



# THE INVISIBLE LANDSCAPE

## AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF URBAN RENEWAL AND THE COLOR LINE

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The campus of Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI) is a rather bleak expanse of undistinguished institutional structures, vast oceans of asphalt parking lots, and scattered garages. A handful of trees and grassed spaces punctuate the 289-acre campus on Indianapolis's near-Westside, but for the most part, the university landscape is strangely invisible and even a bit superfluous to the myriad tasks that students, employees, and visitors carry out there every day.

IUPUI itself was created in 1969, so most of the campus betrays few material indications of any significant heritage. Very few of the campus's thousands of faculty, staff, students, and visitors have any clear historical consciousness of this landscape or the many families who lived there over more than 150 years. Once a thriving neighborhood with at least 5,000 residents, the Indiana University Medical School began to carve out the future IUPUI campus in the 1920s. Most of the university space, though, was acquired after 1964, which required uprooting thousands of residents over about 25 years. Many IUPUI employees and students have a vague understanding of this massive displacement, but they tend to see the University's history reaching back to 1969, when the Indiana Legislature created the joint Indiana and Purdue campus in the state's capital city. Campus and community observers who have some sense of the community's heritage routinely gravitate toward inaccurate and often-irresponsible caricatures that the community was a "Black ghetto." For many years, this unreflective history was compounded by the absence of a systematic campus-wide discussion linking the university to the many people who had once lived in campus space. More troubling was that the near-Westside's residents themselves moved to various other places, so their voices had relatively little impact on how the university landscape was defined.

### **Excavating IUPUI**

The IUPUI campus would not seem like an especially productive place to conduct archaeology, but in fact few places could be better suited to an engaged neighborhood archaeology. From a research perspective, Indianapolis experienced relatively typical material declines and social shifts after the Civil War, during the Depression, and following World War II. Archaeologically, the preservation is extremely good. The campus is dotted with scores of features like wells, cisterns, and privies that were well-preserved by miles of asphalt. Yet neither of those things would matter much if there were not descendant and campus communities who jointly felt stewardship for the space and its complex neighborhood heritage. The university's own complicity in the near-Westside's massive transformation really was never evaded on campus, but it also had not been very effectively made a topic of public discourse outside a handful of classrooms. In a renewed commitment to civic engagement in the past decade, IUPUI has attempted to forge productive relationships with the city, past and present near-Westside residents, and a variety of constituencies that feel stewardship for near-Westside histories. Archaeology has been one surprisingly powerful mechanism to tell this story and build relationships that can link descendants, former residents, University students and staff, and the many people who feel some claim to these neighborhoods.

The IUPUI archaeology project uses sites as public spaces to discuss how near-Westside communities and people of color became “invisible” to much of the contemporary campus community and city. Even the most prescient archaeologist would be hard-pressed to simply look at the campus’s starkly flat topography and see the traces of eradicated neighborhoods. Much of the campus was recurrently flooded when it was first settled in the mid-nineteenth century, so immense volumes of refuse were used to fill the space. Homes were built on this newly leveled ground. Eventually when the University demolished those structures, the house lots were filled and then paved, so the campus quickly became dominated by remarkably flat parking lots.



Figure 1: In 1975, this home on West Vermont Street sat among IUPUI parking lots after all the neighbors had left. (Photograph courtesy IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives).

When these parking lot surfaces are excavated, they reveal dense stratified deposits. Archaeological tours inevitably present the stark juxtaposition of a barren asphalt surface

with structural foundations, dense household debris, and various yard and ecological features that reflect quite different past uses of the space. Much of our project’s power has been a direct product of simply displaying this archaeological record in the midst of busy public spaces. Visitors literally stand atop a series of stratified landscapes, which stresses the relations between those landscapes and illuminates the campus community’s role in this dramatic transformation. We connect these landscapes to examine what social processes produced them over the last century-and-a-half. We examine material patterns along the color line in this historically multicultural community and use material culture to illuminate and defuse present-day caricatures about social and material difference across color lines. Ultimately, transparent expectations that archaeology will unearth a near-Westside “Black ghetto” are dealt their death rites by material assemblages that do not reveal especially crystalline distinctions across color or ethnic lines. Nevertheless, we still must acknowledge that residents’ experiences were profoundly shaped by race and racism, so much of our research focuses on how we can interpret multiple meanings along the color line in mass-produced objects: i.e., might various racial subjects interpret the same commodities in different ways and invest different meanings in those goods?

### Reconstructing Ethnic Pasts

After World War II, the near-Westside became a predominately African American community that included many impoverished folks. However, into the 1920s, most of the near-Westside’s residents were native-born White Hoosiers (the local term for Indiana-born residents). Their neighbors included European immigrants from every corner of the continent as well as White and Black Southern migrants and many farmers who left the fields for Indianapolis’s industrial workplaces. While the census reveals a rainbow of ethnic groups, this was by no means a settled multicultural community—the area quickly became a racially segregated space at the turn of the century, the Ku Klux Klan had a very strong follow-

ing among the near-Westside's White male residents in the 1920s, and informal hostilities were persistently showered onto most of the community's African American and European immigrant residents alike.

A host of Indianapolis city leaders, preservationists, and realtors today tout the city's historically ethnic neighborhoods. A handful of areas were predominated by particular ethnic groups, but most were quite dynamic. A simplistic picture of African American, German, and Irish enclaves dotting Indianapolis paints an idyllic multicultural past that ignores dynamic settlement patterns, lumps together class collectives, and tends to ignore racism altogether. For instance, in the Ransom Place neighborhood at the edge of the IUPUI campus, working-class and genteel African Americans did live alongside each other, but in large part that appearance of cross-class integration was forced on African Americans by *de facto* racism from realtors and neighborhood associations with restrictive covenants.

Many of our visitors are somewhat oblivious to racism and eager to find a distinctive ethnic past, but we have focused on how the near-Westside's residents were situated along a racial continuum. In 1904, Ray Stannard Baker (1968 [1904]:117) visited Indianapolis and noted that

the people one ordinarily meets don't know anything about the Negro, don't discuss him, and don't care about him. In Indianapolis, and indeed in other cities, the only white people I could find who were much interested in the Negroes were a few politicians, mostly of the lower sort, the charity workers and the police.

Baker recognized that Whites were willingly oblivious to African American life and tended to clearly distinguish Black and White experience. However, many African Americans worked for White people in industry, businesses, and their homes and had a quite intimate understanding of their White employers' lives. In Summer 2001, we conducted a project on the IUPUI campus at the Evans-Deschler Site, a neighboring German American meat packing shop and post-1904 African American boarding house. Our public project focused on labor relationships that connected Hoosiers across the color line. We recovered a concentration of straight pins and buttons from the boarding house that likely would have been ignored on most sites, but the Evans boarding house was home to a series of African American women who appeared in the census as laundresses and seamstresses. In this context, these otherwise innocuous objects were clear material indications of the gendered dimensions of racism that relegated many African American women to domestic labor. Archaeological tours are especially powerful when they can situate the most commonplace objects within such broad social and structural issues.

Our project has aspired to complicate such relationships along the color line and over the contemporary landscape. When I first visited IUPUI in 1999, my future colleagues justifiably heralded the archaeological potential of Ransom Place, a six-block historically African American neighborhood that sits at the edge of the IUPUI campus. The neighborhood escaped the wrecking ball and secured Conservation District status in 1998, so it survives today as the sole physical remnant of the vast neighborhoods that once covered the near-Westside. By World War I, Ransom Place became home to many of Indianapolis's African American entrepreneurs and professionals. Madam C. J. Walker's home and her well-known cosmetics factory sat alongside Ransom Place, and Walker's lawyer Freeman Ransom was among the African American professionals who lived in the neighborhood that



Figure 2: The foundations of this German American smokehouse were excavated by the IUPUI Field School in 2003 (photo by author).

now bears his name. Ransom Place's idiosyncratic vernacular housing and gradual recovery in the past decade ensure that it is commonly showcased as a preservation success story, and many of the residents are African American elders.

The Ransom Place Neighborhood Association has emerged as the clearest community voice for those people who once lived in the near-Westside, and the Association has been an ideal platform for community-based historical archaeology. However, the University community also has emerged as a crucial constituency that has begun to lay claim to the near-Westside's heritage. A walk from the heart of campus to Ransom Place demands a hike across parking lots and ever-emerging decks that accommodate the University's commuter student population. For the most part, though, this landscape of parking lots and Ransom Place remains relatively disconnected, the processes that created this disconnection pass unexamined, and the University and neighborhood communities have no systematic relationship. Much of our research focuses on Ransom Place, but in the past five summers, IUPUI Archaeology Field Schools have worked to connect the otherwise-ignored campus with Ransom Place and illuminate the concrete social processes that produced this landscape.

### **Measuring Results**

Much of the archaeology project's impact has simply been its ability to contribute to historical consciousness and foster public dialogue. Some of the products of this consciousness appear modest, but they indicate a clear shift in how the campus materializes its past. For instance, in May 2003 several hundred visitors from across the country convened on a steamy Indiana afternoon to commemorate 21 new dormitories named after community historical figures. Many former campus residents were troubled that only one University building bore an African American name, and that structure is slated for demolition. The new dormitories were named after a range of professional and working-class people, some well-known and others anonymous, representing men and women from most of the groups who once lived in the near-Westside. Most of these figures were identified by archaeology students who produced biographies for a joint University/community committee to consider in selecting the final names. This is a modest but critical effort to materially historicize the campus landscape.

By doing these things the project aspires to place the contemporary landscape—and the people on the IUPUI campus and in Ransom Place today—within over a century of urbanization and racial ideology. Archaeology can potentially reclaim spaces that are now dehistoricized, transforming the parking lots and University buildings into a landscape concretely linked to Ransom Place. This process should illuminate the ways in which race, class, and urban inequalities have been written into material culture ranging from mass-produced commodities to campus landscapes over 150 years. □

### **References Cited**

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- 1968 *Following the Color Line: An Account of Negro Citizenship in the American Democracy*. Originally published 1904. Corner House Publishers, Williamstown, Massachusetts.