

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE WITHIN A CONTEXT OF URBAN RENEWAL**

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Rachel's session abstract charges us with making comments about "urbanism," in Texas. This obviously covers a large terrain: topics include the development of archaeological and anthropological thought about cities, the relationship between the existence of cities and states, the development of cities, social systems in cities, relations between cities and rural communities, city typologies, and cross-cultural comparison of cities (Graham Syllabus). Within this context, the post Civil War urbanization of Texas, especially by newly emancipated slaves, is an interesting phenomenon. It is usually not commonly noticed that the census of 1900 indicates that Texas was largely still an agrarian state and that most Texans of all stripes were poor: agriculture was still the largest employer and well over 50% of Texans working in agriculture were sharecroppers. Land ownership was highly concentrated and wealth remained maldistributed. The extension of railroads and the advent of large Anglo ranches certainly played important social and economic roles between 1865 and 1900 in Texas, but mostly in the imagination.

The discovery of oil in Texas during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century changed this. In characteristic Texas fashion, economic opportunity drove further migration and settlement. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw Texas fully transform from an agricultural to industrial economy, and rapid urbanization saw the establishment of true cities with millions of inhabitants. By the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Texas had become an urban state; over 80% of Texans no longer live in the countryside but now reside in cities. An archaeology of Texas urbanism, therefore, is largely the archaeology of emancipation and oil.

The African American version of this phenomenon was somewhat different. Because of Jim Crow segregation, African Americans were largely excluded from the social and economic transformations engendered by the discovery of oil and the establishment of a petroleum industry. Many left the state for places west, especially California, in a Texas version of the great migration that resulted in hundreds of thousands of African-Americans leaving the states of Mississippi and Alabama for industrial work in cities such as Chicago and Detroit in the 1920's and 30's. Other aspects of the push and pull factors that resulted in the large out-migration of African-Americans in Texas to California have not received enough archaeological attention, although it certainly has received considerable consideration from folklorists and scholars of the performing arts, particularly the blues.

For this reason and others, scholars of the urban Black experience in Texas generally posit that the most important time period in the state's history for Black Americans is the nineteenth century post Civil War period. This time period is interesting not only because it possesses intrinsically interesting research questions, but because the political economy of modern Texas is largely an outgrowth of things that happened at this time. The types of research questions that could be asked are practically endless: What was the meaning of freedom for newly emancipated blacks now free to leave the plantation and to pursue an urban living as free laborers? What sorts of settlement patterning and adjustments did free blacks have to make as they came into the cities? How did the tightening noose of segregation influence black decisions to stay or leave Texas?

While it is still possible to engage in meaningful African-American urban archaeology in Texas, all future research on the subject will have to contend with the shameful destruction of two historic districts in Houston's Fourth Ward. That story is shameful for a variety of reasons,

but from a research perspective it is particularly reprehensible because that neighborhood contained the single largest and best concentration of information on African-American urbanization in Texas, a research opportunity that is now lost forever. What's more, contemporary Black Texans, in addition to opening their arms and wallets in ways that often go unreported, have now had to watch a recent version of this unfortunate situation, as their brothers and sisters in New Orleans suffer unimaginable horror while the city's black soul has apparently been sentenced to death.

One of the biggest challenges to the archaeological study of urbanism in Texas, especially as it concerns African-Americans, is the unfortunate predisposition of regnant archaeologists in Texas to regard urbanism as being somehow unrelated to the real study and practice of archaeology. One could give many examples; the unfair and mistargeted "policy on late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century sites" is one noteworthy indicator of this. Some elaboration would seem to be in order. The suggestion is NOT that the archaeological establishment is "hostile" to the practice of historical archaeology in a theoretical sense, although it does give one cause for concern to realize that a phone call from a politically powerful state senator can cause a rapid change of intellectual attitude about research objectives and methodology. A state that spends millions of dollars excavating, curating, and displaying the shipwreck of a French explorer can hardly be accused of being hostile to "historical archaeology." What I AM saying is that the tone that has been set is hostile to the conductance of *certain kinds* of historical archaeology, especially African-American archaeology that takes seriously the central and enduring theoretical and empirical concerns that have characterized the field for the past thirty years.

Examples include:

- 1.) Any study that takes the ethnic cleansing of Indians or the enslavement of Blacks as an explicit frame of reference and that employs a “presentist” point of view that castigates the role of white supremacy in the Texas Revolution, and subsequent 19<sup>th</sup> century events.
- 2.) A study that takes a critical view of capitalism as a point of departure.
- 3.) A study that questions or explodes Texas myths such as the “Yellow Rose of Texas” myth or the falsehood that “slavery was less oppressive” in Texas than in other states.
- 4.) Studies that seek to use avant-garde theoretical approaches that are non-positivist or logico-deductive in their methodology.

I have watched with particular disappointment the honest but in my opinion myopic attempts of the Texas Archaeological Society and the Council of Texas Archaeologists to “include” African Americans in archaeological projects. By now it should be apparent that the main issue that remains a sticking point isn’t archaeological *participation* but control and self-determination. The memorandum of understanding governing the excavations at the Levi Jordan Plantation, for instance, actually *empowers* the descendant community in important ways and reflects some of the understanding that historical archaeologists active in indigenous archaeologies have had now for years. The challenge has always been, in my view, figuring out a way to institutionalize such understandings within a private CRM context. We got a long way there with our recent attempts at collaboration and shared power at the Houston ISD Gregory-Lincoln site, and I will be writing up what I see as some of the lessons learned from that experience, and will also be making recommendations that I hope can take this much-needed dialogue forward.

In conclusion, I would like to offer a modest proposal. My recommendation is that the THC convene and sponsor an African-American historic preservation summit. The summit should be broad-based and should include discussion of best practices (such as my nomination of

the Santa Rita Courts Historic District in Austin) in minority oriented historic preservation, as well as frank and forward-looking dialogue about how black sites in Texas can be preserved within a context of rapid urban growth and transformation. One of the goals of the summit would be to initiate *real* dialogue about how the THC can work with black descendant communities, and most importantly, how it can use its regulatory role to encourage—and in some cases compel—government and the private sector to conduct an archaeology that respects the Black history of this state. A simple declaration by the powers-that-be that African American archaeology matters would be important. It would send a signal. Scholars and communities could then hammer out a memorandum of understanding that could scrap or re-tool the existing policy regarding late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century sites and produce an agreement mindful of the spirit that led to the enactment of the National Historic Preservation Act and Texas Antiquities Code in the first place.

The protection and recognition of all of the state's heritage—especially in a state like Texas—is not just in the public interest, it is a moral and ethical duty. To quote from the NHPA, it is still possible “to foster conditions under which our modern society and our prehistoric and historic resources can exist in productive harmony and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations.” As this state continues to grow and urbanize, it is my hope that, mindful of past mistakes, we can move forward and produce much needed institutional change while simultaneously producing dynamic and first class African American research.

## REFERENCES

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