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Is It Futile to Try and Be Useful? Historical Archaeology and the African-American Experience

Cover Page Footnote

A version of this paper was presented in October 1993 at the annual meeting of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I want to thank Charles Faulkner, Rebecca Yamin, Mary Beaudry, and Parker Potter for helpful comments and encouragement following that presentation. Professor Beaudry was also instrumental in getting me to submit the paper for publication. I would also like to thank the Ladies' Hermitage Association for its profuse and unqualified support of my research during my tenure as staff archaeologist at the Hermitage.

COMMENTARY:

Is It Futile to Try and Be Useful? Historical Archaeology and the African-American Experience

Larry McKee

This paper considers the place of archaeology in the ongoing debate over the nature of slavery in the United States. The focus is on how the concerns of archaeologists intersect with the concerns of contemporary African Americans, especially in terms of the production and consumption of new information on plantation slavery. Although close links between archaeology and the African-American community should be promoted at every opportunity, archaeologists should avoid entanglement with contemporary social agendas in carrying out research and in interpreting evidence. Archaeology's standing with academic and popular audiences can only be maintained by sticking with the discipline's essential mission: to present fresh information on the past.

Cette article examine la place qu'occupe l'archéologie dans le débat en cours sur la nature de l'esclavage aux États-Unis. Elle étudie comment s'intersectent les intérêts des archéologues et ceux des Afro-américains d'aujourd'hui, surtout en ce qui concerne la production et la consommation de nouveaux renseignements sur l'esclavage dans les plantations. Même s'il faut promouvoir chaque fois que l'occasion s'en présente une étroite liaison entre l'archéologie et la communauté afro-américaine, les archéologues doivent éviter en effectuant leur recherches et en interprétant les données de s'empêtrer dans les visées sociales contemporaines. L'archéologie ne peut maintenir son rang aux yeux du monde universitaire et du public qu'en s'en tenant à sa mission essentielle: présenter de nouveaux renseignements sur le passé.

Our task [as anthropologists] is to decide what is worth knowing, for whom, and why. (Frykman 1995: 41)

Like most archaeologists, one goal in doing what I do is to find the proper place for my work, in terms of having it accepted by myself and by my intended audience, which includes both scholarly colleagues and the general public. One motivation and need we all share is to have what we do valued as a contribution, again by ourselves and by others, in that we want to say with con-

fidence that we have done good work that is in some way useful.

The archaeological study of African-American life involves an extra twist in the struggle to make valued contributions. In addition to the usual audience of our colleagues and interested members of the population at large, we who work in African-American archaeology also are very aware of the presence of another particular audience segment, the descendants of the people we study. Our dealings with African Americans have a special

character beyond the usual intellectual curiosity of archaeology's lay audience. The processes of racism and domination that applied to black residents, both free and enslaved, of pre-emancipation America are still to some degree at play in our own times. In addition, questions about what really happened during slavery, and especially why the institution was tolerated in a nation that refers to itself as the land of the free, have not been settled. The debate remains open and lively and there is an audience, both black and white, eager for more information and ready to use the past in making sense of the present.

So most of us who work on sites associated with African Americans came to the topic with an optimistic outlook that what we were doing had great potential to contribute to a better understanding of a difficult period of the past. Early proponents of the study of both slave and free black sites had encouraged us with the notion that the archaeological record was rich, clean, and unbiased, providing information on African-American life unavailable from any other source. Our intellectual perspectives were supposedly uniquely attuned to this task, being derived from anthropology's ability to assess a situation from the cool position of the interested but unentangled outsider. We had the power to come up with new truths missed by other students of the past. This was heady stuff, and on good days I can still tap into this original enthusiasm.

Challenges from the post-processualists and critical theorists have, with good reason, caused me to reassess and confront some of the somewhat naïve original assumptions made about the archaeology of African-American life. But the core beliefs about what I do are intact. I remain convinced my work contributes new information, and this in-

formation contributes to a better understanding of the past useful to both scholars *and* the general public. I would have given up and gone on to some other occupation a long time ago if I didn't truly believe this.

Recently, archaeologists working with ideas from the Frankfurt school of critical theory have posed some important questions about the use and usefulness of the archaeological study of the African-American past. Much of what the critical archaeologists have to say is constructive, especially in terms of reminding us about contemporary influences on research questions and interpretations. I am less enthusiastic about their conceptions of the relationship between archaeologists and the contemporary African-American community, and about how the message coming out of the study of slavery should be predetermined. Archaeologists working with African-American topics are beholden to confront these ideas, and this essay represents the results of careful consideration of how my research applies to, and can be applied by, African Americans.

My particular awakening to critical theory as it applies to archaeology came from reading the introduction to Mark Leone and Parker Potter's fine volume, *The Recovery Of Meaning: Historical Archaeology in the Eastern United States*. They mentioned the fact that scholars could possibly be "overempowered" by knowledge that could be gained through symbolic analysis (Leone and Potter 1988: 9). The implication was that this could be one more case of white culture dominating and misusing the culture of "the other." It took me a while to pin down exactly why this seemed so out of whack to me. Eventually, I realized that the authors

were criticizing the prime motive for archaeological research—that its sources, methods, and interpretive strategies could result in strong and clear understandings of the past. The essay was clearly making the point that our very strengths as archaeologists should be downplayed because it put us at an unfair advantage. The implication is that our work on reconstructing the past was actually a form of cultural larceny, maybe even intellectual pot hunting. This was an unsettling view (probably meant to be so by the authors) and it made me begin some intensive and productive evaluation of my own intellectual assumptions and goals.

Parker Potter, Jr.'s important 1991 article, "What is the Use of Plantation Archaeology?" provided a focused view of critical archaeology's thoughts on the proper value of research on African-American sites. In critiquing several specific studies, he presents three intertwined themes related to how work on the topic could and should be improved. He examined the need for socially responsible archaeology, the relation between archaeologists and the black community, and what message archaeologists should emphasize in their interpretations. I've listed these in an order from least to most unsettling, and I'll discuss each in turn.

Dr. Potter sees a need to root our work in the main tenet of critical theory, that there is "an inseparability of knowledge and human interest"; in other words, knowledge inevitably serves some social purpose (Potter 1991: 94). We need to be socially responsible about what we do, with "full awareness of the contexts and consequences of the work one does" (Potter 1991: 95). In his formulation, archaeologists need to be more self-

reflexive about their work, and we have to always anticipate and fend off inappropriate uses of our interpretations. I can't imagine any possible disagreement over this point.

Potter's second theme stresses the need for archaeologists "to understand the needs and interests of an audience made up of the descendants of their research subjects" and to provide this audience "with interpretations they can use, in their own interests" (Potter 1991: 100). I have some problems with this, in that it seems to restrict and predetermine the paths our research might take. There is clearly a shocking lack of interaction between researchers and the black community, and nothing but good will come from breaking down barriers and combining what each of us can bring to the table. But what makes archaeology a welcome addition to the mix is its very different perspective and very different particular source material. I think we would be making a grave mistake in abandoning our intellectual autonomy in the service of our intended audience. Let me practice a little self-reflection here and anticipate criticism by saying very clearly that I believe that, by definition, archaeologists are the people who are best suited to deal with the archaeological record. We are equipped to untangle what is left in the ground and to translate our finds into a form available for broader consumption. This may tend toward the arrogant notion of privileged access, but I don't believe this negates my point.

One solution to the problem of minimal interaction between archaeologists and the African-American community is of course to combine the two into individuals who are both black and archaeologists. I would like to think our discipline is succeeding in encouraging more black students to become profes-

sionals, but progress in this regard seems very slow. A discussion of why that is the case is beyond the scope of this paper. Some examination of current research at the African Burial Ground site in New York City will be useful in examining the issue of black scholars studying black sites.

Coming from outside the region I can't claim to know all the ins and outs of the wrangling over the analysis of the material from the African Burial Ground project (see Harrington 1993 for background on the issue). What is important, and what does come through to outside observers, is that the site may well serve as a breakthrough in the archaeological study of slavery and may introduce a whole new audience to the potential power of this research. It is a triumph that the analysis of this material is in the hands of Michael Blakey and his staff at Howard University. The project should serve not only to bring out new information on African Americans, but, more important, it should demonstrate how the social context of the discovery and the subsequent research adds to the interpretive strength of project findings.

Having said this I must add that I am troubled by assertions that *only* African Americans should undertake research on African-American topics. To bring the discussion back to Potter's article, I see this stance as an inevitable by-product of recommendations that our audience define our research questions. In a radio interview (Thuy Vu, "Slave Remains Spark Controversy, Weekend All Things Considered," National Public Radio, 2 October 1993), Michael Blakey himself succinctly, and perhaps recklessly, summarized this point of view. "The comparison would be with the more familiar imagery of Nazis or their

descendants, unapologetic or apologetic, studying a holocaust find and interpreting it."

One answer to such a statement is of course that it is important for the German people to confront their past for themselves, just as it is important for white Americans to be aware of the continued presence of the social residue of slavery. I think Blakey's statement, and the thinking behind it, needs to be criticized at a number of other levels as well. As a matter of practicality splitting up research along racial or ethnic lines is unworkable. At this point the volume of archaeological work being done completely overwhelms the number of active black archaeologists, and it is few sites that will find a Michael Blakey willing and available to take on the work. This kind of research balkanization also devalues countless contributions already made and being made by white scholars looking at African-American topics.

I also think that studying African-American life from just an African-American perspective would end up one-sided and ultimately sterile. I always get new insights on my work when I get together with African-American colleagues or a black public audience, and I hope in some ways this feeling is mutual. Borders can make for fertile ground, and we can't help but be enriched by such exchanges. I also look forward to a time when archaeology attracts more black practitioners and such encounters become much more common. Finally, the idea of assigning research sites on the basis of color has the inevitable corollary that white sites would be off limits to black scholars. Do we really want to carry on scholarship under these conditions? At some point we have to acknowledge we are all in this together and move forward on that basis.

Despite my fears about segregated research, I remain most troubled and unsettled by the third theme in Parker Potter's article, concerning his thoughts about what the proper message of plantation archaeology should be. In his words, "by definition, slaves could never be well off," and he discounts as unreasonable the attempt "to pose any research question that could be answered with a statement that slave life was not all that bad" (Potter 1991: 101, 97). He criticizes the focus on "quality of life" that many of us at least start with, since, in his view, any statements made about slave life that make it out to be anything but absolutely horrendous could be misconstrued as an apologist stance and could be misused by those seeking credence for their racist views.

Even versions of the past that focus on the actions taken by slaves themselves to "outwit their oppressors" and improve their lives don't pass muster, according to Potter, since only an archaeology that "focusses directly on the structures of oppression" can ever really make contributions to the present (Potter 1991: 101). To Potter's credit, he does provide good examples of some clumsy work that does seem to forget that freedom involves more than just easy access to finer tablewares.

My main problem with Potter's ideas here is that by predetermining the message—that nothing positive can be said about the lives of enslaved African Americans—and in setting a single agenda for plantation archaeology—a relentless emphasis on the "structures of oppression"—he is putting some confining limits on what archaeologists can contribute to the lively and complex studies of the topic. Archaeology is too expensive to be used to show over and over again that slavery above all else was totally and

absolutely oppressive. That is a given, and although he is right in pointing out that some archaeologists fail to keep this fact in the forefront of their interpretations, ultimately we have to look inside the institution and concentrate on how people dealt with this encompassing atmosphere of domination. Eugene Genovese, writing in his introduction to *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1976: xvi), provides the best anchor for this approach.

Many years of studying the astonishing effort of black people to live decently as human beings even in slavery has convinced me that no theoretical advance suggested in their experience could ever deserve as much attention as that demanded by their demonstration of the beauty and power of the human spirit under conditions of extreme oppression.

Criticism should only be a starting point. The question asked in the title of this paper is of course rhetorical, since true futility would lie in retreating into the confines of our small discipline and avoiding any attempts to contribute to the ongoing interpretive debates about slavery. We do have to keep our scholarly independence in order to be seen as full participants in the debate. I don't advocate avoiding input from the African-American community, but I don't agree with Potter's assertions that they should define the questions to be addressed by archaeologists. What is involved here is not a matter of bias, but the issue of authority and control over interpretations of the past. We need to avoid the idea that valid research questions and interpretations can be developed out of the contemporary agendas of groups on either side of the power line.

What I am especially interested in avoiding is the replacement of one type of false consciousness with another. I

understand ethnicity and ethnic group interaction as being based on some very fluid dynamics, subject to almost continual redefinition from both inside and out (cf. McKee 1987: 31–32). The past is obviously an important source of information that fuels this process of definition, since ethnic groups are grounded in their cultural and “blood” heritage. But as groups shift, does what we know about the past have to shift as well? Every generation redefines the past in its own terms, but archaeology should work to be as independent of this process as possible.

The simple part of slavery is that it was a vile and violent system whereby one group stole the lives and labor of individuals in another group. The complex part is studying the varieties of ways this oppression was implemented and the variety of ways it was resisted. The interpretations coming from the archaeological and documentary studies of slavery are complicated and won’t fit into the simple conceptualization of the past that most of us seem to crave. Like most explanations of human behavior it takes patience to unravel the complexities and to deal with the ambiguities of the situation. Archaeology is in a unique position to recover material evidence of the push and pull between black and white within specific plantation settings and to bring these together in developing the necessarily intricate interpretations of the situation as a whole.

Archaeologists working with plantation sites need to move beyond wrangling over proper methods and proper interpretive stances and start doing what archaeology is supposed to do best, presenting fresh information on the past. This is what our audience, both scholarly and popular, both black and white, expects from us. There are many elements of the post-processualist

and critical theorist approaches that are positive and constructive, and Potter’s article includes many of these themes. I am disturbed by the fact that others in our discipline are so focused on being cynical about what we do and about what we can say with our sources. A lot of archaeologists seem to spend a lot of time trying to make archaeology as muddled and obscure as possible. No one is going to remain interested, or supportive, of archaeology if this becomes a main theme in how we think about the past. The archaeological record is a tattered and incomplete thing, subject to enormous biases in how it was and is created and in how it is interpreted. But anyone who thinks that this completely disqualifies it as a source of true information on the past should probably find another career. As one pair of observers recently summarized it, “it is critical that archaeologists assert that there is at least a partially knowable antiquity and that archaeologists are the guardians of its integrity” (Yoffee and Sherratt 1993: 7; see other contributions in this volume for further examination of the interplay between research and social context).

Archaeology’s standing and acceptance within the African-American community will be determined by its ability to serve as a source of new and specific information about their past. I am not advocating the arrogant idea that archaeology can “give” them a past that they don’t already have. The black community in this country has a long and successful tradition of defining its own history for its own consumption. Perspectives from this tradition certainly help guide archaeological interpretations, but not all the questions we ask and all the data we collect will find a snug fit with the themes important to the descendants of those

we study or to the entire African-American community. Archaeology has a fine tradition of revisionism and iconoclasm, and it is satisfying to think we can present information that is unsettling in some ways to all segments of our intended audience.

Acknowledgments

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