

Front Yard, Back Yard: Lessons in Neighborhood Archaeology in an Urban Environment

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Doing archaeology right where people live brings immediacy to the processes of site interpretation and heritage-making not usually present in more remote projects. When people can peer down into their buried history or the history of their neighborhood as they move about in the course of their daily lives, public archaeology suddenly becomes very personal. Memory and imagination blend together to create connections to a past that are both highly idiosyncratic and of the political present. Two projects in Tampa aimed at unearthing the forgotten history of the recent past are examined as case studies.

Archaeologists can find themselves working in neighborhoods if the sites they are interested in studying now happen to be built upon by residential development. Such sites might or might not relate to the history of the neighborhood, but chances are the chief archaeological interest is with the archaeological record as an expression of some past cultural stage or historical event. Communication of archaeological results to the current residents might be incidental or informal, with the main intended audience being other archaeologists and scholars. Archaeologists can also find themselves in neighborhoods doing compliance archaeology (highway expansion is one typical example) with, minimally, no intended audience other than those doing compliance review. Or archaeologists can deliberately place themselves in a neighborhood setting, doing archaeology of and for the residents, involving them in field work and research design, and directly providing them with results.

My own work follows from the now-classic studies of Bellah (Bellah *et al.*, 2007) and others charting the historical tensions between American individualism and the mutualism of small-scale social networks. One casualty in the triumph of individualism is the neighborhood as a locus of interaction and shared experience. Neighborhood archaeology is offered as one antidote to the pervasive feeling of loss of place (Putnam, 2000) through its specific focus on local context. In each of these scenarios, no matter what the intention or non-intention of the archaeologist, the impact of the archaeological endeavor on the social and political environments of living people can be quite substantial, potentially disruptive or damaging as well as a force for good, and at the very least can change the fabric of a neighborhood in ways the archaeologist should be prepared to understand. This message applies equally to all archaeologists; those on the one end who identify

themselves as applied or activist anthropologists to those who proudly practice what might be called traditional archaeology. In either case, and no matter what the circumstance, neighborhood archaeology does require at least an empathetic alignment with the perspectives of applied anthropology. This alignment can start with the recognition that neighborhoods contain or lack physical features that can affect the well-being of its residents, for example schools, hospitals, public transportation, and retail stores (Cutrona *et al.*, 2006), and that archaeological and historical resources can also comprise positive elements of the physical environment. Even better, of course, is actual training in interdisciplinary experiences in community planning and development.

What follows are reflections, lessons perhaps, on conducting neighborhood archaeology based on experiences in urban Tampa, Florida, going back some 15 years. Tampa, part of a greater metropolitan area with a population of some four million people, has seen little archaeology that has been specifically urban or neighborhood focused, thus some of the observations related here derive from direct trial-and-error experience and have resulted from an admitted degree of naiveté.

Why Applied Anthropology?

Applied anthropology seeks research-based solutions for contemporary human problems. It takes a holistic view of humans as biocultural beings, and sees human activity organized into webs or networks of mutually reinforcing interactions with both spatial and temporal dimensions. Intrinsic to applied anthropology is the value of anthropologists providing service to groups of people in need. Taken to the logical extension, groups of people in need become clients who might want things more than need them. Applied anthropology has struggled in drawing the line between servicing want and need, but putting anthropology in the service of a broad range of clientele is rapidly

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Fig. 1: Google Earth aerial view of Malfunction Junction (Interstates 4 and 275), upper left, and Perry Harvey, Sr. Park in the open spaces, center.

becoming the norm. The reach of contemporary applied anthropology extends to corporate interests engaged in consumer research and even more controversially to the military's Human Terrain project (AAA CEAUSSIC, 2009), for example, along with more conventional interests in health disparities, human rights and social justice, and cultural survival. For the applied archaeologist this requires an understanding of the conditions of the client relationship and an ability to resolve conflicting interests. Is the client a living person or persons who have the means to retain an archaeologist for some purpose? Or is the client the silenced dead whose lives are given expression through the archaeological record? Applied anthropologists are trained to ferret out underlying political and economic conditions that skew power relations and affect the ability of people to access critical resources, and they are keenly aware of the intensely political environment in which social behavior exists at all levels, from local to global. Above all, they are trained to be critically reflective on the impacts of their own actions and learn quickly that no interventions, no matter how well intended, are truly neutral.

What are the benefits of applied anthropology to the archaeologist working in a neighborhood? First, we must see that we are engaging with living people who as individuals are enmeshed in a web of social, political, and economic relations that connect them to other people and position them favorably or in conflict with the interests of others. Our interactions with them can create social capital or threaten their sense of territoriality or ownership of knowledge. Applied anthropologists learn to work with people respectfully while also remaining keenly aware of their own position in an environment of negotiated interest. Archaeologists working in neighborhoods are interacting with living people in their living space. Nothing about this process should go unexamined or be taken for granted.

What is a Neighborhood?

There is no more fundamental and deceptively simple question than "what is a neighborhood?" Neighborhoods are very complex lived units of human experience that



Fig. 2: Local youth assisting in the archaeological excavations at Perry Harvey Sr. Park.

combine historical and sociological realities (Melvin, 1985); as archaeologists how much do we really know about them? Neighborhoods are places of residence (or non-residence in the case of vacant lots) but are not necessarily social spaces or places exhibiting homogenous social values. Neighborhoods can be defined by externally created boundaries such as interstate highways and still reflect resident perception. More formally, neighborhoods can be census tracts identified by the U.S. Census Bureau through qualitative and quantitative data analysis (Cutrona *et al.*, 2006) Next-door neighbors might express variable or even conflicting levels of interest regarding the presence of outsiders doing anything in their locality. Neighbors might identify their interests in the past, present, and future very differently (as can happen even within families) and, outside of a small piece of shared geography, might have little in common. Neighborhoods are not by definition communities, although they can be, and communities may or may not exist as residential units in the present. Archaeologists need to be careful to distinguish and not conflate the concepts of neighborhood and community. Archaeologists can create a community by bringing together a group of people who share an interest in or connection to what is being excavated (see Baram, this volume), but this is quite different than simply expecting this to happen because you are working in a neighborhood. Although the context of excavation might be residentially hyperlocal,

the community of interest for the project might be dispersed, might be elsewhere (perhaps even relocated?), and the effort required to connect them to the project will be quite distinct from the interactions with residents of the neighborhood. Effective neighborhood archaeology requires both sensitivity to the interests of residents and awareness of political dynamics of the local environment plus a means to connect with displaced residents or descendants who have an active or even latent interest in neighborhood history.

Several of these points can be illustrated through the example of our project focused on the now-demolished historic African-American neighborhood in Tampa known as Central Avenue (Weisman *et al.*, 2004). Known in its heyday during the 1930s and 1940s as the Harlem of the South, most of this once thriving neighborhood is now covered by a huge interstate cloverleaf known locally as “Malfunction Junction” (Figure 1), with a small part archaeologically preserved beneath the sod of the adjacent city park known as Perry Harvey Sr. Park. This park is a small recreational space in the front yard of the Central Park Village public housing complex (at the time of our project in 2003), now destroyed (in 2010) to make way for the latest version of public housing. For the archaeologist, Perry Harvey Sr. Park provided the perfect setting—flat, open, unobstructed, the lure of a “lost city” buried mere inches below the surface, its deposits nicely bracketed in time and presenting a range of historic contexts that have

rarely been subject to systematic archaeological investigation (Weisman, in press).

Our presence in the front yard of Central Park Village made our work difficult to avoid and provided a perfect venue for public archaeology. Could we engage the local residents in the quest for the early history of their neighborhood? Allowing open access to work in progress brings a certain democracy to the enterprise, with people peering into open units as they move about in the course of their daily routines bringing spontaneous questions and observations that might go unexpressed in more formal focus-group settings. At night the field school students often sat up developing new flyers or posters in response to the questions of the day, often writing to confront the skepticism expressed by local residents about the value of what we were doing.

It became clear day by day that this neighborhood, like many others, was composed of people with different points of view and who chose to engage with the outside world with varying levels of interest. Some eyed us with suspicion, others altered their normal routes to avoid passing by. But after turning that first shovel load of dirt there was no going back. We now had to validate the history that we promised lay buried beneath the sod. Space considerations prevent a full accounting of the archaeological results here (see Weisman, in press; Weisman and Collins, 2004), but suffice it to say that we did develop an archaeological research design that considered the local residents as stakeholders. At the same time we presented four broad research questions derived from and articulating with pressing theoretical concerns in the discipline of historical archaeology. Despite recovering thousands of artifacts, we were only partially successful in answering our research questions. We were however much more successful in energizing the neighborhood's own discovery of its history under the ground.

At the neighborhood level this discovery had to take the form available to it, which came largely in the venue of a summer youth program at the nearby community center. Local youth became very involved in the project (Figure 2) and received "I Helped Discover History" certificates for participation. Media attention and social networks enabled the project to both create and connect with larger communities (some of them descendant) interested in the historical and cultural legacy of Central Avenue, communities that traveled to the site to observe excavations in progress. These communities, although historically rooted in the neighborhood, no longer resided there but provided strong validation of our efforts to those who did.

Archaeology Can Privilege Certain Histories

It is important to recognize that the act of archaeology imparts significance to certain histories at the expense of others. What is left out, ignored, or moved through in the archaeological record is someone's history not being paid attention to. This became evident to me, after the fact, in the Buffalo Soldier project conducted in another Tampa neighborhood in 1998 (Weisman *et al.*, 1999). In this project, we showed little interest in the early twentieth-

century remains of the early suburban neighborhood of Tampa Heights, moving through them with only modest attention as we sought to discover traces of the 1898 Spanish-American War encampments of the Buffalo Soldiers. This project did result in the public recognition that several city blocks on the now tree-shaded Elmore Street played a role in a nationally significant event, but did not significantly address the historical and social formation of the neighborhood, despite taking place right in people's yards. People whose families have lived in Tampa Heights since the 1920s might or might not have been enriched by the project, but the community of people interested in the Buffalo Soldiers certainly was.

Living Archaeology Can Take On a Life of Its Own

Once unleashed, an archaeological project can take on a life of its own if it comes into being while people watch and is being shaped by how people react and respond. Outcomes can be produced that bear little resemblance to or connection with actual archaeological results. If this is a happy outcome we will tend to take credit for it and feel that archaeology contributed to a good thing. But there is no guarantee that the outcome will be happy. Outcomes that are detached from the accountability of archaeological method, in theory at least, stand a good chance of turning out badly. How quickly can you back away from archaeology used by special interests to advantage themselves at the expense of others? Never quickly enough. Let's return in more detail to the Buffalo Soldier project for an example. The story has a happy ending, owing more to good fortune than design.

The so-called Buffalo Soldiers were called to the front lines with the quick mobilization of troops sent to invade Cuba during the Spanish-American War. These African-American regiments of the regular army began arriving in Tampa in April and May, 1898 for embarkation. Developed from the black volunteer regiments in the Civil War and then established as regular Army regiments through Congressional order, the Buffalo Soldiers had seen hard service at remote western outposts (Leckie and Leckie, 2003). Needless to say, the onslaught of nearly 3,000 armed and uniformed black men was a cause of great alarm in the Jim Crow South. Tampa became the scene of violent conflict between citizens and soldiers as the prevailing racially based social order was put to the test (Gatewood, 1971). As regulars of the U.S. Army, these black soldiers did not take lightly to being turned away from whites-only bars, restaurants, barber shops, or houses of ill repute. This highly charged atmosphere helped propel the city to the brink of a race war, ultimately avoided only by the departure of the Buffalo Soldiers with the first invasion force steaming to Cuba during the second week of June.

In the decades following the war, Tampa's hosting role for Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders gained ascendancy in the city's historical narrative and the Buffalo Soldier saga fell from view. As the centennial of the Spanish-American War approached, Florida's Department of State began soliciting proposals for projects commemorating Florida's role in that conflict, providing an opportunity to refresh

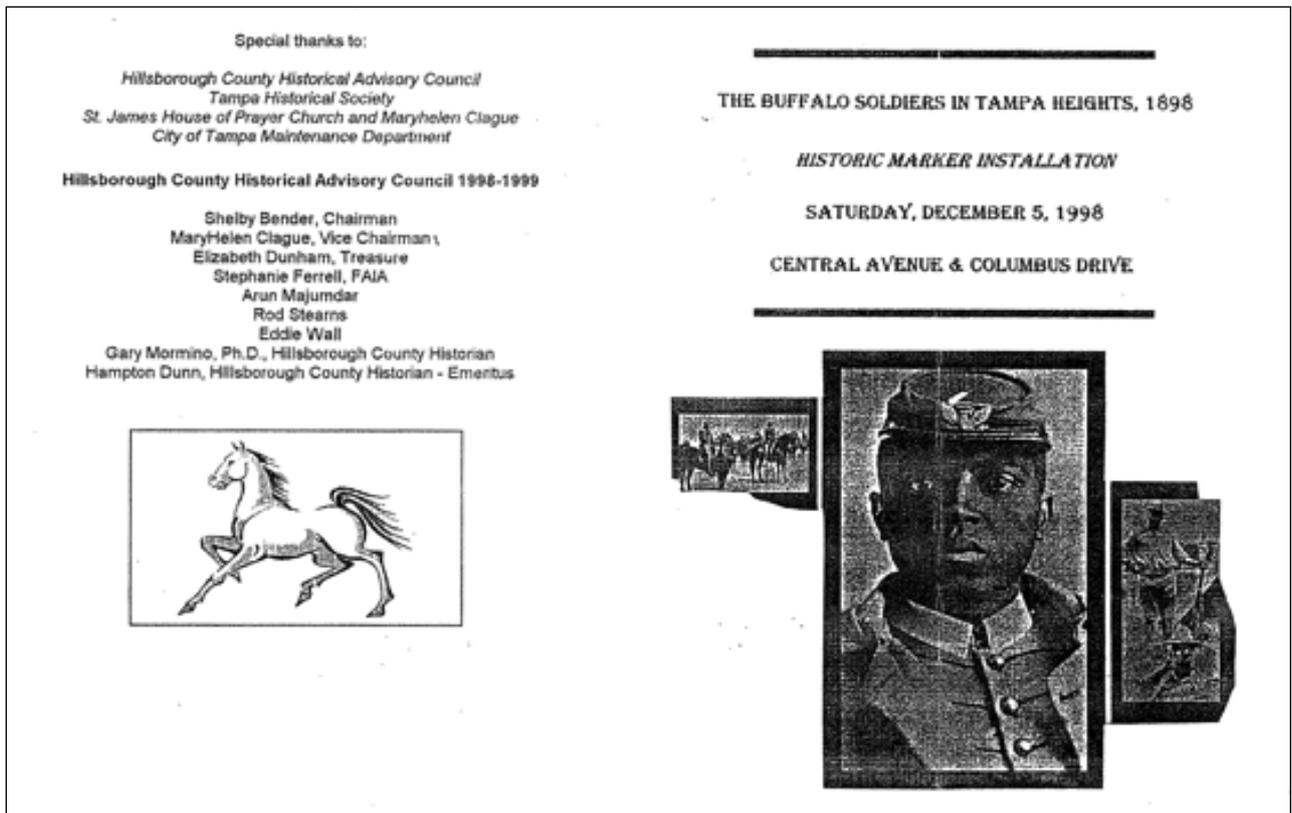


Fig. 3: Flyer developed for the Buffalo Soldier Historical Marker dedication.

the Buffalo Soldier story in the public memory by seeking archaeological evidence of their existence. Despite a steadily growing body of scholarship on the Buffalo Soldiers, their brief but dramatic sojourn in Tampa was largely ignored, their physical presence invisible. This circumstance might have been for good reason, given the reality of Tampa's highly contentious and strife-filled race relations in the twentieth century even after the turmoil caused by the Buffalo Soldiers was long over. How would a revival of this history be received?

Funding from the state allowed us to move forward with the project. Our documentary research enabled the project to focus on a single residential block that seemed to have the highest potential for containing intact archaeological remains. To the field we went, armed with measuring tapes, posthole diggers, shovels, screens, and metal detectors, and attracting, almost immediately, the earnest interest of the local press and the begrudging attention of the homeless occupants of an underbrush-shrouded back-corner camp. We hoped at first to locate diagnostic military artifacts like buttons or equipment through use of a metal detector, naively it turned out, as modern metals blanketed the soils just below the surface. Without metal detector hits to guide our testing, we simply established a grid across the six lots for which we had been granted permission (each lot measuring about 60 feet wide by 194 feet deep), then dug 158 shovel tests (all but seven yielding artifacts) at 10-m intervals. We found plenty of artifacts, collected in 275 different proveniences, most of them reflecting the residential development of the block that soon followed on the heels of the Buffalo Soldiers. A porcelain doll's ear, a marble, a jack, hairpins, plastic

beads, a comb, perfume bottles, coins (dating from 1930 to 1970), and large amounts of broken dishes and ceramics, glass bottles, utensils, fragments of iron skillets and enamel pots, from what was most likely a trash dump or incinerator barrel against the back alley, all gave evidence of early suburban life in Tampa. Butchered animal bone and other faunal remains were also recovered in distributions suggesting kitchen-door deposition or backyard disposal.

But where were the Buffalo Soldiers? At best, their activities were evidenced by no more than 16 artifacts spread across all six lots, none of them absolutely and specifically diagnostic of a soldier's presence but nonetheless most probably dating to the nineteenth century. A kaolin pipe stem, lead shot and sprue, an "F" (for Federal) .22 short rimfire shell casing, three other shell casings, a brass button or badge with an 1894 patent date, and several brass rivets and eyelets which were conceivably part of a tent provided scant testimony to their presence. These paltry results would seem to spell doom for the success of our project. Unexpectedly and fortunately, this turned out not to be the case.

While we were doing the fieldwork we also were presenting public education programs on the Buffalo Soldiers and developed a portable exhibit that made its appearance in several highly attended public venues associated with the Spanish-American War centennial. These activities plus the newspaper visibility brought us supporters from an unlikely place, namely a church and its congregation located on the block adjacent to our survey area. This traditionally black church had recently opened its doors to a displaced white congregation and was attracted to a

ready-made local historical example of blacks and whites working together for a common purpose, as they saw the black and white regiments doing in the Spanish-American War. To further its cause, one of the congregants, who also served on the Hillsborough County Historical Advisory Council, convinced the Council to support the installation of a state historic marker on the corner of our survey block and across the street from the church. On December 5, 1998, this marker, titled "The Buffalo Soldiers in Tampa Heights 1898" (Figure 3) was unveiled in a dedication ceremony featuring a 21-gun salute from a combined group of Rough Rider and Buffalo Soldier reenactors, a convocation by the church's minister, and speeches by local politicians and community activists.

This quite probably is the only historical marker in existence offering public interpretation of the role of the Buffalo Soldiers in the Spanish-American War and might be (according to my research) the only marker commemorating their activities east of the Mississippi River. As another measure of benefit, although our project cannot take entire credit, the Buffalo Soldiers have been included more frequently (even if still only slightly) in new local history exhibits and public education venues that have opened in the ten years since the marker dedication. The message is clear: the act of archaeology itself can serve contemporary needs and purposes regardless of the results. The effects of neighborhood archaeology can transcend the spatial boundaries of the neighborhood and cause new relationships to form. It can bridge the interests of like-minded people from within and beyond the neighborhood and transform, even if fleetingly, a neighborhood's self identity. It can become an agent of change in people's lives. We think of this as usually being a good thing (as with the Buffalo Soldier project), but change occurs even to those who did not ask for it.

Dealing with the Loss of Control

Working in neighborhoods will bring the archaeologist in contact with people who will be entitled to have a say about research scope and goals, by virtue of property ownership or through locally conferred power and prestige. Sharing control over a project is one of the critical measures of doing true neighborhood archaeology. This is a collaborative, engaged archaeology, but it need not sacrifice genuine professional expertise or scientific methods. Each partner gets to bring something to the table. Many people, once shown respect and brought into the process, will indeed abdicate control and authority to the archaeologist as "expert." This should not be assumed, however, or necessarily desired. The archaeologist must avoid patronizing local partners and should not be duplicitous in their relations with them. If the archaeologist is going to work in someone's living space and impact their sensory environment, they must learn to respect that person and strive to equalize the relationship. Otherwise, the archaeologist should choose a site far from civilization and people. Given the professional perils and ethical quagmires that accrue to this kind of archaeology, why do it? One answer is that this is one kind of archaeology that is likely to survive

even the most tempestuous times because people will directly perceive its value and importance.

Conclusion

Neighborhood archaeology requires a distinct set of sensitivities if it is to effectively engage neighborhood residents in the quest for a collaboratively defined past. This past, as it is made tangible through the production of archaeology, can become a positive feature of the external environment and can be shaped and reshaped through ongoing processes of response and interaction. In neighborhoods that lack resources to foster and promote the well-being of its residents (Earls and Visser, 1997; Sampson, 2003), physical spaces (Cohen *et al.*, 2006) associated with or publicly acknowledging the significance of local history can enhance, even if in only a small way, a personal feeling of self esteem.

The archaeologist needs to be aware of the impacts of the archaeological endeavor on local politics and negotiations of power and the fact that archaeology when done in living environments is an intervention with consequences and implications. Archaeology done this way is a form of applied anthropology. Neighborhoods and communities are not the same thing, although they intersect and overlap. The archaeologist needs to be acutely aware of whose interests are being served by archaeology and be guided by ethical standards of conduct. Neighborhood archaeology can happen by chance or design but either way it must involve negotiation of control over the scope and objectives of the project. Through the adoption of protocols and more formalized standards, neighborhood archaeology can provide a future alternative to today's standard practice of cultural resource management (CRM) at the local level. Institutions of academic training in CRM would be well advised to consider this future and prepare their students accordingly (Weisman and White, 2000; Little and Shackel, 2007; Shackel and Chambers, 2004).

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