

Creating Space for a Place: The River Street Archaeology Project

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Community-based public archaeology projects seek to reclaim aspects of the past while addressing the needs and concerns of local communities. Sometimes this work forces archaeologists to tuck between the desire to conduct original research and the need to simultaneously navigate complex economic, social, and political conditions. The River Street Archaeology Project in Boise, Idaho is a perfect example of how archaeologists, historic preservationists, archaeology advocates, and a constellation of educational and government organizations collaborated in an attempt to reclaim the unwritten past of a multi-racial neighborhood. The 2015 field school is a case study in how archaeological data and history production can empower a community to reclaim its heritage.

Introduction

Conducted during the summer of 2015, the River Street Archaeology Project was a collaboration between a number of different organizations at the state and local level, volunteers, and university students (Figure 5). The archaeology component was a continuation of the River Street Digital History Project (www.riverstreethistory.com) that centers on recapturing the history of the River Street Neighborhood in Boise, Idaho (White 2016). This place was historically known as the city's black neighborhood even though it was occupied by a diverse population that included European, Japanese, and Basque immigrant, and Euroamerican families. The entire project seeks to collect information about the neighborhood, including photos, archival documents, and oral histories, in digital format and make them available to the public via the internet. From its conception, the archaeology project sought to include as many stakeholders as possible, but it was quickly realized that each of these organizations and individuals had unique needs, desired outcomes, and perceptions about what the project was all about. Navigating these stakeholders' concerns while also providing an opportunity to conduct an archaeological and anthropological field school was of paramount importance to the success of the project.

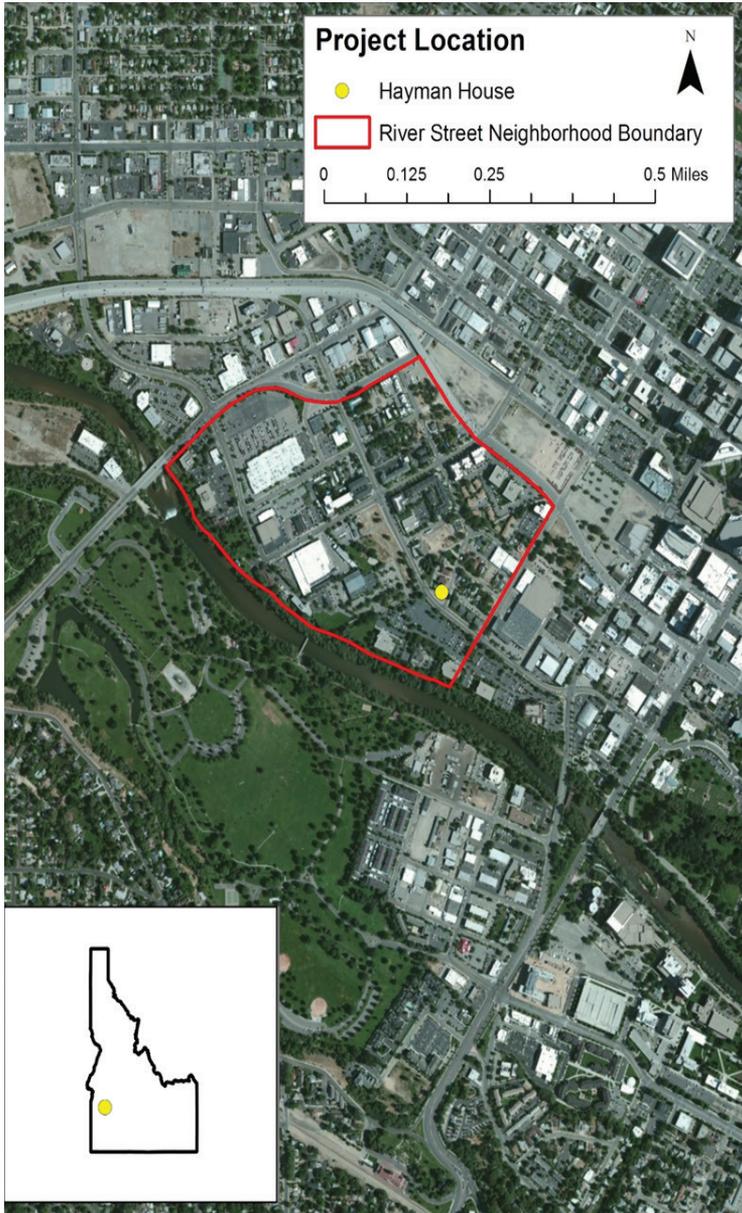


Figure 5: River Street Archaeology Project Location. Provided by author.

The archaeology project was a field school focused on the blocks surrounding the Erma Hayman House at 617 Ash Street in central Boise (Figures 6 and 7). In addition to archaeology, the project had an ethnography component that captured the memories of former neighborhood residents. Four main stakeholder groups influenced this project: the descendant community, field school students and volunteers, property owners, and historic preservation advocates. Each of these entities had different expectations for the project. In order for it to be an ethical contribution to Boise's heritage, every effort was made for both the archaeology and ethnography components to fulfill stakeholder expectations while also conducting quality anthropological research.

The descendant community was asked to contribute by visiting the site to record oral history interviews chronicling their lives in the neighborhood. Students also had the opportunity to participate in recording these interviews and receive credit for this activity. Participating students and their corresponding universities expected to learn archaeological and anthropological method and theory while also getting real experience.

The project also had a strong public outreach component where local news media and online platforms were used to invite volunteers from the general public to also participate in the project. Volunteers wanted a chance to dig, but also learned a great deal about the reality of racial segregation in Boise. The parcels where the project took place were administered by the City of Boise's Parks and Recreation and the Capital City Development Corporation (CCDC). These entities were excited about the prospect of helping make this project a reality, but they had very valid concerns about how the recovered data would affect development potential. They were also wary of their liability for any negative press coverage or injuries. Local preservationists have been campaigning to turn the Hayman House into a historic property since 2010. They believed the archaeology project would help demonstrate the value of this property as a cultural resource for the community.

The community of Boise has been very supportive of previous public archaeology projects and is keenly interested in the way archaeology can inform us of the past; however, the

Brief History of the River Street Neighborhood

The archaeology project contributes to the history of the River Street Neighborhood and provided an opportunity for local residents to help reclaim the unknown elements of this history. The neighborhood was carved from the landscape through real estate speculation. In anticipation of the arrival of the Oregon Short Line Railroad to Boise, local farmer John McClellan sold his fruit orchard in 1890 to real estate speculators. The neighborhood was subdivided into lots to provide parcels for warehouses and housing. It was envisioned that this space would house the workers employed at the various warehouses that flanked the railroad and businesses in downtown Boise. Few opulent houses were built in the neighborhood as it was filled with small dwellings for its working class population (Demo 2006; Stacy 1995).



Figure 7: The Erma Hayman House at 617 Ash Street was the site of the archaeology project. Photo by author.

A construction between 1900 and the 1920s established River Street as a residential neighborhood. European immigrants, specifically Basque, Serbians, Greeks, made their homes here until the 1930s and lived alongside Euroamerican families. The neighborhood at this time was associated with its “non-white” residents—persons of European descent who did

not speak English or follow Euroamerican customs (Osa 1982:2; Stacy 1995:9). This strong immigrant presence diminished the desirability of the neighborhood for upstanding Euroamerican homeowners who started moving away, either renting out their homes or selling them outright. River Street had become a space for the “others.”

During World War II, the neighborhood’s association with non-whites continued with the arrival of African American servicemen and their families to the Boise area (Figure 8). Family housing was not provided to black soldiers stationed at the nearby military installations of Fort Boise and Gowen Field during the war. If the enlisted men wanted to bring their families with them, they would have to be housed off base. A few African American families were already living in the River Street Neighborhood and its identity as the place for non-white people made it the only place where black soldiers and their families could live. At this time property owners in the neighborhood, including African Americans, rented out not only their homes but the garages, sheds, and other outbuildings on their properties as well. Most of the black soldiers left Boise following the war, but the neighborhood continued to be stigmatized by its remaining African American population and the large number of informal dwellings that were being rented to low-income Boiseans and minorities (Demo 2006).

People who grew up in River Street emphasize the fact that this was a place where families raised their children to be free from racism. Within this enclave, residents overcame discrimination because they were familiar with each other and knew that everyone there was considered one of the “others.” Life in the neighborhood was exemplified by Erma Madry Hayman, an African American woman who moved to Boise in search of economic opportunities in 1935. In 1943, Erma married Lawrence Hayman. The Haymans bought their house in the River Street Neighborhood at 617 Ash Street in 1947 because that was the only place black people were allowed to buy homes in Boise (Prentice 2015). She would raise her children and some of her grandchildren in this one-bedroom house before dying in 2009. The Hayman House stands as a testament to African American history in River Street.



Figure 8: African Americans, like Bernease and Arthur Rice, moved into the River Street Neighborhood during the 1940s. Their presence stigmatized this place as "the black neighborhood" (Photo courtesy Lee Rice, II, 2014).

By the 1970s, River Street was considered a blighted ghetto by city officials. This was the era of urban development demolitions and the City of Boise destroyed large swaths of its central district in order to make way for new construction. Neighborhood residents and their allies launched a campaign against demolitions in the neighborhood and were able to secure grants that enabled them to repair disheveled properties. Many homes were saved but the neighborhood was affected by development in a different way during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Demo 2006). Rather than destroying entire blocks, increasingly larger multi-family residential and commercial buildings have been erected in the last 30 years, removing homes one at a time. The neighborhood remains threatened by development. Few historical buildings remain.

The Archaeology Project

The Erma Hayman House and the surrounding parcels were particularly suitable for this project because some of these parcels had been occupied by the same families for decades while others had been developed after the 1980s. This provided a contrast in sediment stratigraphy and a chance to demonstrate historical sediments may remain beneath modern disturbance. It also helped archaeologists attribute dated deposits to family tenures. Historical maps also showed a number of different dwellings had once existed here along with a diverse population of residents that changed over time (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Archaeologists excavate features behind the Hayman House. Photo by author.

Sanborn maps were particularly informative. The 1912 and 1949 volumes in particular showed accurate depictions of the earliest period in the neighborhood's development and showed where buildings had once existed beneath the modern landscape. It was understood by the team that while historical maps are important, the features they depict might not exist anymore. It was clear that archaeological deposits may still exist, but a research design was created that would locate and explore archaeological features shown on maps, if present, and search

for other undocumented features. Finally, the extent of intact archaeological deposits and their relationship to modern disturbance also had to be documented. In order to accomplish these goals, a program of formal excavation units was used in conjunction with a shovel probe grid (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Volunteers Luis Beal (left) and Ruth Fritz (right) dig shovel probes in search of Boise's first Basque handball court. The remains of this court, which was built around 1906, were found during the project. Photo by author.

Most of the people involved with this project wanted to dig (Figure 11). It was essential to channel this motivation in such a way that data was properly collected with as few mistakes as possible.



Figure 11. Volunteers get their first introduction to the site and the project. Photo by author.

It was also important that excavators understood how their efforts were going toward the larger cause of examining the intricacies of the past in the River Street Neighborhood and that they had a good time, which helped turn these enthusiasts into archaeology advocates. Collected artifacts were processed for curation in the field laboratory, which was established to speed artifact processing and provide an opportunity for participants to learn what happens after artifacts are removed from the ground (Figure 12). Students were paying to learn about archaeology. Every effort was made to help them learn about the role archaeology plays in historic preservation and its power to reclaim heritage (Figure 13). Site visitors had a range of different expectations. Most just wanted to know what we were doing, but some of them actually became volunteers. Meeting all these demands was a tall order because of the diverse background of the student and volunteer excavators and site visitors, but we were able to meet these demands most of the time.



Figure 12: Field school student Vincent Bruscas cleans artifacts at the project's field lab. Photo by author.



Figure 13: Archaeologists Lindsay Kiel and Michelle Sing start the next level of an excavation unit at the Hayman House. Photo by author.

Conclusion

The River Street Project was very successful because it welcomed dozens of volunteers of all ages, provided a rare opportunity to dig on an archaeological site in their own community, and helped them become more aware of the way race-based discrimination led to the creation of spaces like the neighborhood (Figure 14). All of the expectations for this project were achieved. We collected information on the archaeological deposits across the project area, identifying locales of disturbance and how they relate to historical material deposits. Building foundation remains, refuse scatters, and other archaeological features were identified. The remains of the earliest Basque handball court in Boise was discovered, the knowledge of which contributes to Basque heritage in Boise. It was presumed that the realignment of River Street had destroyed this feature in the 1970s, but the archaeology project revealed that much of it remains intact beneath landscaping.



Figure 14: Kate Torres and her daughter Olivia clean artifacts. The project brought together volunteers of all ages, including families like Kate and Olivia. Photo by author.

Most importantly project participants learned about how archaeology contributes to our understanding of the past. They experienced how local communities can come together to help reclaim heritage. Students and volunteers saw how the remembrances of the elderly folk within a community can provide a different form of information that aids scientific investigation while also providing a chance for them to contribute to heritage conservation. Project participants gained an understanding of how history is created—through meticulous research and analysis. Because of its collaborative nature, the River Street Archaeology Project provided an opportunity for government entities, preservationists, and the general public to participate in a civic-minded project and a chance to reaffirm their commitment to the community via local media venues. As it was rooted in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial enclave, this project also provided a space where project participants and the wider community could address racism, discrimination, and stigmatization in the past and how it shapes the present.

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