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*Historic Preservation
and Site Interpretation*

Interpreting Uncomfortable
History at the Scott Joplin
House State Historic Site
in St. Louis, Missouri

TIMOTHY BAUMANN, ANDREW HURLEY,
VALERIE ALTIZER, and VICTORIA LOVE

Abstract: In 1901, musician Scott Joplin, the “King of Ragtime,” moved to St. Louis, Missouri, to pursue his composing career. Despite years of neglect and dilapidation, the home Joplin rented during this period was recognized as a National Historic Landmark in 1976 and was subsequently saved from destruction by the local African American community. In 1983, Joplin’s home was given to the Missouri Department of Natural Resources to create the first state historic site in Missouri dedicated to African American heritage. Until recently, interpretation of this site has focused primarily on the celebratory history of Scott Joplin and ragtime music, ignoring the urban milieu in which he lived and its influence on his musical compositions. A new community-based heritage project has attempted to expand this historic narrative to include the more complex social history of African American urban migration and the transformation of a multi-ethnic neighborhood to the contemporary community. Part of this diverse narrative includes unpleasant or uncomfortable topics of racial oppression, poverty, sanitation, prostitution, and sexually transmitted diseases. Through frank and open dialogue among museum professionals, scholars, and local residents, efforts are now being made to engage and interpret this “tough” history. The desired outcome is to transform a static historic site into an engaging cultural center that connects a more inclusive past to contemporary concerns of the descendant community.

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Key words: Civic engagement and revitalization, African American heritage, urban migration, racial oppression, poverty, sanitation, prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases

IN RECENT YEARS, SCHOLARS HAVE REPEATEDLY CALLED ON museums and public agencies to confront their audiences with uncomfortable aspects of humanity's past when interpreting historic sites. Uplifting versions of history that refuse to acknowledge shameful, tragic, or repulsive events, they argue, not only violate professional standards of objectivity but ultimately damage the credibility of the institutions that deliver history to the public. Moreover, playing it safe deprives history of its power to promote constructive social and political change. Advocates for a full accounting of the past insist that it is only through public exploration of divisive issues that historical analysis can foster mutual understanding and responsible civic engagement across multiple and diverse cultures. As public historians and archaeologists around the world endeavor to transform aloof representations of the past into sites of conscience and social healing, the challenge of honest presentation assumes greater urgency.¹

At the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site in St. Louis, Missouri, a National Historic Landmark honoring musician Scott Joplin, scholars, museum professionals, and local residents have accepted this challenge. This inner-city house museum in the heart of St. Louis grew out of a 1970s grass-roots campaign to preserve the ragtime composer's residence and make it an educational and cultural center for the surrounding economically distressed African American neighborhood. Not only did this vision languish for thirty years, but until recently, programs and exhibits at the site celebrated Joplin and his contribution to ragtime music with little reference to his urban milieu. Embracing the paradigm of community-based research, the Scott Joplin Heritage Project has resuscitated the original site goals and expanded the historic narrative to include the more complex social history of African American urban migration and twentieth-century race relations in St. Louis since Joplin's era. Digging through the layers of local history—literally in a series of archaeological excavations and figuratively in archival research—confronted the project with a host of potentially embarrassing or divisive findings related to issues of violence, racism, prostitution, disease, and sanitation. Through frank and open dialogue, efforts are now being made to engage and interpret this “tough” history in the context of the neighborhood's dynamic heritage and long-range revitalization goals.

This case study aims to broaden the discussion of public historians' responsibilities by examining the types of uncomfortable issues that typically arise in inner-city settings and suggesting how with caution and care their public interpretation can complement local efforts to create vibrant commu-

1. Liz Sevckenko and Maggie Russell-Ciardi, “Sites of Conscience: Opening Historic Sites for Civic Dialogue—Foreword,” *The Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (February 2008): 9–15.



A portrait of Scott Joplin (circa 1909) and the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site in 2008. (Photographs courtesy of the Division of State Parks, Missouri Department of Natural Resources)

nities. By proposing a social activist role for historic sites that dynamically engages host communities, we offer an alternative perspective from which to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks associated with prickly historical topics. Far from advocating the raw exposure of ugly or upsetting events merely to generate controversy or draw attention, we urge public historians to consider how sensitive but honest discussion of uncomfortable issues can illuminate those historical processes that continue to impinge on descendant populations. History and historic sites can then become agents of democracy, working on behalf of contemporary civic needs and fostering revitalized communities.²

To Tell the Truth

It is not hard to understand why public historical venues have shied away from full disclosure of controversial events. Many Americans encounter his-

2. Robert Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 1999). Ruth J. Abram, "Kitchen Conversations: Democracy in Action at

tory through heritage tourism; the popular appeal of contemplating history in an authentic setting accounts for the wild success of this format. The viability of most heritage tourism sites, however, depends upon a steady flow of diverse visitors. Alienating large segments of the public can spell disaster, and hence, the pressure to present an inoffensive version of the past is considerable. The impulse to play it safe is especially strong when history is commercialized in festival marketplaces and theme park settings. Here, the overriding objective is to provide a pleasurable ambiance that will induce people to spend money. Numerous commentators have blamed commodified history for bland, superficial, and incomplete versions of the past.³

Yet even sites that have adopted a more serious educational mission remain susceptible to diluted history. When historical interpretation aims to cultivate national pride, for example, the exploration of divisive issues may be viewed as counterproductive. Likewise, cultural institutions that rely on public funding may be wary of opening terrain that might generate unfavorable publicity.

Among the many subjects that have frightened purveyors of public history, none have suffered more from misrepresentation or neglect than those concerning race. Nearly 150 years after the Civil War and 50 years beyond the Civil Rights movement, the nation still has not come to terms with its racial past. James Loewen, James Oliver Horton, Lois E. Horton, and other scholars have written extensively about historical sites that have muted or avoided discussion of slavery and racial conflict rather than stir troubled waters.⁴

St. Louis, with its sordid record of slavery, civil rights abuses, and racial antagonism, has been as guilty of selective memory as any other place in the United States. Even with the presence of a large free black population dating back to the French colonial period, the bustling port of St. Louis has not been a welcoming community for African Americans, serving as a major slave

the Lower East Side Tenement Museum,” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 59–76. Maggie Russell-Ciardi, “The Museum as a Democracy—Building Institution: Reflections on the Shared Journeys Program at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum,” *The Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (February 2008): 39–52. Jacquelyn L. Tuxill and Nora J. Mitchell, *Stronger Together: A Manual on the Principles and Practices of Civic Engagement* (Woodstock, VT: National Park Service Conservation Study Institute, 2009). Jacquelyn L. Tuxill and Nora J. Mitchell, *Leading in a Collaborative Environment: Six Case Studies Involving Collaboration and Civic Engagement* (Woodstock, VT: National Park Service Conservation Study Institute, 2010).

3. Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 206. Daniel J. Levi, “Does History Matter? Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Fake Historical Architecture and Historic Preservation,” *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 148–59.

4. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and American History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York: Free Press, 2006). Lisa Woolfork, *Embodying Slavery in Contemporary Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008). Also see, Barbara J. Heath, “Archaeology and Interpretation at Monticello and Poplar Forest,” in *Presenting Archaeology to the Public: Digging for Truths*, ed. John H. Jameson (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 1997), 177–92. James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1999). On the erasure of memory in more recent urban contexts, see, for example, Chris Hart, “In the First Place: Civic Dialogue and the Role of the University of Baltimore in Examining the 1968 Riots,” *The Public Historian* 31, no. 4 (November 2009): 48–53.

trading depot during the antebellum period and as a site of tragic lynchings. In 1879, the first of several mass migrations of African Americans from the Deep South brought thousands of destitute “Exodusters” across the St. Louis levee in search of better lives further west in Kansas. The mixed reception they encountered in St. Louis prefigured the rocky road to full citizenship that lay ahead.⁵ Although many episodes of racial persecution occurred on the city’s waterfront, they have until recently received little attention in the National Park Service’s historical interpretation on the St. Louis Gateway Arch grounds. Indeed, it was only in 2007 that the Park Service dedicated an entire exhibit gallery to the Dred Scott fugitive slave trial at its Old Courthouse museum where the original case was first litigated.⁶

The East St. Louis Race Riot of 1917 surely ranks as one of the most gruesome events in the nation’s history. In response to the hiring of black strike-breakers, white mobs rampaged through African American neighborhoods, killing dozens of African Americans and driving another 6,000 from their burning homes.⁷ Yet, as Robert Archibald, President of the Missouri History Museum, noted in 1999, most white residents of St. Louis knew little about the tragedy, and those who did rarely ranked it as a significant historical event.⁸ And while local museum exhibits, television documentaries, and popular history books have acknowledged successful nonviolent challenges to racial segregation during the Civil Rights era—the legal assaults on restrictive housing covenants that led to the landmark *Shelley v. Kraemer* U.S. Supreme Court case in 1947 and the Congress of Racial Equality’s (CORE) peaceful protests against discriminatory hiring practices in the 1960s—the public record has underplayed more fiery manifestations of racial conflict in the middle and late twentieth century. For example, the notion that relatively cordial relations between the races forestalled outbreaks of racial violence during the turbulent 1960s has become deeply ingrained in local lore. It requires little spade work, however, to discover evidence of racial hostility and small-scale acts of civil disobedience in those years.

5. Lawrence O. Christensen, “Black St. Louis: A Study in Race Relations.” Ph.D. dissertation in History, University of Missouri, 1972). Suzanna M. Grenz, “The Exodusters of 1879: St. Louis and Kansas City Responses,” *Missouri Historical Review* 73, no. 1 (October 1978): 54–70. Lawrence O. Christensen, “Race Relations in St. Louis, 1865–1916,” *Missouri Historical Review* 78, no. 2 (January 1984): 123–36. Katherine T. Corbett and Mary Seematter, “Black St. Louis at the Turn of the Century,” *Gateway Heritage* 7, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 40–48. Gary R. Kremer, *James Milton Turner and the Promise of America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 105–16. Lorenzo Greene, Antonio Holland, and Gary Kremer, *Missouri’s Black Heritage*, rev. ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 104–05. Bryan M. Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007).

6. Bob Moore, Historian, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, telephone conversation with Andrew Hurley, February 15, 2011. In recent years, the National Park Service has made a determined effort to increase coverage of a disturbing racial past, going so far as hosting a mock slave auction on the Old Courthouse steps in 2011. The Park Service is also contemplating joining the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

7. Elliot Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

8. Archibald, *A Place to Remember*, 110–11.

In the quest for contemporary relevance and more inclusive audiences, museums and public agencies have acknowledged their obligation to explore divisive social issues, including the ugly history of racial discord. One of the most powerful arguments advanced on behalf of full disclosure is that the revelation of brutal truths can mend social wounds. This conviction has inspired the establishment of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in more than a dozen nations scarred by human rights abuses. Most have mimicked the model pioneered by South Africa following the demise of the apartheid regime in which perpetrators of crimes against humanity have been granted the opportunity to confess their transgressions, apologize, and seek forgiveness.⁹ Applications of this model in the United States, although extragovernmental in nature, have revolved primarily around episodes of racial oppression and violence, including the systematic segregation of black and white populations in the Jim Crow south and the 1979 murder of five “Death to the Klan” protestors in Greensboro, North Carolina.¹⁰ Along similar lines, historic sites affiliated with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience—including the National Civil Rights Museum, the Martin Luther King Jr., National Historic Site, and the Holocaust Memorial Museum in the United States—have opened a window onto massacres, forced displacements, institutionalized torture, and other varieties of human suffering to stimulate dialogue about contemporary politics and “promote democratic and humanitarian values.”¹¹

Recently, archaeologist Barbara Little urged her colleagues to take on a larger role in the “civic renewal movement,” an endeavor dedicated to “community building, the creation of social capital, and active citizen engagement in community and civic life.”¹² To attain this goal, some practitioners have advocated an “activist history or archaeology,” in which professionals perform their work “in solidarity with a contemporary community for positive social change.”¹³ With a commitment to involving the public in all phases of a project through formal partnerships, this form of community-based research insists that ordinary citizens generate their own research questions and arrive at con-

9. The literature on Truth and Reconciliation Commissions is vast. For an introduction see the special issue of *Radical History Review* 97 (Winter 2007). On South Africa, see Deborah Posel and Graeme Simpson, eds., *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002).

10. Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report: Executive Summary* (Greensboro, NC: City of Greensboro, 2006).

11. Liz Sevchenko, *The Power of Place: How Historic Sites Can Engage Citizens in Human Rights Issues* (Minneapolis: The Center for Victims of Torture, New Tactics in Human Rights Project, 2004), 4.

12. Barbara J. Little, “Introduction: Archaeology and Civic Engagement,” Barbara J. Little and Paul A. Shackel, eds., *Archaeology as a Tool of Civic Engagement* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 1997), 1.

13. Margaret C. Wood, “Moving Towards Transformative Democratic Action Through Archaeology,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 6, no. 3 (September 2002): 187–98. David A. Gadsby and Robert C. Chidester, “Heritage in Hampden: A Participatory Research Design for Public Archaeology in a Working-Class Neighborhood, Baltimore, Maryland,” *Archaeology as a Tool of Civic Engagement*, 223.

clusions in conjunction with trained professionals.¹⁴ At the very least, a commitment to civic engagement has prompted public historians and archaeologists to consult with constituent communities in the curation of interpretive content and to consider historical topics that resonate powerfully with traditionally underserved audiences.¹⁵

Public history practitioners have discovered, however, that democratizing the process of interpretation does not necessarily facilitate an honest reckoning with the past. Regarding the topic of slavery, historian David Blight recalled a roundtable discussion to consider the mission of the newly opened National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. To his dismay, most of the African American civic leaders who attended the meeting insisted that the museum tell an “uplifting” story of slavery that would “leave families with pride.”¹⁶ Wherever people employ history as a device to make people feel better about themselves, or to make a better impression on others, there is a temptation to expunge or reconcile unpleasant memories from the record. The popular preference for celebration over critical reflection applies equally to the telling of local history, as archaeologist Paul Mullins discovered when he participated in a community-based project on Indianapolis’s near-westside. Although recovered deposits revealed a complex history of race relations and social mobility, local residents were only interested in highlighting stories of success and racial solidarity.¹⁷

With raised stakes and conflicting pressures, historical venues in St. Louis have groped toward a more honest reckoning with the city’s racial past, although well-intentioned efforts have by no means yielded universal satisfaction. The Missouri History Museum has positioned itself as both a local and a national leader in the enterprise of connecting historical interpretation with contemporary civic concerns. In unveiling its new exhibit space in 2000, it promised a thorough revision of local history and a commitment to confronting “persistent questions of race, the environment, and equality.”¹⁸ Yet some visitors expressed disappointment with what they perceived as a greater emphasis on consensus than conflict in the museum’s new exhibitions. With re-

14. Linda Derry, “Pre-emancipation Archaeology: Does it Play in Selma, Alabama?” *Historical Archaeology* 31, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 24–25.

15. American Association of Museums, “Museums and Community Initiative,” American Association of Museums website, <http://www.aam-us.org/sp/m-and-c.cfm>, 1999, accessed September 28, 2007. American Association of Museums, ed., *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2002).

16. David W. Blight, “If You Don’t Tell it Like it Was, It Can Never Be as it Ought to Be,” in *Slavery and American History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, eds., James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York: Free Press, 2006), 32–33.

17. Paul R. Mullins, “African American Heritage in a Multicultural Community: An Archaeology of Race, Culture, and Consumption,” in *Places in Mind: Public Archaeology as Applied Anthropology*, eds. Paul A. Shackel and Erve J. Chambers (New York: Routledge Press, 2004), 59. Also see, Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (Chicago: The Center for American Places, 2008), 25–47.

18. Diana Toroian, “Museum Tells the Story of Us,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 6, 2000.

gard to race, critics charged that episodes of bigotry were downplayed relative to stories about people who overcame the burdens of inequality.¹⁹

Not far from St. Louis, the National Historic Landmark community of Arrow Rock offers another example of tentative engagement with a difficult history. Located on the Santa Fe Trail in Missouri's Little Dixie region, the town bears a complicated multiracial past. A 1996 public history and archaeology initiative at the site aimed to engage the previously marginalized African American descendant community in the creation of new interpretive programs.²⁰ The result has been a more inclusive history, visible through heritage tours, events, exhibits, and educational programming, including biennial Juneteenth and homecoming festivals. In many respects, however, the stories told at Arrow Rock remain segregated, as no one building, exhibit, or tour interweaves black and white history into a meaningful narrative about race relations.²¹

The Village of Arrow Rock and the Missouri History Museum are not necessarily wrong to tread gingerly across the minefield of race. Recent experience has taught public historians that honest disclosure can sometimes work at cross-purposes with progressive social goals. In a provocative essay about public apologies, historian Robert Weyeneth noted that expressions of contrition can prematurely terminate discussion of sensitive issues and in worst-case scenarios, discourage self-reflection about contemporary transgressions.²² Lisa Woolfork, a scholar in African American studies, warned that the recreation of violent acts in immersive environments can retraumatize victims and their descendants.²³ Neither Weyeneth nor Woolfork raised these red flags to justify persistent silence about past abuses. Nonetheless, these observations remind us that exposure of unvarnished truths does not automatically promote social justice or harmony. This realization encourages us to move our discussion beyond the question of whether or not to tell the truth to the question of how best to tell it. It also compels us to think carefully about the goals of public history in specific contexts so we can better calculate the risks and benefits of particular modes of public interpretation and presentation.

The Scott Joplin Heritage Project

The social terrain upon which the Scott Joplin Heritage Project settled made the collaborative exploration of uncomfortable issues especially perilous.

19. Diane Toroian, "Whose History Is It Anyway?" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 19, 2000.

20. Timothy Baumann, "Because That's Where My Roots Are: Searching for Patterns of African-American Ethnicity in Arrow Rock, Missouri" (Ph.D. dissertation in Anthropology, University of Tennessee, 2001).

21. Timothy Baumann, "An Historical Perspective of Civic Engagement and Interpreting Cultural Diversity in Arrow Rock, Missouri," *Historical Archaeology* 45, no. 1 (2011): 114–34.

22. Robert R. Weyeneth, "The Power of Apology and the Process of Historical Reconciliation," *The Public Historian* 23, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 28–29.

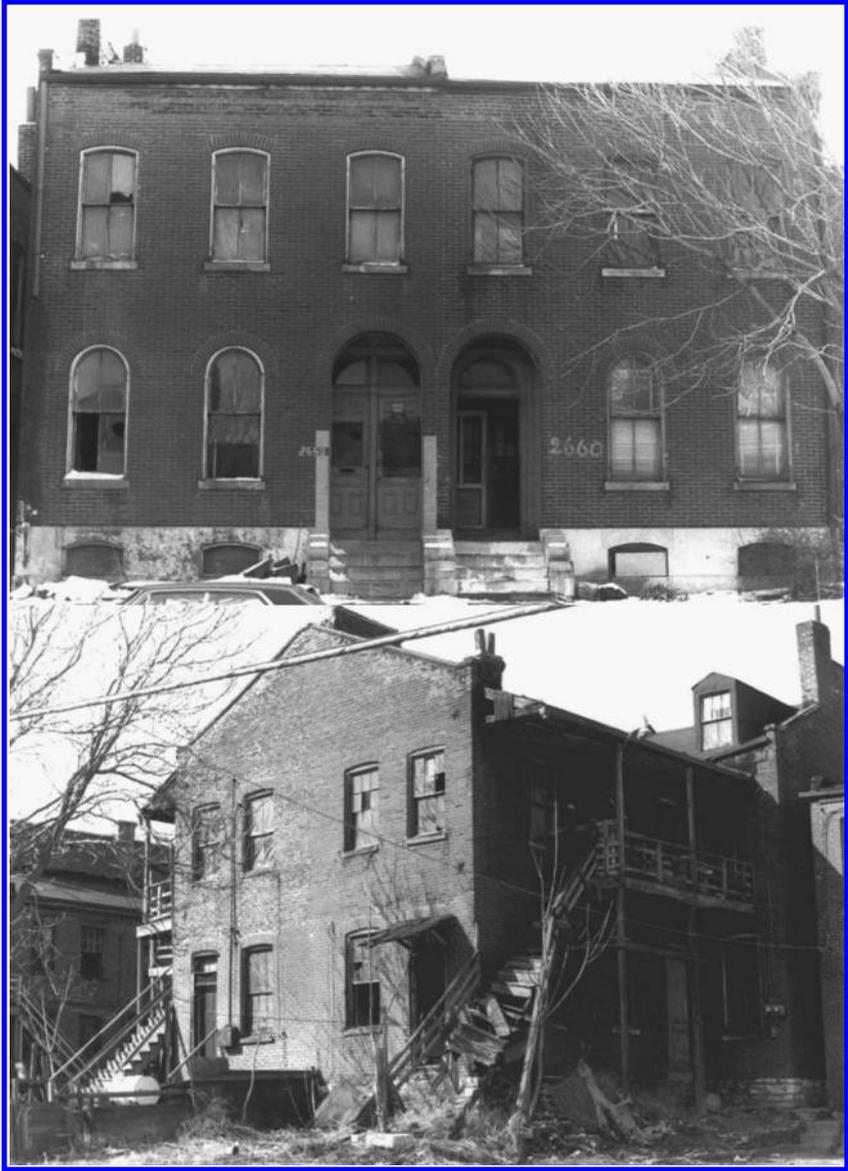
23. Lisa Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 109, 130–31, 163–67.

Conflicting ideas about the uses to which history should be put and divergent standards for assessing evidence make community-based projects fragile enterprises. The danger of permanent rupture increases when class and racial differences are superimposed upon the popular-professional divide. Fifteen years of strained relations between the local community and the state administrators freighted the tensions that normally attend collaborations between predominantly white scholars and public officials and African American residents. The campaign to save and restore Joplin's former residence from demolition had been spearheaded by local African American activists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although Joplin had lived in the flat for only three years, from 1901 to 1903, it was one of only a few structures associated with the composer that remained standing a century later. Hence a committee appointed by the U.S. National Park Service to identify buildings associated with important African American historical figures nominated the four-flat brick rowhouse just west of downtown St. Louis for designation as a National Historic Landmark in 1976.²⁴ Local residents took considerable pride in the honor and saw it as an opportunity to rekindle interest in a poor, inner-city neighborhood suffering from disinvestment and dereliction. The Joplin house itself was severely dilapidated; unfortunately, National Landmark status offered no protection against disintegration or demolition. To ensure the structure's long-term viability, Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., an African American neighborhood development corporation, purchased the property and doggedly pursued both private and public funding for the necessary repair work. Its goal was to convert the house into a museum, which would serve as the cornerstone for an "inner-city cultural center."²⁵ By the early 1980s, however, it had become apparent that Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc. would not be able to raise enough money to complete the project, and in 1983, it donated the property to the State of Missouri. From that point forward, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) assumed the responsibility for finishing the restoration and establishing an interpretive center.

The Scott Joplin House opened to the public in 1991, but much to the community's dismay, the MDNR steadily shifted the site's orientation away from the original intent and interests of the surrounding neighborhood. Exhibits were installed that celebrated the composer and his music but communicated little about the urban milieu that nourished his talents, the origins of African/African American music, or the lasting legacy of his music on contemporary composers. Local residents have been largely excluded from site planning and programming, which included live piano performances targeting aficionados of ragtime music who happened to be overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and suburban. Even as the state purchased adjacent properties to buffer the museum from undesirable development, it did little to advance the broader

24. Charles J. Oswald, "Joplin's St. Louis Home Designated a Landmark," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, December 8, 1976.

25. Tommy Robertson, "Joplin House Breaks Ground," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 8, 1985.



Front and rear view of the Scott Joplin House before renovation, 1976. (Photographs courtesy of the the State Historic Preservation Office, Missouri Department of Natural Resources. Photographer: J. G. Randall & Associates)

vision of neighborhood cultural and economic regeneration. By the end of the decade, local attitudes toward the institution ranged from ignorance and indifference to hostility.

An opportunity for a rapprochement arose in 2000, when the MDNR completed a restoration of the Rosebud Café in an adjacent building. At the turn of the previous century, the Rosebud Bar was the city's premier venue for ragtime performances and an occasional haunt of Joplin's. Although the saloon had been located several blocks southeast of Joplin's apartment, the state anticipated that a reconstructed facsimile next to the museum would attract and accommodate larger audiences for ragtime concerts. It also hoped to earn some additional income by renting out the facility for private receptions. Surprisingly, once the Rosebud opened, 98 percent of the rental business came from African American customers, flipping the museum tour and concert demographic on its head. Eager to cultivate this newfound constituency, Victoria Love, the newly hired site administrator, initiated a community-based history project. To assist with its implementation, she secured the services of historian Andrew Hurley and archaeologists Timothy Baumann and Valerie Altizer, each of whom had previous experience engaging inner-city populations in the study of the past.²⁶ Baumann and Hurley had spent the previous four years assisting a neighborhood organization on St. Louis's north side in its pursuit of heritage-based revitalization. Cultivating a historical consciousness among residents through archival and archaeological research emerged as the primary mechanism for unifying the community around a preservation agenda.²⁷

For the authors, the Scott Joplin Heritage Project offered an opportunity to advance the practice of community-based research. Anthropologist Diane Austin recently outlined five key tenets of this democratic approach to knowledge generation: "reflective practice and reciprocal learning"; "community capacity-building to promote change; a balance between "research and action"; "inter and multi-disciplinary work"; and situating "community concerns in a larger context."²⁸ The project incorporated all of these principles by empowering citizens to make decisions about all aspects of the work and by linking historical research and interpretation to neighborhood revitalization goals. The formation of a steering committee composed of scholars, MDNR staff, and local residents, including religious, education, and business leaders, became the first order of business. This local history committee served as the vehicle through which the project developed a research agenda, selected formats for communicating history to the public, solicited feedback within the wider community, and sorted out difficult issues of interpretation.

26. Baumann and Hurley's work was conducted under the auspices of the Public Policy Research Center at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

27. Timothy Baumann, Andrew Hurley, and Lori Allen, "Economic Stability and Social Identity: Historic Preservation in Old North St. Louis," *Historical Archaeology* 42 (Winter 2008): 70–87.

28. Diane E. Austin, "Partnerships, Not Projects! Improving the Environment Through Collaborative Research and Action," *Human Organization* 63, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 419–30.

The process of connecting historical research to a revitalization agenda required the articulation of a community vision. To this end, one of the steering committee's central responsibilities involved planning for the redevelopment of state-owned properties surrounding the Joplin House. Covering 3.1 acres, these vacant lots and underutilized buildings were ripe for the application of new uses. Through an investigation of local history, committee members identified assets that could serve as the foundation for neighborhood regeneration and liabilities that could be addressed by a re-orientation of the site's mission. As research revealed the existence of a thriving African American arts and entertainment district during Joplin's time and in subsequent decades, a consensus emerged around a revitalization strategy that would revive this tradition. In its final report to MDNR, the committee recommended the conversion of state properties into recording studios, rehearsal spaces, a performance venue, meeting rooms for civic and cultural organizations, and temporary lodging for travelling artists. A parallel exercise required the committee to translate new research into a historical narrative illuminating the rationale behind the redevelopment plan. Of necessity, this narrative departed drastically from the celebratory history of Joplin and ragtime music. Rather than constitute the story's focus, the famous composer became a pivot to an exposition on the evolution of an African American neighborhood in urban America. Elements of this narrative have gradually made their way into new house tour scripts, on-site programming, and exhibits.

While an exploration of racially charged topics was bound to bring unpleasant and potentially disturbing incidents to our attention, the serendipitous nature of historical research made it impossible to anticipate specific interpretive challenges. The research methodology established by the steering committee incorporated oral history, archaeology, archival investigation, and a review of recent scholarly literature. Each mode of inquiry revealed information that could be considered shameful, disturbing, or controversial. In grappling with issues like racism, sanitation, prostitution, violence, and venereal disease, the committee's commitment to honest and relevant history was put to the test. Although there were some uncomfortable moments, clarity on overall project goals not only mitigated anxiety but also guided the resolution of interpretive dilemmas. In most cases, the elaboration of social context proved critical to the attainment of mutually satisfactory, academically credible, and socially relevant results.

Race, Poverty, and Scott Joplin's Neighborhood

The first interpretive venture taken up by the Scott Joplin Heritage Project aimed to place Joplin in the flow of neighborhood history and locate him at the beginning of a tradition of cultural innovation and political resistance. Scott Joplin was deeply enmeshed in social processes that framed his actions and provoked his distinct contribution to American culture. An elaboration of this

social context became the basis for explaining the famous ragtime composer's accomplishments and for making him a meaningful figure for those who inherited his neighborhood.

Joplin was but one among millions of African Americans who migrated from the Deep South to find nonagrarian employment opportunities in the North. Joplin was born in 1867 or 1868 and grew up in or near Texarkana, Texas/Arkansas amongst a musical family.²⁹ He left home as a teenager to play as a "saloon and honky-tonk pianist" throughout Texas, Louisiana, Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, and Missouri, including performances at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The following year, he settled in Sedalia, Missouri, a major railroad and cattle town, where he performed with a travelling band (Texas Medley Quartette) and at local brothels and African American saloons (e.g., Maple Leaf Club, Black 400 Social Club).³⁰ It was here in Sedalia that he published his first ragtime composition, *Maple Leaf Rag*, in 1899 with John Stark, a local publisher. The success of this piece, which sold over a half million copies by 1909, encouraged Joplin to move to St. Louis by 1901.³¹ At this time, St. Louis was the center of ragtime music, with several successful ragtime musicians/composers and multiple performance venues located in and around Union Station and Mill Creek Valley, St. Louis's largest African American neighborhood. It was in this neighborhood that Tom Turpin, the first published African American composer of a rag in 1892 (*Harlem Rag*) and friend of Joplin, operated the Rosebud Bar.³² The final two years that Joplin lived in St. Louis (1905–1907), he occupied a flat across from Turpin's tavern.

When Joplin moved into St. Louis in 1901, the African American population was nearly 36,000, or about 6% of the total population.³³ By 1940 it had increased to 13%, in 1970 to 42%, and in 2000 to 51%. The greater numbers and percentages of African Americans in St. Louis were caused by black urban migration from the South and by white flight to the suburbs, which accelerated after World War II due to the construction of the interstate highway system. The reaction of the white majority in St. Louis and in other northern cities to these new southern African American migrants, like Joplin, included both violent and nonviolent forms of discrimination and exclusion.³⁴ Indeed, Joplin arrived in St. Louis at a time when both custom and law enforced a hardening of racial boundaries. In 1912, at least two African American families

29. Edward Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Susan Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

30. Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 24–25.

31. Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 57.

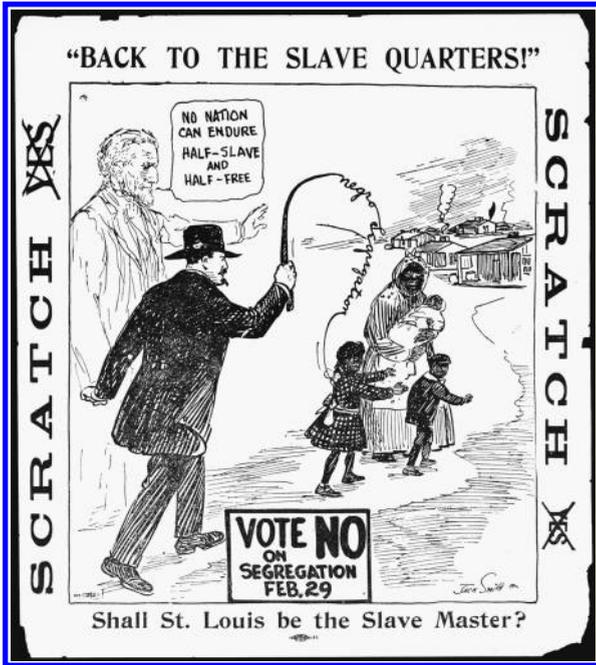
32. Gordon G. Jones, *Tom Turpin: His Life and Music* (St. Louis: Tom Turpin Ragtime Festival, Inc., 1995).

33. Naomi W. Lede, *The Negro in St. Louis Today: A Statistical Profile—1965* (St. Louis: Urban League of St. Louis, Inc.: 1965), 39.

34. Christensen, "Black St. Louis: A Study in Race Relations," 181–225. Christensen, "Race Relations in St. Louis, 1865–1916," 123–36. Corbett and Seematter, "Black St. Louis at the Turn of the Century," 40–48.



Pro-segregation flyer, 1916. (Print courtesy of the Missouri History Museum, Race Relations Collection, Image 21841)



Anti-segregation handbill, 1916, by Jeff Smith. (Print courtesy of the Missouri History Museum, Race Relations Collection, Image 21854)

were greeted by stone-throwing mobs after purchasing homes in white neighborhoods.³⁵ Four years later, residential segregation was clearly defined by a St. Louis city housing ordinance, approved by a three-to-one popular vote, prohibiting the purchase of a home on a block when more than 75 percent of the residents were of a different race. This stipulation restricted African Americans to one of only four designated neighborhoods. One of them was Mill Creek Valley, located within blocks of Scott Joplin's home and the center of ragtime music.

When Scott Joplin moved into his first St. Louis flat in 1901, his neighborhood had already started to transform from a primarily German and Irish immigrant district to an African American enclave. Some of the earlier white residents owned their homes, but in 1900, the majority of occupants were renters. By 1930, the census tract associated with Joplin's former neighborhood held the largest concentration of African Americans in St. Louis. The 32,655 African Americans who lived within this tract outnumbered their white neighbors by a three-to-one ratio and constituted 35 percent of the city's total black population (93,580). Like Joplin, the majority of these African Americans were born outside of Missouri, with most coming from southern states like Mississippi. Due to housing segregation, Joplin's former neighborhood also became one of the most densely populated by 1930, with a higher incidence of disease, medical and child welfare cases, relief and family services, crime, and suicide.³⁶ Segregation governed not only housing, but also employment, education, religion, social organizations, health care, and certain consumer venues.

In response to segregation and its residual social effects, African Americans rebelled, resisted, and asserted their autonomy collectively through a host of local and national organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Black Artists Group (BAG). The NAACP successfully challenged the 1916 St. Louis housing ordinance in court, only to provoke the widespread use of real estate covenants to prohibit African Americans from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods. The fight for equality in St. Louis continued through the Depression era for employment with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs and into the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. In 1963 and 1964, CORE picketed for months against a local branch of the Jefferson Bank and Trust Co., which sat only a few blocks from Joplin's flat. Even though the bank's primary patrons were African American, it refused to hire blacks as tellers and clerks. These protests, which began only two days after the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington, DC, eventually compelled the

35. Christensen, "Black St. Louis: A Study in Race Relations," 145.

36. Ralph Carr Fletcher, Harry L. Hornback, and Stuart A. Queen, *Social Statistics of St. Louis by Census Tracts* (St. Louis: School of Business and Public Administration, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, 1935).



Unemployment march in 1931 on Pine Street in St. Louis during the Great Depression. (Photograph courtesy of the Missouri History Museum, Events and Parades Collection, Image 1583)

bank to hire four African Americans. The success of the demonstrations had a catalytic effect on St. Louis's movement for racial equality.

African Americans also responded to racial oppression and its socioeconomic impacts with educational and artistic initiatives that promoted black pride and expression. BAG, active in St. Louis from 1968 to 1972, was a primary source for both. BAG was part of the national Black Arts Movement, which rejected elitist presumptions about cultural expression by promoting artistic innovation among ordinary, working-class African Americans.³⁷ BAG members were experimentalists working together to create and teach St. Louis's African American community about theatre, visual arts, dance, poetry, and jazz. In their view, as historian Ben Looker explained, the performing arts would “display and transform black culture, becoming a means by which to reclaim a black history that had been distorted or diluted by Western culture, or that could help black people redefine their identities in the present.”³⁸ BAG had close ties to Joplin's former neighborhood. Many of its members lived in nearby LaCledde Town, a mixed-income and racially diverse

37. Benjamin A. Looker, *BAG—“Point from which Creation Begins”*: *The Black Artists' Group of St. Louis* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2004), 38.

38. Looker, *BAG—“Point from Where Creation Begins,”* 38.



St. Louis Mayor Raymond Tucker and Sidney Maestre in 1956 on a rooftop overlooking the Mill Creek Valley prior to its clearance (Photograph courtesy of the Missouri History Museum, St. Louis Redevelopment Projects Collection. Image 20908)

community constructed with federal urban renewal funds in the early 1960s. For its first headquarters, BAG chose a warehouse on Washington Avenue, only a few blocks from Joplin's home. In an unusually direct attempt to advance heritage-based revitalization, the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site offered its facilities free of charge to a group of original BAG members intent on resuscitating the organization.

Although steering committee members uniformly agreed that LaCledde Town had been a positive development, other urban renewal initiatives had more deleterious effects. Wholesale clearance of "blighted" districts and the construction of both low-rise and high-rise housing projects on isolated urban reservations depopulated the streets surrounding Joplin's house and shuttered local shops and businesses.³⁹ The preservation efforts of Jeff-Vander-Lou, Inc., including the one to save the Joplin house from demolition in 1976, were a direct response to the glaring pattern of decay and abandonment.

This narrative of neighborhood transformation appeared in condensed form in a "Welcome to the Neighborhood" brochure published during the project's first year. More detailed versions were presented to the community in on-site

39. Selwyn K. Troen and Glen E. Holt, eds., *St. Louis* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1977), 191–93.

and off-site lectures. Although the storyline navigated the rough waters of racial discrimination, social pathology, and neighborhood decline, neither the steering community deliberations nor the public presentations elicited outward resistance. The decision to balance the more unpleasant depictions of neighborhood life with more uplifting stories of organized struggle likely facilitated a positive reception. Moreover, evidence drawn from oral histories allowed us to present neighborhood “decline” through the voices of current and former residents rather than as an academic pronouncement. Finally and perhaps most important, by continually emphasizing the larger context of race relations and political developments, the committee avoided references that might be interpreted as “blaming the victim” for community woes. This attention to context would prove helpful as the project confronted the more controversial topics of sanitation, prostitution, and sexually transmitted disease.

Socioeconomics and Sanitation

One of the most contentious issues to confront the steering committee concerned sanitation. The roots of this controversy dated to the time shortly after Joplin’s home was acquired by the MDNR. When the restoration of Joplin’s flat to its 1901 condition began, a debate ensued over whether the flat would have had indoor plumbing. The argument in favor of this possibility was that Joplin had made enough money through sales of his *Maple Leaf Rag* to have attained middle-class status and thus an apartment with a flushing toilet.⁴⁰ This position gained more traction when, during restoration, an original footprint of a toilet and associated pipes were uncovered in one small room of Joplin’s home, although it was unclear when they were installed. Despite this inconclusive evidence, a bathroom was partially recreated for interpretation when Joplin’s home opened for tours in 1991. The MDNR staff and some members of the African American community felt that if Joplin’s home was restored without a bathroom, suggesting that he was a “poor black man” who used an outhouse, the interpretation would smack of racism. One of the proponents of this view was a member of the original Scott Joplin Heritage Steering Committee.

Yet, research conducted under the auspices of the recent Heritage Project strongly indicated that the flat did not have indoor plumbing until well after Joplin moved out. At the same time, a comprehensive examination of sanitation practices in St. Louis revealed that lack of plumbing facilities characterized much of early twentieth-century St. Louis, making Joplin’s situation typical of working-class and even middle-class African American households.

In St. Louis, the availability of indoor plumbing varied from block to block and house to house, depending on the age of the neighborhood and whether the property was owner-occupied or rented. Socioeconomics and racist real

40. Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 57.

estate covenants in St. Louis had a direct impact on how quickly specific neighborhoods obtained these modern conveniences, but rental properties were typically the last. Many lower-income neighborhoods in St. Louis continued to use outhouses or exterior water closets until the 1940s and 1950s. On Joplin's block in 1940, 83 of the 119 or 70% of dwelling units had no private bath.⁴¹ In the city's largest African American neighborhood, Mill Creek Valley, located immediately south of Joplin's home, a 1945 survey by the Land Clearance Authority found that 99% of the structures needed major repairs, 80% were without private bath and toilet, and 67% lacked running water (Figure 6).⁴² These conditions contributed to an infant mortality rate that was twice the city average and a crime rate that was four times greater. A study of this same neighborhood in 1958 by the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* newspaper recorded similar patterns with "80% of the homes dilapidated, 80% with no private flushing toilets or private baths, and 50% with no running water."⁴³ Outside of the Mill Creek Valley neighborhood, living conditions were not much better. In 1947, the City Plan Commission of St. Louis conducted a study of living conditions and determined that approximately 33,000 of the residential units were still using outside toilets, 25,000 dwellings had toilets that were shared by several families, and 82,000 structures were built before 1900. The St. Louis City Plan Commission concluded that "we cannot truthfully say that St. Louis is a good place in which to live."⁴⁴

Oral histories recorded by historian Ron Fagerstrom of former African American residents of the Mill Creek Valley neighborhood frequently referenced inadequate sanitation. For example, Verneil Turner stated: "there was no indoor plumbing. It was out on the little porch. There was [were] no bathrooms. I really didn't give it no thought because when I came from the south, we didn't have one. It really didn't faze me; it was something I was accustomed to. It didn't bother me."⁴⁵

A fire insurance map from 1897 of Joplin's block clearly labels outhouse locations in most backyards with a "WC" within small rectangular or square structures. A single water closet is marked behind Joplin's dwelling, which was shared by at least four separate families or flats. Archaeological excavations were conducted in 2008 to locate this privy and to determine its age of construction and discontinued use. Despite an intrusive tree, the privy was relatively intact and was identified in close proximity to its location on the fire insurance map. The outhouse was constructed with a brick lined oval pit and a square brick foundation. The privy fill consisted primarily of con-

41. United States Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, Housing, Block Statistics, St. Louis* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942).

42. Henry M. Hagen, *This is our St. Louis* (St. Louis: Knight Publishing, 1970). Ron Fagerstrom, *Mill Creek Valley: A Soul of Saint Louis* (St. Louis: Fagerstrom, 2000), 49.

43. C. K. Boeschstein, "The Good and Bad Old Days in Mill Creek Valley," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 5, 1958. Fagerstrom, *Mill Creek Valley*, 49.

44. City Plan Commission of St. Louis, Missouri, *1947 Comprehensive City Plan* (St. Louis: City Plan Commission, 1947), 27.

45. Fagerstrom, *Mill Creek Valley*, 46–47.

struction material with brick being the most common artifact and domestic objects of bottle glass, ceramics, food remains, and plastic. Diagnostic materials provided a *terminus post quem* of post-WWII or about fifty years after Scott Joplin moved from this property. A review of the 1897 fire insurance map identified similar privies behind adjacent dwellings, but these were absent from a series of rowhouses across the alley. Excavations in 2006 behind these neighboring rowhouses uncovered a limestone foundation for a brick shed (20 ft. x 10 ft.), a brick pad/sidewalk, and several ash concentrations above shallow demolition pits.⁴⁶ No privy was identified, but the brick pad/sidewalk that was placed on top of the razed shed foundation had a drain pipe opening that was flush with the brick surface. Broken fragments of a porcelain toilet were found lying over the drain pipe with one fragment stamped with the manufacture date of 1948. This suggests that the first flushing toilets were not even in the homes, but instead placed outside and along the alley in late 1940s or later.

The data seems conclusive that the majority of the dwellings on Joplin's block did not have indoor plumbing until after WWII. This is not unusual for St. Louis because of the large number of pre-1900 dwellings, which were primarily occupied by renters. As owners of rental properties, the landlords were responsible for major repairs and improvements, like the installation of indoor plumbing, but in many cases they did not have the financial resources for upgrades or they did not want to invest in these older homes unless they were forced by city officials. It is clear from this evidence that racial segregation and socioeconomics played a major role in Scott Joplin's and other African Americans' access to modern sanitation.

When confronted with this overwhelming evidence, the local history committee concluded that in all likelihood, Joplin did not have access to indoor plumbing. Consistent with earlier expressions of local opinion, committee members were concerned about the perpetuation of negative stereotypes regarding their neighborhood and African Americans more generally. For this reason, they insisted on an interpretation that placed Joplin's situation in a broader context of urban sanitation. If Joplin used a water closet in his backyard, it is important to note that this practice was not at all unusual at the turn of the century and that, moreover, subsequent failures to modernize plumbing in the neighborhood had less to do with the inclinations of residents than the decisions made by external actors.

Currently, families residing in the vicinity of the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site still wrestle with the legacy of segregation and neglect. Homes no longer lack indoor plumbing, but an aging infrastructure and high rates of absentee ownership drive a devastating process of abandonment and decay.⁴⁷

46. Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps of St. Louis, Missouri* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1932).

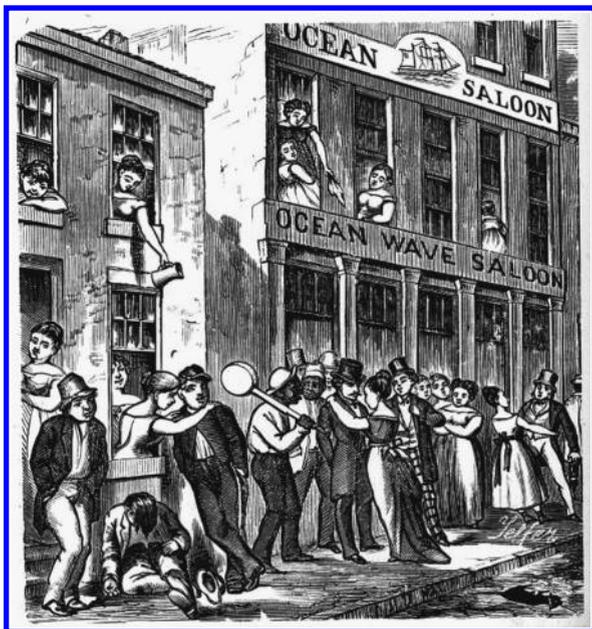
47. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Profile of Demographic Characteristics: 2000, Census 2000, Summary File, 1 (SF 1)," Census Tract 1211, City of St. Louis, *American Fact Finder*, <http://factfinder2.census.gov> (accessed February 20, 2011).

In 2008, 18 percent of St. Louis families were living below the poverty line.⁴⁸ Recognizing a dire need for adequate shelter, the steering committee wholeheartedly endorsed the preservation and rehabilitation of salvageable housing units, not only on state-owned property but elsewhere in the neighborhood as well. Although the MDNR has no direct control over privately owned property, the committee urged the state agency to use whatever clout it had at its disposal to encourage the development of serviceable housing consistent with existing architectural prototypes. Community discussion also concluded that the Scott Joplin House should consider hosting educational workshops on health and home maintenance/ownership and a local food pantry in one of the adjacent rowhouses.

Ragtime and Brothels

As the only heritage site operated by the MDNR to interpret the life of an African American, many people involved in the site's formation and the creation of interpretive content were reticent to talk about aspects of Joplin's past that could be potentially viewed as negative or shameful. This hesitant stance must be understood in the context of ragtime's revival following the commercial success of the 1974 film, *The Sting*, which featured Joplin's music. This mainstream popularity translated into white claims of cultural ownership, evidenced by the mostly white, suburban crowds that subsequently attended the ragtime festivals and provided members for the Friends of Scott Joplin, a nonprofit organization in St. Louis that supports ragtime music. As historical and archaeological research progressed, however, it became apparent that he lived and worked in an area of St. Louis renowned for having a thriving red light district from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. So much so that between 1870 and 1874, the city of St. Louis embarked on an experiment in legalizing and regulating prostitution. This was done primarily to reduce the incidence of venereal disease, which was already recognized as a public health problem. A view of St. Louis's nineteenth-century brothels is provided in an 1878 print with prostitutes and their patrons lining the sidewalk and windows of the Ocean Wave Saloon. Also represented in this picture are two African American men, one carrying a banjo, possibly to play in the saloon/bawdy house, serving the same role as later ragtime musicians. Indeed, research conducted in advance of an archaeological excavation raised questions about the presence of brothels directly behind Joplin's residence. Rather than ignore this potentially embarrassing possibility, the project de-

48. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Table 707. Household, Family, and Per Capita Income and People and Families below Poverty Level by City: 2008," *The 2011 Statistical Abstract: Income Expenditures, Poverty, & Wealth*, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2011/tables/11s0707.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2011).



An 1878 artist's depiction of illicit activities on Almond Street in St. Louis, by J. A. Dacus and James W. Buel (Print courtesy of The State Historical Society of Missouri, Image 028654)

cided to undertake a rigorous examination of prostitution, its connection to ragtime music, and its larger social meaning in the context of gender relations.

Ragtime music was at its peak from 1897 to 1918 and is defined by a style that has a strong and continuous syncopated melody, resulting in a “ragged” rhythm and the logical source for its name. Its musical origins come from a combination of the march by John Philip Sousa and African rhythms found within southern plantation songs and spirituals. African American men were the primary composers and performers of ragtime, playing most frequently in saloons, gambling halls, and brothels. Scott Joplin was no exception, playing primarily in African American clubs/bars and in houses of prostitution across the Midwest. Once he arrived in St. Louis, he spent less time performing and more time teaching and composing, but he always resided near or within the bar/gaming and “red light” districts. This included the Rosebud Bar operated by Tom Turpin, who often sponsored ragtime piano competitions there. Because of ragtime’s African American origins and early connections to establishments considered illicit or immoral, this music style was viewed in a negative light by both the mainstream white and black community. Contemporary rap music has had a similar negative perspective.⁴⁹

49. Carrie B. Fried, “Bad Rap for Rap: Bias in Reactions to Music Lyrics,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 26, no. 23 (1996): 2135–46. Carrie B. Fried, “Stereotypes of Music Fans: Are Rap and Heavy Metal Fans a Danger to Themselves or Others?” *Journal of Media Psychology* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 1–27.

The peak of ragtime corresponds to the Progressive Era in the United States, a period of social and political activism aimed at cleaning up a corrupt government and increasing moral standards, including efforts to reduce or eradicate alcohol consumption and prostitution. The eighteenth and nineteenth U.S. constitutional amendments in 1919 and 1920 for prohibition and women's suffrage as well as the Mann Act of 1917, the "white slave trade" act, were products of this era. All three were enacted directly or indirectly in part to protect "white" women from vice and from miscegenation with African Americans and new ethnic immigrants. Ragtime music was viewed as a contributing agent to immoral behavior, crime, and the victimization of women.

In light of this history, U.S. Census data from 1900 concerning a female boardinghouse in the vicinity of Joplin's home raised some intriguing questions. Directly behind and across a narrow alley from Joplin's flat, a row of apartment houses was occupied exclusively by single white women. Three of the twelve female residents were listed in census records as divorced; four were widowed, and five were single. Although seven of the renters had been married, no young children were listed as residents; all daughters living with their mothers were of adult age. Five of the twelve residents lacked an entry under the heading for occupation; four had "landlady" listed under occupation in spite of the fact that only two of these "landladies" had another resident (one daughter and one "roomer") living at the same address. Of the five residents with no occupation, two were also identified as heads of household. Although no definitive evidence has been found in the historical records or archaeological investigations, the presence of at least five ladies with no gainful employment suggests a strong possibility that Scott Joplin's immediate neighbors were engaged in prostitution. Women's boarding houses such as these were often brothels. An examination of 1880 and 1900 U.S. Census records for addresses of known brothels in places such as Kansas City list the madam's profession as "boarding house keeper" and the other residents as merely "roomers" or "boarders."⁵⁰

Artifacts that could be directly associated with the 1890s to 1910s female boarding houses were few. Written documentation neither supports nor disproves the theory that some or all of these houses were places of prostitution. Although it may be impossible to know for certain if Scott Joplin's flat was adjacent to a row of brothels, these establishments had long been associated with ragtime music and musicians. Joplin had moved to St. Louis from Sedalia, Missouri, a regional center of commerce and transportation during his time, and a town known for having multiple brothels along its Main Street. These establishments provided steady employment for musicians, especially the "piano thumpers."⁵¹ Some historians have claimed that based on what we know about Joplin and his personality, he would not have played in brothels

50. Amber R. Clifford, "Prostitution and Reform in Kansas City, 1880–1930," in *The Other Missouri History*, ed. Thomas M. Spencer (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 214–36.

51. Berlin, *King of Ragtime*.

during his years in Sedalia or St. Louis.⁵² It seems that they have taken Joplin out of context. By all reports he was gifted, articulate, and driven to succeed; however, he was still an African American in a racist, heavily segregated society. Often the only place a black pianist could get work was in saloons and brothels. Limited options may have forced Joplin to perform in places that collided with his moral sensibilities. Edward Berlin, a Joplin biographer, stated in a lecture at the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site in September 2008 that he had a historic letter from a family that referenced Joplin's employment as a piano player at a brothel located on Lucas Avenue (now Samuel Shepard Avenue) in St. Louis. Was this brothel one of the boarding houses across the alley from Joplin's home in 1901? Berlin stated that he did not mention this in his Joplin biography in order to avoid any potential litigation from Joplin's estate.

Considering all the evidence, the local history committee concluded that any public interpretation of the topic should raise provocative questions rather than present definitive answers. Because excavations occurred on the boarding house property, now owned by the MDNR and part of the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site, public interpretation of Joplin's immediate neighbors is inevitable. At a meeting devoted to the issue, members of the local community expressed a willingness, although not necessarily an eagerness, to suggest the possibility of illicit activity in exhibits and on guided tours. Indeed, conversations with members of the local history committee and other nearby residents revealed that known brothels within this neighborhood operated into the 1980s, and individuals engaged in prostitution were seen on the street in the immediate vicinity of the historic site during the archaeological investigations.

Yet, rather than reveal another "shameful" facet of the history of this neighborhood, or invoke the social stigma of the women and musicians who worked in the brothels, the interpretive focus will likely pivot from the topic of prostitution in Joplin's neighborhood to the history of the working-class women who lived there in order to foster a greater understanding of the socioeconomics of his time. Like African American men, women did not have equal standing in society, and most jobs were not open to them, relegating them to the lowest-paid work. As historian Ruth Rosen points out, women's wages in the early twentieth century were treated as supplemental to a family's income, on the assumption that working women toiled only to earn extra spending money, rather than to provide basic necessities for themselves and their families as heads of household.⁵³ In 1916, a U.S. Department of Labor report revealed that the average weekly wage for 1,600 department store and factory women was \$6.67. The same study reported that in the industries in

52. Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1950). Peter Gammond, *Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975). Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*.

53. Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 147–48.

which most female workers were employed, the majority of those women sixteen years of age and over earned less than \$6 in a typical week. Since most authorities agreed that a working woman needed a weekly wage of \$9 in order to support herself, most working-class women were clearly underpaid.⁵⁴ Industrialists justified their subsistence wages by arguing that women worked simply for “pin money” and were already supported by their fathers or husbands. Manufacturers further exploited women as a cheap source of labor by hiring them for seasonal work, which left them unemployed for months at a time. Despite the testimony of prostitutes who complained of their former subsistence wages, industrial employers continued to argue that there was no connection between low wages and vice.⁵⁵ Prostitution, with its constant threat of disease and violence, was certainly a dangerous occupation, but so were many of the manufacturing jobs available to women around the turn of the century. Working conditions in factories subjected workers to long hours, inadequate ventilation, toxic substances, dangerous machinery, and uncontrolled noise and humidity levels.⁵⁶ Archaeological research at other known brothel sites indicates that the residents of the brothels enjoyed a standard of living much higher than that of the households of working-class and even middle-class residents of neighborhoods in their vicinity.⁵⁷ Although certainly the reasons for participating in this line of work varied by individual, many working-class women may have viewed it as the best of a limited set of poor options.

This information was presented to the community committee and to the public through a neighborhood lecture, resulting in a discussion of the contribution and heritage of women over time as well as their continued victimization in the neighborhood today. The result was a suggestion by the community committee that a portion of the historic site be utilized for a women’s shelter and a safe house for kids. Unfortunately, the safe house is the only viable option at this time, but the need for both was expressed and should be addressed through collaborations with other civic organizations and churches in the neighborhood. Current statistics document that prostitution is still a lingering concern in the city of St. Louis with nearly six hundred arrests in 2005, but this appears to have been on quick decline since then, with less than fifty arrests in 2010.⁵⁸ Offenses against women and children, including domestic abuse, rape, and other sex crimes, also have proportionally higher rates in St. Louis than in the rest of Missouri. Through a historic context, the Scott

54. United States Department of Labor, *Summary of the Report on the Condition of Women and Child Wage Earners in the U.S.* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1916), 169.

55. Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 149.

56. Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 156.

57. Donna J. Seifert and Joseph Balicki, “Mary Ann Hall’s House,” *Historical Archaeology* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 59–73.

58. Missouri State Highway Patrol, “Missouri Department of Public Safety Uniform Crime Reporting Website” <http://ucr.mshp.dps.mo.gov/ucr/ucrhome.nsf/> [accessed January 12, 2011].

Joplin House has the potential to serve the community as both a safe haven and a place for educational programs on violence and the exploitation of women and children.

The Death of Scott Joplin and Syphilis

The close association between brothels and ragtime music leads us to the topic of venereal disease and its prevalence among ragtime musicians. This subject and the end of Scott Joplin's life have created discomfort for the MDNR staff. Despite the fact that Joplin's cause of death in 1917 was paresis, which occurs when syphilis enters its tertiary phase, tour guides at the Joplin House often referred to his cause of death as depression resulting from his inability to get his opera *Treemonisha* on stage. Although he may have certainly been depressed over this, the syphilis that was festering in his body and brain was the reason he died. Syphilis was a widespread infectious disease in America in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, and is reported to have been particularly prevalent among black entertainers during Scott Joplin's lifetime.⁵⁹ Referring to the midwestern ragtime pianists, historian and musician Terry Waldo states that "the sheer exhaustion of constant nocturnal activity took some; others succumbed to the lure of drugs; but perhaps the most horrifying peril these men faced was the then almost incurable disease syphilis, which claimed the lives of many a rag player. Among these last were Scott Joplin and his close friend, Louis Chauvin."⁶⁰

Prior to 1909, it was impossible to diagnose syphilis with confidence. Subsequently, a blood test was perfected, and afflicted patients received several treatments, including arsenic and mercury. It is unclear if Joplin was treated with either of these or if he was ever given a blood test to confirm what people must have suspected. The tertiary phase of syphilis has both physical and mental symptoms. According to Frederick Spencer, a physician and author of *Jazz and Death: Medical Profiles of Jazz Greats*:

The onset is usually insidious, with one or more of a wide range of mental symptoms: loss of memory and emotional stability, faulty judgment, headache, insomnia and depression, to name a few. These symptoms become more pronounced as the brain is destroyed. Physically, tremors occur in the hands, face, and speech, the last adding the inability to put words together in a sentence. Muscular incoordination increases until physical and mental paralysis is complete.⁶¹

Eubie Blake, a contemporary ragtime and jazz composer and musician, saw Joplin play in about 1915 and remarked: "I guess I have to say I heard him play, but the poor fellow, they made him play *Maple Leaf*. . . . So pitiful. He was

59. Frederick J. Spencer, *Jazz and Death: Medical Profiles of Jazz Greats* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 172.

60. Terry Waldo, *This is Ragtime* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 36.

61. Spencer, *Jazz and Death*, 171.

so far gone with 'the dog' [syphilis] and he sounded like a little child trying to pick out a tune. . . . He was so weak."⁶²

In the process of researching the subject, Spencer mapped the disease and compared it to oral and written reports of Joplin's activities and physical well-being. He concluded that with a ten- and twenty-five-year range from the time of infection to the time of death from paresis, Joplin was infected sometime after arriving in Sedalia in 1894, had early signs of neurosyphilis by 1901, and paresis by 1907, which caused his death in 1917.⁶³

This disease was devastating, especially to a person who made his living with his hands and mind. Although "social diseases" such as syphilis carry a stigma and Joplin's infection has provoked conjecture upon his lifestyle and that of other ragtime musicians, this disease was common and incurable during Joplin's lifetime.⁶⁴ Historians have speculated that he may have easily contracted it from one of his first two wives or possibly from a prostitute in one of the brothels where he performed. Joplin biographer Susan Curtis cautions on any speculation, stating:

Knowing after the fact that Joplin had syphilis for some part of his adult life prompts one to speculate on his creativity, production, performance, and social relations. But without sources, such speculation presents more problems than it solves. More than likely, Joplin lost dexterity in the later years of his life because of the effects of the disease, but it is hard to say when, to what degree, and how frequently such difficulties manifested themselves. I prefer to remain largely silent on an issue that is so nebulous. Joplin created some exquisite music in the early twentieth century, and at a time when he more than likely had syphilis. I think it ill-advised to speculate on the relationship between ragtime and immorality on the grounds that Joplin died of syphilis.⁶⁵

Joplin entered Manhattan State Hospital on February 3, 1917, where he died on April 1st of that year.⁶⁶ At this point he was impoverished and insane. He was buried in a pauper's grave at St. Michael's Cemetery in New York City with others who shared his fate. His grave was unmarked until the 1970s, when ragtime enthusiasts placed a marker over the site.

When history throws a curveball of a "shameful" disease to the hero of the story, what is the appropriate public interpretation? Why talk about it at all if it may offend visitors to the site? Two reasons for bringing this controversial topic to the interpretive forefront seemed compelling. First, the disease ravaged this brilliant man who changed the face of American music, cutting short his life and productivity. Second, the disease is making a comeback due to antibiotic resistance. The city of St. Louis continues to suffer one of the highest rates of syphilis in the nation, and since 2000 the rate of syphilis in the city

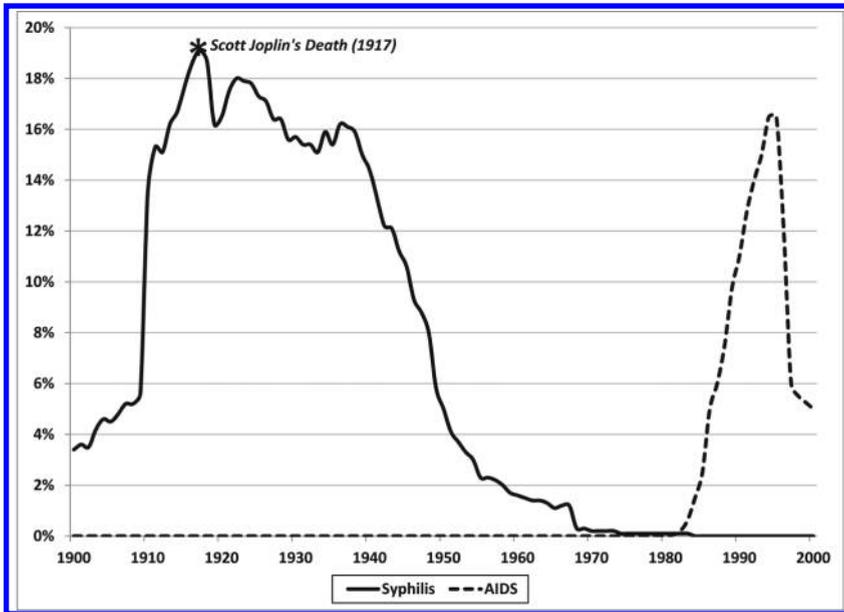
62. Spencer, *Jazz and Death*, 176.

63. Spencer, *Jazz and Death*, 176.

64. Spencer, *Jazz and Death*, 172.

65. Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*, 231.

66. Spencer, *Jazz and Death*, 170.



Mortality Rates for Syphilis and AIDS per 100,000 people in the United States (1900–2000). (Courtesy of Timothy Baumann, 2011)

and in the United States has been increasing.⁶⁷ Syphilis, like many other STDs, in turn facilitates the spread of HIV, increasing transmission of the virus at least two- to five-fold.⁶⁸ Scott Joplin died the very year of the peak mortality rate from syphilis in the U.S., a higher rate of mortality than that caused by AIDS in the early 1990s.⁶⁹ Both diseases have affected African Americans disproportionately, and the HIV prevalence among African Americans in the U.S. is ten times greater than the prevalence among whites.⁷⁰

By sixth grade, public schools in the Midwest are starting to cover sexually transmitted diseases in health class. Being able to illustrate the cankers with a historic photograph or a picture of a pocked skull is an effective way of talk-

67. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP), *Trends in Reportable Sexually Transmitted Diseases in the United States, 2004* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005), 4–5, <http://www.cdc.gov/STD/stats04/04pdf/trends2004.pdf> (accessed November 17, 2009). City of St. Louis, *Sexually Transmitted Diseases in St. Louis: A Five Year Summary, 2000–2004* (St. Louis: Department of Health, City of St. Louis, Missouri, 2005).

68. CDCP, *Trends in Reportable Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, 5.

69. Gregory L. Armstrong, Laura A. Conn, and Robert W. Pinner, “Trends in Infectious Disease Mortality in the United State During the 20th Century,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 281, no. 1 (January 1999): 65. National Center for Health Statistics, “Vital Statistics of the United States,” U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention website, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/vsus.htm>, 2008, accessed January 24, 2011.

70. Adaora A. Adimora, Victor J. Schoenbach, Michelle A. Floris-Moore, “Ending the Epidemic of Heterosexual HIV Transmission Among African Americans,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 37, no. 5 (November 2009): 468–71.

ing about a serious topic without the students realizing they are being lectured to about safe sexual practices. In the revised interpretation at the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site, museum staff asks visiting teachers if it is permissible to discuss syphilis with their students. Members of the interpretive staff have generally found that the teachers are grateful for the advanced warning and appreciate having someone other than themselves talk to the students about the subject. For groups that decline to have his death discussed or when it is not appropriate for the age group, the question, “How did Joplin die?” is answered in various ways. Docents often simply answer “syphilis” (it is explained on an exhibit panel). If young visitors demand elaboration, the staff refers them to their parents or teachers. Alternatively, the question is answered with, “it is a disease that affects your mind and your ability to do everyday things.” Hiding history is not necessary, but deciding the level of divulged details is the key to appropriate interpretation. Tour guides have been instructed to talk to the lowest common denominator. If there is a seven-year-old on the tour, information is given that is appropriate for that child. If the parents ask for more information, then those questions are answered.

Deciding where to draw the line in talking with the public about sexually transmitted diseases, insanity, and race is difficult. The MDNR staff has not been completely comfortable with shifting to this more frank discussion of life in the Jim Crow era. However, with the mounting historical and archaeological evidence from this project, a more comprehensive interpretation of the neighborhood and Joplin’s disease may be necessary to paint a clearer picture of the man whose compositions changed the face of American music.

Conclusion

At the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site, revelations about racial segregation, socioeconomics, sanitation, crime, prostitution, and sexually transmitted diseases tested community relations, audience sensitivities, and a commitment to socially relevant history. Through frank and open dialogue among museum professionals, scholars, and local residents, all of these issues are being addressed and interpreted. Currently, the local history steering committee is in the process of designing a museum exhibit on the neighborhood’s past. A theme of “enduring struggle to sustain community” will frame interpretation in a way that allows for a sympathetic discussion of controversial topics. In virtually all the cases discussed in this paper, potentially explosive findings were defused by placing them in the context of broader social, political, and economic struggles and developments. Thus, a house of prostitution came to represent the tremendous difficulties faced by working-class women rather than a moral weakness. Likewise, poor sanitation and abandoned tenements reflected broader socioeconomic inequities rather than any failing on the part of local residents. Moreover, when juxtaposed with successful community campaigns for social justice and cooperative community-building strategies, these

unpleasant aspects of the past formed part of a larger and more nuanced narrative. Finally, by raising consciousness about sexually transmitted diseases and establishing accurate historical benchmarks of community health and vitality to measure social progress, the Scott Joplin Heritage Project fulfills what many have come to see as public history's highest calling, the application of serious research to the challenges that face society today.

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