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Critical Response Five

ARCH1900: Archeology of College Hill

When reading any document it is paramount to consider the audience that the writer is trying to address; audience shapes the way writers present information so that they can successfully convey their ideas. For archeologists, there are two distinct groups of audience. There is the audience that approaches the archeological report in an academic manner and the audience who is interested in the report because they feel a personal connection to the peoples who are being research. Both of these groups are searching for information about the ‘past’ but the second group is reading in order to learn more about the specific connection they feel, or their ‘heritage’. These people are interested for the purpose of understanding the specific area of the past that they feel connected to. This connection is mainly a result of cultural or geographic proximity to the peoples being studied.

It is paramount to consider the views of any group of people who call a site a part of their heritage when beginning to work on a site. The results of the failure to do so is shown Nick Shepherd’s article describing the intense dispute over the archeological work at Green Point in Cape Town, South Africa. The work began as a type of cultural resource management work for a housing complex and uncovered a large burial ground. As the archeologist began to remove the large quantity of bodies from the site there was a public outcry against the excavations. The public saw “archeology as a science [which] seem[ed] to have been given precedence over other needs” (Shepherd 2007: 105). In this statement, the need which the public felt was being ignored was the need to respect the dead which the community felt a connection to. The excavators at this site caused this conflict by ignored the needs of the community, which felt a strong connection to the dead in the burial ground at Green Point. This extreme example shows how important it is to preform some type of heritage management to help stabilize the relationship between archeologists and the community that identifies itself with a site, or the contents in it, as part of their heritage. This kind of management can help excavators to avoid making the mistake made at Green Point.

It is also important to reach back and examine the past in order to learn more about ones heritage. That is exactly what the Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice set out to so. The issue of institutional heritage was address with respect to Brown University’s involvement in the Rhode Island slave trade. The report sought to “examine the University’s historical entanglement with slavery and the salve trade” (Slavery and Justice 2006: 4). In doing so, the report successfully brought forward the strong connection between Brown’s colonial and early federal benefactors and this trade and how the university reacted to changing policies on the state and national level. In doing so, the committee hoped to help the university reconcile with its past.

It is important to note that in some scenarios it may be impossible to address certain questions of heritage, or the past in general, though archeological excavation. This is shown in the work preformed at the Van Cortlandt Planation in Bronx, New York where the archeologists observed a difficultly in finding archeological evidence of slavery in an area where the historical record shows that slavery was present (Bankoff and Winter 2005: 314). At this site, the archeological record was ineffective in adding to the narrative of the sites history. But, even with this handicap, the authors were able to provide an in in depth, possible narrative for the plantation using the documentary record.

As archeologists at the John Brown House, we too must consider the implications of our excavations. Our work will most likely not cause a large public outcry as Shepherds work did in South Africa, since no group has personal claims to the houses history. Our audience is mainly the Rhode Island Historical Society who will use our work to help further describe the narrative of property and its inhabitants. This narrative is used to help understand colonial and early federal Rhode Island. With respect to the issue of Rhode Island slavery, our works is very similar to the Van Cortlandt Plantation. At both sites a house narrative has been established using the documentary record which can sufficiently describe the houses histories but both homesteads lack archeological evidence for the slave population that we know existed at the Van Cortlandt Plantation and at the John Brown House. Although our site lacks any need for heritage management at this time, it is good to consider and understand the implications and affects of the heritage on a site for our future work.