A Pilot Survey of Church Sites in Western Kentucky  
Kit W. Wesler  
Murray State University  

Presented to the Symposium on Ohio Valley Urban and Historical Archaeology, Madison IN, 18 March 2006

Abstract

Church Archaeology is a thriving subfield of historical archaeology in Europe, and particularly England, but has been thoroughly neglected in the United States. This paper surveys the goals and methods of Church Archaeology, and describes a pilot project in recording church sites in western Kentucky. Murray State University students attempted to locate and record church sites using archival and non-intrusive archaeological survey methods. Success was modest, but suggested some avenues for further research.

Introduction: Church Archaeology

In England, the archaeological study of churches is a booming subfield of their Medieval and Post-Medieval Archaeology. Crossley (1990:98) calls Church Archaeology “a fast growing specialism over the last 20 years.” There is a Society for Church Archaeology, based in Britain, with a journal and a devoted membership. In 1997, Carol Pryah, Church Archaeology’s editor, wrote that “our first issue rides upon a tide of national developments in ecclesiastical scholarship, preservation and management… embracing the buildings of all faiths and denominations, their burial grounds, and settlement and landscape context” (Pryah 1997).

Warwick Rodwell’s following article noted that Church Archaeology had emerged as a coherent subfield within the preceding three decades. He describes a rather inauspicious founding project in 1968:

"The excavation of St. Mary Aldermanbury was carried out by a gang of five Irish labourers, supervised by an ex-army captain who professed an interest in archaeology but had no
previous experience. Recording was basic and largely conducted on Thursday afternoons when the director paid his weekly visit to check on progress and to take away any artefacts. Finds were not an onerous problem: building materials were not generally retained; skeletal remains were shovelled into sacks and taken away for disposal by the local council and lead coffins were rolled up by the laborers and transported to a scrap yard on Friday afternoons in order to provide cash for the weekend" (Rodwell 1997:5).

Other projects, much more professionally designed and executed, followed (Rodwell 1997). The impetus for this development was the Anglican Church’s Pastoral Measure of 1968, which called for the divestiture of underutilized churches, termed “redundant churches.” Suddenly historic churches were on the market, threatened with conversion or destruction. Most of those actually affected were nineteenth-century churches, which are comparable in age to the historic churches of the Ohio Valley. In Europe, those churches are very recent.

Once archaeologists began thinking about historic churches, they realized that the attrition of normal maintenance, restoration, expansion, and burial programs were continuing to degrade the archaeological resources of the churches still in use, so Church Archaeology broadened into the mission statement of the Society: “to promote the study, conservation and preservation of churches and other places of worship and their associated monuments” (Edwards 2005:1).

Church Archaeology has focused on three general areas: fabric studies, burials, and landscape contexts (Rodwell 1997). The work has provided new information about building techniques and materials, and has often revealed sequences of occupation not previously suspected. Here archaeological data have faced an uphill battle. Rodwell (1997:9) noted
instances in which "art historians… dismissed the structural evidence because it undermined a profound dogma" about certain churches' histories.

Cemetery studies, including excavations, have also made contributions, despite that, in Rodwell's (1997:12 words, "exhumation… is influenced by public emotion, irrational decision-making and duplicity of standards." But the work has shown that "the archaeology of Christian burial is… a complex subject embracing grave construction,, funerary ritual… and corporeal decomposition." Rahtz (1981) notes the “virtual extinction” of grave goods in Christian burials in the 8th century A.D. and later, restricting an archaeologists’s favorite area of analysis, but offers a number of observations on the wide range of mortuary practices, body disposition, grave structures and containers, monument symbolism, and grave ornaments that could be studied in Christian burial rites.

Landscape studies consider such aspects as siting, orientation, size and form of churchyards and churches, the nature of boundaries and entrance positions, alignments with roads, and topographical and chronological relationships of single churches and within multi-church towns. Church Archaeology is clearly here to stay in European Medieval and Post-Medieval archaeology.

Church Archaeology in the United States

Not so in American Historical Archaeology. There is no mention of churches in Noel Hume’s (1969) discipline-founding tome. In the index of the journal Historical Archaeology, there are three entries for churches, the latest in 1985. Two articles are about surveys in Mexico that mentioned churches (Andrews 1981; Lee and Markman 1977). The last one is about efforts to find the church at Martin’s Hundred, Virginia (Klingelhofer and Henry 1985). The latter investigators used a soil corer in the suspected area to find graves, window glass and lead
quarrels, which were located in the middle of a field with no other domestic artifacts. They then assumed they had the church site, and went away. I do not suggest that this was a bad project, only that its goals and results were quite limited.

That is what we have for Church Archaeology in the lead journal of our field.

Few other references are available. Kathleen Deagan’s (1976) *Archaeology at the National Greek Orthodox Shrine* sounds promising, but the site is now owned by the National Greek Orthodox Shrine. It did have first chapel of the St. Augustine Minorcans after 1777, but the chapel was not found in the excavations, and a single rosary bead was the only "religious" artifact recovered.

In Illinois, Floyd Mansberger’s (1994) work at L’Eglise de la Famille (Church of the Holy Family) at Cahokia, and in Kentucky, Kim McBride’s (2000) work finding the outdoor worship area at Shakertown, Mansberger’s (1995) project at the Cathedral of the Assumption, Louisville, and Sarah Miller’s (2002) report of testing at the St. Thomas Catholic Church property, Nelson County, seem to be the regional corpus. They are competent projects, but hardly constitute a sophisticated foundation for a Church Archaeology.

The main focus of American “religious” archaeology has been missions. Elizabeth Graham (1998) provided an interesting overview of mission archaeology a few years ago, noting that the focus of the literature was on two areas: the contact experience, especially the success (or lack thereof) of conversion, and indigenous groups at the time of contact. Close to home, Walthall and Benchley’s (1987) little book on the River L’Abbe Mission on Cahokia’s Monk’s Mound fits Graham’s characterization exactly.
We do, of course, have cemetery studies of various types, but as far as I know, few of them consider the archaeology of Christian burial in any explicit way; at best they focus on ethnic variations.

So why have we avoided church archaeology in the United States? We are infamously the most religious country in the developed world. Europe, by contrast, is now seen as a post-religious society, with 25% of the population identifying no religion. Europeans to whom I have spoken are astonished to think that a religious voting block may have had a role in the last two presidential elections here. Is there a secularization of the academic community, especially among archaeologists sick of the religious Right, Creationism and its mask, Intelligent Design, and fundamentalism in its many guises?

Is it our training? Look at introductory textbooks. To pick one: Hole and Heizer’s (1973) third edition. "Most archaeological inferences about the nature of religion or ideology are highly speculative because they concern areas of behavior for which few rules of interpretation have been developed. Or they may concern interpretation of artifacts that could be explained by reference to kinds of behavior entirely different from the intellectual" (Hole and Heizer 1973:408). They avoid the issue.

The textbook I have used recently is Price and Feinman’s (2005) Images of the Past. When I check the index under “religion,” I find these entries: Confucianism, Egyptian, Indus civilization, Islam, Sumerian, Upper Paleolithic evidence—and these topics are mentioned in passing in the text.

Renfrew and Bahn's (2004) Archaeology does have a serious section on the archaeology of religion. But it is oriented to the religions of early states, not to world religions—and not to
shamanism, animism, or Neolithic Mother Goddessism (which is a whole urn of worms in itself [see Meskell 1995]).

So perhaps there is a general lack of interest or extreme discomfort with the idea of religion in archaeology that carries over into historical archaeology, leading us away from churches and church sites.

Or perchance there is a lack of research questions that challenge archaeologists. Maybe our emphasis on anthropological theory, materialism, ecology, explicit research design, and hypothesis testing since the 1960s has left us without defined goals regarding church sites. And then the perspective that religion is epiphenomenal, and so mostly beyond the reach of archaeologists, has reinforced our avoidance behavior.

I think that is a false rationale. One perfectly legitimate goal of historical archaeology is to record historic sites before they are gone; another, to ask humanistic questions of time, place, and society. We can certainly address issues of chronology, landscape and social context, the place of a church in the community, whether we can identify denominations in church sites, and eventually whether the Christian church really is a founding influence on the United States—as current pop culture commentary and court cases about Ten Commandments displays assert. All of these ideas have archaeological implications, and all can be studied by archaeological methods.

It is time to introduce Church Archaeology into American historical archaeology.

Some Remarks on Methods and Principles

Although it is premature to offer a comprehensive synthesis of principles and practices for an American Church Archaeology, a number of studies suggest interesting aisles to follow. Church Archaeology broadly should include synagogues and mosques, which have distinctive
architectural features. However, in the historic landscape of our region, those structures are likely to be rare, and this discussion will concentrate on Christian churches.

Fogelin (2003) outlined an interesting set of architectural principles that are useful in understanding the design of spaces of worship. His cases focused on Buddhist monuments, but have more general relevance.

Fogelin suggested that there are three basic kinds of ritual. Individual ritual is contemplative and private, although not necessarily isolated. It centers on direct worship by an individual of an object of worship such as an altar or stupa. In Buddhism, individual worship primarily takes the form of circumambulation.

Communal ritual is a group activity that does not entail the leadership of a ritual specialist. It is fundamentally an egalitarian form of worship. In Buddhist instances, large open areas surrounding a stupa form assembly areas for groups of worshippers, often arriving as pilgrims.

Corporate ritual, on the other hand, is a group activity that is directed or mediated by a leader, often a ritual specialist, who is the focus of attention. This form of worship is highly institutionalized, and the leadership is often hierarchical.

Fogelin (2003) points out that each kind of ritual has its spatial needs, and places of worship are designed to accommodate the most typical form of ritual at that place. He uses principles of theatrical set design to correlate space with use. A hall type of theater creates a formal relationship between stage and audience: each audience member is encouraged to focus on the stage and the actor(s), and to ignore other members of the audience. On the other hand, an arena is designed as a more participatory experience. The ostensible focus may be on the actor or leader in the center, but the audience surrounds the action, and two aspects of the arrangement
contrast with that of the hall: first, that audience members on the far side of the arena are visible and therefore part of the scene, and second, that the actor has his/her back to part of the audience at all times. Fogelin traces these principles to 2nd-3rd century AD Indian treatises on theater and dance, which urged that formal plays (particularly about gods) should be presented in halls, but that circuses, dancing acts, and comedies are better suited for arenas.

To some extent, the analysis of these spaces concentrates on lines of site, principles well known to historical archaeologists from considerations of Baroque, Georgian and panopticon principles of garden and city planning (Leone 1984, 1987; Leone and Hurry 1998; Miller 1988).

A Pilot Project in Western Kentucky

Some of my students and I decided to do a pilot study in Church Archaeology in last fall semester. We thought that the nearby Land Between the Lakes would be a good laboratory for finding out some of these ideas.

The narrow neck of high ground between the lowest reaches of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers was called the Land Between the Rivers from the early settlement period of western Kentucky until the 1960s. In regional lore, it was an isolated, backward, moonshining place similar to Appalachia without the panache afforded by mountain scenery. In fact it was an area of strong communities, developed largely by an iron furnace industry. One of the interesting tidbits about the Land Between the Rivers is that some of the first Chinese laborers to immigrate into this country came here to work in the iron industry in the 1840s and 1850sm
before the western railroad and mining booms. The iron industry tapped out at the time of the Civil War, but agrarian and small commercial communities persisted.

The lower Tennessee River was dammed in 1944, and then the Cumberland was dammed in 1959. The resulting flooding displaced farmers and other residents. What happened next is described in the Land Between the Lakes web site:

“When the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers were impounded to create Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley, an inland peninsula was formed. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy designated the peninsula Land Between The Lakes National Recreation Area in an effort to demonstrate how an area with limited timber, agricultural and industrial resources could be converted into a recreation asset that would stimulate economic growth in the region. Today, LBL remains the country's only such demonstration site and is the cornerstone of the region's $600 million tourism industry.”

That’s a pretty cheerful way to described what happened. The Tennessee Valley Authority, which was given the task of developing the Recreation Area, proceeded with a blunt force that is astonishing. They acquired land by purchase and by eminent domain condemnation. Holdout families had their houses bulldozed while they were out at church. People were simply driven out. Bitterness remains in the region. Among other legacies is the difficulty archaeologists often have in persuading landowners to give permission to look at sites on their land, for fear of having the land taken away.

The upshot is that the LBL became a vacant quarter, and TVA made efforts to eradicate all traces of former human habitation. Later, descendant families tried to salvage some history, especially in relation to the cemeteries that still stipple the landscape. The LBL now belongs to the U. S. Forest Service, which is trying to work more sympathetically with the former residents.
We thought, then, that the LBL would be a good place to begin to look at church sites. Several dozen churches are recorded. So we decided that each student would pick one, and we would identify the site, conduct some background research, and map the surface remains. We stipulated that no intrusive survey methods would be employed at this stage of the research.

Six of nine students chose LBL sites, and four of them completed the assignment. I’ll briefly describe two completed projects here, and show you the two uncompleted sites, and the two papers which follow this one will provide descriptions of two of the most thorough projects.

Jennifer Parrish-Lamb studied the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church. It was associated with a community called Laura Furnace, named after an iron furnace. The Laura Furnace community had a post office, the Futrell P.O., from 1898-1908, but lost its separate identity by the mid-20th century. In the 1950s residents considered themselves to be citizens of Golden Pond. The residents were evicted in the 1960s by the LBL development.

Pleasant Hill Baptist Church was organized in 1842. The first church was a log building, built in 1844 or 1848—the records aren’t entirely clear. A frame building replaced the log structure circa 1900, and was remodeled about 1950. The church was disbanded in 1967, but the cemetery—like most in the LBL—is still active.

The site is basically an empty field. There were concrete foundations, associated with some window glass. The foundations didn’t seem to look like a church, nor was is sited quite where informants suggested it was. Then we had an experience that was typical of our visits to these sites. As we broke out the total station to do the mapping, some former Pleasant Hill community members drove up to visit. They told us that the foundations were the school, not the church.
There wasn’t time in the semester to do an extensive research on the school, but a couple of tidbits came out. Pleasant Hill school was established in the late 1800s. There probably were three different buildings, the second built about 1911, which burned, and the third around 1930. It was out of use by the 1950s, when schoolchildren were sent to Golden Pond for classes.

So we have a school site, but no surface indications of the church.

Another site is the Bethlehem Baptist Church, a project by January Futrell. Bethlehem Baptist split from the Woodson Chapel congregation in 1873-1874. The Bethlehemites built a log church in 1886, replacing it with a frame structure in 1903.

The site, like the last one, is empty of surface indications of a building, but is next to an active cemetery. We assume that the church was at the top of the hill between the circular drive and the cemetery. There is no known photo of the church that has enough perspective to show its exact location, although one photo does have a curving driveway in front of it. Two photos identified as Bethlehem Baptist show a frame structure with four windows on the side and two doors in front, although a third, also said to be Bethlehem Baptist, shows a building with three windows.

One of the uncompleted projects was at Woodson Chapel, the parent congregation of Bethlehem Baptist. This site has a commanding location up on the bluff, isolated on two sides by deep ravines. This site did have a few ceramics and glass scattered on the surface, which may have been associated with the church, but not structural indications. We mapped the artifacts but did not collect them.

Finally, this is the site of Hematite church. It is at a lower elevation but at the end of a small peninsula leading towards what now is Lake Barkley. Informants told us that the church stood at the foot of this clearing, where the two trees mark the edge of the mown areas.
With one exception, which you’ll see in the next paper, TVA did a very thorough job of eradicating surface traces of the LBL churches that we studied. So, strictly speaking, we did not locate archaeological sites. In that sense, LBL may not have been a great place to do this pilot study.

But there are a couple of things we can say. Most of the churches are on high ground—but this makes sense in the Land Between the Rivers, where high ground is a very practical location to avoid flooding. Most are approached today generally from the west. This may be because the students picked churches on the east side of the LBL, and land routes have to be from the west.

All of the churches are associated with active cemeteries. A study of Calloway County cemeteries shows that between in the 19th century, most cemeteries were small and scattered, reflecting the isolated pattern of rural settlement. In the early 20th century, the burial pattern concentrated on the more popular and more accessible church organizations. This reflects changes in settlement pattern and the rise of communities, as well as better transport for hauling coffins. In the latter half of the 20th century, municipal cemeteries became much more active, but as we have seen, the old church cemeteries remained active, especially in the LBL where it is a point of family honor to maintain the tie to the lands from which they were dispossessed in the 1960s.

This raises the question for archaeological surveyors of whether cemeteries are good predictors of church sites nearby. Perhaps remote sensing and geophysical technology can help us identify features that show the locations of the churches in LBL, where surface traces have been eradicated. We need more research on these patterns. Meanwhile, we will have to look elsewhere than the LBL for historic churches in which we can do fabric studies and ask questions
about denominational identifiers. But even in the LBL, further research can look at spatial patterns, issues of siting and landscape orientation, and relationships to communities that once inhabited the area. At least those of us who participated in the project have a better appreciation for the idea of Church Archaeology, and can suggest that the wider community of historical archaeologists should bring this subfield into the fold. Thank you.

Andrews, Anthony P.

Avery-Quinn, Samuel

Cocke, Thomas, Donald Findlay, Richard Haley, and Elizabeth Williamson

Crossley, David
1990   Post-Medieval Archaeology in Britain.  Leicester University Press.

Deagan, Kathleen

Edwards, Nancy

Fogelin, Lars

Graham, Elizabeth
Hole, Frank, and Robert F. Heizer  

Klingelhofer, Eric and William Henry  
1985  Excavations at Martin's Hundred Church, James City County, Virginia: techniques for testing a 17th century church site. Historical Archaeology 19(1):98-105.

Lee, Thomas A., and Sidney D. Markman  
1977  The Coxoh Colonial project and Coneta, Chiapas, Mexico--a provincial Maya village under the Spanish conquest. Historical Archaeology 11:56-66.

Leone, Mark P.  


Leone, Mark P. and Silas D. Hurry  

Mansberger, Floyd  


McBride, Kim A.  
2000  The search for Sinai’s Plain, the Pleasant Hill outdoor worship site. Presented to the Symposium on Ohio Valley Urban and Historic Archaeology, Shakertown-Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, 18 March.

Meskell, Lynn  

Miller, Henry M.  

Miller, Sarah E.

Morris, Richard

Noel Hume, Ivor

Parsons, David

Price, T. Douglas, and Gary Feinman

Pryah, Carol

Rahtz, Philip

Renfrew, Colin, and Paul Bahn

Rodwell, Warwick
1997   Landmarks in Church Archaeology. Church Archaeology 1:5-16.

Stoddard, Whitney S.

Stopford, J.

Taylor, Richard

Upton, Dell

Walthall, John A., and Elizabeth D. Benchley

Worboys, Paul S.
1973  The historical and cultural implications of cemeteries, Calloway County, Kentucky.  M.A. thesis, Department of Geosciences, Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky.