



## December 2008 Newsletter

### New Philadelphia Archaeology, Heritage, and National Historic Landmark Status

By Charlotte King

#### Abstract

The United States Secretary of the Interior holds the mandate to designate the most important historic properties in our nation as National Historic Landmarks (NHL). NHLs are reminders and illustrations of our nation's past, and help us understand the important events, trends, individuals, accomplishments, and ideals that shaped our country's identity. Based on its exceptional national historic significance, the historic town site of New Philadelphia, Illinois, the first known town founded and officially registered by an African American in the United States, and a place that existed as a multi-racial community during the racially tense times of Black Codes and into the Jim Crow era, was recently nominated for NHL designation.

#### Significance and Nomination of New Philadelphia

The National Park System Landmarks Committee confirmed the national historic importance of the town site of New Philadelphia, Illinois, on October 29, 2008. The Landmarks Committee voted unanimously to recommend the property for National Historic Landmark (NHL) status to the National Park System Advisory Board. In turn, the Advisory Board reviewed the nomination on December 3, and recommended its approval to the Secretary of the Interior, who holds the mandate to make the designation. Listed among more than 83,000 historic properties on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005, New Philadelphia, upon final approval by the Secretary of the Interior, will join the elite group of only about 2,500 historic sites deemed to be *exceptionally* significant to our country's history. The historic town site qualifies for NHL status for its high degree of archaeological integrity and the potential it holds to provide scientific information of major importance (U.S. Department of the Interior 1998, 1999; Gaumer and Quimby 2006).

Property owners, McWorter family descendents, academics, local and national political officials, including U.S. Senators for Illinois Richard Durbin and now President-elect Barack Obama, wrote endorsement letters to demonstrate their support for New Philadelphia's designation as a National Historic Landmark. The New Philadelphia team made a presentation to the Landmark Committee in Washington, D.C., to tell the story of the town and explain New Philadelphia's qualifications for NHL status. Paul Shackel and Christopher Fennell fielded questions from the committee. Patricia McWorter, great-great granddaughter of the town's founder, delivered an eloquent, moving statement on behalf of the McWorter family (Figs. 1, 2). Phil Bradshaw, president of the New Philadelphia Association (NPA), and Carol

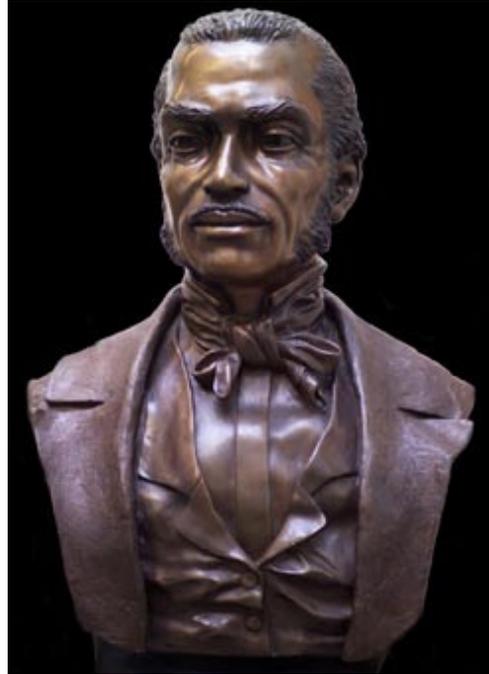


**Figure 1. Presenters and attendees at the National Historic Landmarks Committee hearing in Washington, D.C. Front row (left to right): Phil and Linda Bradshaw, Helen Wright, Patricia McWorter, Charlotte King, and Carol McCartney. Back row (left to right): Chris Fennell and Paul Shackel. Photograph courtesy of Andrea King.**

McCartney, secretary of the NPA, also addressed the Landmarks Committee. Flordeliz Bugarin, assistant professor of anthropology at Howard University, and several of her students demonstrated their support of New Philadelphia’s NHL nomination by attending the meeting.

**Figure 2.**

**Frank McWorter, founder of New Philadelphia, Illinois. Sculpture by Shirley McWorter Moss on display at the Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois. Photograph courtesy of Sandra McWorter and Lincoln Presidential Library.**



## **National Historic Landmarks**

The Historic Sites Act of 1935 charged the Secretary of the Interior, through the National Park Service, to inventory the nation’s historic and archaeological sites to assess those that exceptionally represented or commemorated our country’s history. In addition, the legislation established the Secretary of the Interior’s Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments, known today as the National Park System Advisory Board. Properties determined by the Secretary of the Interior to be of exceptional national significance were designated National Historic Landmarks (U.S. Department of the Interior 2002:1).

New Philadelphia qualifies for Landmark status under NHL Criterion 6, which is most often applied to archaeological sites. To qualify under Criterion 6, the property is expected to yield, or hold the potential to yield information of major scientific importance to affect “theories, concepts, and ideas to a major degree” (U.S. Department of the Interior 1999:11. 30).

In addition to promoting public awareness of the sites' significance, NHL designations were intended to stimulate preservation of historic properties by private owners. Preservation grants are available to properties listed on the National Register, a nationwide inventory of historic places, including NHLs. Those properties are also protected under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 that requires federal agencies to "take into account" effects of proposed federally funded undertakings on the properties. Section 110(f) of the legislation mandates greater attention for NHLs that may be adversely affected by federal actions (U.S. Department of the Interior 1999:9-14; 2002:59; 2006a). The preservation, protection, and promotion of NHLs are the responsibility of the National Park Service (NPS). Federal legislation requires the NPS to monitor NHLs and report its findings to Congress (U.S. Department of the Interior 2002:39; 2006a)

Potential NHLs are commonly identified through "a comparative analysis of properties associated with a specific area of American history, such as labor or women's history" (U.S. Department of the Interior 1999:15). Federal agencies, State Historic Preservation Officers (SHPO), and individuals may prepare and submit NHL nominations. The National Park Advisory Board Landmarks Committee, made up of national and community leaders who are active in the fields of natural, historic, and cultural conservation, schedules to meet bi-annually to consider the historic significance of proposed NHLs and submit their recommendations to the Advisory Board. The Advisory Board, in turn, refers its suggestions to the Secretary of the Interior, who holds the mandate to designate NHLs (U.S. Department of the Interior 1999:10).

In the 1960s and 1970s, social and political forces fueled archaeological interest in sites associated with African Americans. Preparations for the bicentennial celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1976 furthered the research and studies of contributions of African Americans to the nation's history, such as the African Meeting House in Boston, a center for abolitionist movements as well as a house of worship (Singleton and Bograd 1995:14). Other historic sites associated with African Americans include the Booker T. Washington National Monument; Boston's African-American National Historic Site; and the *Brown vs. Board of Education* National Historic Site (U.S. Department of the Interior 2006b, c, d). The state of Illinois is the location of several National Historic Landmarks, such as the Arthur Heurtely House designed by legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright; the Grosse Point

Light Station; and the home of Saint-Domingue-born (presently Haiti) Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, Chicago's first settler. Illinois' prehistoric NHL properties include the Kincaid site and Cahokia Mounds, sites associated with ancient Mississippian culture.

### New Philadelphia

The historic town site of New Philadelphia, Illinois is the first known town platted and officially registered by an African American in the United States. In 1836, Frank McWorter, a freedman, laid out his town on 42 acres of land divided into 20 blocks and parceled into 144 lots (Figs. 2, 3). Proceeds from lots sold to individuals classified as white, black, and mulatto on federal census records were applied to purchase freedom for enslaved family members.

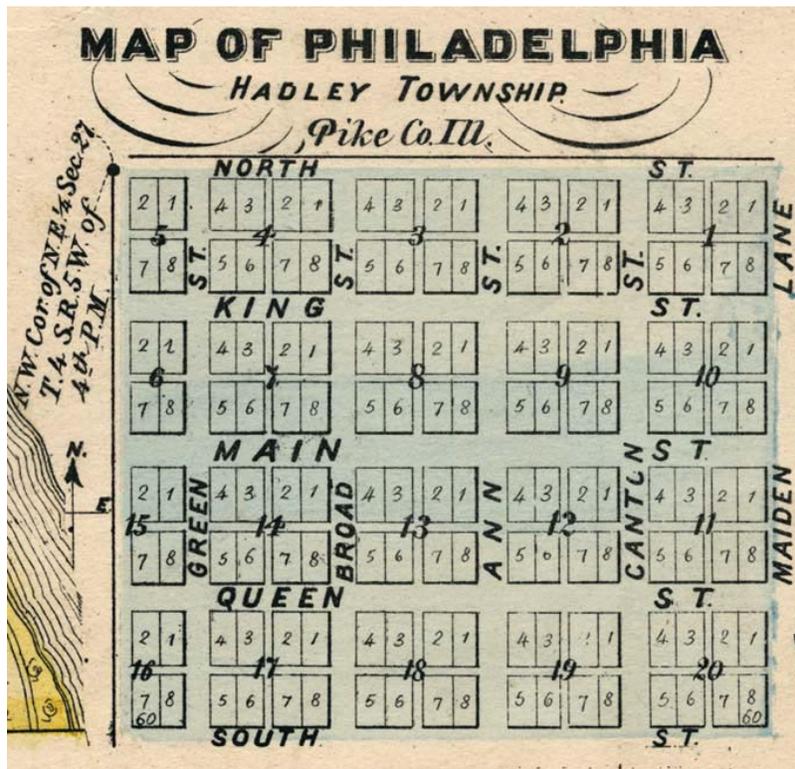


Figure 3. Plat map of Philadelphia (also called New Philadelphia), excerpt from *Atlas Map of Pike County* (Ensign 1872).

The early nineteenth century marked a dynamic period on the Midwestern frontier. In 1825, the 363-mile long Erie Canal reduced shipping costs and connected eastern markets to Chicago, encouraging the development of western lands. Threats to settlers by Native

Americans ended with the conclusion of the Black Hawk Wars in 1832. Around the same time, Great Lake steamers connected New York and Chicago, and a stagecoach line stretched to the west from Detroit, Michigan. Construction began on the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1836 and, upon its completion in 1848, Chicago was linked to the Illinois River (Fig. 4). Steamboats carried cargo and passengers along inland waterways by the 1840s (Davis 1998:155, 169, 220-224; Walters 1985:6).



**Figure 4. Location of New Philadelphia. Image by Christopher Fennell.**

Proximity to land transportation routes and New Philadelphia's position between the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers attracted settlers eager to improve their economic position. Although Black Codes were enacted to dictate nearly every aspect of African Americans' lives and to discourage their settlement in Illinois, some African Americans negotiated the stringent laws to settle in New Philadelphia. For African Americans, the multi-racial town presented opportunities for self-determination and a place where they could find employment as laborers, blacksmiths, carpenters, and farmers. Settlers from at least nineteen different states and three

foreign countries (England, Ireland, and Canada), made their home in the town (Walker 1983:131-132; Harper 2003:454-457; U.S. Census 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880).

New Philadelphia was one of hundreds of towns established during the stimulus to populate the western frontier. Many disappeared from the landscape within a few years; some platted towns existed only on paper. New Philadelphia was one of only a few multi-racial communities that existed during the racially tumultuous antebellum era. The town defied adversity and challenges and existed for nearly one hundred years (Walker 1983:3,121; Walters 1983-1984:33).

The town seemed primed for success. It was situated on fertile prairie land suitable for agriculture. Nearby timberland supplied materials needed to construct houses, tools, wagons, fences, and provided fuel. Positioned at major county crossroads, near the Mississippi River, and the proposed Illinois and Michigan Canal, New Philadelphia's farmers and merchants had access to distant markets (Fig. 4; Mak and Walton 1972:619-620; Walters 1983-1984[9]4:337; Davis 1998:229; Sadowski 2006-2007). But when a proposed line of the Hannibal to Naples Railroad passed the town by in 1869, the town fell into a decline. By the turn of the century, many townspeople moved away; only a few families continued to make their homes here into the 1930s (Chapman 1880:740-741; Burdick 1992).

### **New Philadelphia's Townspeople**

New Philadelphia grew from a small village of three households in the 1840s and peaked in 1865 when 160 townsfolk lived in 29 households (Walker 1983:130-131; State of Illinois 1865:8-12). Although the majority of New Philadelphia residents were of European descent, the town was popularly considered a black community. Author Norman Crockett defines an all-black town as a community comprised of at least 90 percent African Americans (1979:103). Cha-Jua (2000:221) defined an all-black town as a place governed by blacks and comprised of 90 percent black residents.

An analysis of census records from 1850 to 1880 reveals the number of residents recorded by census enumerators as "black" or "mulatto" fluctuated from a high of 38 percent of the population in 1850 to a low of 17 percent in 1880 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880). Although African Americans represented the minority of the town's residents

throughout its history, the number was proportionately large when compared to the entire state of Illinois. For example, in 1850, 38 percent of New Philadelphia residents were African American, while the entire state of Illinois reported only 0.6 percent African Americans among its total population (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1850; 2000). Historian James Davis' observation that the town became "a nodal point for regional black activities" (1998:293) may explain the perception of regional residents that New Philadelphia was a black town, a perception that oral histories confirm persisted into modern times (Christman 2004-2005).

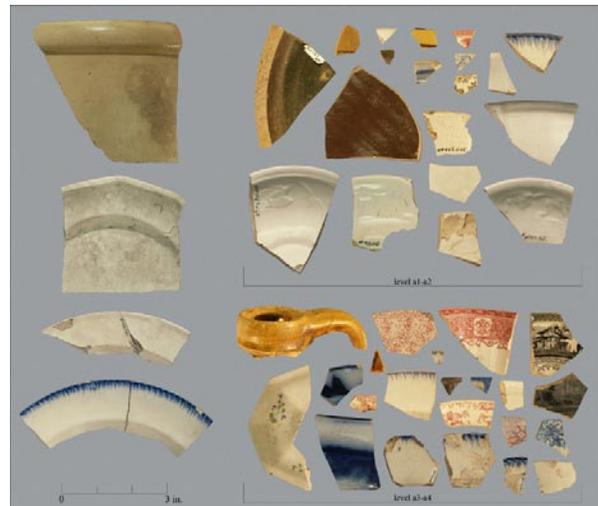
### Archaeological Investigation

Geophysical surveys and archaeological investigations at New Philadelphia, funded by grants from the National Science Foundation from 2004-2006 and again starting in 2008, located many intact features, such as substantial building foundations, wells, cellar pits, and an artifact assemblage that spans the town's occupation (Fig. 5). No obvious differences were detected in the types of material goods found in the households of African-American and European-American townspeople.



**Foundation remains to Louisa McWorter house site on Block 13 of New Philadelphia. Photograph by Paul Shackel.**

**Figure 5.**



**Sample of ceramic artifacts from house site on Block 8 of the town. Photograph by Christopher Valvano.**

An analysis of artifacts recovered from features of five New Philadelphia households was conducted by archaeologists to identify consumer practices. Two households were occupied by European Americans, and African-American residents are associated with the other three sites. The similarity of material culture recovered from the households suggests that townspeople were more concerned with function and less concerned with adherence to popular convention and the implication of social status reflected in their choices of material goods. Similarities among households occupied by African Americans and European Americans may be indicative of a common awareness and social consciousness in a region and time of racial oppression and prejudice (Shackel 2007). As Spencer-Wood and Heberling (1987:56) observe, “ceramics are used in households for food processing, preparation, and eating, for status display, and possibly sometimes as ideological statements.”



**Figure 6. Gaming pieces recovered from across multiple house sites in New Philadelphia may be from a game known as mancala. Top row are stone pieces, middle row are glass, and bottom row are ceramic. Photograph by Christopher Valvano.**

Tokens that may be associated with the game of mancala were found throughout the town site (Fig. 6). Mancala originated in the Middle East about 4,000 years ago and became popular in various African regions. Play involves the distribution of pebbles, shells, or seeds into holes or cups, but there are many variations in the rules of play, number of players, types of

gaming pieces, and types of game boards. In some games, the player with the largest number of tokens is the winner; in other games, the player with the no pieces is declared the winner. Pebbles or cowrie shells were often used as gaming tokens by players in some regions in Africa who sometimes made a series of impressions in the soil in place of using boards. Captive Africans carried the tradition from West Africa to the United States and the Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Evidence of the game has been found on plantations and in association with living facilities of enslaved African Americans (Towshend 1979:794-796).

Mancala gaming pieces recovered by archaeologists are often small, triangular or square-shaped ceramics or glass shards (Wilkie 2000:192). Most tokens found at New Philadelphia were whiteware ceramic pieces; a few yellowware pieces were also identified as gaming tokens (Fig. 6). The pieces measure between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (1.3 to 1.9 cm) long. Color had been added to some of the pieces, others retained the object's original color. A worn glass gaming piece was also found. At New Philadelphia the gaming tokens were found in association with both African-American and European-American occupations, suggesting that cultural exchange occurred between groups. In addition to the similarity of material culture among the households, finding mancala pieces at both European- and African-American sites



**Figure 7. Remains of an early well and overlying house foundation in Block 8 of New Philadelphia. Photograph by Paul Shackel.**

also prompts archaeologists to reconsider and find alternatives to conventional research methods that look for cultural markers (Shackel 2006, 2007).

Although only a few building foundations remain exposed, the high archaeological integrity of the site and its many intact features qualify New Philadelphia for nomination as a National Historic Landmark under Criterion 6, which is most often applied to archaeological sites (see, e.g., Figs. 5, 7). Under this criterion, “information yielded or likely to be yielded must be of *major* scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation *over large areas* of the United States.” NHL Criterion 6 also mandates that the site “should be expected to yield data affecting *theories, concepts, and ideas* to a *major degree*” (National Park Service 1998 rev:51).

New research agendas in historical archaeology note that patterns and meanings of material culture change over time and are influenced by historical, environmental, and social factors as well as cultural exchange and creativity. These same factors influence the concept and expression of race and racial identity. The material culture found at New Philadelphia has the potential to significantly contribute to these research trends within historical archaeology.

The high archaeological integrity of the entire site may also provide information about social relationships through the landscape. Historical archaeology has traditionally focused on studying race at plantations and individual household sites. At New Philadelphia, archaeological research can examine issues on a townsite level to understand the importance of spatial relations and segregation across space and through time. The historic town site offers a new research approach as a town founded through the entrepreneurial skills and enterprise of an African American, and a place where formerly enslaved individuals, free born African Americans, and people of European descent lived together. Archaeologists have a unique opportunity to investigate the interactions between the groups. The findings at New Philadelphia can contribute to an understanding of how people constructed and used their surroundings and material possessions as they negotiated and defined their personal and economic relations in this unusual setting.

## Conclusion

New Philadelphia represents more than the extraordinary story of Frank McWorter and his family's pursuit of freedom, self-determination, and economic opportunities. Long after the town site was abandoned, the story of the town, its founder, its townspeople, and the qualities they represent resonated among family members and the surrounding community who are determined to keep the town's memory alive.

The historic town site provides social scientists with an exceptional opportunity to explore the issues of race and racialization and focus on research questions with historical and contemporary implications. New Philadelphia offers a unique opportunity for researchers to develop new and innovative methods and paradigms that can contribute to a more complete and accurate account of the people, events, and cultural interaction that formed the history and character of the United States.

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