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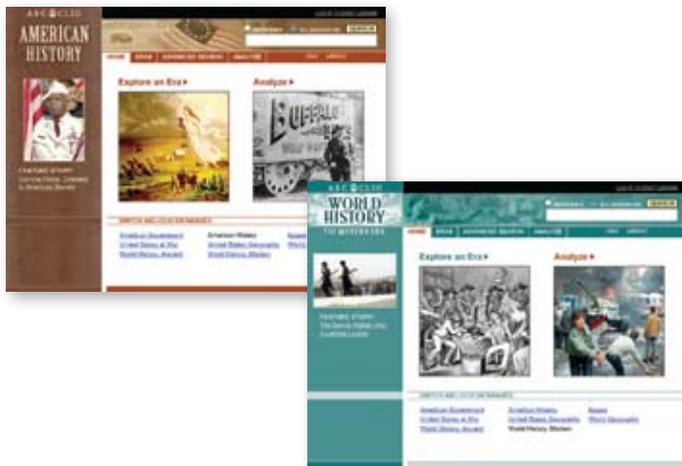
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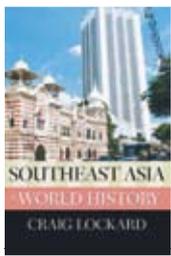
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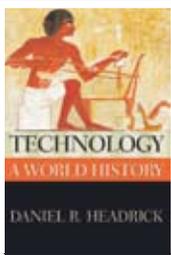
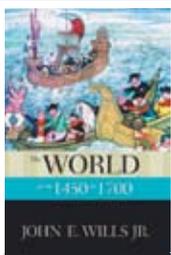
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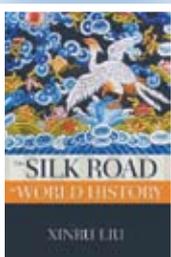
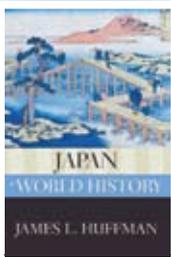
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Students Preserve an Emancipation Site with Archaeological Technology

Paul LaRue

In my years of teaching, I've observed how much students enjoy working with archeology and technology. My history classes in rural southern Ohio were able to incorporate both to help preserve the story of the Gist Settlement, a vanishing treasure hidden in plain sight among the farm fields of our state.

The phrase “archaeological technology” might sound intimidating in the face of an educator’s budget, but rest assured, a project of this kind is feasible. The socio-economic profile of our school district is not impressive: nearly 50 percent of our district’s students participate in the free lunch program. The chance for my students to spend a day doing field archeology work was, therefore, an amazing opportunity.

The Gist Settlement

Samuel Gist was a wealthy British merchant who, toward the end of his life, lived in England, but owned a considerable amount of land with a large number of slaves in America. Upon his death in 1815, his will specified that within one year his slaves should be emancipated, and his estate was to provide them with a new beginning in the form of houses, churches, and schools. Because freed slaves were not allowed to live in Virginia, the Gist estate purchased land in Ohio. One of the tracts purchased in the 1830s was located in Highland County, Ohio, and it is the last surviving tract of land today.

For the past several years, my research history classes at Washington Senior High along with archaeologists from Ohio Valley Archaeology have worked to document and preserve aspects of this

rich story before the settlement and its last descendants disappear. In 2006, the students researched the lives of the eight Highland Gist Settlement members who served in the Union Army during the Civil War. This research led Washington Senior High to order and install two U.S. government headstones for the veterans of the unmarked graves in the Gist cemetery.

While working at the cemetery and interacting with Paul Turner, a descendant of one of the founding families, we learned that the remnants of some of the original Gist cabins were still visible above ground very close by. In 2007, Washington Senior High and Ohio Valley Archaeology began a collaborative project to examine and document the archaeological remains of some of the original cabin sites.

The Archeological Field Work

The fall 2007 archeological dig was focused on the site of a partially intact log cabin that was occupied into the 1960s. The cabin likely dates to the time of the original settlement (circa 1830s), which we were able to determine by tree-ring dating of the logs in the cabin walls. This project provided students a fantastic opportunity to help the team of archeologists excavate around the cabin site. We found numerous artifacts dating back to the 1800s.

In the spring of 2008, our students worked with the archeologists on the geophysical survey of a 20-acre hayfield, which contained the underground remnants of approximately six of the original log cabins. Students also completed shovel tests around the cabin sites. They excavated a well, discovered through ground-penetrating radar, and found many artifacts (shards of pottery, glass, nails, etc.) in the fall of 2008. The well, like the cabins, had been bulldozed to ground level and lay undetected in the hayfield.

During the winter of 2008–2009, the students cleaned artifacts recovered from the well site under the supervision of Dr. Jarrod Burks of Ohio Valley Archeology, Inc. Burks has worked hard over the last 10 years at finding ways to use a type of technology known as geophysical survey in Ohio archeology. He and the rest of the crew from Ohio Valley Archaeology worked together with the students to find more of the missing Gist Settlement cabin sites. The spring of 2009 witnessed more shovel testing near the cabin and well locations. Throughout the process, our students were taught and supervised by the archeologists, and this interaction created numerous teachable moments.

Student Benefits

While “hands on learning” is often neglected in the educational process, doing something like this joins both study and experience, and also gives students civic engagement opportunities. Students

Dr. Jarrod Burks (left) explains the geo-physics mapping technology to Paul LaRue (center) and a student.



comprehend that what they are doing is real and meaningful.

Of course, the biggest benefit to the students is that they get to help in re-creating the history of the Gist Settlement by collecting archaeological data. At the same time, the use of technology allows them to see the benefits of math and science as they apply them to the archaeological process. The “green,” non-invasive, magnetic susceptibility and magnetic gradient surveys show students how preservation can be accomplished without disturbing or destroying the land. This approach employs a practical, economic preservation technique that can be used in certain non-traditional settings, where traditional archaeological excavation is not possible.

The students also benefit greatly from becoming a part of a community’s history. They engage with stories that are very different from their own, and they

do something meaningful in the pursuit of those stories and the people who are behind them.

A major highlight for the students during their work was meeting and talking with Paul Turner, the descendant mentioned earlier. Turner, who is in his seventies, grew up at the Gist Settlement before leaving for a career in the military. Since retiring, he has returned there to farm and maintain the settlement’s land. He fascinated the students with stories of life growing up on the settlement, and he also took an active interest in the archaeology work the students were helping to perform.

Ultimately, students benefit from being outside the classroom and working on a collaborative project. Student self esteem is aided by the camaraderie and team-building involved with this sort of task, and the work was so engaging that little could deter students from getting the job

done. A case in point—the spring 2008 fieldwork took place the day before the prom. The girls laughed as they worked the sifter screens (a very dirty job that is tough on the hands) during some of the excavations, despite just having had their nails done. One of the students (who would be elected prom queen the next day) took great pride in walking the field with the magnetic susceptibility equipment. She joked that her legs had been scratched repeatedly by weeds and briars and she was far more interested in the fieldwork than her appearance at prom.

Another student mentioned during the trip out to the Gist Settlement that her great grandfather was buried in the Gist cemetery. We came to realize that she is a direct descendant of Samuel Gist’s emancipated slaves. As Janelle worked throughout the day, her face beamed with the understanding that she was helping to preserve part of an important story, a

Students clean artifacts recovered from the dig under the supervision of Dr. Jarrod Burks (not present in photo).



story of her own family. She was able to research and trace her family genealogy back to the 1850s in the settlement.

Teacher Benefits

A project of this nature has many benefits for a teacher as well. For starters, it helps cement what the students have been taught in the classroom by engaging their knowledge in a hands-on fashion. This project also meets NCSS Standards for historical thinking, and develops the capabilities of students to conduct historical research and formulate historical analyses and interpretation. Students draw not only on their social studies skills, but also on applications of math and science. Part of the process of helping to run the geophysical survey equipment includes learning how that equipment works and what the results mean.

Once back in the classroom, the work, of course, continues. The students were

required to complete reflective writings about their experience with the archaeological fieldwork. One student created a website: www.washingtonch.k12.oh.us/high-school/research-history-class-projects (click on “Gist Project”).

This kind of project could be undertaken by other teachers, although it is important to add that professional archaeologists should be involved in excavations on archaeological sites. Archaeological technology can be used in a variety of settings, both rural and urban, in cemeteries, parks, and other non-traditional spaces. The real challenge is finding archaeologists who have the expertise to use the equipment, have the equipment on hand, and are interested in working with students.

There are many archaeologists around the country already working with student groups and many more just waiting for the opportunity. Professional organi-

zations like the Society for American Archaeology (www.saa.org) and the Society for Historical Archaeology (www.sha.org) are great places to start looking for related resources.

The benefits of such a project are too numerous to miss out on. We helped to preserve the story of the Gist Settlement, and the students’ day of fieldwork will no doubt be an experience they will remember for a lifetime. 📖

PAUL LARUE is in his 25th year as a high school social studies teacher at Washington High School, in Washington Court House, Ohio. He has won numerous state and national teaching awards, including from the American Legion, D.A.R., African American Civil War Memorial, Time Warner, and The History Channel. He has published previously in Social Education, and most recently in the Black History Bulletin. LaRue has developed lesson plans for the National Park Service, Civil War Preservation Trust, and The History Channel.



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