

From Slave to Landowner

Historic Archeology at the Ransom and Sarah Williams Farmstead

Douglas K. Boyd, Maria Franklin, and Terri Myers

Ransom and Sarah Williams saw many changes in their lives during the last half of the 19th century in Central Texas. Perhaps the most significant change for them, as with most African Americans who lived through the Civil War in the South, was the transition from being enslaved to being free. Word of emancipation came to Texas on June 19, 1865, and it spread across the state over the next several months. For newly freed blacks, this was only the start of a long journey toward freedom and equality that would take many generations and is, in some ways, still not complete. The history of the post-emancipation era is seldom told from the African American perspective, but archeological sites associated with freedmen can add significant data in this quest for a more comprehensive historical view. A proposed road project in southern Travis County is giving us an opportunity to study the post-emancipation transitions of African Americans by investigating the historic farmstead where the Williams family lived.

The road improvement project is sponsored by the Texas Department of Transportation, and Jon Budd is the project manager. The project is a collaborative effort involving archeological investigations directed by Prewitt

and Associates, Inc. (PAI), principal investigator Doug Boyd and project archeologists Aaron Norment and Jenny McWilliams; archival research by Terri Myers, Preservation Central, Inc.; and oral history and archeological consulting by Maria Franklin, the University of Texas at Austin's (UT Austin) Department of Anthropology. This article is a brief report on the multidisciplinary, historic archeological investigations related to the Williams farmstead that are currently in progress.

Site History

Immediately following emancipation, most freedmen were simply hired as employees by their former owners. In fact, the 1865 Emancipation Proclamation stated: "The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages" (Granger 1994 [1865]). This was the most expedient course of action at the time because most white landowners still needed labor to run their plantations while most freedmen needed jobs and knew only how to farm. A small percentage of freedmen were lucky enough to have acquired some special skills that enabled them to do jobs other than farm labor. Williams appears to have been such

Cisterns in Texas—continued

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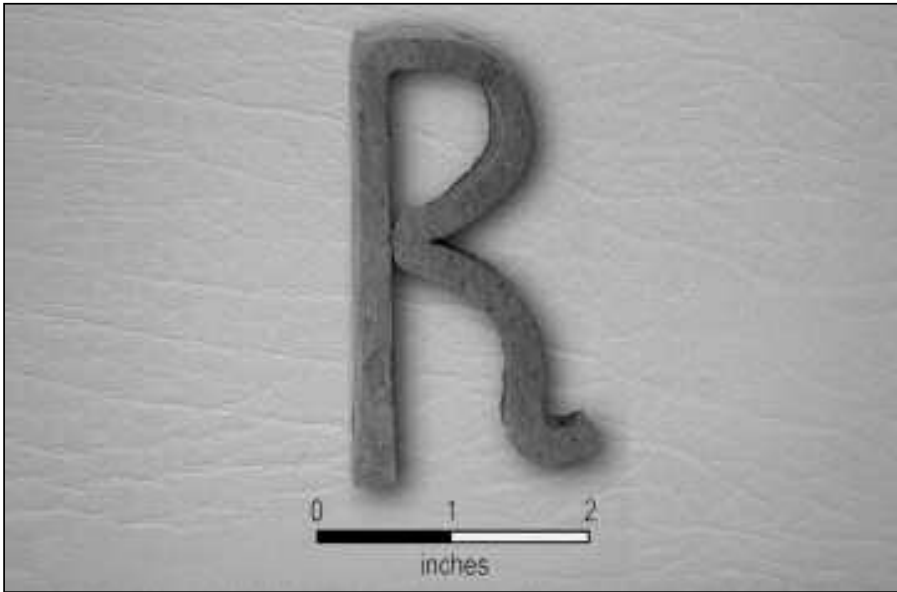


Figure 1. This letter “R” from Ransom Williams’ branding iron was a mistake and would have burned the letter backwards, which is probably why it was broken off and discarded. (Photo by Jennifer McWilliams)

a man, and he may have acquired during slavery some talents and knowledge that helped him succeed as a freedman.

Williams is an enigma in many ways. Various lines of circumstantial evidence suggest that he had been a slave of the Bunton family who came to Texas from Kentucky and started a plantation at Mountain City in Hays County (near Buda). It is even possible that Williams was originally named Bunton but that he changed his last name to Williams soon after emancipation. He appears as “colored” in some records but not in others, which suggests he was a mulatto. Despite the fact that he owned land for 30 years, Williams

somehow managed to miss being recorded in the population and agricultural censuses for 1870, 1880, and 1900 (most of the 1890 U.S. Census records were burned).

Following emancipation, it was common for blacks to congregate into freedmen communities, both urban and rural (Mears 2009:3–11; Sitton and Conrad 2005:1–4). Such communities provided a measure of protection from discrimination and racial violence that was common in the South during the Jim Crow era. But Williams was unusual because he did not fit into this pattern. He chose to purchase land and homestead in a relatively isolated location, essentially surrounded by white neighbors but still within a few miles of the black communities at Antioch and Manchaca.

Williams first appears in public records in 1867 when he is listed on the Hays County voter’s registration rolls. In the late 1860s, Williams owned no land, but he paid taxes on many horses or mules. In December 1871, Williams purchased a 45-acre farm in southern Travis County. A few months later, in April 1872, he registered a livestock brand (Figure 1) with Travis County, but the handwritten record notes it was a “horse brand.” He continued to pay taxes on many horses and mules for several more years. Williams married Sarah (we do not know her maiden name) sometime after 1871, and their first child was born in 1876. They had nine more children over the next two decades, but only five of the children lived to adulthood. Their two oldest boys, Will and Charlie, bought an additional 12 acres of land,

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bringing the size of the family farm to 57 acres. The family paid taxes on the land and made improvements every year through the end of the 19th century, but Williams died around 1901. The older boys no longer lived on the property, and Sarah and other children moved from the family farm to Austin about 1905. Although the Williamses owned the farm for many more years, it appears that no one lived on the property after 1905. The Williams family finally sold off its land in 1934 and 1941. They seem to have followed the “great migration,” a widespread trend when many rural black farmers and farm laborers moved to cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Kyriakoudes 1998; Reid 2003).

Today, the Williams farmstead can contribute to African diaspora studies in many ways. This potential is greatly enhanced by the fact that the site was found to be in excellent condition and was well suited to study via landscape analysis and archeological investigations.

Landscape Analysis and Archeology

Although the Ransom and Sarah Williams Farmstead site (41TV1051) was recorded in 1985, the component eventually identified as the Williams farmstead was not recognized until 2003, and its association with an African American freedman was not revealed until 2007. After limited testing, the site was considered to be significant, and it moved into a data recovery phase. In summer 2009, PAI conducted a detailed landscape analysis of the farmstead (with on-ground investigations limited to the portion located in the state-owned right-of-way) and archeological excavations to investigate selected areas and features.

The landscape analysis included study of modern and historic aerial photographs, GPS and total station mapping of features and topography, and backhoe excavations to test landforms and examine features. The analysis reveals how Williams laid out his farm to take advantage of the geology, topography, and hydrology, as well as to maximize the use of the natural soils, native vegetation, and abundant limestone rocks. Williams’ 45-acre property contained only about 18 acres of flat land suitable for crops, and this area was indeed cleared of trees and cultivated for many years. As might be expected in an upland setting, there were piles and lines of limestone and chert cobbles that had been removed from fields over many years. The rest of the property, which was extremely rocky with gentle-to-moderate slopes, was left wooded and used as pastureland. Williams gathered many large limestone cobbles and boulders to build rock fences that marked the boundaries of his property and formed a barrier between the cultivated field and the pastures (Figure 2). He also built rock walls to serve as livestock corrals and to divert water into a small stock pond he dug in the lower part of his land. We know that Williams



Figure 2. Archeologists Jodi Skipper (foreground) and Nedra Lee (center) stand by a linear rock fence constructed of limestone boulders that runs along the edge of the upland flat. The stacked rock alignment served as a livestock fence between the cultivated fields and wooded pastureland. (Photo by Doug Boyd)

also used barbed wire fencing in conjunction with the rock walls because segments of old barbed wire were found completely encased within the trunks of several giant oak trees.

Most of the archeological excavations were concentrated in the area of the main farmhouse (Figure 3), with only limited excavation (a 2x2-m unit) in the corral complex. Metal detecting was done to identify artifact concentrations, and 113 shovel tests were dug on a 2-m grid around the house. Hand excavations consisted of 138 1x1-m units in the house area, with most being concentrated in three locations—90 contiguous units in the house block, 28 units in the trash midden areas east of the house, and 14 contiguous units in a block located northwest of the house where the location of an outbuilding was suspected (Figure 4). Inside the house block, a subterranean pit just in front of the fireplace was probably used as a “potato cellar” for food storage. The pit had been filled in with domestic trash sometime around the turn of the century, perhaps after the Williams family purchased an ice box and the cellar was no longer needed.

The archeological work recovered more than 26,000 artifacts associated with the Williams occupation. While there are thousands of small fragments of iron and glass of minimal interpretive value, there are many hundreds of specimens that are functionally and temporally diagnostic. The preliminary sorting of materials into functional categories divides the assemblages as follows: activities, 4.9 percent; architectural, 25 percent; clothing and adornment, 3.5 percent; kitchen and household, 65 percent; and personal items, 1.6 percent. This simple functional classification belies the true complexity of the assemblage, though. The activities category, for example, contains a variety of items such as carriage and wagon hardware,



Figure 3. This view of the site shows the excavations of the chimney and the foundation rocks at the Williams farmstead. (Photo by Doug Boyd)

construction hand tools, farming hand tools, plow parts, horse tack (e.g., bridle bits and buckles) and harness gear (e.g., singletree clips) (Figure 5), gun parts and munitions (representing several shotguns, rifles, and pistols), musical instruments (harmonicas and a Jew's harp), sewing items

(e.g., thimble and pins), writing utensils (ink bottles, pencil leads, and erasers), barrel hoops (for water transport and storage), and children's toys (e.g., cap gun, glass marbles, and doll parts). In addition, we identified 109 different glass bottles and containers (mainly food, medicine, tobacco, and alcohol), 21 separate objects of pressed glass (mostly oil lamp bases and tablewares), and 52 individual ceramic vessels. The latter include porcelain wares, stoneware jars and jugs, and a variety of decorated and undecorated white-ware plates, cups, saucers, and serving dishes (Figure 6).

The analysis of material culture that is currently underway will involve looking for spatial patterns to define activity areas in and around the farmhouse, as well as to address a wide range of specific research questions. One of the most interesting observations is that the Williams assemblage is extremely diverse and relatively affluent. In economic terms, it does not reflect material culture of a poor farm family barely making a living; rather, the assemblage represents a relatively prosperous household expressing its identity through the purchase of a wide range of moderately priced consumer goods. We will be exploring this concept further as the analysis continues.

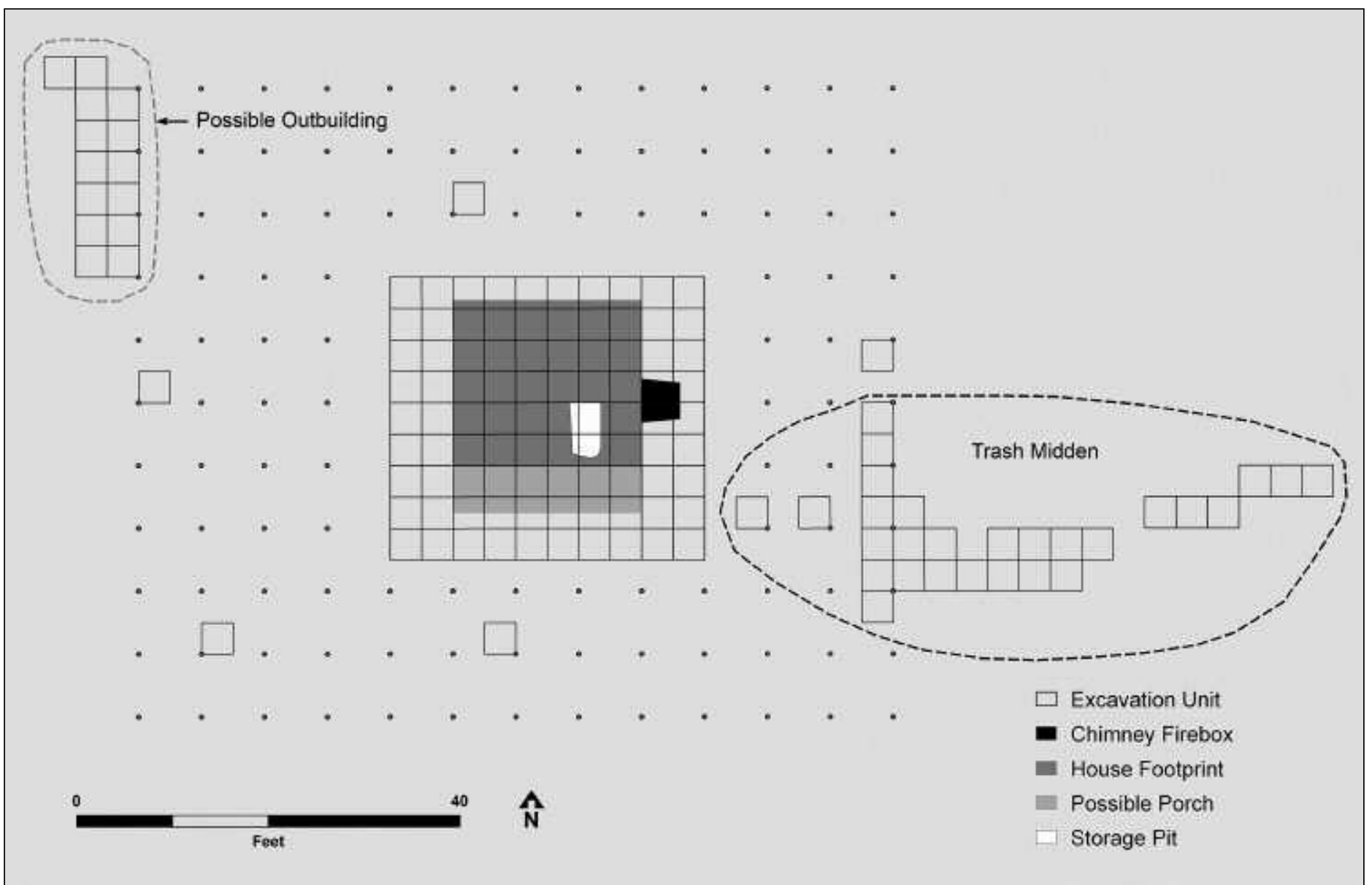


Figure 4. This detailed map illustrates the hand excavations and features at the Williams house location. The house may have been a log cabin. (Map by Sandra Hannum)

One very interesting find may well reflect spiritual beliefs that date back to slavery and may have originated in Africa (Leone and Fry 2001). When we excavated the base of the rock chimney to see how it was constructed, a nearly

complete prehistoric dart point was found below the center of the firebox. Its context within the prepared basal fill layer indicates that it was intentionally placed in this location. African American traditions include the use of “chimney



Figure 5. Horse and harness artifacts found at the Williams farmstead include (a) a spur, (b) a decorative snaffle bit, (c) a whiffletree center clip and hook, (d) a plain bridle bit, (e) harness buckles, and (f) a horseshoe. (Photos by Jennifer McWilliams)

charms that keep things from entering the house” (Arnett et al. 2000:79). Ancient Native American artifacts have been found in similar contexts that suggest they were ritual items used by African Americans. Wilkie (1997:100) notes that dart points have been found in yard areas and underneath houses in African American sites. Brown and Cooper (1990:16–17) note that chert projectile points and scrapers were found inside “the Healer’s Cabin” at the Levi Jordan Plantation in Brazoria County, Texas. Russell (1997:72) states that “Prehistoric Native American stone artifacts were found in all African American contexts at the Hermitage,” a plantation near Nashville, Tennessee. While we do not know for certain why Williams might have placed a dart point in the firebox when he built the chimney, it is likely that the object had some special ritual or symbolic meaning.

Community Outreach and Oral History

One of the more important aspects of the project is the community outreach. From the inception of this data recovery effort, the Ransom and Sarah Williams Farmstead Project was envisioned as a community-based archeological and historical investigation that would involve African American archeologists as well as the local African American community. The project team is firmly committed to the idea that historic archeology at the Williams farmstead should be done in collaboration with those who have a personal connection with the site and the surrounding areas. In the broadest sense, the descendant community is not limited to direct lineal descendants but includes all African Americans who once lived in the region and shared a common history with the Williams family. To this end, we developed an oral history component that used informant interviews as a vehicle for engaging with the local African American community. These interviews were a significant factor in our outreach efforts since they opened up lines of communication between researchers and the community. With evidence that the Williams family had ties to Antioch Colony, the Antioch descendants we contacted wanted to be involved with a project concerning their history. We also contacted African Americans who grew up in Manchaca, the town closest to the Williams farmstead that was known to have an established black presence both during and after the occupation of the site. The collection of oral histories led to many informal conversations that provided ideas on how our project might “give back” to the community and interviewees.

Ultimately, the purpose of this oral history component was to gather individual recollections to preserve the life histories related to an understudied, and thus obscured, segment of Central Texas history—African Americans living in Hays and Travis counties during the Jim Crow era. We



Figure 6. Dinner place setting found at the Williams farmstead. The transfer-printed plate was made by an English pottery, Alfred Meakin, Ltd., between 1875 and 1897. (Photo by Marsha Miller, The University of Texas at Austin)

conducted 18 oral history interviews with 19 informants ranging in age from 52 to 93. The interviews totaled 39.5 hours, and when the interview files were transcribed, they yielded more than 700 pages of detailed memories comprising a wealth of historical data. The original digital interview files will be curated at an appropriate oral history repository, and we will publish all of the oral history transcripts in a single volume. The historical memories are helping us interpret late 19th-century agricultural life, and there is considerable overlap between the people’s stories and the archeological findings. Many of the features, objects, and activities represented by the archeological remains at the Williams farmstead are prominent in the descendants’ memories of early 20th-century farm life.

Most of the informants were more than 70 years old at the time of their interviews. Regrettably, two of the individuals interviewed have since passed away, so we are fortunate to have recorded the memories of Anthy Lee Revada Walker and Moses Harper. We hope their families will cherish the interviews. We are not the only ones who recognize the importance of these oral histories, and many in the descendant community lament the passing of elderly relatives who possessed a wealth of personal and historical knowledge that is now lost. The opportunity to have their biographies recorded and archived for the benefit of their descendants was one of the main reasons why so many individuals agreed to be interviewed. They also wanted to honor their ancestors.

In the narrowest sense, the direct lineal descendants of the Williams family are an important subset of the descendant community, and we made many attempts to locate living relatives. Despite some rather intensive research from 2007 to 2010, most attempts to find direct

descendants met with frustration; however, historian Terri Myers made a breakthrough in October 2010, when she identified several people who are great-grandchildren of Ransom and Sarah Williams. Two of these descendants are living in Austin, and Myers' initial interviews with Corrine (Williams) Harris were very productive. More oral history work with the family members is being planned.

Besides using oral history interviews, the Williams Farmstead Project has utilized many other public outreach avenues. Numerous talks have been presented to archeological and public audiences, and more are being planned. Several African American anthropology students participated in the archeological field investigations. Nedra Lee, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at UT Austin, is working on the project and will be using the Williams site material culture for her dissertation research. A video recording crew from UT Austin's Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services visited the Williams site during the 2009 dig, taped oral history interviews, and shot footage of the site and the archeological investigations. *Life and Letters*, the UT College of Liberal Arts magazine, ran a feature story on the Williams project in fall 2010.

One of the highlights of our project so far is the inclusion of the Williams project in a television program. This was a 28-minute segment used in a Juneteenth Jamboree 2010 program that aired on KLRU-TV (the Central Texas PBS affiliate) on June 17, 2010. Called "Once Upon a Time Ransom Williams Crossed State Highway 45 Southwest," the segment included interviews with project personnel and descendant community members.

Conclusion

Ransom Williams was a black man who purchased a 45-acre farm in 1871, at a time when only a small percentage of blacks could afford any land at all. He married Sarah, a former slave, and they raised five children on their farm. They were illiterate parents who made sure their children learned to read and write and attended school. The Williams family prospered when many blacks were struggling as low-wage laborers or falling into an oppressive system of sharecropping for white landlords. Circumstantial evidence suggests Williams was a horseman, and this knowledge may have contributed to his success. Historical documents (e.g., tax records), archeological features (e.g., rock-walled corrals and a stock pond), and artifacts (e.g., horse tack, harness equipment, and wagon parts) suggest that Williams raised horses and mules and was possibly an independent teamster, perhaps using wagons to haul supplies and products for others. The Williams family lived within a rural white farming community, yet they managed to stay below the radar and avoid the racial violence that was a very real threat for all blacks during the Jim Crow era.

The Williams farmstead is a rare historic archeological site in Texas. It represents a snapshot in time and space within the larger story of the African diaspora. The Ransom and Sarah Williams Farmstead Project is important because it documents—through archives, oral history, and archeology—the story of one African American family's transition from slavery to freedom. To understand why African diaspora studies are important to Texas history, we must remember that Euro Americans wrote most of the state's history, and it is told from a decidedly biased perspective. Much of Texas' history has been written by and about the white society that dominated the state's political, economic, and academic realms throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Consequently, the perspectives of minority groups are seriously underrepresented in official state histories, and these omissions apply to women, Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, and many other groups. We must reexamine Texas history from many different perspectives and look at primary documents, archeological evidence, and oral history to discover and highlight the contributions of historically underrepresented minority groups. The archeological community is becoming more aware of the need to deal responsibly with the realities of racial politics, and a growing number of archeologists are involving descendants in their research at various levels of engagement (e.g., Epperson 2004; Franklin and Paynter 2010; LaRoche and Blakey 1997; Leone et al. 2005; McDavid 2002; McGuire 2008; Mullins 1999; Orser 1998; Palus et al. 2006; Scham 2001; Singleton 1999).

Editor's Note: *More information about the Ransom and Sarah Williams Farmstead Project is available online.*

The KLRU-TV Juneteenth Jamboree 2010 program, with a 28-minute segment on the Ransom Williams project, can be seen at www.klru.org/juneteenth/.

*An article on the project appeared in the fall 2010 issue of UT Austin's College of Liberal Arts magazine *Life and Letters* and can be read online at www.utexas.edu/features/2010/09/20/artifacts/.*

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