

John L. Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology



Christopher C. Fennell 2009

Even though the John L. Cotter Award is designed to recognize historical archaeologists early in their careers for a single, outstanding achievement, the impact that Christopher C. Fennell has had on the discipline in a very short time is deserving of the award in several respects. His theoretical and methodological rigor; democratic and open approach to research, outreach, and engagement; and embrace of new technologies to make archaeological knowledge available to a multitude of publics worldwide are all raising the bar to redefine what “the best in the field” can mean.

Fennell’s contribution of scholarship to the growing literature of African diaspora studies is already significant. In addition to his dissertation (Fennell 2003a) and two widely read articles in the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* (2000, 2003b), Fennell’s book *Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World* (2007) has won the praise of many scholars. His thoughtful and thorough analysis of transatlantic African cultural transformation moves diaspora studies past simple notions of creolization to new ways of understanding the meanings of material culture to those who produced, used, and deposited it. He formulates an alternative explanatory concept of “ethnogenic bricolage” as a way to account for the processes involved in these cultural shifts.

In his book, Fennell accomplishes the tricky maneuver of being *both* race/ethnicity-conscious *and* nonessentialist by examining how new communities, existing within multivalent, dynamic social environments, created new symbol systems and social orders. His examination draws on a four-century-long database of cultural material (from several literatures) to examine how the major belief systems of unwilling African immigrants changed as these individuals gradually became African Americans.

He also addresses shifts in the Christian and non-Christian spiritual traditions of German-speaking immigrants from central Europe and those of the Native American peoples with which both groups interacted. He examines the ways that these individuals and groups acted and reacted, both to each other and to the new social contexts they experienced. His reflexive, critical analysis is situated within a solid anthropological framework and provides new and useful models for dealing with questions of identity and symbolism.

In all of Fennell's writing, his approach to argument is sophisticated, nuanced, and contextually robust. The expertise with which he operationalizes the hermeneutic processes involved in the interplay among archaeological, ethnographic, oral, archival, and other sources also provides an excellent model.

Fennell has become a leader in using Internet technologies to make archaeological knowledge (both his and that of others) accessible to a variety of publics worldwide. One of his major achievements has been to co-found and edit the quarterly *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter* <<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/newsletter.html>>. This publication sprang from a previous effort, the African American Archaeology Newsletter—a paper publication created in the early 1990s as a complement to the African American Archaeology Workshop held at the SHA annual meetings. By the late 1990s, this early workshop and newsletter had reached a natural transition point as those who practiced the historical archaeology of African America increasingly situated their work more globally and as the Internet itself became a dominant mode of communication. In response to this development, Fennell was instrumental in helping to create the African Diaspora Archaeology Network <<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/>> as a virtual community for scholarly exchange and collaboration. He also volunteered to create and edit the new *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter* to support this network and to serve as a new source for global communication in this area of archaeology.

In his typically inclusive and collaborative style, Fennell created an engaging, easy-to-navigate website (including an interactive world map) and began to recruit contributions from researchers worldwide. His skill at recruiting content (and some hard work from a few key supporting editors) has been critical, and it continues to be an ongoing and tireless effort on his part. With Fennell's leadership, consistency, and editorial acumen, the new *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter* has become a respected venue for African diaspora scholarship. While retaining its archaeological relevance, this forum has expanded to include material from scholars in other disciplines and now covers every time period, category of material data, geographic area, and scholarly perspective. Searchable content includes scholarly papers, reports, bibliographies, news, information about field schools and conferences, new theses and dissertations, book and film reviews, and current research related to the archaeology and history of African-descended peoples. Because he has been able to keep up the pace of quarterly online publication, the newsletter provides an important way to discuss methodological, theoretical, and other issues *as they emerge*.

Importantly, these resources, along with a companion listserv, are open to nonprofessionals. As such, they represent an excellent example of successful public archaeology as well as evidence of Fennell's solid scholarship and commitment to the discipline. The African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter and network exemplify the best of what open, transparent, and democratic virtual communication can provide.

Other examples of Fennell's commitment to sharing archaeological knowledge on the Internet include the Web pages for his dissertation research <<http://www.histarch.uiuc.edu/harper/>>, the website for the New Philadelphia project <<http://www.anthro.uiuc.edu/faculty/cfennell/NP/>>, and his work in creating the Plymouth Colony Archive Project as a graduate student of the late James Deetz <<http://www.histarch.uiuc.edu/plymouth/>>. All of these sites are thorough, well-maintained, current, clearly organized, and accessible to readers ranging from curious avocationalists to scholars; all are evidence of his ongoing and active commitment to using new communication technology to benefit both archaeology and its publics.

Fennell's continued research at New Philadelphia, a 19th-century biracial town founded on the Illinois frontier by a formerly enslaved African American who purchased his own freedom, represents another area of significant accomplishment. He has served as a co-principal archaeologist of the New

Philadelphia Archaeological Project since 2004, alongside Anna Agbe-Davies (DePaul University), Terrance Martin (Illinois State Museum), and Paul Shackel (University of Maryland). The project consists of descendant-empowered, civically engaged archaeological research as well as annual field schools that train young archaeologists in several historical archaeological specialties. The work has been funded by two multiyear grants from the National Science Foundation's Research Experiences for Undergraduates program. It is no mean feat to succeed in having a long-term historical archaeology project funded in this way, especially one where civic engagement, student training, and descendant involvement are as important as the science itself. The project is providing an excellent model for a democratic archaeological practice that is collaborative, transparent, accessible, and open to critical review from both professional and lay publics, even as the research is taking place. For example, Fennell uses the project's website to publish research interpretations as well as a considerable amount of primary data as soon as they are produced. The New Philadelphia Project *does* what many others say they want to do, in terms of making primary research data and its interpretations available quickly to diverse audiences.

Prompt scholarly publication is also a goal common to many projects, and the New Philadelphia Project is succeeding here as well: the results of the first three-year research phase will soon be published by the SHA's *Historical Archaeology* journal as a thematic issue. In this scholarly venue as well as in the conference sessions that led to it, Fennell has encouraged his student colleagues to publish individual contributions in their own names and, just as important, to participate in other aspects of the project's ongoing effort to be both accountable and engaged. Fifth-generation descendants of Frank McWorter (the town's founder) work with Fennell in this effort. They also participate in both research and outreach activities, which include lectures, Internet collaborations and exchange of ideas, extensive media coverage, and ongoing communication with site visitors. In sum, this project provides a model for a solid, fundable research design for a major, long-term, and civically engaged archaeology project. Its early successes are a remarkable achievement for a scholar at the beginning of his archaeological career.

Historical archaeology is fortunate to have lured Chris Fennell away from his former profession, the law, and will continue to benefit from the models of practice he is setting now. Therefore, with great pleasure, The Society for Historical Archaeology presents Christopher C. Fennell with the 2009 John L. Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology.

References

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