

CRITERION 6 – ARCHEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEW PHILADELPHIA TOWN SITE

- *Archeological analysis at New Philadelphia reflects new trends within historical archeology that seeks to understand how material culture and racial identity interact. This analytic approach has the potential to significantly contribute to new ideas and theories about how to study race through the archeological record to a major degree.*

Race, Material Culture, and Identity

Recently, archeologists have shifted their research within historical archeology from identifying artifacts that can be specifically associated with a particular race to a more sophisticated approach that analyzes the shifting nuances of race as it is expressed within society. Racialization is the term used to identify this dynamic view of race and racial identity.

Earlier in the development of historical archeology, archeologists determined cultural patterns by analyzing and comparing artifacts from sites as “material expressions” of race or culture used to identify African-American sites, particularly when historical documentation was scant (Price 1985:40; Samford 1996:97; Galke 2000:254-255). However, material patterns of culture or ethnicity may not be obvious or even visible in the archeological record. If those patterns are visible, they may have been influenced by historical, environmental, and social factors (Baumann 2001:159). Patterns and material culture are fluid, meanings change over time, and pattern analysis does not consider the effects of cultural exchange or creativity (Vlach 1998:213; see also Babson 1990:20; DeCorse 1999:132). Similar fluidity can apply to the concept and expression of race and racial identity.

As part of this shift, archeologists have placed the idea of racialization at the center of archeological analysis. In doing so, they have understood racialization as both passive, or ideological, as well as active, that is, racialization creates action and encourages reification within a constructed system of power relations. Because, in this view, social relationships are invented, racism becomes a mechanism to maintain a hierarchy in which some groups are judged to be superior to others. This construct of social hierarchy has material outcomes that are particularly well suited to archeological analysis. In fact, some archeologists have argued that, “some of the most discrete evidence of the racialization process may be retrievable only through archaeological methods.” (Orser 2007:13).

For instance, research has shown that hierarchical societies are sites of constant struggle for material goods. In other words, those at the top of the hierarchy who provide, enforce, and maintain racial labels have greater life chances and thus greater access to goods, creating social distance between the levels of the hierarchy, effectively creating “structures of consumption” (Bourdieu 1984:183-184). Therefore, the connection between race and material culture rests upon consumer behavior or consumption.

“At the root of consumption theory is the idea that people consume what is meaningful to them within the universe of what they can afford.” (Orser 2007:13). Thus, one of the most central issues for archeologists who study consumer behavior through the archeological record is to how to interpret what often appear to be mundane artifacts such as glass and ceramics, in ways that provide insight into, “quite significant social issues, including racial ideology, nationalism, and affluence” (Mullins 2001:159).

For instance, Bastian’s archeological investigation of a logging site in northern Michigan defied cultural pattern theory analysis. In the 1920s, the site was inhabited by African-Americans lured by the potential to acquire their own property, but archeological investigation produced no recognizable pattern identification; only the lid of a hair care product commonly associated with African Americans was evidence of the group’s occupation (Bastian 1999). Interestingly, while documentary sources assert that African Americans at the site left the area because they could not adapt to the extreme cold and their existence in the area was a great trial to them, the archeological evidence indicates neither that the families had a spartan lifestyle, nor that they made a poor adaptation to the area. Artifacts recovered contained material goods that were, “far from being strictly utilitarian, multipurpose, and limited in variety” (Bastian 1999:291). Bastian found that the consumer culture of the families was richly diverse, ornamental, sometimes frivolous in nature, and evidencing activities beyond subsistence. He notes that the families’ consumer behavior, “possibly even exceeded in their technological development the possession of the Elmwood whites” (Bastian 1999:292). While Bastian does not go further in his analysis to examine this discrepancy, this was an early study that recognized the limitations of culture pattern analysis on African American sites and focused attention on the contradictions of consumer patterns at such sites which begged for a different approach.

In a more recent example, archeological studies conducted by Paul Mullins in Annapolis, Maryland, examines how African-American consumers negotiated post-Civil War racism through a complex range of everyday consumption tactics that simultaneously evaded anti-Black racism and secured African Americans the modest yet very meaningful privileges of American consumer citizenship. In one example from the study, African-American consumers chose to purchase higher priced brand-name packaged products to avoid the risk of local shopkeepers substituting inferior or under-weighted goods. Mullins’ findings not only confounded pattern identification methods, but show the value of placing racialization at the center of an analysis (Mullins 1999:173).

While artifacts found at the African-American sites in Mullins’ and Bastian’s studies may have been the same as or similar to artifacts found at European American sites, when interpreted in a way that focuses on the relationship between racialization and material culture, interpretations become more meaningful.

The findings to date at New Philadelphia also reflect this shift in new and exciting ways by moving away from the search for cultural markers, objects identified with certain ethnic groups or cultures, and patterns for evidence of African traditions and customs toward understanding how material culture has various meanings that can reinforce

power structures, defy them, or create new ones. New Philadelphia provides an exceptional opportunity to study how both African Americans and European Americans imagined new social possibilities, as can be seen through their material culture, because of their unique position within a frontier setting, across an entire townsite, and through time.

The linkage between race and class throughout recent archeological analysis, and in the United States generally, is obvious, though, historically, often contested (see for instance, Wilson 1980; Shanklin 1998; Webster 1992), and clearly nuanced and mutable (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Numerous critics and social scientists have illustrated this relationship, but two comments succinctly summarize the issue: “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardship” (Du Bois 1903:14); and “The Negro is poor because he is black; that is obvious enough. But, perhaps more importantly, the Negro is black because he is poor” (Harrington 1963:73).

The usefulness of studying unequal material distribution through consumer behavior and the archeological record thus becomes clear, yet it can be oversimplified. The real question for archeologists that can be explored at New Philadelphia is to consider how race and class, “determine, structure, and impact the distribution of material objects,” they recover (Orser 2007:46).

Following this, nationally significant questions that New Philadelphia can address through the focus on racialization include questions of consumer behavior and class: access, use, and meaning of goods and services recovered at individual households and compared across space and time. What was the quality of life of African-American and European American households? How did the lifeways of the European American merchant vary from that of the African-American blacksmith? What about families of mixed racial descent? How did the frontier setting affect access to goods? How did Emancipation affect the consumer behavior of families in the town? Was there variability (or not) in diet, possessions, dwellings? If not, what does this say about the aspirations of the town’s African-American and European-American residents? How is the American dream defined and/or reimagined by the residents of the town through time and is this reflected in their material culture? How can issues of both race and class be studied through the resident’s consumer patterns? Can archeologists study the idea of “racial uplift” in New Philadelphia in the pre-Civil War and post Civil-War eras? Can we study class consciousness in the archeological record of the towns residents? If home and land ownership was a powerful indicator of class, did it empower the town’s African-American residents? Was the railroad bypass of the town (ensuring its ultimate demise) a conscious decision by those who would deny access to goods to “the black town?” If so, what does this say about the power of material culture to reinforce both social and racial relationships and the length to which white society goes to maintain them?