USING THE PAST IN CALVERT COUNTY, MARYLAND

ARCHAEOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY

Kirsti Uunila

Kirsti Uunila is a Historic Preservation Planner in Calvert County (Maryland) Department of Planning and Zoning.

This brief discussion of two examples of how the past is used in Calvert County, Maryland follows from the assumption that the past always serves the present, with good, bad, or indifferent motivations and corresponding results. County planners, with citizen participation, have articulated constructive uses for the past. The goals toward which planners use the past are to foster a sense of place, recognize or establish community identity, and support the preservation of cultural resources that citizens value as important to a good quality of life. Archaeology is a tool suited to these ends with the added goal to address racism. Archaeology, especially public archaeology, can contribute to all of these goals through insistent and persistent demonstration of the complexity of social relations in the past. Archaeologists can facilitate open discussion of social inequality on the sites we interpret and equip people to see inequity in the present.

In any undertaking that builds on these ideas, the first step is to establish legitimacy. In the cases cited here, legitimacy has been constructed in partnership with the public archaeology program at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum, a state-run facility dedicated to regional archaeology, and with the public schools. Calvert County has crafted policy to undergird such partnerships under the rubric of heritage. The policy is written in documents, such as the Calvert County Comprehensive Plan, the Zoning Ordinance, and the Southern Maryland Heritage Area Heritage Tourism Management Plan. There is no necessary relationship between policy and content, but policy can be crafted in such a way as to drive a wide variety of projects to serve policy goals. Major objectives of the Calvert County Comprehensive Plan, for example, are to control growth and build strong communities. Heritage education and preservation are explicitly named in the plan as tools to these ends. Content that engages citizens in history may meet the action items included in the Comprehensive Plan.

Content also has helped to shape policy. In Maryland, jurisdictions are required to rewrite their comprehensive plans, providing cyclic opportunities for heritage practitioners to influence policy. It is important for archaeologists and interpreters to get involved in planning activities in the jurisdictions in which they practice. They can be effective lobbyists for community participation, as well, and may be able to identify and bring communities that might not otherwise be heard into the planning process.

Tourism offices are also potentially potent allies in providing public access to interpretive sites and activities. Archaeologists and interpreters must maintain constructive relationships with tourism marketers to ensure that heritage tourism content is accurate, appropriate, and managed sensitively with respect to the needs of communities where resources are located.

Case 1: Public Archaeology at Sukeek's Cabin Site

Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum (JPPM) was established in 1983 as an archaeological preserve and interpretive site. When a needs-assessment project in the early 1990s revealed that JPPM was perceived as "white space," the research and education departments wove two projects together: one to search for African American perspectives on JPPM, the other to reach out to African American communities to offer assistance to document and celebrate their histories and heritage. The projects came together in the public archaeology program to connect living African American families with sites on JPPM property.

Oral histories were collected from members of a family that traced their heritage to women who had been enslaved at what is now JPPM. Mining the memories of family elders for names and dates, researchers found documents, such as death certificates, that yielded new information and created productive avenues for further investigation. Recollections of elders in the family gave new meaning and a name—Sukeek's Cabin Site—to at least one site already identified. Documentary research and archaeology established the site as representative of the family's first home as free tenant farmers after Emancipation. Family members participated in all phases of research, and JPPM staff instituted regular meetings with descendants to share information and give updates on planned activities.

Figure 1: A child's alphabet plate in association with writing slate and pencil fragments suggests that the occupants of Sukeek's Cabin Site were teaching and learning at home.

Sukeek's Cabin Site was the focus of the public archaeology session in 2000 and 2001. Work at the site provided opportunities for family members to mingle with archaeology volunteers who were not related. Early on, the cooperative context produced the question, "why do you care?" and prompted nonrelatives to answer in a way that showed their interest in and readiness to identify with the former occupants of the site and, by extension, to identify with the living family members. Before fieldwork began, and at the beginning of each new field season, the family was invited to a meeting and site visit. Gathering at the site was at least as important as the participation of family members in site clearing because it included all kin who were able to travel to the site and not just those physically able to work at it. At the gatherings, the family conferred its blessing on the project and JPPM spokespersons affirmed their commitment to work to uncover the family's history and to tell the stories truthfully.

The site is situated out of the public area on top of a ridge, at the end of a trail up a hill and through woods. The time it takes to walk to the site affords an opportunity to equip visitors with the ability to see human agency of the past in the setting. The relative marginality of the site with respect to the nineteenth-century plantation—as well as the present uses—is pointed out in numerous examples along the way. By the time visitors reach the site, they are ready to "see" the former occupants and understand their relationship to other sites and people on the property. Visitors are shown a sample of artifacts to support interpretations about the use of various spaces on the site. Fragments of a child's alphabet plate are shown with pieces of writing slate and slate pencil fragments (Figure 1). Interpreters suggest that the people who lived here were teaching and learning at home during a period when public education was not available to African American children. The artifacts provide entry into discussions about land and labor before and after the Civil War, education, and race-based differences in access to services that most Americans now take for granted.

Because Sukeek's Cabin Site is not accessible to everyone, public programs, brochures, a web page, interpretive panels and small exhibits have been created for use by people who cannot physically get to the site. These products also help carry the content beyond the site. Another means of extending the experience is a course developed for training teachers.

Case 2: The Landscape of Segregation Tour

The Landscape of Segregation Tour was initially conceived as a component of a teachers in-service to fulfill a state requirement for training in multicultural education (such requirements should be in place in other states as they follow a Federal initiative). Training has also been offered to history and social studies teachers in a summer institute. The tour applies the same objectives as the tour to Sukeek's Cabin Site on a much larger scale and directly addresses the issue of achievement gaps between white and African American students in county schools. One assumption is that low expectations are as much to blame as any other single factor. An intuitive solution is to raise expectations through raising the value of local history and experience by using the past of local African American communities to confer depth and complexity upon their young members.

The tour focuses on African American life after the Civil War. Before boarding a bus, teachers are shown historic maps and aerial photographs of the area. Sukeek's Cabin is pointed out on a 1902 USGS map, along with comparable dots indicating dozens of African American households along the shoreline at the beginning of the twentieth century. There are no African American households on the waterfront at the beginning of the twenty-first century—the meaning and value of waterfront has changed.

The first stop on the tour is a pull-out above two cemeteries that abut each other between two United Methodist churches. One is historically African American, the other historically white.

Figure 2: Albert Gantt enlisted in the 2nd Regiment Light Artillery, U.S. Colored Troops in 1863. He returned to Calvert County, where he became a community leader. He is one of several men buried in this cemetery who resisted slavery through military service.

The church properties were both donated by the same white man in the mid-nineteenth century. The landscape prompts questions that easily permit a discussion of the history that created it, including schisms in Methodism and other social institutions over slavery, legislation regulating African American worship, resistance to slavery, and how people built community to meet their collective needs.

The tour proceeds into the cemeteries to show the subtle ways that the boundary between them is maintained. Teachers are led to the graves of Sukeek's descendants and "introduced" to other families, including men who won their freedom by enlisting in the U.S. Colored Troops. Before leaving the cemetery, teachers' attention is drawn to the buildings and other landscape features that demonstrate the continuity of multiple activities centered around the African American church—a community center since its founding. The church was arguably the only public arena in which African Americans enjoyed autonomy well into the twentieth century (Figure 2).

The tour then continues to an Episcopal church, founded more than a century before the Methodist movement took off in Calvert. Names of the dead are discussed in light of their connections to families who converted to Methodism and their connections to former bondsmen. The tour proceeds past the farm of former slaveholders to an African American farmstead. The two farms were once connected; a path through the woods is visible on the 1938 aerial. On the porch of the farmhouse, a descendant of the African American farmer greets the tour and, through her craft of storytelling, gives a powerful interpretation of the landscapes and relationships in the rural neighborhood. The last stop on the tour is the oldest standing one-room school built for African American children in the county. The building, roughly 15 by 17 feet, held up to 40 students in seven grades until 1934. Finally, the teachers return to a modern classroom setting with all the aerials and maps and discuss what they have seen, felt, and learned.

The tour and courses have been popular with participants. Teachers are multipliers of audience. An investment of resources to offer such a course will pay off in classrooms for years to come as teachers apply what they have learned. Teachers may also provide feedback into policy; Calvert County teachers recommended to the school board that all new teachers be required to take a course in local history.

Concluding Thoughts

The Calvert County case-study projects were designed to address identified needs with existing resources. Partnerships were critical to the success of both projects. The partners involved have counterparts in many locales: school systems, local government, museums, churches, etc. A landscape-based project is guaranteed to be locally relevant, which will make it easier to engage potential partners and audiences.