



12-1-2010

Excavating Nauvoo: The Mormons and the Rise of Historical Archaeology in America

Richard K. Talbot

Benjamin C. Pykles

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Talbot, Richard K. and Pykles, Benjamin C. (2010) "Excavating Nauvoo: The Mormons and the Rise of Historical Archaeology in America," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 49 : Iss. 4 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol49/iss4/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Benjamin C. Pykles. *Excavating Nauvoo: The Mormons and the Rise of Historical Archaeology in America.*

Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 2010

Reviewed by Richard K. Talbot

During a recent coordination meeting, an archaeologist employed by the state of Utah tried to explain how the science of archaeology can help Native Americans to know their history. In response, one of the Native American participants exclaimed, “We already know our history!”¹ This statement sheds light on tensions that arise when reconstructing the past. To those living in a postmodern world, history can serve many purposes and many masters; for this particular Native American, the oral history that had been passed down generationally to her presented her past in a context and form with which she was accustomed and comfortable. Her past was a fact, not a story to be interpreted or reinterpreted.

In a general way, this story reflects the paradox Ben Pykles faced in producing a most enlightening volume on the behind-the-scenes story of the restoration of Nauvoo. As a historical archaeologist and a Latter-day Saint, Pykles is keenly aware that history and story often pull in different directions. Modern archaeology strives to be objective, using artifacts, site types, and patterns to document the record of what actually happened (at least as far as the remains that are preserved can reveal), free from emotion and agenda.² Archaeologists then use those patterns not only to describe the past, but to explain it. But it is an ever-changing history, as more pieces of the puzzle are filled in. To help complete the final picture, historical preservation efforts strive to protect and encourage the study of as many of those pieces as possible.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, like most large religious, political, or social organizations, has always been deeply interested in its own history. And like other institutions, it has a vested interest in telling the story in its own way. A primary goal of the restoration of

Nauvoo, like other Church history sites in New York, Ohio, Missouri, Utah, and elsewhere, is to tell that story. But restoration for preservation's sake or for filling in the pieces of the Church history puzzle is not the end goal. Pykles quotes Steven L. Olsen from the Church History Department: "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not in the business of historical preservation per se. It is in the business of saving souls" (301).³

Students of Church history will find Pykles's research instructive, but perhaps not in the way they might expect, because his intended primary audience is other archaeologists. However, *Excavating Nauvoo* is not so much the story of the archaeological work carried out at Nauvoo as it is the story of the influences, attitudes, and agendas that shaped that work. The book's subtitle, *The Mormons and the Rise of Historical Archaeology in America*, refers to the unusual convergence of the Nauvoo restoration efforts at a time when historical archaeology was on the threshold of becoming a true scientific discipline, growing out of a long period in which restoration and interpretation were the primary objectives. Noted archaeologist Robert L. Schuyler writes in the foreword that Pykles's book is "the second serious, extended study of the origins and early development of the historic archaeology discipline" (x). In this sense, the first four chapters lead into the final chapter, which focuses on the role of Nauvoo in that development.

Pykles's thorough research is evident from beginning to end, which makes it difficult to find substantive fault with the volume, as he traces the many threads that define Nauvoo today. Central to this account is the formation and evolution of Nauvoo Restoration, Inc. (NRI) and the personalities involved throughout the process of reclaiming the city. Pykles gives very detailed treatment of LDS President David O. McKay's deep interest and involvement in restoring Nauvoo. Additional supporters recognizable to many included Hugh B. Brown, Henry D. Moyle, David M. Kennedy, and J. Willard Marriott. However, Dr. J. LeRoy Kimball, a Salt Lake City cardiologist and great-grandson of Heber C. Kimball, was in many respects the visionary behind NRI. Over many years, Kimball had purchased properties in Nauvoo with the goal of restoration, and his early involvement and contacts were instrumental in keeping the project going.

Those familiar with the foundations of historical archaeology in the United States will particularly appreciate Pykles's discussion of J. C. Harrington's role in the formative years of the Nauvoo work. An old-school archaeologist and considered one of the fathers of historical archeology, Harrington had been deeply involved in the excavation and restoration work at Colonial Williamsburg. To elicit his involvement was a real coup for NRI and helped legitimize the project. Harrington and his

wife, Virginia, spent the transitional years of their retirement organizing and supervising the restoration and interpretive efforts at Nauvoo, including the excavation of the original Nauvoo Temple foundation. Overall, the initial restoration efforts reflected the mutual interests of both the Church and of the archaeologists. Yet, as Pykles has demonstrated, the interests of the two eventually diverged as a new generation of archaeologists came onto the scene—more particularly Dr. Dale Berge (now retired after four decades at BYU)—whose goals went beyond just digging and restoring buildings to reconstructing history through professional archaeological methods.

Pykles's research digs deep into the roots of the early interest in restoring Nauvoo and the friction between competing interpretive positions of the Latter-day Saints, the Community of Christ (then RLDS Church), as well as government entities. Latter-day Saints saw Nauvoo as a commemoration of the faith, suffering, and perseverance of the pioneers who later went west, while for the RLDS, Nauvoo was a way to honor Joseph Smith and lend credibility to their beliefs. Concurrently, state and federal government interest in preserving and restoring Nauvoo leaned more toward a secular memorializing of the westward expansion of the United States and the ideals of that period. Pykles's discussions of these various competing interests puts the entire Nauvoo project in a different perspective from what most readers and visitors to Nauvoo might imagine.

The volume is weakened slightly by issues of connectivity and tone. Most glaring is the lack of maps and other figures to contextualize the various buildings and other features that have or have not been restored, including a generalized plat map of historic and modern Nauvoo. Archaeologists in particular, even in a volume examining the roots of historical archaeology, would expect more detailed feature maps and comparison of those maps with final restoration plans, although these may not have been available to Pykles.⁴

While Pykles tries to present a fair and balanced narrative of NRI and the restoration effort, he is not always entirely successful. This is particularly evident when he addresses what may be the most dramatic events in the book, those which revolve around the “changing of the guard” in early 1970 with the death of President David O. McKay and the subsequent tenures of Presidents Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee. The latter two clearly had different leadership styles from those of President McKay and different visions as to what Nauvoo should become. The casual Church member may find Pykles's treatment of this emotional issue a little uncomfortable, since it deals with personality differences and disagreements within the Church hierarchy. In fact, of all the sections in the book, this

particular discussion seems the most one-sided, with many of the most emotional quotes originating from participants heavily invested in NRI. The perspectives and feelings of Presidents Smith and Lee are for the most part only inferred, giving them little opportunity to speak for themselves.

Many archaeologists (who are mostly non-LDS with little or no knowledge of the Church or sympathy for its proselytizing goals) may come away from this book feeling that the treatment of the archaeological remains at Nauvoo was a national travesty. Pykles tries to circumvent this feeling with a rational discussion in the final chapter on the temporal context of the Nauvoo work. That is, by the time historical archaeology began a full-scale shift toward becoming an explanatory science, the path of Nauvoo restoration was already politically set in stone. Further, Pykles correctly notes that Mormon identity is in part built upon a shared interpretation of the past, and Church members not only “touch” the past by visiting Nauvoo, but they become active participants in it. This process is something that anthropologically trained archaeologists can understand and accept.⁵ Archaeologists also understand the importance of telling a story and of making their work “mean something” to the public.⁶ Pykles is mostly successful in this effort to contextualize the restoration work, although the tone of the preceding chapters may be hard for some to overcome.

The final pages of Pykles’s book describe the connection between historical archaeology and the Mormon identity. Here Pykles diverts from his primary audience in order to make the case within the Church for a more sympathetic approach to archaeology and to allow archaeology to contribute to the Mormon identity beyond just finding foundations so that buildings can be restored or replicated. This discussion in many respects is the most masterful in the book and deserves thoughtful consideration by everyone concerned with or even remotely interested in Church history, particularly those who think that “we already know our history.”⁷

Richard K. Talbot (richard_talbot@byu.edu) is Director of the Office of Public Archaeology at Brigham Young University. He received his MA in public administration and MA in anthropology from BYU.

1. May 2010 meeting between officials from the Utah State Antiquities Section and various Native American representatives relative to a large archaeological excavation project being carried out at the time.

2. This is not to say that postmodern interpretations have not slipped into archaeological dialogue, but that the majority of archaeologists try not to take sides in interpretive battles outside the realm of science. As a colleague of mine likes to say when excavating: “I don’t write the record; I just read it.”

3. Quoting Steven L. Olsen, "A History of Restoring Historic Kirtland," *Journal of Mormon History* 30, no. 1 (2004): 120.

4. Selectivity in restoration and the construction of missionary housing and other buildings in the city that were not part of the original city assure that the Nauvoo seen by thousands of visitors yearly is not the same Nauvoo that existed in the time of Joseph Smith.

5. For example, most anthropologists would respect and properly contextualize the very theme expressed on the official website for Nauvoo, at <http://www.historicnauvoo.net>: "Historic Nauvoo is a place for making connections. To the past. To those you love. To yourself. . . . Nauvoo offers its guests a chance to understand a people of faith, to make a connection to the values of a simpler time, and to share some real fun with family or friends."

6. Richard K. Talbot, "Archaeology's Bottom Line: Making It Mean Something," *Utah Archaeology* 21, no. 1 (2008): 137.

7. The research goals of historical archaeology and the proselytizing goals of the LDS Church are not mutually exclusive, and there is always reason to hope that they might unite once again. Museum displays, pageants, costumes, narratives, and rebuilt/refurnished structures are only secondary means of making connections to the past. Written texts are the script of history, and historical archaeology provides the actual set and physical context in which that history is most appropriately viewed. Archaeology allows people to touch the dirt and grind of the past, and it can refresh and refine the interpretation of pioneer life. By filling in these missing pieces of history, archaeology can deepen the appreciation of the pioneer experience and enrich the story being told.