

Archaeological Politics Among and About African-Americans in Texas
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I'd like to discuss the subject of African-American Archaeology in Texas from two perspectives: first, as an African-American citizen and taxpayer of the Lone Star State, someone who is materially and culturally impacted by the decisions made by the political leaders here, and secondly as the owner and principal investigator of an African-American and disabled veteran owned and operated CRM firm in Texas that strives to offer consulting services that are more than just "sensitive" to the issues raised by descendant communities but attempts to actually conduct a form of indigenous archaeology within a CRM context. In my capacity as a citizen I share many of the same perspectives and concerns that other Black Texans have: residential displacement and gentrification, substandard public education systems, drugs, and overimprisonment, among others. Like them I also perceive a perplexing disregard for the misrepresentation of Black history in Texas; the type of history that suggests that a focus on Black cowboys can make up for the neglected history of slavery, or the suggestion that repeated exulting of Texan rugged individualism substitutes as a treatment for the consequences caused by poisonous air, dirty water, bad schools, systematic police abuse, or chronic unemployment.

The thesis of my paper is simple: the perception among African-Americans in Texas about archaeology is that certain officials at the state agency charged with historic preservation in the Lone Star State have been actively and passively colluding with private and other public sector interests to fraudulently allow the destruction of the state's African-American heritage in the name of economic development, private property rights, progress, or similar abstractions. In addition, the perception is that these same officials exercise the kind of regulatory oversight that state representative Garnet Coleman, speaking about the state's environmental protection

commission, once characterized this way: “Texas is one of the few states in the country where you can pay for your own state agency and have it regulate you.”

It should by now be clear that this perception is not fantasy. Evidence is everywhere: the destruction and mysterious “burnings” of black churches to make room for luxury condominiums, the deliberate plowing of historic burials to make room for public buildings such as a new federal reserve branch, or the horrific sentencing to death of the black soul at the heart of the city of New Orleans.

As one of the few African-American archaeologists working full-time in the private sector, I find myself in an awkward position: I began my company because I wanted to be part of the solution--and by giving the private and public sectors a viable option, I AM being part of the solution--but I am increasingly forced to question the viability of an African-American CRM firm in today’s business and regulatory environment given present political realities.

At a more micro-political level the problems inherent in Afro-Texas archaeology, as I see them, can largely be explained by a famous quote from Upton Sinclair: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”

I wish to make clear that for me these questions rise well above customary debates about archaeological ethics. As a descendant community member myself I am materially and spiritually impacted by a decision to destroy and “transform” my neighborhood or to dig up the bones of my ancestors in order to build a hotel or shopping mall. I have never seen, however, these systemic predicaments as an excuse to complain or disengage; I have tried to view them as challenges, albeit difficult ones.

I also wish to be clear about who I am reproaching. I am NOT saying that all or even most people at the state agency for historic preservation are engaged in a conspiracy to permit the destruction of African-American and Native American historic sites. Overall I find the Texas

Historical Commission to be filled with dedicated and accomplished professionals who care deeply about the state's heritage and work hard for what is in some ways an exemplary state historic preservation agency. On the other hand, I WOULD like to suggest that it is easily demonstratable that many of the agency's decisions are obviously political—even ideological—in nature, and that the ideological lens used in decision making reflects an Anglo interpretation of a Texas history filled with the ethnic cleansing of Indians, the enslavement of Blacks, and the oppression of Mexicans. This history reflects the REAL experiences of the people of the state, and is the history, along with the struggle to overcome it, the historical commission OUGHT to be telling. To the extent people at the Texas Historical Commission are NOT permitted to tell such stories, or people work to continue to keep such stories in the closet, unfairness and injustice will continue to exist in the agency and the African-American perception will remain.

What I have found in my own work is that I often occupy an occupational limbo where I am not trusted by either side in a burial or development dispute. The descendant community sometimes distrusts me because I work for and am being paid by a governmental or business entity that has a tangible interest in its “revitalization,” and my business client doesn't trust me because I look, act, walk, and talk a little bit too much like a member of the community being targeted, and too often bend over backwards to solicit their input and advice.

The dilemma for me is essentially this: if I expect to make a living as a private sector archaeologist I have to be willing to participate in projects that I personally sometimes find morally wrong. The trouble is that I increasingly find *most* projects in urban Texas to be morally questionable at least at some level, in terms of their lack of democratic planning and their palpable political dishonesty. Which is another way of saying that there may not be a place for public archaeology oriented heritage management in Texas. I increasingly find myself

wondering whether perhaps I should have become another hot-shot corporate environmental lawyer instead; they seem to be the ones who play a disproportionate role in agency policy formation, along with the former military officers who shamelessly walk through the revolving door that has become federal government contracting.

Some cynics may point out: “What did you expect?” Who ever said that “contract” or “business” archaeology ever actually had anything to do with the stewardship of cultural resources? But I reject that. The radical privatization policies of recent administrations aside, the existing Section 106 framework represented a workable compromise when first enacted in the late 1960’s and still forms a decent policy basis going forward, when applied as intended. The issue, as I see it, isn’t the customary debate between politically progressive critics of the private nature of American, British, and Australian heritage management, and the equally passionate people on the other side of the political fence who have always viewed the legally mandated conductance of archaeological studies as an encroachment on private property rights. While this dichotomy certainly still forms much of the political landscape in Texas, it is the political micro-processes in between these extremes where the conscious and unconscious prejudices about historical significance usually manifest themselves. Please allow me to present a personal example.

My observations will be drawn from my personal experiences working in Houston’s Freedmenstown neighborhood, the oldest and most historically significant neighborhood in the city. My activities there date back over ten years, and my relationship to its residents and sympathizers has changed quite a bit. I have not published much on this subject as of yet, something which I hope to rectify. I invite you to keep watching my website at <http://www.flma.org> for news.

I first became involved in this neighborhood in late 1996 while a graduate student at the University of Texas. I was looking for a field project to participate in, and had heard that archaeologists were working on an historic African-American cemetery there. When I learned that the site in question was also a public housing project, I became even more interested because I also had a strong interest in public housing advocacy and research, having just left the employ of the Austin Housing Authority a few months before.

I learned that the Houston Housing Authority had hired the firm of Espey Huston & Associates as its archaeological contractor, with Stephen Hoyt and Eugene Foster as project principals. After about two weeks of trying, I eventually was able to reach Foster on the telephone and inquired about whether his firm had any field tech positions for the project. I mentioned that I had heard about the cemetery.

In response, Foster at the time flatly denied the existence of a cemetery at Allen Parkway Village. He explained that his company did not have any positions available and that the project was a relatively simple inventory survey. This did not sit well with me; having worked with public housing authorities in the past, I knew that it would be wise to speak with some actual Allen Parkway Village (that's the name of the housing project) residents. That is how I came to know the housing project's resident council president Lenwood Johnson.

Johnson was already something of a neighborhood icon. He had forestalled numerous attempts by the housing authority and city officials to destroy the complex and at the time was hopeful that the environmental and historic preservation concerns entailed in its "revitalization" could serve as something of a trump card in his fight to preserve the 1000 unit housing development. After meeting him and informing him of my skills in both historic preservation AND affordable housing policy, I decided to offer the resident council my services, which were accepted. I thus became one of the *many* graduate students Johnson has worked with over the

years. The issues we worked on were similar to other advocacy campaigns. One challenge we faced entailed persuading housing authority and historical commission personnel to abandon their heavy-handed approach to working with stakeholders and the public. Their perception was that residents and resident supporters were engaged in a last-minute attempt to use historic preservation and environmental laws to prevent the project's planned demolition and "renaissance." We tried to point out to them that they ought to at least listen to the residents and their supporters, who insisted that a cemetery was located underneath the housing project, and desired a new and better research design largely based on the African Burial Ground Model. In a concession to community pressure, the housing authority eventually did hire an African-American—Dr. Warren Barbour of SUNY Buffalo--as a consultant on the project, but Dr. Barbour's role turned out to be largely symbolic.

Fast forward to 2004. Another public entity in Houston—this time it was the local school district—was developing a piece of property on the western edge of the downtown historic neighborhood, close to the two other already demolished historic districts. About three years ago I attended a pre-bid meeting held by the school district, in which it was soliciting the discrete services of a backhoe operator and an archaeologist. A pre-approved archaeological research design had already been written and blessed by the THC; all the school district wanted was somebody to do the work. The research design's primary author was local Houston archaeologist Roger Moore, and the state agency reviewer was Mark Denton.

Several current and former residents of the neighborhood objected vociferously to the school district's stated intentions. The aforementioned pre-bid meeting was announced and was well attended. There were three African-Americans in attendance: myself, a Pacifica Radio reporter, and Gladys House, a longtime Freedmenstown resident and leader. The people looking to bid for the excavation contract were largely Mexican-American firms, and the people staying

for the archaeology contract portion of the meeting were uniformly white and male, including a representative of the company that had drafted the pre-approved research design. At the neighborhood's invitation, several news media outlets were also in attendance. One of them noticed me and asked me a few questions.

In response to the reporter's questions, I raised objections to the lack of community outreach and input in the pre-approved THC sponsored research design. Among other things, I said that it was an issue of fundamental archaeological ethics and informed consent. I also questioned the THC's apparent "policy" of excluding *any* post-1870 material culture from research consideration in the formulation of research questions and goals. This policy was used to great effect during the Allen Parkway Village excavations and just "happened" to have the effect of excluding a major portion of the African-American historical and archaeological record from research consideration. The THC was obviously applying a template of previous precedent. This policy—which is not mentioned in the *Rules of Practice and Procedure for the Antiquities Code of Texas*—was and is viewed by many community members and archaeological practitioners as an abuse of agency discretion. Subsequent years have shown that this policy is selectively applied for political reasons, and constitutes a double standard where urban African-American sites are treated differently from other, less controversial urban sites.

These happenings came to the attention of Houston based state senator Rodney Ellis, who called me into his office at the state capital. Ellis, who has a longstanding interest in African and African-American history and art, used his political influence to compel changes to the research design. Most importantly, he established a "community advisory committee" whose influence and authority would be considerable. My company was eventually hired by the school district to oversee a significantly expanded research design that was more historically and politically aware and in part explicitly based on the African Burial Ground model.

There was but one shortcoming: Houston is not New York, and Houston politics are not New York politics.....

In conclusion, I would like to offer some suggestions.

Firstly, the Texas Historical Commission and other state agencies should abandon or significantly modify the existing “policy on late 19th and early 20th century sites. I just mentioned. In practice this policy has become an excuse to selectively ignore archaeological material from controversial urban African-American sites in Texas, especially sites slated for urban renewal in Houston. The policy was conceptualized and enacted in the late 1990’s during the Allen Parkway Village wars. At the time it essentially was a solution in search of a problem. Curation problems have existed in archaeology for years, as has redundancy in archaeological collections. The policy has certainly had the desired effect; archaeologists report a significant increase in “alternative” mitigation strategies and a sharp reduction in excavations that could lead to more informed national register eligibility determinations. At this point the policy isn’t fooling people; the unsuccessful attempt by the THC and the Houston School District to implement the customary post-1870 excavation moratorium in 2004 are proof of that.

Is the scholarly database on post-Civil War African-American urbanization in Texas so extensive, and are artifact collections on the subject so redundant as to justify the continuance of this prejudicial policy? The persistence of this double standard is disconcerting. The architecturally unremarkable George W. Bush home in Midland, Texas is fast-tracked to NRHP and Landmark status, and two nationally significant Black historic districts in Houston—not to mention scores of human bodies—are treated as obstacles to progress. There’s something wrong about that.

Secondly, I believe that Texas needs to join other big states such as California and enact a state level burials policy that protects Native American burial sites and recognizes the human

right of the dead to a decent burial, regardless of race or ethnicity. I would prefer the passage of a state law on the subject, but in the interim I'll settle for a policy. Texas is clearly out of step with much of the country on this issue.