Change Happens: The Continuing Transformation of Wickliffe Mounds
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Abstract

As of July 1, 2004, the Wickliffe Mounds site (15Ba4) has become the 11th Kentucky State Historic Site. This is but the latest transformation for a site that has been a tourist attraction, a university research center and museum, and now a state park. Murray State University, the most recent former owner, also owns the Savage Cave site (15Lo11), and has proven to be an unreliable steward of cultural resource properties. This paper will comment on some lessons learned during 21 years of directing the former Wickliffe Mounds Research Center.

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As many of you have heard by now, the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center no longer exists, at least not as a museum, teaching and research center owned by Murray State University. The good news is that the Commonwealth of Kentucky has taken it on as the 11th Kentucky State Historic Site, operated through Kentucky State Parks. That this happened is a testament to the flood of emails, letters and phone calls that dissuaded Murray State’s administration from simply abandoning the site. Some of you, I’m sure, added your voices to the protest, and for that I thank you sincerely.

Aside from a certain personal irritation about the process, I wonder if there are some general lessons to be learned from Murray State’s tenure at the site, lessons about the place of public archaeology in universities, lessons regarding issues of stewardship that I, at least, need to put more thought into. I’d like to talk a bit about those issues today.

First, for those of you who are not familiar with the site, here’s a quick background. The Wickliffe Mounds site is located on the bluffs of the Mississippi River in Ballard County, Kentucky, about 5 miles south of the mouth of the Ohio. It was 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—depending on who’s counting—elsewhere on the
site. As we know now, the village was occupied between about AD 1100 and 1350.

The first map we have, and the only one before major disturbance in the 20th century, is this one. It was drawn by Robert Loughridge, of the Kentucky Geological Survey, and published in 1888.

C. B. Moore hopped off the Gopher and onto the site in the early 1900’s, but was unimpressed and went away quickly. The next we hear of it, Paducah businessman and relic collector Fain W. King was writing to William S. Webb at the University of Kentucky, mentioning these mounds among other sites. Then, in 1930, a road crew cut through the southern end of the site to build U. S. Highway 51, and encountered artifacts. King bought the site in order to develop a tourist attraction modeled after the Dickson site in Illinois.

King excavated here from 1932 to 1939. The Alabama Museum of Natural History sent a crew under the direction of Walter B. Jones to help open the site, but Jones figured out King was not a good colleague and pulled out after a month. In the mid-1930s, Fay-Cooper Cole of the University of Chicago sent some graduate students to try to add system to the excavations, which worked to some extent for a couple of years, and then didn’t. All of that make some entertaining history, but you can read about that elsewhere.
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. Whether the tourist income ever covered the expenses, I don’t know, 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 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.

That sounds good in theory, but I have a counter-example, which also happens to be a site owned by Murray State University. The Savage Cave site is in Logan County, Kentucky. It was privately owned until about 1981, by an owner who collected artifacts from it but who protected it from looters. She allowed an excavation by the Carnegie Museum in the 1960s, which has never been fully reported, and we have that collection. With financing from the Archaeological Conservancy,
Murray State University took ownership of Savage Cave barely a year before we took on the Wickliffe Mounds.

Our management plan for Savage Cave embodied the ideals of conservation archaeology and speleology. The site would not be excavated without approval of a board, would only be investigated under a rigorous research design that accounted for the fragility of the cave ecosystem, and Murray State archaeologists would not conduct investigations for anything as low-priority as a field school. The theory was: the site is owned by a university, it is protected, it should not be disturbed.

In the last twenty years, Savage Cave has been looted to hell and gone.

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. The site is thoroughly looted.

What went wrong? The practical answer is that it is too far from Murray 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.

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 we 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.

At Wickliffe, I tried to create a program that was an asset to the university’s mission: public education, student training, and research. We also charged 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.

Speaking of strategic goals, let me read to you a couple of Murray State’s strategic goals, listed in official documents and on our web site. These are presented 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 to me a lot like tourism, museum education, and school tours and visits. Our program helped provide those things to the regional community, as well as research productivity and student training. We also got good press regularly; unlike, say, our major sports, none of our students ever were in the news for drugs, drunk driving, or sexual assault, either. In fact, in some seasons our visitation was noticeably better than the season total attendance for the football team.

It turns out there’s an invisible subtext to our “Goals Related to External Relations”: as long as they don’t cost us any money.

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.
When I went in to speak with our Provost about the cut, he told me, “Well, we can just hand it back to whatever state agency we’re managing it for.”

The administration, having no institutional memory, did not even bother to find out that we owned the site before making the cut. It would not have been hard to find out that much about the program. I wonder how many other management decisions by this administration are equally well informed?

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 the site would be looted, the buildings vandalized and the collections ransacked, all I received was collective disbelief from the administration.

How much money was involved here? At that time, we were down to a university support of two not-very-lucrative salaries and groundskeeping, for a total of about $72,000 per year.

Let’s put that in perspective. The president had just gotten a $35,000 salary increase.

Or let’s try another perspective. Last spring our campus newspaper reported that Murray State subsidized its sports programs to the tune of 3.9 million dollars. That’s the deficit—that’s over and above what they took in in revenue. That’s money coming from state appropriations and tuition,
apparently. That’s three times what we invested in operating
the libraries in FY 2003. The administration did not dispute
those figures.

But $72,000 was too much to spend on a program that
protected a National Register site and its collections, and
supported the “Goals Related to External Relations” noted above.

I am grateful, as I said earlier, that the news of this cut
stirred up a storm of protest. Community members, teachers,
school kids, colleagues like some of you, and Native Americans
from literally all over the United States 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. They even refused to allow me to get an estimate
for writing a grant for security measures, on the grounds that
they would not spend any more money on the site.

The university’s public statements got defensive rather
quickly. The president answered a reporter’s question by saying
that yes, he had been to Wickliffe. It turned out that he had
driven by the closed gates in the dark and had a bowl of chili
in the nearest convenience store, but that was enough to say he
had been to Wickliffe. The university’s press office said that
we didn’t have the money to devote to a tourist attraction, which was all that Wickliffe Mounds really was, and that it was a money-loser for the university.

The entire university is a money loser as far as the state budget is concerned. We, as a society, invest in the universities because we believe that education pays. That, in fact, is a Kentucky slogan: education pays. We, as a society, believe in heritage conservation, in public education, in stewardship, and that they also pay in the long run—or so all of us in this room would like to think.

None of us in this room are college presidents, who cut with a stroke of a pen the funding for a facility we have never visited and which we don’t even bother to find out that we own, because all we see is a line item on a budget sheet.

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. Kentucky still does not have a state budget; the parks system does not 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 that the heritage and public education value of the Wickliffe Mounds was worth saving. Too bad a university president couldn’t.
What are the lessons that I need to learn? One, perhaps, is that university ownership does not ensure enlightened stewardship. I'd like to think that Murray State is an aberration, but I doubt it. The people who are chosen by political appointees to administer universities have no understanding of or appreciation for the cultural properties that we hold to be significant.

A second lesson is that I need to learn what university administrators do value. Savage Cave is not an asset to the university under a management plan limited by principles of conservation, and is in fact a liability if someone gets hurt while vandalizing the cave. I tried to operate the Wickliffe Mounds as an asset academically and as a resource to the region, but that was not enough. Money is the bottom line.

In the end, the site was saved for another incarnation as the Wickliffe Mounds State Historic Site. We will continue cataloguing and analyzing artifacts as part of ongoing laboratory training for our students. We will consult on any new research, for instance, testing and mitigation for a flagpole that State Parks will want to place on the site—when they get a budget. In the long run, State Parks will put a lot more money into the site than Murray State University ever would, because Parks takes pride in its facilities.

I sincerely regret that Murray State University did not.