A Failure of Academic Stewardship
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Murray State University took ownership of two archaeological sites in the early 1980s: Wickliffe Mounds (15Ba4) and Savage Cave (15Lo11). The histories of these sites offer case studies of stewardship in private and public sectors, and suggest reasons why, in this case, academic stewardship was untrustworthy: the principles of conservation archaeology shaped a management plan for Savage Cave that prevented it from being an asset to the university, while the training and public education functions and heritage value of the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center were not appreciated sufficiently by the administration to continue funding in a time of tight budgets.

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From 1983 to 2004, Murray State University owned two archaeological sites. We now own one, and we’d like to reduce that number. We took on these sites with sincere hopes that we would protect them, learn from them, and educate by example of enlightened stewardship. The stories of the two sites are quite different, but the final judgement is the same. Murray State has failed as a responsible steward.

The Savage Cave site is in Logan County, Kentucky. It was privately owned until 1983, by an owner who collected artifacts from it but who protected it from looters. She allowed several excavations in the 1960s, which have never been fully reported, and we have some of those collections. The site was listed on the National Register in April 1970.

In 1983, with financing from the Archaeological Conservancy, Murray State University took ownership of Savage Cave. We designed a gate that would allow access by bats and other cavelly critters, and posted signs warning against trespassing.

Our management plan for Savage Cave embodied the ideals of conservation archaeology. The site would not be excavated without approval of a board, and would only be investigated under a rigorous research design that accounted for the fragility of the cave ecosystem. There were tight limits on the area that would be allowed under excavation in any year that
permission might grudgingly be issued. New excavations would be
discouraged until all previous collections were fully analyzed,
and field schools were expressly not permitted. The theory was
that the site was owned by a university, it was therefore
protected, and a protected site should not be disturbed.

Murray State fenced and gated the entrance, and the looters
cut right through. We found tenants to live in the cabin on
site and guard the cave, and the looters bought them off. In
the last twenty years, Savage Cave has been looted thoroughly.

What went wrong? The practical answer is that it is too
far from Murray State for our personnel to keep an eye on it.
The underlying answer is a basic fallacy in the management
plan’s assumption: that we shouldn’t excavate there because a
university owned it, therefore it was protected.

But it was not protected. It was not an asset to the
university. It served no instructional function, either for
university training or public education. It served no research
function for university programs. However much some of us value
the cultural resource that Savage Cave represents, it makes no
evident contribution to the university’s mission. Therefore,
the resources that were invested there were utterly inadequate
to protect the site.
So, does managing a site as an educational and research asset make a difference? Our second site was the Wickliffe Mounds site, located on the bluffs of the Mississippi River in Ballard County, Kentucky, about 5 miles south of the mouth of the Ohio. It is a Middle Mississippian village of about 6 to 8 acres, with two platform mounds at the north and west of a plaza, and eight or nine small mounds elsewhere on the site. The village was occupied between about AD 1100 and 1350.

In 1930, a road crew cut through the southern end of the site to build U. S. Highway 51, and encountered artifacts. Paducah businessman and relic collector Fain W. King bought the site in order to develop a tourist attraction modeled after the Dickson site in Illinois. King excavated here from 1932-1939.

In 1946, King turned the site over to Western Baptist Hospital in Paducah, with the agreement that the hospital would operate the tourist attraction whose income would support the site, help pay down the hospital’s mortgage, and pay King and his wife an annuity for the rest of their lives. I don’t know whether the tourist income ever covered the expenses, but the hospital was stuck with the deal until 1982, when Mrs. King died. The hospital looked into developing the property for condominiums and also into selling it to the local relic collectors, but the responsible amateurs in Western Kentucky
helped persuade the hospital administration to donate the site and collections to Murray State University.

So, in 1983, the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center rose from the carnival formerly and regrettably called the Ancient Buried City. We had four exhibit buildings—one of which we promptly tore down—, an office, and a house. We also had some 85,000 artifacts, mostly pottery and faunal remains. We were grateful for a grant from the National Science Foundation that helped us sort and inventory the artifacts.

We then embarked on a mission that I considered to be appropriate to a university program: stewardship of the site, curation of the collections, public education, and training of students through an annual field school. We excavated there every year from 1984 through 1996, again in 2000, and again in 2004. I’d like to think we made a contribution to understanding West Kentucky Mississippian archaeology. We also hosted around 150,000 visitors and trained nearly 200 students in archaeological and museum methods.

The fact that we did excavate the site raised a fundamental issue of stewardship. When I circulated an excavation plan to colleagues in early 1984, I got some nice comments, but also some suggestions that I should not excavate the site at all, that I should conduct survey and testing in the region instead. Well, on the one hand, the University of Illinois was already
doing that, but on the other, I understood the principle behind the suggestion, a principle that came out of the ideal of conservation archaeology. Simply put, I should not be digging a protected site, but should address my attention to privately-owned sites that were being plowed and pothunted.

I understood that, but I disagreed in this case. At Wickliffe, I tried to make a program that was an asset to the university’s mission: public education, student training, and research. We had to charge admission to the site to help defray operating expenses. We scraped by for twenty years, with the help of grants too numerous to list here, volunteer help, and long hours by a dedicated staff. Murray State supported two salaries, and then the state legislature added a third salary and some groundskeeping money. With occasional extra help from well-disposed but cash-strapped deans, we scraped by, thinking that we brought in enough good publicity and served academic and strategic goals well enough to justify our existence.

Last winter, a new gubernatorial administration slapped the Kentucky state universities with unprecedented funding cuts. I appreciate that my university made a conscientious effort to handle these cuts without firing any tenured faculty. But the funding for the Wickliffe Mounds was cut from the budget without warning, without consultation—and without any consideration of the consequences.
The administration expected that we could just close the doors of the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center and quote “mothball” it, and come back when times were rosy again. When I pointed out that the site would be looted, the buildings vandalized and the collections ransacked, all I received was collective disinterest from the administration.

I am grateful that the news of this cut stirred up a storm of protest. Community members, teachers, school kids, colleagues, perhaps some of you, and Native Americans from literally all over the United States (and elsewhere) called, wrote, emailed, published letters to the editor, all decrying the shortsightedness of the decision. One former student emailed repeatedly from Afghanistan. It worked, sort of. The administration began to take seriously the notion that maybe the site should not be left unprotected. But they still didn’t want to pay for it.

In the end, the university solicited the new Secretary of the Commerce Cabinet to ask if he would take the Wickliffe Mounds into the state parks system. He did. At the time, Kentucky didn’t even have a budget. But the Commerce secretary, a Republican with a business background in hotels and tourism, and a mandate to cut costs, streamline and make profitable the state parks system, recognized the heritage and public education
value of the Wickliffe Mounds. Too bad a university president could not.

I wonder: are there general lessons here?

Last year, I saw a documentary called The Corporation. The thesis was that a corporation is a legal entity with the status of an individual. But as an individual, a corporation registers on psychological personality scales as a sociopath. The single overriding concern of the sociopath, the corporation, is its own well being. It will consume, discard, destroy, or co-opt whatever resources it needs to continue, without any sense of shame or guilt, and offer any observer whatever propaganda makes it look good at the moment. I think that this applies to any institution, and in particular, to a university.

For example, let me read to you a couple of Murray State’s strategic goals, listed in official documents and on our web site. These are published under the heading, “Goals Related to External Relations”:

· The University shall play an active role in regional economic development.

· The University shall support the region through arts, cultural, and professional programs.

· The University shall engage in public service programs with business, industry and labor, public and private schools, governmental agencies, and the general public.
Those goals sound a lot like tourism, museum education, and school tours to me. Our program helped provide those things to the regional community, as well as research productivity and student training. We also got good press regularly.

It turns out there’s an invisible subtext to our “Goals Related to External Relations”: as long as they don’t cost money. Assessed by its behavior, by the choices and policies it pursues, the university’s real priorities are clear: first its administrators, then its sports franchises, then its position as an economic generator for the town and county. After that, somewhere down the list, are education and research.

Perhaps I should end this paper with a confession. I persisted in a career in academia because I was naïve enough to believe in the ideal of the liberal arts: that university communities maintained some commitment to higher values of education, literacy, appreciation for culture and cultures, and stewardship of knowledge and heritage. After 24 years at Murray State, I am considerably less naïve about where a university’s priorities lie. I find that universities, if mine is an example, are unreliable and uncaring stewards of fragile and unrenewable resources. I would like to think that my university is an aberration, but I doubt it. It's an institution, which is sociopathic.
Attempts to protect Savage Cave with physical barriers and rent-free tenants were ineffective. At Wickliffe, looting was prevented only by our continued presence. But research, training, public education, and good publicity were not enough to justify spending university money at Wickliffe, and Murray State University attempted to just walk away. Stewardship clearly is not a value held by my institution.

Is the failure of academic stewardship inevitable, given the nature of the institution? I'll leave you with that question, because I honestly don't have an answer.

Thank you.