

Integrating the Frontier

A town founded by a former slave resurfaces in Illinois

BY JENNIFER PINKOWSKI

THERE USED TO BE A LOT MORE TREES on this low-hilled Illinois farmland rolling eastward from the Mississippi River. In the nineteenth century, settlers cleared most of the forest, and since then it's been farmed continuously or returned to prairie grass. I'm aware of the lack of leafy protection as my skin tingles in the intense, high-noon sun and archaeologists complain that exposed soil quickly bakes into a cement like hardness, making their work slow and difficult. Paul Shackel of the University of Maryland is giving me a tour of the excavated remains of New Philadelphia, a nineteenth-century frontier town and the first in America to be founded by an African American, a former slave known as Free Frank McWorter.

That gives it historical status. But for archaeologists, New Philadelphia is compelling because its population was unique, too: a multiracial mix of skilled laborers, farmers, and merchants living together at a time when segregation ruled, and when most free blacks lived in urban areas. Born in antebellum times and gone by the Jim Crow era. New Philadelphia evolved from a small settlement of just a few families on the very edge of the United States to a bustling market town that met its demise when the railroad passed it by.

Shackel, along with Chris Fennell of the University of Illinois-Urbana and Terrance Martin of the Illinois State Museum, wants to put New Philadelphia back on the map, and they are not alone. Funded by a \$224,000 grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) for a three-year field school, the archaeologists have the support of a vigorous community organization and descendants of former residents. The hope is that one day New Philadelphia will be a nationally recognized historical site that draws ongoing federal funding for research and tourists with dollars to spend in the local communities.

The momentum has picked up this year. In February, a 35-mile stretch of I-72—which runs between nearby Hannibal, Missouri, and Springfield, Illinois, and passes within three miles of New Philadelphia—was renamed the Free Frank McWorter Highway. During the days I visit the dig, several new signs pointing the way to New Philadelphia go up along the short stretch from the highway to the site. And a week before my visit, the Illinois Historic Sites Advisory Council approved nominating New Philadelphia for inclusion on the National Register of Historical Places because of its archaeological significance. (Free Frank's grave site, on a lush hill overlooking the highway, has been on the list since 1988.) A 45-day federal review began in early June. Shackel tells me, "The review should be pretty smooth sailing. By the time this article hits newsstands, New Philadelphia should be on the National Register."

Making New Philadelphia nationally known may be the public aim of the project, but the archaeological goal is to see if the town's material remains reflect its unusual racial mix. Deed, census, and tax records give researchers some idea of who lived where in New Philadelphia. By comparing the plant and animal remains, domestic and commercial goods, and how households from different ethnic backgrounds used their lots, they aim to reconstruct the economic and social dynamics of the frontier town.

There are many takes on New Philadelphia. It was a bastion of racial equality; a place where blacks and whites lived together, but not equally; the very picture of triumphant capitalism; the embodiment of abolitionist activism. Supporters of these disparate views, however, agree that New Philadelphia deserves wider recognition.

NEW PHILADELPHIA'S STORY IS a quintessentially American one. A savvy entrepreneur

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sets out for the wild frontier to make a living, support his family, and live free. He buys cheap land, subdivides it, sells the lots, and turns a profit. But Free Frank McWorter was different, having once been on the brutal underside of nineteenth-century American capitalism. A former slave from Kentucky, McWorter bought 42 acres of land in Hadley Township, Illinois, in 1836, seventeen years after purchasing his own freedom with money he had earned from saltpeter mining and hiring himself out as a laborer.

He chose wisely. The land was in a fertile corridor between the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, two major arteries for trade and goods coming from St. Louis, Chicago, and Springfield. It had timber for houses and fuel, and open prairie for crops and livestock. And it was sparsely populated—a safer bet for free blacks threatened with being kidnapped and sold into bondage by “bounty hunters” from neighboring Missouri, a slave state. (Mark Twain set *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* in the 1840s, when he lived in Hannibal, 25 miles away.)

McWorter had the town surveyed, registered it with the state, and subdivided it into 144 lots. (He may have named it New Philadelphia after the Pennsylvania city, a center of free-black intellectualism and activism at the time.) He settled his wife, Lucy, also a former slave, and their four free children—other children and grandchildren remained enslaved—on an adjacent farm. During the next 20 years, McWorter nurtured New Philadelphia’s development, selling town lots to whites, blacks, and people of mixed heritage. The income went to freeing 10 members of his family. After his death in 1854, at the age of 77, his estate provided for the freedom of six others.

Meanwhile, New Philadelphia continued to grow. By 1850, it was a flourishing market town, and in the next decade became the biggest west of Springfield. Located on a major road through the county, it supported many skilled laborers, including blacksmiths, cobblers, and seamstresses, and thriving businesses—general stores, a post office, cabinetmaking shop, a wheelwright, tavern, and a stagecoach stand. Its people married each other and had children. They traded with merchants along the Mississippi and in other towns. They may have sheltered escaped slaves. Its population, two-thirds white, peaked at 170 just after the Civil War.

But when the Hannibal and Naples railroad came through the region in 1869, bypassing the town in favor of Barry three miles away, the town suffered. As Barry’s economic activity grew, New Philadelphia’s declined, and people began to move away. By 1885 the town was unincorporated. A few families hung on, farming, but by the late 1930s, the last resident left. With the exception of a few cabin foundations, New Philadelphia disappeared until last year when archaeologists began to dig it up.

FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN the small towns in the area—Barry, Griggsville, and Pittsfield among them—the existence of New Philadelphia is well known. “Everyone has always been proud to say they were from New Philadelphia,” Phil Bradshaw tells me at the Kinderhook Lodge, where the archaeologists and field students are staying. It’s a sentiment I hear from many locals, many of whom have given oral histories to the archaeologists. Bradshaw, a successful pig farmer with good political connections (he has sat on national and international livestock committees), is the head of the New Philadelphia Association (NPA), the community organization largely responsible for getting archaeologists involved. It is trying to raise money to buy the site with the idea of eventually donating it to the state or to the federal government for a national park. It also provides food, lodging, and supplies for the archaeology team, including an air-conditioned RV stationed on the site where trays of artifacts dry after being sorted and washed.

Hoping to get New Philadelphia nationally known, in the late 1990s the NPA approached Vibert White, a historian then with the University of Illinois-Springfield (he now heads the Public History program at Central Florida University). Outside of the academic world, few people, other than locals, knew of its existence. “New Philadelphia is one of the earliest attempts at American pluralism at its best,” White tells me shortly after my visit to the site. “Slavery controls our imagination of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, but it wasn’t the only thing. We have to look at other ways people lived.”

Most archaeology related to the nineteenth-century African American experience has focused on preemancipation sites in the south, and therefore mostly slave quarters. Moreover, only a limited amount of archaeology has been done in frontier towns, regardless of their racial makeup. New

Philadelphia has the potential to take historical archaeology in a whole new direction.

In 2002, White held a one-day conference in Springfield at which 75 scholars discussed the future of New Philadelphia. The 42-acre site was on a farm owned by Larry and Natalie Armistead, who had placed that portion in a USDA soil conservation program years before, aware that New Philadelphia had once been there. With a \$50,000 grant from the University of Illinois, White enlisted Shackel to do a land survey. The director of the Center for Heritage Resource Studies at the University of Maryland, Shackel has worked at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, among other sites. The survey yielded more than 6,000 artifacts typical for a frontier town, including whiteware and stoneware ceramics, ground glass, faunal remains, domestic objects such as needles and thimbles, and a lot of construction hardware, including machine-cut nails, which were used in that region from 1820 to 1880s, when they were replaced by modern wire nails.

On the strength of these finds, the team got the NSF grant for the field school. (A University of Illinois-Urbana field school is also on site. The two work together.) In May 2004, a geophysical survey found distinct soil anomalies, particularly in the commercial district, where owners of house lots were known from deeds and census data. The team then opened up 18 pits in four areas, finding undisturbed archaeological features, including hundreds of artifacts and a refuse-filled cellar, which span the entire period of the town's occupation. No two weeks into the second, 20 students are digging away at a half- dozen more.

One lot is where Arden Cobb, a white physician from New England, lived after 1867. Tax records say the property was undeveloped before then, but the archaeologists find a post hole and pottery predating that. "If there is a structure here, it's not mentioned in the tax records, so it must be very early—before 1850," says Martin.

A cellar or well seems to be emerging from yet another lot that historical documents and oral history say was undeveloped. Yet pottery, nails, animal bones, even a tavern pipe—intact, and sooty from its last smoker—have surfaced within the 13-foot-deep structure.

The typical New Philadelphia home was a 16-by-30-foot wood cabin with a stone cellar accessed

through a hole in the floor on a 60-by-120-foot lot, which probably had outbuildings for cooking or keeping animals. You can get a sense of what these homes looked like from the two New Philadelphia-era cabins on the site, which protect the only visible foundations. (Larry Armistead got them from other farms in the county: One was about to be destroyed, and he traded his 1969 sports car for the other.)

Excavations on the site of a lot where Squire McWorter, one of Frank's sons, and his wife, Louisa, once lived, have yielded foundation walls and artifacts similar to types found elsewhere on the site.

Overall, the artifacts indicate a good quality of living for a frontier town. Last year, porcelain ceramics and a pewter toy set were among the finds. This year, shards of contemporary English pottery reveal New Philadelphians' ability to acquire imported pottery from merchants along the Mississippi. It has been found in lots owned by residents of all races, indicating a similar access to markets and trade.

But ethnic differences between households will be informative as well. These will probably emerge from the faunal and botanical remains. Last year, a refuse-filled cellar on the property once owned by the Bulters, an African American family, yielded nearly 1,000 faunal remains that show a dietary pattern called Upland South: lots of pig, chicken, and very little beef. It can provide a basis for comparison with other household remains.

But more refuse pits need to be found. While the excavations this year have been rich in unexpected architectural features, allowing the archaeologists to see the town's "footprint," as Fennell calls it, the dietary remains are slim, says Terry Martin, who is back at the Illinois State Museum, where he and students are analyzing the faunal and botanical remains. He says, "We haven't really gotten any large faunal samples. That's disappointing, but I think we uncovered a lot of promising features for next year," such as the deep cellar or well, and the Squire and Louisa McWorter house.

Overall, the team is hesitant to interpret the finds, because the project is less than half-way done, and the site is so large. "We don't have a handle on what the artifacts mean yet, because they're still being excavated," Fennell says. "When we finish the next summer we'll have a better picture."

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SLAVERY, THE CIVIL WAR, the labor movement, the Depression, the Civil Rights movement—at every single stage of American history; there’s been a McWorter trying to reach the moral high ground,” Sandra McWorter tells me as we find reprieve from the heat in front of an oscillating fan in the Armisteads’ living room. She is visiting the dig from Chicago. A liaison between a community technology center and the University of Toledo, Sandra is a great-great-granddaughter of Free Frank. She came to the highway renaming ceremony in February and spoke at the state historical review. She believes New Philadelphia was an abolitionist town because of its integrated nature.

This impression, and her relationship with the excavation, couldn’t be more different than those of her first cousin, Juliet Walker, who has been publicly critical of the project. Author of *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* and a scholar at the University of Texas who specializes in black business history, Walker says the public is getting an image of the town that is historically inaccurate. Rather than being a bastion of racial harmony, it was a place where blacks and whites were in no way on equal footing, despite the town’s founder being black. She also says the town’s importance begins and ends with Free Frank. “What makes New Philadelphia interesting was that it was founded by a black person before the Civil War,” Walker tells me on the phone. “After that, it became just like any other small Midwestern town. Blacks have always lived among whites. It doesn’t mean they were treated equally.”

The archaeologists deny promoting a utopian idea of the town, though they argue it was an exceptional place. Historical evidence, Fennell says, indicates that the many small towns dotting the frontier were segregated. “You have enclave towns of African Americans on the edges of white areas but you don’t have towns that have the same mix of race as New Philadelphia,” he adds.

As a scholar and a descendant, Walker is protective of New Philadelphia. She got McWorter’s grave site on the National Register, and she dug up much of the historical evidence for New Philadelphia in county and township records. She also feels that her work as a black scholar has been hijacked by white archaeologists. “I have been working on this for decades. From my perspective, it’s an exploitation of a slave laborer, and a descendant of his,” she says.

“This is a town with a very complex heritage, so it makes it hard to say that any one person has a claim on it,” says Fennell.

Abdul Alkalimat (originally Gerald McWorter), director of Africana Studies at the University of Toledo and Sandra’s brother, says, “I understand [Walker’s] passion about protecting the integrity of our family history. She’s not pleased with the archaeological research, but many of us are. I’m not talking about the developing interpretations, but the fact that we have material remains of our ancestors that we didn’t have before. I’m grateful to the archaeologists for that.”

DESPITE THE CONFLICT, NO ONE wants to see New Philadelphia fade from the public radar. The National Register designation looms on the horizon, and the NPA has signed an option to buy the land from the Armisteads. (Now it has to come up with the money.) In late June, around the time that 50 members of the McWorter family met at New Philadelphia at a reunion sponsored by the NPA, Walker, who did not attend, held a press conference in Barry at which she announced plans to reconstruct the town a few miles from the actual site.

Though there is no contact between Walker and the archaeologists or the NPA, some community members and descendants have also voiced interest in reconstruction. “When we’re asked, ‘Can we rebuild a house?’ we say, ‘Well, we could tell you the locations of houses, the general dimensions, and then perhaps you could have a display plaque,’” says Fennell. “But to build a three-dimensional structure ... there’d be too many guesses and inaccuracies.” The archaeologists suggest an off site museum and visitor’s center. The NPA is also interested in re-creating the town by planting its former streets and lots with native trees and plants, which the archaeologists think is an interesting idea, provided their archaeobotanical data yields good information.

White believes the site should be overseen by the National Park Service, which has the resources and scholars to support ongoing research and to help draw visitors. The region is one of the poorest in Illinois, and the small towns nearby could use tourist dollars. Hannibal and Springfield have long tried to capitalize on their most famous residents:

Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln. New Philadelphia could lure historically minded visitors traveling from one city to the other.

Whatever the future of the site, the archaeologists hope research continues. Shackel says, "Ten, twenty years you could work on this site. There is so much to do. We're just touching the tip of the ice-

berg here. Even after three seasons, we won't have the complete picture of New Philadelphia. It's exciting to be part of the beginning of a very large project that means a lot to a lot of different people."

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