

Heritage West: The West Philadelphia Community Archaeology Project

BY ZOË RAYN EVANS, MEGAN KASSABAUM, SARAH LINN, AND DOUGLAS SMIT

CONFRONTING THE TROUBLING HISTORIES of racial and social injustice in West Philadelphia, specifically those of the historically Black neighborhoods north of Market Street, has been top of mind for many residents, community organizations, and Penn students and staff in recent years. From the removal of hundreds of Black families in the 1950s under the auspices of “urban renewal” to ongoing gentrification, the status of the University of Pennsylvania as an elite urban institution is deeply intertwined with the displacement and dispossession of these communities. Any step toward reparative justice requires collaboration with trusted community organizations and a willingness to acknowledge the past in a public forum. *Heritage West: The West Philadelphia Community Archaeology Project* was developed from this conviction. In partnership with the People’s Emergency Center CDC, the Black Bottom Tribe Association, and University City Arts League, we created a multi-year community archaeology and heritage program that links past and present through three interrelated themes: the late 19th-century formation of Black communities, 20th-century struggles over homes and housing due to redlining and gentrification, and 21st-century community persistence and renewal.

Heritage West builds on the legacy of previous and ongoing public history programs undertaken at Penn. However, our emphasis on an archaeological perspective that links the materials and heritage of the recent past with present communities is unique. This archaeological perspective places contemporary problems of gentrification and systemic racism within



The Penn project team (left to right) Zoë Rayn Evans, Megan Kassabaum, Sarah Linn, and Doug Smit.

a broader historical and material context. Community archaeology aims to democratize the methods of archaeological research by seeking collaboration from day one, relinquishing control so that the community may drive the research objectives and themes. Community members and local leaders work alongside Penn Anthropology students Chrislyn Laurie Laurore, Chelsea Cohen, and Robert Bryant; faculty members Megan Kassabaum and Doug Smit; and Penn Museum Research Liaison Sarah Linn to develop and share their perspective in confronting these issues.

Launched publicly in September 2021 during the annual PARK(ing) Day—a global, public, participatory art project, where people across the world temporarily repurpose street parking spaces and convert them to tiny parks and places for art, play, and activism—*Heritage West* exhibited a mobile pop-up booth featuring a timeline of West Philadelphia with a single prompt asking passersby to fill in the blanks using their own community, family, and individual knowledge. Over the course of the day,

our team met dozens of individuals and families stopping to share anecdotes of the past. People contributed everything from holiday light shows to grandparents' birthdays to the openings and closing of local businesses. Some even paused to call family members asking what they would want to add to the timeline.

Over the course of the program, participants will explore our themes through conversations, a community archive, and a culminating local excavation at a location determined by the community.

Zoë Rayn Evans is executive director of the University City Arts League and former Penn Museum Collaborative Programs Manager; Megan Kassabaum, Ph.D., is the Weingarten Associate Curator for North America and Associate Professor of Anthropology; Sarah Linn, Ph.D., is Research Liaison in the Academic Engagement Department; Douglas Smit, Ph.D., is Senior Fellow, Department of Anthropology

The Heritage West collaboration recognizes West Philadelphia residents as experts on their own history. There is a sense of excitement at PEC to work on this project with community members, the Black Bottom Tribe Association, University City Arts League, and Penn Museum. It's an opportunity to build relationships, learn from each other, and create a model for the future of anthropology and archaeology.

—LATIAYNNA TABB, Creative Placemaking Project Manager at the People's Emergency Center



At Heritage West's mobile, pop-up booth at PARK(ing) Day in September 2021, local community members add to a West Philadelphia timeline and share histories with team members. Photos by Megan Kassabaum.

