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Book Review: The Archaeology of Antislavery Resistance, by Terrance M. Weik

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANTISLAVERY RESISTANCE, by Terrance M. Weik, 2012, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 204 pp., 16 black and white figures, 3 maps, references, index, \$69.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Ashley Peles

Terrance M. Weik's (2012) book, *The Archaeology of Antislavery Resistance*, represents an overview of the wide range of topics and approaches used by archaeologists at sites related to this theme. This book is a part of the series, *The American Experience in Archaeological Perspective*, edited by Michael S. Nassaney, the stated purpose of which is to "explore an event, process, setting, or institution that was significant in the formative experience of contemporary America," and to give both students and scholars an idea of the current state of the discipline. To some degree, this objective then limits the type of discussion that Weik can pursue, with many chapters consisting primarily of literature reviews of particular subjects. The benefit of this approach is that someone seeking to pursue a project related to antislavery resistance can quickly scan a number of theoretical and archaeological approaches that may prove useful to their own project and learn about the challenges that may be in store.

In Chapter 1, Weik defines what he means by the term antislavery resistance; for him, this concept includes any form of defiance against slavery. This is a useful place to begin as it instantly broadens the archaeological perspectives beyond the normal group of abolitionists and unites the activities of runaways, maroon societies, conspirators, and abolitionists as part of a larger, heterogeneous movement. As the author points out, because resistance was illegal, we know much less about the wide variety of people who resisted slavery—those who rebelled and those who were sources of aid—but we need to have a framework that still includes all of their contributions. Such a framework is explored in Chapter 2, which presents a genealogy of the history of slavery and resistance. Ultimately this chapter reveals that we cannot assume anything about slavery; both the definitions and associations are complicated and different depending on the

geographic area and time period being discussed. This complexity means that there are often contradictions in people's engagement with both slavery and resistance, but rather than being stumbling blocks, these can be productive forms of inquiry.

This comprehensive approach is mirrored in Chapter 3, which provides the reader with a summary of the current themes tying together scholarly approaches to antislavery resistance. The unifying topics covered by Weik include resistance, freedom, liberation, ethnogenesis, and networks, but as he points out (p. 27), "no single generalization can adequately describe people's reactions or initiatives in resistance, nor their engagements with authorities, peers, and indifferent actors." This variety of motivations and backgrounds means that archaeologists also have to be careful about the theories we apply; resiliency and survival may not be all that differentiable from resistance. Within this chapter, the author also urges archaeologists to simultaneously question the premises upon which our theoretical approaches are built. Weik's most important point is that freedom does not necessarily equal autonomy. This consideration is especially important for archaeologists working in the Northeast to grapple with while problematizing categories like antislavery. Disagreeing with slavery does not necessarily mean that collaborators believe in racial equality and, while telling these stories may be somewhat difficult, populating the historical landscape with these contradictions brings us closer to recognizing the motivations that brought disparate people together in antislavery networks.

At this point, Weik more closely inspects the archaeology that has been conducted under the rubric of antislavery resistance. These overview chapters are split into a discussion of self-liberated communities or maroon societies (Chapter 4) and antislavery collaborators and the Underground Railroad (UGRR) (Chapter 5). These two chapters provide the reader with a sense of the breadth of archaeology that has been done in both North and South America in the first case and in various regions of the United States in the second. While providing a comprehensive overview of excavated sites, these chapters also bring together the common stumbling blocks encountered by most projects. These

obstacles include survey methodologies that may largely miss ephemeral materials and sites, issues of difficult or largely inaccessible site locations, and a need for artifact databases and comprehensive studies that can aid with site recognition and comparison. The most directly applicable part of these chapters for archaeologists in the northeast is a section in Chapter 5 devoted specifically to the Eastern United States, detailing projects in New York and Pennsylvania.

In particular, Weik considers the nature of archaeological evidence we should expect from known or possible UGRR sites. Enslaved people fleeing their captors would not have brought much in the way of material objects with them. Alternatively, collaborators would not have wanted any signifying objects or hiding areas to have obvious connections with the UGRR, so they would have taken advantage of common, everyday objects. This means archaeologists are unlikely to be able to connect any particular objects with the UGRR outside of more general temporal associations; indeed, investigations of suspected UGRR locations have encountered this situation. Importantly, such a lack of evidence does not mean that oral histories are wrong, but rather that archaeological means may not be well-suited to providing definitive answers to a subject purposely meant to remain hidden. This condition leads to a second important point: understanding the consequences of archaeological interpretations among the local community. Often, community members are quite invested in stories that tie their family members and/or houses to participation in the UGRR; archaeological investigations that do not reveal definite evidence of this involvement can be deeply upsetting. When researching such emotion-laden topics, archaeologists must tread carefully and choose their words wisely. This caution is particularly warranted when dealing with sites that were known as important locations of antislavery events, such as the Combahee Ferry site, where media representations overemphasized the ability to connect artifacts with a specific night. While archaeologists do not necessarily have control over such media coverage, it is important to make an effort to shape this discussion in a more productive way that emphasizes the broader story represented at a site.

The last full chapter (Chapter 6) presents the details of Weik's current research at the comparatively document-rich site of Pilaklikaha, a Seminole and African Seminole community in Florida. His investigations, though limited to date, have focused on addressing how the community was laid out and how such arrangements may inform our ideas about the nature of community interaction and ethnogenesis. The ephemerality he documents is a testament to the inherent fragility of such sites, but seems to also indicate that the failure to produce archaeological evidence in other places may be more a fault of archaeologists than of the sites themselves. We may need to bring different techniques to bear, particularly large scale excavations involving stripping the plow zone, to obtain a broader view of the subsoil and any features. While these techniques are understandably limited by the schedule, budget, and permissions of individual projects, these methodologies have been successful on ephemeral sites elsewhere and, perhaps, should be adopted more widely.

Overall, this book will be useful as a reference text for those who are beginning projects dealing with issues of slavery and abolition, particularly in the Northeastern United States. Weik's overview of the pitfalls and difficulties that researchers experience, as well as examples of projects that have overcome these difficulties, provide models for academics, cultural resource professionals, and government agencies alike. The one small complaint I have is that the figures are not referenced in the text and a few bibliographic citations are missing, but these issues are small in contrast to the broader contribution of such an encompassing compendium.

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