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Reclaiming a Silenced Past: Community Outreach and Oral History at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage

Whitney Battle, University of Texas at Austin

The Hermitage plantation was once the home of President Andrew Jackson and more than 160 enslaved Africans. The Hermitage has functioned as a museum since 1889, when the Ladies Hermitage Association acquired the property in order to save and restore the decaying mansion and surrounding property. Their intent was also to restore the story of Andrew Jackson's life and legend. When the property was purchased, a man by the name of Alfred Jackson lived just outside of the mansion in a small log structure. Once enslaved, Jackson would be the source of personal stories, Hermitage events, and memories of life during the nineteenth century when he was much younger.

The oral history told by Alfred Jackson became a major source of information for the museum in its earliest years. Images of how the plantation would have looked and stories of events that took place both inside and outside the Jackson mansion were brought to life through the tales of its first caretaker. As time went by, the importance of oral history at The Hermitage became a thing of the distant past. The legend of Alfred was preserved, but the importance of his role in establishing The Hermitage would be left behind as The Hermitage established itself as a leading museum in the state of Tennessee. In recent times, The Hermitage has had to develop an interpretive framework that would ensure its success as a historic site.

In response to the growing need to expand the scope of the Hermitage, a permanent archaeological program was established in 1989 under the direction of Dr. Larry McKee. There were few surviving documents that addressed the enslaved Africans that lived, worked, and died on the plantation. The "erased" stories of the enslaved community became the primary focus of archaeological excavations conducted at the museum site. Although a great deal of energy was now focused on including the contributions of the enslaved African population in the museum's narrative presentation, something was still missing. The oral history of Alfred Jackson that was once the catalyst for the lore of The Hermitage seemed no longer to be scholarly enough or relevant for the current interpretive staff.

I first arrived at the Hermitage for a five-week internship during the summer of 1996. There was a great deal of public interaction and one-on-one dialogue with the visitors. I was very encouraged by this approach, and as a result decided to return as a field supervisor for three consecutive summers. Each season I returned I could see visible changes across the landscape "beyond the mansion" with the inclusion of enslaved African men and women in the interpretation of the outside.

During the summer of 1999, with the hard work of the public relations department, a great deal of local media attention began to center around the summer archaeology program at the Hermitage. With the new media coverage, people from all over Nashville and surrounding areas were beginning to visit and see archaeology first hand. Yet, I could not help but notice that although the number of visitors was growing, the faces hadn't really changed. African-American

visitors remained few and far between. The goal of public archaeology is to engage with multiple publics, and being the self-reflective critical archaeologist that I am, I could no longer turn a blind eye to the reasons behind this absence. The great deal of energy that went towards illuminating African-American history at The Hermitage did not deal with the reality of contemporary issues regarding how the past is presented and how the museum continues to neglect the very communities it supposedly sets out to serve.

I feel strongly about the involvement of the local African-American community in the dialogue of changing various Hermitage exhibits. How, as archaeologists, can we practice African-American archaeology while failing to reach out the African-American community? I seriously contemplated how I could begin to find the African-American community in and around the Hermitage area, but had no idea where to start, or if this local community existed. Archaeology took over as my primary concern, until a two-week volunteer from Boston, decided she wanted to go to church.

Joan Harris came to excavate with us through Earthwatch, and her search to find a local African Methodist Episcopalian church led to the beginning of an incredible community partnership that has only begun to yield positive results. Harris' inquiry would put me in touch with an active and vibrant African-American community that was literally across the street from The Hermitage. I had been at this job for three summers and never knew they were so close. Each Sunday after that I traveled to yet another church to find large congregations with individuals who had stories that stretched over 70 years. Some were the very descendants of those enslaved at The Hermitage.

I was able to get into contact with an incredible woman by the name of Mrs. Washington. I met Mrs. Washington while looking at a cemetery just outside of the old Stateland Baptist Church, next door to her house. Mrs. Washington and I began to talk about once a week. Through these interactions, I learned a great deal about the founding families of The Hermitage, the beginnings of the Black church, how other churches claimed Stateland as a mother church, and how many people in community knew about the lives of folks from "way back when". When I talked to people in the community, I did not concentrate on what people knew about slavery or Andrew Jackson. I wanted to learn more about local histories, and to once again evaluate these histories by adding another dimension to the story of The Hermitage plantation.

I find it very important to use the stories of how people remember the past and how all types of memories about The Hermitage can contribute to the museum. Through these interactions with community members and leaders I am creating a bridge to connect the current needs of the community with the interpretation of African-American history at The Hermitage.

The process of recording oral histories has just begun, but importantly, the connections have been made. When I shared what the archaeological excavations were revealing I was met with great curiosity, excitement, and encouragement. In the summer of 2000, I will return to The Hermitage and continue my work with both the community and the museum. Through the suggestions of Dr. Amy Young and her work with African-American communities in Mississippi, I will try to involve the younger people of the community in taking down oral histories. Dr. Young used this tactic to create an active community outreach program, while

leaving a great deal of the information in the community itself and teaching the younger generations about the importance of the plantation in terms of African-American history and culture.

The legacy of Alfred and other enslaved Africans from the plantation can be seen today in and around Nashville. These descendants remain in the area and for so long have felt no connection with the plantation or its museum. However, through site tours, oral interviews, and presentations to the elders, the story of the extraordinary lives of the enslaved community can once again take its proper place in American history. There is good reason for the African-American community to be involved in the interpretive message of The Hermitage, and partnership-building seems to be an appropriate way to reclaim a silenced past.