Articles Received

The Newsletter has received several newspaper and magazine articles from readers who would like to pass along news that may be of interest to readers in other areas of the country. These are too long to be published in their entirety, so I have tried to summarize them and provide pertinent excerpts. Interested readers can contact the original newspaper or magazine, who would undoubtedly be delighted to provide the entire article. If you have an article that you feel would benefit other readers, send it along, making sure to include the name and date of the publication.

Task Force To Advise National Trust on Archaeology Issues


Submitted by Barbara Rowan

Katherine Ann Slick has been named to head a newly created task force to make recommendations on archaeological issues to the National Trust, and on the role the Trust should play with respect to archeology. As the Trust has become more involved in archeological issues at its various properties, archaeology related litigation, advocacy, and actual field support have become more important, particularly out west. The task force will make its report to the board of trustees by May, 1994. For further information, write to Ms. Slick in care of the National Trust Archaeology Task Force, 1785 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Re-examining a Past Built on Slavery

(Atlanta Journal/Atlanta Constitution, Mar 13, 1994)

Noting that Charleston likes to call itself "America's most historic city", the article goes on to note that Charleston has overlooked "some of the last tangible links to the country's most anguished period -- the relics of slavery." The search for antiquities and accuracy is digging up controversy as well as apathy in South Carolina. . . . The debate transcends racial lines. Some blacks don't want to talk about the past, and some whites don't want to hear about it. . . . Many South Carolinians and the swarms of visitors Charleston attracts have never noticed what's lacking, because the history has been lost for so long. . . . `Most tourists in Charleston don't hear anything about black history.' said Liz Alston, the head of a state council established last fall to identify black historical sites. . . . `A lot of slave history is already lost. What was saved relates to the life of the planter,' said Elaine Nichols, curator of black culture at the South Carolina State Museum.
Last fall, for $2 million, the Historic Charleston Foundation acquired the McLeod Plantation, 42 acres within the city limits that were threatened by development. The plantation includes an 1852 house and its seven cabins. It is the last complete sea-island-cotton plantation in the country, . . . and could give a truer picture of the antebellum south. McLeod reflects the smaller, common plantation, where the owner worked alongside the slaves, rather than the few great estates.

Even with the McLeod acquisition, black Charlestonians said the restored, tourist-attraction plantations largely neglect them. One location promises ‘the total plantation experience’ in its ads. ‘They might tell you that blacks used to shine the brass doorknobs,’ said Al Miller, who has conducted black-oriented tours of Charleston for seven years. ‘Blacks built almost all the buildings in Charleston, but you don't hear that.’

Leland Ferguson of the University of South Carolina in Columbia, an authority on early black American culture, has excavated plantation sites in several states. He has tied slave pottery, known as Colono Ware, and religious practices to specific spots in West Africa.

**Blacks Protest Excavation Team**

*The Washington Post, Jan. 18, 1994*

Submitted by Esther White

The University of Virginia's plans to allow white archaeologists to excavate property owned by a free black family in the 1830s are being criticized by leading black specialists and local residents for not involving enough blacks.

Critics say excavation of land owned by the Fosters, whose graves were unearthed by a bulldozer last summer as the university prepared a parking lot site, should be led by a qualified black anthropologist.

Drake Patten, a doctoral candidate and archaeologist who is white, hopes to involve students in a field study of the Foster property this summer. She said she anticipated, but is saddened by, the negative reaction.

Some university officials view the field study and Patten's proposed class which would be open to students and interested local residents, as a way to patch up frayed relations between the school and Charlottesvile blacks who have been leery of university expansion into one of their neighborhoods.
The field study class would focus on basic archaeology, identification and research of the Foster family and property, which was purchased in 1833 by family matriarch Catherine Foster. Researchers have agreed not to disturb the 12 graves uncovered on the one-acre site during clearing of university-owned land across the street from the bustling heart of the campus.

Although acknowledging that there are few blacks in the field of archaeology, Michael L. Blakey, director of the African burial ground project at Howard University, said he has misgivings about the proposed field study and the so-far all-white team that would conduct it.

"The study", he said, "needs an African-American perspective."

"It sounds like a superficial offering," said Blakey, who is doing research on remains from a burial ground discovered in New York in 1991. "They need a broader historic context to understand the woman and her family."

Barbara Walker, president of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Association in Washington, agreed that the project needs to have more black participation.

"It would be good if an African American did it because he or she could bring to the project a little better knowledge. A lot of it comes from our traditions that are not written down," Walker said.

Jeffery Hantman, head of the university's anthropology department, said Patten is "uniquely qualified" to head the dig, although he said he has sought comment from several black faculty members in other aspects of the project. Blacks were first admitted to the school as students in 1970.

Patten holds two master's degrees, has worked as an artifact researcher at Monticello and specializes in African-American history.

Hantman said historians so far have been unsuccessful in tracking down descendants of Catherine Foster, a mulatto woman who apparently worked at the university as a seamstress or laundress. Researchers believe the Foster property lies in what may have been a neighborhood of skilled free black workers, but they say little is known about the pre-Civil War community.

Local residents, however, have embraced the Fosters as heroes and symbols of defiance toward the university.
"The community will be upset over the appearance of an all-white dig," said Charlottesville genealogist David Smith, who is black and serves on the university's task force for the site. "Appearances do count, and the best appearances are those grounded in truth."

Smith, who has worked closely with Patten, urged greater minority involvement in the project, saying, "It is inconceivable to me that a project like this, which has so much interest, would fail to have full black participation."

Including black students and faculty members in the project is a "significant concern," said Hantman, who plans to recruit students from the university's Black Student Alliance and advertise the class at other colleges to attract wider participation.

Black Student Alliance leader Damion Samuels, an anthropology minor who is considering enrolling in the summer field class, said the study is a step toward bridging rifts between the university and local residents.

"The university has a notorious history when dealing with black people," Samuels said. "Historically, there's been a great deal of tension between the university and the Charlottesville community, particularly when it comes to ownership of property. I think people want to see some old wrongs righted."

The university's Foster task force, which sought community comment on the site in a series of hearings, including one at a Baptist church downtown, has tried to assuage residents' concerns about the future of the family's land.

"For a long time, the university was regarded by many people, especially in the black community in Charlottesville, as kind of having a plantation mentality and an exclusive atmosphere," said university spokeswoman Louise Dudley, who also sits on the panel. "There is a good chance for to work together."

Once the site is excavated and research is complete, the task force will consider asking the university to erect a monument to the Foster family on the site. The remains of family members could be moved to a local cemetery, task force members said.