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Book Review: Archaeology and Created Memory: Public History in a National Park by Paul A. Shackel

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ARCHAEOLOGY AND CREATED MEMORY: PUBLIC HISTORY IN A NATIONAL PARK, by Paul A. Shackel 2000, Kluwer/Plenum Academic Publishers, New York, 210 pages, \$57.50 (hardcover).

Reviewed by James C. Garman

Since the days of John Brown, the picturesque town of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, has served as a flashpoint in American historical memory. Mere mention of the town's name will call to mind lurid images of Brown and his band holed up at the armory, their subsequent capture, and Brown's dramatic execution, all rallying points for the increasingly militant cause of abolitionism. More discerning readers may be aware that Harpers Ferry, an important strategic point, changed hands eight times during the course of the Civil War. It seems safe to say that few, however, have any notion of the town's history after Lee's surrender at Appomattox.

This "problem of memory," according to Paul Shackel, is precisely the problem in interpreting the town, a National Historic Park since the 1950s. In this ambitious new volume, Shackel sets out a promising research agenda: that is, to look at the post-Civil War histories of the town and its citizenry, and to "interpret the interpretation" of the town. Drawing on a range of historiographers, Shackel proposes to develop a "more inclusive" vision of the past, one that gives expression to "alternative voices" (p. vii). The history of interpretation at Harpers Ferry largely ignores the later Victorian era at the expense of the Civil War. Consequently, the histories of the working classes in the industrial town have largely been suppressed or forgotten.

Archaeology and Created Memory rises directly out of the project team's earlier reports and articles. In 1993, the National Park Service published *Interdisciplinary Investigations of Domestic Life in Government Block B: Perspectives on Harpers Ferry's Armory and Commercial District*, a project report edited by Shackel. Full disclosure: I reviewed this massive and impressive work for *Historical Archaeology* and liked it very much indeed. Its lavish illustrations make it a reference that I still use frequently. One year later, Shackel and Susan Winter edited a series of methodological

essays on the project as a special volume of *Historical Archaeology*. Other articles have appeared in national and regional journals.

What, then, is different about *Archaeology and Created Memory*? Mainly, any difference lies in Shackel's efforts to link a wide range of sites and a diversity of data to attack the problem of "time-freezing" at Harpers Ferry. He traces the roots of the problem to the devastation of Harpers Ferry by the end of the Civil War. The infrastructure of the city was in ruins, a fact not lost on visitors. "What a God forsaken place!" wrote one at the end of the war. Subsequent efforts by leading citizens to rejuvenate the town—through industries like tourism and brewing/bottling—ultimately failed, largely through the influence of Temperance and Prohibition. Unfortunately, it was these sorts of sites—post-Civil War factories, Victorian houses, and boarding-houses—that were bulldozed shortly after the federal government's acquisition of the town.

One aspect of the town on which Shackel is particularly strong is that of the context of Reconstruction. In Chapter 3, he ably traces the peregrinations of the "John Brown Fort" until it found a new home on the grounds of Storer College, an all-African-American institution on the edge of town. The fort's iconic significance led to the hosting of the Second Niagara Convention in Harpers Ferry, a remarkable circumstance in the Jim Crow South. Although this is by far the strongest chapter in the book, readers are also referred to Shackel's excellent article on the subject ("Terrible Saint: Changing Meanings of the John Brown Fort," *Historical Archaeology* 29(4): 11–25).

Archaeology and Created Memory borrows from all of that excellent previous work while inexplicably reducing its complexity at the expense of some theory. Chapter 5, which looks at the brewing industry, is an appropriate example. In the National Park Service report, this was a superb chapter by Deborah A. Hull-Walski and Frank Walski that touched on material culture, working conditions, specific company histories, and biographies of owners and workers. In the *Historical Archaeology* volume, this diversity was largely retained. In *Archaeology and Created Memory*, all of this is greatly compressed. Drawing

largely on the work of Robert Paynter, Michael Nassaney, and Marjorie Abel, Shackel proposes an industrial archaeology of resistance. He then moves on to discuss some possible examples of worker resistance in the archaeological record of the brewery and surrounding areas. All of the detail that made the original essay so compelling is now largely lost. The theoretical context used to support the archaeological results is surprisingly sketchy and lacks coherence.

Ultimately, readers are likely to find *Archaeology and Created Memory* disappointing. Shackel has a real opportunity to examine the National Park Service's "restoration" from a critical perspective. Certainly what happened at Harpers Ferry was not an anomaly; at Salem Maritime National Historic Site, for example, one of the first actions that the government undertook after acquiring the property was the demolition of important waterfront warehouses. Today the National Park Service finds itself struggling to reinterpret those vanished structures. Such criticism need not be an indictment of federal preservation; rather, it can serve as an admonitory lesson regarding its highly-charged political context. Surely Harpers Ferry, "preserved" at the height of the Cold War and with the approaching centennial of the Civil War, provides similar lessons.

Without a compelling theoretical context, the wealth of available Harpers Ferry publica-

tions suggests that there is no compelling reason to buy this book. Those seeking a nuanced review of the extensive and exciting archaeological data should seek out the original National Park Service report. Those seeking methodological overviews of the project's different analyses should study the *Historical Archaeology* volume. Those seeking an excellent example of Shackel's deft theoretical touch should read the "Terrible Saint" article in *Historical Archaeology*. *Archaeology and Created Memory* does not deliver what it promises; more seriously, it does not do justice to one of the most exciting and well-executed interdisciplinary projects of the recent past.

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