

“As happy and contented with their vocation:” Shame and Pride Surrounding the Industrial Slaves of the Arcadia Cotton Mill

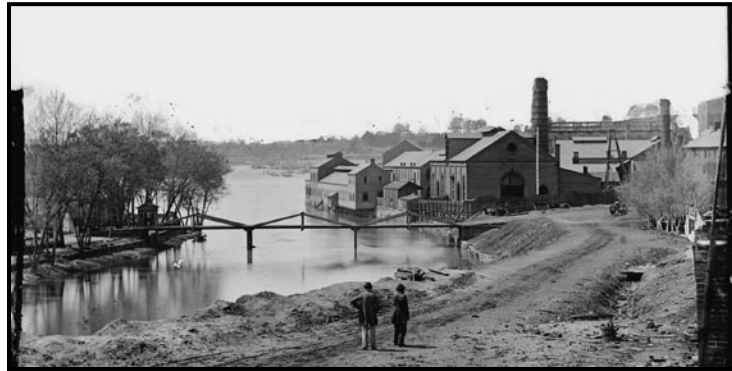
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Arcadia Mill’s enslaved work force confronted conventional wisdoms of Southern race/labor relations and caused conflict on many social and cultural levels. Local leaders criticized the mill owners for undermining the institution of slavery by having “untrainable” slaves performing skilled industrial work. They feared this industrial success would prove slaves could compete with working class whites. This fear ran headlong into the pride of corporate owners for the competency and productiveness of their workforce. Using Arcadia as case study, we examine the social rhetoric of industrial ownership and production in the Antebellum South and the challenge of its archaeological interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Historic sites have long been understood as “hallowed ground” by the public. This is particularly true of sites known to be the tragic result of conflict, such as battlefields, or shrines of nationalism, such as the homes of our founding fathers. In North America, historical archaeologists entered this discussion first to assist in the reconstruction of shrines, but increasingly sought to uncover the story of the disenfranchised and to reconnect written and oral traditions with the landscape. Places of conflict, battlefields in particular, became benchmarks of the intellectual juxtaposition of mainstream historical interpretation against a convergence of multiple records, written and oral, reconciled against archaeological residue and the landscape. Through this process, historic sites have become an important medium for the discussion and communication of the process of conflict. These historic places, which were once the seed of conflict, once again become the embodiment of conflict as we seek to reconcile and remember a

past that has led us to our present but which has either been too painful, forgotten, or pushed aside along the way.



**Tredegar Iron Works, Richmond, Virginia
(Courtesy of US Library of Congress).**

The landscape of the antebellum industrial south is one such landscape of conflict. We are interested in two parallel conflicts surrounding southern industrial development. The first resulted in a pre-Civil War debate swirling around the value of southern industrialization. For historians writing in the twentieth century, this debate was carried on in the form of social and economic explanations for a non-industrially minded south supported with the documentary record of the antebellum debate (Downey 1999; Genovese 1967; Goldfarb 1982; Preyor 1961).

The second conflict revolves around the appropriate nature of a southern industrial workforce. This conflict spurred debate prior to the Civil War about the value of using slaves in industrial production on the one hand, and the need to protect the white laborers of the south. Later historians perpetuated this debate by arguing that the nature of southern laborers, or the climate in which they toiled, was related to the perceived lack of industrial success in the antebellum south (Downey 1999; Genovese 1967; Goldfarb 1982; Preyor 1961).



**Slave family, South Carolina
(Courtesy of US Library of Congress).**

It is our belief that that the underlying story of the issues, actively debated during the lives of these sites, is about the conflict of change. Change, the fear of change, and questions of how to change, are uncertainties that we in the present also face and have to deal with. As we sit at the tail end of 2008 in the midst of a world changing rapidly in ways that we can little predict or control, it is easy to understand and relate to the fear of change in the past and the attempts by our predecessors to create a rational basis for the changes affecting their lives. Regardless, it is essential to realize that the rhetorical remains of past conflicts, these expressed and reinterpreted perceptions, possibly inaccurate, are as essential to understanding the development of our culture as is the actual record of events that we see clearly today. These experiences, often acted out as rhetorical resistance or as conflicts, are an important part of the story of places that might otherwise be seen simply as a place where work was done and lives were lived out.

THE MYTH OF THE NON-INDUSTRIAL SOUTH

Myths about the industrial southern past; perceptions fueled by the rhetoric of the past, evolved out of the perpetuation of these antebellum debates through historical rhetoric of the twentieth century. These myths about industrialization in the south have been dispelled to a large degree in modern historical discourse and do not hold up against the logic of a clearly industrialized southern landscape (e.g., the industrial landscape of places such as Richmond, Virginia and Tallassee, Alabama), but it does persist today in the way we interpret southern industrial sites.

In contrasting industrial development prior to the Civil War in the north and the south, there is no question that industry was more actively pursued and successful in the north. Tales explaining this industrial lag, such as slaveholder's resistance, the lack of southern initiative, lethargy brought upon by climate, and a variety of other excuses found their way into textbooks and popular history.

This myth-building is due in part to the trajectory of historical research on this topic conducted in the mid to late twentieth century. Retrospectives of antebellum southern industrialism have been fervently pursued along two conflicting explanatory paths: social versus economic explanation (Downey 1999:78-79; Genovese 1967; Goldfarb 1982:546). Social explanations were the first to appear in historical research in an attempt to understand the "peculiar institution" of a regional dependence on an enslaved workforce. Initial research in the 1930s suggested that southern industry was hindered by the dominant non-industrial planter elite that saw manufacturing as a threat to their established agricultural means and wealth. This interpretation of the past contributed to or fed the myth that slaveholding planters did everything possible to squelch the growth of industry in the south (Goldfarb 1982:546-548; Downey 1999:79).

Economic arguments followed which questioned this social explanation. Further economic research focused on the criteria and theoretical interpretations of capitalism, labor force issues, fluctuating cotton prices, cotton surpluses, economic panics or depressions, and transportation costs (Goldfarb 1982:549-553). Interestingly enough, historical research during the late twentieth century documented that in fact southern industry was exploding throughout the 1800s, subject to the same market forces that affected industry in the north and hamstrung by factors such as the retarded development of a transportation infrastructure sufficient to serve a widespread water-powered industrial base (Downey 1999; Griffin 1962:261; Rucker 1990:334-339)

CONFLICT DURING THE ANTEBELLUM PERIOD

The discussion of industrialization in the south was in fact a subject of considerable debate during the antebellum period that pitted the social mores of the social and economic elite against the logic of an emerging industrial world. Around these topics developed a lively debate waged in newspapers such as *Southern Journal*, published in Tallahassee, Florida, and certainly on the street and in parlors, as well. Editors of southern newspapers and individual journal contributors like James M. Wesson, president of the Mississippi Manufacturing Company, and David B. McComb near Tallahassee used these publications to express their views. For example, Wesson explained his hope that attention to industrial pleas by planters would be circulated when he wrote in an 1858 letter to a journal editor that, "We hope ... your patronage will enable you to make the 'Farmer' worthy of its name, and that it may prove to be a source of pleasure and profit to all farmers in the South, [resulting in] the means of developing the untold Wealth of the South" (Wesson and Moore 1956:201) and that "their minds should be properly diverted and instructed. And the Agricultural journals of the country are the proper mediums through which it should be done" (Wesson and Moore 1956:202).

The rhetoric of the conflict over whether the south should industrialize is rich, and is preserved in the newspapers and journals of the day. The editor of the *Pensacola Gazette* made the cry in 1841 that, "...the time is fast coming when the slumbering South will be awakened to the unwelcomed truth, that she must manufacture her own clothes and raise her own provisions, or her people must become the bond slaves of the north and west" (*Pensacola Gazette*, February 13, 1841, as quoted in Griffin 1962:263).

On the other side of the issue, the editor of the Tallahassee *Southern Journal* wrote in 1846, "But what means this stimulating cry of 'Southern Independence,' which is to seduce our farmers from the fields to the factories? We confess that...we never wish to see the time when the South shall cease to be dependent on the North, or the North to be dependent upon the South. As for the establishment of manufactories in the South, we state with great deference, that we have nothing to hope from such a thing" (Tallahassee *Southern Journal*, April 14, 1846, quoted in Griffin 1962:265).

According to historian Richard Griffin (1962:265), "The opinions expressed were not all favorable to the growth of a Florida or Southern industrial system. The editor of the *Southern Journal* was unimpressed by the growing cotton mill campaign. In an editorial he warned his readers that the promotion of industry was merely a plot of Northern protectionists to win adherents for their unfair tariff views in the South."

Equally divided were arguments made by southerners during the antebellum period over the relationship between industrial production and southern labor. Within this was a considerable argument related to the use of slave labor for industrial production. In 1828, David B. McComb, a planter from near Tallahassee wrote in the *American Farmer* about the merits of establishing cotton factories on cotton plantations. He argued for the use of slave labor, that it was in fact preferred over "...white labor, both on account of its certainty and cheapness" (*The American Farmer*, IX, January 4, 1828, 332, quoted in Griffin 1962:262). A new factory manager from New England hired in 1848 to oversee production at the Saluda Manufacturing Company of South Carolina became so impressed by the ability and productiveness of the slave workforce that he commented that "They are easily trained to habits of industry and patient endurance and by the concentration of all their faculties ... their imitative faculties become cultivated to a high degree, their muscles become trained and obedient to the will, so that whatever they see done are quick in learning to do" (Preyor 1961:75).

To contrast this support for the use of slaves in industry was the belief that the southern elite had a responsibility to protect if not promote the welfare of the class of poor white laborers. An opinion expressed in 1858 by James M. Wesson (Wesson and Moore 1956:202) stated, "For if we are permitted to stop here and take a political view of the Subject and see what an influence a general system of manufacturing in the South would have upon this very numerous class of our population ... A general system of Manufacturing would raise [poor whites] above the manual labor performed by the Negro..."

A little different twist on the paternalistic attitude towards poor whites was that they were also ultimately better and cheaper to employ. Quoting again the 1858 letter by James M. Wesson (Wesson and Moore 1956:203), "We use white labour...178 souls are fed, except in some of the preparatory departments which are very dusty, not because black is not equal to the task, but because white is cheapest and really more efficient. And it affords the means of an honest living acquired by their own labour. And when all the resources and energies of the South shall have been fully developed...what a large and prosperous class of population will have been created out of the very dregs of society (and it may be in some instances worse than dregs)!"

Ultimately, some held a fear that employment of the African American slave in industry would undermine one of the tenets of slavery, which we now recognize to be patently racist, that they were incapable of all but the most menial of labor (contrary to the testimony of many skilled black craftsmen employed throughout the south as

carpenters, blacksmiths, etc.!). Representative of this position, the editor of the Tallahassee *Southern Journal* seemed to be particularly fearful of the proposals for the employment of slave labor in such enterprises, not because of the competition this would make for the poor whites, “but because success would invalidate the belief that the Negro was incapable of such advanced training” (Tallahassee *Southern Journal*, April 14, 1846, as quoted in Griffin 1962:265).

From our vantage point removed 150 years, we know that industry was no stranger to the south, and that the conflict about industrialization was more of a social reaction to a changing world. In this context, heritage sites become a medium where we explore the reality of the past, revealed archaeologically and historically, against the backdrop of contemporary perceptions of that past. This conflict is embodied at every industrial site in the south (and, despite the myth, these industrial sites abound), and should be but is not an important part of the story presented to the visiting public at the industrial site turned heritage tourism destination. Because we do not acknowledge this conflict of change, it lives on in our implicit denial of the reasons for the struggles of and sometimes transient nature of industrial production in the south.

Where ever industrial production was conceived or developed in the south during the antebellum period, these issues provided a social context for the associated sites, had a certain importance for the nature and success of the endeavor, and provide part of the story that by its absence confronts us today at seats of southern industry now turned into the seats of a modern heritage tourism industry. Arcadia Mill, located in Northwest Florida is one such seat of industry turned seat of heritage tourism in which we can see this historical conflict and discuss how this conflict plays today and how it could be brought productively into our public interpretation.

ARCADIA MILL: CASE STUDY

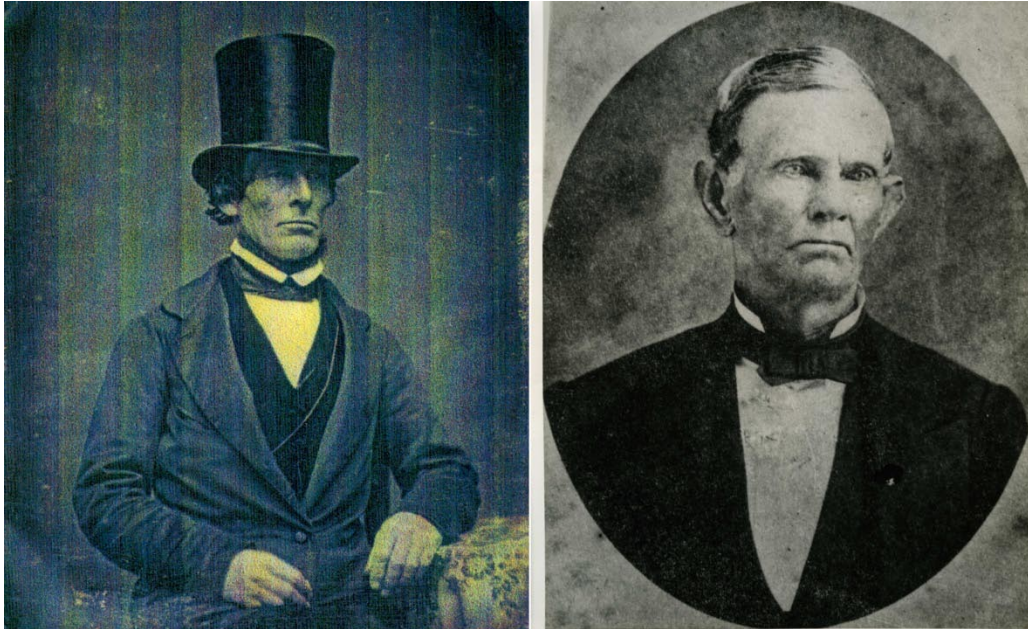
Arcadia Mill is part of a much larger southern industrial landscape; it is where we were confronted by the contradictions between its current conventional wisdom interpretation and the realities of its existence within an antebellum culture of conflict surrounding industrial development in the south. Here, the site itself is not of so much interest to us as its current and potential future interpretation.

The suite of industrial operations known as Arcadia Mills was in operation from 1817 until 1855 under the lead ownership of Joseph Forsyth, Ezekiel Simpson, and Andrew Simpson. Initial development at the site included the quarrying of ironstone and construction of the mill pond dam, and sawmill. A second mill was soon added to produce more finished lumber products. Transportation of lumber from the site proved problematic due the inadequacies of Mill Pond Creek and eventually a 3-mile simple mule-drawn railroad was constructed to transport lumber to market from the banks of the Black Water River. In 1840, due to the difficulties of transportation from the Arcadia

mill seat, Forsyth and Simpson moved the sawmill operation to the Blackwater River and erected a steam-powered mill (Griffin 1962; Phillips 1993; and Rucker 1990).



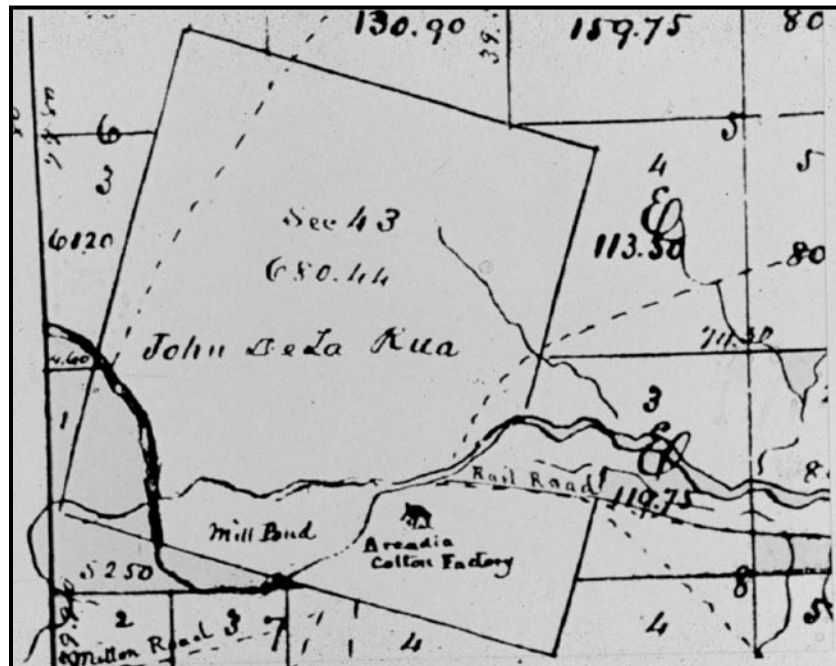
Artist's conception of Arcadia Mill ca. 1850 (Courtesy of Dave Edwards).



Joseph Forsyth (Left) and Ezekial Simpson.

Prior to moving the lumber operation away from the water-powered Arcadia location, Forsyth, Simpson and three other local investors formed the Escambia Manufacturing Company in 1835 "...for the manufacture of Cotton, Wool, and other materials, into thread, yarn, or cloth, or other manufacture of like character..." (*Florida Session Laws*,

1835, pages 286-87, as quoted in Dodd 1934:7). Nothing came of this newly chartered enterprises and it has been suggested that this was due to a lack of additional investors because of the newness of the industrial concept and a depressed economy culminating in the Panic of 1837. In 1845, the textile concept found enough financing and a new charter was secured by the same five investors for the renamed Arcadia Manufacturing Company. The textile mill was established at the Arcadia site within the recently abandoned lumber mill building. Machinery for the mill was purchased in the north and installed in the spring of 1845 (Griffin 1962; Phillips 1993; Rucker 1990).



Land survey showing Arcadia Cotton Factory
(Phillips 1993)

The new mill owners decided to purchase a slave work force and "...determined to incur this last expense at once in order to avoid the possible inconvenience of white operatives becoming dissatisfied and leaving their work" (*Pensacola Gazette*, September 13, 1845 as quoted by Griffin 1962:265). A labor force of 40 African American girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty were purchased in Virginia. They were described by a newspaper reporter to be "...mostly married, and look as happy and contented with their vocation as it has been our lot to see anywhere..." (Griffin 1962:266). In the first year, 4,000 yards of cloth was produced weekly and in subsequent years the slave labor force was increased to 100, allowing for an increase in production (Griffin 1962).

The editor of the *Pensacola Gazette*, used the productivity of the enslaved textile workers and the success of the mill as evidence in his argument for increasing manufacturing in the area. Regarding the slaves, he commented that "...to suppose as many have pretended to do, that they are not equal to white girls in a factory is

ridiculous nonsense, it is to suppose that the manipulation depends on the color of the fingers” (New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, October 17, 1846, as quoted in Griffin 1962:267).



Artist conception of enslaved Arcadia Mill textile hands
(Courtesy of Dave Edwards)

Unfortunately, Joseph Forsyth died suddenly in 1845, and a few months later the mill burned to the ground. The mill was never rebuilt and the slaves were sold. Though documents are relatively silent, and despite newspaper claims to the contrary, it is speculated that the mill was only marginally profitable due to the market of the time, competition, and the difficulties of transportation of finished product to market. With the demise of the textile mill, the Arcadia mill complex was abandoned and was soon reclaimed by nature (Phillips 1993; Rucker 1990).

Although seemingly forgotten to history, the remains of Arcadia Mill were rediscovered by a local historian in 1964 and interest in its preservation and investigation coalesced in the 1980s. Site clearing, mapping, and archaeological testing occurred in 1988, and excavations by the University of West Florida were conducted in 1990 and 1991. Archaeological remains of the textile mill and a sawmill, as well as related features such as flumes, were excavated and documented, and left exposed for eventual use as part of a heritage tourism attraction (Phillips 1993).



Mill foundations at Arcadia Mill (Courtesy of John R. Phillips, University of West Florida, Archaeology Institute).

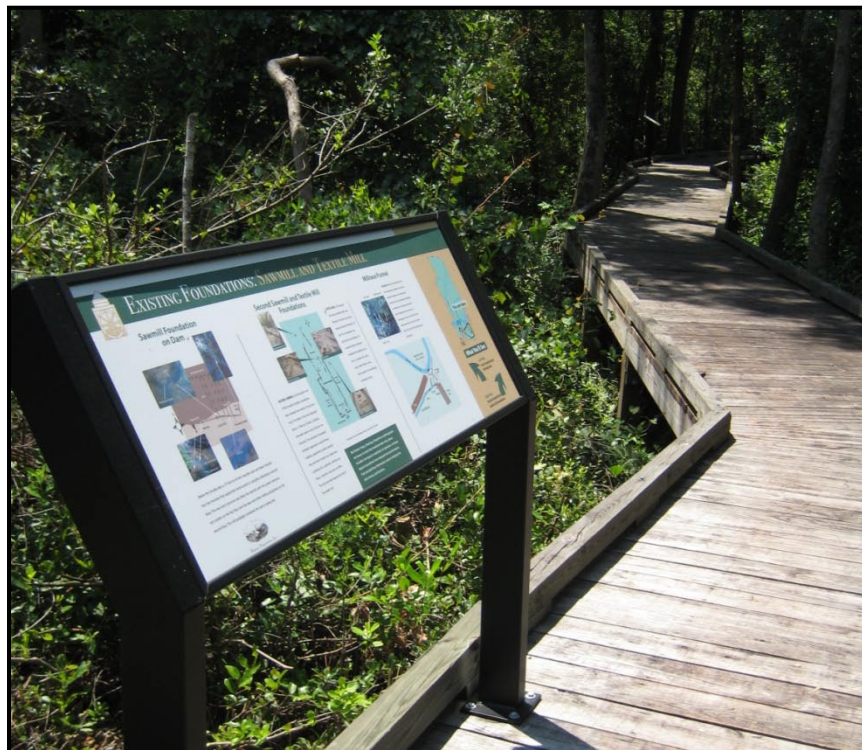
Initial interpretive development occurred through the auspices of the Santa Rosa Historical Society which, through a state grant, constructed a residence/visitor center on the site and a boardwalk/trail system that would take a visitor to key portions of the site including areas excavated by archaeologists. In 2004, the site was taken over by the University of West Florida through the auspices of West Florida Historic Preservation, Inc. (WFHPI), a direct support organization of the University. WFHPI contracted with a local exhibit design firm to develop on-site interpretive panels to augment the walking tour experience. Content for these panels was developed with the assistance of UWF archaeologists and a local professional historian whose thesis had focused on the site.



Excavation of crane foundation at Arcadia Mill (Courtesy of John R. Phillips, University of West Florida, Archaeology Institute).

Five exhibit panels were installed along a boardwalk during 2007 and, although some additional information is available in the visitor center, constitute the main interpretive tool at the site. Combining artist renderings, archaeological photos and maps, and text, these panels are:

- **Arcadia Mill Site.** Presents an artistic rendering of the entire mill complex and a timeline of site development.
- **Arcadia Dam and Water Works.** Presents an artistic rendering of the mill pond and saw mill complex, and describes the history of this part of the site.
- **Existing Foundations: Sawmill and Textile Mill.** Describes the archaeological remains of the first sawmill and dam, second sawmill and textile mill foundations, and the mill race.
- **Arcadia Railroad & Cocoonery.** Provides a brief discussion of the three-mile mule drawn railroad and the off-site experimental cocoonery operation (the cocoonery was actually not part of the Arcadia mill).
- **Arcadia's Cotton Textile Mill.** Presents an artistic rendering of the textile mill during its operation, images of the enslaved women working the variety of mill machinery, and brief history of the operation of this mill.



Interpretive panel on boardwalk.

Unfortunately many of the archaeological remains of this site have been masked by a heavy treefall and new secondary growth resulting from hurricanes Ivan in 2004 and Dennis in 2005. The interpretive tour and the connection of the information on the panels with the related archaeological remains is slowly being restored with the

selective clearing of this treefall and new growth to reveal again archaeological foundations and landscape features.

However much this may help improve the visitor experience at Arcadia, it is clear that this experience will not lead to the enlightenment of visitors on the context of industrialization and the use of enslaved African Americans in industrial production at this location. These are certainly two topics that could be productively added to the on-site interpretation—even as additional panels interspersed between the existing—that challenge the visitor to consider the conflict of the times by understanding the debates that were occurring in Florida and elsewhere. Arcadia is more than just a mill, it is a place where we can remember conflict and its importance for the development of our culture. It is a place where we can challenge visitors to understand that life in the antebellum south is similar to our lives today in that it was filled with uncertainty, and the fears that accompany change.

ISSUES OF INTERPRETATION

Social conflicts of the sort that we describe here are not well reflected in the archaeological record but they are well represented by archaeological places. Fortunately, we can benefit from memory and the written word which allows us to bring an overlay of conflict onto a physical place that otherwise would be much less dimensional. For our interpretive purposes, the historical record and the archaeological record must develop a synergy that might take on the appearances of circularity, but in reality guarantees that the archaeological site as interpreted matches the physical reality of the issue that we seek the public to understand. In a sense, this is the way it has always been; when the story was a founding father, we were concerned largely with his dwelling, but when the story became also the life and social context of that person, we became concerned with other places that spoke to this broader context.

Arcadia Mill is a new heritage tourism site that came to this status in a familiar fashion. It was not identified as the best example or the most well suited for interpretation by a panel of the leading experts. Business plans and interpretive studies were not undertaken to determine the potential for success of this site. It was a site that came to us through a legacy of local interest and advocacy and it exists today as a preserved and interpreted site to the credit of a lone visionary individual.

Interpretive development of the site, including archaeological excavation, followed along the trajectory of interpretation developed prior to its acquisition by the University of West Florida. The newly developed interpretation at Arcadia Mill tells an interesting yet conventional story of this industrial place but is notable because it is not the least bit controversial—it does not touch on the conflict that we have introduced in this paper, or any other. The site is presented as the cradle of industry in Florida, and panels, while they mention the use of slave labor, focus on the means of production and the industrial structure of the site. Although the site has been subjected to archaeological survey

efforts, the archaeological research on which this interpretation is based is itself focused on the mills and related industrial features.

What our discussion has shown is that the tension embodied in the use of slave labor at this industrial site, and the very act of industrial production, is an important part of the story of Arcadia Mill and, perhaps, its lack of longevity. We feel it highly unlikely that this conflict is discernable in the archaeological remains of Arcadia, but we do believe it is reflected there. The ruins of a factory, and the broken mill machinery, tell not only the story of the production of cloth, but also the story of the conflicts and tensions embodied within industry and industrial slavery in the antebellum south. The development and ultimate failure of this seat of industrial production may also be at least partially explained in the context of this conflict.

The story of Arcadia Mill and of the conflicts of industrial slavery could be told in a brochure, book, web site or other remote medium. But by choosing to preserve a site and use it as a point of heritage education, we require a higher standard. If our story is about a place, we must do whatever possible to identify the important points and their material correlates, and connect the interpretation with the physical site. It is not enough to show that this is the site of Arcadia Mill; we must provide authenticity to the story by linking the archaeology and the interpretation in the most visual and direct way possible. To do this we must first identify the physical correlates of the interpretation, and ensure that their archaeological authenticity is established by research and preservation in situ where possible (Gilmore and Pine 2007).

Certainly, for example, the remains of the mills at Arcadia are an important part of the story of this site and of the struggle over southern industrialization. But as much as anything else, it is the people who are part and parcel of this story, and in this case these people are the industrial slaves at Arcadia. How do we make these people real to the public? It must be by allowing the visiting public to connect with their lives at Arcadia—to see with confidence where they lived, and to understand their daily lives through archaeological research. This provides direct connection, and the authenticity required before the public can move to a consideration of the conflict as it affected real people at a real place.

This is what makes a heritage site work. It is not enough to simply preserve the site, thought this is important, or to simply tell the story of the site, thought this is essential. It is necessary that the visiting public connect with the physical reality of the past, in as visually compelling way as possible. Artifacts, exposed or reconstructed foundations or features, restored landscapes, and even reconstructed buildings are all portals to the public acceptance of place sufficient to justify their visit and to warrant their consideration of an interpretive argument (Jameson 2004).

Unless a heritage site possesses shrine status, such as Mount Vernon or the Little Bighorn Battlefield, we believe it is necessary for a heritage site to challenge the visiting

public with more than the route history of the site or the physical presentation of archaeological or architectural remains, as amazing and as visually compelling as those may be. We instead need to recognize the visually compelling remains, and the amazing historical context to be the base from which conflict and controversy in the past can be discussed, and how those tensions affected a particular place and how they have affected our lives today. Certainly, Arcadia Mill was not a great success and the south never became a major seat of industry. Is this because of the climate, or is it instead the result of conflict and controversy that erected a cultural fortification so onerous that even economic forces could not penetrate? This is not the only story to be told about Arcadia Mill and its southern brethren, but it is among the most interesting and perhaps the most informative to our lives today.

In many very real ways, the conflicts of the past, such as those surrounding industrialization of the south prior to the Civil War, are a reaction to impending or potential change. This is certainly something that our visiting public can identify with, because we are faced today with change that forms a conflict within our modern lives, and about which we are involved in an almost constant debate about the best path to take.

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