

This summer I conducted pre-dissertation research for a potential community-based collaborative archaeological project in the town of Oak Bluffs in Massachusetts. Oak Bluffs is located on the Island of Martha's Vineyard, called Noepe by the Aquinnah-Wampanoag and their ancestors. My research focuses on the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century period in which Oak Bluffs became a destination for religious and secular summer vacationers, many of whom owned second homes or rented homes for the season, placing them in the middle- or upper-class strata of American life. In addition to these individuals were farmers, shop owners, service workers, servants, fisher peoples, and many others who made their lives on the island and who supported the tourism industry on the island; they, too, rented or owned homes there. My research focuses on the growth of Oak Bluffs as a pluralistic community during this period, examining the importance of African American homeownership to the growth and maintenance of the community. I see this work developing into a collaborative community research project that combines mapping and archaeological excavations to reveal the long history of African American presence in Oak Bluffs and to understand how post-Emancipation communities defined and enacted freedom on their own terms.

My interest is in the lived experiences of freedom of African Americans and how community structure, geography, gender, and material realities restrict or enhance these experiences of freedom. Travel and the creation of vacationing spaces is one these experiences, where wealthy and middle-class African Americans in the years following the failure of Reconstruction, negotiated both prosperity and racial segregation. Archaeology of community, which integrates micro, macro, and meso scales of analysis is particularly suited to material-based studies of experience. I want to develop this work towards a dialectal archaeology which studies freedom as a process, understanding that freedom is defined relationally to unfreedom and oppression. This conception of freedom necessarily places studies of black life in conversation with whiteness and anti-black structures.

However, I am aware that my nascent ideas may not directly align with, or may conflict with what local stakeholders and descendent communities see as the most important questions or frameworks of potential archaeological investigations. When I began my research on Oak Bluffs, I was unaware of the best locations to focus my work or the places where archaeological excavations could feasibly be done. Only by understanding and foregrounding these concerns and limits can a collaborative project be successful in Oak Bluffs. Success in this instance is defined as an archaeology which highlights social relationships, long-term engagement, and conflict, past, present, and future, as a reality of community (Theoretical Archaeology Group 2019). This work is about preserving, sharing, and understanding the history of Oak Bluffs and the community in the Highlands area.

With this in mind, I structured my summer fieldwork with the idea of creating meaningful connections and beginning dialogues with a number of stakeholder groups and individuals throughout Martha's Vineyard and gauging the community's desire for and the feasibility of future archaeological investigations of a number of locations in Oak Bluffs. From afar I had focused on a number of organizations and hoped to open a dialogue with these groups and interested individuals, explore archival and documentary resources, and gain an understanding of the ways archaeology could be a useful addition to this community of voices. As a result of this work, the ties made, and the information I gathered, I now have a far more concrete understanding how this project could move forward in the coming years. Specifically, I see the opportunity to develop two distinct research angles, both of which focus on the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs. One would involve the archaeological excavation of a park where Baptist Revivals were held from the mid-1870s to the 1930s. The second would use deed and probate records to map diachronic change in the neighborhood starting from the early 1870s when lots were first surveyed and promoted for sale.

Collaborative archaeology and the archaeology of community intersect in interesting ways, as both highlight the ability of heritage work to contain and deal with multiple, entangled, and sometimes

conflicting historical perspectives (Richardson & Sanchez 2015; Silliman 2016). Recent trends in public and collaborative archaeology have focused on redefining the roles of archaeologists and collaborators as on as a partnership in which various types of expertise and knowledge are valued. Multi-vocality here is directed towards developing project goals, methods, and ethics in which structural constraints and participant's right to refuse are acknowledged (Clark & Horning 2019). Similarly, the archaeological study of community has expanded the concepts of community and community members to include intra-community discord (Harris 2014) and affect, the experience of emotions, and nonhumans in the construction and development of space, place, and individuals (Harris 2014; Dawdy 2016). These ideas, while broadening what archaeological investigation can look like, require archaeologists to develop deep understandings of the communities, past, present, and future, in which they plan to work. Social ties relate directly to the process of doing archaeology by allowing archaeologists to learn from community experts, incorporate diverse ideas into all stages of the work, and to ensure their outcomes are social justice orientated.

By putting an emphasis on social relations and the nuances of community life, archaeologists and collaborators will be in a better position to identify the goals, methods, and outcomes that will make a project beneficial and sometimes they will realize that a project must be radically changed or must be discontinued. Accepting this as a possibility, accepting failure and refusal as inherent to collaborative work, allows archaeologists to both maintain their authority and affirm a commitment to work that is socially beneficial. Archaeologists have long realized that studying history means working in the present (McGuire 2008) and many, following Gonzalez-Ruibal et al (2018) and Marina La Salle and Richard M. Hutchings (2018), are recognizing that in our political present, multi-vocal collaborative projects must retain the authority to refuse certain voices and local people must have the authority to refuse archaeology. This can only be successful if archaeologists do the early work of introducing

themselves and their ideas, and incorporating the considerations and limitations of local people and contexts from the very start. This was the impetus of my fieldwork in the summer of 2019.

I attempted to align my research methodologies to these ideas of collaborative research and around the limitations of any fieldwork on an island resort. I conducted four weeks of field research, one of which I spent on the island at an historic inn and for the rest of my time I commuted to and from the island each day via the ferry. My methods were a mixture of archival research and snowball style interviews and meetings. My methods were designed to gain insights into the growth and development of the African American community in Oak Bluffs from the 1870s to the 1930s. Although I see this project as exploring the entire community, this was a pragmatic decision based on the temporal restrictions of preliminary fieldwork, the comparative lack of historical information on the black residential community, and my understanding that the project I proposed could not happen without support and collaboration from the African American descendant community and current residents.

I conducted archival work at institutions including the Massachusetts State Archives and Historical Commission, the Martha's Vineyard Museum, the Oak Bluffs public library, local newspapers, county offices, the Oak Bluffs Water District, and with the Oak Bluffs preservation board. The interviews involved local heritage groups and the Aquinnah-Wampanoag Tribal Historic Preservation Officer at first, each of whom I had made contact with during the winter and spring. Further connections grew from these initial meetings, sometimes directly and sometimes through my interactions with other organizations or at the many community events I attended. I conducted these interviews as conversations, without survey questions and I took handwritten notes. Interviews were loosely structured around the growth of black community in Oak Bluffs and the interviewees' perspectives on this history. These interviews were approved by Michigan State's Institutional Review Board, consent forms were presented to interviewees. No formal oral historical interviews were conducted.

One of the main goals of both archival research and interviews was to introduce myself and my project to stakeholders and potential collaborators and to further develop the frame of my research interests. Secondary goals were to identify what resources were available to me as a researcher, who would be willing to collaborate with me, and what collaborators would be interested in exploring in a future project. I hoped this would identify avenues of research that were feasible and would benefit the community. I learned that there is a great deal of primary source material preserved and available for research, especially deeds records and the files of community organizations and churches. I learned that there is community support for historical investigations, particularly in the Highlands, where a number of threatened or razed homes hold high historic value, and whose history is threatened by increasing land value and the ageing local community. Yet, currently there are many individuals who retain this memory and local organizations who are working to preserve and teach this memory, I see my work engaging with and building on this structure. I also learned that my interests, the information from interviews, and written records could work together to structure future archaeological investigations.

What initially interested me about Martha's Vineyard and Oak Bluffs was its history of black land and home ownership during this period from 1870s to 1930s, an idea that adds depth to the area's well known identity as a welcoming place for black vacationers. Census records (Census Reports 1902; US Census of 1900) confirm this, showing that in 1900 60% of people identified as living in homes with black heads of house owned their homes. This was higher than the national average overall (45%) and the national average for white homeownership (50%) and nearly three times higher than the percentage of African Americans who owned their homes (22%). The same discrepancy between race and homeownership occurs in Massachusetts, Martha's Vineyard and Oak Bluffs are outliers in this regard. Interviewees of various kinds spoke to the importance of homeownership in the maintenance of the community and the reason people were able to come here in the first place. These data show the

construction of a place for African Americans to live, work, and vacation through control over space and property.

Other interviews focused on the fact that the homes individuals, their parents, or their grandparents bought were considered affordable and land in the Highlands was available, and reportedly black land purchasers were restricted to this area. Deed records show Henrietta and Charles Shearer obtained a mortgage in 1903 for two plots of land totaling one tenth of an acre for \$300 (Dukes County Register of Deeds [PRD] 1903: 107.96-7) and that these same lots and eight others were purchased in 1880 for \$700 (Dukes County Register of Deeds [PRD] 1880: 47.626-7). This was far more costly than lots sold at Idlewild, an all black resort from the same time period in Michigan (Walker & Wilson 2002: 20-1). Yet, secondary sources (Hough 1936: 148-9) and period maps show that Oak Bluffs and the Highlands area experienced a land speculation boom in the 1870s that quickly went bust, suggesting that land may have been affordable in the aftermath (Finley 2019: 47-54). While not being cheap, evidence indicates that land was available and middle-class African Americans believed they could take advantage of it. The Shearer's for instance, used their summer home as a laundry and later as an inn (Finley 2019: 97), indicating that affordability and summer retreat, for them, had a unique meaning. Evidence from household assemblages in the area could be used to further understand this relationship.

Homeownership is inherently constructive, it allows people to control space, to grow their property, to pass it on to their children and relatives, and to invite others to visit or live. In general, it builds community. Scholarship on black land ownership notes that homeowning "emphasized the preservation and continuation of family ties and social networks through land", the ways land marked internal social differentiation, and the ways landownership can problematize flat discussions of race and class which under theorize the black middle class after emancipation (Lee 2014: 30). This study takes a point of view of community from a middle- and upper-class perspective, as many of the homes in Oak

Bluffs were second homes, but it also recognizes that the experiences of the black middle class during this period cannot be reductively conflated with those of white elites (Lee 2014: 65).

To investigate this topic on Oak Bluffs requires community level study of multiple sites and ideally, of multiple types of sites and include oral histories and written documents. During my research this past summer I identified some of these potential sites and then experienced the disappointment of realizing many would not be available for excavation, ironically because of land ownership. However, a community driven archaeological project could develop the relationships needed to access these spaces and homes. These sites include multiple cottages in the Highlands, including Shearer Cottage, a historic home which has also served as an inn on Oak Bluffs since 1912. As well as Bradley Memorial Baptist Church, which was both a home and church and was torn down in 2016, a still standing Pentecostal church, which was also a residential and communal space, and Baptist Temple Park in the Highlands, which was the site of Baptist Revivals from 1875 until the 1930s (Hough 1936; Stoddard 1980). These are the locations where excavations would be productive and where I feel, there is potential for landowner support. It is possible, following Edward González-Tennant's (2018) work in Rosewood, Florida, that minimal excavation combined with oral histories, walking the landscape, and investigating deed and probate records could shed a great deal of light on the historic community and serve as a strong beginning to a long-term investigation. My summer research allowed me to identify a framework for these future studies.

Currently, I believe the most productive place to start would be excavations at Baptist Temple Park and a GIS project tracking homeownership in the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs. In many ways Baptist Temple Park is an ideal starting point for any archaeological project exploring the growth of the area and the lived experience of Oak Bluffs residents. Firstly, like much of Oak Bluffs, the Highlands was developed as a planned community, developed in concentric circles around Baptist Temple Park and

meant to be marketed as a more secluded home of the Methodists residing in the Campgrounds, as tensions with secular visitors were on the rise (Hough 1936: 148-9; Vineyard Gazette 1869). Secondly, interviews indicate that some of the earliest African American residents of the Highlands were originally introduced to the island through the Baptist Revivals held there in the summers and chose to buy homes near to it. Few written sources discuss the park and its use for revivals, and these do not go much beyond the dimensions of the structure or its use by white and black Baptists (Hough 1936, Stoddard 1980). Current residents and archived oral histories preserve a memory of the tabernacle and its place in the community (Denniston 2004). The park fell out of use in the 1830s and, after the tabernacle burned down in the 1840s, the land has remained undeveloped. Not only should there be excellent preservation of a site of great historical value, but the land is zoned in a way which makes commercial and residential development impossible (Conversation with employee of Duke Country Registry of Deeds, 2019).

The other starting point does not involve excavations, but rather would use combine deed and probate records with GIS to develop a map of the Highlands, tracking changes in homeownership and the makeup of the community. This project would be developed with the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard and would be a collaborative effort between archaeologists, historical experts, and local community members. The resulting map would be intended to create a diachronic sense of the community and document the presence and absence of individuals on the landscape. The goal would be to preserve memory which mainly exists in the minds of elders, descendants, and in the county records. A project like this is possible because of the existence of community elders who still associate places on the landscape with past homeowners and the island's archive of of land records dating to the mid-1600s.

Either of these projects would form a strong starting point for community engaged collaborative work and if I am able to make progress on them in the future it will only be through the connections and



in-depth understanding of the area I began to develop this past summer. However, there are also things I learned through my experiences, which I would in retrospect do differently. One of the first things is minimizing travel time. Staying on the island for any extended length of time was prohibitively expensive, but I was also staying in a home far from the cape, taking over an hour just to get to the ferry. Which reduced some of the time I had to work with institutions and collect data. I also think it would have benefited my goals to attend even more community functions, but I also recognize myself as an outsider and recognize there is a balance to maintain.

Most importantly, though there were times I wish I had been more proactive in developing an easily communicable frame for my summer project, it was my intention to keep my research as open as possible. I was there to build connections and learn about the history of Oak Bluffs so I could potentially develop a future project. On at least two occasions, individuals I interviewed expressed unease and confusion at the lack of a concrete idea of what I would be doing in the future. I began to develop a stronger research framework towards the end of my fieldwork and I learned a great deal about the need to express concrete ways the proposed work could benefit the community when entering spaces as a researcher. This is likely, in part, an inevitable aspect of initiating a community based archeology project, but in the future I would like to have a clearer sense of how to explain my future intentions to stakeholders. In the end, I wish I could have spent more time there, talked to more people, and asked more questions, but I plan on doing all this in my future research.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the School of Social Science at Michigan State University and the Kenneth E. and Marie J. Corey Research Enrichment Fund which funded this summer research. I would also thank Department of Anthropology at Michigan State University for their support and for funding my conference travel and stay. I extend my deepest thanks to the many individuals and organizations I worked with and learned from this past summer. I appreciated you welcoming me into your spaces and sharing your history and your summer with me.

## Sources

Clark, Bonnie J., and Audrey Horning

2019 Introduction to a Global Dialogue on Collaborative Archaeology. journal article. *Archaeologies*.

Dawdy, Shannon Lee

2016 Profane archaeology and the existential dialectics of the city. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 16(1):32-55.

Denniston, Dean

2004 Dean K. Denniston Sr. A Person of Color Film. In *MVM Oral History Center*, edited by Linsey Lee. The Martha's Vineyard Museum, Vineyard Haven, MA.

Finley, Skip

2019 *Historic Tales of Oak Bluffs*. American Chronicles. The History Press, Cheltenham, UK.

González-Tennant, Edward

2018 *The Rosewood Massacre: An Archaeology and History of Intersectional Violence*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville.

Theoretical Archaeology Group

2019 Slow Archaeology. Theoretical Archaeology Group  
<http://tag2019.maxwell.syr.edu/organizers/slow-archaeology/>, accessed 2019.

Harris, Oliver J. T.

2014 (Re)assembling Communities. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 21(1):76-97.

Hough, Henry Beetle

1936 *Martha's Vineyard, Summer Resort, 1835-1935*. Tuttle Publishing, Martha's Vineyard, MA.

Labrador, Angela M., Neil Asher Silberman, Marina La Salle, and Richard M. Hutchings  
2018 "What Could Be More Reasonable?" Collaboration in Colonial Contexts. Oxford University Press.

#### Land Records

1903 Duke County Register of Deeds, Book 107, pp. 96-97. Land Records. Duke County Register of Deeds, Edgartown, MA.

#### Lee, Nedra

2014 Freedom's paradox : negotiating race and class in Jim Crow Texas. Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation, Anthropology, The University of Texas at Austin, The University of Texas at Austin.

#### McGuire, Randall H.

2008 *Archaeology as Political Action*. California Series in Public Anthropology. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

#### Richardson, Lorna-Jane, and Jaime Almansa-Sánchez

2015 Do you even know what public archaeology is? Trends, theory, practice, ethics. *World Archaeology* 47(2):194-211.

#### Silliman, Stephen W.

2016 Disentangling the Archaeology of Colonialism and Indigeneity. In *Archaeology of Entanglement*, edited by Lindsay Der, and Francesca Fernandini, pp. 31 - 47. Routledge, New York.

#### Stoddard, Chris

1980 *A centennial history of Cottage City*. Oak Bluffs Historical Commission, Oak Bluffs, MA.

#### United States Census Office

1900 United States Census of Population: 1900, Massachusetts, United States Census Office, Washington, D.C.

1902 Census Reports Volume II: Twelfth Census of The United States, Taken in the Year 1900. United States Census Office, Washington, D.C.

#### Walker, L. and B. C. Wilson

2002 *Black Eden: the Idlewild community*. Michigan State University Press

Using data from the US census of 1900 allowed me to get a sense of how this place compared to the US and to Massachusetts at the turn of the century. Excluding homes which census takers did not know were owned or not and combining categories of "foreign born whites" and "white" I was able to integrate local, uncollated, housing data from Oak Bluffs and compare it to homeownership rates from the census report on 1900 which aggregated national and state level data on the proprietorship of homes. The average homeownership rate for all people living in the US in 1900 was 47% and 35% in Massachusetts. In the US 50% of whites owned homes, but only 22% of black families did so. Unsurprisingly, a similar pattern of homeownership rates occurs in Massachusetts, with 35% percent of whites and 17% of blacks owning homes. However, this changes on Martha's Vineyard. On the whole island and on Oak Bluffs 60% African Americans own homes, well above the national average. This was also true for white homeownership 78% across the island and 69% in Oak Bluffs. These numbers align with what I was expecting overall, but I was slightly surprised that black homeownership percentage island wide and for Oak Bluffs were the same. The numbers of reported black homes on the island is quite small, four-thirty overall and twenty in Oak Bluffs where as there are nearly 1,200 white homes on the island and 296 in Oak Bluffs.

What these numbers fail to capture most notably are the number of borders, both white and black, and the number of black domestic servants living in white homes. It misses, an any study drawing from census data does, those people who owned homes clandestinely by squatting or who were simply not counted. These numbers also leave out Aquinnah peoples classified as Indians and African Americans who may also have been listed as Indian or were living in homes with Aquinnah heads of house. On Martha's Vineyard, like elsewhere in the United States, as a settler state, black and indigenous populations forged close bonds because of colonization, the system of chattel slavery and anti-black racism (Conversation with Bettina Washington, TIPO). Yet, these number do show that

something different was happening on Martha's Vineyard compared to elsewhere. Oak Bluffs, although having average homeownership percentage for the island, has the highest number of black homes and has a lower percentage of white owned homes. I argue that this would have made Oak Bluffs feel like a shared space during a people of time when many spaces even in the North were segregated. It would have contributed to a landscape that felt secure and navigable for black residents.

Yet, we know that racism is too deeply ingrained to be ameliorated simply by wealth, that as Paul Mullins writes, "all social privilege in American life has been fundamentally shaped by racial ideology, so race must have a concrete material form" (2006: 63). Mullins asks what form race assumes in patterns of consumption, the ways different groups of people view and navigate the same landscape. This is one of the questions which I would like to investigate through an archaeological study of historic Oak Bluffs. Affect can be a powerful constructive or destructive force for community and homeownership lends a unique permanency and structure to community which renting may not. All people, to the best of their abilities and through networks of agency, strategically connect to and distance themselves from certain social groups and institutions. Power and social position influences how easily this can be done, what the consequences are, and the form it takes. Mapping and tracking this allows for a nuanced understanding of how race and racism worked in the past, what were its material and social consequences, and how it is reflected in the present. By recognizing that *community* includes people racialized as white as well as black and other minoritized identities does the work of considering "what whites secured from particular racial discourses, not simply how blacks and other marginalized racial subjects were instrumentally disempowered by anti-black racism" (Mullins 2006: 62).

Conference paper outline –

**Introduce your project and what you had hoped to get out of the summer –**

- 1- particularly connecting with groups and discovering which resources were available, what questions could be asked, and if this type of work would be supported
- 2- Talk about having your own ideas going in, but working to see what questions, ideas, and concerns the community has
- 3- Goal was to find information, identify sites, and find partners

#### **Introduce your idea of community archaeology and archaeology of community**

- 4- Position of the archaeologist and of stake holders
- 5- Goals of this kind of archaeology
- 6- Conception of a community as including conflict and nonhumans in its creation / development

#### **Talk about what sites are available and what groups seem interested in this**

- 7- Shearer cottage, Baptist temple park, masonic temple, Bradly memorial church, twin cottage, home of James' grandmother, and Pentecostal church
- 8- Primarily working with the African American Heritage Trail, poss. also East Chop Ass.

#### **Talk about plans going forward**

- 9- Mapping project using deeds and probate records on GIS and making that available to the public, schools, and AAHT
- 10- Excavations at baptsit temple park
- 11- Possible excavations at the various houses