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Excavations at Little Africa - A Missouri Freedmen's Community

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In the wake of Emancipation, small African-American communities dotted the Little Dixie region of central Missouri, each a manifestation of the freed people's desire for land, economic independence, and security. One such community, commonly referred to as "Little Africa," developed in a rugged area southwest of the then prosperous town of Roanoke in north Howard County. By 1876 at least 300 adjoining acres were under African-American ownership, and in excess of 500 acres by 1897. On one of the properties, a small neighborhood, or settlement, was established where some of the farmers and a number of unlanded individuals built homes. A church, school, and a remote secondary neighborhood soon followed. Although these freedmen made efficient use of the natural resources and attained a minimal degree of agricultural self-sufficiency, they were integrally tied to the tobacco industry that accounted for the area's prosperity and previously employed much of its slave labor. When tobacco production in Little Dixie declined around the turn of the century, the community slowly began to dissolve; by 1920 Little Africa was a ghost town and its small farms absorbed by surrounding landowners who subsequently bulldozed and burned most of the community's built environment. Only wells and scant traces of foundations remain to mark the network of farmsteads that were built and used for decades, and the only obvious remnant of the actual settlement is a small cemetery. Although public documents and local oral history provide some insight into the social, agricultural, and material development of the community, the information is largely fragmentary. Since there is no longer an African-American community in the Roanoke area, the oral record is especially punctuated with uncertainty. In March and April 1997 a series of excavations were conducted in an attempt to more fully document the history of Little Africa. The resulting archaeological record provides a small window into the lives of these freedmen (and women) and has played an integral role in my larger interdisciplinary study of this once vibrant hamlet.

Although preliminary excavations and surface collection have aided in documenting and dating the sites of many of the individual farmsteads, most of the archaeological activity has focused on the central neighborhood, and a secondary area of settlement located one half mile west, where most of the residents lived. The settlement was founded between 1871 and 1874 and originally included an AME church, a school, and assorted log and frame structures. It was completely destroyed and the land drastically reshaped in the 1950s; as mentioned, only the cemetery remains.

Intense surface collection at this site has yielded a significant number of artifacts, primarily ceramics, dating to the period of the original settlement. An examination of the ceramics suggests that the residents of Little Africa used a variety of wares; ironstone, blue-glazed, and blue and white patterned porcelain as well as pottery of local manufacture and a large variety of stoneware crockery. Other artifacts found at this site include nails, colored glass (green, clear, dark blue and white) and sizable fragments of what were the fieldstone foundations of the various dwellings. The bulk of the glass recovered is common window glass, but the collection includes fragments of jars and bottles as well. The surface evidence not only provides insight

into the material possessions of the residents, but has allowed me to speculate on the original placement of their dwellings and various outbuildings.

Today, two fieldstone-lined wells, and a subterranean fieldstone foundation of an icehouse along a wooded hilltop, are all that remain of the Murrell farmstead, which served as a secondary neighborhood. Here, surface evidence includes bricks, nails, and glass fragments. Formal excavations at various locations on the site provide more substantial material insight. Work at the icehouse uncovered excellent examples of local pottery (in various forms), two kinds of stoneware, assorted glassware, and metal hardware (including one of the massive strap hinges of the original door). The icehouse, rare for Missouri, is situated adjacent to a small pond and is thought to have provided cold storage for the entire community until the time that the site was abandoned, around 1920. Similar artifacts, though not as plentiful, have also been excavated from the two wells, one of which was used as a refuse pit after the turn of the century.

Collectively, the artifacts suggest that both sites were inhabited from as early as the 1870s, when the community was initially established, through the early years of the 20th century. Although the information provided by these artifacts is incomplete, and represent only a small portion of the activities that actually occurred on the site, the artifacts have played a key role in identifying the location and general architectural arrangement of the settlement. Perhaps more importantly they contribute to our general understanding of African-American life in these secluded rural communities and everyday life in post-Civil War Missouri. Further excavation at the Little Africa site is planned for early next spring.

A portion of this paper was presented at the Thirty-ninth Missouri Conference on History in April, 1997.