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Buried Treasure

UI dig uncovers Illinois town that welcomed blacks and whites

In August, as Barack Obama looked to being nominated the Democratic Party's first black candidate for president, he did so within a nation that just a century and a half ago was nearly ripped apart by slavery.

As the Illinois senator geared up for his landmark campaign, another summer of digging was unearthing history from a lost town in his home state where blacks and whites lived together in peace and freedom a quarter century before the Civil War.

"The town's history provides a very timely story that's now in the press with Sen. Obama's theme of having a meaningful conversation about race," said University of Illinois archaeologist Christopher Fennell. "We've been having that conversation for years now with regard to New Philadelphia."

In late May, Fennell led a sixth year of research in a remote field between the Mississippi and Illinois rivers where, in 1836, freed slave Frank McWorter founded the earliest-known U.S. town planned and legally registered by a black man. Their findings are revealing a community that was generations ahead of its time, with blacks and whites living

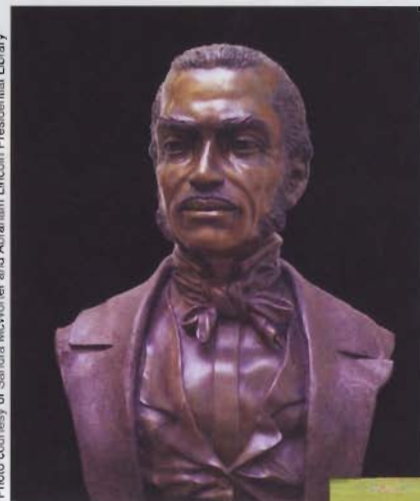


Photo courtesy of Sandra McWorter and Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

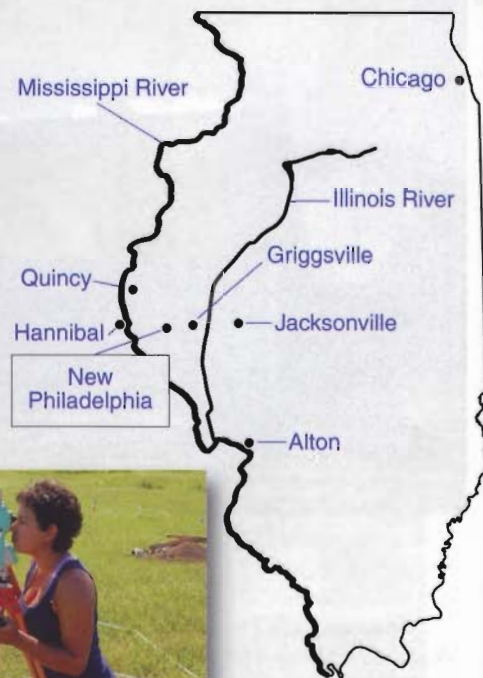


Image by Chris Fennell

side-by-side and an integrated schoolhouse that opened 70 years before the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling outlawed segregation.

So far, the project has uncovered more than 65,000 artifacts and remains of a dozen houses and businesses from the inte-



Joe Conover Photo

grated frontier town that grew to about 160 people – a third black

and two-thirds white – before it began to slowly fade away when it was bypassed by the railroad in 1869.

Earlier digs beneath the farmland that ultimately buried New Philadelphia have recovered thousands of artifacts, including broken pieces of ceramics and ironware, a pewter tea set and pewter toys and molded pieces of glass used as pieces for Mancala, a traditional African game similar to backgammon.

Studies also have uncovered no signs of burned buildings or other evidence of racial violence in New Philadelphia, despite ethnic tensions that engulfed the Civil War era and a major slave trading post just 25 miles away in Hannibal, Mo.

"I think the town's story is very uplifting," said Kati Fay, a UI doctoral student in archaeology who managed an on-site lab this summer. "It's a different example of race relations from that era that you don't hear about very often. You hear about the race riots and



University of Illinois archaeologist Christopher Fennell (in red cap and black shirt in back row) has led students in the unearthing of New Philadelphia for the past several years. Above, the 2006 team gathers; at top middle, UI undergraduate Annelise Morris measures an excavation site this summer. The Illinois town, founded in 1836 by freed slave Frank McWorter, top left, was noted for its racial harmony, despite its proximity to a slave market in Hannibal, Mo., slave-escape routes of the Underground Railroad and slavery-related clashes in nearby cities.



Joe Conover Photo

Kati Fay, above left, a UI graduate student who directed the field laboratory at New Philadelphia this summer, examines uncovered artifacts. So far, more than 65,000 have been discovered in recent years, including a miniature pewter tea set, far right. Geophysical surveys, such as the one at right above, use devices that transmit and receive electrical and magnetic signals to provide evidence of what may be buried beneath the surface. This map of a magnetometer survey of several lots of the New Philadelphia site eventually helped unearth the remains of an early well, which was later filled in and covered over by a house.

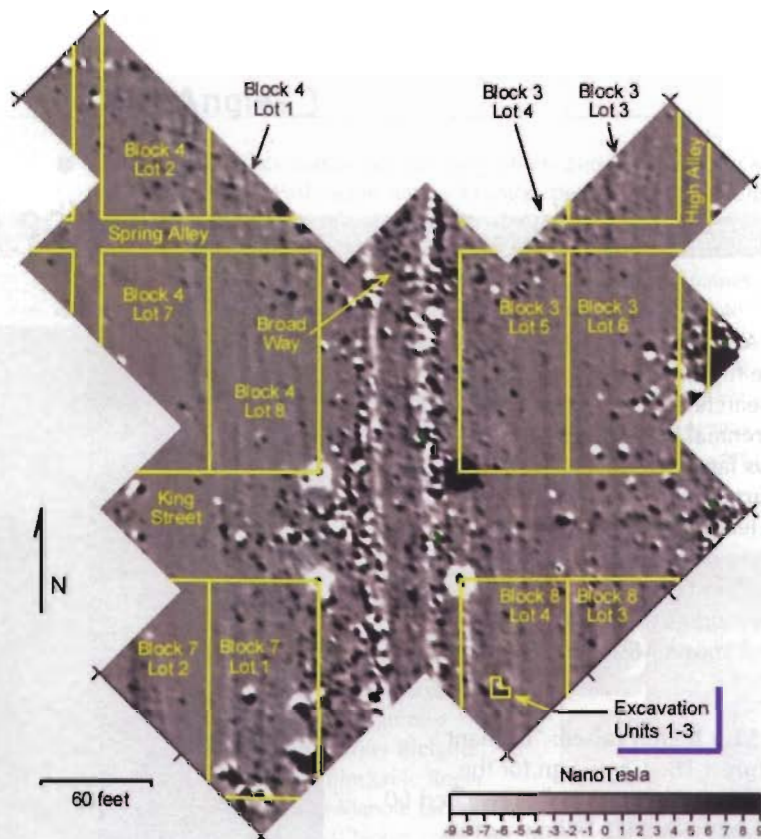


Image by Michael Hargrave; overlay by Chris Fennell

[other atrocities]. You don't hear about the races living together, apparently quite successfully," she said.

Known as "Free Frank," McWorter was a slave for a Kentucky man who allowed him to earn wages in his spare time. McWorter saved, bought a small farm and earned enough money to buy first his wife's freedom, then his own.

Later, McWorter traded his Kentucky assets for a large parcel of land in western Illinois, where he developed a prosperous farm that enabled him to buy the freedom of his slave-born children and other relatives. He then bought more land and established New Philadelphia, giving free black families a place to buy homes and become independent.

McWorter's vision of an integrated community soon attracted whites from around the region – forward-thinking people who very likely shared his dream, Fennell said.

"He'd probably be a politician of the highest rank in today's society," Fennell said of McWorter. "His social skills were extraordinary when you look at all of the things he was able to negotiate."

"It's not a simple story of harmony," Fennell said. "It's even greater than that, a story of overcoming adversity. It was an incredible struggle for freedom, not just by African-Americans but also by European-American families who lived with them."

Meanwhile, archaeological research resumed on the site in May under a second three-year grant from the National Science Foundation. This year's research will include the first aerial survey with a high-resolution thermal camera, which researchers hope will locate foundations and other buried structures that have gone undetected through digging and ground-based geophysics.

The ongoing project is being led by the U of I, DePaul University and the Illinois State Museum, working in collaboration with McWorter's descendants, local community members and the New Philadelphia Association, a



Illinois State Museum/Gary Andraszko Photo

nonprofit group that seeks to preserve the site and promote its history.

The archaeological work builds on historical research into McWorter's life by former UI history professor Juliet Walker, McWorter's great-great-granddaughter, and is being done in collaboration with other descendants, including Abdul Alkalimat, a UI professor of African-American studies.

In 2005, New Philadelphia was named to the National Register of Historic Places. The town site and cemetery have now been nominated for National Historic Landmark status.

—Jan Dennis
UI News Bureau