

As a Living Part of Our Community: Sharing the Past with the Public through CRM

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The 1966 National Historic Protection Act generated a cultural resource management industry eager to conduct new federal and state mandated archaeological and historical investigations. Until recently, sharing this information with the public has not been a priority. This paper explores the challenges of presenting archaeology to the public within the framework of CRM and offers ideas for transcending the boundaries that often exist between archaeological research and public interpretation. The public programme designed for the SC Department of Transportation's Combahee Ferry Historic District mitigation project serves as a case study.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 prompted the creation of a cultural resources consulting industry eager to conduct the many new federal and state mandated archaeological and historical investigations. In the past 40 years, thousands of investigations have been undertaken, hundreds of thousands of artifacts recovered, and millions of pages of documents generated, all with the goal of preserving important cultural resources for the American public. Unfortunately, we have not done as well sharing this information with the public, who, in one way or another, has footed the bill. That is, until recently.

More and more there are calls by public agencies and by archaeologists to remember our obligations set out in the 1966 Act to preserve our cultural resources "as a living part of our community life," and to "give a sense of orientation to the American people." Regulatory agencies like the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, public agencies like the South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT), cities, and private developers are all seeking opportunities to include public outreach in the mitigative process. Our challenge is no longer to get people to recognize the value of public outreach, the challenge is to find effect ways to accomplish this outreach. The

Combahee Ferry Historic District (CFHD) mitigation project is an ideal example of how significant historical information can be provided to the people of South Carolina and the United States as an integral part of mitigation, and the challenges we as archaeologists and interpreters face in developing public programming.

The SCDOT began to develop plans to widen the last two-lane stretch of US Highway 17 in South Carolina in the 1980s. This section of the highway extends through the ACE Basin in Beaufort and Colleton counties; the ACE Basin is an extensive series of waterways and historic landscapes along the Ashepoo, Combahee, and Edisto Rivers. The ACE Basin has witnessed little modern development and many of its swamps, river marshes, and woodlands are publicly owned or held in conservation easements that will protect and preserve this unique Lowcountry environment. Here, US Highway 17 follows the most direct overland route closest to the Atlantic Coast between Charleston and points south. This route has been traveled since the initial settlement of Carolina, if not before, as evidenced by the establishment of a ferry over the Combahee River by 1715 and the continued use of this route throughout the next three centuries.

However, the road widening plans were abandoned in the 1990s because of concerns about environmental impacts to the Basin. The widening of US Highway 17 to a four-lane divided highway would affect the largest acreage of wetlands ever in South Carolina up to that time. Initial cultural resources investigations identified a number of potentially significant sites at or near the Combahee River crossing but did not identify the most important historical event associated with this locale, the June 1863 Combahee Ferry Raid led by Harriett Tubman.

The SCDOT continued to monitor this section of US Highway 17 throughout the 1990s. As Charleston and Hilton Head Island/Bluffton grew, so did traffic along this stretch of US 17. It became one of the most dangerous sections of road in the state. A number of fatal accidents prompted the creation of passing lanes in certain sections of the highway but did not eliminate most of the two-lane constrictions. Following a horrendous bus accident that resulted in the deaths of US Navy personnel in 2004, the SCDOT again decided to widen the highway since no other feasible alternative existed to relieve the safety issues inherent in this narrow stretch of road. Also, the bridge over the Combahee River, constructed in 1947, was now obsolete and required replacement.

Brockington and Associates and Tidewater Atlantic Research conducted intensive surveys of the US Highway 17 corridor (Shuler et al. 2007, Watts 2005) and identified one historic property along this 21 mile stretch of highway, the Combahee Ferry Historic District.

The District contains 18 individual resources (11 archaeological sites and seven architectural or landscape elements including the Combahee River). The District's elements reflect the importance of the Combahee River crossing in the development of the Carolina colony and the State of South Carolina from 1715 to 1924. Most importantly, historical research demonstrated the association of this locale with the largest emancipation event that occurred before or during the Civil War- a raid personally guided by Harriett Tubman that freed 700-800 people in one evening.

This is the only locale within South Carolina and one of the few in the United States that can be directly linked to Ms. Tubman and closely associated with the emancipation of African American slaves. At least ten of the individual elements of the

District are associated with the Civil War and possibly this event. This association is the most significant aspect of the CFHD. In support, the South Carolina legislature named the new crossing “The Harriett Tubman Memorial Bridge.”

Once identified, the SCDOT immediately began efforts to avoid or minimize impacts to the District. The SCDOT, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) entered into negotiations to define the activities necessary to mitigate adverse effects to the District. Given the nature of the ACE Basin and its terrain, there was no feasible alternative to building the new road atop the existing roadway. Portions of the project were redesigned to create the smallest possible footprint through the District and to avoid specific features related to the Civil War occupations of the ferry crossing. A Memorandum of Agreement between the principals outlined six tasks necessary to mitigate the adverse effects of the US Highway 17 projects to the CFHD.

These include:

- Extensive archival research concerning the Combahee Ferry Raid of June 1863, the operation of ferries on the Combahee and throughout the South Carolina Lowcountry, other military actions at the Combahee Ferry, and the role of taverns in the social, cultural, political, and economic development of the Lowcountry.
- Archaeological data recovery at 38BU1216 (the site of the ferry keeper’s house/tavern) including examination of the terrestrial and intertidal portions of the site within and beyond the US Highway 17 right-of-way.
- Detailed topographic mapping of the District’s landscape elements.

- Documentation and monitoring of 38CN255 (a sunken vessel in the Combahee River).
- Preparation of an NRHP nomination form for the CFHD.

and

- **Development of an extensive public information/education program highlighting the Combahee Ferry Raid and the results of the other mitigative actions.**

The MOA also created a Public Information Committee selected by SHPO and SCDOT staff to represent as many interested parties and viewpoints as possible to ensure that no aspect of the historical significance of the CFHD was overlooked. This Committee has oversight responsibilities for the public information/education programme developed during the mitigation project.

Although we recognized the need to develop a broad spectrum of public interpretation early in the design of the mitigative actions associated with the US 17 Improvements projects, this did not alleviate the many challenges inherent in sharing archaeology with the public. Many of these issues are discussed in recent publications by John Jameson (1997) and Barbara Little (2002), to name just two. Much of this discussion centers on our obligation to make archaeology more accessible, both socially and intellectually, and to create opportunities for the consideration of multiple views of the past. For our discussion today, we will accept the construct that we are obligated to interpret or translate our archaeological research and make it meaningful for the public.

Our case study today is to consider the additional challenges we face developing public programmes within the framework of cultural resource consulting. Many of these are practical as much as philosophical. They include:

- convincing people we have something important to share – this can still be a problem with some private clients but we usually can show them that history and archaeology can add value to their project;
- working with small budgets – underestimating the costs involved in producing quality interpretive products is a common problem; we deal with a lot of sticker shock;
- and determining the cost-benefits of our programming. Justifiably, folks want to know if their money is well spent. Assessing success and interest is difficult for us. We seldom have the opportunity to do visitor counts or surveys. We rely solely on positive feedback from our clients.

Another challenge is maintaining curatorial control. On several occasions we have had clients who asked us to give them the artifacts so they could develop exhibits. Even clients who ask us to develop exhibits on their behalf may have their own agenda. We have an obligation to ensure that the materials we recover are treated properly and appropriately and that all of the voices reflected in the archaeological record are presented in any interpretive programme.

There are even more practical issues related specifically to developing appropriate interpretive products. These issues include finding and selecting an appropriate venue. More often than not, it is not possible to create a program within or near the archaeological site that is the center of the interpretive programme. The very nature of

CRM means it is likely the site no longer exists. In addition, sites can be located along highways, within gated communities, on military bases, under parking lots, or in out-of-the-way areas like national forests, or other managed lands. Similarly, when we do have a venue, its primary purpose usually is not to serve as a “museum” or gallery. Often, we develop displays and exhibits that are installed in sales offices, clubhouses, libraries, community centers, and schools. We are then challenged to coordinate with interior decorators, military rules, controlled access, and limited hours of operation.

Most of the time, our venues mandate self-guided/self-explanatory presentations. Seldom do we create interpretive programmes within existing heritage-based facilities. This too can limit the opportunities for true participatory experiences for visitors.

Finally, we have the issue of audience – again, since we are often working outside traditional venues, we have little opportunity to assess and understand who we mean by “the public.” Our presentations must try to appeal to the wide array of audiences that make up the general public.

At the Combahee Ferry Historic District, our goal for the public interpretive program is to showcase the historical significance of the district, and to create opportunities for the public to make meaningful connections to the district’s natural and cultural landscape. Here, our primary challenges are:

- Our lack of venue – we are located along US Highway 17 – a very busy thoroughfare,
- Our undefinable audience - our audience is “the public,” and
- our mostly invisible cultural resources – the archaeological site is under the roadway, the Civil War features are on private land, and the vessel is submerged.

Our solution, therefore, is to create a multi-component program that includes a series of interpretive products we hope will help the SCDOT reach the greatest number of people, allow the presentation of meaningful information close to the actual location of some of the historical events, and create opportunities for people to see and experience real objects recovered during the archaeological investigations.

To determine which interpretive products would meet our presentation goals, we developed a series overarching themes and associated stories, set out learning opportunities, and considered our audience. We know that the CFHD has a complex and multifaceted history that is difficult to present in a single product. As a result, we will develop three interpretive products for the SCDOT – a double-sided outdoor kiosk, a traveling exhibition, and a Web site.

The double-sided outdoor kiosk will be located on SCDOT property at the Beaufort County-owned boat landing on the Combahee River adjacent to US Highway 17 bridge. One of the most powerful ways to create memorable and meaningful experiences for the public is to present interpretive materials at the location where events occurred. When visitors can read about a place, person, or event, AND stand at the location where the events took place, it is easier for them to make deeper, more personal connections to the story. While the plantations, the tavern, and the ferry associated with the CFHD are gone, it is still possible to imagine the landscape that existed at the Combahee River during the period of significance by reflecting upon the modern-day marshes that are in fact remnants of the old rice fields. While the structures built to manage the fields are gone, relict ditches and embankments continue to create the feeling of the antebellum

landscape. The historic causeway is also present and makes a scenic drive across the marsh and over the river.

It is likely the Combahee River looks much as it did when Harriett Tubman helped free nearly 800 African American slaves in a single night. This is the ideal location to present a general overview of the significance of the Combahee River crossing and the myriad of important events that happened here. A significant portion of this product will be dedicated to an overview of the famous Combahee Ferry Raid undertaken by the African American troops of the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers and led by Harriet Tubman and Colonel James Montgomery.

The traveling exhibition will allow SCDOT to share the fascinating stories of the CFHD with audiences throughout the Lowcountry and indeed all of South Carolina. This exhibit will not only present the stories of Combahee Ferry but will also include a selection of objects recovered during the archaeological investigations. Providing the public with the opportunity to see and experience real objects will help them make more meaningful connections to the historical events associated with the CFHD. Real objects make real experiences.

Like the exhibits planned for the outdoor kiosk, the traveling exhibit will provide visitors with a broad appreciation of the historical events that make the Combahee Ferry Historic District a significant resource in South Carolina. Our ability to include artifacts in the exhibit will allow us reinforce the concept that archaeology is an object-based discipline and that much of our understanding of the past relies on objects. The traveling exhibition will be available to museums, libraries, visitor centers, historical societies, schools, and a variety of other venues through the SCDOT.

The final product we are developing is a Web site. There is no question that the world-wide-web is and will continue to be a powerful and essential tool for information gathering, research, advertising, and socializing. Indeed, much of the power of the Web lies in its ability to reach millions of viewers around the world, and the vast quantity of information that can be stored and shared with visitors. Our multi-page Web site will be the essential ingredient that ties the other two products together. The Web site will have the ability to reach a much wider audience than the outdoor kiosk or the traveling exhibition and can supplement these two products with more in-depth historical information, information about viewing or borrowing the traveling exhibit, links to other resources pertinent to the stories of the CFHD, and a variety of interactive experiences that static exhibits cannot provide. Today, many people seek out Web sites that offer instructional resources as well as in-depth information about historical events, people, places, and objects. Equally important is the Web 2.0 trend that promotes new ways of using the web including information sharing and user collaboration. There is no doubt that the web has become an essential arena for social interaction. Since interaction and engagement are two of the primary goals of any interpretive program, identifying and embracing new and unique ways to create participatory experiences for Web site visitors will be an essential component of the site. As presently set out, the Web site will have a home page and six subject pages. Some of the key features of the site will be a virtual tour of the CFHD; a feature-based virtual tour of 38BU1216, an interactive historic timeline, research opportunities for students, teachers, and historians, and a virtual museum that showcases some of the unique objects recovered during the archaeological investigations. Our virtual museum offers one more opportunity for people to view real

objects. We hope this online collection will be of interest to casual visitors as well as a valuable tool for researchers.

In summary, our primary goal for the CFHD public outreach programme is to have a dialogue with the public. It is our responsibility to translate archaeological research into information that is relevant, meaningful, and accessible to the public. We must show that history and our understanding of the past is not static and is not determined by a single viewpoint. In our efforts to develop, design, and present public programmes within the framework of cultural resource management, we will continue to be challenged to create participatory experiences, to make important connections to the past, to know what our visitors think and feel when they view our products, to find appropriate venues, and to convince others that public interpretation is an investment and not a burden. These challenges will be ameliorated if we keep in mind John Jameson's charge to us that the "ultimate purpose and the *raison d'être* of the compliance process ... is to provide public enjoyment and appreciation of the rich diversity of past human experience."

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