Chapter 6

The Archaeology Plantation: Racial Violence and the Making of Americanist Archaeology

by Matthew C. Reilly and Stephanie E. Barnes

The handwritten artifact catalogs of Montroville Dickeson are like many written by archaeologists or curators: they detail many of the "Indian Antiquities" of the Mound Builders he would introduce to East Coast audiences throughout the mid-nineteenth century. They're descriptive, including material, function, and decoration, also noting provenance, in most cases making clear that the objects were not excavated by his hand but rather acquired through purchase or coercion. To this end, there are some telling entries in his catalog: "Item 114: Terra Cotta Pipe. Found near the Ferriday Mound Louisiana. It was used by one of the slaves for two years, believed to have been made by the Choctaws."[1]

Montroville Wilson Dickeson (1810–1882) explored Indigenous burial mounds in the Mississippi Valley between 1838 and 1848. He paused his medical residency to explore this region and kept detailed journals of his expedition. He traveled from plantation to plantation, rubbing elbows with wealthy planters, where it may have been over lavish dinners that owners kindly offered extra "hands" to assist in his expedition. These "hands," of course, were like those that once held the Choctaw pipe—they belonged to enslaved

1. All references to Dickeson's catalogues and journal entries are taken from manuscript materials available at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Africans and African Americans. When read in a particular way, Dickeson's manuscripts chronicle the methods and thoughts of some of the earliest archaeologists working in the United States. They were enslaved.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that enslaved people came across Indigenous artifacts while they labored in agricultural fields of the Mississippi Valley, but this fact was rarely documented and is even more rarely discussed today. The violence we seek to address in this paper is, therefore, twofold: the violent and dehumanizing labor practices that allowed archaeological science to grow and the subsequent forms of archival silences that persist in how we think about the field. The UMMAA@100 conference is a moment of celebration but also reflection. After all, two years prior to Dickeson's excavations at Ferriday Plantation, University of Michigan geology professor Douglass Houghton donated a Chippewa canoe, thus starting the ethnographic collection of what would become the Museum of Anthropological Archaeology. As Indigenous collections and collecting practices continue to be investigated and critiqued (Colwell 2017), it's incumbent on practitioners and institutions to grapple with the realities of our shared pasts if we hope to achieve more equitable and emancipatory futures.

Speakers this weekend represent the vanguard in archaeologies of care, restorative justice, and antiracism, as well as more senior scholars who brought to light the darkest chapters of our disciplinary past and sought to generate more inclusive, community-oriented ways of thinking about the past in the present. This paper and the broader project attempts to wed the two, but it really germinated from pedagogical reflection. Reilly began teaching at the City College of New York in 2017. City College, part of the City University of New York (or CUNY) system, boasts one of the most diverse student bodies in the world. The overwhelming majority of the students, in addition to being first-generation college students, claim BIPOC identities. In larger introductory courses to archaeology, we reckoned with the fact that students saw themselves or their ancestors as the subjects of archaeological research, but rarely as the producers of archaeological knowledge. Where in the history of the field, or in the contemporary discipline, for that matter, were BIPOC populations? We know of their presence, the archaeological hewers of wood and drawers of water, but what did they think about the pasts they were materially confronting? How did they shape the emerging science of archaeology? More pointedly, as in the title of Allison Mickel's excellent recent book (2021), it's worth exploring *Why Those Who Shovel Are Silent*—or rather, why and how they're often rendered silent.

With COVID halting fieldwork for ongoing projects Reilly usually directs in Liberia and Barbados, he pivoted, when safe, to archival work, primarily at the University of Pennsylvania. The Penn Museum's archives, like those housed at institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Chicago, and U-M, contain invaluable manuscripts related to early expeditions, including fieldnotes, diaries, photographs, maps, correspondence, inventories,

and (rarely) laborer profiles. Reilly and Barnes, an MA student at the time, scoured these materials, prioritizing discussions related to laborers and general perspectives on the communities with whom archaeologists worked.

For this paper, we draw from the archive of Montroville Dickeson, as his early and extensive manuscripts provide hauntingly detailed accounts of the enslaved pioneers of archaeological practice, even if Dickeson himself didn't see them in that way.

Montroville Dickeson is not considered one of the more significant founders of the field, though some biographical publications lament the lack of credit he receives for his pioneering methodological rigor and expansive investigations of Indigenous sites across North America (see Veit 1997). He is, however, representative of a larger group of intrepid expeditionists, many of whom (including Dickeson) trained in fields other than archaeology or anthropology, and then went on to receive funding from American universities and institutions to study "disappearing cultures" across the country and globe and line the walls of newly christened museums.

If you're unfamiliar with Dickeson, you may be familiar with a famous painting depicting one of his projects. This is the work of Irish painter John J. Egan, who was commissioned to paint the much larger *Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley* in the early 1840s (Figure 6.1). Completed in 1850, the painting is 348 feet long, consisting of 25 individual scenes, depicting the splendor of the Mississippi Valley with a rather unique focus on archaeological work. Dickeson himself commissioned the piece, offering him the opportunity to charge 25 cents to East Coast Americans eager to witness the bucolic Mississippian countryside and catch a glimpse of exotic, stoic, and noble Native Americans (Lyons 1976:32). The money accrued from this touring panorama funded many of Dickeson's future archaeological excavations, which would later put appropriated "Indian Antiquities" on display to showcase the exotic, primitive other to White audiences around the country (Veit 1997:113). In this small section, featured in select introductory textbooks, two White men act as overseers of enslaved Black laborers (for more on the painting, see Agbe-Davies 1998; Reilly 2022). As a teaching tool, this image is often included in textbooks to illustrate the development of early scientific methods, namely stratigraphic excavation. What is not discussed is that the excavations depicted were taking place on William Ferriday's cotton plantation in Louisiana, and that it represents a broader pattern of what we refer to as the "archaeology plantation."

Dickeson's manuscripts are held at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. One of the manuscripts in the collection that provided much of the narrative presented in this paper was a journal by Dickeson titled "Catalogue of the Stone and Terracotta Impliments [*sic*] and Ornaments of the North American Mound Builders." Dickeson's journals were divided according to region or set of mounds. On the right side of the manuscript, he maintained a catalog, in list form, of all the findings. The

Figure 6.1. Detail from the painting *Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley* by John J. Egan, c.1850. Distemper on cotton muslin, 90 inches x 348 feet. Saint Louis Art Museum, Eliza McMillan Trust 34:1953. Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

findings were numbered, named, and given locational details and explanations about their condition, and sometimes how they were found or who found them. On the left he journaled about his experiences. These entries provide autoethnographic accounts detailing mid-19th-century plantation life in the Deep South and how it played a role in the development of Americanist archaeology.

Dickeson often stayed on plantations at or near the lands where the mounds were being excavated. He frequently wrote about the hospitality of his hosts, who were the owners of these plantations and homes, describing the dinners and warm evenings outdoors on verandas. As referenced earlier, enslaved men were used to excavate the mounds, with Dickeson noting that the plantation owners "volunteered their services, and also that of their force" (Dickeson 1838–1848:40). Dickeson observed the enslaved during his stays on plantations, frequently referring to them as "negroes" and commenting on their "peculiar phraseology" and superstitions (Dickeson 1838–1848:42).

During excavations, Dickeson describes the enslaved workforce as "hands" and "gangs" (Dickeson 1838–1848:82, 136). He frequently mentions the enslaved making discoveries during excavations, which is never mentioned in publications related to the mounds. Dickeson seemed very curious about the enslaved people, seeing them as fearful and peculiar. He mocks their speech, writing phonetic phrases in his journal (Dickeson 1838-1848: 100 and 128). It is clear Dickeson worked very closely and frequently with the enslaved. Despite the reliance on these men, detailed accounts of the mounds in archaeology texts never make mention of the enslaved labor that was relied on for these discoveries.

Roughly half a dozen times Dickeson notes that enslaved people are in possession of "Indian Antiquities." In some cases, he convinces them to turn over the artifacts at no cost. In others, he provides a small sum or, in instances when the individual tries to strike a hard bargain, has the planter or manager force the individual to hand over the goods. On one occasion, he came across a stone pipe in the possession of one of the "negroes" on a plantation near Natchez. Despite his efforts, "no offer of money would induce him to part with it, but he allowed me to have a fac simile cut in soft sandstone."

The pages of Dickeson's diary leave no question as to the violence of slavery. In an early entry from July 1843, while visiting Quitman County, Mississippi, near Quitman's Mounds, Dickeson describes the scene of rollcall in the early morning hours. The serene morning sun was interrupted by the ringing of a bell, "reminding the sooty inmates of the huts that the hour was approaching for the renewal of their daily toil. In a moment, as if by the wand of a magician, the curly heads of hundreds, old and young, male and female, issued out from the doors of their quarters."

When it came to excavation, Dickeson relied on the knowledge of the enslaved. He, as well as select overseers, sought their advice on where they had previously come across antiquities in the fields. For instance, on the same day Dickeson had earlier witnessed

rollcall, the overseer "mustered sufficient force," meaning he forced the enslaved to join in what would be a day of stratigraphic excavations:

> Two ploughs were set-to work at the base of bluffs, where the negroes, at sundry times had reported bones and ornaments to have been found during their ploughing for the crops. Examining the nearly ploughed ground, we soon discovered several circumscribed spots, varying from twenty to thirty feet in diameter ... completely filled with fragments of human bones, teeth, and pottery. We set several of our force to digging away the soil immediately surrounding these spots or burials.

Days later, Dickeson set out to explore "Lewises Mound," named after the planter who owned the property. Here he notes:

> We continued our course to the plantation of Mr F Lewis some ten miles distant from Natchez, to examine (by invitation of the above named gentleman) a buried mound of the ancient race of Red Men, who peopled this part of the country, in the days of Aboriginal Sovereignty, Mr. Lewis not knowing the precise location, summoned several of his negroes, of whom we inquired, if at any time, they had seen ones or pottery on the place.

In a final telling example, Dickeson descended upon Bingaman plantation just outside Natchez along the Mississippi River:

> The Colonel was absent from home. We divided our course through a cluster of China trees, bordering the lane, till we reached the field, where we came to a gang of athletic negroes, at work with their hoe, under the eye of an overseer. The whole gang worked vigorously, and were employed in cutting out from the Cotton weeds and grass; all seemed in high spirits, and occasionally burst into a wild chorus from different parts of the field. Making known the object of our visit to the overseer, he, with the usual kindness of a Southerner, furnished us with a sufficient force and proper implements for the investigation. We all [repaired] to the spot, and after taking their proper dimensions, and a sketch of the outlines of the group, we set our force to work.

These selections from Dickeson's diaries provide an overview of his field strategy. Dickeson hopped from plantation to plantation across the Natchez area of Mississippi and Louisiana. At this point in the 1840s, this was one of the wealthiest areas in the United States for White planters and others who benefitted from King Cotton. Dickeson visited some of the most opulent planter homes ever constructed, complete with neoclassical columns and whimsical live oak. He was clearly taken by the general atmosphere of the cotton belt, regularly being impressed and pleased by the gentlemanly behavior of the White men and the work ethic, orderliness, and efficiency of the hundreds of enslaved who did his work for him. The last line quoted from Dickeson is a telling example of how the plantation mentality seeped into early archaeological science, though we tend

to remember and revere the method rather than the violence. Perhaps it's time we think less about the "proper dimensions, and a sketch of the outlines of the group," and more carefully consider the implications of "we set our force to work."

In the midst of plantation violence rather callously glossed over by Dickeson, he simultaneously reveals thoughts, practices, and coping mechanisms of the enslaved peoples he encounters. For the latter, he is repeatedly amused and bemused by the music of the enslaved. One particularly lengthy passage comes from his visit to the Ferriday Plantation, located on the Louisiana side of the Mississippi in that same Natchez cotton belt.

> The sound of music struck our ears and down the long avenue, came grinning several of the negroes (the plantation hand) arrayed in their gay congo uniforms, blue trousers, fancy jacket, and a red cap, on they came with violin, tambo, and an instrument constructed from the lower jawbone of a horse, whose teeth kept up a continued chattering and chimed well with the other rude instruments. As they advanced towards us, their ebony faces bore a smile of pleasure, elated with the [honors/humors] their master had conferred upon them.
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> The smaller of the party, somewhat bordering on the Gurnes and as black as Cyclops, opened the performances with the well known Old Virginia 'patting juba,' while his comrades assisted on the tambourine and bone. Each in his turn, gave us a specimen of their separate performances, and concluded in a quartette. The manner in which they kept time was truly astonishing. We retired to the parlor, and enjoyed some delightful music, of a higher order on the piano and flute. Mr. Ferriday favoured us with an exquisite performance on the eight key flute.

It's hard to miss the derisive and derogatory tone of the ethnographic description, especially when compared to his glowing review of the music "of a higher order" from Mr. Ferriday himself. The scene simultaneously speaks to the vicious White supremacy that characterized this early expedition and the post-field moments in which the earliest crews found a semblance of joy and creative expression.

The final element we'd like to address is the complex ways in which these enslaved archaeologists thought about the material past. These thoughts are difficult to articulate clearly, primarily because of the translator's racist attitudes and unwillingness to acknowledge the meaningful ideas being expressed. If you recall, in the summer of 1842, Dickeson learned the location of an Indigenous site from enslaved laborers at a plantation owned by a Mr. Lewis. When the enslaved were asked about the exact whereabouts of the site, this is the scene that unfolded:

> Their reply, at first, was a hesitating negative, expressed in their own peculiar phraseology, (Lacly[sic] none, Massa, none whatsomeber[sic],) but, in the course of a familiar interrogation, and with the assistance of a few pieces of silver, one of them gave, with much

> circumlocution, an account, the account of which was, that a fellow servant had, some four years before, found part of a skeleton, and several vases, washed out from the sides of the bayou, which he instantly destroyed, not comminating his discovery to any one, till the following spring; and then, only, in the way of cautioning his comrades not to pass...[102]

> ... the spot, but they should be haunted. The negroes upon many of the plantations, entertain superstitious ideas on this head, to a surprising degree. If, in their ploughing they chance upon any of the stone relics, so common there they studiously avoid touching it, believing them to have come from heaven with the thunder; whence they are known by the name of thunder-bolts. They further suppose, that, being driven into the earth, they remain there for seven years, and then ascending to the surface, are undisturbed for a brief period and again descend; and they believe that, if at such a time, they should be caught with one about their persons, down they go seven years, [...] Companion.

> A gentleman, residing a few miles from Natchez, sent me by one of his blacks, several Indian hatchets.

> The boy, seeing what they were, mounted his horse, and set off as if thunder and lightning were in pursuit. He arrived at Natchez, with his horse in a foam; and dismounting, without a moments delay, rushed into the office; casting the fearful articles in question upon the floor, apparently as much relieved as if he had escaped a seven year's confinement in the penitentiary of the earth.

> Having ascertained the situation of the Bayou, and decided upon the proper course, we were enabled, through the profiting of Mr. Lewis, who kindly tendered us the aid of several hands, to commence operation immediately.

Rather than speculate on African-influenced cosmologies or the degree of Christian assimilation, there's an opportunity here to think about relationships between enslaved African Americans and the Indigenous. Terrance Weik's (2021) work in this region is particularly telling in this regard, noting how Chickasaw and Choctaw removal in the 19th century led to complex encounters and relationships between Indigenous and African peoples. Explorations of how African-descendant, Indigenous, and African-Indigenous people experienced various forms of settler colonial violence might also include how the enslaved conceptualized the Indigenous past. Perhaps Dickeson's failure in comprehending the "peculiar phraseology" of the enslaved masks a particular kind of reverence for Indigenous sites and material culture. Dickeson perceived fear, superstition, and avoidance in a number of instances. This may certainly have been the case for some

individuals. If we can draw your attention back to the start of this paper, however, we want to present another form of engagement with the Indigenous past. Dickeson's catalog notes the terracotta pipe produced by the Choctaws found at the Ferriday Mounds. It entered Dickeson's collection after being taken from an enslaved man who had used it for two years. In July of 1842, Dickeson would describe another instance in which the enslaved are engaging with a living past of the Choctaws:

> The Choctaws very often select a mound for their place of burial, and these being in the vicinity of their camping ground, would be the spot likely to be selected. The blacks also use them for the same purpose.

At the very least, these are documented instances of enslaved people very purposely engaging with Indigenous material culture and sacred spaces. How might our field have developed differently if such engagements were taken seriously from the outset and insights from African and Indigenous communities were valued as archaeological knowledge? Furthermore, could we envision different futures related to the reverence, respect, and afterlives of Indigenous material culture and landscapes?

In closing, we found one anecdote from the diaries particularly relatable to those of us who continue the craft of archaeology. While visiting a mound site near White Apple Village, Mississippi in 1844, Dickeson notes that he narrowly escaped a drenching rain storm by seeking shelter among the ruins of Fort Rosalie, a former French outpost. Dickeson was not alone in finding shelter in this precarious location:

> There I was detained for two hours, seated upon the bottom of a huge cotton basket, holding some ten bushel, placed in the center of the shed, whose edges were fringed with about forty healthy, sleepy, tawny looking fellows as the country could produce; they seemed much surprised at my anxiety about the rain. Had the storm continued till now it would have only realized their motto, 'the more rain the more rest.' It gradually subsided, I mounted and pursued my course to the structures. The survey of these left a melancholy impression on my mind.

The juxtaposition of how the rain was experienced by Dickeson and those laboring is a fitting metaphor for the archaeology plantation. In addition to making a name for himself, Dickeson pioneered methodologies and built knowledge surrounding the Indigenous past on the backs of the enslaved. His manuscripts indicate that enslaved people were routinely stripped of archaeological finds and forced to labor grueling shifts in the fields and in the trenches. At the same time, Dickeson unintentionally provides insight, albeit tinged with White supremacy, into how enslaved peoples on these plantations conceptualized

the material past. This certainly isn't the ethnographic care of Zora Neale Hurston, but the voices, words, actions, and thoughts of the enslaved are present.

Across oceans and decades, archaeologists similarly wrote about the communities surrounding excavation projects and the laborers working under various circumstances of unfreedom. There's more in common between these early archaeologists than the commitment to scientific rigor they shared. An espoused White supremacy jumps off the pages in a variety of contexts we're exploring as part of this broader project. An Egyptologist adopts the vocabulary of the plantation, describing the various gangs of labor under his direction, later dismissing an overseer who had the gall to challenge the interpretation of the White man; an expedition to China results in the discovery of young talent—a docile, well-spoken young man who would later keep things tidy and loyally perform needed tasks around the Penn Museum and, eventually, the Smithsonian; a future director of the Penn Museum starts his career at the ruins of Copán, where he takes a liking to young, Indigenous women, describing in vivid detail his sexual proclivities and desire for the vulnerable Brown women at arm's length.

This is our inheritance. It fills the pages of the archaeological archive. We need to take the time to study, analyze, and eventually demolish the archaeology plantation (Reilly 2022). Equity, co-knowledge production, care, restorative justice. These are not metaphors but instead point to the work needed to disrupt the disparities that have existed in the field since its founding. Unless properly addressed, there will always be reasons for those most disenfranchised to keep praying for rain.

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