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Robert P. Connolly

Samantha E. Gibbs

Mallory L. Bader

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The C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa

Community Engagement at an Archaeological Site

Robert P. Connolly, Samantha E. Gibbs, and Mallory L. Bader

Abstract

Over the past decade, the C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, located on the grounds of a prehistoric earthwork complex in Memphis, Tennessee, initiated an outreach program to the surrounding African-American community. The archaeological site was first investigated and the Museum founded as a byproduct of the 1930s Jim Crow era segregation policies. Since its inception, the archaeological site and Museum functioned as a place of academic privilege that ignored the surrounding community. Key to the Museum's outreach program is a transparency and commitment to community engagement. Highlights of the Museum's outreach engagement to date include the installation of an African-American Cultural Heritage exhibit, hosting community events, establishment of a community garden, and the collaborative efforts with community partners to carry out service projects. Based in a participatory model, the Museum moved to take its place as a social asset and stakeholder in the Southwest Memphis community.

About the authors

Robert P. Connolly is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Memphis and the Director of the C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa. Samantha E. Gibbs is the Administrative Assistant at the Museum. Mallory L. Bader is a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Memphis and a graduate assistant at the Museum.

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Introduction

In 2002, the American Alliance of Museums published *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*. In that volume Ellen Hirzy (2002, p. 14) asked, "How do we encourage museum professionals, trustees, and volunteers to engage with the community in open and useful ways, as civic leaders but also as community members?" She continued, "Working together or diversifying audiences is not enough. What is needed are reciprocal, co-created relationships that connect the assets and purposes of organizations" (Hirzy, 2002, p. 16).

Silverman (2010, pp. 5–14) demonstrates that such engagement has considerable antiquity in museums, predating the clarion call in John Cotton Dana's *New Museum* of one century ago. Further, Silverman notes that museums can be the basis for visiting families, friends, and groups to explore their relationships (2010, p. 18) and build social capital (2010, p. 19). Silverman also discusses the potential to break down linear transmission where a museum speaks and the visitor receives. Such participatory experiences are at the heart of contemporary approaches to engaging museum visitors (e.g., Simon, 2010; Falk & Dierking, 2002) coupled with addressing issues of relevance, sustainability (e.g., Janes, 2009), and social justice (e.g., Sandell & Nightingale, 2012).

At the C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa (CHNM), the participatory challenge remains at the forefront of our work. The Mission Statement of the CHNM mandates that we provide "the public with exceptional educational, participatory, and research opportunities." We find that the critical components to actualize and operationalize the concepts of civic engagement and participatory museums require a commitment to developing sustainable, long-term, transparent, and equitable collaborative arrangements with community partners. As Silverman (2010, p. 32) notes:

As their efforts have turned toward social service, museums have employed methods for fostering more personal relationships with specific communities, neighborhoods, and groups through town meetings, focus group series, planning teams, and the use of community advisors. These kinds of activities can be empowering for participants. In some of their most explicit social service

endeavors to date, museums have fostered deeper and more sustained relationships by working in partnership with social workers and social service agencies, in long-term partnership with community groups, and in teams that include social workers, community members, and clients. Viewed from the social work perspective, such approaches and relationships are essential to the social work of museums. Museums must continue to strengthen their own relationships and relationship-building capabilities and strive toward actions and activities that empower visitors and other users.

In a similar vein, the International Council of Museums definition of a museum notes that they are “institutions in the service of society and of its development” (ICOM, 2004). In this paper we explore the long-term approach taken by the CHNM toward the “social work” of our institution.

The C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa

The Mississippian culture (A.D. 1000–1500) temple mound complex, located in the southwest corner of Memphis, Tennessee, today known as the Chucalissa Archaeological Site, was “discovered” in the 1930s through a Jim Crow era Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) project to construct a segregated park, known then as the Shelby Bluff State Park for Negroes, and later renamed the T.O. Fuller State Park, for the African-American community of Memphis. However, when evidence of the prehistoric occupation was encountered, the area judged to contain the rich Native American deposits was removed from the park development. In 1956 a museum was opened to provide greater public access to the prehistoric site. In 1962, the Tennessee Division of State Parks transferred the museum and archaeological site to the Tennessee Board of Education. The museum and archaeological site were administered by the University of Memphis (UM) (then Memphis State University) and throughout the 1960s and ‘70s were an integral component of the University’s anthropology program (Schwimmer, 2010).

The museum and site complex created an oasis of white privilege in the heart of the African-American community of Southwest Memphis. The forty-acre museum and archaeological site complex

was surrounded on three sides by the T.O. Fuller State Park. The whites only Memphis State University was not integrated until 1959. Even after formal segregation policies were overturned, the surrounding communities, whose residents today are 95% African-American, remained alienated from the museum complex. Residents could watch up to 40,000 visitors per year drive through their working class community to visit the CHNM, yet they received no direct economic benefit in their neighborhood.

From the 1960s through the 1990s the museum complex contained a reconstructed prehistoric village and an open burial exhibit. Members of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians served as performers/interpreters for site visitors. Visitors could also view ongoing archaeological excavations.

Since the 1980s, the Museum complex has undergone substantive changes. With the 1989 passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) archaeologists and museum professionals became accountable to the indigenous peoples whose ancestral lands they previously excavated with limited oversight. The open burial exhibit at Chucalissa was closed and site excavations decreased dramatically. The role of Native American employees at the site also shifted from one of performance to that of administration (Connolly, 2011). Because of a reduced operating budget, the replica prehistoric village fell into disrepair, with the last vestiges removed by 2003. Museum visitation dropped from an estimated 40,000 per year in the 1970s to about 8,000 visitors in 2007. From 2000 to 2006, priorities at the CHNM were limited to assuring the integrity of the curated collections and the earthwork complex along with completing the legal mandates of NAGPRA compliance.

In 2007, the Museum complex began to refocus its role as an educational resource of the University of Memphis. Since then, all Museum programs were revised and brought into line with state curriculum standards, new exhibits were installed, and the 40 acres of natural environment were brought into the interpretive sphere through a nature trail, arboretum, and medicinal plant sanctuary. These achievements resulted from highly successful participatory volunteer, student, and community service learning programs (Connolly, 2011; Connolly & Tate, 2011). A

central focus of the Museum since 2007 included engaging the surrounding community in all aspects of the CHNM activities. The engagement flowed from the Museum's commitment to begin to function as a social asset in the Southwest Memphis community. On the one hand, the Museum aimed to develop bonding social capital to link the Museum with community organizations in neighborhood development. Further, as a part of the University of Memphis and drawing on other available resources, the Museum aimed to serve as part of a bridging network to bring assets to the community (Putnam, 2000). The five-year experience in that process is addressed in the remainder of this paper.

Initial Overtures to Community Engagement

Between 2002 and 2007, the CHNM initiated attempts to directly engage the community in Museum activities. As the Museum had virtually no contacts in the surrounding community in 2002, the initial efforts were exploratory and geared toward traditional institutions. For example, in 2002 the Museum adopted a nearby elementary school, provided guest speakers at the school, and offered the school free admission for field trips to the CHNM. In 2005 a Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibit on the Maroon cultures of escaped slaves from the pre-Civil War South was installed at the CHNM in anticipation of local community interest. The temporary exhibit and school adoption met with limited success.

In November of 2008, during National Native American Indian month, the CHNM featured a showing of the film *Black Indians: An American Story* narrated by award winning actor James Earl Jones. The decision to feature the film was based on the Museum staff perception of community interest. The film showing was advertised through flyers and in electronic media and resulted in the largest local community turnout for any special event at the Museum, with nearly 70 community residents in attendance.

Out of the successful film showing, the Museum embarked on several other community based activities over the next year. A project funded through a Tennessee Board of Regents Diversity Grant brought together a group of community high school students, a community service agency called Westwood Indian

Hills Neighborhood Development, UM faculty, and UM graduate students to create a photographic exhibit of the community surrounding the CHNM. The exhibit hung for thirty days at the University of Memphis Art Museum. At the end of the period, the CHNM approached the exhibit creators and suggested installing the exhibit at the CHNM for a period of thirty days. Both WIND and the high school students readily agreed, as the CHNM installation would feature the exhibit in the very community where the photographs were taken.

Subsequent to the photographic exhibit, the following February, the Westwood Indian Hills Neighborhood Development and the CHNM collaborated on additional film showings of *Black Indians* during Black History Month events at both Chucalissa and the local community center. As well, high school students organized through Westwood Indian Hills Neighborhood Development (WIND) worked with students in the Anthropology Department at the University of Memphis to create three banners on the historic era of the Southwest Memphis community that were installed at the CHNM.

The collaborative projects were mutually beneficial to the mission of each agency. WIND's mission that included "Empowering community members through education, information and advocacy" matched with the CHNM mission to provide "the public with exceptional educational, participatory, and research opportunities on the landscape's past and present Native American and traditional cultures."

These initial outreach efforts might be likened to Silverman's (2010) discussion of a "transmission" model where museums function as "senders" to visitor's who are "receivers." Through 2009, the transmission was lineal and uni-directed. The Museum collaborated with community residents directly for the first time in 2009. Community leaders were rightly suspicious of the new found interest of the CHNM and UM researchers in their neighborhoods. However, after the successful mission driven collaboration on the photographic exhibit, the two organizations met on a regular basis to plan additional collaborative projects. The collaborative projects with Westwood Indian Hills Neighborhood Development marked a new direction in the CHNM community outreach.

African-American Cultural Heritage in Southwest Memphis

Beginning in 2010, the CHNM and WIND discussed an applied approach to engage residents of the neighboring communities. The engagement was discussed from the perspective of co-creative projects. Simon (2010) writes that the purpose of co-creative community projects is “to give voice and be responsive to the needs and interests of local community members; to provide a place for community engagement and dialogue; and to help participants develop skills that will support their own individual and community goals.” The CHNM considers community engagement as the essential driving force behind such projects.

An integral point of this engagement began in the summer of 2010, when the CHNM partnered with WIND and received a Strengthening Communities Initiative Grant to create a permanent Museum exhibit on the African-American Cultural Heritage of Southwest Memphis (AACHSM). A distinct difference between the AACHSM exhibit and previous community outreach was the full collaboration with the community partner from the outset in the latter project. Over a six-month period, CHNM and WIND met regularly to strategize on the next appropriate steps in their collaborative process that would be in line with the mission of each institution. The AACHSM exhibit proposal centered on a 1920s era African-American farmstead excavated at the Chucalissa site in 2002. The CHNM curated seven cubic feet of artifacts, field notes, and plan maps from the farmstead excavation. The excavation had remained unreported at the Museum because of an existing interpretive focus solely on the Native American occupation of the site.

WIND and CHNM viewed the interpretation of the farmstead materials as a means to further the mission of each organization. For WIND, the exhibit could provide an opportunity for pride and empowerment of an under-served community. For the CHNM, inclusion of the historic era enhanced the holistic interpretation of Chucalissa’s built environment. In so doing, the CHNM would incorporate a voice not heard in any other cultural



Figure 1: Angel Conway, student participant, leading a tour through the African American Cultural Heritage Exhibit.
Photo courtesy of the authors.

heritage venue in Memphis, the African-American community of Southwest Memphis.

Based in the educational mission of both organizations and WIND connections with educators, nine high school students from an application pool of 35 were selected to create the exhibit. The application criteria required that the students live in the zip code surrounding the Chucalissa site, be enrolled in an area high school, and complete an essay on why knowing about the cultural heritage of their community was important. The essays were evaluated and participants chosen by area teachers, nonprofit administrators, and the staffs at T.O. Fuller State Park and CHNM. The students created the exhibit over a five-week period working 30 hours each week. Two graduate students facilitated the work of the high school students on a daily basis. Exhibit creation methods included artifact analysis, structured interviews with community members and historians, literature research, and the physical creation and installation of the exhibit.

The high school students had limited experience in museums so they were initially uncertain of their roles in the project. In the first week, one of the students asked what the Museum staff

intended to do with the exhibit after the students left. We replied that the exhibit would be permanently on display at the CHNM, and if their children visited twenty years in the future, the exhibit might be updated, but would still be in place. Our response to this question was a turning point for student engagement in the project. The answer demonstrated to the high school students that the Museum was serious about the exhibit and that the creation was an opportunity to tell the story of their community.

The students visited a local cultural resource management firm where a historic archaeologist identified and contextualized the materials for them. They performed archival research, wrote labels and didactic panels, and chose photographic images for the exhibit from digital collections curated at the UM. Initially, the farmstead exhibit was the project's sole intended product. However, because the students were the decision makers in the project, they chose to create much more, including banners that formed a timeline tracing the history of the African-American community in Southwest Memphis from the early 1800s to the present day and "Did you know?" wall placards that recounted important historic facts about their neighborhood. The students recorded over 30 hours of oral history interviews with leaders of their community and edited the footage down to a 20-minute documentary. Finally, the students began a resource center at the Museum to curate the research documents they obtained over the course of the five-week project (Figure 1).

As one of the students noted at the exhibit opening "It was all on us to decide what was going to be in the exhibit." The only criterion the facilitators insisted on was that the exhibit must be focused on Southwest Memphis. For example, at first when discussing the Civil Rights Movement, the student's default was the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Similarly, the default for music was to consider the famous Beale Street in central Memphis. When refocused to Southwest Memphis, the students interviewed their own pastors and elders who were active in the Civil Rights Movement, participated in bus boycotts, and were imprisoned with Dr. King. When they refocused their research on



Figure 2: African-American U.S. military veteran participants in Black History month celebration at C.H. Nash Museum, February 2012. *Photo courtesy of the authors.*

musical traditions to their own community, they discovered that recording artists such as Al Green, Little Howlin' Wolf and others were all from Southwest Memphis. In fact, the soundtrack for the documentary they produced was played by Southwest Memphis resident, Bobbie Jones, who was the high school music teacher of Stax recording artist Isaac Hayes. Because the cultural materials that comprised the exhibit and the documentary's oral histories were all from the areas where both the CHNM and WIND are physically located, the community engagement that each group sought was strengthened.

The community residents of Southwest Memphis see the exhibit as an important asset to their community. The Westwood Neighborhood Association (WNA) president commented at the exhibit opening, “We need to let more community members know about *our* exhibit at the Museum.” The exhibit project was truly a co-creative experience intended “to give voice and be responsive to the needs and interests of local community members; to provide a place for community engagement and dialogue; and to help participants develop skills that will support their own individual and community goals” (Simon, 2010, p. 187). This approach provided the community with an example that the CHNM wished to truly function as a collaborating partner who wished to open the voice of cultural authority in Southwest Memphis.

The Museum staff view the exhibit creation as a node on a continuum of long-term reintegration and relationship building of the CHNM with its neighbors. In 2013, the CHNM hosted the third Black History Month event. Of importance, the Black History Month celebrations at the CHNM are organized and presented by the community. The Museum functions only as a venue, community partner, and host (Figure 2).

From Focus Groups to Community Gardens To Community Service

As a direct result of these efforts, local community members were consulted on the planned upgrades and redevelopment of the exhibits in the main hall of the Museum. The CHNM carried out a series of focus groups and interviews with our Museum stakeholders, including neighborhood residents, anthropology faculty at the UM, Native Americans, archaeologists, students, volunteers, and Museum staff. During the focus group with neighborhood leaders, we received an unexpected response. Although the community residents discussed the exhibits as a whole, they were particularly interested in the current exhibit on prehistoric agriculture that details the traditional Native American plants of corn, beans, and squash. The community residents told stories of traditional foods from their own past—such as the making of elderberry and muscadine wine. They expressed concern that



Figure 3: Community members who worked in the urban garden at the Museum. *Photo courtesy of the authors.*

children today are disconnected from food production. The community participants expressed a desire to grow traditional foods, but noted there was not an appropriate common area in their neighborhood to create an urban garden.

Within days of the focus group, the CHNM proposed a space for the urban garden at the Museum complex where visitors can view the process of planting and harvesting the traditional foods. Within weeks, community residents tilled and planted the garden, and over the summer and fall of 2012, community members weeded, watered and harvested the crops. The urban garden is a prime example of a community-directed project that is only hosted by the Museum (Figure 3).

A final case study we consider here is the CHNM and community partner collaborative projects with AmeriCorps NCCC teams. In 2012, the CHNM proposed a joint project with the WNA and T.O. Fuller State Park to host an eight-week AmeriCorps NCCC team (ultimately two teams) to live and work in the Southwest Memphis area. The team is housed in residences at the CHNM complex. At Chucalissa, AmeriCorps team members assisted in the construction of a replica prehistoric house, building picnic benches, and assisting in other on-site maintenance tasks. In the Southwest Memphis neighborhood, the

team corrected residential code violations and performed basic maintenance on homes of the elderly and seniors living on fixed incomes. The AmeriCorps Team performed maintenance on the six-mile loop trail in T.O. Fuller State Park (Figure 4).

The AmeriCorps Teams serve as another node on the continuum of relationship building for the collaborating agencies in Southwest Memphis. The AmeriCorps Team demonstrates the ability of the CHNM to function as a bridging network to bring resources into the community.

Discussion

The outreach programs to the Southwest Memphis community at the CHNM are transforming relationships. Community engagement for the CHNM is institutionalized as a process, not just an event, and each project is viewed as a node on a long-term continuum of engagement. The AmeriCorps Team projects could not have occurred had the African-American Cultural Heritage exhibit project not come before. The Cultural Heritage exhibit flowed directly from the experiences in the photography project and the *Black Indians* film showing. Looking forward, the CHNM and our collaborating community partners applied to

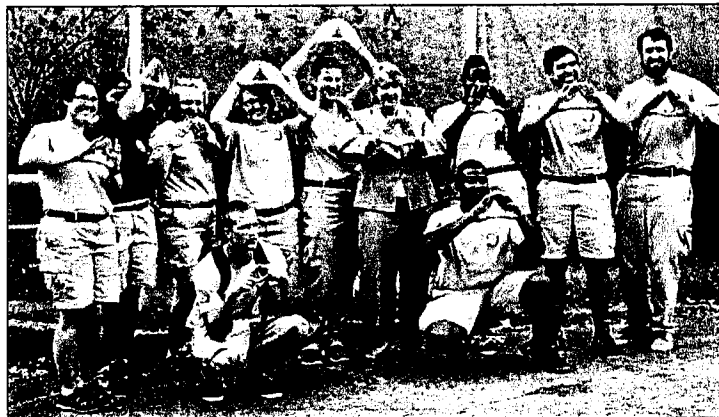


Figure 4: Delta 9 AmeriCorps Team at C.H. Nash Museum were visited by the CEO of NCCC, Wendy Spencer, during the tour.
Photo courtesy of the authors.

host another AmeriCorps Team. The next team will expand the geographic scope of the code violation work and draw on corporate sponsorship for supplies and supervisory expertise. The team will also assist in the reorganization of the repository at CHNM and the construction of lab space. The ability to expand the team operation is based directly on the experience of the previous AmeriCorps teams.

We have learned that the outreach process is not always straightforward. In the case of the AACHM exhibit creation, our regular staff and interns from the UM could have created an exhibit more quickly and perhaps with a more “professional” appearance than the high school students’ product. However, had we done so, the exhibit would not be *of* the Southwest Memphis community but only *about* the community. Additionally, our museum staff does not have access to or knowledge of many of the individuals interviewed.

The initial overtures toward community engagement produced mixed results but constructive lessons. Especially true was the Museum’s decision to participate fully as a service learner in the community who “listens to the concerns of the group or person, lets the ‘other’ define the situation, and responds by trying to meet that need. In listening and learning, receiving and giving, the service-learning relationship is horizontal, lateral, parallel. It is not hierarchal” (Kronick et al., 2011, p. 23). This approach directly aligns with the co-creative museum experiences proposed by Simon as a response to community needs (Simon, 2010, p.187). Had the CHNM not employed a “listening and learning” approach, we could not have hosted an urban garden growing traditional foods of the community, or a cultural heritage exhibit that truly incorporates the community voice. That is, as an institutional entity, the CHNM is reliant on, and requires a wholly collaborative relationship with, the communities whose cultural heritage it curates.

Social capital and the ability to operate as a bridging network cannot simply be imposed in a system. Rather the relationship must be built through a series of engagements over time. Today’s level of engagement for the CHMN stands in sharp contrast to

the UM's relationship with the surrounding community when the Museum was founded in the late 1950s. Part of the shift results from archaeology as a discipline taking a considerably more applied approach. Chambers (2004, p. 194) notes, "What is important to recognize here is that what makes this work applied is not the knowledge itself, which certainly can be relevant to the interests of others, but the act of engagement with others who are trying to make decisions related to particular heritage resources." In this capacity, an applied approach has played a pivotal role in forming a collaborative relationship between the CHNM and community partners in Southwest Memphis. Institutions such as the CHNM who develop the long-term social capital and bridging networks embedded in communities as stakeholders will be better able to facilitate or broker projects that satisfy both community and academic research interests.

Finally, we consider the relevance of our cultural institution to the community of prime importance. We believe that if in 2007 we had asked the residents of Southwest Memphis what the C.H. Nash Museum meant to them, in all likelihood, their response would have focused on how some of "our children visit for school field trips and Chucalissa is where the Indian Mounds are located." If we ask that question today, we hope the response will include "Chucalissa is the place where there is an exhibit on the cultural heritage of our community; where there is a resource center on our community history; the place where we hold our Black History Month celebrations; where our traditional foods garden was planted last year; where the AmeriCorps Teams that work in our community live; and also where the Indian Mounds are located."

We find the process is not linear or without ambiguity. The community engagement does not detract in any way from the components of our mission related to the prehistory of the area. By holistically interpreting the entire built environment of the Chucalissa site, we invite more stakeholders of that environment to the table for dialogue. We believe this incorporates the very essence of the International Council of Museums definition of a museum: "institutions in the service of society and of its development" (ICOM, 2004, p. 222).

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