Letters

Thomas R. Wheaton
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From The Editor:

I would like to apologize for any misunderstandings about who had "1994" and who had "unpaid" on their last Newsletter. Those of you who had paid for 1993 and 1994 had "1994." Those of you who had paid for 1993, even if you paid in December (and received all 1993 back issues), had "unpaid." The last issue cost well over $100 just for postage. The few who had paid their $5.00 ended up paying for the many who had not. At that rate I would not have been able to mail out this issue.

I apparently did not explain this very well in the last issue. With my unsophisticated accounting abilities, I cannot keep track of part years, and have opted to keep everyone on a calendar year. New subscribers will get back issues of the current year to bring them up to speed.

Tom Wheaton

To the Editor:

Although I listened to a similar discussion at the SHA meetings in Richmond several years ago, I was very disappointed to read of the protests concerning the University of Virginia project. Talk about being ethnocentric! Does this mean that only Euro-Americans can excavate Euro-American sites and only Native Americans can excavate Native American sites? What about women's, or men's, or Polish-American, or Italian-American, or Hispanic, or Irish-American, or Jewish sites? Where are the politically correct experts for those sites?

We all have some ethnic or religious roots in this country. That's why it is considered to be a melting pot. Further, the large majority of us are not purely one group or another. Even African Americans frequently have Euro-American or Native American ancestors. Where do you draw the line?

Let's get beyond the fact that there is a shortage of minority archaeologists, an unfortunate but true situation. It seems to me that several factors are important here:

1. We are supposed to be trained anthropologists, observers of culture. I always understood that to mean that we were supposed to be objective outside observers who recorded what we saw, rather than becoming a part of the culture under study. This is supposed to give us a perspective different from those who are part of the culture and perhaps allow us to understand the interrelationships within the culture by standing apart from those relationships.

2. African Americans are no more a part of the past African-American culture than I am of the past Euro-American culture. What does a 25-year old urban northern African American really know about the 19th century rural African-American south other than what he or she has been told or read? All I know about my families' rural 18th-century roots is what I've been told and read; it is certainly not part of my life experience. Yes, it may be part of their tradition, but tradition and culture are not the same.
3. As I somewhat facetiously pointed out in the first paragraph, we are all (including African Americans) studying the remains of cultures to which we probably have limited ethnic, gender, or religious ties. If we don't do it, who will? And does this mean African-American archaeologists should be prevented from studying the Euro-American component of African-American sites?

4. I would also note that in terms of historic sites in this country, there is probably no such thing as an ethnically pure site. Certainly the African-American component of a plantation, while it may have functioned as a separate world and reflect Africanisms, was also influenced by and in turn influenced the world of the owner. An urban free African-American site in the north was also part of the community or region in which it was located, and as such was influenced by and in turn influenced that region -- which was probably predominantly some other ethnic group. African-American sites here in Florida were almost certainly influenced by the Seminoles or the Spaniards or the British or the Americans. None of us operate in a vacuum.

5. Yes, yes, yes!! It is extremely important to get input from the cultural groups which produced a site -- if such input is available and moreover, reliable. All of us know the pitfalls in oral traditions, but that does not lessen the potential contribution of such traditions to understanding a site. And yes, again, these cultural groups should have a voice in the ultimate curation of materials and management of the site. But perhaps it should be in terms of disposition by a group which can demonstrate a legitimate relationship to the site beyond saying it's part of my heritage. In reality sites are part of everyone's heritage.

Today when so many sites are threatened by the increase in development, it seems more important than ever to pull together to salvage the data and tell the story than it is to squabble over who should be in charge. I realize part of the problem stems from the early errors in the New York burial ground mess, but can't we get beyond that to the real goal -- understanding all of the cultures of the past? We all have something to contribute and we all have a stake in the results. Do we really need to be establishing separate special interest groups? Shouldn't we try to work together to address our common interests?

Lucy B. Wayne, Ph.D., SouthArc, Inc.

Recently I joined the HistArch listserv on the Internet and invited input for the Newsletter. I noted in my introductory message that the last Newsletter covered several topics, including whether non-African Americans should excavate African-American sites. The response was immediate (I had four or five responses within two hours). For those of you not familiar with the Internet or listservs, I am including a few of the shorter responses. These can be a little disjointed since after the first response or two people start responding to each other, and the discussion takes on a life of its own. The responses below may be a little hard to follow as a result. To subscribe to HistArch send a message with "SUBSCRIBE to HistArch" in it to "listserv@asuvm.inre.asu.edu". -- Editor.

As a short reply to the question of whether or not non-African Americans can or presumably should conduct archaeology on Afro-American sites, a fundamental question that underlies your
question is should the pursuit of knowledge be dependent on the researcher's ethnicity and/or abilities?

Marc Kodack, Corps of Engineers

Maybe the colour of one's skin does not make someone more insightful as far as the interpretation of a site is concerned. However, someone who has been brought up in the United States with darker skin has felt the prejudice inflicted upon him/her which has developed over the past centuries. Someone who hears stories from grandparents about the horrors inflicted on their ancestors will have a different viewpoint than those of us who haven't. This is not just a matter of skin colour, it is a matter of conditioning and social standards which are ingrained into the American psyche whether anyone wants to admit to it or not. Granted, an education is important, but the lack of one does not mean someone can't have an opinion and an important input. Keep your options open.

Sandra Sauer, Simon Fraser University

. . . To shut someone out of a site simply because they are not of the persuasion of those being excavated, is in itself shutting out a perspective that may shed light on the subject. But I would offer this: It would be improper to excavate such a sight without the exhausting input from those who could offer a closer view of the sight being excavated.

An example:
While at a field school in Annapolis, we excavated the home of a freed slave (it is now known as the Maynard-Burgess house). The excavators included only one African-American. In my opinion, this dig suffered because of that; at times I felt I was operating in a vacuum, unable to confidently offer an opinion. However, that experience opened up my world enough that I began to read much more widely in that field.

I guess what I am saying is that to shut out any view, is to risk the possibility of shutting out an important view . . .

John Buckler, University of Maryland