



June 2023 Newsletter

African Diaspora Communities of the Shawnee National Forest and Mary R. McCorvie's Civic Engagements

By Mark Wagner

Mary McCorvie and her projects focused on the African diaspora communities of the Shawnee National Forest region received the 2023 *Mark E. Mack Award Community Engagement Award* by the Society for Historical Archaeology. Mary served as the Heritage Program Manager on the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois from 1991 through 2021. During that time she conducted extensive collaborative public outreach programs with African-American, Native-American, and local Euro-American stakeholders to reconnect them with their heritage within Illinois. Her most well-known project involved the pre-Civil War, African-American community called Miller Grove.



Mary McCorvie (left) receives the Mark E. Mack Award from Society of Historical Archaeology President Julie Schablitsky at the annual conference in Lisbon, Portugal, January 2023.

Established by freed slaves in the 1840s, the now-abandoned community of Miller Grove consisted of over 20 homesteads, a church, school, and cemetery, all located on a landscape of rolling hills that would later become Forest Service land. Mary was instrumental in the preservation of this community though her sponsorship of collaborative investigations into its



history, including archaeology and oral history interviews with descendant family members. As part of these initiatives, she directed a multi-year, Historic Black College grant sponsored by the Forest Service headquarters in Washington, DC. This support provided funding for two students to be trained annually in archaeology, historical research, and oral history interviews at Miller Grove. She also developed an “I Too Am America” (ITAA) summer camp program for Miller Grove in which Historic Black College students served as mentors for 324 African-American, 6 Hispanic-American, and 65 Euro-American school children. Adult chaperones and instructors involved in this project totaled an additional 109 participants.

The ITAA summer camps worked to reconnect school children of an underserved area—deep southern Illinois—with their heritage by instilling in them a sense of pride in their region. Mary also worked with adult community volunteers, including Americorps “Promise Fellows,” the “100 Black Men of America Club,” and the African-American Museum of Southern Illinois in the implementation of this program. The Promise Fellows identify and work with 6th to 8th grade students in a one-to-one mentorship to engage students with their community. The 100 Black Men Club mentors similarly seek to develop young people into future leaders by surrounding them with positive influences.

Mary also collaborated with the descendants of the Miller Grove residents in investigations of the history of their ancestral community through interviews conducted with them by her Historic Black College students and local African-American residents. She also collaborated with professional African-American archaeologist Cheryl LaRoche in her investigation of free African-American communities associated with the network of escape routes called the “Underground Railroad” (LaRoche 2014). As Cheryl observed, Mary actively

engaged community members, descendants, and professional archaeologists in a collaborative outreach program to help preserve the Miller Grove community by documenting its history and bringing it to widespread public attention across Illinois and the nation.



Abby Gill Miller and her daughters, ca. 1910.

The Miller Grove project is centered around the long-term investigation of a pre-Civil War community of formerly enslaved persons now located on Forest Service lands within southern Illinois. Since 1991, this collaborative project has involved archival research into primary sources, archaeological surveys, and test investigations to identify archaeological features and artifacts associated with the daily lives of the Miller Grove inhabitants.

Miller Grove was established by freed slaves from Tennessee in the 1840s who settled in a secluded interior area where they formed a “crossroads” community of families living on separate farms clustered around a central church and school. Within 6 years 29 additional freed slaves and their children joined them, increasing the population to 32 by 1850. By 1860 the population had doubled in size to 12 families totaling 66 people. The presence of a school at Miller Grove reflects the value that formerly enslaved African-Americans placed on education as a “privilege that had been withheld [from them] by owners out of fear of slave insurrection” (McCorvie and Devenport 2004, 12).

The relative isolation of Miller Grove can convey an impression that the safety of the inhabitants depended in part on seclusion, something that may have been particularly important if the community was involved in the Underground Railroad (LaRoche 2014, 43–56; McCorvie 2000). Two natural features on the landscape—a small cave and a bare stone outcrop—have been identified by descendants being associated with the Underground Railroad (Fuller and McCorvie 1999). Other characteristics linking Miller Grove to the Underground Railroad include: the presence of white abolitionist missionaries within a few miles of the settlement; the presence of an African Methodist Episcopalian (AME) church at the site; escaped slave narratives that indicate the presence of runaways within the general vicinity; and advertisements in local newspapers seeking the recapture of escaped slaves believed to be passing by the general vicinity of Miller Grove (LaRoche 2014). Miller Grove continued to function as a farming community centered on the AME church into the late nineteenth century. Its fortunes during this time paralleled that of many small communities in the region, which peaked economically around 1900. By 1920 only eight families remained at Miller Grove, and between 1935-1941 the federal government purchased the last remnants of Miller Grove.



Artifacts from Abby Miller’s and other house sites within the Miller Grove community.

Mary’s research has been conducted within a public outreach framework by an ethnically diverse group of African-American, Euro-American, and Hispanic-American researchers, both children and adults. Their research is extremely significant to our understanding of African-

American lifeways prior to the Civil War in that Miller Grove is a “silenced” community (Trouillot 1995) where the inhabitants did not talk about their lives or possible involvement in the Underground Railroad even long after the Civil War for fear of retribution from their white neighbors. The community also was silenced by local white historians who found the lives of African-American peoples of little importance. As such, the information recovered by Mary and her collaborators regarding the daily lives of recently freed African-Americans in a rural setting prior to the Civil War and their possible participation in the Underground Railroad provides critically important baseline information that literally cannot be recovered elsewhere and that has been shared freely with and greatly benefitted other researchers investigating the same topic as well as family and community members (LaRoche 2024).

References

{Insert entry for “Fuller and McCorvie 1999” as cited in text}

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