

# A POTENTIAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF ROSEWOOD, FLORIDA

## THE PROCESS OF REMEMBERING A COMMUNITY AND A TRAGEDY

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Historical archaeology is often viewed as a positive act, a means to remember that which has been forgotten. Many archaeological projects have been fostered through local communities, and have drawn often-diverse voices toward the common goal of memory. Less common are contentious archaeologies that deal with controversial or violent events in the past. Events that many don't want to remember. One particularly noteworthy example is the 1914 Ludlow Massacre, where National Guard troops opened fire on a tent encampment of striking miners in Colorado; the result was the death of twenty men, women, and children. Randall McGuire and colleagues have conducted archaeological investigations at Ludlow and documented the material evidences of their lives and the camp's destruction (Wood 2002; McGuire and Reckner 2003).

Even where the past is a difficult and painful one, such as in a plantation context, where enslavement and the insidious legacy of racism was engendered, the common goal of documenting this past is often held by descendants on both sides, white and black. David Babson (1990) has written about how one digs up racism in the past, and suggests that it is easy to imagine the impacts of racism on the lives of individuals within antebellum slavery, and far more difficult to see its effects, materially or archaeologically, in other contexts. Of course racism did not end with the demise of slavery, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such tragedies as so-called race riots, lynchings, and the destruction of black homes and businesses were common headlines.

A spike in racial violence at the close of the First World War was spurred in part by returning black soldiers wishing to exercise the freedoms that they had experienced abroad and a greater white populous grown increasingly fearful of these assertions of equality. For example, during the summer of 1919, often referred to in retrospect as the "Red Summer," there were at least 25 so-called "race riots" throughout the U.S. Around 400

African-Americans were killed or injured in Chicago alone, and whole sections of towns or entire African-American communities were put to the torch. These atrocities were commonplace events well into the 1920s, assisted in part by the Klan's brief resurgence as a mainstream force in America (Williams 1968).

Perhaps the most famous cases known today are the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot and the 1923 destruction of Rosewood, a small black community in Levy County, Florida. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, during the course of only eighteen hours 35 square blocks within the black portions of town were deliberately destroyed in fire, with more than one thousand black homes lost and at least 39 confirmed fatalities. It has been described as one of the worst cases of American civil unrest since the Civil War. Rosewood's destruction, while on a smaller scale, was even more complete (Halliburton 1962; Jenkins 2003; Jones et al. 1993).

Rosewood is located in western Levy County, nine miles from the Gulf of Mexico. Between January 1 and 7, 1923, a horrible sequence of events rapidly unfolded in the black town of Rosewood and the adjacent white community of Sumner. That New Year's Day morning, a white woman, Fannie Taylor, claimed that a strange black man had forced his way into her home and assaulted her. The black community remembers it another way; Fannie had been having an affair with a white railroad employee, and for some reason they had quarreled. With a black eye and bruises to explain, Mrs. Taylor chose an easy lie over the hard truth. But her lie had dire repercussions (Jenkins 2003; Jones et al. 1993).

The white mob in pursuit of this phantom assailant soon encountered Sam Carter, a Rosewood resident. Accused of duplicity, Carter pleaded his innocence but was still tortured and then casually murdered. Fearing further terror acts, Rosewood's women and children took refuge in the home of Sarah and Hayward Carrier. That night a mob of well-armed white vigilantes attempted to enter the dwelling. Two whites were killed, and



Figure 1. A white mob inspecting the charred remnants of black houses in Rosewood, Florida (*The New York /Literary Digest/*, January 20, 1923).

several wounded. Sarah Carrier also died in a pitched gun battle that lasted several hours. Over the next 24 hours, the remnants of Rosewood were able to escape the killing zone, but the entire town was eventually looted, ritually vandalized, and finally burned, save for the home of the white storekeeper. In the span of three days, a town of 200 vanished.

Fannie Taylor's accusation may have been the catalyst, but it was not the reason for the viciousness of the attack. Rosewood was a stable, settled community; these families had been living there since the 1860s. Through decades of diligence and hard work, they had built some measure of prosperity and small visible indicators of wealth. The white town of Sumner, however, was composed of transient labor employed at the local sawmill and living in company housing. Within this recognition of Rosewood's relative prosperity, there was a deep-seated jealousy that these blacks were living far better than most whites in the county.

The residents of Rosewood had taken the words of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise speech of 1896 to heart, and to the best of their ability pursued economic advancement as a means to achieve some measure of equality in the eyes of white society. As eloquently described by W.E.B. DuBois in 1933 (1996:1020) in the *Crisis*:

In the years between emancipation and 1900, the the-

ory of escape was dominant. We were, by birth, law and training, American citizens. We were going to escape into the mass of Americans in the same way that the Irish and Scandinavians and even the Italians were beginning to disappear. The process was going to be slower on account of the badge of color; but then, after all, it was not so much the matter of physical assimilation as of spiritual and psychic amalgamation with the American people.

But of course, African-Americans did not escape their "badge of color"; DuBois was writing, in retrospect, of what might have been. Forty years before he wrote these words, the promise had already proved to be hollow. The consequence of this betrayal of ideals was that African-Americans with improved economic conditions did not demonstrate their worthiness to join the ranks of greater America, to shake off their badge of color, but instead only brought to greater emphasis many whites' own economic failures and a growing shame that was building toward some horrible conclusion.

What also made Rosewood different from many past acts is that the community fought back, and the price for such audacity was the total destruction of the town. This new strategy of open resistance was seen in other racially motivated acts of violence in the second decade of the twentieth century, and marked a critical turning point in race relations in this country

(Williams 1968).

Remembered only by the perpetrators, the survivors, and their descendants, the story of Rosewood became common knowledge in 1982. This revelation engendered public outrage and prompted survivors and descendants to come forward and tell their story. In 1994 the state of Florida officially recognized the gross violation of the Rosewood community's civil rights and loss of property with a monetary compensation of 2.1 million dollars. Rosewood had achieved such notoriety that a 1997 major motion picture was created by African-American director John Singleton.

But why Rosewood? Why is Rosewood remembered, when so many other communities saw the same kinds of brutality—the same intimidations, murders, burnings, and expulsions? For example, in the town of Ocoee 115 miles away, two African-Americans attempted to vote in 1920, and this act of defiance resulted in the burning of 25 homes, two churches, and the black Masonic lodge, with estimated fatalities at six blacks and two whites (Colburn 1997). And yet virtually no one remembers Ocoee. In the nearby town of Perry, just a month before Rosewood burned, the murder of a white school teacher, believed perpetrated by an escaped black convict, incited local whites to extreme violence. The accused man was dragged from jail and burned alive at the stake. Two other black men were shot and hung, and then the entire black community was attacked, with several homes, as well as their church, Masonic lodge, amusement hall, and school burned to the ground. And yet no one remembers the atrocity in Perry (Colburn 1997).

Rosewood was clearly not a unique event; however, it may have been a unique set of circumstances or timing, with the 1982 newspaper articles acting as a catalyst that ignited an interest that may not have sparked just five or ten years before. Perhaps Rosewood once discovered, easily became that key symbol, that proxy for the literal multitude of sins committed in the senseless name of racism, blind hatred, and envy in the past. Richard Flores (1998) has written extensively about this phenomenon, where past and present meet and create “a memory place.” There are numerous examples of this need for symbols, where events and places, at the time obscure or extraordinary, later become elevated in status or recognized for their uniqueness to symbolize a group identity, or in the case of Rosewood, stand as proxy for all wrongs.

Flores uses the Alamo as an example of a memory place, arguing that the physical site where one of the key battles for Texas Independence was fought in 1836 had soon after the battle become neglected and essentially ignored, with the chapel serving as a warehouse and other mundane uses, until the 1890s, when a state and even national symbol of white pride and supe-



Figure 2. An African-American home set ablaze by a white mob in Rosewood, Florida (*The New York /Literary Digest*/, January 20, 1923).

riority was needed in the transition to modernity. The Alamo, once forgotten, was reborn as a shrine and cradle of Texas liberty. Rosewood may function in the same way, but in the opposite direction; once a place of black pride, viciously and senselessly attacked and destroyed, all but forgotten for decades, now is remembered and revered as a symbol for all the Rosewoods in the past, present, and future.

But what of archaeology? Just what would an “archaeology of Rosewood” resemble? Before its destruction, Rosewood contained two general stores, two churches, a school, a Masonic Hall, a baseball diamond, a railroad depot, a small community cemetery, and of course, dozens of private homes. After its destruction, nothing of substance was built there. For all intents and purposes, it was simply allowed to grow wild again. While there are at least 50 years of living to document, bearing witness to the 1923 event cannot be avoided. The destruction of the entire town in just three days created a virtual Pompeii Effect, leaving *in situ* all durable architectural elements and entire contents of homes of several dozen households. Further, it was at the Carrier house where the 12-hour gun battle took place, and at least 4 people died. Excavating here would be akin to documenting a crime scene, and employing techniques pioneered on battlefield sites might allow some insight into establishing a sequence of events.

Unfortunately, the 1994 reparations bill did not address the return of lost property. Currently all of what was once Rosewood is in the hands of ambivalent or even actively hostile white landowners. Mrs. Lizzie Jenkins (2003), Rosewood descendant

and historian, has attempted to lead tours of Rosewood over the years, with intermittent and limited success, at times being set upon by dogs. Further, recent attempts to contact current landowners by mail, inquiring about the potential of initiating archaeological investigations of their properties, have all been ignored.

This paper—the attempts of the descendants of Rosewood to spread the word—and the proposal to conduct archaeology at the site, are all acts of remembering. But is there also a right to forget? The almost exclusively white population of Levy County (Loewen 2005:7, 382) largely does not want to remember Rosewood. To them, Rosewood really does not exist. Further, some have suggested that the reparations paid to survivors bought the state some kind of official forgiveness, a sort of blanket protection from all past wrongs, and a right to forget. Without a long-term activist archaeological investigation of the former town, the one voice speaking for Rosewood that will touch the most lives will be the 1997 film, although many of the Rosewood families were upset about how their story was dramatized. An archaeology of Rosewood could potentially have similar broad impacts that would not sacrifice historical accuracy in the process.

These contentious pasts must be remembered, or forgotten at our peril (Shackel 2001). It's not enough to say that there's a historical marker there, describing the events of 1923. Common knowledge of Rosewood's destruction didn't occur until 1982, 60 years after it took place. Reparations were not paid until 1994, 70 years later. Governor Bush and Rosewood descendants didn't dedicate the historical marker until May 2004, some 80 years after Rosewood was destroyed. And only three months later, in the dark of night a truck's tow chain was wrapped around it, it was ripped out of the ground, and dragged to the all white town of Cedar Key, some 9 miles away.

Because we can't presently gain access to the property, to re-create the town archaeologically, we are re-creating the town digitally, a virtual Rosewood based on current information as to how it would have appeared in 1923, which can give us some insight into this past landscape. It will be permanently housed on the University of Florida's anthropology server and available for viewing on the Internet. It's not enough to let the memory of this particular past take care of itself, because many in Levy County and elsewhere are actively trying to forget this past, to construct alternative histories about themselves where Rosewood is de-emphasized or erased altogether. Perhaps that is the ultimate value to be derived from such a contentious archaeology; the simple act of remembering in the face of overwhelming and deliberate forgetting.

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