

# MEMORY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND THE PUBLIC MEANING OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

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**A**rchaeological heritage is an important component of our national story, and we need to look at ways to engage a larger public. Public places, like county, state, and national parks, can reach thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people every year. Interpreters and archaeologists at public places have a tremendous responsibility to the profession and the public to make archaeology a central issue in interpretation and to connect the meaning of the resource to important and compelling issues.

It is not enough to have gratuitous temporary exhibits or a display of artifacts that identifies their material and function. Archaeologists also need to be careful about making simplistic arguments. We have all seen exhibits at historic sites that praise technological advancements and industrial output as a significant benefit for increasing our material wealth. This type of statement ignores the process of industrialization and the struggle of labor for decent working conditions. However, by placing these items in their larger context, archaeologists and interpreters can tell important narratives related to nationally significant stories. Labor, race, class, and gender should be part of the story. When interpreting archaeological materials, we also need to think about international and national perspectives, heritage tourism, museum interpretation, community involvement, descendant communities, and the protection of archaeological resources. These are important issues that need to be part of the interpretation of archaeological resources.

## **Memory**

What we remember and how we remember as a nation are important issues that allow us to see how public memory develops. A consensus history often occurs when we leave others out of the picture. Those who disagree with a multicultural history have questioned, “how can all these groups, each cherishing its uniqueness and its claim to sovereign attention, be mainstreamed into a single, coherent, integrated history” (quoted in Nash et al. 1998:100–101)? It is a challenge to make minority histories part of the national public memory, and these stories often make the consensus histories much more complicated. However, they also create a richer texture of the past and make it more accessible to other groups.

The National Park Service (NPS) oversees and maintains the National Register of Historic Places, and a quick glance at some statistics is quite revealing about what we as a nation see as important and worthy of remembering. There are over 70,000 places on the National Register of Historic Places, and less than 7% of these are archaeology sites (Little 1999). Fewer than 900 sites on the National Register are connected to African American, Asian American, and Latino heritage (Kaufman 2004).

The representation of traditional peripheral groups on the American landscape has changed significantly since the Civil Rights Act. Until that time, there was very little on the national landscape that could

memorialize minority groups in the national public memory. Places like Woman's Rights National Historical Park, The Frederick Douglass House, and Lowell National Historical Park now tell the stories of women, African Americans, and labor. The telling of stories of traditionally marginalized groups is becoming even more important on the national scene with the redevelopment of many inner cities. Traditional minority communities are being displaced from the landscape with gentrification and the development of transit schemes, like highways and metros. While the heritage of minorities can still be found in traditional folkways, the places may no longer exist, and the historical park is one of the few places where minority stories can be told and passed down to generations (Kauffman 2004). We need to think about how we can make our national heritage more representative of the entire nation, and I think archaeology can be one tool to help create a more inclusive past.



Figure 1: Late 19th-century image of the Robinson House (Courtesy, Manassas National Battlefield Park).

### Civic Engagement and Archaeology

The process of civic engagement can make places of memory usable to a wider audience by engaging muted and nontraditional communities in a dialog that addresses issues of social importance. Historic sites can become places to understand contemporary social and political issues. They can also be places that teach social justice.

Some examples outside of archaeology may serve to frame our archaeology projects. The NPS sponsored a *Community Study Report* (Bowser 2000) that highlights the organization's recent experience in helping to organize community and park cooperation to celebrate diversity ([http://www.nps.gov/community/community\\_report.htm](http://www.nps.gov/community/community_report.htm)). The report contains many stories that show how the NPS connects with diverse communities and promotes pluralism. For instance, at Alcatraz, the NPS explores the history of the American Indian occupation of the island and relates it to the current activism within the American Indian community. It is part of a larger program titled "Promoting Tolerance," which "brings emerging leaders from Eastern and Central Europe to the U.S. to learn about techniques to strengthen pluralism and respect for diversity" (Bowser 2000:20). Representatives come from Russia, Bosnia, Estonia, Rumania, and Bulgaria. In each of these countries, the practice of democracy is a relatively new concept, and the program demonstrates how differences could be reconciled and minority groups could become part of the political process. The program uses a NPS park to help promote democracy around the world (Bowser 2000:20).

Another example is a compelling exhibition titled *Looking for Liberty: An Overview of Maryland History* at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. *Looking for Liberty* is an interesting, compelling, and thought-provoking exhibit. The exhibition helps visitors to understand the historic struggle for liberties, and it encourages them to contemplate the threats to their own liberties today. The exhibit is very timely, as many Americans today feel that their civil liberties are threatened in the name of patriotism. The

exhibition uses artifacts as props, and it asks visitors to “help tell the story of liberty.” Visitors are asked to comment on the exhibition, and they are told that it is a prototype. They are told that their stories are valuable and may be added to the final and completed exhibition. Allowing people to participate in the story of their past is an important part of making history more socially engaging to communities.

Archaeology needs to be more fully integrated into the civic engagement process. Here is one example how. The Center for Heritage Resource Studies at the University of Maryland is involved in a series of important workshops held in the community of Hampden, Baltimore—a once-powerful industrial center in the city of Baltimore. The mill companies that built the town have abandoned the area, leaving their factories to be reused as warehouses and offices. Despite having lost the basis of its local economy, the community and much of the early workers’ housing still remains. Center Affiliates David Gadsby and Bob Chidester engaged the local community in a dialog about the archaeological process. Through a series of workshops, they learned about the topics that are important to the community. These issues include gentrification, racism, class structure, and labor. Through the process of civic engagement, archaeology has brought the community together to discuss some very important matters that trouble them. These concerns will become part of the archaeology’s research design, and it will be the focus of continued collaboration with the community.

There are other ways to promote civic engagement in archaeology. For instance, St. Mary’s City, the first capital of Maryland, has been the focus of archaeology for many years, and the town has been recovered through extensive excavations. To me, the story of Margaret Brent is both interesting and compelling. She became a landowner in the colony, and in 1648 she petitioned the Maryland assembly for the right to vote, a privilege that only landowners shared. The assembly denied her this right. Her story became a rallying cry for the subsequent women’s suffrage movement. Using this archaeological site and tying it to issues related to gender and women’s rights for school groups or any organization discussing these issues is a powerful use of the place.

Also, the story of the Robinsons at Manassas National Battlefield Park in northern Virginia is compelling. This free African American family lived on what is now the battlefield before and after the Civil War (Figure 1). They replaced and expanded their house by about 1870, and it burned in the early 1990s. Only the chimney remained on the landscape after the house was dismantled by the NPS because of fire damage (Figure 2). The Park administration decided to dismantle the chimney, and in effect erased a significant trace of this African American family from the battlefield (Figure 3). The archaeological material from the Robinsons’ house dates from the antebellum era into the early 20th century. Manassas National Battlefield Park can expand its interpretation of the place and use the archaeology to interpret the African American experience during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era.



Figure 2: The remaining Robinson House Chimney after the house was dismantled by the NPS following a fire that damaged the structure.



It can be a place to engage the public and address issues of race and racism in the larger community. The park interpretation does not have to stop at the Civil War (Shackel 2003).

In local, state, and federally owned parks, it is a difficult task to counter the status quo and do a different kind of archaeology. Based on my personal experience, I can suggest that change only occurs with persistence, partnerships, and public outreach. It is hard work! The data we collect have the potential of telling a much broader story. We need to assert our findings into the public memory.

Archaeological objects can be a touchstone for a dialog that can be placed in broader conversations of the past. If we

want to be relevant to society and to be part of an important dialogue throughout this country, we need to think about how we can make our discipline relevant. Archaeologists can address the issues of a diverse past, the social relevance of archaeology, and real-world problem-solving (see Bender and Smith 2000). It is important to motivate students and practitioners of archaeology to convince stakeholders and decision-makers that we can make these contributions. 📷



Figure 3: The dismantling of the chimney erased the landscape signature of the Robinson family.

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