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## An Engaged Archaeology for Our Mutual Benefit: The Case of New Philadelphia

Of all of the factors to shape archaeological practice—curiosity about the peoples and events of the past, a desire for a more scientific approach, or the willingness to embrace ambiguity, just to name a few—it may be that the most revolutionary of all will be the discipline’s halting realization that archaeologists do not practice in a vacuum. In reviewing the research output for the first three seasons of historical research, excavation, and analysis of the site at New Philadelphia, one is struck by how profoundly this project has been shaped in a positive manner by the principals’ attention to the contexts within which they work, and the way in which their work reverberates in the world. Archaeologists have become accustomed to asserting that their work improves the world: ancient wisdom is revived to solve modern problems; lost or neglected stories are brought to light by the “democratic” discipline; and the roots of current social conditions are revealed, the better to transform the present. These beliefs sustain many archaeologists in their work, and examples of such benefits can be found within this volume. But here is also an extended case study, with detailed examples, that demonstrates not only how archaeology can save the world, but how engagement with the world can save archaeology. The authors contributing to this volume provide a multifaceted description of one particular research project, and in doing so demonstrate how community engagement shapes and benefits archaeological practice.

The ways in which this phenomenon is manifested can be grouped, for the purposes of this essay, under several mutually inclusive headings. One might consider how community engagement touches upon themes at the forefront of current archaeological research, or how that engagement intersects with enduring themes that have

shaped the field for many years. One could examine the juxtaposition of various stakeholder perceptions of, and uses for the past and its residues. Finally, one can contemplate how this transformed archaeology fits with the categories customarily used to partition archaeological work—period, region, cultural group, and social institution. These various stances are used to frame the remarks which follow.

At whatever scale it is considered—archaeology, historical archaeology, African diaspora archaeology—the New Philadelphia project reflects the themes and concerns that shape contemporary archaeological practice. This aspect is of particular interest to me, as I joined this long-term project as a co-director starting in 2008. Researchers are animated by a variety of questions. How can technology be harnessed to wrest interpretations from the landscape? What new ways of thinking about material culture will allow greater insight into the lives of those who made, used, and discarded those things? How to best communicate project findings? Researchers also reconsider the topics and institutions investigated and the research questions that drive the work, in part because of increased attention to, and appreciation for the complexity of relationships with stakeholders.

The traditional means of publication and dissemination of archaeological knowledge through monographs, conference presentations, and journal articles has been joined by a number of other forums and venues that extend the reach of scholarship, and bring it to the attention of broader and more diverse audiences. The New Philadelphia team maintains two websites, available at <<http://www.heritage.umd.edu>> and <<http://www.anthro.uiuc.edu/faculty/cfennell/NP/>>. Both sites present material for a lay readership, as well as the standard technical reports, and in doing so join a number of other recent projects notable for the accessibility of raw data and incremental developments, as well as working interpretations (McDavid 2004; African Burial Ground 2007; Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery 2007). The New Philadelphia project made these electronic resources broadly accessible long

before the publication of the present volume. This is not an accident, as observed by Paul Shackel in his introduction to this volume. An engaged archaeology is an accountable archaeology. Ready access to data and transparent interpretive procedures build trust and credibility among stakeholders, no less than they do within the profession. Likewise, in responding to the challenges of non-archaeologists, researchers are compelled to consider their own ideologies and the partial perspectives that are part of archaeology's culture.

The fact that archaeology is being undertaken at sites like New Philadelphia, where one learns about emancipation and interracial relations, as opposed to slavery and its attendant social distinctions, is itself a response to the interests of the public, particularly a black public, which is sometimes, but not always as fascinated by "the peculiar institution" as are social scientists (Derry 1997; Watters 2001; Leone et al. 2005). Indeed, other institutions are coming to the fore in African diaspora archaeology, including schools (Sprinkle 1994; Agbe-Davies 2002; Helton, this volume). In the process of developing a research program on the archaeology of the African diaspora in Chicago, I have been struck by the number of requests by community members to investigate sites other than residences. This runs counter to long-term trends in African diaspora archaeology, in which homes and graves have been the predominant focus—the latter being a mixed bag as far as many stakeholders are concerned. Rather, people seek an archaeological perspective on important community institutions: clubs, businesses, theaters, churches, or "institutional" residences. An example of the last is the Phyllis Wheatley Home for Girls, where for the last two years archaeologists and students from DePaul University have had the privilege of working with community educators and preservation activists to remind the city of the struggles and triumphs of the women who founded, and those who resided in the Home (Bobbie Johnson 2006, pers. comm., 2007, pers. comm.; Joann Tate 2006, pers. comm., 2007, pers. comm.; Agbe-Davies [2008]). Think of the expanded picture of American lives that is obtained when not just houses, but the array of spaces in which people spent their days is considered!

With this infusion of new subjects and increased openness to research questions that

inspire a general audience, comes a more complex relationship among the various stakeholders in an archaeological project or site. An interesting discussion of the very term "stakeholder" occurred at the annual conference of the Society for Historical Archaeology in 2007, which included an open-forum discussion of research designs and methods in African diaspora archaeology (Fennell 2007). As I recall, the conversation began with an assertion from the floor that to use the term "stakeholder" was to engage in gratuitous and politically correct wordsmithing, and that the customary term "audience" was perfectly adequate. I do not remember how the question was resolved, but it did get me thinking. What role do archaeologists envision for those who witness their efforts? What makes the New Philadelphia project—and any number of its contemporaries—notable is the fact that the term "stakeholder" is no mere lip service or jargon, but reflects an actual appreciation for the stake—the risk, the investment, the claim—that such individuals and groups do indeed hold in the research and its outcomes. Audiences look and listen. Stakeholders engage and often challenge, a dynamic that may encourage archaeologists to see themselves as stakeholders as well (LaRoche and Blakey 1997; Epperson 2004). Throughout the contributions to this volume one observes the traces of the ways in which various stakeholders—including descendants of New Philadelphia residents, McWorter family members, current inhabitants of the region, scholars in other fields, and collectors and providers of oral history testimony—have done more than just absorb the information that emanates from the archaeological team working at New Philadelphia. Instead, they have asked difficult questions and pushed for clarity in analysis and interpretation, doubtless to the benefit of the final result.

As archaeologists become more explicit about the impact they hope their scholarship will have on "the real world" (see, for example, the contributions to "community archaeology" in *World Archaeology*, vol. 34, no. 2), they have also sought mechanisms to inculcate these values in the next generation of researchers. As Michael Nassaney (2004:89) notes, archaeologists were advocates for experiential learning long before it became a pedagogical buzzword, and

their work is often conceived as serving some larger purpose. Projects like New Philadelphia bring the processes of service learning explicitly into archaeological instruction (such as the contributions to Nassaney and Levine 2007). The students who participate in the Research Experience for Undergraduates program at New Philadelphia certainly learn state-of-the-art archaeological methods, but true to the model of service learning, their education comes through the process of serving a function useful to some constituency, namely those who wish to perpetuate and enlarge upon the legacy of Frank McWorter and his neighboring townfolk (Martin et al. 2004; Christopher Fennell, Terrance Martin, and Paul Shackel 2005, pers. comm., 2007, pers. comm.).

Despite the many ways in which the endeavors described in this volume point towards the future of archaeological practice, one can also see traces of themes that have endured for years and continue to shape the field. For example, there is a continued pursuit of ways in which material culture might be used to distinguish among the former occupants of the town site, whether along racial/ethnic lines, or in terms of regional origin, occupation, or gender. Also apparent is the tension that often exists between various local and traditional understandings of a site and its contents, and the archaeologists' interpretations of that evidence, not to mention conflicting descendant perceptions of the site and its meanings.

As Shackel (this volume) notes in his contribution on ceramics, African diaspora archaeology has often been preoccupied with the persistence of traditions. Yet the artifacts of New Philadelphia, like so many other sites, frustrate attempts to find clear differences between, for example, assemblages associated with African American and European American occupants. Although the problems associated with a focus on patterns, or Africanisms, or markers is acknowledged (Howson 1990; Edwards 1994; Singleton 2006), in analyses archaeologists often revert to familiar tropes that arguably have shaped anthropology and archaeology since their inception—that by their works you shall know them (Morgan 1877). To use the examples at hand, this volume includes not only the comparison of ceramic assemblages from white and black households, but also a discussion of distinctive features of

black cemeteries (King), and distinctive faunal assemblages that may signal the racial/ethnic, or perhaps regional roots of the features' creators (T. Martin and C. Martin).

The questions may be traditional, but I see interesting ways forward, in this volume and elsewhere, that avoid an essentialist “pots = people” equation. These ways are grounded in concepts of ethnicity reaching back to Barth (1969), and even Weber (1978). This concept of ethnicity can be expanded for analytical purposes to encompass categories of “race,” with a resulting focus on “racial/ethnic” contours (Agbe-Davies 1999). Following such frameworks, archaeologists can begin to consider the work that ethnic categories do, and how material culture might be implicated in that work. Such a perspective requires, first, a new flexibility about the variables relied on to construct analyses of difference versus sameness among material items (Brown and Cooper 1990; Barile 2004). Second, archaeologists must stop trying to use material culture to do what texts can do better (Schuyler 1988). For example, a census can label the members of a household “white,” “black,” or “mulatto.” Archaeologists should use *their* toolkit to consider how material culture might have been deployed to maintain these stated boundaries, or in competition among people so labeled, or as traces of the prizes won or lost (Mullins 1999). As Theresa Singleton (2006:265) observes, essentialist interpretations do speak to the questions and interests of some stakeholders. Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of archaeologists to ensure that their analyses and interpretations acknowledge the simultaneous mutability and rigidity of social categories (Armstrong 2008; Mullins 2008).

Another enduring theme, one that appears with an updated twist in these collected contributions, is the tension between local/popular/traditional/community narratives of New Philadelphia's past, and those that emerge from research by historical archaeologists. The contributors discuss how they have negotiated the terrain between memories of racial harmony and recollections of structural racism, bigotry, and indeed, race-based terrorism. These efforts go a long way toward “complicating our national narrative” (Paul Shackel 2007, pers. comm.). As a result of the New Philadelphia project, a great deal has been learned about slavery and race-based servitude

in a “free” state. To be sure, all of these complications are entering the public sphere through a concerted program of undergraduate instruction, but perhaps more significantly, also through the engagement of local community members and descendants with the research process, rather than their receipt of the research team’s interpretations as *faits accomplis*.

In fact, the involvement of “local community members” and “descendants” also brings to the fore interesting and productive tensions. Against claims of integration and amity can be set descriptions of segregation (in the cemetery and in the school, King, Christman, and Helton in this volume). Should the reader be surprised by the diversity of recollections? Ask any ten people if affirmative action is still necessary, or what constitutes a “hate crime,” and one will see the possibilities for wildly ranging interpretations of *current* social conditions, let alone those translated through generations and through memory. The analyses described here take that tension and use it to forge stronger, more nuanced, and perhaps ultimately truer interpretations of the oral, written, and material records.

Discussion of the disjuncture between local residents, New Philadelphia descendants, and McWorter descendants does beg the questions: Who are the African American residents of this region today? Do they have any links with New Philadelphia? Whether they do or do not, what do they think of the project, and what does it mean to them? Also worthy of notice is the enthusiasm of most oral-history interviewees and non-archaeologist stakeholders for the excavation and associated research (Christman, this volume). Perhaps it is only to be expected, given that the project’s impetus lay in the recruitment of academic specialists by the local community (Shackel’s Introduction, this volume), but it speaks to the diligence and goodwill of all parties that the relationship continues to be fruitful.

I wish to conclude with a brief discussion of how the contributions to this volume, and the ongoing project that they represent, fit with and advance several genres of archaeological investigation. A number of keywords might be used to categorize the articles assembled here: “19th century,” “African diaspora,” “frontier,” “interracial,” “Midwest,” and “townsite” come to mind. It is my hope that the assembled data and resulting interpretations from New Philadelphia

will push the boundaries of archaeological thinking of all of these fields.

The apparent lack of segregated districts within the town could help advance the appreciation of how boundaries were maintained, transgressed, and challenged in the United States from the antebellum through Jim Crow eras. Studies of the New Philadelphia site provide a wonderful contrast with studies of residential and social segregation available from other communities of the same period. Furthermore, the emerging story of the town is a useful comparison to other “all black” towns and communities of the rural Midwest (McCorvie 2005; Demel and Kusimba 2007; Wood 2007).

I would also like to see New Philadelphia as a model for deconstructing notions of homogeneity and defeatist attitudes about the possibility of using mass-produced material culture to say anything useful about culturally patterned behavior. Such notions seem to pervade archaeological studies of the 19th and 20th centuries, and of the Midwest in particular (Wilson 1990; Barile 2004). Of course, such lofty goals cannot be accomplished using the same variables, criteria, and analytical strategies that have led to the conclusion that somehow *mass production + marketing + consumerism = homogeneity*. This is where the hard work of devising novel analytical techniques comes in. Evidence of this creativity is present throughout the assembled articles. Let the readers judge the contributors’ efforts and how they might transform the readers’ own practices.

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