ARTICLE

AFRICAN AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY IN ANNAPOLIS

Thomas W. Cuddy

Thomas W. Cuddy is a senior archaeologist at URS Corporation in Gaithersburg, Maryland, and formerly Curator of Archaeology for the Historic Annapolis Foundation.

Maryland's capital city of Annapolis knows its history. Or does it? It knows the parts it wants to believe, the parts everyone already knows. Annapolis was settled in the mid-seventeenth century; it has a Baroque street plan laid out in 1695; it was home to four signers of the Declaration of Independence; George Washington resigned his military commission in Annapolis in 1783; and the city was the acting capital of the United States from 1783–1784. Some would ask, what's left to know? In fact, there is a whole segment left out, that of African Americans in Annapolis. This article is about the historical archaeology of African Americans in Annapolis, but it is also about ethnic divisions that have persisted for hundreds of years and profoundly affect the field of archaeology. It is more about public relations than archaeology and is something of a cautionary tale about the present meeting the past in more ways than one.

The development of African American culture in the United States is arguably the most exciting cutting-edge of archaeological research today. It is still a largely untapped subfield of research, and one for which archaeology and anthropology are exceptionally suited. Within the discipline, historical archaeology has the advantage of merging documentary and archaeological data into research. Sometimes one form of data is emphasized more, and on that continuum not all archaeology is created equal.

Historical documents from the era of colonial settlement predominantly record the transactions of the affluent and educated. Those social leaders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were invariably white, and while their struggles with the mother country are interesting, they are European ideological debates. Much of the history describes white, European American history, and it tends to be individualistic, focusing on a male figure and his historical achievements.

African American archaeology is different. It is more anthropological, looking at broad social patterning with an eye toward culture change. Historical documents can rarely offer any more than the first name of an African American in Annapolis in the colonial era—a name often assigned by a white Christian. The archaeology of African descendants in America offers insight into domestic subsistence practices, architectural styles, material culture, and more. The cultural origins of African Americans encompass greater issues of injustice to human rights than the white settler's debates about taxation without representation. African American archaeology is inherently linked to theories of power, subjugation, and struggle. African American archaeology ultimately centers on processes of radical culture contact, played out variously through resistance, accommodation, and assimilation to changing cultural patterns. Furthermore, understanding continuity and change in the cultural practices of the earliest African American communities must be evaluated almost exclusively through archaeological methods.

Discovering Annapolis Ethnicity

"What is left from Africa?" That is the question that was asked by a visitor to one of our Archaeology in Annapolis excavations. That is what African Americans want to know from archaeology, and it is a straightforward and obvious question from an African American perspective. Unfortunately, the answer

Figure 1: Mark Leone talks with field school students in front of the Charles Carroll House in Annapolis.

is anything but obvious for anthropologists. The Archaeology in Annapolis project has recovered evidence that applies to this question, addressing such issues as how free blacks in Annapolis negotiated their daily lives prior to emancipation in the nineteenth century (Mullins 1999), how enslaved and free blacks engaged in spirit management (Ruppel et al. 2003), and what economic patterns of African American production and consumption existed in the Jim Crow era of "separate-but-equal" (Mullins and Warner 1993). In pursuing the simple question, "What is left from Africa," archaeology has proven an effective research tool, but it also reflects a peculiar convergence of issues inherent in the academic discipline of public archaeology meeting the reality of several "publics" in both the practice and interpretation of African American archaeology. The biggest, I believe, is the residual effects of disparate social power in the modern community.

People often refer to *THE* history of the U.S., but is there a single history? Some things we all share, and some things we each do differently. This is the case throughout history. In 1756, the population of Maryland was 30 percent black, and by 1790 that had risen another five percent. Many African Americans in the city of Annapolis in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were free and worked as wage laborers. The population of Annapolis today remains 31–35 percent black, clearly a substantial portion of the community, and clearly one with its own unique historical development.

Under the direction of Mark P. Leone at the University of Maryland (Figure 1), Archaeology in Annapolis has spent 23 years excavating historical remains around this city and has always maintained the idea that archaeology should be carried out as a public program and for a public constituency. In 1990, an unusual discovery provided the catalyst that turned the project from a focus on landscapes and power toward a pursuit of African American historical archaeology. A cache of large quartz crystals was found intentionally buried beneath the basement hearth in the former home of Charles Carroll (Figure 2), the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence (e.g., Leone and Frye 1999). The archaeological finds were nothing short of astonishing, but the Annapolis public has been slow to accept these finds as anything significant. Even now, 13 years later, what should have been a breakthrough in African American social history has become yet another tool to divide community and political interests. While the materials have been displayed at the Banneker-Douglass Museum of African American History and Culture, at Emancipation Day celebrations, and at the Charles Carroll House, prominent local historians continue to refer to the materials as "the rat's nest." The term is a pejorative reference that on the surface suggests that the archaeological context of the finds is suspect, but the term is rooted in ethnic conflict and the desire to belittle the role of African Americans in shaping this town.

Annapolis's history is a key tourist industry in the city, and control of that history is a position of power. Controlling the city's history is largely about the city's national identity (e.g., Matthews 2002). Ironically,

divisions between black and white were never as polar in Maryland in the past few centuries as in other states. The historians here are quick to point out the percentages of free blacks in Maryland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is almost as though past facts legitimize the present day. What might have once been mere ethnic divisions now permeate institutions and political decisions throughout the city.

So how does an archaeology program fit in between? Instead of our finds providing fascinating common threads to the history of the region, they have further polarized certain segments of the community and forced us, as archaeologists, to become as creative in shaping the consumption of our research as in the pursuit of the research itself. The progression of the project has become as nuanced as the interweaving of ethnicity throughout history.

Figure 2: Quartz crystals, a pearlware bowl with an asterisk mark, and other items from sub-floor caches in the Charles Carroll House.

Summer Camp

Even in Annapolis, the general public knows little about archaeology and more often than not misconceives the goals and processes of the field. Archaeologists must often empower the public about the significance of their work, and this is especially true of African American archaeology in Annapolis. Since the discoveries in 1990 at the Carroll House, perhaps the most important discovery has to do with the social process of carrying out archaeology, not the material remains. It is not enough to simply find artifacts of African American lives. Empowering an effective and accurate history begins on the street with our day-to-day social interactions.

To that end, two years ago, Archaeology in Annapolis engaged in its own program of educational outreach in an attempt to create a broader community understanding of archaeology and its role in anthropology and social history. Through a partnership with the Banneker-Douglas Museum, a summer program was established to teach African American kids the value of archaeology for understanding their own history (Figure 3). Education Administrator Maisha Washington uses the class to teach a combination of science, archaeology, and history to children enrolled in the Stanton Center summer enrichment program (Figure 4). Unlike some of our other educational programs, this one has had more pitfalls in development and implementation. It also has more potential for making a substantial contribution to the field of archaeology and to the education of an underserved part of the Annapolis community. For Archaeology in Annapolis, the premise is one of active community engagement. The program has completed its third season, with the hope that it will come around full circle to confront and head

Figure 3: Graduate student Jennifer Babiarz leads excavation exercises with Stanton Center students and staff.

off community criticisms and break down the invisible social barriers not only among communities, but in those communities' perception of their own history.

African Americans want to have their own history, and as a cultural group with separate roots and traditions, they do. The black community in Annapolis knows that it has an extensive and illustrious history. Alex Haley's *Roots* begins at the Annapolis waterfront, and Annapolis provided a black regiment to fight in the Civil War. The state of Maryland emancipated its slaves *prior to* the federal ruling. But even in the African American communities, the past is closely guarded. They are reticent to come together financially to help develop community support for the research programs or even simply in locating and identifying sites for excavation. In the modern arena, maintaining a history separate from that of white Annapolis is a social statement that restricts archaeological research.

Figure 4: Stanton Center students catch up on paperwork as they practice mock excavation.

Back to School

The question of who controls the past is often debated in college classrooms, and often without much resolution or insight. The answer, of course, is that it is controlled by those with the power. It is not always controlled by descendent groups, who would seem to be obvious stakeholders. It is, however, those descendent groups that hold the keys to making the archaeological research successful. The field of archaeology needs more ethnicity in several respects. In a comprehensive demographic survey of the field of archaeology, minority groups including African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians altogether formed only two percent of respondents (Zeder 1997).

Ethnic relations have become one of the primary considerations for any work done in Annapolis at the theoretical, methodological, and interpretive levels, but not for the reasons most archaeologists would initially think. The success of African American archaeological research in finding significant material contrasts with the criticisms we have encountered and with the frustrations of trying to get the community to recognize the meaning and significance of these discoveries. Ethnic relations have clearly shaped our project, but not always as we would choose. Any work will produce results, and those results will then become political power to differentiate interest groups. Almost secondary are the facts that archaeological research discovers elements of past cultural practices that become part of scholarly literature, or that ethnic relations play into the methodological processes of identifying sites to investigate.

In his exquisite 1992 book *Uncommon Ground,* Leland Ferguson opines "future students with a keenly developed interest in African American life and a willingness to combine archaeology with other research methods will embark, I believe, on an unparalleled adventure in historical research" (Ferguson 1992: xli). The Archaeology in Annapolis program considers African American archaeology central, but we are very much situated in a modern-day context with its own latent and unspoken cultural divisions. This is the public part of Public Archaeology that can not be studied. Archaeology in the public interest

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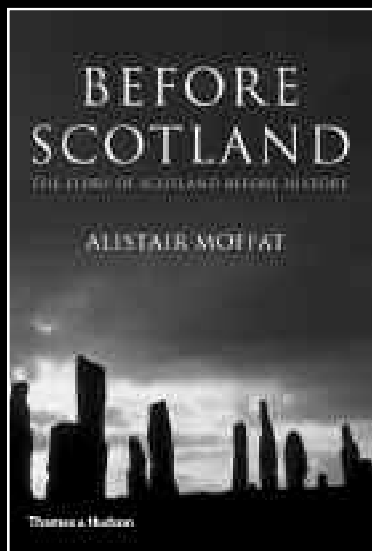

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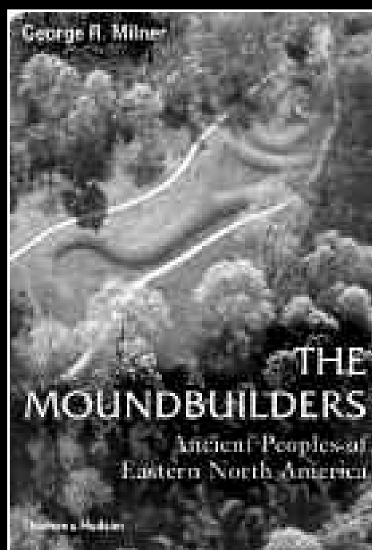

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requires us all to behave like cultural anthropologists (e.g., Watkins et al. 2000) attempting to understand the multiple "publics" and competing interests that exist in a community. In the case of African American history, I would say this is exactly how it should be. African American archaeology is infused with power struggles, political ploys, skepticism, and resistance at all levels. Why should that only be limited to the interpretive contexts?

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