The Archaeology of Class in Urban America

No examination of contemporary urban communities would be complete without the discussion of class identity. But how did class identity inform the urban communities of yesteryear? Taking as case studies Newport, Rhode Island in the eighteenth century and Lowell, Massachusetts in the nineteenth century, at the peak of their economic powers when they represented some of the purist forms of capitalist production in North America, this book explores the material and biological manifestations of class identity. Stephen Mrozowski uses a combination of documentary research, material cultural studies, and environmental archaeology to probe the lives of artisans, merchants, and mill workers in these urban communities. Taking an interdisciplinary approach to examine fully burgeoning notions of class, he offers significant new insights into the factors shaping those notions. This engaging study, supported throughout by tables, illustrations, and graphs, is required reading for all students of urban history and historical archaeology.

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STEPHEN A. MROZOWSKI

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This book is dedicated to my mother, Jean Mrozowski

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PREFACE

One of the most poignant moments in my life came when my father told me I would never be an intellectual. Some of my colleagues may end up agreeing with this sentiment after reading this book; however, I think few would underestimate the impact such a proclamation might have on their own personal outlook. My father's underlying rationale was that I was the son of working-class parents who knew virtually nothing about being an academic. Then, as now, I was struck by my father's class-based rationale. For him the barriers of class were very real and his advice was meant to prepare me for the realities of the world he had experienced. For him class was a determining factor. Fortunately for me, and him, my mother had a very different view of my prospects and encouraged me to listen to my father's counsel, but not to let it limit my own aspirations. Class was real enough for my mother, but for her it represented a permeable barrier.

Both of my parents were the youngest children in large, immigrant families living in cities. My father was born in Lowell, Massachusetts while my mother was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Both had lived through the Depression and World War II, and these had clearly been defining events in their lives. My father's formative years were spent on a farm outside Lowell which he left at the age of sixteen to join the United States Navy. My mother was employed as a garment worker during the war. Both worked throughout most of their adult lives.

Notions of class were important parts of both my parents' identities, but their perceptions of what class meant obviously differed. In many respects this book is about that difference and what it says about the world they had known, the world that preceded it and that of the future. This book is also concerned with the realities of class as experienced by my parents and people like them. Because class was more than just a part of who they were, it was also bigger then they were; it was outside of them. That larger world threaded itself through my parents' lives in ways they may not have been able to articulate, but which they understood all too well. This dialectic of inside/outside is in many ways the same as that which confronts historical archaeologists who attempt to understand the manner in which larger historical processes affect the lives of individuals. If, as is the case in this book, I want to understand the power of class to influence people's self-images, then I must find a way of linking the

individual experiences revealed through archaeological and documentary research to much larger historical movements that were often global in scale.

In this book I try to do this by focusing my attention upon a relatively small number of people living in Newport, Rhode Island during the eighteenth century and a slightly larger group who lived and worked in Lowell, Massachusetts during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I have chosen these communities because they straddle a period of significant change in the history of capitalist production. In fact, each was immersed in a political economy that is representative of particular moments in that history, what Marx called merchant capitalism and industrial capitalism respectively. Precisely what these terms encompass conceptually and historically is important; however, for the purposes of this book I am more interested in the experiences of individuals whose lives were shaped by the notions of class that were part of the cultural-historical space created by these particular moments in history. In the same manner that my parents' perceptions of class were shaped by the Great Depression, other events contributed to the world of the past and the perceptions of those who lived that history. The space they inhabited was multidimensional in the sense that it had real physical and cultural parameters that conjoined to give meaning to daily life. Often these cultural-historical spaces were contested realities that hinged on a person's position in society, their gender, age, and ethnicity. My conceptions of space also extend to areas of discourse within archaeology itself. In particular I am interested in the contested spaces shared by nature and culture and that between global structures and individual agency. Although not my primary focus, each of these dualities, and the dialectical common ground they share, are threads that run just below the surface of the larger project this book represents.

This notion of space draws heavily on the work of French social theorist Henri Lefebvre, English social geographer David Harvey, and American geographer Edward Soja. In my attempt to understand the changes that took place in the urban communities of North America between the eighteenth and the early twentieth century, I have found that space served as both context and canvas for a monumental drama. As a form of mercantile commerce with deep historical roots gave way to the powerful behemoth of industrial capitalism – a period of historical transformation like few others – the manner in which urban space was conceived, constructed, and used all began to change. A powerful force in this grand transformation was the notion of class. In pure physical terms class was to be an underlying principle in shaping the way urban space was produced during the nineteenth century. Joined with variables such as race, gender, religion, ethnicity, and occupation, class would also help in shaping both individual and group identities during the same period.

These forms of identity carried various labels including gentry, middling sort, gentleman, or artisan in the eighteenth century, as well as middle class, working class, industrialist, and operative during the nineteenth century. These too were spaces,

mental spaces that nevertheless found concrete expression in the material domain. Often they were contested spaces in which a dialogue concerning cultural perceptions and values was played out in the manner in which space was apportioned and used and in the way people dressed, dined, and spent their leisure time. All of these activities were influenced by economic and social changes that were global in reach. Yet in this book I have chosen to examine these changes through the lens of a rather intensive archaeology that seeks both to interrogate and to interpret the remains of individual and corporate households in just two communities, eighteenth-century Newport, Rhode Island, and nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Lowell, Massachusetts. This more intensive approach provides tangible evidence of the manner in which notions of class identity were being negotiated at a time when capitalism was entering its formative stages. It draws inspiration from the work of E. P. Thompson whose study of the English working class presaged our current appreciation for the importance of individual action in the course of human events.

In my attempt to understand the lives of individuals against a backdrop of monumental historical events I have chosen to focus on communities that were dominated by economic regimes that characterized very specific moments in the history of capitalist production. The fact that Newport rivaled Boston – a community with twice its population – during the eighteenth century stands as testimony to its commercial prowess, a prowess enhanced by the Rhode Island colony's commitment to a separation of church and state. Unfettered by religious strictures, Newport's merchant elite developed an economy that typified the concept of mercantile capitalism. As the first planned industrial city in North America, Lowell was the model for all subsequent enterprises.

The research presented in this book represents work that has occupied my thoughts for much of my career. During that time archaeology has changed immeasurably and in some respects those changes are reflected in this book. My concern for rigor in interrogating the archaeological record clearly represents what I believe to be the single most substantial contribution of processual archaeology, its study of archaeological formation processes. Using a combination of artifact-based dating techniques and environmental data, I have tried to link the formation of archaeological deposits with periods of transition at both the household and community levels. My interpretations of space and material culture are, by contrast, situated within a contextual paradigm that grew out of my experience at Brown University where the influence of people such as Peter Schmidt, Marley Brown, John Otto, and the late James Deetz resulted in a healthy respect for the importance of history. My experience with the intricacies of interdisciplinary research owes much to my brief but important collaboration with the late Richard "Scotty" MacNeish.

Given the book's focus on class identity and its links to forces of capitalism, it should come as little surprise that I have benefited from conversations with other

scholars interested in the subject. These include Mary Beaudry, Joanne Bowen, David Harvey, Michael Hebert, Matthew Johnson, Mark Leone, Barbara Little, Randy McGuire, Gary Nash, Michael Nassaney, Robert Paytner, Karl Reinhard, Paul Shackel, Diana Wall, and LouAnn Wurst. Eleanor Cassella, Matthew Johnson, Patrick Malone, and Jim Symonds have also shared their thoughts concerning the current state of industrial archaeology.

My research in Lowell has benefited greatly from my collaboration with Mary Beaudry and Gerald Kelso. David Landon, whom I first met as a graduate student at Boston University, but who is now on the staff of the Fiske Center for Archaeological Research at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, helped with my thoughts concerning faunal results from Lowell. He and Heather Trigg, also at the Fiske Center, have had to withstand far too many manic discussions of landscape and environmental archaeology as they pertain to completion of this book. Both have also played a role in the editing of the current book, as did Kathryn Grover. Simon Whitmore at Cambridge University Press has been patient and helped to fine tune the concept of the book.

Many people helped in supporting the original research carried out in Lowell as well as more recent endeavors. These include several key members of the Lowell National Historical Park staff and the North Atlantic Regional Office of the National Park Service. These include Mark Bograd, Lawrence Gaul, Myra Harrison, Francis McManamon, and Robert Weible, as well as Steven Pendery and William Griswold of the Northeast Regional Archaeology Program office in Lowell. I would also like to thank Deborah Cox, president of the Public Archaeology Laboratory, who asked me to serve as the principal investigator for the examination of the Lawrence Manufacturing Company overseers' block.

Living with projects and data for so long means there is a long list of people who have unwittingly contributed to this enterprise. Although I am sure there are some I will have forgotten, I would like to thank the following people for their help in this effort. Lindy Gifford, Melody Henkel, Alytheia Loughlin, Dana Richardi, and Gail Van Dyke have all helped in the preparation of the graphics for this book. Paul Giblin, Kevin Neal, and Richard Kanaski contributed photographs. Jennifer Malpiedi helped with the final text of the manuscript. Jeff Beck, Kathleen Bond, Kathleen Bragdon, James Brown, Craig Cippolla, Deborah Cox, David Dutton, Jack Gary, Hannah and Stuart Geman, Christine Haughton, Martin Hall, Audrey Horning, Katherine Howlett Hayes, Leslie Hunt, David Landon, John McLaughlin, Kathy Orloski, Dennis Piechota, Dominic Powlesland, Duncan Ritchie, Pharaoh Sanders, Tim Sieber, Stephen Silliman, William Stokinger, the late Peter Thorbahn, McCoy Tyner, Judith Zeitlin, Grace Ziesing, have all helped to see this project to conclusion.

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