



March 2008 Newsletter

Ragtime Archaeology: Excavations in Scott Joplin's Neighborhood

By Timothy E. Baumann*

Introduction

In 1984, Missouri State Parks acquired the last standing house or structure associated with Scott Joplin, known as the “King of Ragtime,” in St. Louis and created the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site (Figures 1 & 2). Efforts by Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., a local African-American neighborhood organization, had previously saved this home from destruction and had it recognized as a National Historic Landmark site in 1976. At the turn of the century, Joplin



**Figure 1: Early 20th Century Photo of Scott Joplin
(Courtesy of the Scott Joplin State Historic Site)**

moved from Sedalia, Missouri to St. Louis and rented the second-floor flat of this brick row house to be closer to his publisher and to the center of ragtime music. He only lived at this address for a short period between 1900 and 1903 with his first wife, Belle.



Figure 2: Current view of the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site in St. Louis (Photo by Timothy Baumann 2006)

By this time, Joplin was already a well-known composer with his earlier publication of the *Maple Leaf* rag in 1899, which eventually sold over 500,000 copies (Berlin 1994; Curtis 1994). In St. Louis, Joplin focused on composing new rags and teaching, spending little time performing. One of his published works that was written in this house was *The Entertainer*, which was popularized again by the 1973 Paul Newman and Robert Redford movie, *The Sting*.

Since 1984, the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site has acquired adjacent buildings and vacant property as a buffer zone around the site and for potential future development and interpretation. For example, in the early 1990s the New Rosebud Café was opened in the adjacent property for receptions, ragtime performances, and parties. This venue was designed to mimic the Rosebud Bar, a historic rag joint in St. Louis operated by Tom Turpin. In 1897, Turpin was the composer of the first published rag, called the *Harlem Rag* (Jones 1995). In the early 1900s, the original Rosebud was located only eight blocks south of Joplin's home and was at the center of St. Louis' African American community and Rag music nationally.

The interpretation of Scott Joplin's house has focused on the celebratory history of Scott Joplin and ragtime music. This site serves an important role in the Missouri State Parks because it is the only site dedicated to African-American heritage and located within a large urban context. Despite this emphasis, the majority of museum visitors have been affluent white citizens of St. Louis County. African Americans from St. Louis, including children from the local schools, have been less frequent and have instead utilized the New Rosebud Café for receptions and parties.

In order to increase African American visitors and school tours, the Missouri State Parks partnered with the University of Missouri-St. Louis and Missouri Valley College in 2005 to develop a new strategic plan for site interpretation and outreach programs. The first step in this process was to develop a community committee that included State Park staff, historians and archaeologists from the partnering colleges, and members of the general public. The latter were recruited from neighborhood residents, schools, churches, and civic organizations. This committee has met monthly since the fall of 2005 to discuss new initiatives to attract more visitors to this historic site. The preliminary suggestions have been to 1) expand the site's interpretation beyond Scott Joplin and ragtime music to broader lines of social and neighborhood history and 2) to transform this site into a community cultural center, providing synergy for neighborhood revitalization.

The historical interpretation should expand to connect the past to the present citizens of St. Louis and include 1) the evolution of ragtime over time to jazz, rap, and other forms of music, 2) the interaction and transformation of Joplin's ethnically diverse neighborhood, and 3) the African American struggle for equal citizenship and identity in the face of racism and class division. These new interpretive initiatives can then be developed into new exhibits and education/outreach programs.

The next step was to acquire funding for these initiatives. In 2006, a six-year U.S. Department of Education Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program grant (GEAR-UP) was obtained to utilize the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site as a "laboratory for learning" for area high school students. These students and their teachers will participate in a historical and archaeological investigation of the Scott Joplin house and its surrounding neighborhood between 2008 and 2010 to encourage education, with the goal of increasing high school graduation and college enrollment rates.

Prior to high school participation in the summer of 2008, a research design was developed in 2006 to establish a historical timeline, a landscape history, and major research themes, as well as a preliminary archaeological testing project. The latter was conducted in July of 2006 as a public archaeological excavation on historic residences/businesses behind and across the alley from Scott Joplin's house. This archaeological assessment was conducted to determine this neighborhood's archaeological integrity (e.g. undisturbed features, artifacts), to collect some initial data for the educational programs in subsequent years, and to clarify the historical themes accessible through these below ground resources.

2006 Project Area -- Historical Background

Archival research was conducted to establish a historic context of Scott Joplin's neighborhood in order to understand the landscape history of the 2006 testing area and to develop major research questions. This research included oral histories and the analysis of census records, city directories, and historic maps. The preliminary results indicated that Scott Joplin's neighborhood was initially settled in the mid-nineteenth century by primarily German and Irish immigrants in single and multi-residential brick homes with associated outbuildings (e.g., privies, sheds) (Figure 3). Some of these early settlers owned their homes, but by 1900, the

majority of the residences became rental properties. When Scott Joplin moved into this neighborhood in 1900, it was transforming into a major African American community. By 1930, this neighborhood consisted of 32,655 African-Americans or 35% of the total African-American population in St. Louis and 73% of the neighborhood's population, making it the largest African American concentration in St. Louis.

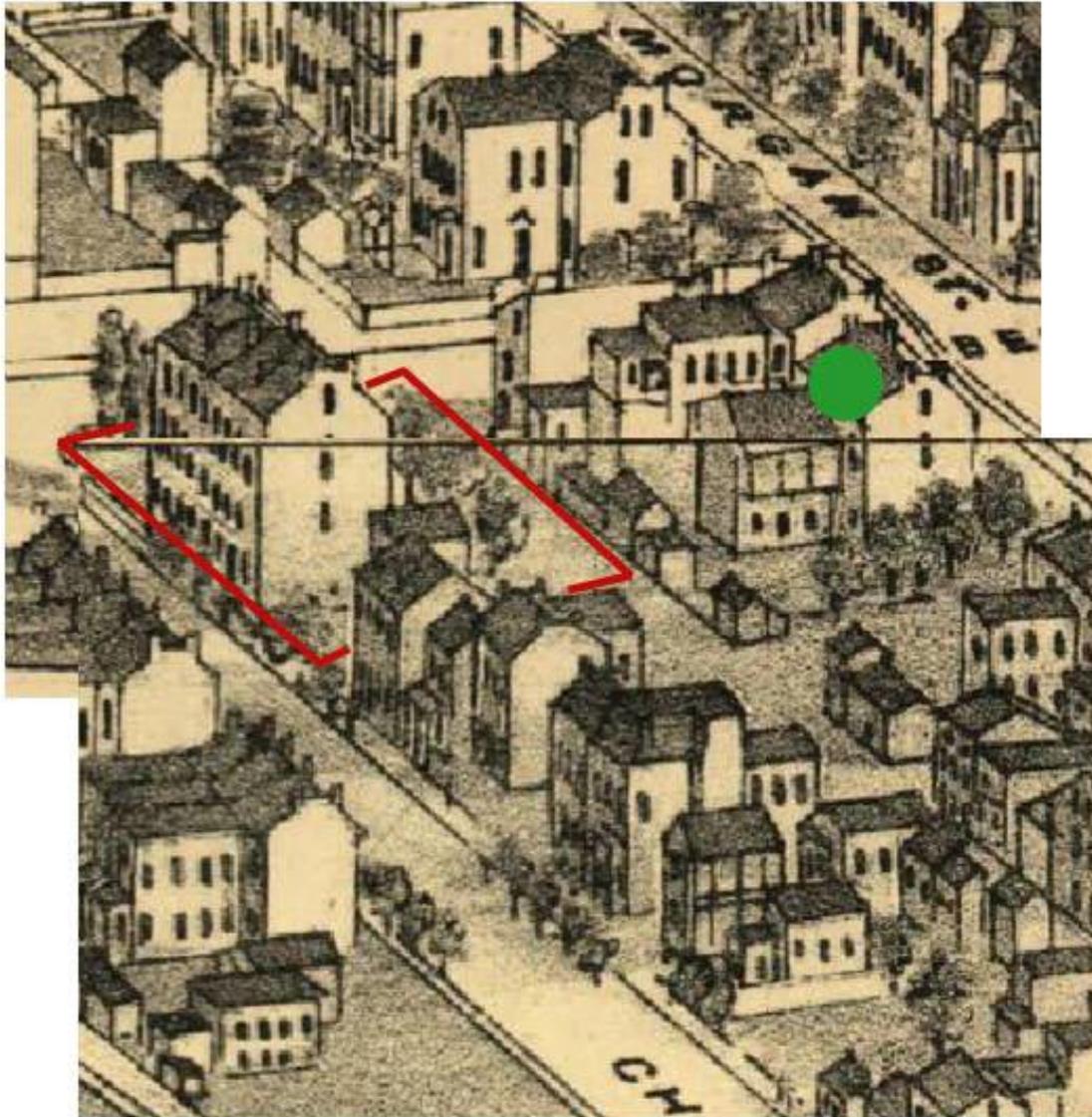


Figure 3: Bird's Eye View Drawing of Scott Joplin's Neighborhood in 1876. (Source: Compton and Dry 1876)
[note: green dot = Joplin House; red box = boundary of 2006 project area]

This consolidation of the African-American population was the result of racially motivated real estate covenants and St. Louis city ordinances beginning in 1916 that designated specific neighborhoods for African Americans. The majority of African Americans that moved

into this neighborhood were from outside of Missouri with most coming from southern states, like Mississippi. Between 1879 and the mid-twentieth century, a mass exodus of southern African Americans began to move to northern urban cities, like St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit, to find employment and to escape the legacy of slavery.

Within the 2006 testing area (Figure 4), a series of two and three story brick row houses were constructed in the 1870s and 1880s. Along the alley, each residence also had a single shed with an ash pit. None of the historic maps identify privy or cistern locations, but they were likely

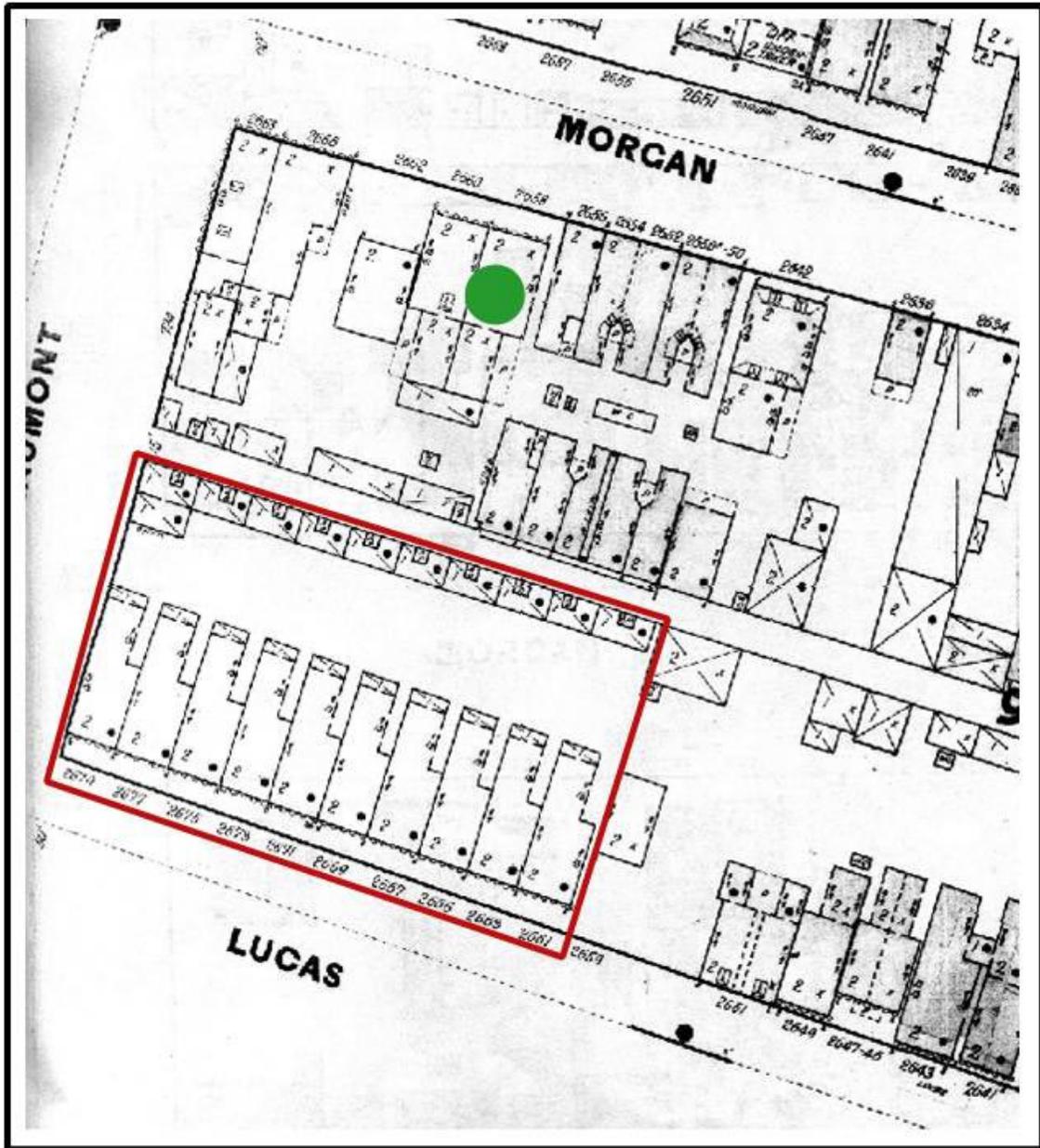


Figure 4: 1897 Whipple Fire Insurance Map (Source: Whipple & Company 1897)
[note: green dot = Joplin House; red box = boundary of 2006 project area]

present at each residence. Prior to 1920, these homes were utilized as boarding houses for single, divorced, and widowed Euro American women with no children or men in their households. A female boarding house was one of several euphemisms used in public records to identify houses of prostitution, but there are no historic records to substantiate this possibility. The census records state instead that these women came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including German, French, English, Irish, and Spanish origins, and worked in various jobs that included a cook, dressmaker, servant, waitress, hair dresser, sales, and bookkeeping.

By 1920, all of these homes were rented by African American families who worked in domestic and blue collar jobs. African American women most frequently worked as laundresses or domestic servants, and African American men worked as porters, janitors, firemen, and laborers for the railroad, foundries, and other industrial businesses. After 1910, the first floor of the corner row house was also utilized as a billiards hall and then a grocery store. After 1930, two homes were constructed at the south corner of Beaumont Street and the alley and were occupied by African American families. At some point, these buildings also housed a coal merchant, a small restaurant, a scrap iron shop, and a beauty parlor. All of the buildings in the 2006 project area were last occupied and then razed in the 1960s.

2006 Archaeological Investigation

The 2006 archaeological investigation was conducted from July 11-29 and was operated as a college field school through Missouri Valley College and with volunteers from the local community. Due to time and money constraints, only a portion of the project area was tested. Excavations focused on the backyard and alleyways, searching for outbuildings (e.g., privies, ash pits, and cisterns), fence lines, and general yard refuse.

The row house structures were not studied because they were razed in the past 20 years and because extant examples are still visible in the neighborhood. Excavations included both hand and mechanical excavation. Hand units were conducted to document the general yard stratigraphy and artifact concentrations. Soil was screened utilizing a one quarter inch wire mesh. Cinder, coal, and architectural artifacts (e.g., brick, cement, and concrete) were field sorted, a volume determined, and then discarded.

A backhoe was used for two block excavations, which focused on the mid-yard area behind the row houses and uncovered one alley shed completely. Soil removed by the backhoe was hand sorted for artifacts. Features uncovered were mapped with a total station and then hand excavated and screened. A two-liter flotation sample was also removed from each feature level.

Features uncovered during these excavations included a limestone foundation for a brick shed (20 ft. x 10 ft.), a brick pad/sidewalk, several ash concentrations above shallow demolition pits, and an irregular pit of unknown function (Figure 5). Absent from this feature list is a privy. Interestingly, the fire insurance maps do not have any water closets labeled behind these row houses, but on the north side of the alley and behind Scott Joplin's residence there are several privies clearly marked. So, where are the toilets? The majority of Joplin's neighborhood did not

receive indoor plumbing until the 1940s-50s, so it is unlikely that these row houses had in-home toilets with running water. The outhouses may have been frame shacks with no foundation over dirt pits. If so, then the impermanent construction may have been ignored on the fire insurance maps. There is also a possibility that the privies were located in the basement of these row houses, but excavations did not attempt to explore this hypothesis because the basements were



Figure 5: Excavation Block No. 1 with Alley Shed and Brick Pad Exposed (Photo by Timothy Baumann 2006)

filled with building rubble. Extant examples of these row houses are still located within this neighborhood, but none have been found to have basement privies. Another reason for the lack of privies may be that the two block excavations simply missed the privy positions or they may have been destroyed by the 1960s abandonment and demolition of this block. The privies could have also been within the alley sheds, which are labeled on the fire insurance maps to contain ash pits, but the excavation of one shed did not identify any privy within. Based on a 1937 fire insurance map, the alley sheds were razed during the depression likely to recycle and sell the bricks (Sanborn Fire Insurance Company 1937). Sometime in the 1940s a brick pad/sidewalk was placed on top of the razed shed. A drain pipe opening was found within and flush with the brick pad. Broken fragments of a porcelain toilet were found lying over the drain pipe with one fragment stamped with the manufacture date of 1948. This suggests that the first flushing toilets were placed outside the homes and along the alley in 1948 or later. This toilet may have replaced an earlier privy at this same location, which was then destroyed by modernization.

Artifacts that could be directly associated with the 1890s to 1910s female boardinghouses were few. Written documentation does not support or disprove the theory that some or all of these female boardinghouses were houses of prostitution. Previous archaeological studies of bordellos have documented artifact patterns with higher frequencies of lamp glass, personal items (e.g., clothing fasteners, cosmetics, jewelry, grooming items), and a higher socioeconomic pattern in foodways and ceramics than the surrounding neighborhood (Seifert 1991, 2005; Cheek and Seifert 1994). Examples of lamp glass and personal items were collected from this site, but not in the quantity found from previous bordello studies (Figure 6). Similarly, analysis of the ceramics and foodways do not indicate higher status levels.



Figure 6: Buttons, Jewelry, Dice, and a Poker Chip from the 2006 Excavation Season (Photo by Timothy Baumann 2006)

During Joplin's era, ragtime music, gambling, and drinking were also linked to houses of prostitution. Alcohol consumption and gambling were represented at this site by alcohol bottles, dice, and a poker chip found near the alley shed, but none of these were in quantities that would suggest prostitution or gambling establishments (Figure 6). The dice likely came from kids and young adults gambling in the alley ways. This interpretation was provided by an African American male that grew up in this neighborhood during the 1940s and 1950s, who stated to the archaeology crew "you will probably find some dice in the alley, because we used to throw dice against the sheds when we were kids."

Probably the most intriguing artifact pattern was the high frequency of ammunition (Figure 7). This assemblage consisted of nearly 100 pieces, including bullets of various calibers as well as spent and unspent shotgun shells and cartridges. There was no discernable

concentration of ammunition from one house lot or alley shed, but instead gun activity was found equally across the entire site. What caused this pattern? Oral traditions from this time period



Figure 7: A Sample of Ammunition Collected during the 2006 Excavation Season (Photo by Timothy Baumann 2006)

suggest that on New Year's Eve everyone would fire their guns to celebrate. If this was the case, then we should find a similar ammo pattern in other St. Louis city neighborhoods. Previous studies archaeological studies in urban St. Louis have not recorded even a tenth of the ammo found in Joplin's neighborhood (Harl 2005; Baumann et al. 2008). Another possibility was a post-WWII race riot that occurred just a few blocks from this site. Accounts of this riot suggest that it did not spill into the project area and thus was not the likely cause of this artifact concentration. A final interpretation is that at the time of the 1960s abandonment, these empty row houses were used as an unofficial shooting range. This seems the most likely interpretation, as most of the ammunition was found within post WW II through 1960s deposits with a portion found in ash concentrations within the 1960s demolition lens.

Conclusion

The Scott Joplin Project is partially funded by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources and a U.S. Department of Education Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program grant (GEAR-UP). The later will attempt to utilize the Scott Joplin

House State Historic Site to increase high school graduation and college enrollment rates in eight St. Louis school districts. Participating high school students and teachers will be introduced to archival research, oral histories, and archaeological excavations. A teacher workshop will be held in the summer of 2008 and a high school excavation program will be in 2009 and 2010. The archival material, oral histories, and archaeological data from the 2006 field season will be utilized in educational resource kits for use during the forthcoming high school programs and for future outreach activities by the Missouri State Parks.

The 2008 field season will investigate the rear yard of Scott Joplin's home, uncovering portions of his privy, outbuildings, and general yard activities. Information gathered from this field study will be used to expand the interpretation of the Scott Joplin State Historic Site through new exhibits and educational programming. These excavations will also include a college field school through Missouri Valley College for three credit hours. Registration is open to any college student in good academic standing. For additional information, see the following web link: <http://www.moval.edu/Faculty/baumannt/joplindig.html>

Note

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