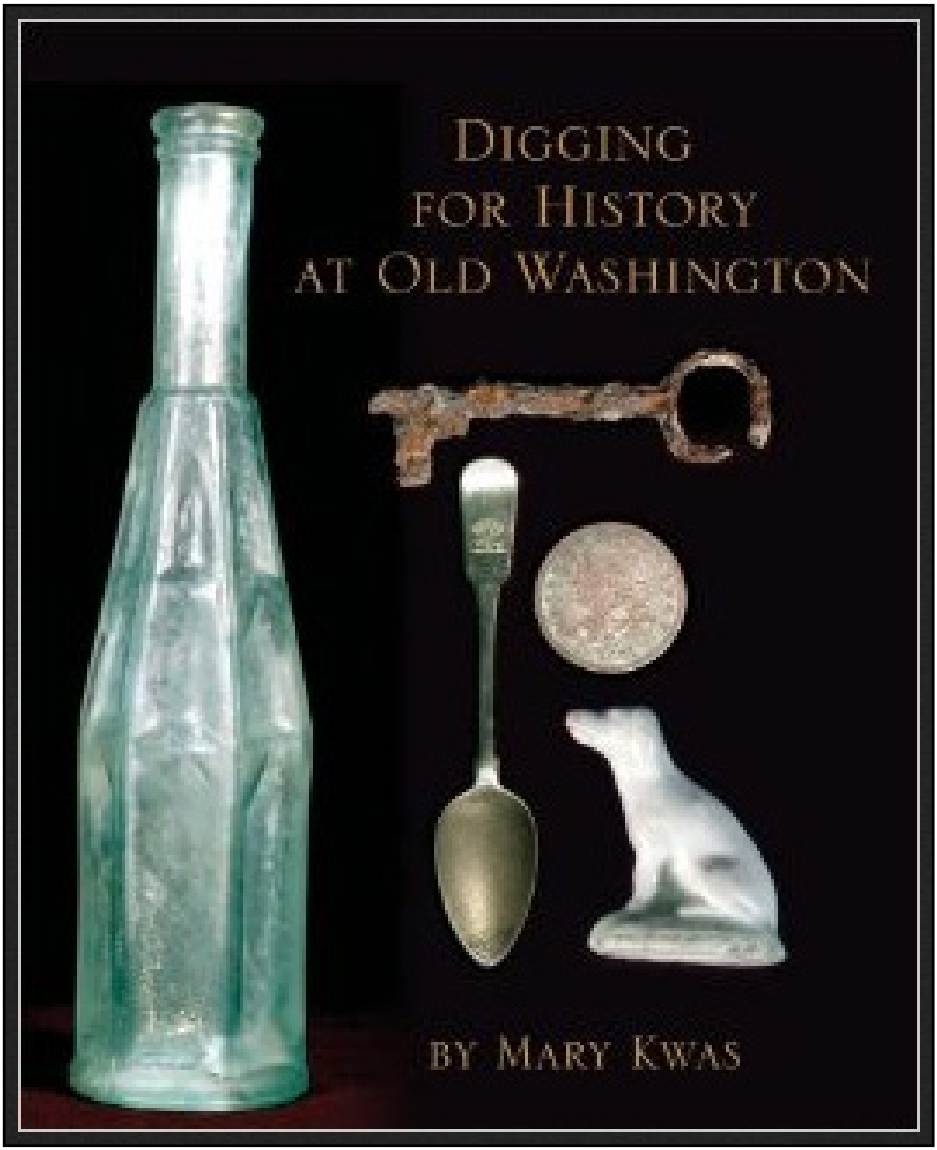

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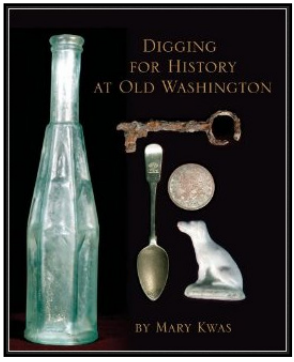

Digging for History at Old Washington

Mary L. Kwas with a forward by Jay S. Miller. 2009. University of Arkansas Press. 150 pp., 79 color photographs, 5 maps, index. $34.95 (cloth).

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Mary Kwas' latest publication provides a rich history, both in content and design, of Washington, Arkansas, a National Historic Landmark community and state park. This book was designed for the general public with nearly 80 colorful images and an introductory chapter on the importance of archaeological research. Professional archaeologists will also find the information offered useful as Kwas highlights the role of archaeology in Washington's transformation from an economic and political center in the nineteenth century into a major heritage tourism site in the twentieth century. This narrative of "Old" Washington's preservation legacy is similar and contemporaneous to that of Colonial Williamsburg or to Midwestern towns like New Harmony, Indiana, and Arrow Rock, Missouri.

Washington was established in 1824 along the Southwest Trail, which ran from St. Louis through Little Rock and into Southwest Arkansas, where this town is located. This community thrived during the antebellum period on this transportation/trade route, attracting a diverse set of people and businesses. After the Civil War, the railroad bypassed Washington in 1874 and two major fires in 1875 and 1883 leveled the primary business district. At this same time, the nearby town of Hope was established on the new rail line and quickly replaced Washington as the economic hub of Hempstead County. Within five years, Hope began a challenge to move the county seat to their town, which eventually happened after 60 years. During this struggle for their socio-political/historical identity, Washington embraced a successful preservation movement, spearheaded by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in the 1920s, that saved and restored the original courthouse. With this victory, the local preservation efforts continued with the establishment of the Pioneer Washington Restoration Foundation in 1958, and then the Historic Washington State Park in 1973. This town was also selected as the location of the Southwest Arkansas Regional Archives, a resource center for historical and genealogical research. Today, more than 30 historic buildings have been restored and are open for heritage tours, interpreting Washington's nineteenth century past.

Archaeological research was employed to help with restoration and interpretation of Washington because it is part of the Arkansas State Parks system. The first project was conducted in 1980 by professional archaeologists with the Arkansas Archeological Survey and excavations have continued regularly under their guidance into the twenty first century. Members of the Arkansas Archeological Society, the state avocational organization, have also participated in this research, including several seasons of the Society's summer Training Program, which allows members of the public interested in archeology to take part in archeological research under professional supervision.

Archaeological investigations have focused on the Courthouse Square and two domestic households. Excavations on the Courthouse Square were conducted to locate and document the original clerk's office so that a reconstruction could be made to house a public bathroom. In spite of the project's motivation for a new toilet, Kwas is able to clearly present to the general public how archaeology, archival research, and architectural history are combined to develop, test, and interpret scientific inquiries. I commend her for highlighting the clerk's office project because although they were not successful in locating this structure, she was able to emphasize that not all research questions are answerable no matter how good the science or documentation.

The two households examined in this publication were those of the Block and Sanders/Meredith families. The Block family was led by Abraham and his wife Frances, who came to Washington from Richmond, Virginia via New Orleans in about 1823. The Blocks were members of the "first large Jewish family to settle west of the Mississippi River"(p. 27). They had at least seven children, built a large I-house, and operated a successful mercantile as well as several other businesses in Washington. Living in antebellum Arkansas, the Block household also included several female African Americans, who worked as enslaved domestic servants and cooks. Their house is still standing today and is part of the Historic Washington State Park.

Archaeological research on the Block House was first conducted to assist in architectural restoration, but the most exhaustive work focused on documenting the razed detached kitchen and other outbuildings as well as "trash disposal patterns" (p.47–49). The resulting artifacts and their spatial patterning led to an expanded discussion and interpretation of Jewish ethnicity and consumer choice. The former was addressed through the food remains, which suggested that despite their ethnic and religious tradition of *kashrut,* the Blocks did not follow a kosher diet and consumed pork. Consumer choice and status were presented through a contextualized interpretation of ceramic types and patterns. Kwas reports that 18 different ceramics

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sets were documented from over three decades of deposition. The ceramics are quite varied and represent heirloom pieces, common utilitarian vessels, and expensive/decorative tea sets and dinnerware. Most of the expensive/decorative wares were acquired from New Orleans through the Block's mercantile business. Kwas argues that the variety of ceramic/decoration types reflected the Block family's increase in wealth and social status, but it was unlikely that they had 18 complete sets. Instead, some pieces were probably from mixed or broken sets that could have been used by the Block family for breakfast and snacks or as everyday ware by their enslaved African Americans. Kwas also connects the types of ceramic decoration/patterns to individual choice and selection. For example, a transfer-printed pattern called *Chinese Pastime* was highlighted, which depicted a scene of children at play. Kwas suggests that this pattern was acquired by the Blocks after they started a family and that the "light-hearted motif was chosen to amuse the children" (p. 56–57). Another example is a transfer printed tea cup with "a patriotic design of a spread-winged American eagle, with a shield across the chest and arrows grasped in one foot" (p. 58). Kwas concludes that Abraham Block may have acquired this cup as a commemorated piece for the War of 1812, in which he served to defend Richmond, Virginia.

The Sanders/Meredith family was led by Simon Sanders, who arrived in Washington from Tennessee by about 1837. He was first employed in a general store, but quickly became the Hempstead County Clerk in 1838. He purchased four town lots in Washington, establishing an "urbanstead" with a house and supporting outbuildings (e.g., barn, smokehouse, chicken coop), a pasture for animals, and garden for fruits and vegetables. Simon Sanders lived a middle-class lifestyle, but through his political position and extended family relationships, he became a highly respected member of the community. He was married twice and had three daughters. He also owned two enslaved African Americans who worked as domestic servants. Archaeological excavations of the Sanders/Meredith urbanstead began in 1980 to assess this site's research potential. In 1981, a razed detached kitchen took first priority with investigations uncovering "two parallel brick wall lines and an area of brick paving beneath the kitchen, but not the hoped-for chimney remnant" (p. 98). In was not until 1992 that work resumed, exposing the entire kitchen footprint. To help explain the process of archaeological research to the public, Kwas provides a "putting it all together" section, which lays out all the "clues" from this urbanstead investigation and how they were used to formulate a critical interpretation. This then leads to a discussion of children's activities and gender roles in the Sander/Meredith household. The Block children were represented by alphabet plates, marbles, porcelain doll

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parts and tea sets, and a unique fragment of slate with a child's name and drawing. Adult male occupants were linked to pipes, pocketknives and jewelry (e.g., cufflink, pocket watch). Female roles were defined as all domestic related artifacts (e.g., ceramics) and activities (e.g., cooking , sewing). These material correlates of gender are oversimplified. A pipe fragment does not always equate to an adult male activity because juveniles and women also smoked tobacco. Instead of using these artifacts as gender "markers," they should instead have been utilized as "clues" to decipher the complex process of gender relationships. For example, in the way that diZerega Wall (1994) utilized ceramic types, forms, and decoration to examine the engendered use of space, both inside and outside the household, and how these roles developed and transformed over time.

Kwas provides her own critique of this book and the archaeological research conducted in Washington in the final chapter. Historic preservation and heritage tourism in Washington has successfully combined "three fields of study — architecture, history, and archeology — that has enabled researchers to provide a fuller and more complete interpretation than would be possible with any one of those fields alone" (p. 121). Unfortunately, this research has focused primarily on this town's elite heritage, resulting in a glimpse that highlights predominately a white, male, and wealthy past. This is reflected in the domestic lots and people that are presented in this publication, but Kwas recognizes this bias and does attempt to include women and enslaved African Americans within the historic context and interpretation.

Kwas correctly stated that forthcoming research and interpretation must "examine the lives of people from different social classes and occupations, as well as different ethnic groups" (p. 121). I agree with Kwas that future studies need to address both sites in and outside the city limits, including the commercial district and nearby farmsteads and plantations. Of the three fields of study, archaeology can provide the most democratic approach to the past, offering a voice to all despite the lack of written records or standing structures. This is particularly true of the working class, women, children, and African Americans, both enslaved and free. I am confident that future investigations under the leadership of Mary Kwas and others with the Arkansas Archeological Survey will diligently uncover and embrace this diverse heritage, resulting in a deeper interpretation and additional publications for both the professional and public.

References Cited

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