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Deborah L. Rotman
Ball State University

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Investigating Indiana's 19th-Century Agricultural Heritage: African-American and Quaker Farmers in Randolph County

Deborah L. Rotman, Archaeological Resources Management Service, Ball State University

Editor's Note: This paper discusses the results of research first briefly reported in A-AA No. 20.

Introduction

African-Americans have played an important role in east central Indiana's long agricultural heritage. As a free state, Indiana was a frequent destination for African-Americans and Quakers migrating from the south, particularly from North Carolina and Virginia (Lyda 1953:18). Many of these individuals came to Randolph County and formed three distinct agricultural communities -- Greenville, Cabin Creek, and Snow Hill (Tucker 1882:133-134).

These settlements were recently the focus of archaeological and historical investigations. The project included extensive documentary research and interviews with descendants of early pioneers. A reconnaissance level survey of nearly 1,000 acres was also conducted 72 percent of which was owned by African-Americans and 28 percent by Quakers and other white farmers. Fourteen historic sites associated with African Americans were identified, each with a mean ceramic date (MCD) before 1850. The goals for this research included: understanding early agricultural practices in the region, examining economic stratification within and between cultural groups, and determining if an archaeological correlate for ethnicity existed. This paper briefly outlines the project results.

Historical Background

Early African-American and Quaker pioneers had familial, cultural, and economic ties to one another, both in their home states and after resettling in Indiana (Cord 1993:107-108). Members of both groups assisted fugitive slaves on their way north as well as provided support to those who chose to remain in Randolph County. The Underground Railroad brought new members into the communities and offered opportunities for individuals and families to relocate to northern Indiana, Michigan, and Canada (Funk 1964:9). The number of African-American residents in Randolph County increased from five in 1820 to 825 in 1850 (Thornbrough 1993:45). Greenville appeared to have been the largest and most dynamic of these settlements. At its peak, it had 800-900 members (Tucker 1882:133). This community was also the home to the Union Literary Institute (ULI), founded in 1845 by a board comprised of both African-Americans and white Quakers. This manual boarding school became the first integrated, coeducational institution in the area (Dye 1981).
Despite being a free state, four-fifths of Indiana's population was in sympathy with slavery prior to mid-century (Cockrum 1969:12). By 1831, African Americans were required by law to give bond as guarantee of good behavior and against their becoming public charges (Thornbrough 1993:31). As the Civil War drew nearer, African Americans were increasingly unwelcome in Indiana. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 mandated the capture and return of fugitives who had fled to free states (Thornbrough 1993:32). In 1854, the Indiana Constitutional Convention adopted a provision which prohibited African Americans from becoming residents of the state (Litweck 1961:70).

In addition to these social and political changes, agricultural production in Indiana and elsewhere was undergoing a transformation. Prior to circa 1855, and depending on location, many farm households were virtually self-sufficient family units. However, after mid-century, the size of land holdings increased and farmers began to focus on one or two primary crops rather than tending to a broad spectrum of livestock and agricultural pursuits (McMurry 1988:54). Poor farmers were often unable to meet the increased capital requirements of this new system and were, therefore, at a greater competitive disadvantage. Many abandoned farming and sought employment in urbanized areas (Tucker 1882:133).

Randolph County communities grew and expanded from the first wave of migration after statehood (1816) until the Civil War, but by the turn of the 20th century, the African-American and Quaker settlements in Randolph County had virtually disappeared (Thornbrough 1993:177). The transformation of the agricultural system in east central Indiana coincided with deteriorating race relations as the Civil War approached. The migration of black farmers out of the settlements in Randolph County may have been motivated by decreased economic opportunities in farming or marginalized social position as a result of the changing political climate . . . or perhaps both (Leavell 1997; Robbins 1997).

**Settlement and Agriculture**

Although merchants, shoemakers, and blacksmiths were operating within these communities, agriculture was the primary focus. Few specific references to material possessions and farming practices in Randolph County were found. However, a study of a rural African-American community in St. Joseph County, whose inhabitants also originated from North Carolina and Virginia, indicated that "life was apparently typical for the pioneer period in Indiana"(Karst 1978:261). Threshing, butchering, and other farm tasks were shared with neighbors, many of whom were white. Farming included the cultivation of general crops and the raising of livestock. There is no evidence to suggest that life in the Randolph County settlements deviated from this pattern.

All but three of the sites investigated contained agricultural-related artifacts (i.e., tools, plow parts, etc.), although the relative percentage of these items was low. The absence of large numbers of agricultural artifacts substantiated that farm tools were highly valued, curated, and re-used (Smith and Driver 1914:786). According to the 1850 census, there were three blacksmiths residing in the Cabin Creek settlement. These individuals would have been instrumental in refurbishing and repairing important metal components of agricultural implements. As a result, these items would have entered the archaeological record in limited
quantities. Additionally, the wooden pieces of hoes, axes, harrows, and plows would not have been preserved archaeologically.

Economic Stratification

These early agricultural communities were stratified economically. However, stratification appears to cross ethnic, social, and religious boundaries. A wide range of farm values and sizes were noted in the 1850 agricultural census (Reel 3895) for African Americans and for Quakers and other white settlers (Table 1). The archaeological evidence also illustrated economic variation. Some assemblages contained only a few undecorated earthenwares and utilitarian stonewares, while others were dominated by transfer-printed and other decorated whitewares. Consequently, all points on the economic spectrum appeared to have been occupied by individuals from multiple social categories.

| Table 1: Summary of Sample Data from the 1850 Agricultural Census, Randolph County, Indiana. |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|                                              | African-American Quaker Farmers   | White Farmers                     |
| Acres of Land                                | Mean 82.9                         | 101.2                             |
| Mean                                         | 80                                | 102                               |
| Median                                       | 80                                | 102                               |
| Range                                        | 0-320                             | 0-250                             |
| Value of Farms ($)                           | Mean 933                          | 1,179                             |
| Mean                                         | 700                               | 1,000                             |
| Median                                       | 700                               | 1,000                             |
| Range                                        | 0-4,000                           | 0-3,000                           |

Overall, however, the Quakers and other white farmers fared better than their African-American neighbors, particularly during the shift to commercial agriculture after mid-century. White farmers generally occupied their farms longer and retained possession of them later into the 19th century. Only half (N=7) of the properties owned by African Americans were occupied longer than 20 years, compared to 80 percent (N=4) of farms owned by whites. Additionally, in the decade following the transformation of the agricultural system (ca. 1855-1865), only 33 percent (N=1) of white farmers had sold their property, while 55 percent (N=5) of land held by African Americans was sold during the same time period.

Archaeological Correlates of Ethnicity

The sites surveyed were associated with landowners from a range of ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds, yet the artifacts recovered were quite similar. Another study, which compared African American and Euroamerican farmsteads from the early 20th century, also did not indicate any significant differences in material culture attributed to ethnicity (Stine 1990:48).
Within Indiana, rural African-American settlements in St. Joseph County during the 19th century were much like white rural communities of the same time period (Karst 1978:267).

The only discernible differences in the archaeological assemblages appeared to be along economic, not racial lines. Material culture may not have played a primary role in asserting social boundaries on the frontier in Indiana during the first half of the 19th century. As was suggested by Stine (1990:49) character attributes, such as being "crooked," slovenly or lazy, may have been more important than class, occupation or race. Consequently, no clear archaeological correlate of ethnicity was discerned for sites within the project area.

Summary

The documentary research, oral interviews, and reconnaissance level survey conducted during this project are only the first step to understanding dynamic African-American and Quaker communities in Randolph County. However, the data collected provides an important foundation upon which to base future historical and archaeological research of pioneer settlement, farming practices, and social interaction within African-American communities in Indiana and the Midwest.

Note: If interested in ordering a copy of the research report for this project, please contact the author at dlrotman@aol.com

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