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### GIVING VOICE TO THE VICTIMS OF THE 1908 SPRINGFIELD RACE RIOT

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Most archaeologists would admit that archaeological endeavors of the recent past have much less relevance (research potential or significance) than that of the more distant past. Archival records and written histories contribute immensely to our understanding of the more recent past, and archaeological research within this time period often results in redundant data that can be more easily extracted from the documentary record. Generally speaking, the older the resource, the fewer the archival records available for the historian or archaeologist to consult. As such, the archaeology of 1820s pioneer settlements in Illinois holds more inherent research value than that of urban households dating from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Progressive Era.

Nonetheless, the archival record is often incomplete, and the written record often portrays the social and political elite of society. More often than not, the lower echelon of

society (such as the laboring class and minorities) is poorly documented within the archival record, and that information which has survived is often biased and/or misleading at best (if not overtly untruthful). With this in mind, the archaeology of the recent past can also contribute significantly to our understanding of our collective past. As this case study illustrates, the archaeology of the recent past has the potential to look beyond these inaccuracies and/or biases, giving voice to the “voiceless,” and speaking “truth to power.”

For us, the ability of archaeology to “speak truth to power” was emphatically illustrated with our recent archaeological investigations on the Springfield Rail Improvements Project (SRIP). This multi-year project, located within the heart of the Capital City, is being undertaken to alleviate rail congestion in Springfield’s downtown central business district. It involves widening the 10<sup>th</sup> Street rail corridor and the construction of several underpasses.

Phase I surveys of the rail corridor identified 22 historic sites that were recommended for Phase II testing, all of which have been tested and/or mitigated. In the fall of 2014, Phase II archaeological investigations at the first of these 22 sites were undertaken. This work was located within a large, paved parking lot, a location once occupied by five dwellings that archival

records suggested had been burned to the ground during a seminal event in the city’s history—the August 1908 Springfield Race Riot.

On the evening of August 14th, 1908, racial tensions in Springfield ignited, in part due to the allegations of a white woman that she had been assaulted by a Black man (allegations later recanted). The accused Black man was arrested, and soon thereafter a large, vengeful crowd gathered at the Sangamon County Jail demanding immediate justice. Fearing trouble, the sheriff secretly whisked the prisoner out of the jail to the safety of Bloomington. Hearing such, the crowd erupted into violence, leading to two days of rioting during which two prominent Black men were lynched, many downtown businesses and homes were destroyed, and five white men died from wounds. One residential neighborhood in particular—referred to by the contemporary press as the “Badlands”—was targeted by the mob. With quick action by the authorities, the National Guard was mobilized, crowds were dispersed, and order was again returned to the streets of Springfield. Soon after this horrific weekend of violence, and incensed by the fact that it had taken place in the hometown of the Great Emancipator Abraham Lincoln, a prominent group of social reformers came together in February 1909 and formed the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The 2014 archaeological investigations exposed the extremely well-preserved subsurface remains of all five houses, each of which exhibited extensive evidence of having been destroyed by fire (see Figure 1 and Cover Figure). Based on the site’s archaeological integrity, its association with the 1908 riot, and the subsequent establishment of the NAACP, the site (11SG1432) was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Place, in recognition of its national significance relative to the civil rights movement in the United States. After a lengthy four-year consultation process between interested parties and the various state and federal agencies involved with the project, the right-of-way (ROW) was shifted 22’ in an effort to preserve in place a portion of these significant archaeological deposits, and the “green light” was given for moving ahead with data recovery (Phase III archaeological mitigation) within that part of the site remaining within the re-designed ROW. In April 2019, data recovery was initiated at the Race Riot Site, with the fieldwork continuing through October of that year.

During the archaeological mitigation, only the front portion of each of the five houses located within the project ROW was excavated (see red shaded area of

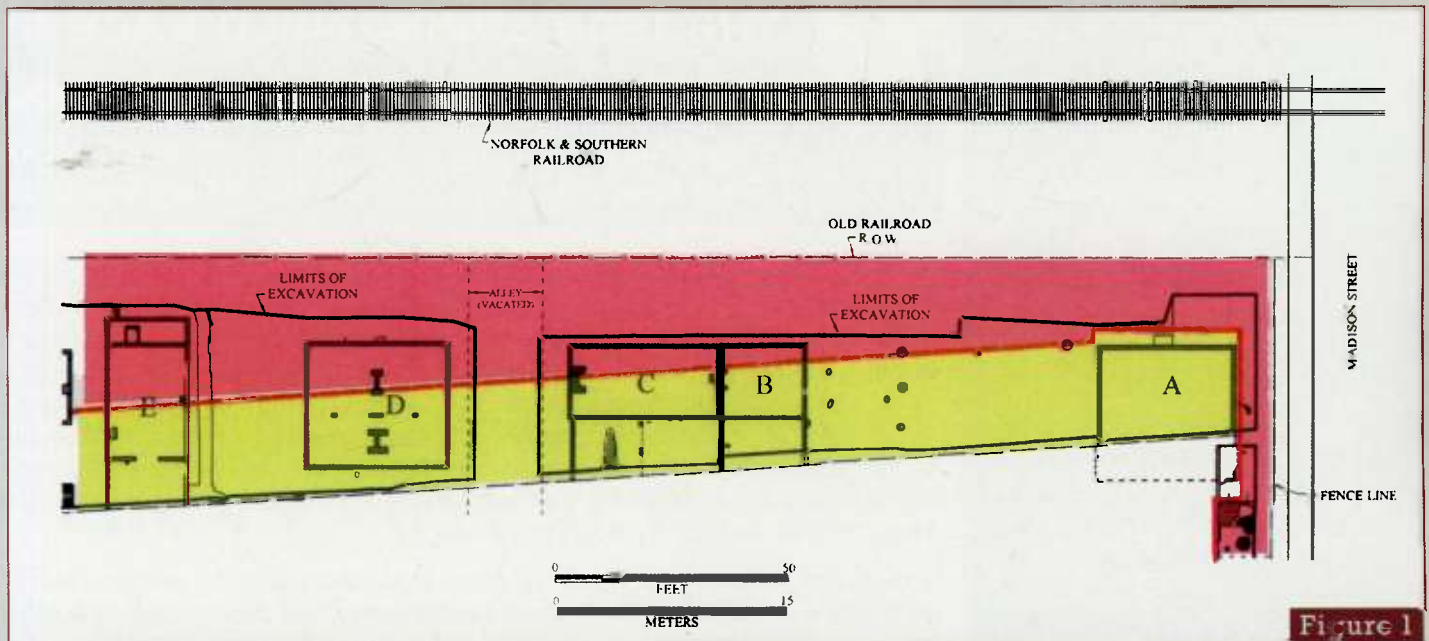


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1). The ROW cut on a diagonal across the fronts of five house lots, variably impacting each dwelling. Although the mitigation resulted in the excavation of approximately 50% of the original portion of House E (located on the north end of the project area), the excavated portion of each house decreased dramatically towards the south end of the site, with the entirety of House A remaining intact and unaffected by rail construction and preserved on City-owned property. Phase II testing exposed House A's front stoop from which an elderly Black invalid named William Smith was beaten and left for dead by the mob (Figure 2). The image of this architectural feature, which remains preserved in place on City-owned land, is a tangible link to the horrific events that transpired that hot August evening.

House B was constructed as a single-room brick dwelling with a partial cellar beneath it. Fire deposits in this cellar were well defined and artifacts from these deposits, like those from the other houses investigated, consisted predominantly of architectural debris (including brick, nails, window glass, and architectural hardware) and limited household furnishings. Among the household furnishings from the fire deposits of House B were three partially fused Illinois National Guard medals from the Spanish American War era

(Figure 3). One of these medals references the 8<sup>th</sup> Illinois Regiment, which was an all-Black militia regiment. Among its accolades, the 8<sup>th</sup> Illinois was the first U.S. military regiment that was fully under the command of Black officers. Although the regiment did not arrive in Cuba in time to see combat, they served with honor as the Army of Occupation at Santiago. Approximately 100 soldiers from the 8<sup>th</sup> Illinois were recruited from Springfield, one of whom was the young Robert H. Wright—the occupant of House B at the time of the riot.

House E, as originally constructed, was a small two-room frame house, also

with a partial cellar beneath it. The excavations of House E exposed a large section of burned flooring, and the remnants of both a trunk and a dresser. The marble-topped dresser contained a number of nicely folded fabric garments, whereas the trunk contained additional folded garments as well as several books, personal items (combs, jewelry, a wedding ring), a Metropolitan Life insurance policy, toys (dominoes, rubber balls), and a bone china demitasse cup and saucer. At least five books were present in this trunk, which included religious devotional texts, as well as everyday business references such as *The Mechanics' and Laborers' Ready Reckoner*. Also present in the trunk was a folded copy of the October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1905 issue of *The Topeka Plaindealer*—a Black-owned and edited newspaper. The analysis of the garments within this assemblage documents a woman's wardrobe that includes a variety of everyday and formal wear (Figure 4). Archival research suggests that a young, recently divorced woman named Bessie Black occupied this property at the time of the riots. Collectively, the artifacts from this house suggest that Bessie was a working-class woman striving for middle-class respectability.

William English Walling was a labor and race activist who visited Springfield during the course of the riots and



Figure 3



Figure 4

literate, family oriented, religious minded, politically engaged, and sought middle class respectability. Additionally, the young Robert Wright had served honorably in the military (during war time) in service to both his community and country.

The 1908 Springfield Race Riot was an event that was quickly “swept under the rug” and not talked about for multiple generations, by both Black and White citizens. By the 1970s, many Springfield residents were not even aware of the riot, let alone its significance. The archaeological investigations at this site have served as a window into the past, allowing current residents of Springfield (and the nation as a whole) to have a direct physical connection to this horrific event, and has fostered new dialogue regarding the events that transpired that hot August weekend. But more than just being a nostalgic and highly emotional connection to reverent ground, the excavations have given us significant new insights into the lifeways of the inhabitants who called this neighborhood home at the time of the riot—insights that contrast dramatically to the historical narrative of the contemporary press.

The archaeological excavations, and the variety of artifacts recovered from the burned-out houses, have provided a “voice” for the more-or-less anonymous victims of the mob action and has contributed to a more holistic interpretation of those individuals who had the misfortune of being caught in the middle of this historical event. This research has resulted in a significantly different perspective as to who these individuals were, and the history of the neighborhood referred to as the “Badlands.” Although silenced for a long time, these “voices” provide a sharp contrast between the racially-driven “perceived reality” of the past, and the “actuality” of the time period. Anonymous victims have become actual people.

This project has not only sparked new discussion regarding the event, but has

spurred the U.S. Department of the Interior to add the Springfield Race Riot Site (11SG1432) as the 30<sup>th</sup> site within the African American Civil Rights Network (AACRN). The site was recognized by the Department of the Interior for its historical and national significance “in the struggle for civil rights that served as the catalyst in the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).” Additionally, this research has received strong bipartisan support on a national level, and efforts are moving forward for creation of the Springfield Race Riot National Historic Monument, a new unit within the National Park Service, which would be under the management of the nearby Lincoln Home National Historic Site. The proposed National Historic Monument would memorialize the events that transpired that fateful weekend and commemorate the formation of the NAACP.

History is complex, has multiple viewpoints, and must be interpreted in its proper context. Hopefully, this research will contribute to further discussion as to who we are as a society, to understand our past so that we can improve our future.

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authored “The Race War in the North” that was published in the magazine *The Independent* the month after the riots. In accessing the cause of the riots, Walling stated that “Springfield had no shame...” and wrote of the community’s racial tension leading up to the riots—noting, in essence, that many of Springfield citizens believed it was the Blacks that brought this tragedy upon themselves. In summarizing the impetus for the riots less than one month after their occurrence, Walling (1908) wrote that the feeling of the community was that “[i]t was not the fact of the whites’ hatred toward the negroes, but of the negroes’ own misconduct, general inferiority or unfitness for free institutions that were at fault.” Similarly, the contemporary press painted a distorted picture of the City’s Black inhabitants, describing the neighborhood impacted by the riots as the “Badlands,” its inhabitants as “disreputable,” and the homes destroyed as “huts and shanties.”

The archaeological research undertaken at the Race Riot Site presents a much different image of the riot victims that stands in sharp contrast to the contemporary, generally derogatory historical record. Bessie Black and Robert Wright were two individuals of color, doing their best to survive in a community rife with racial bigotry and hatred. The archaeological data suggest that these two individuals (and their associated households) were