

HERITAGE, ARCHAEOLOGY, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

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Locked beneath the sunken ships, tenuous structures, abandoned cemeteries, and forgotten former towns and plantations that comprise the archaeological record lay the material remains of an African American history of place. Archaeological investigations into a variety of sites raise new questions that release scholarship from the boundaries and limitations of written histories. Alternative knowledge that emerges from archaeological practices has the potential to generate controversy, public engagement, and scholarly activism. Passionate public responses combined with scholarly commitment indicate the level of importance and depth of meaning associated with several African American archaeological sites. The impact and implications of archaeological knowledge can be seen among the intersections of local activist communities, academe, regional economic interests, and national and global issues that bring new thematic combinations in African American history.

For sites such as the African Burial Ground in New York City, the *Henrietta Marie*, a slave ship that sunk off the coast of Florida in 1700; or Underground Railroad sites, nonverbal communications, the language of material culture, and cultural landscape analyses must be interpreted in conjunction with maps, deeds, probate, and census records to piece together an African American history of place. For each of these sites, the public, stakeholders, descendant community members, or committed professionals took action to ensure survival of historical and cultural heritage. At the African Burial Ground in New York City, for example, the public was involved in rescuing historical and cultural property at Broadway, Duane, Elk, and Reade Streets on a site that historic maps indicated had been the location of an "African Burying Ground." The rugged topography of early Manhattan helped preserve a portion of the cemetery buried 23 feet below street level (Castanga and Tyler 2004). The original cemetery was approximately six acres; its use spanned the greater portion of the eighteenth century.

Although the concept of a "site of conscience" is currently limited to museums, throughout the conflict and contentiousness of the past 14 years, the African Burial Ground has been a site consistently marked by public stewardship. Through both public reaction and scholarly activism, the African Burial Ground meets the definition of a site of conscience. The cemetery site possesses the "unique power to inspire social consciousness and action" and is a vehicle through which "new conversations about contemporary issues in historical perspective" are introduced and realized (International Coalition n.d.). In addition to meeting the primary definition of a site of conscience, the Burial Ground, through the Office of Public Education and Interpretation, meets the remaining criteria: (1) interpreting history through historic sites, (2) engaging in programs that stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues and promote humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function, and (3) sharing opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at the site (Figure 1).

Stakeholders

For African American heritage sites such as the African Burial Ground or the *Henrietta Marie*, scholarly or public activism was required to insure scientific and archaeological investigation. Stakeholders vary from site to site; they are idiosyncratic and particular to the individual circumstances of discovery. As a result, it



Figure 1. Revealing the power of archaeological resources, Nigerian President Obasanjo, "called upon the citizens of New York to revere the African Burial Ground as a sacred place of meditation, reconciliation and healing, and as a site of African history and heritage." Shown here prior to the 2004 reinterment ceremony is a marble plaque placed at the site. The plaque is a gift from the people of Nigeria. (Quote from Dan Perkins. 2004. "Nigerian President Calls for Reconciliation Between Africans and African-Americans." U.S. Newswire. Originally from *diversityinbusiness.com*, Oct. 2004. http://www.diversityinbusiness.com/dib2004/dib20410/News_Nigeria_Reconciliation.htm Photo by Cheryl J. LaRoche.

is imperative that we understand who the various stakeholders really are. How well do we understand the people we serve, our ethical clients (Mack and Blakey 2004)? Among the New York public not associated with governmental agencies, educational institutions, or archaeological firms, an older population consisting primarily of black women was at the forefront of the movement to save the site. This mature population recognized the importance of heritage in ways that often elude younger generations. These elder community members saw or see themselves as placeholders, with a responsibility to protect heritage sites until the next generation is in position to offer support or take up the fight.

As part of the Section 106 process and other state and local mandates, required oversight meetings are generally held during business hours. Frequently, retired members of the descendant community have the time to attend mid-day meetings and emergency sessions. Stakeholders often self-identify or self-select and have no official designation or affiliation. Within the process of reclaiming an archaeological site, contentiousness initially may be viewed by stakeholders as more productive than partnership, and from this ethos comes the certain knowledge that reclamation of a site may depend upon effective power sharing. At the New York African Burial Ground, stakeholders recognized interpretation as a political act and that intense provocation could be an effective force for change.

For the *Henrietta Marie*, the National Association of Black Scuba Divers (NABS) worked tirelessly to

ensure that the wrecked ship was scientifically excavated and nationally publicized. The *Henrietta Marie* sailed from London in 1697 and again in 1699 and eventually sank off New Ground Reef in the Florida Keys in 1700, where it settled in 12 to 32 feet of water. The ship was discovered off the coast of Florida in 1988 by Mel Fisher, a treasure salvor considered a pariah among underwater archaeologists. The history of the ship was deemed less valid by academicians, due to the circumstances of discovery and was not scientifically investigated for several years. NABS was largely responsible for commemoration efforts and insisted that the historical legacy was too important to be lost. *The Wreck of the Henrietta Marie*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Cottman (1999), chronicles rescue efforts and is a powerful example of public response to archaeology. The book and a national exhibition make the history of the ship accessible to the public.

Underground Railroad

Scholarly inattention to the topic of the Underground Railroad led Congress to mandate implementation of a study by the National Park Service (NPS) in 1993 and to establish the Network to Freedom in 1998 when Congressman Rob Portman (R-Ohio) co-sponsored the National Underground Network to Freedom Act with Congressman Louis Stokes (D-Cleveland). The Network to Freedom Act links Underground Railroad sites across the country into a network maintained by NPS which, in conjunction with The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, has become the institutional custodian of Underground Railroad history. Throughout the years of neglect, however, local and family historians understood the relevance of preserving their stories.

In the absence of strong documentation in the form of written records supporting Underground Railroad activities, historians and other researchers find little to no basis for historical analysis or claims by local historians. Archaeologists from the National Forest Service, however, are excavating Underground Railroad sites in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Through a combination of archaeological, family, and historical records, archaeologists are realizing that free people of color involved with the Underground Railroad adopted a radical stance in helping one another, often risking their own freedom to ensure the escape of family, friends, or loved ones, as well as strangers. One must literally create this history by first identifying and confirming sites and then looking at census data, deed books, slave schedules, and old maps in order to formulate historical perspectives and create a thematic presence. Heritage resources cannot be effectively established until after historical analyses have been completed.

History

Combining a critical mass of archaeological sites such as the Underground Railroad sites identified by the National Forest Service opens new historical perspectives. Multidisciplinarity, informed by landscape studies and combined with the material record generated through archaeology, adds dimension and alternative paths to historical inquiry. However, archaeological contributions to American history in general and to African American history in particular continue to be both overlooked and undervalued. From the plantation economy, to an understanding of foodways, medicinal, and spiritual practices, to bioanthropological data, archaeology has made significant and long-lasting contributions to understanding African American history.

Archaeological inquiry answers questions unavailable to historians where the supporting documentary record is simply unavailable. Archaeology, therefore, is one of the most powerful tools leading to African American cultural heritage. Analysis of material culture retrieved from archaeological sites has contributed to understandings of African American religious, social, biological, and cultural structures. Archaeology is a tool that contributes compensatory information that enriches history. Questions derived from archaeological investigations are separate and distinct from those arising from historical sources. Furthermore, the language of the landscape informs an understudied and overlooked African American history of place within efforts to reclaim an African American past.

Heritage and History

Generational transmission of cultural legacies and traditions, communal histories, artistic expression, identity, and sustained cultural values combine to form heritage. A historical component is necessarily included in any definition of heritage. History precedes heritage. If the historical record is not preserved, neither heritage resources nor historical legacy can emerge.

Sites once dense with African American cultural expression lay forgotten beneath the earth. Were it not for archaeological investigation of a site, resurrecting and reclaiming the past, history would have been completely lost. But for many of these sites, African Americans in conjunction with other concerned citizens recognized the importance of the story that lay behind the silences, the lack of preservation, and the collective forgetting associated with archaeological rediscovery. Archaeology is not an end in itself; it is, rather, a conduit, an avenue leading to renewal of black history. One of the greatest archaeological finds of this century exists, in part, because of the relentlessness of the New York descendant community in a space and time when there should have been no discussion, no less contentiousness, associated with investigation of the African Burial Ground. This and other examples reveal the struggles that surround preservation of African American history and heritage as African Americans look for ways to negotiate their cultural capital.

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claims to the Copán site into their general demands for social rights. The Chortí view Copán as part of their own cultural heritage based on a logic of cultural and biological descent. The political leadership of the Chortí officially regards Copán as a sacred place, and they argue for a greater role in its management and more opportunities to benefit from its international significance.

Conclusion

Barbara Little recently observed, “there is no single public and no single past” (2002:7). At Copán, there is also no single conception of heritage. Instead, different interested groups derive meaning and value from the archaeological past based on the perspective that their relationship to the site provides. Factors such as national citizenship, cultural identity, biological descent, and local residence are fairly straightforward angles for constructing heritage out of the archaeological past. But other kinds of dimensions, such as work investment, academic expertise, official custodianship, basis of livelihood, and level

of interest, also play a role in the kind of heritage Copán represents. The variety of meanings Copán holds for various publics speaks to the complexity of the archaeological past as resource and reminds us that managing such resources is always a shared endeavor. ☐

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Conclusion

Archaeological inquiry is a powerful tool that often introduces new questions for historical research and analysis. Expanded approaches to African American history can benefit from multidisciplinary perspectives that combine cultural studies, material cultural, religious and historical analysis, and political and legal research with archaeology. The combination yields information that contextualizes documentation and provides tangible and lasting historical legacies that enrich society and engage the public, while expanding research questions and approaches of scholars. In some instances, were it not for public stewardship combined with archaeological investigation of a site, resurrecting, reclaiming, and reconfiguring the past, the history might have been lost to us. ☐

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