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**Archeological Griots:
An Environmental History Program at Miller Grove,
a Free Ante-Bellum African American Community in Southern Illinois**

**By Mary R. McCorvie
Shawnee National Forest**

In Roots, Alex Haley wrote of a heated exchange between his mother and his grandmother: "Oh Maw, I wish you'd stop all that old-timey slavery stuff, it's entirely embarrassing." Grandma would snap back, "If you don't care who you are or where you came from, well I does!" This generational rift seems to be fairly characteristic of different people's attitudes toward African American heritage in general and slavery in particular. Because of it many families have become disconnected from their own heritage. It has also caused entire generations of African American families to be clueless in regard to not only their own family heritage, but also the often times long, rich and unique heritage of individual ethnic groups within their local regions as a whole.

Beginning in 1995, the Heritage Program of the Shawnee National Forest has been conducting archaeological excavation at sites related to African American heritage. Initially we conducted archival and archaeological research at Camp Pomona, an African American Civilian conservation Corps camp. We interviewed CCC enrollees and mapped the remains of the camp structures and cultural landscape. We also excavated a small portion of the camp discard area where we recovered quartermaster corps military-issued items, as well as personal artifacts.

In 1998 we began to conduct archival and archaeological research at a number of African American farmsteads that were initially occupied in the years before the Civil War. This collection of farmsteads made up the community that has come to be known as Miller Grove. Miller Grove is the remains of an African American community that was originally settled in 1844 by freed slaves from who emigrated from Tennessee. A number of families from Marshall, Hardeman and Henry Counties eventually settled and took up farming and housekeeping in this rural southern Illinois community. The community was named for Bedford Miller who traveled to Miller Grove with his parents, Harrison and Lucinda Miller, when he was nine years old. The Miller family had been freed by Andrew Miller and his sister, Matilda Miller.

The majority of work at Miller Grove has been conducted under two Forest Service programs: Passport in Time and the Historically Black College and University Comprehensive Program, also known as HBCUCP. The HBCUCP program was designed to make minority students aware of non-traditional career opportunities, such as archaeology and heritage resource management. Each summer we recruit two African American students from Tennessee State University, an 1890 Historic Black University in Nashville, to come work with us for the summer. Passport in Time is the Forest Service's public outreach initiative for the Heritage Program. Though Passport in Time, we are able to invite members of the public come learn about such diverse heritage topics as

archaeology, Custer's Last Stand, Native American basket weaving, fire tower rehabilitation, rock art, or African American quilting.



Passport in Time excavation team at Miller Grove.

In 2003 we added a new project to our outreach program: a summer conservation education day camp. In an attempt to bridge the gap in information pertaining to local African American heritage, the Shawnee National Forest sponsored a conservation education day camp, entitled Camp "I, too, am America." The camp was made possible through a \$15,000 grant from the Washington Office of the Forest Service.

The Forest Service's partner, the University of Illinois Extension staff and other interested citizens were concerned that local youth lacked a sense of civic pride about the communities in which they lived. Local history is not emphasized or taught in the school systems and the region as a whole is characterized by a 28% illiteracy rate. As a result, the area's young people do not have an appreciation of the rich historical legacy of what has become known "Egypt." Many of the area's youth wrongly come to the conclusion that formal education is a waste, while the same or others attempt to gain economic independence elsewhere. The small towns and villages of southernmost Illinois suffer from chronic poverty and have few economic or educational resources to call upon. Many of these communities are characterized by high ratios of African American and/or other minority youth. It was thought that participating in Camp "I, too, am America" would instill in the area's youth pride in their home communities families, while enhancing their self esteem.

I entitled the paper "archaeological griots" because the name appeared to fit our project goals and objectives. As archaeologists we were recovering bits and pieces of people's lives and putting it together in order to write a history of Miller Grove. Although primary documents about African Americans exist, they often consist of public documents or are otherwise written by others about African Americans. Of real concern to the study of African American history is the tendency for African Americans to traditionally

acknowledge and hand down their own history orally rather than in writing or in photographs. This is a very ancient tradition, dating back to at least the 14th century, and perhaps, even antedating the time of Christ (Hale 1999). Traditionally, griots, and female practitioners, or griottes, maintained the oral history of their groups. They acted as genealogists, historians, spokespersons, diplomat, musician, teacher, warrior, praise singer, master of ceremonies and advisor. Interestingly enough, griots and griottes are unique to Africa.

But griots are not just historical or cultural curiosities. they fulfill a real need within African society. Griots ". . . serve as the social glue in society. By their efforts, they inspire people, mediate conflicts, and facilitate important life ceremonies, they seem to operate as secular guides to human behavior and as social arbiters. At events related to birth, initiation, marriage, family, history, sports, music, and government, griots and griottes are there to witness the occasion, to enliven it, to facilitate it, and to convey what happened to others. No other profession in any other part of the world is charged with such wide-ranging involvement in the lives of the people" (Hale 1999).

This oral tradition, which was handed down from generation to generation, preserved not only the names of ancestors, but also heroic or and often unique episodes in local and regional history. However, when one generation, or a significant portion of a generation, as with Alex Haley's mother, does not want to participate in this tradition, it results in a failure and a break in continuity. Today, African American families and communities have gotten away from the oral traditions involved in family history. When the elders in the community today talk of the old days and relay stories of ancestors, younger people often don't care to listen (Burroughs 2001:75). In many instances, genealogical studies are helping to recover these forgotten stories.

Other times, history has been lost because, like Alex Haley's mother, many preferred not to remember it. Many have found it, and continue to find it a shameful and degrading. They are victimized by the memory.

Another way history was lost or unrecorded was through secrecy, as with the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was built upon a foundation of secrecy. In addition, involvement in the Underground Railroad could be dangerous and free African American participants risked the most. Retaliation might include tar and feathering, jail or perhaps being sold into slavery. Although in many areas, the Underground Railroad was well documented through Wilbur Siebert's excellent history (1898). In other places, like southern Illinois, "The geographical position of the most southern portions of Illinois and Indiana determined the character of the population settling there, and thus rendered underground enterprises in those regions more than ordinarily dangerous" (Drew 2004:115). In southern Illinois small enclaves of freed men and women worked to aid fugitive slaves on their journey north, their involvement is not documented at all, even though we know from fugitive slave narratives that escaping slaves passed through the area. In 1856 Benjamin Drew published a collection of autobiographies of fugitive slaves who had successfully escaped to Canada (Drew 2004). Four of those narratives involved

escaping through southern Illinois (William Hall, Mr. and Mrs. John Little and Aaron Sidles) (Drew 2004: 139-163; 189-191; and 220-224).

Archaeological studies are also recovering lost histories. Scholars have begun to expand the definition of the documentary record by turning to such mediums as quilts, artwork, folk culture, and oral histories as data sources to augment African American history. However, the majority of history and historical information continues to be derived mostly from written sources. The paucity of records by and about African Americans results in a gap in knowledge. This is why the archaeological record of African American sites like Miller Grove is crucial. The archaeological record has long been used to investigate the lifeways and behavior of "invisible" people, or "those of little note" (Scott 1994). "Those of little note" were considered of little importance, not worthy of notice by the dominant social, political, political, and economic groups in societies past (Scott 1994:3). They were not worth writing about, and therefore are not as visible to in the written records we rely upon. Because they are not prominent in the historical record, historical archaeologists have traditionally spent little effort in reconstructing their lifeways. More recently the archaeological record has already contributed to examining variation in African American lifeways under slavery and to addressing questions regarding acculturation, participation in a larger capitalistic society, economic status, spatial organization, diet, and material culture.

The archaeological record is the static material remains of a once functioning sociocultural system. In other words, what used to be the vibrant and alive community of Miller Grove in the mid-nineteenth century is now the archaeological record. Through the summer Camp "I, too, am America" local day-campers have the opportunity to learn about African-American heritage in southern Illinois through archaeology and hands-on history lessons. Topics that were addressed during the day camp included local history, archaeology, the Underground Railroad, food and nutrition at Miller Grove and on the Underground Railroad, the lives of people during the nineteenth century and the preservation of our heritage. Forest Service archaeologists, historic preservation specialists and history students employed by the Forest Service, were joined by fourteen other adult volunteers that included teachers, school principals, agency leaders, parents and grandparents, and a number of camp counselors from the summer recreation and education programs.

In 2003 campers had the opportunity to paddle a 36-foot long Montreal canoe. This is the kind of vessel used by French voyageurs. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these canoes were used on most of the inland waterways. The Algonquin-style birch bark canoe in regular use during that time would transport more than three tons of goods and people as far as eighty kilometer (50 miles) each day. The campers signed a contract with Jean Baptiste LaMontagne, an agent of the Compagnie de Indies that obligated them to work for the fur trading company for three years for the sum of 350 livres for each year, two blankets, two shirts, a tump line and a pair of heavy duty boot moccasins. These are the same kind of canoes that were used by Lewis and Clark as they traveled up the Missouri River to winter at Fort Mandan.

The campers also learned about Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery through hands-on activities. They got to write a message in a leather journal with a feather quill pen and ink just like William Clark kept. It was definitely messy, but it was also fun. They got to handle the glass beads and brass trade axes that were given to the Native Americans, the leather "possible" bags that the Corps of Discovery members carried their personal possessions in and the powder horn similar to ones used by the Corps with their flintlock rifles. They even got to sit upon a bison skin with the fur still on. They also had the opportunity to learn about Native American cultures that Lewis and Clark encountered along the way.

They also heard about William Clark's slave, York. Clark's life-long slave companion, York and William, were roughly the same age. He had been bequeathed to William by his father, John Clark, in a will dated July 24, 1799. In 1803, the two lived together in Clarksville, Indiana Territory, opposite Louisville with Clark's brother George Rogers Clark. On October 29, York and Clark, who would become co-commander of the expedition, joined Lewis and the other members of the Corps when they stepped aboard the Corps' keelboat and set off on a journey into history. During the expedition the other members of the Corps of Discovery treated York like a corps member and not like a slave, but when the expedition arrived back in St. Louis, York was back to being Clark's slave. During the western expedition, according Clark: "[T]o the Indians, every article about us appeared to excite astonishment in their minds; the appearance of the men, their arms, the canoes, our manner of working them. *the black man york* and the sagacity of my dog were equally objects of admiration."

However, the majority of the summer was spent in working at Miller Grove. An ideal group of twelve students, including adults with disabilities, visit the site, receive an overview and orientation, and then divide up into work groups. Some preferred screening, while others could not wait to begin digging. Trowels were the main tool used in the excavations. Even the most mundane artifact, such as barrel hoops and rough sandstone, are a treasure to the young archaeologists. In the afternoon, the campers hiked to Sand Cave, an awesome cathedral of a rock shelter located nearby that according to local legend was used as a hiding place for escaping slaves. While exploring the nooks and crannies of the rock shelter they listen to more tales of the Underground Railroad.

After participating in the archaeological experiences at Miller Grove, and hiking to Sand Cave, 90% of the participants reported that they had a better Understanding of the Underground Railroad; 98% reported that they had a better understanding of archaeology; 92% reported having a better understanding of nineteenth century lifeways; and 98% again reported having developed more pride and appreciation of their heritage and community! In addition, several students reported that they would utilize this new information while at school, perhaps in writing reports on black history, while others noted that they would help other understand more about archaeology. Other comments included that the experience has encouraged them to learn more about the old days, and that the opportunity to work on the excavations would be an aid to them when they took archaeology in college. Among the most important lessons learned at Camp "I, too, am America" were learning how people lived during the nineteenth century, how important it

was to have your freedom, and that things can change, if you put your mind to it. According to Paul McNight, Education Coordinator for the University of Illinois Extension, one "unexpected result form the program was that several students are considering careers in archaeology. Most likely they never would have been exposed to the field if not for this event."

The summer ended with traditional griot storytelling and singing.

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