



ARCHAEOLOGY OF MY PANDEMIC SAFETY PLACE

OSUN Connected Learning Contest Winner

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**Course: Historical Archaeology—Early African and
German Americans near Bard**

As the pandemic crested in New York, we reconvened online at the close of Spring Vacation. The students already had done more than a month of 10 seminar sessions of classroom learning from textbooks and individual research projects, following an initial visit to the planned excavation site on January 31st of 2020. As participants in an Engaged Liberal Arts and Sciences course, they also met a prominent member of the descendant community, plus the Town Historian, in addition to a recent Bard student who had written his senior project thesis about the dig site. In the semester's 2nd week, the class drove together to Manhattan for an all-day symposium at the Bard Graduate Center, entitled 'Archaeology of Free African American Communities in the 19th Century.' Each student then explored one of symposium presenters' research and provided in-depth introductions of their scholar's work to the class.

As a result of some students' difficulties focusing during the pandemic (anthropology faculty's consensus), reading was reduced to one chapter of a book per week, rather than three of its chapters. This afforded close reading of the text and careful study of maps at various scales. We examined a range of frames, from symbolic artifacts clustered intentionally at the bottom of a hand-dug pit (in the ground under a slave cabin bed), to descriptions of various social and economic circumstances across hundreds of miles along the sea coast. This enabled students to develop a heightened appreciation of spatial scale and gave them experience in shifting frames of reference from close-up to far distant, from personal to societal.

Historical Archaeology: Early African and German Americans near Bard

Documentary research and excavations focus on a religious site 9 miles from Bard, epicenter in 1710 of the first substantial German-speaking community in the New World. At this parsonage in Germantown NY, students search for vestiges of material culture left by the African Americans who lived as slaves of a Calvinist minister's family for 30 years in the late 1700s. The excavators have found evidence of rituals for protection, cures, and well-being. Adjacent to these buried 'spirit bundles' in the house cellar are symbolic artistic markings that represent the human soul's place in the cosmos, likely made by an African American family who purchased the property when it became the center of a diverse neighborhood from 1850 to 1900.

Practical and pedagogical value

Students turned themselves into subjects of archaeological study by interpretation and representation of their own surroundings. In an online seminar we sequenced their presentations by distancing outward from a part of the campus they all knew. Three were sheltering at or near Bard; one was sheltered westward in the Catskills Mountains; a fifth was eastward near the coast of Rhode Island; a sixth was far to the south near the Gulf of Mexico, outside Houston; the last was by the Pacific coast in suburban Los Angeles. By this intra-continental convergence, the class learned how each member of a dig crew relates to others from a unique perspective, communicating a personal environment.

The College's safety measures against the viral spread blocked us from actually digging and analyzing physical discoveries so the class instead got to witness how prior students presented their excavation techniques and discoveries through video, still photographs, and brief analytic texts that those students had prepared to illustrate various aspects of how the project was conducted in other seasons. The class responded by being consistently in attendance, completing the assignment, and participating with enthusiasm, thoughtfulness, and insight.

Part of the assignment was to discuss in Zoom seminar how such approaches could serve future learning experiences, both for undergraduates in the course but also younger students, such as the sixth-graders with whom we had planned to work, in this Engaged Liberal Arts and Sciences course.

Students realized their historic positionality during the pandemic and reflected upon their surroundings, first in writing and then by way of maps, photos, and sketches. They addressed the question one might ponder in the future: Where were you when the initial withdrawal from in-person interactions began, as the global pandemic hit hard in North America?

Students used email to receive the assignment and replied via email the day before the class meetings on Zoom. We Zoom-recorded for later reviewing the last three Friday sessions of the semester, as we returned to focus on our original dig site, via the Bard Archaeology website. The class discussed a sequence of interactive maps produced through Neatline and ArcGIS software, videos of the excavation process by previous students, interactive 'slide' shows from lectures at scholarly conferences, and internet exhibits of on-site public educational installations.

The tasks combined old and new media of expression: familiar means of communication rendered into novel formats, most importantly creative map-making and drawings, shared from each student's computer screen via Zoom. Each presenter was able to use a cursor to point out particular places of interest, sometimes by zooming in closer or farther out, or by movement from one image to another.

The assignment

For the assignment texts, verbatim below, dates have been added in [brackets] and key elements have been put in **bold**. The 2nd entry has a brief introduction added *in italics*. The text mentioned in both parts of the assignment below is Patricia Samford's 2007 dissertation book Subfloor Pits and the Archaeology of Slavery in Colonial Virginia. In the chapter 1st cited, she explores evidence for West African cuisine, by analysis of holes where sweet potatoes were likely in storage under slave cabins' floors beside their fireplaces. Samford is rigorously scientific as she marshals contextual evidence, yet she uses fictional vignettes to convey the profound excitement of her discoveries, featuring people known to have lived at the sites and the things they likely made and used. In the 2nd chapter mentioned, such usage was for personal goals, as containers for medicines to treat illness or charms to resolve love sickness. In the second part of the assignment another text is mentioned: Mechal Sobel's 1987 book, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*.

[Assignment on Monday, March 30, for 2/3 April:] Hi folks, **we'll resume our seminar on Samford with her Ch. 6, on hearth front pits**. Pls send me your 1-page paper as usual on Wed by 8 AM, so I can organize discussion. Note a mistake on p. 132, 5 lines up: Structure 50 is in Utopia III, not U' II, which you'll need to know to see the arrangement of pits for her physical analysis of its plant remains on pp. 135-6. **Be sure to have a look back at its map on pp. 54-5. Pls. comment on how Samford prepares you in the opening vignette to appreciate the significance of the analysis of plant remains and how she provides a different *kind* of interpretation near the chapter's end. How does this 'empathetic archaeology' complement her scientific presentation? What experience of your own can you share regarding food**

sources, storage, and serving that expresses your own sense of the meaning of Samford's conclusions in this chapter? Be well, Prof Christoph

[Continued assignment, made on Sunday, 5 April, for seminars Th/Fr 9/10 April:]

In your one-page paper please provide 1] **your interpretation of the 4 'personal' sub-floor pits at Kingsmill and Carters Grove in Samford's 7th chapter, drawing on her reasoning about their use identification and the contextual data she provides;** 2] Your brief **sketch of how you'd write a story** about the Kingsmill feature, or even a vignette briefly using the knowledge you've gleaned; 3] **references to 5 images [cartographic, photographic] that you could embed one within another as map details**, zooming from sub-region to the feature itself [the Williamsburg area as shown in Sobel zooming down to the pit with the bottles]. Send the document to all of us, as we agreed you'd do with Thursday's too. For Friday, **draw a map of your 'site[s]' from last week, illustrating it with sketches of its history &/or images of your hypothesized discoveries at the site[s].**