Resistance and Compliance: CRM and the Archaeology of the African Diaspora

ABSTRACT

Archaeological investigations carried out in compliance with the dictates of the National Historic Preservation Act have played an integral role in developing our understanding of and approach to the archaeology of the African diaspora. These cultural resource management (CRM) studies include several landmark projects that helped shape the national approach to African American archaeology. However, as with other sectors of the discipline, CRM archaeology of the African diaspora is presently suffering from a period of stagnation and lack of focus. This paper considers CRM’s contribution to the archaeology of African America, past and present, and attempts to project the future place of CRM in the study of the African American past.

Introduction

“Personal decoration, like ceramics, may be an effort among the freedmen to imitate the master class, or it may represent a significant African tradition” (Trinkley 1986:279).

African American archaeology and the archaeology of cultural resource management (CRM) have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship since the advent of CRM in the late 1960s (by CRM I refer to archaeological and historical studies undertaken in compliance with sections 106 and 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act). Established by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (and subsequent amendments), CRM seeks to identify and evaluate archaeological and historical resources that would be affected by federally funded, permitted, or mandated projects, as well as those sites located on federal lands. Sites are evaluated with reference to their eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Of the four evaluative criteria for listing, Criterion D, which states that an archaeological site may be eligible for the scientific information it has provided or can provide, has become the standard of CRM archaeological site evaluations.

CRM has taken archaeologists, many trained as prehistorians but a growing number educated in historical archaeology, into settings that had not previously been the focus of historical or archaeological research. Highway projects, urban redevelopments, Corps of Engineers reservoirs and drainage works, and Department of Defense installation inventories all exposed a wider array of sites than had traditionally been studied, which forced archaeologists to develop historical contexts and criteria for assessing the significance of previously unevaluated resources. In concert with trends in social history, historical anthropology, and cultural geography, which recognized the significance of people on the periphery of traditional history, CRM archaeologists began to research and recognize the archaeological value in the study of small farmsteads, urban working-class house lots, tenant sites, ethnic groups, the 19th century in general, and other archaeological remains that had previously received little attention by a discipline directed, before the 1960s, more toward the study of lost Colonial towns, forts, and the house yards of the well-to-do. Prominently featured in this new focus was CRM’s discovery of African America.

The history of African American archaeology can be traced to a number of landmark studies: Adelaide and P. Ripley Bullen’s excavation and Vernon Baker’s analysis of Black Lucy’s Garden, a freedman site in Massachusetts (Bullen and Bullen 1945; Baker 1980); Robert Ascher and Charles Fairbanks’s work with enslaved African American cabin sites at Ryefield and Kingsley Plantations in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Ascher and Fairbanks 1971; Fairbanks 1974); Robert Schuyler’s (1974, 1980) excavations at the African American oystering village of Sandy Ground, New York; John Otto’s (1975, 1980, 1984) doctoral analyses on the archaeology of Cannons Point plantation; Leland Ferguson’s (1978, 1980) study of African American colonoware; Jim Deetz’s (1977) study of Parting Ways; Sarah Bridges’s and Bert Salwen’s (1980) excavations at Weeksville; Joan Geismar’s (1980, 1982) study of Skunk Hollow; Sam Smith’s (1976,
1977) excavations at the Hermitage Plantation in Tennessee; and John Combes’s (1972) ethnohistorical and archaeological study of a late-19th to 20th-century African American cemetery at the Charles Towne Landing Site, South Carolina. These studies explored themes and perspectives that would influence the development of the discipline, most notably Ascher and Fairbanks’s search for African cultural retentions; Otto’s analysis of status variation within the plantation community as revealed in the archaeological record; Schuyler’s application of the ethnohistoric approach to African American archaeology; Combes’s study of African and African American burial practices; and Deetz’s, Bridges and Salwen’s, Geismar’s, and Schuyler’s recognition of the significance of African community with settlement structure. While all of these studies were influential, CRM’s approach to African American archaeology would largely be structured by the developments within CRM itself.

Three studies from the South Carolina lowcountry signal CRM’s recognition of African America and are founding elements in the discipline of African American archaeology: Lesley Drucker and Ronald Anthony’s investigation of the Spiers Landing enslaved African American house (Drucker and Anthony 1979; Drucker 1981), William Lees’s investigation of Limerick Plantation (1980), and Thomas Wheaton, Amy Friedlander, and Patrick Garrow’s (1983) excavations of Yaughan and Curibo Plantations. The work at Yaughan and Curibo (Wheaton et al. 1983) was particularly significant in its influence on the discipline of African American archaeology because it found the remains of earth-walled, African-style dwellings as well as conclusive evidence for the production of a low-fired earthenware ceramic—known as colonoware—by enslaved African Americans within the villages (for further discussion of colonoware, see Ferguson 1978, 1980, 1989, 1992; Lees and Kimery-Lees 1979; Wheaton and Garrow 1985; Garrow and Wheaton 1989). These discoveries showed a clear linkage between African cultural behaviors and African adaptation to the New World. However, Wheaton and colleagues (1983) also witnessed the gradual replacement of these African artifacts with European and American ceramics and house styles. As a result, they presented a model of acculturation that posited the loss of most archaeologically identifiable African cultural traits by the early-19th century and the eventual Americanization of enslaved Africans.

This transformation from African to African American has formed the paradigm of CRM African American archaeology over the past decade and a half. As illustrated by the opening quote from Michael Trinkley’s investigation of the African American freedman village of Mitchellville, CRM archaeologists have routinely debated whether the objects of African American archaeology are legacies of African cultural behaviors or evidence of African American efforts to emulate Euramerican culture, in particular concepts and markers of social status. The majority of CRM studies have concluded that so-called Africanisms ceased to exist by the 19th century. In the absence of readily recognizable African cultural attributes, CRM archaeologists have treated African American sites, artifacts, and behaviors as analogs to their Euramerican counterparts. Sites and assemblages have thus been analyzed using concepts and indices developed for Euramerican sites that are well suited to the cursory-level analysis and interpretation of many CRM studies—George Miller’s (1980, 1991) socioeconomic index scaling and Stanley A. South’s (1977) artifact patterning in particular. The outcome of these studies have been two-fold: emphasizing African Americans’ impoverished socioeconomic status within Euramerican economy and society, and measuring African American assimilation as seen in part by the assumed acceptance by African Americans of the Euramerican socioeconomic structure and cultural ideals. What these studies have been routine failed to seek or identify are evidences of continued African behaviors and the resistance to Euramerican cultural norms, as well as indications of the formation of a creolized, African American culture with its own distinct values and behaviors. Several recent studies illustrate CRM archaeology’s ability to contribute to the study of African American creolization and provide signposts for the future of African American CRM.

This paper summarizes the results of CRM African American archaeology within the broad functional contexts of plantations, freedmen villages, tenancy, urban studies, and cemeteries. The overviews provided for each of these categories are meant to provide an introduction to the general drift of African American CRM and should not be considered as comprehensive
assessments of all of the CRM archaeology conducted within a given context. This summary also reflects my geographic bias and is thus weighted toward the archaeology of Georgia and South Carolina. These overviews are followed by a summary of CRM’s impact on African American archaeology and recommendations for the future direction of CRM studies.

Plantation Studies

By far, the majority of African American archaeological studies conducted within a CRM context have been completed on plantation sites, a statistic that applies to academic archaeology as well. This archaeological bias in favor of plantation sites is also found in historical studies and also reflects the social condition of the majority of African Americans within the United States prior to the Civil War. Plantation studies have been conducted throughout the southeast, from the seaboard states of the original 13 colonies to the interior states such as Kentucky and Tennessee. However, coastal plantations have received significantly greater attention than plantations of the piedmont and interior. In part, this reflects differences in the agrarian economy of the coast versus the interior and the effects of varying crop economies on site formation and preservation. Coastal crops included rice, indigo, Sea Island cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane. Of these, rice cultivation in particular and sugar and indigo to lesser degrees were associated with stable plantation settlements because of the high labor investment needed to create rice, indigo, and sugar-cane fields. These fields were enriched through tidal flooding, and the profits of these crop economies financed the creation of substantial plantation homes and complexes. Village architecture was more likely to be permanent on these plantations than on upcountry plantations, and thus the locations of enslaved African American villages are more readily identifiable. In contrast, short staple cotton, the primary crop of the interior, quickly exhausted soil nutrients. Hence cotton-field locations were rotated every three to five years. Outlying upland plantation settlements were relocated with the fields to minimize transportation of enslaved African Americans from the plantation center to the fields. Cabins were routinely constructed of log, and the archaeological legacy of these short-lived settlements is negligible. As a result, it is extremely difficult to identify outlying village locations on upland plantations (Anderson and Joseph 1988:422–424).

Coastal plantations have also received a significantly greater degree of study than upland plantations because of the nature of development and federal permitting on the coast. The past two decades have witnessed a significant amount of development in coastal areas, particularly in South Carolina. Federal permitting increases the likelihood that a coastal development will require CRM study, either through Corps of Engineers permits (where projects are situated on major waterways or will affect wetlands) or through various coastal regulatory agencies that receive federal support. Between Drucker and Anthony’s excavations at Spiers Landing in 1979 and 1998, there have been more than 30 enslaved African American site excavations within coastal South Carolina alone (Drucker and Anthony 1979; Carillo 1980; Lees 1980; Wheaton et al. 1983; Zierden et al. 1986; Abbott and Brockington 1989; Poplin and Brockington 1989; Trinkley 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Wayne and Dickinson 1990; Brooker 1991; Gardner and Poplin 1992; Adams 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b; Trinkley et al. 1993, 1995; Adams and Trinkley 1994; Eubanks et al. 1994; Kennedy et al. 1994; Poplin and Brooker 1994; Trinkley 1995, 1996; Wayne et al. 1996a, 1996b). This figure does not include sites identified during CRM surveys that were not recommended for excavation or that were preserved in place.

These excavations have revealed several important aspects of African American life on the lowcountry plantations of the old South. Work at Yaughan and Curiboo, as well as subsequent excavations at Wapoo Plantation (Gardner and Poplin 1992) and elsewhere, have revealed the presence of wall trench/mud-walled domestic architecture that is likely African in style and construction (Carl Steen [1999] suggests these structures could also reflect French architectural traditions). These excavations, coupled with the recovery of enslaved African American-made colonowares at a number of lowcountry plantation sites, suggest a measure of social autonomy which enslaved African Americans in coastal South Carolina experienced during the 18th century. In combination with historical documentation, it appears that African Americans at work
on lowcountry rice and indigo plantations prior to and shortly beyond the Industrial Revolution lived in villages consisting of African-style housing and ate from handmade earthenwares similar to those used in Africa, relying on traditional African cultural practices to adapt to the New World. Indeed, Africans represented a majority of the South Carolina population by 1740, and the appearance of the colony was such that by 1737 Swiss visitor Samuel Dyseli would remark, “Carolina looks more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people” (qtd. in Wood 1974:132–133).

Interpretations based on CRM archaeology have shown that during the 18th century, enslaved African Americans in coastal South Carolina functioned under minimal supervision, lived in isolated villages, and grew rice on the margin of coastal swamps. This situation changed in the last decades of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th century as the plantation economy matured. Plantation settlement and architecture became more structured and formal, and African American villages were moved from peripheral locations to a core area comprised of the main house and its domestic and agricultural supporting facilities. Artifacts changed as well, with European-made industrial ceramics replacing African American colonoware as the dominant ceramic within the plantation villages. While the majority of CRM studies have treated this change within the African American world as a product of acculturation, it is important to recognize that this change affected plantations as a whole and not simply the material culture of slavery. Tidal rice agriculture, employing dikes and locks and the tidal surge to flood and drain rice fields, became prominent, and with it arose more stable and profitable plantation complexes. Previously planters had resided in Charleston and allowed their plantations to be run by overseers. The profits of tidal rice agriculture as well as its geography, which emphasized proximity to the coastal rivers that were the region’s highways of the era, induced planters to move onto their plantations, establish large plantation homes, and create more stable plantation structures. Racial tension was clearly a factor in these changes. Planters moved outlying villages into the big-house sphere and organized these villages along streets where enslaved Africans could be more easily supervised.

I have suggested elsewhere (Joseph 1989, 1993a, 1993b, 1997a) that the ideology of the Industrial Revolution, which focused on labor management and units of production, came to dominate the mindsets of lowcountry planters and left in its wake plantation factories. Within this European-American ideology, material cultural came to reflect class and social status, not cultural identity. As a result, images of Africa had no place. Ben Sullivan recalled that

Old man Okra he wanted a place like he had in Africa so he built himself a hut. I remember it well. It was about twelve by fourteen feet and it had a dirt floor and he built the sides like basket weave with clay plaster on it. It had a flat roof that he made from bush and palmetto and it had one door and no windows. But Master made him pull it down. He say he ain’t want no African hut on his place (qtd. in Works Project Administration 1940:179–180).

As the nature of the lowcountry plantation economy shifted from an informal system in which enslaved African Americans had a degree of social and cultural autonomy to a highly structured and profitable industry in which planters displayed economic and social standing through architecture and its organization, the appearance of Africa was forcibly erased from the plantation landscape (Joseph 1993a).

Culture change, however, is not acculturation. CRM’s treatment of enslaved African Americans within the Euramerican cultural system has by and large ignored the importance of African American resistance to change and the processes of creolization, applying formulas such as artifact patterning and the socioeconomic status index to show that enslaved African Americans were “acculturated” and of a lower socioeconomic status than Euramerican planters. Work outside CRM, most notably Kenneth Brown’s excavations at the Levi Jordan Plantation in Texas and more recently at Frogmore Plantation in Beaufort, South Carolina, has recovered evidence of African ritual practices and beliefs through artifact caches (containing Euramerican manufactured artifacts) found in the floors of African American dwellings. Brown suggests that archaeologists working on the plantation must be more cautious in recording and recognizing the contexts of artifacts as well as being more cognizant of African belief systems and their potential material reflections (Brown and Cooper 1990; Brown 2001).
Freedmen Villages

Southern enslaved African Americans began leaving their plantations to seek Union encampments following Union General Benjamin Butler’s decision to treat enslaved African Americans who had fled to the protection of the Union forces at Fort Monroe, Virginia, as contraband of war. As the numbers of enslaved African Americans reaching Union lines increased, a plan to house them was needed. The result was the establishment of freedmen villages, camps established to support the freedmen until the war’s end. These villages were established primarily in coastal areas where the Union army had formed occupations supported by their superior naval resources. Most villages were of short duration, only the wartime years, although some persisted after the conclusion of the Civil War.

Two of these village sites, Mitchellville in South Carolina and James City in North Carolina, have been the focus of extensive archaeological investigations (Trinkley 1986; Wheaton et al. 1990). Union forces both planned these freedmen villages and dictated their architecture. In these respects, life within the villages was not significantly different from life on the plantations. Both towns were occupied after the war ended, and the artifacts from both archaeological excavations are predominantly from the 1870s and 1880s. Both Trinkley’s and Wheaton’s analyses focus on the use of artifact patterning and socioeconomic indexing to judge status. Wheaton notes that socioeconomic status among the James City sites was slightly higher than measured for enslaved African American sites, while Trinkley notes that some high-status artifacts (considered to be products of the plantation big houses) had found their way into the archaeological record of the freedmen camps. Interestingly, Wheaton and colleagues (1990: 247–248) note evidence of communal behavior within James City, as witnessed by the use of central wells within urban blocks as well as other aspects of the archaeological and historical record. They view this communal chord as the most African element of James City.

Tenancy

For many southern African Americans, agricultural tenancy was the keynote of the postbellum South. The archaeological legacy of African American tenancy is represented by a number of CRM studies (Anderson and Muse 1982, 1983; Orser et al. 1982; Trinkley 1983; Brockington et al. 1985; Orser and Nekola 1985; Joseph et al. 1991). These studies have contributed to the archaeological debate on the visibility of tenancy and the role of artifact density in tenant site evaluation and assessments of National Register eligibility (this debate is sometimes known as the Anderson-Muse/Trinkley debate). CRM archaeologists have recognized that tenant sites are difficult to identify archaeologically because of their limited material remains and impermanent architecture and because tenant site locations were frequently employed as agricultural fields following abandonment, damaging the limited archaeological integrity these sites might earlier have possessed (Joseph and Reed 1997).

Charles Orser and Annette Nekola (1985) recognize the importance of continued community relationships within the tenant community as witnessed by the perseverance of Millwood Plantation’s village residences into the tenant era, and the effects of kinship on tenant settlement have been recognized elsewhere (Crass and Brooks 1997).

Urban Studies

After the war, many African Americans flocked to cities, which offered the greatest potential for employment as well as community. CRM archaeological studies of urban African American houses and neighborhoods have been conducted in Mobile (Wheaton et al. 1993; Joseph et al. 1996; Gums 1998), Atlanta (The History Group 1982), Lexington (O’Malley 1990, 1996), Pittsburgh (Carlisle et al. 1991), several towns on the Delmarva Peninsula (Catts et al. 1989; Catts and Custer 1990; Catts and McCall 1991; Catts 1992), and Washington, DC (Garrow 1982; Cheek et al. 1983; Cheek and Friedlander 1990), among other cities. The majority of these studies have addressed late-19th-century occupations, with the analysis of socioeconomic social stratification as the primary theoretical approach. Analysis of the remains of the antebellum free African American community of Springfield in Augusta, Georgia, provides an important glimpse of African American culture outside the plantation and during the first half of the 19th century (Joseph and Reed 1991; Joseph 1992, 1993c, 1997b).
Excavations at Springfield revealed a post-in-ground house with associated pit features dating to the period from 1820 to 1855. The structure measured approximately 10 x 20 ft., the common dimension for Yoruba houses in West Africa, which John Vlach (1975, 1978) views as ancestral to the shotgun house, commonly found in many southern African American neighborhoods. This house thus reflects African and Afro-Caribbean building traditions and design. The house yard was pocketed by small pit features, many of which contained light to moderate quantities of refuse that appears to represent yard sweepings. The purpose of these yard pit features is unknown, although they were possibly dug to obtain dirt for house wall or floor construction. Yard pit features have been documented both ethnographically and archaeologically by Emmanuel Kofi Agorsah (1983:106–107) as a common feature of Nchumuru settlements of West Africa and were common at Yaughan and Curriboo plantations and on other plantation workers villages. Ceramic vessels recovered from Springfield indicate a preference for hollowwares, cups and bowls, supporting an observation made by Otto (1975) at Cannon’s Point that the African American diet shared West Africa attributes in its preference for liquid-based soups and stews.

A single artifact, an anthropomorphic clay pipe, provides a unique insight into free African American lives as well as the complexities of interpreting material culture. This figural pipe, representing a biblical figure as indicated by the gilt cross earrings, headdress, and gold beads in the braided beard, would obviously be considered of high socioeconomic value and status (Figure 1). However, its interpretive meaning is far more complex. Various Southern laws placed prohibitions on African American’s public use of clay pipes, designed to prevent African Americans from co-opting artifacts that conveyed social status (Haughton 1972:16; Cashin 1980: 63). However, pipes were integral facets of African life, where they were also used to denote rank and status. Finally, this particular pipe possesses ideological and symbolic meaning in the personage it displays. The pipe was identified in the maker’s catalog as representing a Ninevien or a citizen of the Middle Eastern town of Nineveh (Figure 2). Nineveh was one of the birthplaces of Biblical archaeology and was excavated and described by Henry Austin Layard (1849) in Nineveh and Its Remains. The design of the pipe may in fact be taken from the illustrations appearing in Layard’s book (Figure 3). The archaeological discovery of Nineveh was seen as proving the validity of the Bible. Nineveh may have been a particularly relevant place to African Americans of the old South, as the Old Testament prophecy of Nahum depicts God’s destruction of Nineveh and the freeing of the Ninevien slaves.

These are the words of the LORD:
Now I will break his yoke from your necks and snap the cords that bind you.
Image and idol will I hew down in the house of your God.
This is what the LORD has ordained for you: never again will your offspring be scattered; and I will grant your burial, fickle though you have been.

FIGURE 1. Ninivien pipe recovered from archaeological excavations at the Free African American Springfield site.
Has the punishment been so great?
Yes, but it has passed away and is gone.
I have afflicted you, but I will not afflict you again.

Cemeteries

CRM has made significant contributions to the studies of African American physical anthropology, health and disease, diet, and ritual behavior through the study of African American cemeteries. Two cemetery projects in particular, the First African Baptist Cemetery (FABC) of Philadelphia and New York City’s African Burial Ground, represent comprehensive, large-scale excavations that have yielded significant information concerning African American life (Parrington and Roberts 1984, 1990; Blakey 1986; Angel et al. 1987; Parrington 1987; Parrington et al. 1989; Crist et al. 1991, 1995, 1997; Harrington 1993; Crist and Roberts 1996; LaRoche 1996; Rankin-Hill 1997; Mack and Blakey, this volume).

The FABC project provided evidence of African ritual behaviors within the burial customs of Philadelphia’s 19th-century African Americans. Several of the burials were placed with coins near the head. Usually this was a single penny. Michael Parrington and Daniel Roberts (1990:150) speculate that the inclusion of a single coin in the FABC graves may reflect the West African tradition that death represents the beginning of a journey into the spirit world, and that the coins may represent the fee for traveling to the spirit world (among the Fanti of West Africa, money is interred with the corpse to help its spirit “cross the river” into the spirit world). Similarly, six burials containing a single shoe also appear to reflect the West African perception of death as a journey. Shoes are also believed to have power and can be used to keep the devil away. Two burials contained an overturned plate covering the stomach area of the deceased, which may represent a West African practice designed to contain the “essence” of the deceased within the plate from which the last meal was eaten and prevent this spirit from haunting the living. Among the African Burial Ground graves, Cheryl LaRoche (1996) notes the recovery of beads from a number of burials that are indicative of both West African dress as well as potentially ritual behavior. Beads were also recovered from burials at the Sam Goode Cemetery in southern Virginia (Crist et al. 2000). Alex Caton noted the use of beads in Ghana to provide ritual
protection of the wearer, particularly infants and children. The recovery of bead necklaces from children’s burials at the Sam Goode Cemetery would appear to indicate this same practice and behavior. A pierced 1854 dime recovered from another child’s grave where it was worn as a necklace also appears to indicate African and African American cultural beliefs. Pierced dimes and other silver coins were reportedly worn to guard against sorcery, with the belief that if the coin turned black, then it was an indication that someone was conjuring against the wearer (Works Project Administration 1940:124–125; Crist et al. 2000).

Conclusions

CRM excavations of African American cemeteries demonstrate the persistence and continuation of African beliefs and customs into the 19th century. Similarly, the archaeology of the free African American village of Springfield shows that when left to their own resources, antebellum 19th-century African Americans drew upon their African heritage to adapt to their setting in the New World. By and large, however, CRM investigations of African American sites have been one-dimensional, emphasizing the American and neglecting the African. CRM analyses that focus on African American socioeconomic status as measured by Euramerican indices or that view cultural change using simplistic and outdated models of acculturation (for a review of acculturation studies, see Howson 1990) are meaningless at best and at worst, demeaning. CRM archaeology must study African American sites within a cultural perspective and must take into each project a knowledge of African cultural behavior as a fundamental context for understanding. While recognizing that the cultural legacy of Africa is both rich and diverse, and itself engaged in culture change from the 16th century onward (Thomas 1995), historical archaeologists working on African diaspora sites must bring an understanding of African peoples, histories, and cultures to their analysis and place less reliance on analytical techniques developed for Euramerican cultures.

By the middle of the 19th century, European and American industrial material culture dominated the world market. It should be of no surprise that these goods had also found their way into African American households. But material culture’s meaning lies not in what an object is, or what it is worth, but in how it is used and in the meanings and values imposed on them (Brown and Cooper 1990; Wilkie 1995). An ornate clay pipe does not indicate simply that an individual is a smoker with some financial resources. In the case of Springfield, the pipe indicates a continuation of African traditions, a belief in Christianity and its promise of a just world, and the defiance of Euramerican laws that sought to regulate social behavior. The most promising future CRM study of African American archaeology will likewise consider sites and objects as African artifacts engaged in negotiating the passage from African to African American.

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