeological and historical research on many of the properties located throughout Harpers Ferry and nearby Virginus Island. However, due to their location on private property, no such archaeological investigations of the grounds of St. Peter's Church and School were undertaken in the course of those investigations. The Church and School grounds potentially offered a wealth of archaeological data on the daily lives and material culture of the Church pastors, support staff, teachers, students, parishioners, and neighbors, for the time period of 1830 onward.

Regular services at St. Peter's Church were curtailed in 1995, as part of a reorganization plan of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. This plan called for the preservation of the Church in view of its historical significance. St. Peter's remains open to the public, and receives hundreds of thousands of visitors a year, many of whom come to tour the surrounding Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. I conducted excavations on the grounds of the Church and School in the summer of 2000. I undertook this project in cooperation with Reverend Father Brian Owens, the Pastor of St. James Church in Charles Town and of St. Peter's, who was working to coordinate restoration work on the buildings and surrounding grounds. This work included improvements of the landscape and repairs to the Church, Rectory, and the stone retaining walls that surround them. I organized archaeological investigations to coincide with those efforts in order to preserve the record of artifacts and features located on those grounds. The excavations were conducted with volunteers, including individuals from as far away as England, California, and Minnesota, as well as volunteers who were also civil war re-enactors and remarkably knowledgeable about the material culture of union and confederate soldiers' uniforms and personal kits.

Harpers Ferry changed hands between Union and Confederate control 14 times during the years of the Civil War. St. Peter's was the only church in the town that was not severely damaged or destroyed by the heavy bombardments and destruction leveled on Harpers Ferry by both northern and southern forces. The drama of the War left St. Peter's with a number of local legends. Two ghost stories are applied to the Church. In one, the ghost of a priest walks the path along the north exterior wall of the Church, reading a book, and then turns abruptly, disappearing into the wall, at a spot where the original 1833 Church's front facade likely stood. In another story, the stone steps leading into the east entrance of the Church are haunted by the cries of a baby who was killed there by a falling mortar shell.

Archaeological excavations in the summer of 2000 dispelled a third belief (Fennell 2001). A large capstone from the Armory wall rests in the ground just outside the west, exterior door of the old School House. This stone weighs approximately 500 pounds. In view of its weight, the labor it would take to move it up to the School House yard, and the likely use of the Church and School House as makeshift hospitals in the Civil War, some Harpers Ferry residents believed that this stone might cap and memorialize a burial of limbs amputated from unfortunate soldiers. We were careful in moving the stone so we could excavate beneath it, and we were ready to contact the State Historic Preservation Officer of West Virginia in the event we uncovered any human remains, so we could obtain guidance on how best to proceed. No such remains were found beneath the capstone. One might learn from this experience that we should not underestimate the industriousness of past residents in preserving and utilizing such tangible artifacts of the town's armory history. The rich history of St. Peter's Church and School grew somewhat more mundane, but also more accurate, in the course of those investigations.

### References Cited

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