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TEXAS HERITAGE

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Lost and Forgotten Lone Star History

Community Archeology Project
Connects Descendants
to Their Past

A Lucky Find: The Recovery
of an Iconic Work of Art



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FEATURES

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In the 1870s, Thomas "Tom" Cook, Sr., who was born enslaved, opened a blacksmith shop in Bolivar, 20 miles north of Denton. A community archeology project uncovered the former site of Cook's smithy—and helped reconnect his descendants with their ancestor's legacy.
By Maria Franklin, Douglas K. Boyd, Kevin Hanselka, William Howard Clark, and Halee Clark Wright

- 20 **History Revealed**
For two decades, artist Buck Winn's *The History of Ranching*, a 280-foot canvas mural comprised of individual panels, was thought to be lost to history. However, rolled-up and tucked-away sections of the artwork were rediscovered, and 10 now are on display for public viewing.
By David L. Coleman, Ph. D.

CONTRIBUTORS

Michael Amador, Douglas K. Boyd, City of San Augustine, William Howard Clark, David L. Coleman, Ph. D., Core Design Studio, Jeanette Covington, Kim Cupit, Denton County Office of History and Culture, Maria Franklin, Kevin Hanselka, Hemisfair Conservancy, Helen D. Johnson, Tina Kinser, Gene Krane, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Lockhart State Park, Michael Marchant, Larry D. Moore, Pamela Murtha, Jason Jonathan Rivas, Bill Sibley, Michael Sparks, Charlie Staats, Courtney Stevens, Texas Department of Transportation, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas State University Archives, Lane Transou, U. S. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Administration, Dan K. Utley, UTSA Special Collections, John Vachon, Mike Vance, Wichita Falls Convention and Visitors Bureau, Wikimedia Commons, Travis K. Witt, The Wittliff Collections, Halee Clark Wright

EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor, Gene Krane

Assistant Editor, Pamela Murtha

Proofreaders, Molly Brown and Donna B. Jones

Production Designer, Stacey Van Landingham

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ON THE COVER

An upcoming post office box exhibit at the Brenham Heritage Museum will allow visitors to experience local and regional history using a hands-on approach. Photograph courtesy of Core Design Studio.

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Finding Tom Cook

COMMUNITY ARCHEOLOGY RECONNECTS DESCENDANTS WITH THEIR ANCESTOR'S LEGACY

By Maria Franklin, Douglas K. Boyd, Kevin Hanselka,
William Howard Clark, and Halee Clark Wright

There is an ongoing effort to expand upon United States and Texas history by being more inclusive of the lives and contributions of minority groups that played an essential, but often little recognized and unacknowledged role in shaping the nation and state. In one North Texas town, a team of archeologists and researchers have been working towards that goal by collaborating with African American descendants on a project that tells the tale of one family's experiences after emancipation.

Founded in 1859, Bolivar is a small rural community located about 20 miles north of Denton. The present-day solitude and scarcity of historic structures belie the fact that the area was once a thriving enclave following the Civil War. Although sparsely populated at the time, the town prospered due to its location near the Chisholm Trail. From 1867 to 1884, this route was the major conduit for transporting livestock from Texas to Kansas. The trail brought a steady stream of cattle drives and stagecoaches to Bolivar, which had general stores, druggists, a hotel, and a saloon. The town's entrepreneurs, ranchers, and farmers constructed churches and a district school in this close-knit commu-

nity. In the early 1870s, Bolivar is where Thomas "Tom" Cook, Sr., his wife Lethia Perry, and their eight children sought to make a life for themselves. Cook was a blacksmith who operated his own business, a landowner, minister, and leading figure in the community. His achievements would be considered notable for any man during the 19th century. They are all the more remarkable given that Cook was born enslaved.

People of African descent have lived in what is now Texas since European colonization. Their numbers grew exponentially during the *antebellum* years (before the Civil War) as slaveowners sought their fortunes in sugar and cotton planting. Thus, by 1865, Tom and Lethia Cook were among the more than 250,000 African Americans who were freed in the Lone Star State. Still, the heritage landscape of Texas only recently has begun to reflect its diverse history and population. The legacy of slavery and secession, and the aftermath of emancipation remain untold stories of the Texas past. It is why archeological research on African American sites has grown in importance during recent decades. Although marginalized groups are underrepresented in

Opposite: Four generations of the Clark family, direct descendants of blacksmith Thomas "Tom" Cook, Sr., pose on the steps of the Quakertown House Museum in Denton. Clockwise from left: Halee Clark Wright, Betty Clark Kimble, Howard Clark, and Mylah Wills-Clark. Photograph by Michael Amador, courtesy of the Texas Department of Transportation.



TINY ARTIFACTS TELL A BIG STORY

The popular perception is that archeologists always seek to find the most extraordinary and most valuable artifacts. While this is partly true, the reality is that these professionals do not measure "value" in monetary terms as many people think, but rather in relationship to the potential information yield. The relics archeologists find most prized are not what most would expect.

At the Tom Cook site, the excavation uncovered many hundreds of iron artifacts including blacksmithing tools (fragments of hammer heads and tangs), fairlier items (horseshoes, horseshoe nails, and a clinching tool), broken wagon parts, stock iron pieces, and small scrap iron fragments. Additionally, the majority of 19th-century blacksmiths used coal to heat the iron so the metal could be hammered into various shapes. In the process, the impurities in coal are driven off and transformed into coke, which burns much hotter than the fossil fuel itself. Some of the impurities that burn off are solid particles that form melted blobs called clinker. Not surprisingly, fragments of both are the most common finds in and around historic blacksmith shops.

What is less well known is that the act of forging hot iron produces another by-product that is smaller but far more abundant. As a blacksmith's

hammer strikes a piece of hot metal against the anvil, each spark that flies off is a piece of iron called hammer scale, ranging in size from a quarter inch to microscopic. One blow may produce dozens or hundreds of these particles, which become super-concentrated inside a blacksmith shop.

By studying the horizontal and vertical distributions of hammer scale, archeologists are able to define the floor zone across the smithy (the workshop of a blacksmith) and, in some cases, determine the placement of the forge and anvil inside the shop. When examined, the nature of these particles, which tend to be spherical, can indicate the quality and types of iron and steel that were worked, the variety of forged items produced, and even the skill level of the individual blacksmith.

As with the case of Tom Cook's blacksmith shop, these smallest and often most mundane of artifacts can provide detail that helps reveal the larger story.

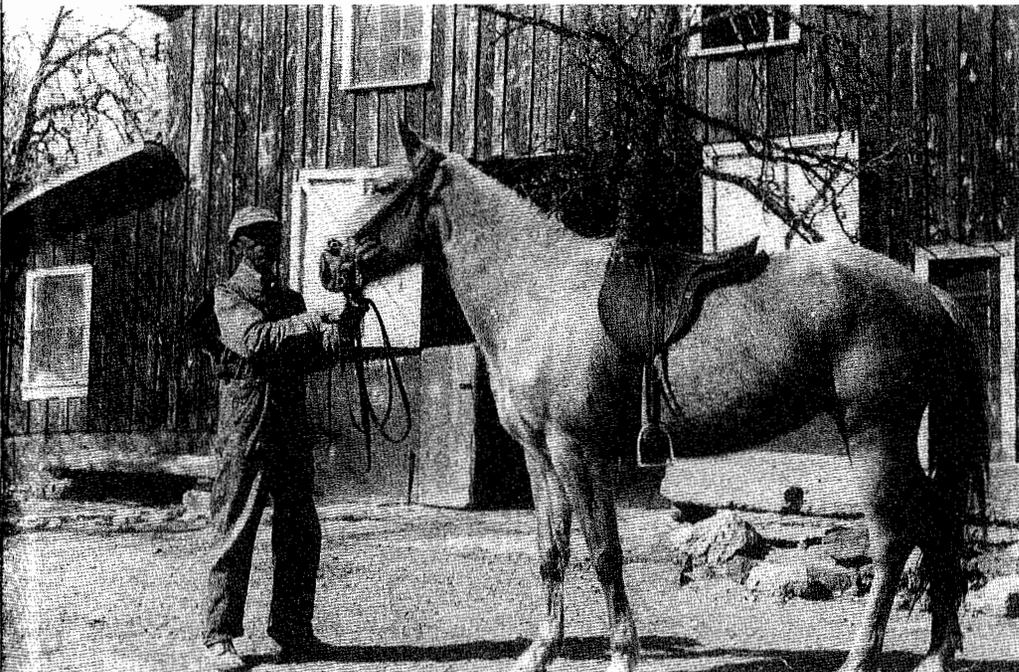
Above: Archeologists digging at the Tom Cook site used hand-held magnets to find hammer scale in the soil, confirming where the material was most concentrated. This, in turn, revealed where the wooden smithy building had once stood. Analysis of these iron particles will reveal even more about Cook's blacksmithing skills and business. Photograph courtesy of TxDOT. Original in color.

historical records, archeologists can recover the physical remnants of their experiences. The Bolivar Archeological Project was borne out of a commitment to illuminate the town's early history and Tom Cook's significant role in that past.

DIGGING INTO THE PAST

In 2016, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) began advance planning to widen a five-mile stretch of FM 455 between Bolivar and the nearby town of Sanger. In Bolivar, an archeological survey of the areas that would be impacted by the construction revealed two late 19th-century sites: Jesse Sartin's hotel, and just across the road, the spot where Tom Cook plied his trade as a blacksmith. Sartin (1820-1899) is believed to be one of Bolivar's founding settlers. In 1881, he paid \$500 for a lot there. The purchase likely also included the wooden two-story structure that would become the Sartin Hotel, which soon became a popular stop along the Chisholm Trail. Archeological excavations were completed at both locations between November 2020 and February 2021. This research has the potential to shed light on the nature of rural commercial enterprises that relied on the Chisholm Trail for patronage. Very few sites associated with blacksmiths have undergone excavation and archeological investigation in Texas, and the Tom Cook Blacksmith Shop has the added distinction of being the first one owned and operated by an African American.

According to the 1880 U. S. census, both Tom (1839-1898) and Lethia (1840-1908) were born in South Carolina, and the couple had eight children residing with them in Denton County. Cook purchased his place of business from another blacksmith in 1882, but he may have been working in Bolivar at his trade before then.



Left: Jack Cook, the son of Tom and Lethia Cook, lived in Denton's Quakertown community and worked as a stableman at the College of Industrial Arts. Photograph, early 20th century, from the Denton County Office of History and Culture archive, courtesy of Kim Cupit.

Blacksmiths were highly skilled and played important social and economic roles in their communities. The artifacts recovered from the North Texas site indicated that Cook was a *farrier* (a person who shod horses) and also repaired wagons for outfits passing through on Chisholm Trail cattle drives. Bolivar residents also would have relied on the tradesman for farming implements, tools, building materials, and other metal goods.

Cook passed away in 1898 and was buried at the Knox Cemetery in Bolivar. He was survived by his wife, sons, and daughters.

COOK DESCENDANTS JOIN THE PROJECT

Researchers with TxDOT, the University of Texas at Austin, and Cox-McLain Environmental Consulting have partnered with Cook's lineal descendants on the Bolivar Archeological Project. Thus, this undertaking is an example of community archeology that combines archeological research and collaboration with a wide array of stakeholders—local residents, business owners, and members of area historical or-

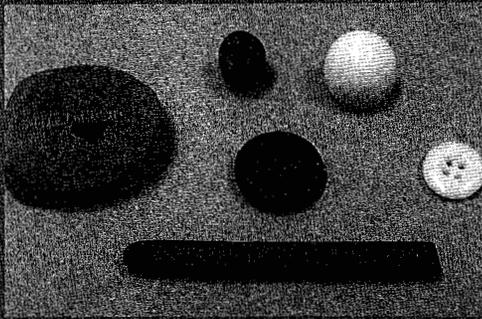
ganizations. Participants in community archeology projects also can include those who have ancestral ties to, or more broadly, a shared heritage connection with the people who once occupied a site. This approach acknowledges that members of a community have a vested interest in heritage resources and may have different but equally important questions about locations undergoing study. It also recognizes the importance of engaging public support for the stewardship of historic and archeological sites.

Cook descendants have resided in Denton County for 150 years, and the blacksmith's story would be incomplete without the knowledge of his life and what transpired for the generations that followed him. Prior to the Bolivar excavation, researchers began collaborating with Howard Clark, Halee Clark Wright, and Betty Clark Kimble, the lineal descendants of Tom and Lethia's daughter Kitty, who married Glasco Clark. Kimble was excited to learn more about her great grandparents and the anticipated dig at the newly discovered site. She helped fill in the gaps concerning the family's genealogy. Her recollections of Tom and Lethia's offspring revealed the strong

family ties that have persisted in subsequent generations.

Clark and Wright were hired as members of the project team to ensure that Cook descendants had a voice in shaping the research questions, outreach efforts, and project outcomes. Howard Clark is the Cooks' great-great grandson. A retired law enforcement officer, he worked as a member of the field crew throughout the Bolivar dig. According to Clark, archeology provided him with the opportunity to experience firsthand "where they [his ancestors] lived, where they stood, something they might have held in their hand, something they might have eaten a meal off of. This is as close as we can get without actually meeting the person." Halee Clark Wright, Howard's daughter, also reflected on her experience:

It's given me a sense of belonging and helped me believe in myself a little bit more. Because if my great-great-grandfather could come out of slavery and have his own successful business...what's to stop me from succeeding? I come from a...lineage of strong individuals, and [this experience] has given me something to pass on to my daughter.



BEYOND BLACKSMITHING

In historical archeology, the integration of multiple lines of evidence—archeological features, artifacts, documents, and oral history—can make historic sites and the people who lived and worked in these places come alive. While digging in the northwest corner of Tom Cook's lot, the Bolivar team discovered a dugout structure that measured roughly 15 feet by 16 feet inside and was more than four feet deep. The upper portions of its south and east walls were built using stacked limestone rocks resting on clay benches. Large-diameter wooden posts in the corners and the center of one wall once supported the structure's roof.

The artifacts in the dugout's floor date from the middle to late 19th century, but what is noticeably absent from these deposits is any material related to blacksmithing. What was found is a wide range of domestic items that are consistent with household occupation from the latter half of the 1800s. The floor zone yielded cast iron cooking vessels and stove parts, jewelry such as brooch pins and necklace beads, an array of clothing buttons, children's toys, firearm cartridge cases, pieces of glass bottles, a variety of *sherds* (fragments of ceramic materials), and broken vessels used for food storage and consumption. Archeologists believe that some, or perhaps all, of these materials were used or discarded by the Cook family.

Above: Numerous domestic artifacts were recovered from the dugout area of the Tom Cook site. Those include, at center, a hard rubber button made by the Novelty Rubber Company. Directly beneath that and moving clockwise are: a slate pencil, a brass end cap from a tubular G. Bruckbauer mouth harmonica (patented in 1874), a necklace bead, a porcelain dress button, and a Prosser button. Photograph courtesy of TxDOT. Original in color.



Master blacksmith Kelly Kring spent two days at the Cook site and gave the field crew an impromptu lesson on the trade. Photograph courtesy of TxDOT. Original in color.

THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY ARCHEOLOGY

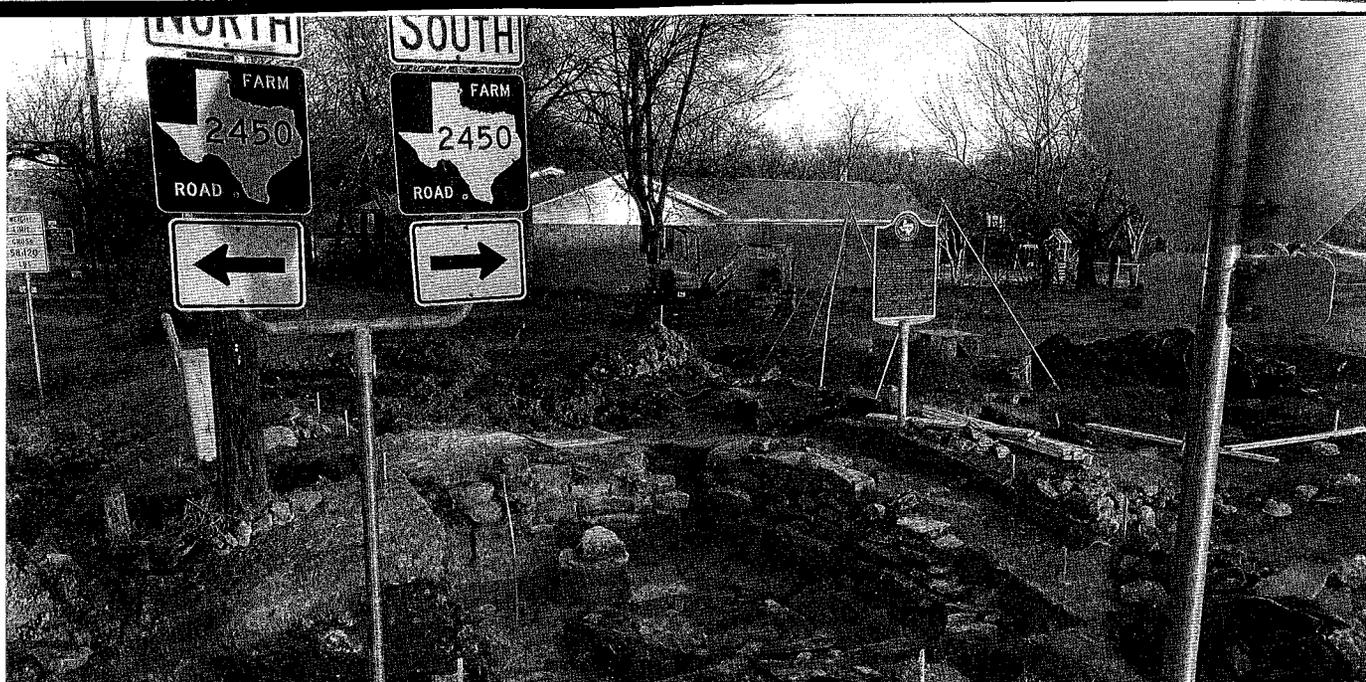
Involving Clark and Wright in the research demonstrates an important component of community archeology, as stakeholder participation helps to demystify the practice of studying the physical remains of the past. Moreover, as researchers and those with a vested interest work side by side, they communicate with one another and build a relationship of mutual trust. This affords more opportunities for stakeholders to ask questions and provide archeologists with their own insights on excavation findings. Thus, both the process of discovery and knowledge of the site's history are shared.

In addition to Cook's lineal descendants, the Bolivar project team and TxDOT are conducting outreach with a broad range of other stakeholders. The agency's scope has been statewide, and the interested parties include academics, heritage preservationists, and cultural resource management firms. To complement TxDOT's efforts, the project team has focused on working with other Cook descendants, the African American community in both Denton and Sanger, students and faculty at the University of North Texas (UNT), the Denton County Office of History and Culture, the Denton County Genealogical Society,

the North Texas Archaeological Society (NTAS), and Bolivar residents.

Specific to this project, the community archeology approach has entailed employing different strategies to encourage and support the involvement of this diverse group of participants, as well as expanding wider public interest in the project. Volunteers from NTAS spent many days excavating and screening dirt to recover artifacts. In addition, site visits were organized and a series of newsletters on the research findings were circulated to interested parties. As the archeologists shared what was found at the Sartin Hotel and Tom Cook Blacksmith Shop dig sites, these individuals and groups learned about archeology's role in reconstructing history and the everyday lives of ordinary people. Four generations of Cook descendants and their close family friends toured the site. Dozens of others made impromptu visits when they saw archeologists at work along FM 455, which led to even more interest in the project.

These engagements also have precipitated better research. Conversations with individuals and project presentations to organizations have opened up channels for sharing historical knowledge. After attending a talk given to the Denton County Genealogical Society, member Donna Spears offered to assist with the archival in-



This is a view of the archeological excavations at the Tom Cook Blacksmith Shop, shortly before the dig ended. The stacked rocks in the lower middle of the image are the east and south walls of the dugout structure. The probable location of the smithy is in the shallow excavation area immediately behind the dugout. Photograph courtesy of TxDOT. Original in color.

vestigation of Jesse Sartin and Tom Cook. The Curtsingers, long-time Bolivar residents, and Rheba Marshall, who rented a house during the 1950s where the Sartin Hotel once stood, shared photos and recollections of early Bolivar. Kelly Kring, a local blacksmith, identified artifacts recovered from the Cook site and spoke to the field crew about historic blacksmithing. In years past, UNT oral historians interviewed Betty Clark Kimble, Alma Clark, Ruby Cole, and Reverend Reginald Logan regarding their experiences as African Americans in Denton County. All of these individuals visited the Bolivar excavations and were generous in relating their knowledge of local history with the project team.

MOVING FORWARD

As decisions are made on how best to commemorate the history of Bolivar, the Sartin Hotel, and Tom Cook's legacy, stakeholders will continue to be part of that process. Their feedback already has helped to define potential public history goals, including a state historical marker, interpretive signage at both Bolivar

sites, and an oral history project involving descendants of the Cooks. The stakeholders also have recommended that an exhibit on the Tom Cook Blacksmith Shop be installed at the Quakertown House Museum in Denton.

Quakertown is a former African American neighborhood that was transformed into a city park in 1922. One of the few surviving remnants of that residential community is a house built in 1904. The city purchased and relocated the historic home, restoring it to serve as an African American history museum. Because some of the blacksmith's descendants lived in Quakertown in the early 20th century, an exhibit at the museum would be a natural fit for telling the Cook family story.

Buried for more than a century, Tom Cook's story is coming to life through the practice of community archeology. In 19th-century Texas, most former slaves were landless and labored as sharecroppers. They were largely denied the opportunities to advance due to systemic racism, economic exploitation, and political disenfranchisement. Thus, the Bolivar Archeological Project is

providing a rare opportunity to learn about a self-employed freedman who practiced a skilled trade. Tom Cook succeeded as a father, religious and community leader, and businessman despite the tremendous obstacles that confronted African Americans. His narrative is one that deserves to be told as part of Texas history. ★

Maria Franklin is a historical archeologist who teaches in the Department of Anthropology at The University of Texas at Austin. Douglas K. Boyd is a senior archeologist with Cox-McLain Environmental Consulting, Inc., in Austin. Kevin Hanselka is a staff archeologist for the Texas Department of Transportation. William Howard Clark is a native of Denton who retired after 30 years in law enforcement. Halee Clark Wright is a special education teacher and coach at Crownover Middle School in Corinth.

Editor's note: Although "archaeology" is an acceptable spelling used by many professional organizations, "archeology" is the preferred style of Texas HERITAGE magazine.