

Section 1 – Background

historical and social context; work being done; thesis questions

My name is Jeffrey Burnett, and I am an archaeologist and PhD candidate at Michigan State University. I

am presenting on two aspects of my dissertation research, the Oak Bluffs Historic Highlands Archaeology

Project (OBHHAP);

a community-based historic landscape study that utilizes archival information, oral histories, and

landscape and archaeological survey to map the construction and growth of a Black vacationing

community in the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, starting in the late 19th century. This

project focuses on the role of space, place, racialization, and collective memory in the construction of

this community, in shaping the built and natural landscape, in residents and visitors' experiences, and

the production of meaning and historical knowledge. The central questions that drive this study are why does the Highlands community of Oak Bluffs look the way it does today and why is it remembered as a core site of Black history and life in Oak Bluffs and Martha's Vineyard (Cromwell 1997; Finley 2019; Taylor 2016)?

This research was designed by myself, Co-PI Dr. Stacey L. Camp, and by community oversight collaborators

Carleen Cordwell, Fred Handcock, James Jennings, Larry Jones, Jim Richardson, Richard Taylor, Christy

Vanderhoop, and Elaine Weintraub. We seek to investigate how vacationers, as homeowners,

businessowners, and visitors, shaped and experienced the landscape in the Highlands area. We also seek

to identify the ways in which these factors were shaped by Black vacationers' experiences of racism,

struggles against structures of racialized social and economic exclusion, and assertions of a right to

leisure.

A primary goal of this project has been to document, understand, preserve, and share the history and memory of residents, homeowners and visitors in the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs and explore the relationship between historic Black homeownership and the construction of Black communities in the Highlands. This work was prompted by my interest in the archaeology of the African Diaspora and the construction of community in the United States, the historic preservation and public history interests of the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard (AAHTMV), the historic preservation interests of the East Chop Association (ECA), and the interests of individual community members interested in preserving and sharing the African American history of Oak Bluffs (Burnett 2022).

Following Sonya Atalay (2012), Rachel Kiddey (2014), Edward González-Tennant (2018), Maria Franklin and Nedra Lee (2020), and Christopher Matthews (2020), the methods used in this project are designed to add to local efforts empowering members of the local and descendant communities of the Highlands to participate in defining and implementing cultural heritage work on their own terms.

Historiographies of Oak Bluffs suggest that during the early 20th century, Black home- and business-owners formed the core of an infrastructure and landscape that would support the growth of vacationing communities of color (Cromwell 1997; Finley 2019; Hayden and Hayden 1999; Taylor 2016). These communities are connected to the history of tourism and vacationing in America, the history of Black vacationing, and to the Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th century. Using archaeological data, oral historical interviews, and historic property and census records we are constructing a multi-dimensional map of the people, places, and events that made the Highlands area the historically significant area it is today.

The Highlands community includes summer vacationing and year-round residents of the geographic area of Oak Bluffs known as the Highlands / East Chop, as well as former residents and/or their descendants. My research focuses on the subset(s) of the historic highlands community who identified as, or have

been identified as being of African Descent (e.g. Black, African American, Cape Verdean, Afro-Jamaican) but also includes the histories, views, and material worlds of those community members who identified as, or have been identified as, Indigenous or being of European descent.

[Slide X – Mapping project]

From July to October 2023, I, along with a group of paid and volunteer collaborators identified, recorded, and mapped the extant features, artifacts, and built landscape of the historic Baptist Temple site. This mapping project was designed to make a digital map of the site which could be shared with the organization that own and manages the site, other heritage organizations, and with the public. We also designed the work to complement ongoing historical and cultural heritage preservation work in the area. It is my hope for archaeological knowledge and/or methods to become part of the assemblage of tools local heritage workers view as valuable and feel comfortable using.

[slide X – interviews]

During this time, I also conducted collaborative “memory mapping” interviews with seven individuals of African descent who live in the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs. Participants in these interviews were asked to annotate maps of the community as we discussed significant individuals, everyday interactions, events, places, and how community members engaged with their environment and how they used and navigated the landscape. Our goal was to document the stories, places, routes, material culture, and memories that are meaningful to participants and their families and neighbors (Hart and Homsy 2020; Kiddey 2014).

Section 2 – History and experiences of AA homeownership

[Slide X – historic map]

Residential lots were first sold in Highlands area of Oak Bluffs in 1870 by a group of wealthy residents who purchased, subdivided, and marketed the area as a planned community called the Vineyard Highlands. The developers intended the Highlands to be a densely populated residential area but, due in part to the economic recessions of the mid-1870s, lot sales remained low well into the 1950s.

[slide X – Dorothy West Ave]

The Highlands is remembered as an African American community and despite the geographic area never having a predominantly Black residential population, there are several neighborhoods where, for generations, all, or a majority of the residents were people of African descent. Further, six homes have been designated as sites on the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard, a local heritage organization that commemorates site of Black history and runs guided tours. One home on the Heritage Trail, the historic Shearer Cottage inn, is also part of an exhibit in the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

[Birmingham property]

People of African descent were involved in the Vineyard Highlands community from its earliest days – most notably the Samuel and Annie Birmingham family of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Samuel T. Birmingham was a Methodist physician who purchased property in the Highlands in 1870 and was an early investor in the Vineyard Grove Company. By 1875 the Birmingham had sold their original property in the Highlands and purchased property land elsewhere in the community, which they maintained until 1893.

Another notable family of African descent include the Shearers. In 1903, Henrietta and Charles Shearer, of Virginia and later Everett, MA purchased property in the Highlands, where they built and operated a laundry service in the summer months. In 1912 the family opened a 12-room inn, providing room and board for Black vacationers who faced racialized discrimination and exclusion at white-owned and white-

serving establishments. Shearer Cottage is now the hands of a fifth generation of Shearers and in interviews, several participants mentioned working their first jobs as hosts and servers at Shearer Cottage. For many participants, Shearer Cottage was a node in a small network of Black-owned homes and establishments that made up their summer community.

One participant, in her 80s, when discussing the routes she frequented in her youth, shared an experience of racialized harassment. In this incident, an adult white woman used a racial slur in a casual remark directed at a baby girl as participant and other young women of African descent walked by. In recalling the incident, the participant stated she remembers not being angry or fearful in that moment, but rather that of how “stupid” the woman was to use that term. For her, the woman who harassed her was just a short-term visitor to her home, a place where the participant and her family had a house and stayed all summer. She highlighted the sense of security and belonging that came with having a home in a place that others could only visit temporarily (Interview with OT 7/2023).

Another participant, however, highlighted the limits of this belonging, which they encountered when seeking employment in Oak Bluffs as a young adult in the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, racialized discrimination and de facto segregation were an everyday aspect of life for people of color living in and visiting Oak Bluffs. This participant, whose grandmother purchased a home in the Highlands in the 1940s, discussed how racist hiring practices by white business owners in Oak Bluffs prevented her from finding a job the summer before she would be going off to college. Needing a summer job to pay for college she found employment in her home city but remembers this as the first summer she did not spend on Martha’s Vineyard. Despite her family owning a home, she was not able to spend a summer in Oak Bluffs for many years after that (Interview with JC, 9-2023).

Section 3 – study and interpretation

The Baptist Tabernacle in the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs was constructed between 1877 and 1878 by the Baptist Vineyard Association to hold yearly revivals known as camp meetings. Historical accounts state that the Tabernacle was an open-air octagonal, post-and-beam structure made entirely out of wood which measured 120 ft across and could seat 2500 – 3000 people. The last Baptist camp meeting we have records for was held in 1931 and local newspaper records suggest that the structure fell into disrepair in the 1930s and was demolished in the 1940s. The site of the Tabernacle is now a park owned by the East Chop Association which manages other parks and natural resources in the Highlands and East Chop areas of Oak Bluffs.

The Tabernacle is an important part of the story of the Highlands area as some of the first residents were members of Baptist congregations, which organized and attended Camp Meetings at the site from 1875 until the 1930s. One such resident was Charles Shearer, who served as a deacon at the racially integrated Tremont Temple Baptist Church in Boston. Because of this, Baptist Temple is seen by community members as one of the core reasons there is now, and has historically been, a strong history of African American homeownership the Highlands.

[Slide X – GIS map]

We conducted a systematic survey of architectural remains at the site; identifying and mapping the 47 cement footings which supported the structure's vertical posts, the extent of the concrete floor of the Tabernacle with sub-centimeter GPS-equipment. We also located the likely position of the stage and performed a walkover survey of the park. Our findings support historical accounts of the size and shape of the Tabernacle. The data also generated insights into the maintenance and construction of the Tabernacle, finding evidence that the builders of the Tabernacle added extra support posts and anchors

for guy lines, in either the original construction or as the structure was aging. These findings indicate that the builders were concerned about the structural integrity of the structure and acted on these concerns.

Our analysis of the physical characteristics of architectural features, particularly threaded bolts which were seemingly re-purposed as metal support rods, provided support local secondary sources which claimed the structure was built with material re-used from buildings built for the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Work is ongoing to analyze the relationship between historic and present-day access paths and the location of 19th century homes and their residents which may provide information on processes of community formation and re-formation for the Highlands area.

In addition to the archaeological data that this survey could provide, we also believed that a community-based participatory mapping project was an effective and low-risk introduction to archaeological investigations for local and descendant communities that could form the basis for additional investigations of the Baptist Tabernacle site and elsewhere in the Highlands area. To facilitate the broadest possible community participation, a large portion of the funding I received for the project was to pay individuals who participated in field work and lab work. We decided to conduct the survey, five days a week – four weekdays and one weekend, for this same reason. Our idea was that the funded positions and weekends would better facilitate the participation of some social groups, particularly those working full- or part-time jobs, individuals between the ages of 18 – 55, and/or Black, Indigenous, and people of color in the project.

During the mapping survey of Baptist Temple Park, 38 individuals, both residents and summer vacationers, directly engaged with the project, 15 of whom participated in the mapping work. Others shared what they knew about the park and the community and others wished to stay informed about our work. Reporters from the two local newspapers visited the site, and we presented our work and findings to tour groups and visitors.

Having the funds to compensate collaborators had the biggest impact on the project with regards to participation in the mapping survey. Of the fifteen participants, two were paid and thirteen were volunteers. The two paid participants were both women of African descent, between the ages of 30 – 50. All of the volunteer participants found the project through either the organization that owns and manages Baptist Temple Park or a local historical and planning commission. Of the paid participants, one found the project through work with the African American Heritage Trail and learned of the project through word of mouth while vacationing on the island. Thirteen of the participants were white and of these, twelve were over the age of 60 and owned summer homes in Oak Bluffs. Eleven of the participants were women and four were men. The racialized, age, and class identities of the majority of participants aligns with the populations most represented as volunteers in historical archaeology.

This is despite multi-year connections with the African American Heritage Trail and other groups associated with to Black history, culture, and businesses; efforts to share the project with residents of the Highlands, and articles in two local newspapers. The ability to compensate participants for their time and weekend availability directly facilitated the participation of the only women of African descent who took part in the mapping survey. One of the paid participants was also the youngest person to participate in the mapping survey, aside from myself, and the only participant who did not own a home on the island.

An unexpected benefit of facilitating the participation of individuals between the ages of 30 and 50 was a familiarity with technology and research methods. One of the paid volunteers took the lead in designing and constructing a digital database to record the data collection forms we were using in the field. Her suggestion improved on our original method of digitizing field data and came from her experience as a researcher in another field of study.

I want to connect our experiences in the interviews and mapping survey to Dr. Christopher Matthews' articulation of a People's Preservation. Matthews (2020) notes that the goals and criteria of the National Register can overdetermine what is deemed historically significant heritage, valid preservation practices, and threats to heritage sites in a community. Matthews argues that efforts to solicit the participation of historically excluded groups without fundamentally changing the logics of historic preservation work primarily to enclose these histories with little or no benefit to local communities.

Some of the community members who visited the site told us they routinely walked through it, some knew of the park but remembered it as overgrown and inaccessible, and others had no idea the park or the historic foundations existed, even if they had heard of the Baptist Tabernacle. This is in part because the park is not an official site on the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard and there are no signs promoting the park as a historical site or accessible greenspace.

The memory mapping interviews with community members revealed a different understanding, that for decades Baptist Temple Park and the Tabernacle was a known and recognized place in the Highlands. Interviewees recalled the space as a childhood play area and short-cut; as a place where family members rushed to in the middle of the night to help a woman living illicitly in the park give birth; the place they or their families attended religious events; a wooded place to avoid.

Due to the work we conducted this summer, the organization who owns the park is now planning to add an informational sign in the park detailing the history of the Tabernacle and some of the findings from the project. African American community members and heritage organizations expressed a desire to ensure that the information reflects their voices - but the plans are in their earliest stages and the private landowner group is not required to consult with residents. This reflects a fundamental tension in cultural heritage work in Oak Bluffs, where nearly all the historically significant sites are privately owned. It is possible to reshape the heritage landscape quickly – sites can be added to the heritage trail if the

owners and the Trail agrees to add them or a sign can be added to a historically significant park but without public oversight, there remains significant gaps. I hope that this project will increase familiarity and collaboration among local heritage organizations, facilitate broad engagement with significant sites, and help empower individuals and organizations to build a heritage landscape that represents the historic and contemporary communities, regardless of who owns the site.