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Patrice L. Jeppson

Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, pjeppson@speakeasy.net

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2010 *Black History Showcase* Features African American Archaeology

By Patrice L. Jeppson*



The *Black History Showcase* is an annual exposition mounted in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Its stated mission is reinforcing African American pride and fostering tolerance and respect through promoting a greater awareness for and appreciation of African American history.

Held each February in celebration of Black History Month, this event draws upon "real people, real artifacts, and real stories" to highlight African American history and achievement. Now in its seventh year, the *Showcase* attracts thousands of African

American members of the general public for an "'edutainment' (education + entertainment)" experience. This year, for the first time, African American archaeology was featured among the *Showcase* exhibits. Students and faculty from Cheyney University of Pennsylvania (the nation's oldest Historical Black College or University (HBCU)), teamed with a National Park Service Archeologist (Jed Levin) to present information about Philadelphia-area African American historical archaeology.

In specific, this new exhibit aimed to demonstrate how Philadelphia African American history can be learned through archaeology. The recent excavations done at the President's House and the James Dexter archaeological sites in Independence National Historical Park were featured, as were cultural resource excavations conducted several decades ago at the First African Baptist Church Burial Grounds. Archaeological site maps, excavation photographs, and reproductions of artifacts were used to engage the *Showcase* audience. The archaeologists and university students spent more than 16 hours in one-on-one conversation with adults and children explaining how archaeological evidence can inform us today about past African American cultural experience.

The *Black History Showcase* was founded by Everett Staten and is produced by Everett & Associates, Inc., in association with the Proud African American

Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting awareness and appreciation of African American history. The event's annual exhibitors include, among others, surviving members of the Tuskegee Airman, members of the 9th and 10th Calvary of the Buffalo Soldiers, and players from the Philadelphia Stars Negro League. Exhibits feature, among other topics, Black Inventors, the Civil War-era Colored Troops, the history of Blacks in Ice Hockey, and material culture evidence from the slavery and Jim Crow-eras. This year's Showcase was co-sponsored by the U.S. Census, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Sunday Sun*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Philly.com*, *Neighborhood Leader*, *Teenshop*, *Heath Partners*, *Scoop USA*, *American Legacy*, *WURD* and *WDAS* radio stations, the Proud African American Foundation, the Philadelphia Convention Center, *Colgate-Palmolive*, *OARC*, *KD Communications Group*, and *Everett & Associates, Inc.* The *Black History Showcase* is always free and is open to all. The vast majority of the audience attendees are African American residents from the city of Philadelphia, South Eastern Pennsylvania, and Southern New Jersey.

The Cheyney University participants included an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences (Patrice L. Jeppson, Ph.D.), students from CU Anthropology courses (Tiffany Stanley and Vinta Gains from "Introduction to Anthropology" and "Culture, Language, and Society") and an Internship student (Tristan Hebron) whose hands-on heritage policy research has helped lay groundwork for erecting an historical marker at the Dexter archaeological site. The class of students from CU's upper division "Culture, Language and Society" course (Spring 2010) assisted in designing the display materials used during the *Showcase*. These students suggested the graphics to be used, advised on color and presentation layout, and helped in the writing of titles and text captions. Dr. Shirley Parham, CU Professor of History, contributed several of the graphics used in the display as did NPS Archeologist Jed Levin and Mitchell Smith of MediaSmith Productions (the documentary filmmaker of *In The Shadow of Liberty: The Search for James Dexter*, an historical archaeology documentary).

Participation in the *Black History Showcase* was sought out both to share African American archaeological research findings with the community and to encourage awareness of archaeology as an endeavor important for African Americans. The *Showcase* highlights African History and presents African Americans who have achieved greatness in sports, the military, and science. In approaching the organizers, a case was put forth that offered not only viable history resources but expressed a need for African Americans to become involved in the field of archaeology and recognize it as a possible profession.

Recent HBCU experience in trying to recruit African Americans for the field of historical archaeology was referenced (including Eleanor King, "Buffalo Soldiers, Apaches, and Cultural Heritage Education," *Heritage Management* 1(2):19-33, 2008). It was posited that until African Americans saw African Americans involved in archaeology, archaeology of the African Diaspora would continue to be conducted by non-African Americans. Founder Staten appreciated this reality and made a special point of stating that, in their participation, the students from Cheyney University would be serving as valuable educational role models for the community.

Important insights were garnered from this community outreach experience. It was learned through engaging the many thousands of African American citizens from the region that many local African Americans are aware of the President's House archaeological research and remain vested in its outcome, commonly inquiring as to the status of the site's commemorative 'memorial' development. It was discovered through conversations that James Dexter and the archaeological research related to his life are not well known by the local African American community as of yet. Many Showcase attendees remembered the First African Baptist Church cemetery excavations which took place more than two decades ago. Few had realized that this early African American historical archaeology research fed into a recent, 2007, *African American Museum of Philadelphia* exhibit about early Philadelphia African American history (Jeppson 2007). And while most *Showcase* attendees were aware that the institution of slavery existed in the North, our engagement activities indicated that members of the local African American community often appear unaware of the rich cultural history of Free Blacks in early America. Future prospects for archaeological outreach via the *Black History Showcase* look promising. *Showcase* Founder Everett Staten stated that he was pleased to have African American archaeology included in the *Black History Showcase* and has invited the presenters to return next year.

*** Patrice L. Jeppson, Ph.D., Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania.**