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## Digging up the Past: An Exhibit Review

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## September 2007 Newsletter

### Digging Up the Past: An Exhibit Review

By Patrice L. Jeppson\*

*Digging Up the Past: First African Baptist Church Burial Grounds*

African American Museum in Philadelphia

701 Arch Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

July 2007-March 2008 (Phase 1 of exhibit)

Archaeology should -- and sometimes does -- serve as a resource for community needs. An excellent example of this is the new exhibit 'Digging Up The Past: First African Baptist Church Burial Grounds' which opened in July, 2007 at the African American Museum in Philadelphia (AAMP). Two cultural resource studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s are drawn upon for a presentation about African American life and death in 19th century Philadelphia. Created by AAMP with assistance from the First African Baptist Church of Philadelphia and one of the museum's partners, the Khepera Charter School of Philadelphia, this is public history at its best. The interpretation conveys rare levels of immediacy. It is homegrown and notably heartfelt.

#### **The Archaeology of the Exhibit**

The exhibit draws on the findings of two cultural resource studies conducted a quarter-century ago in Center City, Philadelphia by archaeologists and physical anthropologists from John Milner and Associates, Inc., a professional consulting firm specializing in historic preservation and archaeological and historical investigations. The work re-discovered two lost

(forgotten) church burial grounds -- the Eighth Street Cemetery, in use from circa 1823 to 1842, and the Tenth Street Cemetery, in use from 1810 to 1822. These burial grounds were the final resting place for free blacks practicing religious freedoms "in a distinct church of the Lord Jesus" known as the First African Baptist Church (Parrington and Roberts 1984:29). The first encountered cemetery, which lay in the path of ramps for the new Vine Street Expressway and a proposed office building, was excavated in 1983-84 by a team directed by archaeologist Michael Parrington under a contract with the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia with supplemental funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the William Penn Foundation. The second, directly in the path of the Expressway, was excavated for PennDOT and FHWA by a team led by John McCarthy in 1990. The archaeological recovery was undertaken in accordance with federal historic preservation legislation.

The First African Baptist Church was established in 1809, upon separating from the white-dominated, First Baptist Church. The two congregations remained connected through mutual membership in the Baptist Association of Philadelphia (Christ and Roberts 1996). The First African Baptist congregation then divided, in 1816, with both resulting branches called the First African Baptist Church (McCarthy 1996). Both institutions were established and first active at a time when Philadelphia was the largest and most important center of free African American life in the United States. Philadelphia's African American community grew in size from approximately 4,200 individuals in 1800, to nearly 11,000 in 1850 (McCarthy 1997). Most of these new city residents were former slaves who migrated from the south.

Background research for the archaeological investigations revealed that the two churches relocated over time and that both burial grounds were officially closed by 1841. By mid-century

(circa 1850) both properties had transferred ownership and the lands were under development for factories and housing. More than 140 years later, heavy machinery making a large subsurface cut for the 1980s construction of Philadelphia's Commuter Rail Tunnel exposed the first wooden fragments from a coffin approximately five feet below the modern ground surface (Parrington and Roberts 1984:27). The First African Baptist Church burials were preserved in the remaining undeveloped spaces under the yards of the subsequent factories and homes (Parrington and Roberts 1984; Christ and Roberts 1996).

In all, the First African Baptist Church Cemeteries Projects recovered the remains of 225 individuals and their associated mortuary goods. Many of the burials involved multiple internments with several individuals buried in the same plot. Wood remnants and soil stains from two different types of 'pinch-toe' coffins were identified. Some of the coffins had flat lids while others had gabled lids.

Prior to their being re-interred in reburial ceremonies at Eden Cemetery, just west of Philadelphia, the recovered human remains from the Eighth Street site were analyzed by Dr. Lawrence Angel of the Smithsonian Institution. His examination provided insight into the health condition of these 19th century Philadelphia residents. Identified afflictions included rickets, arthritis, and dental cavities, as well as broken bones, and, in one case, bone tumors on a skull that had been examined in the past by surgery (likely postmortem, during an autopsy). The recovered funerary items were researched and interpreted. These included a single shoe placed on a coffin lid (6 examples), plates placed on the stomach of deceased individuals (2 examples, one a child's burial), and a single coin buried with the deceased (8 examples). The Tenth Street human remains were analyzed under the direction Dr. Thomas Crist (then of John Milner Associates) with the assistance of Dr. Douglas Owsley of the Smithsonian Institution and other

scholars. Additional insights into comparative health, physiology, mortality, and morbidity resulted.

Over the next two decades, a vast trove of grey literature and academic writing documenting and interpreting the First African Baptist Church Cemeteries Projects was produced -- 24 academic publications, 21 presented conference papers, 3 conference poster sessions, 3 technical reports, and 2 Ph.D. dissertations (Bibliography courtesy of Milner Assoc. Inc., 2006). This formal reporting for federal and state agency and professional archaeology needs followed on the heels of significant and substantive public archaeology outreach that is notable given its early date of practice. The church was contacted in the early planning phase and the congregants, who were interested in the research, contributed history information that assisted the projects. During the 1983 and 1984 field seasons, a wooden viewing platform was constructed for observation of the excavation by members of the public and a detailed handout was written up for distribution. Close to 3,000 people visited the site during two field seasons, including school groups and congregation members (Crist and Roberts 1996:6). Staff from the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum (now the African American Museum of Philadelphia) provided platform interpretation for tours that the Museum advertised in the major Philadelphia newspapers. A popular article was published in *Archaeology* magazine at the time (the Nov/Dec 1984 issue) and a 32-minute documentary film about the excavation and the burial remains was produced in 1988 -- *Ground Truth: Archaeology in the City* (directed by Richard E. Robinson).

While there was consultation with the First African Baptist Church congregation and members of the congregation were able to visit the Tenth Street site, the location of excavations in the middle of Vine Street did not allow for a full public interpretive program on site during the 1990 excavation. During analysis however, John Milner Associates opened their laboratory for

tours for more than 50 groups, most of whom were inter-city school children, K-12 (Crist 2002:112). Arrangements were made for the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum to house the recovered collections. However, the materials ended up stored in the city repository, the Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia, where, in the subsequent decade, selected objects were included in an urban archaeology exhibit entitled the 'City Beneath Our Feet' (Dr. Shirley Parham, personal communication, August 2007).

### *An Exhibit of Archaeology, History, and Heritage*

Two decades later, after a protracted effort, the archaeological assemblages from the First African Baptist Church Cemeteries Projects were relocated to the African American Museum in Philadelphia. A few months ago, in early 2007, portions of the collection were brought out of storage to serve a central role in a new community history exhibit entitled 'Digging Up The Past: First African Baptist Church Burial Grounds.' The exhibition includes artifacts discovered in association with the cemetery burials, including the shoes and plates, as well as a child's coffin and coffin hardware. These items are on view along with original field notes, field sketches of the excavated burials, and the documentary film made during the excavation. Interpretive panels explain what the archaeological evidence means in terms of the life and death of these past Philadelphia citizens.

This archaeological information is used alongside historical church records (baptismal and death records), church artifacts (e.g., an antique pew, a woven basket coffin) and a modern photographic art display of members of the church today (located at Sixteenth Street and Christian Streets) that vividly captures the energy and fraternity of the descendant congregation.

A tribute quilt specially created for the exhibit by students from the museum affiliated-Khepera Charter School of Philadelphia hangs toward the end of the exhibit.

Maya Angelo's empowering poem *Still I Rise* is used as a sub-theme in the exhibit. Its presentation alongside a reproduction of the current Church's stained glass window also knits together the exhibit's layered, double meanings: the challenging life on earth and religious ascent / hardship and suffering in earlier generations and a thriving descendant community; African ancestor belief practices / African American history and culture.

These multiple media create a rich presentation of First African Baptist Church history and community identity. In doing so, this exhibit shines a spotlight on the place of the First African Baptist Church in the founding of African American churches in early Philadelphia and America, and on Philadelphia African American history and identity within broader US society.

'Digging Up The Past: First African Baptist Church Burial Grounds' marks a return to a focus on early Philadelphian history for the African American Museum in Philadelphia. This institution, established during the bicentennial year just one block from Independence National Historical Park, is the first institution funded and built by a major municipality to preserve, interpret, and exhibit the heritage of African Americans. For years, it has presented achievements and aspirations of African Americans by showcasing national artists, national stories, and broad cultural themes (e.g., the Art of African Women; African American Dentistry). In recent years, African American history, African American history in Philadelphia, and African American church history in Philadelphia have received significant attention nearby in the archaeological excavations at the National Constitution Center (NCC) and the President's House site in Independence National Historical Park. This includes research on the home of the free black coachman, James Dexter, where the founding meetings were held that gave rise to the Episcopal

Church of St. Thomas and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.). Eight other properties once holding free black households were also excavated as part of the NCC project and then the domestic work spaces where George Washington's enslaved Africans toiled (including in an underground passageway that kept their movement out of view) were investigated, with much public attention, at the site of the Executive Mansion in Philadelphia (1790-1800). 'Digging Up The Past: First African Baptist Church Burial Grounds' shines a light back onto the African American Museum in Philadelphia's own history and identity -- its place in Philadelphia history interpretation, its place among Philadelphia heritage institutions, and the place of African American culture and history within US history. The exhibit is mounted in time for the National Baptist Convention, the largest and oldest African American religious convention, that is bringing as many as 40,000 (of an estimated 7.5 million) African American Baptists to Philadelphia in September, 2007.

### **An Instructive Design for Archaeologists**

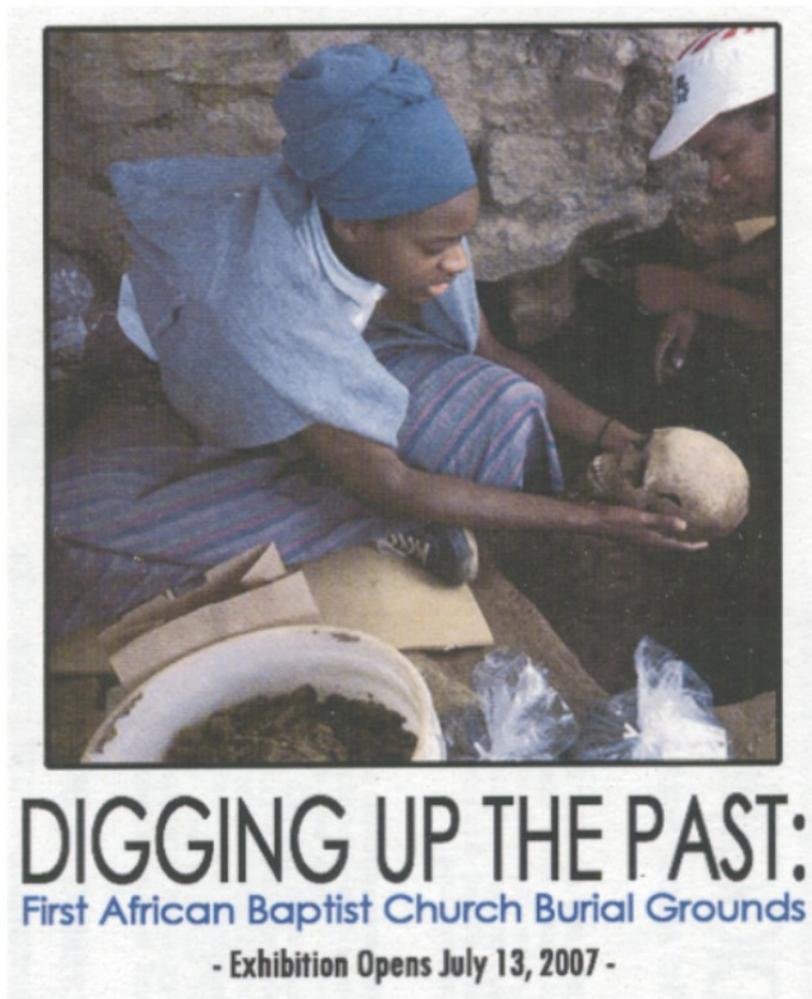
Excitingly, the archaeological evidence from the First African Baptist Cemeteries Projects is integral to this museum exhibit. More importantly, the archaeology evidence is allowed to speak for itself. The installation is not encumbered by diversionary, side-bar, interpretations explaining *how* archaeology is done. Foregrounded instead are the historical and cultural understandings about the social and economic conditions affecting 19th century African American residents of Philadelphia. The health, general quality of life, and cultural beliefs of these early residents comprise the central focus. Archaeology 'as a process' for learning about the past is left for another day.

Archaeologists can learn from this community's priorities in using archaeological evidence. Archaeologists pride themselves on being caretakers working on behalf of the common good. As a result, outreach efforts regularly focus on *how* we archaeologists do '*what we do*' with an educational goal of helping to encourage site preservation. This exhibit, however, gets directly at *why* we archeologists do *what we do*. It is not archaeology for archaeology's needs (e.g., for stewardship), but archaeology in service to another community. This exhibit is a great example of what archaeology *actually does for others*.

Beyond demonstrating community use of archaeological evidence, this exhibit also demonstrates good scholarly mechanics for material culture presentation. Historical records for this early church community are sparse, as is the documentary record for African Americans at this time as a whole. When rediscovered, the burials had no grave markers, leaving the buried individuals anonymous. The exhibit works the limited documentary evidence and the recovered archaeological evidence against one another so as to extend the potentials of each database towards a deeper historical interpretation than either database could achieve on its own. This is what good historical archaeology interpretation should always strive for academically and pragmatically, so that we are not merely verifying with artifacts what we know from documents, or conversely, documenting what we learn archaeologically. Left out of 'traditional' history, this community makes use of all available resources in deciphering their past. In doing so, they demonstrate how archaeological evidence is used in constructing a bigger picture.

One valuable lesson this exhibition has to teach archaeologists involves the conscious choice to use archaeological field photos of human remains. Many archaeological concerns, and archaeologists, choose not to promote the public dissemination of images of human remains, and indeed informal and formal policies exist in some areas of practice to discourage such displays.

This is not the case in this archaeology-derived exhibition. Just one example, the flier advertising the exhibit, has a beautifully framed and quite moving photograph of a female African American excavator sitting on site among buckets and artifact bags. Wearing African-styled clothing (a head wrap *gele* and wrap skirt), this field technician is leaning down, drawing towards her an unearthed human skull.



**(Image courtesy of Najah Palm and the African American Museum of Philadelphia.)**

This community's choice to use archaeological images of human remains to tell and even advertise their history is instructive. Archaeologists need to be more self-reflexive and to

regularly inquire as to whether a decision to not show human remains would serve the preferences of the particular communities who have stakeholder interests. Decisions against such displays represent responsible and necessary practice for meeting the needs of *some* descendant groups, namely many Native Americans. However, this may not be the case for all of the public communities that archaeologists serve in all projects. Perhaps the important difference in this case is that the community itself is making use of the archeological resources, as opposed to outsider archaeologists making an exhibit based on another group's ancestors.

Another strength evident in this exhibit is the collaborative nature of its development. This was especially clear at the opening reception where the individual contributions were called out for acknowledgement, but in each and every case the attention was redirected back to the community crediting a group wide effort. Just as the focus of this exhibit is not on individuals but on the community (albeit due to the fact that so much history is *lost*), in crediting the making of this exhibit, the focus on the expertise and talents of specific individuals was matched by recognition of the contributions from the community at large, including museum partners, such as the Khepera charter school, and various local church and community groups. This is likewise seen in the support for the exhibition which is provided by a number of local concerns and not just the usual museum benefactors: the Carol Miller Funeral Home, Philadelphia Light, Inc., the Lomax Family Foundation, Dave Smith Photography, and Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church, as well as Talisman Interactive, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and Bank of America. This is proof of a community that is *not lost*.

Archaeologists and physical anthropologists are some of the individuals who helped make this exhibit happen alongside local religious leaders and a local artists. The AAMP's archivist, Nahja Palm, who is formally trained as a physical anthropologist, helped organize this

exhibit and has also created an educational module based on the archaeological research. This has been actively deployed at the museum's education partner, the Khepera Charter School of Philadelphia, where it is used to teach anatomy and African American History. Archaeologist Daniel G. Roberts of John Milner Associates consulted in the exhibition design process. Archaeologist and conservator Cheryl LaRoche was also consulted during the exhibition preparation.

### ***The Past in the Present***

The layout of this exhibit reflects a community sense of purpose. It is mounted in a multi-purpose room that serves far reaching functions for the museum and its outreach mandate to the local community. The space serves as a venue for educator meetings, classroom visits, films, lecture series, workshops, book signings, receptions, and music and theater performances. In planning this exhibit, two dimensional interpretive text boards and artifacts circle the room, hanging on the walls -- for example, the modern church photographs and other art work including the stained glass window reproduction and the quilt. Three dimensional displays located within the room are built on castors allowing them to be easily moved back against the wall. These include a reconstructed archaeological deposit, cases with funerary items, wooden and basket casket exhibits, and church furniture and artifacts such as a pew, a pulpit, a chalice, and record books. Functionally, this arrangement frees the center of the room for other (community) needs, but the configuration is rich metaphorically. In not being static (i.e., fixed in place), the malleable display elements let the exhibit feel somehow 'alive.' Voyeuristic viewing of the past is less evident because the past is, literally and figuratively, moved about as part of present life events. For example, at the opening reception, with 'the past' surrounding and

embracing the gathered assembly, descendents were figuratively and literally at the heart, or center, of a living -- and historical -- community. This 'past/present as one' aspect exists no matter what purpose the room is otherwise used for: the ancestors are ever there, all around, in the present.

This metaphorical and likely spiritual understanding presumably will extend to the exhibit's reach outside the museum. The museum's education department has prepared a Curriculum Planning Guide for teachers to use with students. The predominately black Philadelphia School District has a new African and African American History requirement for graduation. This exhibit and its future phases will, no doubt, comprise an important community touchstone as well as educational resource for the city's young people.

### **Still Archaeology Rises**

In 1986, the Eighth Street project received a Historic Preservation Commendation from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (with the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia). In 1988, they were honored with the National Historic Preservation Award from the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the National Park Service (with various agencies and organizations). Twenty-five years later, this work with its public archaeology dimension is being put to renewed and new public history uses. Likely I speak for everyone in archaeology in expressing how good it feels to see a community access archaeological evidence for community history and heritage purposes. Now archaeologists have to take the opportunity to learn all that we can from this community's actions.

During the opening reception for this exhibit, the leaders of local Baptist congregations talked about the place of their church and their congregation's forefathers and foremothers in

early Philadelphia. In a call and response delivery, it was stated that the First African Baptist Church and its community “was as important as, and equal to A.M.E. and the Episcopal Church of St. Thomas” (referring to Philadelphia’s other early black churches and denominations), “that Reverend Henry Simmons [of the early 19th century First African Baptist Church] was as important as, and equal to, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen” (the well-known leaders of these other, aforementioned churches). And it was stated that “the First African Baptist Church and its community are as important as, and equal to, these two other denominations *today*.” These statements deepened and extended my understandings about both this exhibit’s genesis and its legacy. The recent African and African American archaeological research at Independence National Historical Park comes over 20 years after the First African Baptist Cemeteries Projects which one could rightly say started the historical archaeology study of the African American community in Philadelphia. This once lost and forgotten church history, its rediscovery, and its descendant community are not going to be forgotten again.

In conversation at the opening reception I was told that the First African Baptist Church draws from a different subset of the local population than the other two denominations due to “different economics” and “different levels of education.” I have no evidence of whether this assessment is accurate or not, and my limited knowledge indicates otherwise. However, I can attest that there is an operating assumption that this difference exists, at least by some. Importantly, this sentiment, as expressed, was not defensive but rather declarative: the First African Baptists are equals; they will not be forgotten; they continue to rise. Archaeology is now a resource being used by this community as they tell themselves this and as they show others that this is so.

As contextual understanding, this present use of archaeological evidence for heritage, identity, and reaffirmation is both academically interesting and relevant in light of the past 20 years of research on these cemetery assemblages. Researchers have posited that the identified African-influenced burial practices at the two cemeteries reflect an active expression of an African ethnic identity that served as an important social resource for Philadelphia's antebellum African-American community (Parrington and Wideman 1986, McCarthy 1997, 1998, 2004). The First African Baptist Church Cemeteries Projects were among the first opportunities to study black mortuary customs in the American North. The research helped seed historical archaeology's current working concepts for ethnicity, for the development of a performance approach to the expression of social identity, and for the understanding of social identity as a form of social agency.

Now, 'still rising,' this same archaeological evidence of 19th century African American Philadelphia is seeding vital understandings for public archaeology -- specifically the role of archaeology as a material resource in community identity needs in the present. Much will be learned in comparing the Philadelphia cemeteries projects and the public's engagement with the resources over time with the African Burial Ground project in New York City which began shortly thereafter. While some comparisons between the projects have been offered with respect to the relationships between archaeologists and descendent communities and other stakeholders (McCarthy 2001, 1996, Crist 2002), the full potential for comparison and contrast among the results of these investigations has yet to be realized.

## **Beyond Learning**

Archaeologists were some of the few non-Baptist, non-African American, and non-Philadelphia-born persons in attendance at the opening reception for this exhibit. It was evident that archaeology, and the interest in the event by archaeologists, was both welcome and appreciated by those gathered. I do not know if the group understood how much the exhibit's creation would mean to archaeologists. I had such an uncanny sense of professional fulfillment in viewing the exhibit and attending this reception. It made me feel proud of my colleagues for a job more than well done. I felt assured about championing archaeology's use not for archaeology's needs (i.e., stewardship) but for public needs -- whatever those may be. I left firmly knowing that archaeological research serves a meaningful purpose.

## **Acknowledgements**

John McCarthy kindly provided details and references related to the 1990-era excavations. I thank Najah Palm for permission to use the exhibit promotional photograph. Dan Roberts and the African American Museum in Philadelphia provided the John Milner Associates, Inc., bibliography of First African Baptist Church Cemetery research. Najah Palm provided additional background about the exhibit preparation and Dr. Shirley Parham provided helpful details about the museum's engagement at the time of the excavations.

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\* The author, Patrice L. Jeppson, Ph.D., is an Independent Scholar.

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