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2011

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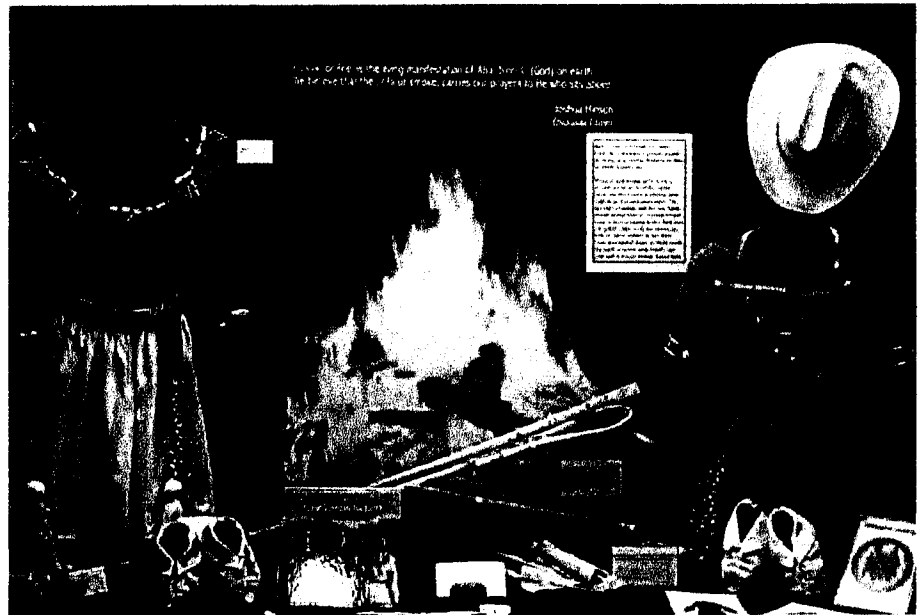
FROM ACTORS TO DIRECTORS: NEW VOICES AT THE C.H. NASH MUSEUM AT CHUCALISSA

By Robert Patrick Connolly

This article focuses on the changing voices of descendent communities at the C.H. Nash Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. Since its inception in the 1950s, the C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa has been the destination for local residents and others who wish to learn about contemporary Native American cultures and the prehistoric inhabitants of the Chucalissa site, a temple mound complex built and occupied from 1000 to 1500 C.E. For the first several decades of the Museum's operation, visitors viewed exposed human burials, hypothesized replicas of prehistoric houses, and the American Indians who acted as guides and demonstrators and effectively became a living part of the site exhibit.

Because of an aging site infrastructure, accountability to the American Indians as codified in the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), and a shift in archaeological interpretive emphases, many of the Museum's activities and events were either terminated or markedly curtailed in the past twenty years. In fact, the 1990s marked a period of stagnation in Museum programming, along with a dramatic drop in visitor attendance.

NAGPRA legislation resulted in dramatic direct and indirect impacts in the field of archaeology and museum operations not just at Chucalissa, but nationally (e.g., Wilcox 2010). The direct impact of the legislation mandated that museums complete inventories and enter into repatriation dialogues on the cultural materials and human remains of the descendent Native Americans peoples curated in their facilities. Less directly, flowing from the legal requirements of NAGPRA legislation, anthropologists and museum professionals began, as a matter of course, to engage and collaborate with the descendent communities represented in their research (e.g., Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008).



Chickasaw Exhibit Created and Installed by the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma

Beginning in 2004, the previous Museum Director Dan Swan made an ambitious effort to reinvigorate the operation through expanded programming, establishing a sound business plan, and bringing the curated collections into complete NAGPRA compliance. During his tenure, Swan also had the unpopular task of removing the last vestiges of the antiquated and deteriorating reconstructed prehistoric village that served as a stage for forty years of Native American performance at Chucalissa.

Removal of the village met with a mixed response by the multiple users of the built environment. The vast majority of the site visitors, especially those who visited Chucalissa when the reconstructed village was first in place, were disappointed that the Native American performance they had come to expect was no longer available. Over the past several years, with few exceptions, the sole negative comments from museum

visitors center on removal of reconstructed village area, and to a lesser extent, the elimination of the burial exhibit.

For the Native American community, the response to the removal of the reconstructed village remains mixed. The reduced visitation over the years, accelerated by the removal of the structures, led to reduced incomes for the Native Americans who relied on purchases of their handmade craft items sold in the Museum store. However, given the dilapidated condition of the village, the more typical Native American response favored the removal, and the return of the temple mound complex to a more natural appearing sacred space.

In an SFAA presentation in 2005, Swan (2005) raised the questions put forward by the public in Memphis: "Without the reconstructed village, what is the value of the Chucalissa site? What will replace the reconstructed village at the site?"

This is the juncture at which this article takes up the discussion. What are the C.H. Nash Museum and the Chucalissa site going to be? The 2010 revision of our Mission Statement is:

The mission of the C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, a division of the University of Memphis, is to protect and interpret the Chucalissa archaeological site's cultural and natural environments, and to provide the University Community and the public with exceptional educational, participatory, and research opportunities on the landscape's past and present Native American and traditional cultures.

Our understanding of this mission allows us to think outside the traditional box of a prehistoric archaeological museum and to engage multiple perspectives that represent additional, yet no less legitimate, voices of the landscape on which the Chucalissa site is located. We envision that by engaging all voices with a stake in the landscape, we may revitalize the many-layered built environment and live into our mission mandate.

As a first step, we re-envision the Chucalissa landscape as a dynamic cultural setting not restricted to a specific point in time. Typically, archaeological sites with occupations that span considerable periods of time, in many cases thousands of years, are interpreted through singular snapshots, ignoring what comes before or after the specific temporal setting of interest. Such a selective interpretive approach generates a skewed presentation of the total human occupation of the landscape, focusing on a single voice at the expense of others.

Expanding Museum Voices

We consider efforts to more fully engage the multiple voices that can lay claim to a heritage in the Chucalissa landscape an integral mandate of our mission. From this perspective, we now discuss how distinct communities may be more fully engaged in telling the cultural heritage of the Chucalissa built environment.

Relevant to the African American and Native American communities, two points in the Mission received considerable attention in the past three years. First, we moved to expand our mission to interpret the total built environment of the Chucalissa site by incorporating the African American experience of the past 200 years. Second, we acted decisively on our mandate to provide exceptional educational experiences on past and present Native American cultures of the Midsouth.

We note that the very beginnings of Chucalissa as a center for the expression of cultural heritage is rooted in the voice of the Memphis African American Community. Boxtown, so named because the shape of the houses were likened to railroad boxcars, is a blue collar African American residential community in Southwest Memphis, located near the Chucalissa site. As well, the present day T. O. Fuller State Park surrounds the Chucalissa site on three sides. The original name of the park, T. O. Fuller State Park for Negroes, developed in the 1930s as the Jim Crow era equivalent to the Whites only Shelby County Park that is located in North Memphis. As originally conceived, the T.O. Fuller State Park was to contain camping, swimming, picnicking, and playground facilities. During the construction process, Native American cultural materials and evidence of prehistoric earthwork construction were encountered. Those areas with evidence of prehistoric occupation were removed from the T.O. Fuller Park purview and instead became the focus of scientific investigations by the University of Tennessee. The University investigations led to the founding of the Chucalissa Museum in 1956 the forerunner of the current C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, which is named for the archaeologist who conducted excavations at the site over a 30-year period.

There is a long-standing and sometimes contentious relationship between the Boxtown community and the C.H. Nash Museum emanating from the removal of the American Indian site from the T.O. Fuller development. Chucalissa is often viewed as an Ivory Tower of

white research and interest. Particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, Boxtown residents witnessed steady streams of tourists from Memphis drive through their community to a cultural heritage asset in which the local community reaped no benefit. Arguably, based on photographs from that period, the reconstructed prehistoric houses at Chucalissa were in a better state of repair than many of the houses of the Boxtown residents.

The African American Voice

In recent years, Boxtown and surrounding community residents expressed a desire for an increased interaction with the C.H. Nash Museum. In fact, the single zip code with the largest visitation to the Museum is the community in which the site is located. Previously, the Museum's primary outreach to the surrounding community was through the Adopt-A-School program at nearby Whites Chapel Elementary School that is attended by children from Boxtown. The relationship is limited to occasional school visits by the Museum staff and sponsorship of the children's field trips to Chucalissa. A second area of engagement took place in 2005, with the temporary installation of a Smithsonian Institution traveling African Heritage exhibit. Both of these programs were met with limited success.

Since 2007, we have considerably ramped up our community collaboration. The C.H. Nash Museum now hosts the monthly meetings of the Friends of T.O. Fuller, a local resident support group for the State Park. We also actively collaborate with the State Park, assist each other in our special events, and seek to establish partnerships that draw on our individual strengths to generate a greater whole.

The Museum staff is sensitive not to approach this process from a quick fix "now that we have seen the light, let us show you what we can do for you" perspective. Rather, our interest is one of long-term collaborative relationship where we function as a social asset and stakeholder in the Southwest Memphis community. To that end, we participated

in a host of community partnerships. Two of these are particularly instructive. In November 2008, as part of our Native American month activities, we showed the film *Black Indians* in the Museum Theatre on a Sunday afternoon. The film chronicles the history of the common struggles and cross-cultural relationships of the two communities. We were surprised by the near standing room only turnout from the local community. In collaboration with a local community partner, we showed the film again during Black History month. However, instead of showing the film in the C.H. Nash Museum Theater, we scheduled two showings at the neighborhood community center. We see this location shift as a very basic step in the Museum outreach to the community, as opposed to the community coming to the Museum.

As a follow up to the film showing and several other collaborative projects with the community partners, we received funds through a Strengthening Communities Grant Initiative. We used the funds to conduct a program in which nine neighborhood high school students created and installed an African American Cultural Heritage in Southwest Memphis permanent exhibit at the C.H. Nash Museum. The exhibit opened in September of 2010. Additional partnerships were formed in the Southwest Memphis community, resulting from the exhibit creation process.

Projects such as the film showing and exhibit construction can only occur through the collaboration of the C.H. Nash Museum and the community partners. The process requires that the Museum take its place as a stakeholder and asset in the Southwest Memphis community. We treat each interaction as one of equals coming to the table on a continuum of a planned long-term relationship building process.

Re-visioning the Interpretation of Native Americans

A second high priority for the Museum is our mission as educators on Native American cultures, both past and present. Until 2008, there were no



"Reconstructed" Prehistoric Chuc Village, circa 1960

substantive upgrades to museum exhibits in over twenty-five years. We are moving away from the notion of permanent exhibits to that of core exhibits that will be routinely upgraded. The shift from permanent to core exhibits provides a wealth of opportunities for interns from the University of Memphis Museum Studies Graduate Certificate Program, undergraduate internships, and the three graduate assistants assigned to the Museum each semester. Our upgrades to the prehistoric exhibits have been aesthetic, programmatic, and interpretive updates.

We are freeing up exhibit space that contains static archaeological method displays in favor of a hands-on archaeology lab that provides the public of all ages with an engaged and participatory exploration of methods and interpretation. We have not proclaimed a moratorium on further excavations at Chucalissa, but we have no research design or immediate intent to initiate invasive fieldwork. Instead, we focus research and volunteer efforts on the utilitarian materials curated in the museum. Now our Volunteer Saturday events routinely attract 25 to 40 participants. That is a thumbnail view of our current prehistoric projects.

The historic and contemporary American Indian cultures of the Midsouth are a central focus of our program expansion. Unique to prehistoric sites at least in the Midsouth, and perhaps the entire Eastern Woodlands, the primary public interpreters and demonstrators that interacted with the visiting public over the years at Chucalissa were American Indians.

The Choctaw Legacy

Although the majority of Choctaws moved to Indian Territory in Oklahoma, about 8,000 remained in Mississippi and became sharecroppers and tenant farmers on local cotton plantations. They were focused in Neshoba County, where the reservation of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI) was established. In 1952, two families from Neshoba County moved to Lauderdale County, in west Tennessee, near the town of Golddust, to work as farm laborers. By 1960 nearly 200 Choctaws lived in Lauderdale County.

The Chucalissa Museum opened to the public in 1956. From the very start, American Indians played a prominent role as demonstrators and interpreters at Chucalissa. Charles H. Nash, the first



Sonny Bell, Administrative Assistant at the C.H. Nash Museum, and member Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians

Museum Director, sought out American Indians as a way to authenticate the "Indian Village" at Chucalissa. Nash secured the services of MBCI members living in Mississippi and West Tennessee.

In 2008, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians celebrated their 50th anniversary as the public face of Chucalissa. That public face evolved considerably over the years—initially as artisan/craft demonstrators, actors on the landscape, often in rather stereotypical roles, and as exhibit guides, including to the exposed burials of their ancestors. In the past decade, the American Indian role expanded to include administrative tasks.

In 2008, we began making substantive changes in how contemporary American Indian cultures were represented and who voiced the representation. Recently, we witnessed an evolution in how this process works. As the new person at the Museum, and having been Director only since July 2007, I was able to initially and conveniently distance myself from the unpopular removal of the reconstructed village, the stereotypical role American Indians had played in the past, and the declining attendance and programming of the previous era.

I suggested that the changing role of American Indians be likened as moving from that of actors to directors and producers at the C.H. Nash Museum.

Although this was an immediate public relations hit, I was naïve about the ability to administratively operationalize this. Through a series of discussions with MBCI staff members, we agreed to move forward with three projects. First, we would install a Choctaw Heritage exhibit to celebrate their 50 years as the public face of Chucalissa. Second, we would create an exhibit to represent various aspects of Choctaw culture. Third, we would update our existing exhibits on the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

The Choctaw Heritage exhibit was created first. Although staff members were initially quite excited by the project, the actual process raised a host of issues unforeseen by the Choctaw staff and me. My response to the staff question "What should be in this exhibit?" was to ask what did the staff want the visiting public to know about the Choctaw legacy at Chucalissa. The most common unprompted response from the staff was, "We don't know because we have never been asked our opinion about exhibits before."

Over a six-month period we moved through a host of considerations raised in creating the exhibit, such as unresolved familial issues extending back over a forty year period, whose photos should be included, and so forth. The Choctaw staff ultimately decided all content. University of Memphis graduate assistants and I did the production and installation of the content. The process was pushed along by a deadline of the 2008 SFAA meetings in Memphis, when we planned to debut several new exhibits at the Museum.

Upon completion, the exhibit was an immediate source of pride to the Choctaw staff, visiting Choctaw, other American Indians; it was also a source of education for the site visitors. Two of our recently retired senior staff members routinely used the exhibit as a means for contextualizing themselves within the Chucalissa space to museum visitors. Two high school age Choctaw summer interns sponsored by the MBCI were particularly enthusiastic to point to their kinship ties to individuals depicted in the exhibits when giving tours to site visitors.

Our second exhibit on the Choctaw Culture was designed to dramatically increase the amount of information about the Choctaw Indians presented to the visiting public. The same approach of, "What do you want the visitors to the Museum to know about the Choctaw Culture" was used with Museum staff, to determine the subject matter and specific content of the banner exhibits. After determining the topics to be covered, we cast a broader net to acquire specific content information. Choctaw staff members were considerably less amenable to providing input on this project. They expressed a concern of not being qualified or authorized to speak on Choctaw culture. We made multiple trips to consult with the heritage professionals at the Choctaw reservation in Neshoba County, Mississippi, with limited success. Although enthusiastic and supportive, the project received limited input from the MBCI. I was somewhat surprised by this lack of direction. The MBCI is very supportive of activities at the C.H. Nash Museum, including funding of programs, participation in festivals and providing senior administrative speakers at special events. Viewed as a totality, the promotion of culture heritage in museum venues does not appear a high priority for the MBCI.

The completed Choctaw banner exhibit seems less a source of pride for Choctaw visitors, as the topics are less personal and more sound bite snippets on dance, basket making, language, and removal. Choctaw visitors pay most attention to the contemporary leadership banner. The total Choctaw Culture exhibit receives considerable positive feedback from non-Indian site visitors for its educational value on a specific American Indian culture.

The third project focused on the existing Choctaw culture exhibits. With the exception of replacing yellowed 15-year old newspapers and pamphlets, the existing exhibits on Choctaw culture have not been updated, are 30 years old, and clearly show their age. A considerable reluctance on the part of both the Choctaw Museum staff and representatives from the reservation was encountered in even discussing the third