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A Civil War Cemetery and African-American Heritage

Salvage archeology is almost synonymous with loss in Cultural Resource Management. Working just ahead of the bulldozers, archeologists are placed in a tense situation attempting to save the past from the present. Usually no one wins, the archeologist saves only a fraction of the site, the developer is put behind schedule, and the public loses yet another part of their heritage. This was the situation that the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology found itself in during May of 1987 when a private developer uncovered an unmarked cemetery of African-American Civil War soldiers on Folly Island, South Carolina. With no modern cemetery protection laws at that time, the site being located on private property, and no funds available for salvage, it looked like yet another example of America's heritage being lost to progress. But in the case of the Folly Island, the Institute took a chance and conducted salvage excavations without assurance of financial assistance or ultimate success, and over the years we believe that it has paid-off in largely a win-win result for everyone.

Folly Island was the staging area for the Federal siege of Charleston, South Carolina, during the Civil War. From April 1863 until February 1865, thousands of Union soldiers camped, built gun emplacements, and fought on Folly Island, transforming the six-mile-long, half-mile-wide sandbar from a quiet, forested, barrier island into a barren, treeless fortification. Among the soldiers who performed the hard, grueling siege work were a number of African-American units, the foremost being General Edward A. Wild's "African Brigade." This unit consisted of the 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and 1st North Carolina Colored Infantry. The 55th Massachusetts was the sister regiment of the more famous 54th Massachusetts. The recruitment of northern free black men to form the 54th had been so successful in Massachusetts that officials decided to form a second regiment. The 55th mustered in at Readville, Massachusetts, in the spring of 1863. After training they were shipped to New Bern, North Carolina, and brigaded with the 1st North Carolina Colored Infantry. This unit was made up of culturally quite different men. They were slaves who had escaped through the Confederate lines or who had been "recruited" during Union raids into

the North Carolina countryside. Together they were sent to Folly Island and were immediately ordered to perform the heavy labor of building forts and gun emplacements on Folly and Morris Islands. These units worked incessantly through the fall and winter of 1863. In February 1864, both units were shipped to Florida and participated in the Olustee Campaign, but afterwards the 55th returned to Folly Island to perform more fatigue and guard duties, and eventually fight during the long siege of Charleston. During those two years, many of these soldiers died of various camp related diseases like typhoid, fevers, consumption, and pneumonia, and were buried on the island. When the island was abandoned after the war, so were those who died.

There the soldiers rested until that spring day when a relic collector found the disturbed graves as the site was being cleared for development. He called the Institute. With the bulldozers rumbling in the background, the Principal Investigator met the Mayor of Folly Beach, South Carolina, and the developer on site. While public pressure may have eventually forced the developer to avoid or otherwise preserve the cemetery, at the time there was no legal means by which to stop the site clearing from continuing, and continuing it was. The time to act was now. In a tense meeting in which no one was sure of the future or each other, a private, public, and research partnership was formed with a simple handshake. The developer agreed to a construction delay to allow the Institute to salvage the graves for study and with the promise that the soldiers would be reburied. For two weeks the Institute worked to recover 14 burials. Later, another four were recovered by another archeological group, bringing the total to 18 burials, plus miscellaneous bone which could not be assigned to a particular burial. Eventually in May 1989, two years after the excavations, the soldiers were reburied in a Memorial Day ceremony at Beaufort National Cemetery, Beaufort South Carolina, that brought together hundreds of people and made national news.

But it wasn't nearly that easy. During the two years in which the Institute worked on this project, nothing seemed to go right. The developer, having moved from site clearing to the construction phase of the project, applied for permits and the SHPO correctly required additional survey of the property. More sites were found which were potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and a legally-binding Memorandum of Agreement was signed for data recovery. The SCIAA began data recovery but these excavations only proved that the site was one vast campground of many regiments spread over the entire project area. As the SHPO, the

developer, and SCIAA grappled with this problem, the project became mired in controversy.

Restless preservationists who thought that nothing was being done let their feelings be known in the press. A relic collector saw the opportunity and chastised the archeological community, stating that collectors do a better job of preserving sites by collecting it. At one point the data recovery was close to being stopped when, during a site visit, representatives from the SHPO and the developer were set upon by an angry dissenter.

The cordial partnership was close to unraveling. But the developer again allowed additional time for more work beyond that prescribed by the MOA. Funds were promised by the state of South Carolina and SCIAA began this additional work. Then right at the end of fieldwork, the decision to fund the project was reversed. SCIAA was now left with an unfunded, unfinished project and a promise to rebury the soldiers. But feeling an obligation to keep going, SCIAA absorbed the loss, completed its analysis, wrote a report, and contacted officials in Beaufort, South Carolina to arrange reburial at the National Cemetery there.

Sometimes the fruit of such exertions are only seen after some time has passed, and in re-examining the effort from the perspective of 1996, we now feel much good came out of the project either directly or indirectly. First, archeologists were able to learn much about the lives of African-American soldiers on Folly Island and in the Civil War, despite the fact that conditions and time worked against them. Government agencies within South Carolina whose job it is to preserve cultural resources became aware of the vast Civil War resources on the island and surrounding the city of Charleston. Such awareness led to additional salvage work at another Civil War site by The Charleston Museum when Hurricane Hugo hit the island. Awareness of the problems of protecting burials led the Institute to work with the state legislature to modify the state's Abandoned Cemetery law. Broadening the terms defining a cemetery has helped protect all buried human remains. The effort to find funding for the excavations, while ultimately unsuccessful, forged a partnership between a conservative white senator and a liberal black senator who worked together for a common cause.

But the big winner was the public, especially South Carolina's African Americans. While it cannot be said that no one in South Carolina knew about African-Americans' contribution to fighting the Civil War before Folly Island, it can be said that Folly Island excavations and reburial ceremony brought a greater awareness of this contribution to many residents. Through countless public presentations to historical, community, and

educational groups still being presented today, South Carolinians are being reminded of this heritage. Through popular publications, South Carolina's African-American community is reading about their ancestor's contribution to winning the Civil War. The reburial ceremonies in 1989 folded into an important traditional African-American holiday in Beaufort, in which local church and civic organizations, both black and white, pulled together to bring off a successful remembrance. Included also were a large contingent of white and blacks from urban Boston, Massachusetts who worked with rural whites and blacks from South Carolina. At the cemetery today, a plaque honors the men of the 55th Massachusetts and 1st North Carolina, serving as a constant reminder of their contribution to visitors and tourists.

Today in Charleston, South Carolina there is a preservation group working hard to preserve the Civil War battlegrounds around the city. At one of Charleston's Civil War battlegrounds on James Island, an earthwork has been purchased and set aside for preservation. There is an African-American Civil War re-enactment group now active in the community. The Charleston Museum is working on an exhibit of Civil War archeology combining their work with the Institute's which will bring additional awareness. Of course, the Folly Island excavations cannot take credit for all these developments. But at the same time, the project was the first large-scale, well publicized, archeological effort to salvage a piece of Charleston's Civil War past. Certainly as a result of the Folly Island excavations more people in South Carolina today know that archeological remains of African-American heritage lie at their feet. In that sense, we who worked on the project would like to think that our work somehow assisted in affecting these positive developments and helped in bringing about the current state of the public's awareness of African-American heritage.

References

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