



Finding My Roots by Digging in the Ground

LEARNING HISTORY AND HERITAGE THROUGH ARCHAEOLOGY

Guy Weston

Updated July 12, 2024

ABSTRACT

Defined as “the study of human history through the excavation of sites and the analysis of artifacts and other physical remains,”¹ archaeology can be an important and enlightening tool for studying community history. However, archaeological excavations are typically too expensive for consideration in community-based history projects. Moreover, unlike history, which is widely appreciated as a topic of study in any public school, community historical society members may not be familiar with archaeological findings and the insights they provide regarding the history and culture of a community. This paper describes how this author and the Timbuctoo Historical Society, a small community-based organization, became familiar with archaeology and is using it to learn more about family history as well as the history of Timbuctoo.

KEY WORDS

archaeology; collaborative archaeology; geophysical Survey; ground penetrating radar (GPR)

Timbuctoo is located in Westampton Township in Burlington County, New Jersey. Timbuctoo traces its origins to a community settled by formerly enslaved and free Black people, beginning in 1826.² My ancestors settled there in 1829 on land still owned by my family. In volume 38 of the *AAHGS Journal* in 2022, I described the journey of learning my Timbuctoo lineage, beginning with my fourth-great grandmother who was born in Philadelphia (c. 1795). In volume 41 of the *AAHGS Journal* in 2024, I recounted how my mother inherited the property from a cousin in the late 1980s and how that process prompted my interest in genealogy, as well as how the Timbuctoo Historical Society seeks to preserve the Timbuctoo cemetery. The cemetery is the “only above-ground evidence” of Timbuctoo’s historic

past, and archaeological work plays a critical role in this preservation effort. The present article briefly discusses prior archaeological work in Timbuctoo, as well as a planned excavation of the site of our ancestral family home, established in 1829 and occupied through the 1940s.

Background

In 2009, archaeologist David Orr from Temple University and historian Bill Bolger from the National Park Service met with Westampton Mayor Sidney Camp to inform him of Timbuctoo’s historic significance and expressed interest in possible archaeological work. At that point, the conception of Timbuctoo among government officials and area residents alike was simply that it was the “Black section” of town, and there was not

widespread knowledge of any remarkable history or culture. Subsequently, Mayor Camp shared this information with other local officials, and the Township Committee allocated funding to support archaeological work. The first project was a geophysical survey.

Definitions

A *geophysical survey* is a systematic method of “collection of information associated with subsurface features”³ in a particular area of interest. In this case, the area of interest is the “core area” of Timbuctoo and the nearby Timbuctoo cemetery. The principal technique used for this geophysical survey was ground penetrating radar (GPR), a specific method used to collect images of the subsurface.⁴ In archaeology, GPR “can be used to detect and map subsurface archaeological artifacts, features, and patterning.”⁵ Speaking simplistically, we can say that GPR produces images similar to X-rays that identify subsurface features, and these findings can be used to plan and guide archaeological excavations.

Process

Westampton Township then contracted with John Milner and Associates to conduct a geophysical survey that produced a final report conveying their findings in September 2009.⁶ The project required eight days of fieldwork and the cost was \$22,016. Based on the findings of the geophysical survey, Dr. Orr and his team, including eventual Principal Investigator Christopher Barton, selected the homesite of the US Colored Troop (USCT) soldier, William Davis, for excavation. Historical records indicate Davis purchased the 20 × 100-foot parcel in 1879 and raised his family there along with his wife, Rachel, in a 12 × 16-foot home.⁷ Two field seasons of excavation were conducted in 2010 and 2011, resulting in excavation and analysis of 15,042

artifacts, as well as bricks that had been used for construction.⁸ Artifacts included lots of tableware, glassware, pottery, clay pipes, shoe fragments, etc. It is noteworthy that the area of the Davis home was used as a community trash midden between the 1920s to the 1940s, resulting in a high volume of artifacts clearly not associated with a lone single-family residence.⁹

Findings

By analyzing and interpreting these artifacts, Christopher Barton and colleagues gleaned an array of insights regarding early twentieth-century Timbuctoo residents’ social class, material consumption, access to consumer goods, and home canning. For example, a foundation built with inexpensive bricks suggests a family with limited financial resources, whereas very high-quality bricks would mean a family was more well to do. Multiple “Dixie Peach” hair pomade jars would indicate the site was populated by Black people, although this was already known. In a book chapter entitled “Food, Strife, and Preservation,”¹⁰ Barton “discusses dietary patterns at Timbuctoo through the lens of archaeology, focusing on home canning and commodified foods.” He draws these conclusions from home-canning artifacts and artifacts related to commodified foods recovered



Figure 1 Excavation Site

Dennis McDonald



Figure 2 Sampling of artifacts

from the excavation, as well as the global context of the World Wars and the great Depression, which occurred during the period of interest. Barton has numerous publications about his work in Timbuctoo, most notably *Archaeology of Race and Class at Timbuctoo*, based on his PhD dissertation.

For anyone interested in social justice perspectives on Black history (as opposed to merely reciting facts), this book provides a comprehensive analysis of the archaeology as it relates to the



Figure 3 Barton instructs descendants A. J. Weston and Maya Weston on excavation techniques when they were fifteen and nine years old, respectively.

struggles and resilience of Timbuctoo as a community. This was fascinating to me, because I did not know archaeology could provide a framework for this type of analysis. Barton is known as a proponent of *collaborative archaeology*,¹¹ which insists on meaningful participation of descendant communities. On this basis, a multi-disciplinary advisory committee had been formed to help plan the excavation and interpret findings under the name Timbuctoo Discovery Project. Unfortunately, enthusiasm about descendant participation was not uniform among all the scholars involved.

Barton touches on this aspect in his book as well. I can attribute my mid-career transition to Timbuctoo scholar and family historian to his mentorship as well as his meaningful engagement with my mother and me as participants in the Timbuctoo Discovery Project.

None of the community participants in the Timbuctoo Discovery Project were familiar with archaeology as a field of inquiry that could inform our understanding of the history. The archaeological work did result in substantial research into the history of Timbuctoo, both to support the archaeological work, and to answer questions among historians and community members whose interest was piqued by the archaeological findings. Substantial publicity ensued, including front page stories in *The Washington Post*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *New York Times* in 2010. These events substantially raised the public profile of Timbuctoo, fomenting further research and public history projects to better understand the community's history and raise public awareness.

This renewed interest in Timbuctoo's research potential occurred seventeen years after my family built a house on our family parcel that had been vacant for at least fifty years. These new lessons in archaeology caused me to rethink our strategy



Figure 4 Me explaining the moonshine jug during a Timbuctoo event

for building a house in the 1990s on land that had been unoccupied since the 1940s. How much noteworthy pottery and broken glass found while digging to plant shrubs did I regard as trash and throw away? On the other hand, I did find some important artifacts that I saved, including an intact clay moonshine jug. I had no idea what it was, so I asked an elder neighbor, who told me. He added that one of the occupants of an adjacent house had a still, and it could have been hers based on the location where I found it. Knowing that the neighbor had been friendly with my Aunt Rosie, who reportedly knew how to make corn whisky, I dubbed this artifact as Aunt Rosie's jug. Of course, I have no way to validate this notion, but I am satisfied by what I do know: that I found an archaic moonshine jug on an adjacent property very near the location of my ancestral family home.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of learning about archaeology and historic preservation seventeen years after building a house on a parcel rich in archaeological potential, was how we chose to demolish an ugly dilapidated structure on an adjacent parcel of land. Researching the title, I learned that the structure had been the home of the Mitchell family, one of whom had been the purported owner of the moonshine

jug, and the last known descendant of the home's original owner.¹² The house had been sold to another family in 1959 who lost it in a tax sale in the early 1970s. Having languished in disrepair for two decades by the time we built our house in 1992, it was an eyesore. I complained to the local government to no avail. The local government was both the owner of the property because of the prior tax sale and the enforcer of local ordinances about property upkeep. For whatever reason, violations of property upkeep ordinances were tolerated in Timbuctoo in ways not tolerated in other sections of town, and this had gone on for decades. After three years of complaining, the local government proposed a solution: "We'll sell it to you for a dollar, and you tear it down." So, we did, at a cost of about \$18,000. Most of this was fees for hauling away the debris and dumping it in a local landfill. So, for \$18,000, we increased the land area of our lot by one half acre. That was less than the cost of a half-acre of land at the time. We enhanced the beauty of our landscape at a bargain price!

Around 2015, I learned that the house we demolished was most likely the last remaining structure of original Timbuctoo. I say "most likely," because we know the original owner, Major Mitchell, purchased the parcel from Quaker Samuel Atkinson in 1830,¹³ and that his heirs occupied the premises through at least the 1920s. Mitchell's granddaughter Henrietta sold the property in 1959.¹⁴



Figure 5 Former home of Major Mitchell and his descendants, demolished in 1996. Clapboard portion on the right is the original structure; left side cinderblock portion was added sometime after 1959.

The style of construction with clapboard siding is consistent with mid-nineteenth working-class century dwellings in the region. In brief, we can confidently say this was the Mitchell family home throughout the nineteenth century, whether this was the original structure created in 1830, or whether it was enhanced or replaced later.

I am the first to admit that I had neither the expertise nor the financial resources to engage historic preservation experts or conduct a geophysical survey before building on family property in 1992 or demolishing a historic property in 1996. However, I can't help but lament the lost opportunities to learn about our community's history and heritage.

A lot has happened since my introduction to archaeology in 2010. Beginning in 2017, I began publishing research on my family history as well as Timbuctoo community history in *National Genealogical Society Magazine*, *Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society Journal*, *New Jersey Studies*, and other publications. Most notably, "Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Early Nineteenth Century"¹⁵ is the most comprehensive history published as of this writing, with merely 8,500 words. Its highlights include nineteenth-century newspaper articles and deed transcriptions; in some cases, publishing these critical primary sources for the first time. Later that year, I located and transcribed the deed for the Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church, which established the Timbuctoo cemetery in 1854.¹⁶ This monumental effort facilitated The Timbuctoo Historical Society's ownership of the cemetery in 2019. As owners of the cemetery, we took charge of its preservation efforts. Having already installed interpretive signage while working under the auspices of Westampton Township's Timbuctoo Advisory Committee a year earlier, our efforts have focused on gravestone preservation; identifying names associated with unmarked graves through military pension files, burial permits, and other sources; and a plan to mark unmarked graves

identified from the 2009 ground penetrating radar previously referenced. We acknowledge the decades-long effort of Gail Astle, whose research of military pension files and other records prior to online access made a substantial contribution to our knowledge of US Colored Troops (USCT) and their families. We also acknowledge Holly Draycott, who spearheaded gravestone preservation and cemetery cleanup efforts, as well as local historian Paul W. Schopp, who has been a resourceful advisor on all things related to Timbuctoo history. In this case, he provided invaluable assistance with the transcription of the church deed.

Two compelling archaeology projects related to the cemetery were outstanding as of 2023: (1) identifying the location of the former church sanctuary within the cemetery parcel, and (2) determining the extent of grave shafts outside the legal boundary of the cemetery parcel. The boundary discrepancy was first observed on the GPR performed in 2009 (see Figure 6). The survey identified an eighteen-foot strip outside the cemetery boundary, but there had been no follow up effort to determine the total extent of the problem or protect the out of boundary gravesites. This problem is common in nineteenth-century cemeteries, and is frequently addressed through deed restriction, identifying the parcel in question as one containing human remains and restricting its use, or granting an easement to the cemetery owner. Another option would be for the cemetery to obtain ownership of the portion of the adjacent parcel containing gravesites. In any event, the first step in assessing these options is documenting the extent of the problem.

In 2024, the Timbuctoo Historical Society obtained funding from the New Jersey Historical Commission, which included support for archaeological work. These funds provided for additional ground penetrating radar to address the boundaries discrepancy and identify the church location, as noted above. The details of that research will be published separately. At this point, suffice to say that the location of the church foundation

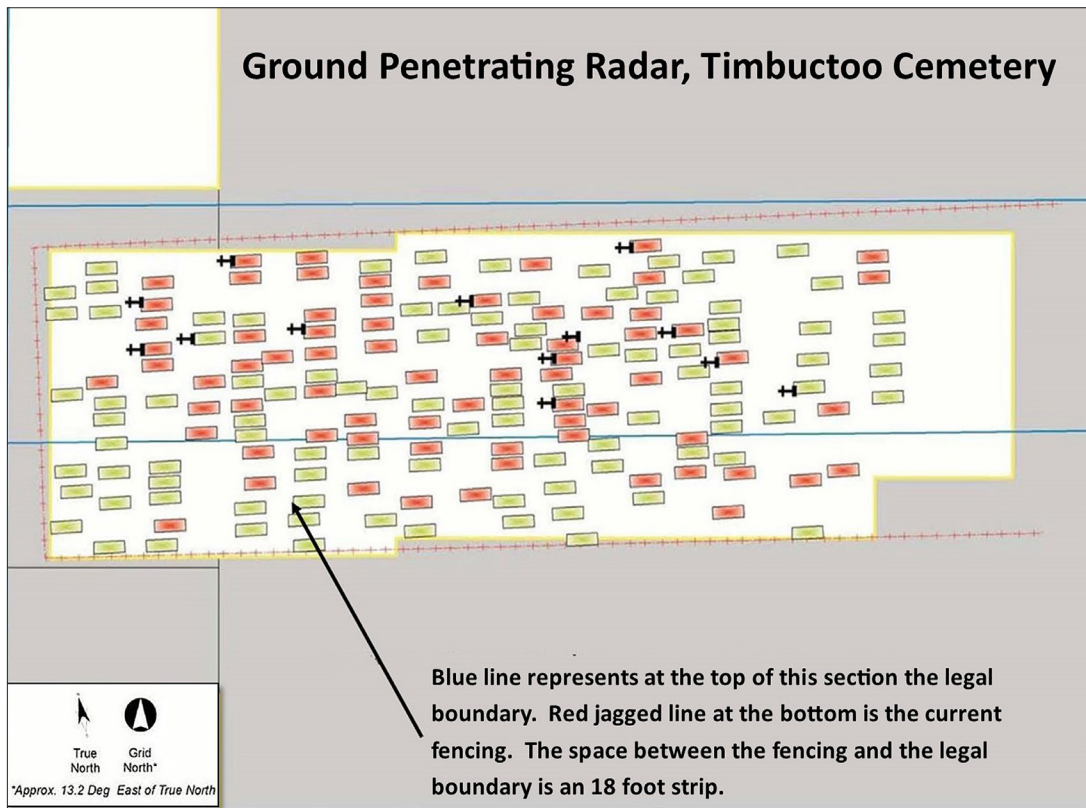


Figure 6 Ground penetrating radar of Timbuctoo Cemetery, 2009. Orange squares represent “likely” grave sites. Those with crosses have markers. Green squares are “probable” grave sites.

was confirmed, and there were no “out of boundary grave” shafts observed, aside from the eighteen-foot strip identified in 2009.

Having archeologists onsite for three days of cemetery work provided a unique opportunity. Most notably, it gave me an opportunity to observe archaeologists at work and learn how their techniques answer important questions.



Figure 7 GPR Device operated by archaeologists Olivier Vansassenbrouck and Vaughn Ortner. Equipment like this can cost between \$30,000 and \$40,000. This is a major factor in the cost of doing GPR.

With minimal additional expense, the team could also spend an afternoon identifying the footprint of our ancestral home with the objective of planning for excavation in 2025. The home was long gone by the time I was born, and even my mother, who was born in Philadelphia while the home was still standing, did not visit the area frequently enough to remember a precise location. Sadly, the last ancestor born on the property who could have walked it with me and explained things died in 1989. The youngest neighbors who could identify the location from childhood memories were born in the 1930s and 1940s. I was able to collect some information from them, but their recollections did not totally concur.

An important resource used in archaeology to identify locations in circumstances like this is *historic aerial photography*. I was surprised to learn that aerial photography was pioneered in the mid-nineteenth century and has been used in meteorology, war reconnaissance, land-use planning, and cartography, going back more than one hundred years.¹⁷ For my purposes, I was able to purchase



Figure 8 1940 Aerial photograph Timbuctoo’s northern border area. Red arrow points to ancestral home site.

areal photographs online for a nominal fee, going back as far as 1931. A 1940 historic aerial depicts the home, and it was easy to locate our land because the parcel happened to be mowed clearly along the boundaries depicted in the current tax map.

This survey did not clearly identify anomalies “forming a clear structural pattern that would indicate the presence of intact foundation walls or floors.” That was a disappointment. However, “such a clear structural pattern may not be expected if the building had a post in ground or peer supported foundation,” according to the archaeologist’s report.¹⁸ Since the nearby 1830 structure that we demolished in 1995 did have a post in ground foundation, it is certainly plausible that ours did as well. Moreover, remains of any foundation could have been robbed out from decades of farming between our family’s departure from Timbuctoo in the 1940s and our return in the 1980s. Also, the survey did “identify several anomalies that may offer evidence for the presence of a building.” While the archaeologists did not raise this question, I also have to wonder whether

the 18 × 22-grid targeted in the GPR was located properly. It would be totally understandable, if not. Ideally, with additional funding, the survey grid would have been larger.

In any event, our research will persist. The next step will be *ground truthing*. This will involve several hand-dug shovel test pits (STPs) within a 40 × 40 area. The specific locations will be determined by the areas of anomaly identified in the GPR, and the larger area addresses the concern about the prior area of survey being too small.

This proposal includes a plan for analysis and disposition of up to two hundred artifacts. I do recall that a majority of the artifacts identified in the 2010–2011 excavation were fragments that may have little meaning for a casual observer, but I do know that our archaeology colleagues will interpret their meaning in an insightful manner. Moreover, the meaning should be directly relevant to my family! I can’t wait to get started.

Guy Weston is the managing director of the Timbuctoo Historical Society, where he coordinates various public history initiatives to raise the profile of Timbuctoo in the local history landscape. In addition to the archaeology work described here, current projects include a children’s book about Timbuctoo, developed in collaboration with high school history and art students, an interpretive plan for Timbuctoo, and interpretive signage in the Timbuctoo cemetery. He also serves as editor of *AAHGS Journal*.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “Archaeology” accessed June 25, 2024, <https://languages.oup.com/research/oxford-english-dictionary/>.
- 2 Guy Weston “Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Early Nineteenth Century.” *New Jersey Studies* 8 (1) (Winter 2022).

- 3 Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, Teaching Resources. https://naturalhistory.si.edu/sites/default/files/media/file/wibgeophysical_surveyfinal.pdf, accessed June 25, 2024.
- 4 “How Ground Penetrating Radar Works”. Tech27 <https://web.archive.org/web/20211123181148/https://tech27.com/resources/ground-penetrating-radar/> : accessed on June 24, 2024.
- 5 Lowe, Kelsey M; Wallis, Lynley A.; Pardoe, Colin; Marwick, Benjamin; Clarkson, Christopher J; Manne, Tiina; Smith, M.A.; Fullagar, Richard (2014). “Ground-penetrating radar and burial practices in western Arnhem Land, Australia”. *Archaeology in Oceania* 49 (3): 148–157. doi:10.1002/arco.5039.
- 6 John Milner and Associates *Geophysical Survey of Timbuctoo, Westampton Township, New Jersey*, unpublished report prepared for Westampton Township governing body, September 2009.
- 7 Christopher Barton, *The Archaeology of Race and Class at Timbuctoo* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2022).
- 8 Christopher Barton, *Archaeology of Race and Class*.
- 9 Christopher Barton, *Archaeology of Race and Class*.
- 10 Christopher Barton, *Archaeology of Race and Class*.
- 11 For a full explanation of *collaborative archaeology*, see Gonzalez-Tennant, Edward, “Anarchism, Decolonization, and Collaborative Archaeology.” *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 5: 238–244. 10.1558/jca.33487.
- 11 Henrietta Mitchell describes herself as Major Mitchell’s only living descendant in a Quiet Title Action filed on July 8, 1957.
- 12 Burlington County, New Jersey, Deeds, E3:102 Samuel Atkinson to Major Mitchell, 3 February 1830 Burlington County Clerk’s Office, Mount Holly.
- 13 Burlington County, New Jersey, Deeds, 1395: 45–46. Henrietta Mitchel Monger to Frank Simmons and Isabel Simmons, 9 April 1959; Burlington County Clerk’s Office, Mount Holly.
- 15 Guy Weston, “Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Early Nineteenth Century.”
- 16 Burlington County, New Jersey, Deeds, A:77, Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church, 23 December 1854; Burlington County Clerk’s Office, Mount Holly.
- 17 History of Aerial Photography *Professional Aerial Photographers Association* https://professional.aerialphotographers.com/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=808138&module_id=158950 : accessed on June 17, 2024.
- 18 Richard Grubb and Associates, *Geophysical Survey Using Ground Penetrating Radar, Westampton Township, Burlington County, New Jersey*. Unpublished report prepared for the Timbuctoo Historical Society, May 23, 2024.