

## *Heritage West: West Philadelphia Community Archaeology Project* Recovers Erased Histories from Black Bottom

PHILADELPHIA, July 11, 2023—A partnership between HopePHL™, the Community Education Center (CEC), Tabb Management, University City Arts League, University of Pennsylvania students, Penn Anthropology, and Penn Museum, *Heritage West: The West Philadelphia Community Archaeology Project* aims to recover forgotten stories of the residents of the historic Black Bottom neighborhood before the 1960s. Using archaeological investigation, archival research, oral histories, and state-of-the-art technology, *Heritage West* team members are working together to unearth and preserve untold—or erased—histories dating from the 19th century to the present.

### Uncovering the past with modern technology

Earlier this spring, with permission from CEC, the *Heritage West* team conducted a geophysical survey using Ground-Penetrating Radar (GPR) and Electrical Resistivity (ER) to “look underground” first—before digging. They found promising, evidence-based starting points for the excavation.

### Excavation plan

An excavation at the CEC’s site on the 3500 block of Lancaster Avenue will begin on August 1, 2023, when the team will test locations in the parking lot and yard behind CEC for two weeks. Following the testing phase, and in consultation with CEC, *Heritage West* will focus on two areas for further excavation as part of an undergraduate anthropology class, “Archaeology in the City of Brotherly Love,” which starts **September 1, 2023**. The excavation will continue through November 17, 2023.

### Black Bottom neighborhood

For more than 200 years, the 3500 block of Lancaster Avenue has been home to community centers, art spaces, theaters, and residences. Once the location of seven homes, this area includes evidence of some of the earliest houses built in West Philadelphia during the 1850s and has remained relatively untouched after the structures were demolished in the 1960s—displacing Black Bottom’s residents.

"CEC is excited to be a part of the project. Our building is over 100 years old, a former Quaker meetinghouse and school, and our community has always been interested in its history—and the history of the Black Bottom," says Ms. Theresa (Terri) Shockley, CEC's executive director since 2001. "This project helps to bring community members together, hopefully to discover something new."

### **Archival records**

In addition, *Heritage West* team members searched archival records, which told stories of early residents like Stonewall and Mary Jones. Born in Virginia in the 1880s, they raised four children in a wood home at 32 N. 35th street in the early 1900s. Another story is about Henry Johnson, who migrated from South Carolina in 1910. He worked as a waiter until he was drafted for World War I in 1917. Excavating the structural remains of their homes just a few feet underneath the surface could yield objects they left behind—and help reconstruct their forgotten histories.

### **Community involvement**

Co-creating projects like *Heritage West* with community members is a necessary step towards reparative justice. As marginalized groups advocate for stronger recognition and support, community archaeology uplifts rarely documented stories—with evidence. Community-involved archaeology informs the present by uncovering everyday objects and overlooked historical records, as well as documenting family stories and memories of living community members.

"*Heritage West* illuminates how archaeology can be utilized to create rich, community-based projects that are intentional about shared learning opportunities and spaces for meaningful connection between local residents and institutions," says Latiaynna Tabb, *Heritage West* team member and principal at Tabb Management, which fosters bridges between mission-driven organizations and communities.

### **Welcoming public participation**

"Community participation is essential to every step of this research," says Dr. Megan C. Kassabaum, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and Weingarten Associate Curator for North America at the Penn Museum. "From brainstorming to reporting outcomes, this project runs on collaboration and community engagement. To sustain that, we have built in many opportunities for the public to be a part of the project through excavations and events," she explains. "Keeping our West Philadelphia neighbors involved throughout the process is a critical component to the work."

To mark **International Archaeology Day** on **October 21, 2023**, *Heritage West* will invite the public to the CEC excavation site and encourage them to visit Penn Museum for free that day.

The team will spend the Spring of 2024 analyzing artifacts recovered from the CEC in Penn Anthropology's North American Archaeology Laboratory. Community members involved with the excavation will be invited to study the materials, archives, and reference books to learn more—alongside the project directors and students.

"The Lancaster Avenue neighborhoods embody a rich history that everyone in Philadelphia should discover. HopePHL is honored to have played a part in connecting Penn Museum and Community Education Center for this excavation," said Kathy Desmond, president of HopePHL. "We hope to see many community members participate in the Heritage West activities."

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*Heritage West: West Philadelphia Community Archaeology Project* contributors include:

- Black Bottom Tribe Association
- Zoë Rayn Evans, Executive Director, University City Arts League & Director, *Heritage West*
- Latiayna Tabb, Principal, Tabb Management & Director, *Heritage West*
- Dr. Megan C. Kassabaum, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and Weingarten Associate Curator for North America at the Penn Museum & Director, *Heritage West*
- Dr. Sarah Linn, Assistant Director of Academic Engagement at the Penn Museum & Director, *Heritage West*
- Dr. Douglas Smit, Teaching Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and Director, *Heritage West*
- Dr. Austin Chad Hill, Postdoctoral Fellow in Penn's Department of Anthropology

## **About HopePHL™**

HopePHL™ (pronounced "hopeful") was founded through an integration of two human service organizations in Philadelphia, PA: People's Emergency Center (PEC) and Youth Service, Inc (YSI). HopePHL's mission is to inspire Philadelphia's children, youth, families and communities to thrive by providing housing, advocacy, and trauma-responsive social services designed to promote equity, resilience, autonomy, and well-being.

*Heritage West* project team members include James Wright, Director of Strategic Partnerships and Major Gifts, and Yolanda Braxton, Manager of Community Engagement and Partnerships.

## **About Community Education Center**

The Community Education Center's mission is to cultivate a spirit of community by nurturing the creative efforts of individuals and organizations, and by fostering interaction between artists and audiences. The center is a space for artists to rehearse, teach, and perform and a place for the larger community to explore their creativity through classes and performance opportunities.

Ms. Theresa (Terri) Shockley, Executive Director, is a *Heritage West* project team member.

## **About the Penn Museum**

The Penn Museum's mission is to be a center for inquiry and the ongoing exploration of humanity for our University of Pennsylvania, regional, national, and global communities, following ethical standards and practices. Through conducting research, stewarding collections, creating learning opportunities, sharing stories, and creating experiences that expand access to archaeology and anthropology, the Museum builds empathy and connections across diverse cultures.

The Penn Museum is open Tuesday-Sunday, 10:00 am-5:00 pm. The Café is open Tuesday-Thursday, 9:00 am-3:00 pm and Friday and Saturday, 10:00 am-2:00 pm. For information, visit [www.penn.museum](http://www.penn.museum), call 215.898.4000, or follow @PennMuseum on social media.