

Starting Slow: Community informed background research on Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts

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This summer I conducted pre-dissertation research for a potential community-based collaborative archaeological project in the town of Oak Bluffs, 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 19th and early 20th 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, domestic servants, fisher peoples, and many others who made their lives on the island and who supported the tourism industry; 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, identity, 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, that 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 for 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 local 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, fosters long-term engagement, and benefits the community in real ways (Theoretical Archaeology Group 2019). This work is about preserving, sharing, and understanding the history of Oak Bluffs.

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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 on various 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, to explore archival and documentary resources, and to 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 I made, and the information I gathered, I now have a far more concrete understanding how this project could move forward in the coming years.

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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 late 1860s, 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).

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Recent trends in public and collaborative archaeology have focused on redefining the relationship between archaeologists and collaborators 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 communities has expanded the concepts of community and community members to include intra-community discord (Harris 2014), affect, and nonhumans in the construction and development of space, place, and identities (Harris 2014; Dawdy 2016). These ideas, while broadening what archaeological investigation can look like, require archaeologists to develop deep understandings of the past, present, and future of the communities 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 will realize that a project must be radically changed or 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 in our political present, multi-vocal collaborative projects must retain the authority to refuse certain voices and local people must maintain the authority to refuse archaeology (Gonzalez-Ruibal et al 2018; Marina La Salle and Richard M. Hutchings 2018). 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.

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I attempted to align my methodologies to these ideas of collaborative research. My methods were a mixture of archival research and snowball style interviews and meetings. They 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, I made a pragmatic decision to focus primarily on establishing connections with African American institutions, experts, and stakeholders. This was 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 have happened 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, and county and town offices. Initial interviews involved local heritage groups and the Aquinnah-Wampanoag Tribal Historic Preservation Officer. Further connections grew from these initial meetings, sometimes directly and sometimes through my interactions with other organizations or at the 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 the black community in Oak Bluffs and the interviewees perspectives on this history. These interviews were approved by Michigan State's Institutional Review Board and consent forms were presented to interviewees. No formal oral historical interviews were conducted at this time.

One of the main goals of both the archival research and interviews was to introduce myself and my project to stakeholders and potential collaborators and to further develop 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 deed records and the files of community organizations and churches. I learned that there is community support for historical investigations, particularly in the Highlands area, where a number of threatened or razed homes hold high historic value and where memory is threatened by increasing land value and the ageing local community. Yet, currently there are individuals who retain this memory and local organizations who are working to preserve and teach it. I see my work engaging with and building on these structures. I learned how my interests, the information from interviews, and written records could work together to structure future archaeological investigations.

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What initially interested me about Martha's Vineyard and Oak Bluffs was its history of black land and home ownership, 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) support this, showing that in 1900 60% of people living in homes with black heads of house, owned those homes. This was higher than the national average overall (45%) and the national average for white homeownership (50%). It

was nearly three times higher than the national average for black homeownership (22%). The same discrepancy between race and homeownership occurs in Massachusetts generally. Martha's Vineyard and Oak Bluffs are outliers in this regard. Various interviewees spoke to the importance of homeownership in the maintenance of the community and the reason people were able to come there in the first place. These data show that the construction of Oak Bluffs a place for African Americans to live, work, and vacation can be linked to control over space and property.

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Other interviews focused on the fact that the homes bought in this period were considered affordable and land in the Highlands was available to black land purchasers who may have faced discrimination when buying land in other areas. 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). Deed records add nuance to this. 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). These same lots and eight others were previously purchased in 1880 for \$700 (Dukes County Register of Deeds [PRD] 1880: 47.626-7), showing that the price of land recovered and increase over time. These records also show that land in Oak Bluffs was more costly than at Idlewild, a contemporary all-black resort in Michigan (Walker & Wilson 2002: 20-1). Though, while not 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. Nedra Lee, writing 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 undertheorize 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, but it recognizes that the experiences of class differed across racial lines (Lee 2014: 65).

To investigate this topic on Oak Bluffs requires community level study of multiple types of sites and the inclusion of 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 readily available for excavation. However, a community driven archaeological project could develop the relationships needed to access such spaces. These sites include multiple cottages in the Highlands, the now destroyed Bradley Memorial Baptist Church, a still standing Pentecostal church, and Baptist Temple Park in the Highlands. 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 mapping could shed a great deal of light on the historic community and serve as a strong beginning to a long-term archaeological investigation. My summer research allowed me to identify a framework for these future studies.

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Currently, I believe the most productive place to start would be excavations at Baptist Temple Park and a GIS project mapping homeownership in the Highlands area. 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, structured around what was eventually Baptist Temple Park (Hough 1936: 148-9; Railton 2006: 418). 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 the revivals, and these do not go much beyond the dimensions of the tabernacle or its use by white and black Baptists (Hough 1936, Railton 2006: 418; Stoddard 1980). Current residents and archived oral histories preserve a memory of the Baptist tabernacle and its place in the community (Denniston 2004). The park fell out of use in the 1930s and, after the tabernacle burned down in the 1940s, the land has remained undeveloped. Not only should there be excellent preservation of a site with great historic 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).

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The other starting point does not involve excavation, but rather would combine deed and probate records with GIS tools to develop a map of the Highlands, tracking changes in homeownership and the makeup of the community. This project could be developed with local heritage groups 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 and families on the landscape. The goal would be to preserve and make accessible 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 members who

still associate places on the landscape with past homeowners and the island's archive of land records dating back to the mid-17th century.

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 understandings of the area I began to develop this past summer.

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