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The Old Washington Collections: The Potential for an Engendered Archaeology of the African Diaspora in Southwestern Arkansas

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For the last 20 years, historical archaeology investigations have been conducted at Old Washington Historic State Park, in extreme southwestern Arkansas. Old Washington is perhaps the best surviving example of a 19th-century county seat in the Old Southwest (Cande and Brandon 1999:1; Stewart-Abernathy 1993:2). The town of Washington, Arkansas (1825-1939; 3HE236), the former county seat of Hempstead County and a booming antebellum cotton town on the Southwest Trail, is perhaps best known historically as the Confederate capital of Arkansas during the Civil War. Although archeological investigations into this aspect of Old Washington's past have been made (e.g., Harcourt 1994), it is the potential of the archeological assemblage for illuminating the lives of the enslaved individuals that provided much of the labor on Old Washington's "urban farmsteads" that seems most promising at this juncture (Cande and Brandon 1999:22-24; Stewart-Abernathy 1986, 1995).

After several devastating fires and its omission from major railway routes, Washington was condemned to the role of economic backwater and eventually the nearby town of Hope replaced it as the seat of government in Hempstead County. The town's stagnant economy, however, meant that very little of the town's architecture changed during the course of the 20th century. Beginning in 1959, the Pioneer Washington Preservation Foundation served as steward of the town. The Foundation was joined by the state of Arkansas as Old Washington Historic State Park was established in 1973 (Guthrie and Witsell 1985:18; Stewart-Abernathy 1997:2). The park is now one of the highlights of the state's heritage tourism program.

The 20 years of historical archaeology that has been undertaken by the Arkansas Archeological Survey (AAS) was largely under the supervision of Leslie "Skip" Stewart-Abernathy (e.g., 1981, 1984, 1985, 1986; Stewart-Abernathy and Ruff 1989) and, more recently, by Randall Guendling (Guendling 1993; Guendling et. al. 1999). However, as most of this work has been funded under contract by Arkansas State Parks on a project-by-project basis and/or through the AAS annual training program excavations, little money has been available for the extended analysis needed for synthetic interpretation of the data. In fact, many of the artifacts and data collected have yet to be analyzed, synthesized, and written-up. More importantly, despite Stewart-Abernathy's best efforts to disseminate the information gleaned from the Old Washington excavations to a professional audience via conference papers (e.g., Stewart-Abernathy 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997), the site remains seldom-cited in historical archaeology's literature due to the lack of synthetic publications.

In July of 1997, the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council (ANCRC) awarded two grants to the AAS for the purpose of cataloging the more than 80,000 artifacts recovered from excavations at antebellum houseplaces, outbuildings and public buildings in Old Washington Historic State Park. In addition to a comprehensive "finding aid" for the reorganized collections,

the resulting report (Cande and Brandon 1999) also provides an historical overview for excavations and a review of the research strategies employed by the archeologists working within the park. This work, however, included only limited examples of the usefulness of the excavated data (e.g., Brandon 1999), while this data set has the potential to be mined for many veins of fruitful research-including landscape studies, commercial and industrial aspects, the economic and social connections between plantations and "urban" service centers, material culture studies and, of course, the studies of gender and both the Jewish and African diasporas (Cande and Brandon 1999:23-29).

From the perspective of diasporic studies, the surface of the potential of Old Washington's collections has only barely been scratched (but see Stewart-Abernathy 1995, 1997; Stewart-Abernathy and Ruff 1989); a potential which interestingly springs largely from an unexpected source-architectural history. Similar to the situations at many other "living history" museums or parks throughout North America, the major role of archaeologists at Old Washington has been to provide information for architectural reconstruction. This element of archaeological work is made all the more important since the original outbuildings, which can tell us a great deal about the fabric of the lives of those residing in the antebellum town, were largely removed by the mid-20th century (Guthrie and Witsell 1985:54-58). Several of these outbuildings have been archaeologically relocated, including the detached kitchens, privies, and wells associated with the Sanders House, the home of Simon T. Sanders, a city official from 1845-1882 (see Guendling 1993 for details) and the Block House, occupied between the 1830s and 1857 by the Block family, successful local merchants (see Guendling et al. 1999; Stewart-Abernathy 1985).

It is the contexts of these outbuildings, especially the detached kitchens, that offers us a glimpse of both race and gender on the antebellum urban farmsteads of the Old Southwest. For instance, Abraham Block, patriarch of the aforementioned Block family and himself a part of the Jewish diaspora and personally involved in the slave trade through his mercantile activities, (see Stewart-Abernathy 1995; Stewart-Abernathy and Ruff 1989), owned at least 25 human beings who worked on land holdings spread throughout the county (Montgomery 1981:19-21, 25, 27). The census data, however, tell us that the Blocks only kept between two and three slaves at their home in the town of Old Washington. All were women who appear to have lived in the detached kitchen (Stewart-Abernathy 1995:5). More tantalizingly, to date several artifacts have been recovered from Old Washington's detached kitchens which hint at the possibilities of dramatic interpretations. Artifacts such as a pierced 1856 seated liberty dime (from the Block detached kitchen) and a porcelain doll head which appears to have been painted black (from the Sanders kitchen) point to the potential of interpreting enslaved African-American life in urban Old Washington, but without placing these artifacts within the proper, broader contexts such interpretation would be over-simplistic and possibly misleading (cf., Deetz 1995; Fesler and Franklin 1999:5).

Thus, the purpose of this article is to alert interested researchers to the existence of these collections, their condition, and their rich potential, especially for African-American Archaeology. It is hoped that in the future more researchers may use these collections and help bring about a synthesis that has "fallen through the cracks" of our discipline.

Thanks go out to ANCRC and the AAS for making it possible for the authors to work with the Old Washington Skip Stewart-Abernathy for the years he has devoted to the site. Anyone interested in research involving the Old Washington collections should contact either Lela Donat, AAS registrar (ldonat@comp.uark.edu) or Kathleen Cande, Senior Research Assistant, AAS Sponsored Research Program (kcande@comp.uark.edu).

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