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# African American Oral History and Archeology: Perceptual Politics, Political Practice

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## ABSTRACT

Awareness of the role of collective historical memory in the generation of historic contexts is crucial to understanding African American history and in making professional heritage management decisions. In practice this means treating Black history and Black experiences with seriousness and respect, and confronting racism. Utilizing selected oral histories from Houston as a springboard, I argue that forthright political examination of National Register of Historic Places eligibility determinations based on a valid historical context is a prerequisite toward moving forward on a plan to reconcile the Afro-Texas experience with the Texas history master narrative.

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of oral history, oral narrative, and oral tradition in establishing the historical significance and context of archeological sites—indeed most historic sites—is by now reasonably well recognized (Barber 1994), even by middle range theory-based archeologists, although still not widely applied. Historical archeologists have the advantage of being able to consult and work with a diversity of sources, many of them not in the ground or in the water. African American cases, for instance, often present more weighty and nuanced judgment calls that do not lend themselves to programmatic summary.

One noteworthy example of a problematic “one size fits all approach” was the Texas Historical Commission (THC) policy on “Late 19th and Early 20th Century Sites” (Denton 1999). The policy flatly stated, “In general, late-19th and early-20th century sites are not considered eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places” because:

the distribution of mass-produced goods across the United States produced amazing artifact assemblage uniformity, and, therefore, the archeological results rarely provide important new interpretive insights for the historical record. What these massive numbers of artifacts almost always produce is increased costs, dramatically increased analysis times, and curation problems (Denton 1999:13-14).

The policy went on to declare:

...we are not saying that archeological excavations of late-19th or early-20th century sites should never be conducted—only that the rationale for doing so must be extremely well developed. As with problematic prehistoric archeological sites, the contractor must present a clear case justifying why public funds should be spent to investigate such sites (Denton 1999:14).

The apparent overflow of superfluous artifact collections was not seen as evidence of flawed technique or a lack of interpretive sophistication on the part of *archeologists* or the people reviewing their work. Instead the policy reflected an interpretation of state law that considered not only the cultural resource significance analysis customarily conducted by agency archeologists, architects, and historians but also inserted the analysis of “economic” or “fiscal” impacts that archeological investigations would have on cities or municipalities that were mandated to comply with the Antiquities Code of Texas. “Driving these efforts [was] the widely held belief that three decades of creeping environmental controls ha[d] strangled the economy and undermined economic competitiveness” (Meyer 1999).

Also at work was a misinterpretation of middle range theory. The theory’s origins in sociology long since forgotten, it continues to be applied

haphazardly and unsystematically, and ultimately applied in ways that appear to be more political than empirical:

Unfortunately, many archaeologists have seen Binford's methods of studying site-formation process as an end in themselves. In many cases, the development of middle range theory has become the research goal rather than the means to connect archaeological data with high-level, abstract explanations...although such studies increase our interpretive abilities, they contribute little to the advancement of our understanding of human behavior (Maschner 1996:469).

In short, as Singleton and Bograd noted in 1995 about African American archeology generally, archeology in Texas remains "theory poor, not data poor" (Singleton and Bograd 1995:29). The Texas example is particularly unfortunate, because African American archeology is both theory and data poor, a situation which the enactment of the THC policy exacerbated, since many African American archeological sites, particularly urban ones, postdate the 1870s.

While this agency interpretation of the Antiquities Code of Texas has reflected the cost-benefit analysis model of historic resource protection for some time now, the National Historic Preservation Act and its implementing regulations are still supposed to follow the traditional model, wherein the intrinsic nature of a historic property is more frequently of greater consequence than the "fiscal impact" of historically preserving it, or mitigating adverse effects to its historic integrity. Regrettably, however, "regulation creep" appears to have resulted in a confusion of *state* standards with *federal* undertakings, particularly at African American sites, which fall into the late 19th and early 20th century time framework the policy sought to criticize.

African American sites from this and other time periods already faced a higher eligibility burden under state law than conventional sites, and as Barile (2004:90-100) eloquently noted, positive National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) eligibility determinations of African American sites were already rare before the policy change. She attributed the disparity to the fact that THC archeologists were not conversant in historical archeology, and especially not in African American archeology, which grew into maturity largely after THC archeologists had finished their graduate educations

and had embarked on private sector and government careers. She observed:

Inherent prejudices influence one's valuation of certain site types, especially when historical context is a secondary consideration or denied consideration at all. In particular, the often-used methods of evaluation for many CRM projects give primacy to artifact quantity, rather than quality, which is then placed within its historic context. This approach appears to favor large sites with elaborate architecture and a high quantity of artifacts, rather than lower class sites with vernacular structures. When specifically looking at late-19th and early-20th century sites, it is not only the issue of class that enters the analysis but, importantly, the issue of race (Barile 2004:93).

As part of a number of recommendations for improvement, Barile suggested that Cultural Resource Management (CRM) firms move beyond an over-reliance on archeological surveys. Writing against methodological approaches employing "single-level analysis" where "the strengths of historical archaeology are ignored," Barile (2004:99) instead suggested that historic context—one that does not shirk controversies of race, class, or gender—is crucial to any understanding of "significance" in a CRM sense, or in a larger more epistemological one.

Barile's critique was more than simply insightful. Crucial to Barile's argument is adherence to the *historic context* procedure laid out in National Register Bulletins 15 and 16A (National Park Service 1997a, 1997b), which define and describe the process for applying the National Register criteria in considerable detail. *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (National Park Service 1997a:53) defines historic context as:

An organizing structure for interpreting history that groups information about historic properties that share a common theme, common geographical area, and a common time period. The development of historic contexts is a foundation for decisions about the planning, identification, evaluation, registration, and treatment of historic properties, based upon comparative historic significance.

The necessity of having and consulting a proper

historic context framework is also made clear by the bulletin:

Decisions concerning the significance, historic integrity, documentation, and treatment of properties can be made reliably only when the resource is evaluated within its historic context. The historic context serves as the framework within which the National Register Criteria are applied to specific properties or property types ((National Park Service 1997a:1).

The concept of historic context is not a new one; it has been fundamental to the study of history since the 18th century and, arguably, earlier than that. Its core premise is that resources, properties, or happenings in history do not occur in a vacuum but rather are part of larger trends or patterns (National Park Service 1997a:7).

Historic contexts are historical patterns that can be identified through consideration of the history of the property and the history of the surrounding area (National Park Service 1997a:7).

After stressing the importance of historic context in the making of National Register eligibility determinations, the bulletin goes on to elaborate the process of how to evaluate a historic property within its historic context. The first step in this process is as follows: “Determine how the theme of the context is significant in the history of the local area, the State, or the nation” ((National Park Service 1997a:8). This step is important because a context may be organized by theme, geographic area, or chronology, and helps to inform the interpretive framework used by evaluators in assessing the significance of a historic property. The unfortunate problem in Texas has been that African American history and archeology have not been seen as themes. This deficiency has led to the destruction of historic African American sites in Texas.

The obligation to utilize historic context in making NRHP decisions stands by itself. But how is such a requirement in the public interest? First, if our nation’s history—and its present—is multicultural and multivocal, we must seek to produce interpretations of that history to a general public that deserves to be able to see itself in representations of the past. As a practical matter, this means that resource managers

must cease defining the hypothetical “taxpayer” they routinely invoke in defending their management decisions in stereotyped and parochial ways. It is incumbent upon federal as well as state resource managers to ensure that African American history and archeology’s relevance to the American story is respected and understood as being integral to any effort to tell the overall story.

The gathering, documentation, and interpretation of African American oral histories, traditions, and narratives is bound to be a key aspect of any future project to develop an Afro-Texas historic context document. Using a set of oral history interviews I collected in Houston’s Freedmenstown neighborhood, I contend that regulatory compliance-oriented African American historical research must also understand the role of *historical memory* in Black culture, politics, and expression. I further argue that any worthwhile investigation of black life must have a working and informed theory of not just race and racism at the core of its analysis, but must also consider the perspectives of other minorities and women. Further, any significance determination of Texas cultural resources—particularly at the federal level—must employ a historical context analysis based on issues relevant to African American history and archeology.

### HISTORICAL MEMORY AND THE PRODUCTION OF HISTORY AND ARCHEOLOGY

A discussion of historical memory within African American culture and its relationship to historic preservation requires a brief discussion of how “heritage” is actually produced and consumed. Paul A. Shackel (2008:10) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) have long noted that official public histories hide as much as they reveal, and that the past can only be understood in a present context. It is incumbent upon historic context authors, therefore, to not only embrace reflexivity but also positionality in crafting historical narratives. This means frank discussion about the interests or motives of the parties involved and fuller disclosure of political and/or financial prerogatives.

Both authors critically analyze the different strategies that are often used to “create” or “produce” the public past. “First, people can create an exclusionary past. By implying continuity with the past, or reinventing a collective memory, these

traditions reinforce values and behavior. Many cases that deal with race and ethnic genocide are often about forgetting a past” (Shackel 2008:10). One notable example from Texas is the apparent non-history of racial violence committed against African Americans and American Indians, particularly in the 19th century. For instance, in 2008 there still is no official commemoration of a lynching in Texas, despite the fact that such spectacles, often advertised in newspapers as “Negro Barbecues,” often involved thousands of whites, who would eat chicken salad and drink sweet tea, while the black victims were being hung, then shot, then burned. The victims’ body parts were then cut off, to be handed out to onlookers, with postcards of the events traded as souvenirs.

A second strategy is to develop a memory that commemorates a patriotic and/or celebrated past. The two quintessential Texas examples of this phenomenon would have to be the Alamo and the San Jacinto Battlefield. What is important to remember is that what is *said* about what happened at those places is *not* the same as what actually took place. Historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983:13) writes: “The history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so.” It is important to go beyond simply stating that “history is written by the winners” and to critically engage the process by which historical narratives are actually manufactured. Visitors to Texas historic sites would do well to reflect upon the political circumstances surrounding their commemoration, and to ask themselves some critical questions (Loewen 1999:459). Who sponsored the historic monument? What were their motives? Who was their intended audience? Who is left out? Is the presentation accurate?

### **Archeology, Politics, and African American Perception**

Archeology conducted subject to federal or state law is by definition political because the creation and enforcement of those laws involves political processes. The different environmental and cultural impacts experienced by vulnerable populations targeted for urban renewal (McGhee 2007) or other forms of redevelopment entail policy decisions that are also political by their nature. The proponents of community redevelopment initiatives, who often undertake such

initiatives with crucial government support, usually display only token concern for how their projects will actually impact the people on the ground. Within the context of this discussion, it bears repeating that “history is what is past, while ‘heritage’ is a filtered past infused with purpose in the present” (Dodd 2007:7; see also Lowenthal 1998; Olivier 2004). “Heritage is history processed through mythology, ideology, nationalism, local pride, romantic ideas, or just plain marketing into commodity (Schouten 1995:21; see also Meskell 2005:136). Therefore, differential conceptions of what is “historical” play a key role in what actually happens.

It stands to reason, therefore, that archeologists working in such circumstances are political actors and make political decisions. These decisions have impacts on people and the environment, not just “the resource” or “the archeological record,” particularly if descendant communities are involved. The largely unacknowledged history of discrepant access among minority peoples to the resources and tools necessary for heritage making in Texas, has left its mark in a variety of places, laws, ideas, and customs. Therefore, a truthful historic context for African American archeology and history in Texas must also describe that aspect of the story.

African American familiarity with archeological politics and with archeological practice is extensive, as is African American experience with the politics of historic districts (Schmickle 2007:159-170). It encompasses a perception that archeological consultants are often paid to facilitate the ethnic cleansing of historically significant black neighborhoods. The perception is that they do this by producing documents that justify the desired outcomes of the people who pay them money, regardless of what the facts are. The perception is that they often do this by looking at African American sites through a Eurocentric lens, as in the African Burial Ground case (La Roche and Blakey 1997:84-106), cherry-picking “facts” that reinforce what clients want, and excluding “facts” that would complicate the undertaking, usually by making it more expensive. What is particularly disturbing to black citizens is that the money these consultants are paid is usually public money, which means that black taxpayers are in effect paying for the destruction of their own communities.

The showpiece example of this phenomenon in Texas is surely the destruction and redevelopment of the Freedmenstown Historic District and the San Felipe Courts Historic District, a.k.a. Allen Parkway Village, in Houston. In this case two *acknowledged*

historic districts of national significance were judged to not be worth saving because the “highest and best use” of the downtown land upon which they now sat was deemed to be different from what the residents of the historic districts, mostly renters, thought. It may be useful to remember that in the time period in question (the 1990s), Enron was considered the crown business jewel of Houston and was widely admired for its charitable giving and lavish campaign contributions, particularly to politicians such as Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee, D-Houston, members of the Houston City Council, and others. The destruction of this neighborhood and its subsequent gentrification, is a complicated story and encompasses many dimensions, a diversity of documentary evidence and multiple points of view, and a detailed discussion here would take us too far afield (for some beginning discussion of this complex subject, see McGhee [2000:327-251], Fox [1996], Wallstin [1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b], and Mason [1999], among many others).<sup>1</sup>

To summarize briefly, downtown business interests, real estate developers, and four mayoral administrations pursued the redevelopment of this area for 20 years (Harol 1999:6). The neighborhood is historically significant at the national level because it illuminates important themes about post-Civil War African American neighborhood development, particularly efforts on the part of newly emancipated slaves to purchase, keep, and defend land across the postwar urban South. To many Houston Blacks, the term “Freedmen’s Town” also conveys symbolic and spiritual significance. Long known as the “Mother Ward” of Houston’s black community, the neighborhood has fostered a sense of pride in the success that the city’s early black settlers had in establishing their own autonomous neighborhoods and communities (Maxwell 1997:126).

In 1998 Allen Parkway Village, a housing project listed on the National Register of Historic Places (as the San Felipe Courts Historic District), was demolished to make way for a mixed-use development. The housing project was built during the early 1940s over what was the oldest part of Freedmen’s Town, and also over an African American cemetery. Archeological background studies and monitoring were undertaken prior to demolition of the structures. Although extensive household remains and structure foundations from some of the earliest Freedmen’s Town residences were observed during monitoring, these were not considered significant enough to warrant testing with any rigor. Also ignored were

repeated community declarations of the existence of a historic cemetery inside the project area. After repeated denials on the part of the housing authority and its contractors, a cemetery was eventually inadvertently located on the site. Eventually more than 400 African American burials were excavated from the site, none of them by properly trained African American archeologists who were familiar with the “biocultural” approach pioneered by Michael Blakey and others at the New York African Burial Ground several years before.

Many lessons can be learned from the archeology that was and was not conducted in the Houston of the 1990s. One that is important to note is the degree to which the state government exercised double standards in its regulation of the quality of the archeology that was conducted at African American historic sites. When one examines the internal administrative record of this undertaking, what becomes apparent is that none of the THC staff involved in regulating the project had experience in African American archeology, and that none of them perceived themselves as even *needing* experience in the subject, because they perceived the undertaking as an “urban” archeology project, not an African American one. They also did not have an African American historic context document upon which to base their decisions, but did not see that as a shortcoming. It was only after protracted activism by neighborhood leaders that an out-of-state consultant with no previous Texas experience was eventually brought in, *after* the HUD and housing authority objectives of neighborhood and community destruction had been achieved, and only *after* the eventual discovery of a historic cemetery, which residents had repeatedly told officials was there all along. The administrative record placed on file at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory at The University of Texas at Austin after the completion of the project, and the publication of the final report, also shows that the consultant’s role was quite limited and not substantive.

The depth of disillusionment and frustration many blacks have about Texas archeology is reflected in the oral history interviews I conducted in 2004 and 2005 in Houston. The interviews were conducted as part of a comprehensive research strategy, based on the African Burial Ground model (Mack and Blakey 2004), I authored for the Houston Independent School District in conjunction with its effort to clear, remove, and redevelop a multi-acre property it owns in the western portion of the city’s Freedmenstown neighborhood (McGhee 2004a).

What becomes clear upon listening to the interviews and analyzing them is that African Americans seem to have a different definition of “historic context” than the majority of archeologists, most of whom have almost no functional historical understanding of the Texas black experience. The end result is that African Americans perceive that archeologists use their superior position as scholars and consultants as weapons of intellectual and cultural destruction instead of as tools for community uplift and empowerment. In short, they see that archeologists operating in this role commit and reinforce acts of racism.

For instance, Black Houstonians from the Fourth Ward have long resented the paternalism and secrecy that has permeated the gentrification of their neighborhood, and see archeological activities as complicit in this practice. This is admittedly not necessarily an “archeological” problem per se, but it is an ethics problem because it violates the informed consent and collaborative research provisions of most professional social sciences organizations, a shortcoming the CRM industry and its advocacy groups (such as the American Cultural Resources Association) have yet to adequately address.

Ms. Jacqueline Beckham, a longtime resident, observed in 2004:

...When things are done in this community, they're done in secret. We don't know anything; it's done...they kept tacking things up on the telephone pole. I said “No, that's not the way you do that.” You're going to tell me that you're going to put around and put up notices up on the telephone pole for a whole community to read?” In the first place, they don't last. People tear them down (McGhee 2004b).

Ms. Gladys M. House, born and raised in Freedmenstown and a lifelong resident, sees the destruction of her neighborhood as the continuation of racist practices that have long characterized American society:

Freedmenstown is the only one that it was planned and developed by and for African American people. The only one. So therefore, we pose the biggest threat, really the only threat, because the Caucasian power structure wants to just eradicate, just erase, African American history, so that they can say—It's no different than

Rosewood, what happened to Rosewood, and other freedmen towns all across the nation (McGhee 2004c).

Mr. Terry L. Howard keenly felt the 1980 closing of the “Old Gregory” school, one of the lynchpins of the neighborhood, as a key event in the gentrification of Fourth Ward:

Well, when we saw the close, or the conversion, shall I say, of our high school, we knew that that would be a change coming. What extent we did not know, certainly to this extent today. We expected change. The redevelopment in the area, we're saying that this redevelopment is supposed to be for low income (McGhee 2005).

Finally, Mr. John Fenley, born at Jeff Davis hospital in 1949, lamented the lack of proper historic preservation oversight when that historic hospital and its surrounding property was torn down to make room for the Houston branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas:

I think they demolished old Jeff Davis Hospital about three years ago, and they started building the Federal Reserve Building this year. And there were some issues about bodies being buried there, too. But of course, when progress is—I mean, you know, most of the time, they're not going to let, you know, some dead bodies stop progress. Especially when they're African American descendants (McGhee 2004d).

Over time, perspectives on “progress” such as these produce *historical memories* that differ from conventional narratives because they reflect different experiences. How are African American understandings of historic “significance” and “context” different from standard accounts? Several factors are involved, but two are predominant: (a) as with many Native American communities, African Americans view “historical” significance from the standpoint of cultural and/or religious significance. Discussions of “effects” or “impacts” from this point of view take on a different meaning, because religious or cultural impacts do not lend themselves to easy quantification; and (b) the historical memory of enslavement, racial violence, segregation, and discrimination, and their justification, racism, permeate black understandings of history.

The lingering problem that remains is that racial prejudice and its effects are not considered proper historic contexts. White denial of the history, effects, and ongoing challenges of racial prejudice and racism are surely a major cause. This explains, for instance, why there is not *one* historical marker or commemorative plaque in Texas that memorializes a lynching. It also explains how people can have differing recollections of the *same* reality, both equally valid. Take, for example, oral histories of 20th century Central Texas teachers; the recollections of white teachers fell largely within the dominant “immigrant” model of American history, whereas the remembrances of black teachers helped to fill out the picture:

An oral historian studying Texas teachers who made the transition from the one-room schoolhouse to modern consolidated schools found that white teachers said almost nothing about racial segregation or the details of the integration process. Blacks, Hispanic Americans, and disabled students, remained largely “invisible” in their memories. African American teachers by contrast recalled the days of integration vividly because it affected their own lives so personally (Ritchie 2003:32).

### THE SORDID HISTORY OF LYNCHINGS IN TEXAS: WHITE DENIAL, BLACK REALITY

Few things illuminate the politics of heritage making and unmaking in Texas more strongly than the history of racial violence. The lynchings of Jesse Washington and Jesse Thomas in Waco in the early 20th century are two of the more egregious cases of how differing historical memories can produce political disputes. White Waco has tried to forget the staggering and terrifying history of extralegal mob violence against blacks that characterized Central Texas for most of the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

Roger Norman Conger, the city’s premier historian, did not mention racial violence in his many histories of McLennan County and Waco. In a telephone interview he maintained that there was no need to bring up aspects of Waco’s history that

reflected poorly on the city (Carrigan 2004:194).

In 1998 Waco city councilman Lawrence Johnson called for the city of Waco to issue a statement denouncing Washington’s lynching and proclaiming a commitment to racial harmony. He asked for the city to pay for and install some type of commemorative monument or memorial. In 2002 the struggle over the historical memory of Jesse Washington’s lynching reached the McLennan County Commissioner’s Court. The struggle erupted when the court voted to spend \$22,000 to refurbish a 16 panel mural in the county courthouse. A hanging tree is pictured on one of the mural’s panels. County commissioner Lester Gibson offered a resolution that would have acknowledged Jesse Washington’s lynching and would have placed a commemorative plaque near the mural with the hanging tree (Carrigan 2004:207):

No one seconded Gibson’s resolution, however, and it died. He complained that the white population of central Texas preferred to ignore and forget the racial violence that marked the area for so many years. County Commissioner Wendall Crunk disagreed with Gibson’s interpretation and maintained that the mural did not symbolize racial violence but rather a long-gone era of vigilantism that claimed victims of all backgrounds (Carrigan 2004:208).

The politics surrounding this heated discussion revolve around differing conceptions and interpretations of history. The facts of the case are not in dispute. The event was the subject of contemporary newspaper coverage and its imagery was captured for posterity in a series of macabre photographs graphically depicting Washington’s charred corpse. Prior to being strung up, Washington was stoned with bricks and shovels and one of his ears was cut off. He was also castrated and had his fingers cut off when he tried to remove the chain that was used to hang him, leaving him to slap at his noose. He was then lowered into the fire several times and burned alive. His corpse was paraded through the streets of Waco, including City Hall Plaza, and eventually was hung for public display in front of a blacksmith’s shop (Carrigan 2004:2).

An estimated 15,000 people gathered to witness the lynching of Jesse Washington. The event took place in broad daylight and had the atmosphere of

a family gathering. The gathered mob watched and cheered what was happening and then posed for pictures with the corpse. The perpetrators of the murder were not arrested and they were not punished. Their identities were and are well known.

Commissioner Crunk is playing false with history. The fact that some whites, often northerners suspected of being abolitionists or supportive of civil rights for blacks, were lynched in Central Texas is not suggestive of a non-racialized history of violence. The lynching of Jesse Washington “deserves scholarly attention not because it was a singularly infamous event in the history of mob violence but because members of the mob, and residents of the community who tolerated the lynching, represent a deeply disturbing part of American culture in the early twentieth century” (Carrigan 2004:2). White Central Texans such as Mr. Crunk have made a conscious effort to forget what happened and to strike lynching from the region’s historical memory. African Americans, however, did not and could not forget the lynchings, burnings, fire hoses, and police dogs.

#### **THE IMPORTANCE OF RACIAL CANDOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TEXAS AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORIC CONTEXT**

Award-winning historian and biographer Robert A. Caro (2008) once observed: “To show power you not only have to show how it is used but also its effect on those on whom it is used. You have to show the effect of power on the powerless.” The anthropologist might add: “from the perspective of the powerless and in their voice.”

Historical contexts in southern states—where they exist—that deal forthrightly with slavery, slave trading, and racism are rare.<sup>2</sup> This is partly because honestly discussing such matters can shatter popular myths and misconceptions. For a variety of historical reasons, Texas is probably the state with the largest material, intellectual, and cultural investment in “great man” conceptions of popular history.<sup>3</sup> The African American historical experience will not fit neatly into dominant Eurocentric historic contexts such as immigrant or “gone to Texas” paradigms.

Any incorporation of Afro-Texas history into the Texas master narrative is going to require grappling with some uncomfortable truths. Perhaps most

importantly, it is going to have to admit and come to terms with the nature and effects of racial violence. It would have to forthrightly, for instance, examine why the Lone Star State still operates under its 1876 “Redeemer” constitution, albeit with several hundred amendments (Texas Legislative Council 2004). An African American historic context at the state level would of course begin with slavery, but would go well beyond. In particular it should anticipate recent developments in African American archeology and seek to broaden archeological investigations beyond the plantation (Wilkie 2004:111). It must also come to terms with the recognition that all archeological work is politically situated, and that issues of race, inequality, and identity that have characterized much of historical archeology work over the past 30 years are not going to disappear and are likely to intensify.

Descendant communities of all kinds should play an important role in any historical archeology research. In the African American case, Mack and Blakey (2004:16) make important observations about the interaction of historic context and community participation. They note that “[u]ntil the discipline views descendant communities as integral participants in the comprehensive research effort, there will always be the real risk of lost research opportunities and scientifically and humanistically problematic and ineffective investigations of the African Diaspora.” This requires admitting that African American historical perspectives and interpretations are valid. On that score, the noted historian Eric Foner (2002:xvi-xvii) observed the following:

...the history wars did underscore the basic differences between historians’ understanding of their task and what much of the broader public thinks the writing of history entails. Historians view the constant search for new perspectives as the lifeblood of historical understanding. Outside the academy, however, the act of reinterpretation is often viewed with suspicion, and “revisionist” is invoked as a term of abuse.... historical truth does exist, not in the scientific sense but as a reasonable approximation of the past. But the most difficult truth for those outside the ranks of professional historians to accept is that there often exists more than one legitimate way of recounting past events.

Stated another way, there is no one “Story of Texas.” There are many stories. Gathering those stories and giving them meaning is the true business of the historical archeologist:

Archaeologists should strive to create personal connections between the consumer and the people of the past... regardless of whose history they are constructing. An aspect of historical archaeology often envied by prehistorians is the possibility that we can re-find the names of the people who lived on our sites. We should take full advantage of this strength in our interpretations (Wilkie 2004:114).

In terms of African American archeological research conducted by the CRM industry that is subject to federal, state, or local law, this means basing research frameworks on a sound historic context that skillfully blends the political with the archeological and comes to terms with the unique struggles that have characterized the black experience in America and Texas.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Critiques of the research strategy employed by the Houston Housing Authority’s archeological contractor (Espey Huston & Associates) are discussed in McGhee (1997) and Fox (1996), and were included in oral and written testimony at numerous public forums and town hall meetings (at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church and the Museum of Fine Arts’ Glassell School Auditorium) (Chmiola 1998). Critiques of the Programmatic Agreement reached between HUD, the Houston Housing Authority, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, especially the flawed “historical” studies conducted by J. K. Wagner & Company (Wagner 1994) that served as its basis, can be found in Fox (1996), McGhee (1997, 2000) and the testimony of dozens of Houston citizens who testified against the agreement and in favor of the Allen Parkway Village Community Campus concept (Barth 1995). For a discussion of the use of public money to finance “public/private” urban revitalization schemes in the 1990s (e.g., Tax Increment Financing and HUD’s HOPE VI program), see McGhee (1999), Johnston (2007), and Bennett et al. (2006). See Dillon (1998) for a discussion of some similar socioeconomic forces entailed in the decline and “renewal” of Dallas’ Freedman Town neighborhood.

2. For discussion of similar difficulties facing the Mid-Atlantic region, see O’ Bannon (1994:22). For some discussion of a broad-based African American example, see Wellman (2002), particularly her mention of Marie Tyler-McGraw and Kira R.

Badamo’s (1998) innovative historical context document on the Underground Railroad.

3. Critiques of “great man” interpretations of Texas history such as John Henry Brown’s (1892) *The History of Texas*, Eugene Barker’s (1925) *The Life of Stephen F. Austin*, or more recent versions such as T.R. Fehrenbach’s (1968) *Lone Star* abound. Examples would include McGhee (2000), Anderson (2005), or Carrigan (2004), but would also include work by Cantrell (1999). It is perhaps worthwhile to note that in 1999, the Dallas school board responded to longstanding criticism of Brown’s well-documented racism by changing of the name of John Henry Brown Elementary School to Billy E. Dade Elementary School (Dade was an African American public school educator in Dallas). As of 2006, the Dade School became the Billy E. Dade Middle Learning Center.

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