

**RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT THE CHENEY HOUSE SITE,  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY CAMPUS**

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*The purpose of this paper is to provide information on the recent excavations at the nineteenth- and twentieth-century May and Warren Cheney House, located on the University of California's Berkeley campus. Initially a private home, the property was acquired by the University in the 1930s, and has since been used for student housing and administrative office space. The planned southeast campus development threatens the site's future, and as such, excavations have been carried out in partnership with students, faculty, and administration of the University in order to document the property. This paper emphasizes the benefit of utilizing local archaeological sites as places of learning for college students, in keeping with pedagogical ideas regarding participatory learning and communities of practice.*

The May and Warren Cheney House site, which is now located on the University of California's Berkeley campus, was built in 1885 as part of the burgeoning residential neighborhood forming along the eastern edge of the University. It was home to the Cheney family until 1939, when the University acquired the property as part of its gradual expansion toward the Berkeley hills. During in the 1940s, the house was used by the University as graduate student housing, and since the 1950s has been used as office space. Research into the property was prompted by the announcement in the spring of 2006 that both the Cheney house and its smaller adjacent rental cottage were to be demolished to make way for a new structure as part of the University's Southeast Campus Development Plan. While that particular building project has since fallen through, the site is still slated for development at some point in the future. The delay in construction, however, has allowed for a change from the basic survey-and-recording plans initially organized, to the conducting of more extensive excavations on the property over the past four semesters. This has enabled the involvement of a significant number of students in the ongoing research as well as various smaller related research projects. The promise of utilizing such local sites as learning laboratories in keeping with pedagogical ideals related to participatory learning and communities of practice, as well as public archaeology, is the focus of this paper.

**SITE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE**

May and Warren Cheney were both early graduates of the University, members of the classes of 1883 and 1878, respectively. The Cheneys raised their family of four sons in the house, while May worked for the University creating and implementing a placement service for students graduating with teaching degrees, and Warren owned a real estate and insurance business in downtown Berkeley. The Cheneys also hosted various gatherings of political progressives and local artists and writers, including Jack London, Mary Hunter Austin, and John Galen Howard (Page and Turnbull 2006). May was quite active in the state women's suffrage movement in 1910 and used her position at the University to improve conditions for female students both academically and professionally. Warren was a prolific author of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and both he and May regularly contributed to publications such as *Sunset Magazine* and *The Overland Monthly/Out West*. Over the years the family home also housed student boarders, aged parents, and in later years, several of the Cheney's grown sons with their wives and children.

Warren died in 1921, and May sold the house to the University in 1939, just three years before her own death at age 80. By this time, most of the surrounding neighborhood had been purchased by the University, and the construction of Memorial Stadium just east of the house in 1923 had significantly changed the character of the neighborhood by bringing it spatially within the fold of the campus. Many of

the houses were then in use by fraternities and sororities, and the area was no longer the quiet residential neighborhood it had once been. The main Cheney house was used for graduate student housing during the 1940s, and since 1950 it has housed various departmental and graduate student offices, as it does currently. The smaller rental cottage, built in 1902 by the Cheneys, has been used as office space over the years by the University, but has stood empty since 2005.

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

In beginning archaeological research on the property, the main concern was to determine the extent of site disturbance and evaluate the potential for further excavations. Testing began with a shovel test pit survey to determine the placement and state of archaeological deposits on the property, and area excavations have since explored several locations more intensively as a result of the initial survey. While much of what is left of the property has been heavily disturbed, there are several areas in which the nineteenth-century ground surface, features, and artifact scatter are intact. Nearly half of the original lot is currently covered by a parking lot, which has prevented testing of the rear yards of both houses, although Sanborn maps indicate the presence of several outbuildings in these areas.

In the undisturbed yard areas, remnants of brick pathway and garden bed edging, nineteenth-century drainage features, and a horseshoe pit have been found. The small yard area between the main house and rental house, where the garden bed edging and horseshoe pits were found, has been the least disturbed and most fruitful in terms of excavations. The greatest overall concentration of artifacts, including ceramics, glassware, kitchen utensils, animal bone, and small items such as marbles, coins, buttons, and beads, was found in this area. This space was located just outside the kitchens of both houses, and appears to have been heavily used by the occupants of both properties.

### **Archaeology on Campus**

Despite the disappointingly disturbed and limited yard space accessible at this site, I would like to argue that this project has provided a significant teaching and learning opportunity for students at UC Berkeley. All of the excavations and associated research completed thus far have been undertaken by a dedicated group of undergraduate and graduate students which has formed a “community of [archaeological] practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991). This particular project is part of a greater effort on the University of California, Berkeley campus to partner with the University’s Office of Capital Projects, which oversees campus development, in order to use pre-construction archaeological testing for teaching and student research (Wilkie et al. 2010).

Over the course of the last four semesters, more than 30 undergraduate students have participated in the Cheney House project through the University’s Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program, or URAP. This program gives students the opportunity to participate in faculty-sponsored original research projects in nearly all of the programs and departments on campus on a semester-by-semester basis. Almost all of our research apprentices have participated in the project for a full academic year, in addition to a number of volunteers who have spent varying amounts of time with the project.

Given the sense of continuity among participants arising from their long-term commitment to the project, we have been able to maintain a relatively cohesive-feeling crew. This is despite the fact that we only excavate for one day per week during the academic year, and there is inevitably some turnover in participants with each new semester. This continuity has been crucial to the formation of a learning community in which graduate and undergraduate students, both experienced and inexperienced, have come together to work on various aspects of the project.

For example, several students have taken on portions of the research process as individual projects, both to fulfill requirements for classes and for personal learning experiences. These have included analyses such as soil flotation, soil chemistry, and X-Ray fluorescence spectrography of ceramics from the site. In addition, the site itself has been used as a space to teach and learn the process of 3-D laser scanning of standing architecture, and of using a total station for site mapping. Despite the fact

that the site's usefulness in terms of a learning laboratory is fleeting (as the site will eventually be developed by the University), we are quite consciously attempting to put it to good use within the time that we have. All of the smaller studies conducted by students will ultimately inform our interpretation of the site, while at the same time enabling those affiliated with the project to gain new skills and explore different analysis and recording techniques.

Another significant component of the project is its focus on public archaeology. Students participating in the project also take part in public outreach and education through a variety of methods, including speaking with site visitors, "blogging," making videos, and participating in site open houses and local school visits, the latter in conjunction with the UC Berkeley Archaeological Research Facility's Outreach program. For all of these activities, research apprentices provide the ideas and enthusiasm. This engagement is an important aspect of an education in the discipline of archaeology, as it models best practices in terms of including a public component in the research from the outset and connects students with the community of Berkeley beyond the University.

Conducting this research, especially the fieldwork component, during the academic semester has been crucial to successfully utilizing the site for teaching and learning experiences. Students participating in the project gain experience equivalent to that of a formal field school over the course of the semester and are able to participate in the ongoing excavations, laboratory studies, and archival work during the course of their normal academic schedule. This has enabled students not otherwise able or likely to attend a formal field school course during the summer to gain important hands-on experience, and has provided students who do go on to a field school the benefit of prior experience.

In addition to these outcome-oriented learning experiences, participation in the on-campus project has an emotional benefit. As this site is deeply entangled with university history, students typically feel a strong sense of identification with the site's past occupants. Students are placed in a unique position as stakeholders, and the project presents the opportunity for them to gain a sense of ownership in the research. While the time it has taken to conduct these excavations is unusually long, especially from a professional cultural resources management perspective, the site's location within the campus community and the fortunate delay in development plans for the area have allowed us to utilize the site as a learning laboratory.

## **PEDAGOGY**

From a pedagogical angle, this approach conforms to Lave and Wenger's (1991:37) concept of legitimate peripheral participation. In this analytical model of learning based on refining notions of apprenticeship, Lave and Wenger argue that learning itself is a part of social practice in general, rather than a simple, unidirectional process of internalization. Participants who engage in the social practice of a community of practice thus eventually progress toward "identities of mastery" in learning. At the core of this concept is the availability of and "access to practice as resource for learning, rather than to instruction," as well as to perceived legitimacy of practice. In this understanding of learning, participation in practice is the very condition required for effective learning (Lave and Wenger 1991:85, 93).

Archaeological research on the Berkeley campus fits this mode of learning by enabling students, both graduate and undergraduate, to participate in a community of practice – composed of faculty and fellow students – and contribute original research to the communal learning effort. Rather than employing the now much-maligned "banking" approach to education (Freire 1970), or forcing students to complete assignments that are little more than "busy work," students contribute meaningfully to ongoing research practices and projects and thereby shape their very forms and outcomes. As a result, students renegotiate the social relations they are enmeshed within through the process of research, and gradually increase their knowledge of and participation within the wider community of practice, changing from a "newcomer" to an "old-timer" in the process.

## CONCLUSIONS

In closing, I would like to reiterate the potential that I hope I have demonstrated in using local sites to engage students in original, hands-on archaeological research. Besides acting as an arena for gaining skills in basic fieldwork, laboratory work, and archival research, sites like the Cheney House provide a sort of “safe space” in which to try out analytical methods which are new to the researcher. In the process, students gain a sense of ownership in the project and the community of practice, while the public nature of a project such as this one provides opportunity for community outreach and engagement. In the specific case of the Cheney House, I hope that it has demonstrated the potential that lies behind these two dilapidated old buildings on campus for their use in research and teaching, in addition to their historical significance in other aspects.

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