

MARIA FRANKLIN

"Power To The People": Sociopolitics and the Archaeology of Black Americans

ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the sociopolitics of African-American archaeology. The intent here is to prompt archaeologists to think more about how our research affects black Americans today, and therefore why it is necessary that they be encouraged to take an interest in archaeological endeavors. The success or failure of our attempts to establish ties with black communities depends on us. The main emphases of this article are, therefore, focused on raising our level of awareness to the challenges we face, and increasing understanding as to the variable histories and perspectives that the diverse and knowledgeable black American public possesses and will hopefully share with archaeologists.

Introduction

The question of "Why do historical archaeology?" is often answered with the discipline's ability to give "people without a history" a "voice" (Little 1994:6; Orser and Fagan 1995:37-38). Indeed, while historical archaeology initially focused on the "rich and famous" of America's past, the discipline's growth is most notably due to the study of historically oppressed groups: Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants, and women. The emphasis on a more inclusive American history is an important goal, and this goal is often cited by archaeologists in order to substantiate the relevance of historical archaeology to today's society. Yet we seldom question our intentions in "giving a voice" to people of the past. Is it simply so that people of the present can better understand and appreciate their cultural heritage and national identity? Are we to assume that the American public is interested in the same questions that we are, and that our research both serves public interests and positively affects our society (Potter 1994:14)? Archaeologists seldom

reflect upon these questions, even though we are aware that the practice of manipulating the past to serve social, economic, and political agendas is probably as ancient and as widespread as human interest in the past itself. The addition of archaeology to the repertoire of "means to study the past" gave imperialists, nationalists, and racists one more weapon in their arsenal for re-pennning histories better suited to legitimate and support their oppressive regimes (Trigger 1989). As archaeologists, we may recognize the open-ended potential for abuse through the control and subsequent distortion of historical and archaeological interpretations (Schmidt and Patterson 1995). Such an unconscionable act, we believe, could only be carried out by those politically motivated in order to further secure their privileged position in a society. We stop short of questioning our own position as guardians of the past: our inherent biases, our personal agendas (Pyburn and Wilk 1995:73), and our role in creating pasts which serve the present. It is as if we are unaware that the social and political context within which we operate has any influence on our interpretations and representations of the past. As Christopher Tilley (1989:110) warns, "an apolitical archaeology is a dangerous academic myth. The problem is not that archaeology is a political discourse, but that its politics largely take place on a tacit or unconscious level."

The unreflective practice of archaeology has had detrimental social and political effects upon people everywhere and throughout time (e.g., Hall 1984; Handsman and Leone 1989; Layton 1989; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Stone and MacKenzie 1990; Potter 1991). Those who remain unwilling to reflect upon the social and political implications of their work will only escalate further alienation of archaeologists from the public. Either people will increasingly learn to live quite contentedly without archaeology (McManamon 1991:127) or, if we are not willing to change, we may eventually be forced to change (Zimmerman 1995:67). This article, then, is an attempt to challenge an uncritical

African-American archaeology primarily through consciousness-raising.

The question I pose is, has the black archaeological past been colonized by white, middle-class specialists? I begin by briefly summarizing some of the troubling aspects of archaeological practice exposed through "critical" sociopolitical analyses which are relevant to this critique of African-American archaeology. A critical approach is necessary if African-American archaeology is to be made relevant to black Americans in particular, and American society in general. I then focus on African-American archaeology, and why it is necessary that we make more of an earnest effort to involve black Americans in research and interpretations. I discuss some of the issues that we can address as we initiate a discourse with black Americans, including the question of legitimate claims to cultural resources and dealing with a multivocal black community. The success or failure of our attempts to establish ties with black Americans will hinge upon *our* level of sensitivity, openness, and understanding of the histories and viewpoints that they bring to the exchange. For this reason, most of this discussion is meant to prompt archaeologists to reflect upon and question the current and highly problematic state of African-American archaeology. While the suggestions here are not fully developed, they can serve as a point of departure for future action in transforming our discipline.

Sociopolitics and Critical Archaeologies

The tendency for archaeological interpretation to be influenced by society does not appear to be diminishing as archaeology becomes more theoretically sophisticated, as some archaeologists have suggested it would (Clarke 1979:154). Instead it appears to remain one of archaeology's permanent features (Trigger 1989:380).

The sociopolitical analyses of archaeology are fairly recent phenomena (Wylie 1989:95) that, while increasing in momentum and influence, cannot be labeled a unified trend (Gero 1985:342; Wylie 1985:134). As Handsman and Leone (1989:118) have observed, "the relevant literature is diverse and inconsistent in orienta-

tion." Such analyses generally involve exposing and critiquing the connections between archaeological knowledge claims and how they are "constituted" by the social and political contexts within which we practice archaeology (Wylie 1989:94). There are two ways in which this occurs, as Wylie (1983:120) further explains: "On one hand, there is a concern with the way in which contextual factors condition or control the archaeological enterprise, complemented on the other hand by a concern with the way archaeology, so conditioned, serves interests dominant in this context." The critique of sociopolitics has been carried out with varying emphases (cf. Gero 1985:342). There is, however, a unifying bond to these approaches: "They are, above all, critical" (Handsman and Leone 1989:118). Cases exist where archaeologists have been effectively critical without even referring to "sociopolitics." In these examples archaeologists have variously challenged the authority of academic knowledge claims (Klesert and Powell 1993; Zimmerman 1994), the control of cultural resources (Messenger 1995:68), and the need to actively involve descendant groups in archaeological endeavors (Spector 1993). Then there is the other end of the spectrum where lies the well-developed "philosophical" approach of the critical theorists (Wylie 1989:94). Developed by German sociologists—the Frankfurt school—in the 1920s and '30s, critical method and theory is grounded in Marxism (Leone 1984:1). Critical theorists are interested in challenging the ways in which historical interpretations are used against the dispossessed in the form of a "masking ideology;" to obscure and hence perpetuate class differences within a capitalist system where domination is assumed (Wylie 1983, 1985, 1989; Leone 1984, 1992; Handsman and Leone 1989; Tilley 1989; Potter 1994:36–39). Leone (1984:1) has observed that although critical theory is not widely used by archaeologists, "many of its insights have entered piecemeal."

By whatever means, confronting the sociopolitics of archaeology has had the effect of transforming the ways in which many of us think about, practice, and advocate our discipline

(e.g., Gero et al. 1983; Gero 1985, 1989; Handsman and Leone 1989; Layton 1989; Pinsky and Wylie 1989; Tilley 1989; Wylie 1989, 1991; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Stone and MacKenzie 1990; Gero and Conkey 1991; Potter 1991; Leone 1992; Spector 1993; Lynott and Wylie 1995; McDavid, this volume). This transformation owes its impetus to the initial repudiation by post-processualists of New Archaeology's unrealistic goal of a neutral, "value-free" archaeology, and an intense critique of futile attempts to achieve it (Handsman and Leone 1989:118; Tilley 1989:110–111; Trigger 1989:381; Wylie 1989:93–94). Critical archaeologists charge that interpretations and representations of the past are at all times "interest-constituted" (Handsman and Leone 1989; Wylie 1989:94). The interests served by an unreflective archaeology are of those in power who seek to tighten control of the dispossessed through history and archaeology by purchasing "an empirical substantiation of national mythology" (Leone 1973:129). An uncritical, unreflective archaeology therefore, whether we intend it or not, "sustains rather than challenges the contemporary social order" (Tilley 1989:105). In the United States, this translates to the support and legitimization of a social order permeated by racism, classism, and gender bias.

A Word on Reflection

The point of departure for critical approaches is the recognition that all forms of knowledge are interest-constituted. Next, through self-reflection, critical archaeologists attempt to demystify the relationship between sociopolitics—both within and without the discipline—and archaeological practice (Potter 1994:36). What does it mean to be "self-reflective" or "reflexive"? Reflection involves contemplation. Reflection is the means by which the archaeologist raises his or her level of awareness regarding the focus and meaning of their research: what is the subject, what are the questions, who is the intended audience, and to whom would the interpretations be most useful? An archaeology conditioned by its sociopolitical context does not readily reveal

which interest it serves. Only through reflection can we come to understand how our research could potentially serve to legitimate dominant interests at the expense of everyone else (Handsman and Leone 1989). Wylie offers this interpretation of self-reflection as a strategy employed by critical theorists:

Critical theory is 'critical' in two senses. First, it involves critical reflection on the knowledge-producing enterprise itself. This encompasses . . . two forms of self-consciousness . . . self-consciousness about the extent to which knowledge claims are conditioned by their social context and serve interests and beliefs that comprise this context. Second, where this self-consciousness reveals the form of a dominant ideology and social order as mediated by the scientific production of knowledge, it provides a basis for reflective understanding and criticism of the social context of research; it takes the form of prospective social criticism and action (Wylie 1985:137).

Self-reflection is therefore "central" to critical theorists (Potter 1994:29), and without it, according to Potter (1994:30), "archaeologists cannot understand the relationships between their work and contemporary life." For this reason, reflection is central to all critical archaeology.

Critical, Responsible, and Accountable

Emotional confrontations between archaeologists and indigenous peoples during the last decade have prompted most of us at some time or another to reflect upon our research. Native American concerns regarding repatriation (Powell et al. 1993; Worl 1995) provoked a growing number of archaeologists to critique an archaeological enterprise "conditioned" by elitism and ethnocentrism (Klesert and Powell 1993). This line of sociopolitical analyses confronts dilemmas such as the "ownership" of cultural resources (Powell et al. 1993; Messenger 1995:68), as well as the primacy granted Anglo- or Euro-centered knowledge claims (Layton 1989; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Zimmerman 1994, 1995) and archaeological knowledge claims in general. Non-archaeologists would currently find that there is little room for opposition. As academically-trained experts on the material record, our

interpretations are viewed as authoritative; especially within the profession (Gero 1989). Although cultural resources are considered a "public trust" (Lynott and Wylie 1995:23), archaeologists are the self-imposed guardians of archaeological remains, and in most instances we are in the position to dictate who is allowed access to those remains. Even site reports with the requisite data tables and site information are "coded" in language often so obtuse as to be intelligible only to other archaeologists. We essentially have a monopoly on archaeological data and interpretations, which are then "packaged" and "sold" via museum exhibits or National Geographic Society articles to "passive consumers," namely, the public (Tilley 1989:107).

Sociopolitical analyses, all of which are methodologically critical, urge archaeologists to "level the playing field" (Jeppson, this volume). The general consensus among critical archaeologists is that control of archaeological resources and knowledge must be shared with descendant groups, other impacted communities, and the public at large. Critical theorists in particular contend that impacted groups must be active participants in the process of constructing histories (Handsman and Leone 1989; Potter 1994). As these insights are put into practice through public outreach and involvement, we must remain flexible, accessible, and willing to approach each situation with an open mind. To conclude, although the aforementioned issues are more often associated with the archaeology of indigenous peoples, they are increasingly entering the discourse concerning the archaeology of black Americans.

Black Americans and African-American Archaeology

Our basic need is to reclaim our history and our identity from what must be called cultural terrorism (Carmichael and Hamilton 1970:166).

The sociopolitical climate of the 1960s and early '70s rattled the walls of academia when civil rights proponents, and most notably Black

Power advocates, insisted on the institution of black studies programs nationwide (Genovese 1970:242). Black voices were the strongest in setting the agenda, which in essence insisted that American black culture and history finally be recognized as unique, valuable, and hence worthy of serious scholarship. It was no coincidence that Charles Fairbanks undertook the first anthropologically based study of an African-American site during this period of great change (Fairbanks 1984a; Ferguson 1992:xxxvi). Yet seeing as how blacks were largely responsible for igniting interest in their own histories, it is a sad irony that archaeology is perhaps the only discipline involved in the study of early black lifeways which has yet to incorporate significant contributions from any segment of black society.

The current social climate warns that the time to develop a more critical approach to African-American archaeology is past due. Our public visibility has increased as a result of the dramatic rise in the number of historical archaeologists excavating African-American sites. While the few who have made earnest efforts to communicate with black communities managed to maintain mostly positive relations (Henley et al. 1983; Leone 1992; Franklin 1996), there have been instances of conflict. Friction between white archaeologists and members of the black public over the New York African burial ground (Harrington 1993; Blakey 1995; LaRoche and Blakey, this volume) and the Venable Lane excavations (Leeds 1994; Patten, this volume) are the most notable. These examples serve to underscore the point that our research and public education efforts must be viewed within the context of contemporary American race relations. If we continue to ignore the needs and interests of descendant groups, we will foster antagonism, and our research will mean little to nothing to those segments of society whose ancestors we choose to study. If we are truly intent on using archaeology to create more meaningful histories whereby Americans of all backgrounds have the opportunity to participate in the process and, in the end, come to better understand themselves and each other, we have to start by standing in judgment of our own sociopolitics. The

following observations were borne out of my initial reflective steps towards a more critical African-American archaeology. Although this critique is not fully developed, there are areas which can potentially serve as points of departure for current and future research.

Towards an Inclusive Archaeology

To start, American society remains profoundly polarized by racism. Of course most, if not all of us, realize this, but how many of us actually reflect upon how our work could potentially legitimate racism? As archaeologists, we must question how racism conditions our discipline and, in so doing, how an unreflective archaeology is fed right back into a racist society without challenging it (Potter 1991). With African-American archaeology, the potential for abuse is staggering given the uncritical state of the discipline (Potter 1991:96, 1994:15), the overwhelming number of whites excavating African-American sites, and the relatively weak efforts to involve black Americans through outreach (Fairbanks 1984b:12). This is not a statement accusing white archaeologists of racism, but to get us to think about social responsibility and ensuring that our research does not serve racist interests. This is highly likely to happen where members of descendant groups are excluded from all aspects of archaeology, including the conception of research questions, excavation, data analysis, and interpretation.

Those who have the most to gain from the current dismal state of race and class relations would continue to have only whites interpret the black archaeological past. The issue of a white majority studying and writing the histories of blacks is only beginning to be debated among historical archaeologists (Potter 1991; McKee 1994; Franklin 1996), and black Americans have generally not participated in this debate at any significant level. Yet we can look to the discourse between archaeologists and indigenous peoples to try and understand why a diverse perspective is the crucial element in the reconstruction of histories that are more relevant to

the latter (Layton 1989; Stone and MacKenzie 1990; Messenger 1995; Zimmerman 1995). Many of the concerns that blacks will have regarding the treatment of black sites will be similar to those traditionally expressed by Native Americans, as the New York African burial ground controversy demonstrated (Harrington 1993; Blakey 1995; LaRoche and Blakey, this volume). The initial lack of communication between white archaeologists and black Americans fostered mistrust, as did what was perceived to be insensitive treatment of the human remains. We are learning the hard way that archaeologists are not the only people interested in the past (Fairbanks 1984b:12), and that descendant groups have a vested interest in archaeological sites (Layton 1989; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Ayau 1995; Naranjo 1995; Wylie 1996:180–183). Moreover, it is we who must bear the responsibility for bringing diverse perspectives into the discipline (Pyburn and Wilk 1995:72).

Most archaeologists agree that we have a responsibility to educate the public, but some may question the degree to which we are obligated to include the public in the research process at the level called for by critical archaeologists (McKee 1994). Fundamentally, however, our failure to establish ties with black Americans—whether they be from the local community, scholars, or members of interest groups—serves to further subjugate them, for they are in turn fully implicated in any historical interpretations concerning the black past. That is, historical and archaeological research affects *all* black Americans, not simply those whom archaeologists or others deem to be culturally, historically, or ancestrally linked to a historic site or era under study. For example, when Colonial Williamsburg's reconstructed slave quarter at Carter's Grove first opened to tourists, there were watermelons being grown in the yard, and rinds were present among the cabins' foodstuffs. Black interpreters complained that this representation of past foodways served to perpetuate negative stereotypes regarding blacks, and these items were subsequently removed (Gable et al. 1992:802). This one aspect of early black lifeways at

Carter's Grove could easily have evoked in the minds of white tourists the racist "black-face" images popularized by minstrel shows that stereotyped blacks as slow, lazy, and stupid. As this brief example demonstrates, the past does serve the present. Given this, it would not only be arrogant, but unethical, to insist that interested black Americans be able to demonstrate any sort of legitimate claim to a site before we actively involve them in a project. They are collectively impacted by our research results, and in this crucial sense, they are *all* connected to the pasts we reconstruct.

Some archaeologists might be tempted to proclaim that "history belongs to everybody" to shrug off any accountability to descendant groups, or to the general public. History belongs to everyone ideally, perhaps, but in actuality it belongs to those who have access to its material remnants, to those who control its penning, and to those who possess the power to authorize and disseminate it. History *should* belong to everyone, and that is the goal archaeologists must reach for if we are intent on archaeology being relevant to non-archaeologists.

On Relevance

Potter (1994:16) asserts that "the first responsibility of the archaeologist is not to try to make his or her research relevant but rather, it is to be conscious of how that work *is* potentially relevant, what it is relevant to, and the uses to which such work could be put." So all research is relevant, and in this case, we must determine how our research can be made relevant to black Americans. The suggestions for doing so have varied.

Much of African-American archaeology centers on the institution of slavery. Potter, a critical theorist, insists that in order for plantation archaeology to be relevant to black Americans today, it must "focus on the structures of oppression" (Potter 1991:101). That is, if through plantation archaeology we all come to "recognize contemporary vestiges of past domination," we can more effectively challenge oppression in today's society (Potter 1991:101). Potter

(1991:100) further suggests that archaeologists and African Americans come together in developing research questions to ensure that the research be in the interest of the latter. Potter's method is the most direct and effective means for instituting social action through archaeology. It aims right at the system, and therefore holds the most potential for prompting people to reflect upon and challenge the system, and hopefully institute change for the better. But here I agree with McKee (1994:5) that we must be careful about confining ourselves to only certain questions. I realize that critical theory embodies a neo-Marxist critique, and therefore systems of domination and class inequalities are emphasized. A *critical archaeology*, however, need not have the same emphasis on class structure. There are other research questions which black Americans may be more interested in where the "structures of oppression" are not immediately the focus. Leone (1992:7) refers to archaeology where "local people define the questions" as archaeology through "local empowerment." I am often questioned by other blacks about the material evidence for the roots of black culture. For many, understanding where they came from is the same thing as understanding who they are, and this knowledge is the legacy that they wish to pass on to future generations (Figure 1).

In the end we must involve black Americans in archaeology. As individuals and as a people who have much to gain or lose depending on how reflective and critical we are as archaeologists, we have an obligation to ask that they be a part of any project. In so doing, we must never assume what direction their questions and concerns might take for, as Potter (1994:225) warns, "critical archaeologies are intensely local; one size does not fit all." Black Americans constitute a culturally, socially, and politically diverse and multivocal group. In working with local black communities, we must therefore be prepared for different reactions among them.

Engaging a Diverse Black Public

Ruffins (1992) observed that collections of black memorabilia assembled by black collectors

during the 19th and early 20th centuries did not contain any items pertaining to slavery for a reason. Slavery was a painful and degrading memory for blacks, and its offspring Jim Crow ensured that further humiliation through racial oppression would continue. Why, then, collect the material reminders of a system so brutal? The tendency was to try and move away from this past by moving onto and up the social ladder. Although we might lament this decision by early black collectors to exclude artifacts which now would be invaluable to our understanding of American history, it is easy to sympathize with them. Slavery was a not-so-distant memory back then. But some 130 years have passed since slavery, and American society has changed. Slavery should no longer be a subject that we sweep under the rug, for that smacks of ignorance. Or does it? Scholars are discovering that there are black Americans who still feel that slavery is a shameful topic and still too sensitive to be discussed or displayed openly. Some fear that whites would only trivialize the anguish and suffering of enslaved Africans, and the brutality of slave-owning whites. Others resent how many whites continue to ignore black contributions to history by essentially “white-washing” the past by excluding blacks. Commenting on the “total plantation experience” promised by ads of Charleston, South Carolina, plantations, black tourist guide Al Miller stated: “They might tell you that blacks used to shine the brass door-knobs. Blacks built almost all the buildings in Charleston, but you don’t hear that” (Wrolstad 1994). Being systematically excluded from the process of historical and archaeological research surely only exacerbates the anxiety and resentment. But not all blacks feel that the enslaved past should remain shrouded.

Black people are currently divided over what is deemed appropriate for discussion, study, and disclosure with regard to black history (Potter 1991:100; Leone 1992; McDavid, this volume). As many more black Americans move towards dealing with slavery and its prevailing social effects, confrontations between opposing black voices resound. For example, in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, members of the black com-

munity debate the future of the slave quarter at Sotterley Plantation (Figure 2). George Forrest, a descendant of enslaved Africans from another St. Mary’s plantation, and a trustee of the Sotterley Foundation, sums up the problem: “Some think it is a painful part of history that needs to be torn down and forgotten about. The other [approach] is to take this structure and use it as a memorial to those folks who struggled here” (Hill 1995). In another case, the Library of Congress shut down a new exhibit titled “Back of the Big House: The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation.” Curated by John Michael Vlach, the exhibit was meant to show the “slaves’ perspective” on the plantation (Nicholson 1995). Hours after the exhibit opened, however, a group of black employees found the exhibit offensive and demanded the exhibit’s closure. David Nicholson, a black editor for the *Washington Post*, condemned the shutdown as irresponsible. Nicholson felt that slavery would remain “a psychic wound that black Americans, and only black Americans, can heal.” Despite the antagonism within black society, these case studies and others demonstrate that blacks on both sides are very much emo-



FIGURE 1. “African to American,” *Daily Press*, 21 August 1994:B1. (Courtesy of the *Daily Press*, Williamsburg, VA.)



FIGURE 2. "Coming to Grips With Painful Past," *Washington Post*, 2 April 1995:B3. (Courtesy of *Washington Post*.)

tionally bound to the issue of how to deal with the legacy of slavery. These mixed emotions surfaced during the reenactment of a slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg in October 1994 (Clawson 1994; Mathews, this volume) (Figure 3). A racially mixed crowd of 2,000 supporters and protesters, including representatives from the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, gathered for the event (Boyd 1994; Jones 1995). Although the majority of blacks present that day supported what was deemed an educational program, the tension in the air was heavy.

Whenever black Americans have attempted to understand what it took enslaved ancestors to survive, the words "opening the wounds" and "healing," "pain," and "struggle" are invoked to describe the emotional transformation and catharsis associated with coming to terms with a slave heritage (Hill 1995; Jones 1995; Nicholson 1995). All disagreements aside, there is a

shared compassion within black society when it comes to reckoning with the experiences of their enslaved ancestors, and this is evidenced in the above examples where the debates were similarly impassioned. These emotions arise out of a shared sense of connection to the past, and with a particular sense of commitment to rising above past and present oppression.

As archaeologists, we must not take sides in these conflicts. It is important that we do not simply dismiss the voices of opposition to our work, most of which currently involves the topic of slavery, for, as I have previously argued, all black Americans are connected to the pasts we unearth. Further, most of us have not given black society much reason to feel that archaeology should be important to them. But is it our responsibility to do so? After all, archaeologists are not the only specialists involved with constructing histories, and nonprofessionals have created their own versions of the past and then

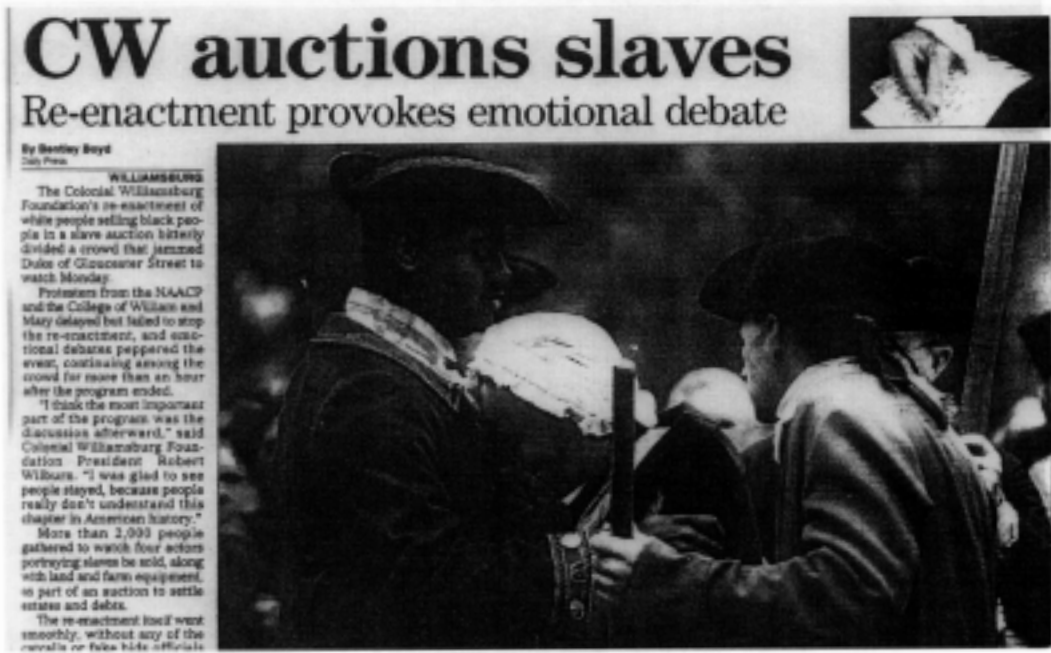


FIGURE 3. "CW auctions slaves." (Courtesy of the *Daily Press*, Williamsburg, VA.)

"imposed" them upon others. Unlike the latter, however, many archaeologists recognize that this profession exists for, and because of, the public. Along with the privilege and authority that we possess as professional archaeologists, we must bear the burden of social responsibility and set an example; for if not us, then who?

Roots, Remembrances, and Contributions

Black scholars must remember their sources, and by this I mean no technically historical sources. I mean human sources. They are the products of their source—the great pained community of the Afro-Americans of this land. And they can forget the source only at great peril to their spirit, their work, and their souls (Harding 1986:279).

As academics we often think about how our scholarship can enrich the lives of others. Seldom do we consider how our own lives, including our research, could benefit from the knowledge and experiences of nonarchaeologists. Much of the time this occurs because we have fooled ourselves into thinking that we are in the

business of "giving" a history to the public. Instead, our discipline is but one cog in a machine that has been churning out histories long before we came along, and it will continue to do so if we are no longer around to participate in the process. I firmly believe that archaeology can be valuable and worthwhile to everyone else, but I still recognize that people would not be without history, culture, or tradition should archaeologists and anthropologists vanish from the face of the earth. Where black Americans are concerned, we have a long-standing tradition of studying ourselves, as evidenced by the pioneering work of individuals such as Zora Neale Hurston, Carter G. Woodson, and W. E. B. Du Bois. African-American archaeology must be seen as not only an extension of the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology but also of the vast body of scholarship on black American history and culture, much of it conducted by blacks themselves.

Archaeologists are in the enviable position of potentially benefiting from the exchange of information with insightful and knowledgeable black

Americans. What we must first overcome is the presumption that because we might be experts on the archaeological record, this makes us experts on black history and culture. Most practitioners of African-American archaeology do not even have a formal background in any sort of African or African-American studies. The resources that we do have within arm's reach, we often fail to call upon: black scholars and members of the black communities in which we work.

One suggestion for bridging the gap between archaeologists and black Americans has been to recruit more black archaeologists. While this goal should certainly be pursued, the diversification of archaeology will take time. At the same time, we often overlook the possibility of networking with black scholars with similar research interests in fields which largely overlap

with ours: history, literature, folklore, cultural anthropology, black studies, cultural geography, museum studies, genealogy, and so on. In all of my exchanges with other black academics, I walked away with more than I arrived with. They were in turn eager to learn more about archaeology. I have also benefited greatly from the wisdom of nonacademics who were willing to share their insights and life experiences in order to enrich my research on early black culture. Archaeologists who have discovered that a "plural archaeological environment" can benefit research (Leone 1992:7; Agbe-Davies 1995; Franklin 1996; Powell 1996) are joined by other scholars who have also found enlightenment beyond the walls of academia.

Historian George McDaniel (1982) discovered an immeasurable wealth of memories and cultural traditions within the black families of

First-hand reflections

Local man source for many historians

By Jennifer Andes
Daily Press

WILLIAMSBURG

Alexander Lee was 7 when his parents learned in January 1921 that they would have to find a new home.

The Lees were among 800 or so families forced to leave an 11,433-acre area that the U.S. Navy took in the 1920s. The land, which many freedmen populated in the years after the Civil War and was known then as a reservation, is now the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station.

"My mother cried. I remember crawlin' up on my mother's lap," Lee says, recalling his mother's reaction to the government's eviction notice.

"In two to three years, my father could've sat back and smoked his pipe and sold oysters," Lee says, explaining that his father was an oysterman in the winter and farmed in the summer.

Lee's recollections of life on the land now owned by the government have been included in "Tales from James City County, Virginia Oral Histories," a 1993 pamphlet by the James City County Historical Commission.

He has also been interviewed by the Smithsonian Institution and researchers from the College of William and Mary, who recently compiled a history of people who lived on the site that is now



Alexander Lee says his family took a loss when they had to leave their farm in 1921.

Jennifer Andes/Daily Press

the weapons station.

"The only thing that I ever regretted was my father never got the profit from the oysters," Lee says, thinking back on his life on the reservation.

Oysters, once planted, take three years to mature, Lee explains. His father was in the middle of a cycle and had to abandon three acres of oysters when the government came for their land.

The U.S. Navy paid \$1,800 for their 96-acre farm, a meager compensation considering the family

moved to a 20-acre lot in York County, which Lee's father bought from a white man for \$3,000.

"He had to use his life's savings to do that," Lee says of his father. Lee, 78, and his wife, Lee-restine, live in a home on the lot his father bought on Merrimac Trail in James City County, just over the York County line.

Lee lived on the reservation with his mother, father and five siblings in a wood-frame home in the upper end, where Felgate's

Creek empties into the York River. "It was neatly built with plenty of room," Lee says of the house.

"The houses weren't too far apart, even though there was a lot of land," Lee says. All of his nine neighbors, and most of the other reservation families owned land, he recalls.

"After slavery, that's the biggest thing that black people did, they bought land."

Socializing was usually done on Sundays. "That's when people really met," Lee says. The Lees were members of St. John's Baptist Church, an all-black church which was moved to Penniman Road in York County after the Navy took the land.

"Whites went to the white church and black went to the black church," Lee says. "Nobody thought about integration."

After the family relocated to James City County, Lee and his brothers and sisters wanted to return to the reservation. "That was home down there," he says.

In retrospect, Lee says leaving the reservation was good in some ways.

"I believe we got better schools," he says. "Leaving gave us a better chance to be exposed to things going on in the world, in other parts of the county."

The weapons station hired Lee in 1938 to help build bombs. He retired as a supervisor in 1970 and now spends much of his time volunteering for St. John's Baptist Church.

FIGURE 4. "First-hand reflections," Daily Press, 17 March 1993. (Courtesy of the Daily Press, Williamsburg, VA.)

Mitchellville, Maryland. When a turn-of-the-century black tenant farm house was taken down and rebuilt within the walls of the Smithsonian, McDaniel invited black families from Mitchellville to view the house. Their collective reaction? While at the Smithsonian for 10 years, the house had been displayed backwards by curators; the front of the house was supposed to be the rear, and the kitchen and living room were reversed (McDaniel 1982:26–27). McDaniel, a white historian interested in black history, found his interviews with descendants to be invaluable. With regard to his attempts to approach and talk to people he stated: “Though I have met with a few hostile receptions, the overwhelming majority of people have been cooperative because *they have been concerned about recording the history they knew* [emphasis added]” (McDaniel 1982:xv).

Individuals as well as whole communities can help to make the difference between histories viewed through a single lens, and bolder, fuller histories viewed through multiple lenses. Scholars from the Smithsonian and the College of William and Mary have interviewed Alexander Lee to help in recounting the lives of descendants of freedmen who settled in Yorktown, Virginia, after the Civil War (McDonald et al. 1992; Andes 1993) (Figure 4). When Lee was a child, the U.S. Navy used the process of “eminent domain” to seize property that had long been settled by 600 black families and as many as 200 white families (McDonald et al. 1992:43, 75). Although the government paid some compensation to landowners, unlike the whites, many blacks could not prove that the land was theirs. Some had inherited land from family members who worked the property under slavery and were then given parcels of plantation land upon emancipation without ever receiving a deed (McDonald et al. 1992:15). Their descendants therefore ended up with nothing despite the fact that they had lived on the property for years without dispute. The land is now home to the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station. Yorktown’s written history and public interpretations are dominated by glorious military events such as the surrender at Yorktown during the Revolution.

The naval base serves as a constant reminder of this grand military past. In turn, Lee’s memories serve to keep alive a more grim side of Yorktown’s history: the disrupted lives of those who were torn from their place of birth and way of life by a system of oppression deeply rooted in American society.

Within black communities, there are living ties to the past, both historical and cultural. And while we may be the experts when it comes to the archaeological record, this does not necessarily make us experts, or the only experts, on black history and culture. Consulting with black Americans, both scholars and nonacademics, can only broaden our base of understanding of the past. This is not to say that we should privilege knowledge on the basis of skin color. Hopefully these examples simply demonstrate that black Americans possess perspectives, insights, and lifeways, the knowledge of which could benefit archaeological research.

Conclusions

The discipline of historical archaeology is not a timeless, static entity, just as the cultures that we study were and are not. The positive growth and transformation of our field depends upon the continual reexamination of our objectives. The goals of archaeologists in general have been confined to ensuring professional responsibility to other archaeologists, to protecting cultural resources, and to dictating proper field conduct. It is only recently that archaeologists have come to debate among themselves about the privileged “ownership” of archaeological knowledge and cultural resources, and the potent effects of the social and political implications of our research. The Society for American Archaeology, for example, has recently revised its ethics statements to include principles on accountability, public education and outreach, and stewardship (Lynott and Wylie 1995; Kintigh 1996:5, 17; Wylie 1996:184–187). The statement on accountability reads: “Responsible archaeological research, including all levels of professional activity, requires an acknowledgment of public accountability and a commitment to make every reasonable

effort, in good faith, to consult actively with affected group(s), with the goal of establishing a working relationship that can be beneficial to all parties involved" (Kintigh 1996:7).

The World Archaeological Congress and the American Anthropological Association both have similar edicts in their bylaws. Yet, the bylaws of The Society for Historical Archaeology have no such specific clause in Article VII, its statement of "ethical positions." This is likely due to the fact that historical archaeologists have generally studied Anglo-Americans, and cases where whites are studying other whites are not perceived as a threat by most Americans who are white. For now, the study of African Americans by historical archaeologists goes virtually unnoticed by black Americans, mainly due to a lack of concerted efforts to bring this research to their attention. It is as if we are biding our time; waiting for more heated confrontations with black Americans before we are finally forced through public opinion and governmental regulations to engage them as equals in archaeological research. But why let push come to shove? No one stands to benefit through forced relations, where the long-held feelings of mistrust and resentment between blacks and whites are then further fueled by struggles to control archaeological interpretations of multiple black pasts.

In the end, it is up to archaeologists to make the initial effort of extending an open invitation to members of the black community to participate in the construction of their histories. Our interpretations of black history can potentially serve to legitimate and perpetuate racism in American society, and are more likely to do so should black Americans be excluded from the process of researching histories. We must take every measure to identify who benefits from our particular projects, and to whom our research is relevant. With an active, critical analysis of our research, and with the input from impacted groups, we are more likely to produce archaeological results which serve to uplift and empower communities which still suffer under racial and political hegemony.

For those who are still unsure about whether archaeologists should be accountable to black Americans, and whether we should have to actively involve them in archaeological endeavors, just ask ourselves why it is that we want to study black history and culture. But be warned, for there is far too much at stake to answer that one simply finds it interesting.

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- MARIA FRANKLIN
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH
THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION
WILLIAMSBURG, VA 23187-1776
AND DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
BERKELEY, CA 94720