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Some Thoughts on Archaeology and Public Responsibility

Kenneth L. Brown, University of Houston

Over the past decade that I have been conducting research and writing in historical archaeology, I have been made continually aware that we are not, or at least should not be, "prehistoric archaeologists." In many ways this statement is true. Differences between the two archaeologies exist in areas such as: questions formulated and researched, methods employed in investigation, and our contact with the very people whose ancestors helped to create the archaeological sites. While the issues of questions and methods have received a great deal of attention, the aspect of our work related to living descendants has not been addressed in the same detail, although some authors have addressed this issue with respect to cemetery sites (e.g. Roberts and McCarthy 1995; McCarthy 1996). After more than ten years of research in a number of historic sites in and around the city of Houston, Texas, I have come to believe that the question of living descendants should be of vital concern to historical archaeologists. Indeed, if we do not face this issue, we may shortly face the resentment and hostility currently being displayed by Native Americans toward our prehistoric colleagues.

It seems to me, that the descendant populations historical archaeologists are concerned with are likely to be even more directly affected by our work than is the case for most Native American groups. Certainly, historical descendants can perceive themselves to be more directly impacted because historical archaeologists use the actual names of the people who built the sites we excavate. We tell scientifically based stories about the lives of actual named individuals, many of whom have living descendants. Through various means, these descendants, along with their neighbors and co-workers have access to these stories. We hold living people's ancestors up for public examination. Private lives become public ones without the consent of the living or the dead. They become public for scientific" reasons. Somehow, we historical archaeologists think that since it is only for science (read benefit to humanity) we can somehow invade the lives of individuals from both the past and present, without regard to the potential impact such an invasion may have. This type of thinking has led to potentially devastating results for prehistoric archaeologists. Such thinking may lead historical archaeologists down the same road. It may also lead us to court.

During our research on the Levi Jordan Plantation, in Brazoria County, Texas, a number of incidents have occurred which have directly effected our relationship with the various communities concerned with this investigation and our interpretation of the site. I would like to relate two incidents/discussions from the Jordan Plantation

work, that I feel can serve to illustrate the problems with the current "we only serve science" approach to historical archaeology.

The first concerns a chance meeting between one of my students and a descendant of one of the slave and tenant families known to have been living on the Jordan Plantation. This descendant overheard a conversation between this student and another person concerning the student's research on the plantation. Later that day the descendant (a co-worker of the student's) went to the student and asked about the plantation research. The descendant stated that they had been keeping up with the research through the various news reports and through contact with other relatives living near the plantation. The descendant also stated that there were some feelings of apprehension concerning this research and its publication felt by many members of the "descendant community," especially those working outside of the immediate plantation area. This descendant wanted to know more about the project in order to assess what impact our publication might have on their lives. The descendant was given copies of all papers (published and/or presented) as well as a statement as to our future plans, by the student. At the next meeting with the student, the descendant stated both an interest (stated as a curiosity) in the research, a willingness to serve as an informant on that family, and a strongly expressed desire that the family's name not be published in anything written. The sole reason given by this incredibly valuable descendant/ informant was a fear that such publication would cause harm and embarrassment to all those descendants working outside of the local area. "Harm," the descendant felt, would come through the creation of an unacceptable environment in the places these descendants were employed. This fear was supported by the fact that the descendant's immediate supervisor visited the student on several occasions clearly attempting to find out "what was going on?" (why was the student meeting with this descendant?) "Embarrassment," the descendant felt, would come through the fact that we have obtained information on subjects that the general public can "ridicule" as primitive superstitions and dismiss the people and their descendants as stupid and backward. The interpretation of the Conjuror's Cabin and the Cosmogram from our excavations at the Levi Jordan Plantation are two examples of "scientific interpretations" that might contribute to this sense of embarrassment. The second incident concerned the reaction of a member of the descendant community to our research and our request for aid in obtaining additional oral history concerning the slaves and tenants on the plantation. This individual stated that for us to obtain that help from the descendants of the site's occupants, we would have to demonstrate to them the relevance of our work and interpretations. In a very real sense, this is the same concern as the "embarrassment" issue raised earlier. However, it goes beyond embarrassment to directly question the belief that interpretations proposed by "scientific historical archaeologists" are neutral in any fashion -- especially when they involve the employment of peoples' names.

Clearly, our intention is not to hold people up for any kind of treatment, either positive or negative -- ours is merely the job of reporting scientifically-derived facts. Even despite the impossibility of this "job," it is, in fact, the descendants of the people who originally produced our scientific facts who are directly impacted by any presentation of those facts (scientific or otherwise). Members of the "general public" will interpret what we say and they will act on it. This might not effect us as archaeologists directly, but it has the potential to effect the descendants, possibly negatively, despite our best intentions. A series of such impacts may produce a strong dislike of historical archaeologists among the descendants, much like that being experienced by prehistoric archaeologists.

There have been several attempted solutions to these problems during the final phases of the Jordan Plantation project and the beginning phases of the public interpretation of this research. First of all, where it has been requested, the actual personal and family names have not, and will not, be employed in any publication. This has been difficult. In one case as the family's history has been research back to the 1730s, and has proven to be a fascinating study in slavery to freedom by the members of this family. However, there is a very real fear among several of the descendants that this information can and will be used against them. Second, we have begun to "alter" our interpretations of life in the tenant community in our public presentations. For example, the presence of a Conjuror has been construed in a very negative light by a number of members of the general public. However, when this individual is presented as a folk-healer and a midwife, the negative connotation has not been observed. Placing the tenant community into the context of the late 1800s in a rural area aids this. Doctors were very scarce, and all rural people had to employ folk medicinal practices and/or mid-wives in order to survive. There is even limited archaeological and historical evidence to suggest that this Conjuror was, in fact, a female.

The presentation of this "scientifically-based interpretation" to the general public, descendant communities, and the scientific community has been altered. However, the descendant communities are much more comfortable with this approach, and there has been no violation of "scientific principles." The interests of those most likely to be affected by what is said about their ancestors have been served, and the scientific community has also been served as we gain the trust of the descendant communities involved with the old plantation and gather additional oral information. I believe that historical archaeologists cannot, as our prehistorically oriented colleagues have maintained, that the past is anonymous. For us it is simply not the case. Accordingly, we must directly address the issue of how our work can impact descendants, and we must deal appropriately with these potential impacts.

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