ARCHAEOLOGY FOR THE PEOPLE

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE JOUKOWSKY INSTITUTE

edited by

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Oxbow Books
Oxford and Philadelphia
Cover image: Part of a Soviet propaganda poster used in one of the advertisements for the Archaeology for the People competition.
Remembering Slack Farm

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Aerial view of Slack Farm shortly after the looters were indicted. (Photo by David Pollack, used with permission.)
It’s been nearly 28 years since the lives of my husband and myself were irrevocably changed by what has euphemistically been referred to as “the Slack Farm Incident.” Before, during, and – for several years after fieldwork ended at that looted ancient Native American village site in Union County, Kentucky – our lives were consumed by Slack Farm. At the height of fieldwork, we couldn’t open a local newspaper without seeing an article about Slack Farm. We couldn’t talk to anyone, once they discovered we were involved with the project, without being grilled. What was new in the case? Had the looters been sent to jail yet? What kinds of artifacts had we found? What were the Indians doing? How can I help?

Everything about Slack Farm broke the mold. The diversity of circumstances, people, and events surrounding the looting, the resultant archaeological study, and the subsequent outcomes set that project apart from all the others I have been involved in, before or since, over the course of my over 40-year-long archaeological career. In the extent of the looters’ damage. In the involvement of lawyers and police. In the response by Native peoples to the grave desecration. In the amount of public involvement to right the wrong. In the site’s visibility in the media. And especially, in the project’s long-lasting impact on archaeology and on heritage law: the information it produced about ancient Native farming peoples, the repercussions it set in motion, and the legacies it left behind. From start to finish, my husband and a good friend were co-directors of the project, and close friends were members of the field crew. As for me, to have witnessed the destruction first-hand and to have been involved in so many aspects of the project: that was life-changing.

The Slack Farm Incident began with a phone call in November 1987. But in truth, it had begun decades earlier, when a childhood hobby turned from passion to obsession.

December 19, 1987: David Pollack’s 36th birthday. On a gray, bone-cold morning, Pollack (an archaeologist with the Kentucky Heritage Council) and David Wolf (the Kentucky State Forensic Anthropologist) were riding in a Kentucky State police car on their way to conduct a damage assessment of a site in Union County called Slack Farm. The short drive from the airport in Henderson, Kentucky took them across the rolling ridge-tops of Henderson and adjacent Union counties, then past agricultural fields and coal tipples, before the road dropped down into the broad Ohio River floodplain. Farmers had harvested their crops of corn and soybeans: now the ground was clear,
or nearly so, and Indian relic collectors could return to walk the fields in search of spear points and arrowheads.

The Kentucky Heritage Council is the State Historic Preservation Office, the state agency responsible for documenting important cultural resources. Although Pollack was just beginning his fifth year at the Council, he had nearly a decade of archaeological fieldwork under his belt. He was no stranger to the impacts of looting and vandalism on archaeological sites. In late November, several weeks before the site visit, Pollack received a call from a western Kentucky resident: men were digging graves on the old Slack Farm property. Since it was unlawful to dig up human remains in Kentucky, Pollack informed David Wolf, the man responsible for attending to human remains, ancient or modern, in the Commonwealth. Wolf called the Henderson State Police Post and asked them to check out the story. The Post’s captain sent Sergeant Miles Hart. Hart was a reformed looter who knew all about the allure of digging and was well aware of the ancient Indian site on the farm. As Hart approached the site, he was met by several of the looters, who informed him he was trespassing and demanded he leave. A few hours later, Hart returned to the site with a warrant and a cease-and-desist order. The men were later charged with grave robbing and were arrested.

In the weeks after the arrest, Pollack met with David Morgan, the Director of the Kentucky Heritage Council, Cheryl Ann Munson of Indiana University, and the Kentucky archaeological community to discuss the appropriate course of action to take. Those conversations had culminated in this mid-December visit by Wolf and Pollack. Pollack would look back on this trip as a watershed moment, a turning point in Ohio Valley archaeology.

Locals had known about the Indian site on the Slack Family’s farm for decades. As early as 1871, Sydney Lyons had mentioned it in a brief survey report filed with the Smithsonian Institution. Oddly enough, Pollack had only recently read about Slack Farm during his review of a research proposal Munson had submitted to the Heritage Council. Munson had conducted research at ancient farming village sites in Indiana and wanted to extend her work across the Ohio River into Kentucky. Among the sites in Henderson and Union counties she planned to visit was Site 15UN28 – the designation assigned to Slack Farm by the University of Kentucky’s Office of State Archaeology.

Thus, on December 19, 1987, all Pollack knew about 15UN28 was this: sometime after A.D. 1400, above the active Ohio River floodplain near the mouth of Sibley Creek, Native American farmers had lived in a village for at least several decades and had buried their dead within it. The remains of their village took the form of dark soil and thousands of artifacts – an indelible mark on this modern agricultural field. But the looters, too, had left their own indelible marks.
Nearly every farm field in Kentucky holds fragments of its indigenous past: most commonly chips of flint, broken scrapers, spear points, and arrowheads, but sometimes pottery fragments, bits of animal bone or shell, and rarely, smoking-pipes and bone ornaments. And it’s no wonder: Kentucky’s Indian history is 12,000 years long, making it the Commonwealth’s longest historical period.

Most kids in rural areas grow up walking plowed fields, picking up spear points from their family’s or neighbors’ farm fields, and keeping their collections safe in cigar boxes. They open the boxes from time to time to examine the contents, remembering where they found their favorites and conjuring up visions of ancient battles. Most leave all that behind with their childhood, but a few become consumed with finding, owning, buying, selling, and trading Indian relics of all kinds: stone tools, exquisite shell and bone ornaments, animal-shaped stone smoking-pipes, whole ceramic jars and bowls, and human bones. Switching the cigar boxes of their youth for basements lined with display cases, the most fanatical put up separate buildings – private museums, really – to house their collections. Some even make a living buying and selling artifacts. For these individuals, walking plowed fields to find pieces to add to their collections is no longer enough. They have to dig and, in so doing, they cross the line from interested lay people to looters, from law-abiding citizens to criminals.

In the summer of 1987, two local men approached William D. Lambert, the new owner of Mrs. Slack’s farm, for permission to dig on his property. Mrs. Slack had not permitted digging, but she was gone now. Her death signaled an opportunity to make money and the promise of collectible, marketable artifacts. The men took it.

Owning an archaeological site is a double-edged sword. Possessing a piece of the past can be a joy, the stewardship responsibilities, a burden; Lambert saw only the burden. Looters sneaking onto the site had left large holes on his property, a safety hazard in the summer when the farmers who leased the property drove their combines through the field. This was a problem that was not going away. Lambert also saw an opportunity when the two men approached him for permission to dig. For him, it was a way to unload his burden and make some money in the process. Naïvely, he figured that if the looters robbed all of the burials, nothing would remain – problem solved. Lambert said yes. At the price of $10,000, the men could dig on his farm for six months, from the Fall of 1987 to the Spring of 1988. The lease specified that up to 12 individuals could be on the site at any one time, that they could
dig as long as they did not break any laws, and that they could keep whatever they found; when their time was up, their “digging rights” would cease. The two men paid Lambert’s asking price, then sold shares to ten others, who each paid $1000 for the right to dig. Thus, even before the first shovel was raised, the two men had recouped their investment.

The Ohio River is wide as its swings by Union County on its trip to join the Mississippi River at Cairo, Illinois. It parts briefly at Wabash Island, which sits at the mouth of Indiana’s Wabash River. Slack Farm lies opposite the mouth, on the Ohio’s southern shore, at the center of the homeland of the Caborn-Welborn people. From the A.D. 1400s to the early A.D. 1700s, Caborn-Welborn villages, both large and small, dotted the floodplain on both sides of the Ohio River in a 60-mile stretch of the valley from Evansville, Indiana downstream to the mouth of the Saline River. Sprinkled among the villages were hamlets and tiny farmsteads.

The ancestors of the Caborn-Welborn people had lived in this region for a very long time. Outside of what is now Evansville, they had built their major town and mound center at Angel Mounds not long after A.D. 1000. Networks of social and political relationships linked the chiefs at Angel to chiefs living in similar town and mound centers across the Southeastern U.S. and the Midwest. These networks provided the Angel chiefs with the knowledge and the ritual items they needed to be successful leaders.

For reasons unknown, many of these farming cultures and most of the chiefly networks collapsed around A.D. 1400. So, too, did the farming culture centered at Angel Mounds. Thus, Caborn-Welborn history begins with the collapse of their grandparents’ way of life. In A.D. 1400, the Caborn-Welborn people faced many of the same challenges the people of Europe faced in the wake of World War II: build a new world from the rubble of the old. Caborn-Welborn people continued many of their ancestors’ traditions. Farming corn, beans, and squash was their mainstay; hunting, gathering, and fishing rounded out their diet. They built permanent, mud-walled houses and buried their dead in nearby cemeteries. However, Caborn-Welborn leaders were unable to muster the political power and influence of their grandfathers; there would be no large, flat-topped platform mounds for them to live on. Quite literally, they would not achieve the heights of their forefathers.

In this new world, Caborn-Welborn leaders expanded long-distance trading connections with different sorts of people living to the south and north.
These connections provided them with objects made from exotic materials, like marine shell, catlinite (a soft, carvable red stone native to southeastern Minnesota), and metal. Grieving families often placed these highly-prized objects with the dead. Caborn-Welborn leaders and the people who followed them created a viable and prosperous culture that endured for over 300 years. And their largest village was Slack Farm.

The police car turned onto the farm road and headed toward the site, past the silos and toward the barn where Hart had nailed up the cease-and-desist order weeks before. The barn would become a reference point for volunteers like me in the months ahead.

“I don’t know if this is illegal, but it is definitely wrong,” Pollack recalls a seasoned trooper saying during that December visit. Some of the most intensely looted areas at the site were in the vicinity of the barn. The men immediately noted the remains of infants, children, and adults scattered about. Skulls sat on dirt piles. I remember the look on my husband’s face as he described to me what he had seen: “It’s a good thing you didn’t come with us: all you would have done is cry.”

Weeks later, I did see it with my own eyes, and he was right: I wept at the destruction. Even now, remembering, it is hard to find words to describe the scene, and they cannot convey the emotional impact. I felt frustrated and helpless. “What’s to be done, now?” I thought. “Filling the holes back in and documenting what’s happened can never put it back as it was.” I felt anger – such intense anger. For a long time, history had lain there, undisturbed. Then, in an instant, the looters had ripped it to shreds. I wanted to scream at them: “How could you do this? No artifact is worth this destruction!” But they were not present to listen – only the evidence of their work was. Holes. Piles of dirt. Broken jars. Desecrated graves.

The scale of destruction was enormous. The field was pockmarked with 450 holes, scattered across about 15 acres. The most concentrated looting was located within a seven-acre area in front of the barn, but the holes and the dirt piles adjacent to them were not the worst of it. In their haste to find graves containing marine shell gorgets, catlinite pipes, and copper pendants, the looters had also dug through house floors, hearths, and storage pits, recklessly destroying the record of past lives and the evidence that Caborn-Welborn people had lived at this place. Broken pottery, arrowheads, charred corncobs, and animal bones littered the ground.
Pollack, Wolf, and the troopers walked for a couple of hours that day, attempting to process what they saw before starting to collect evidence. This was proving to be very a different site visit than previous ones Pollack had made to looted sites. Exactly how different a visit it was, he could not have known.

The depth of callous disrespect for the dead was overwhelming. The looters had used shovels but also had brought in small bobcats to use when they needed to move larger amounts of backdirt. Their work was not done in secret, at night by flashlight; after all, they had permission, and so could work unchallenged in broad daylight. They systematically mined the site for the objects lovingly placed, ostensibly for eternity, in the graves of the departed. The looters soon learned that the villagers had laid out their dead in rows in distinct cemeteries. Once the looters hit one grave – quite literally, “pay-dirt” – they knew others would be nearby. One of the men did not like the skulls of the people whose graves he was looting staring at him while he dug, and so he routinely used his shovel to shave off the faces and toss them out of the pit.

Eventually, Pollack, Wolf, and the troopers turned to the work at hand, doing their best to conduct a preliminary damage assessment, taking photographs and collecting evidence. At the end of their visit, they had recovered the remains of 34 individuals and sufficient evidence to charge the looters with 34 counts of desecrating graves. In the eight weeks the looters had worked before they were arrested, they had turned an unremarkable agricultural field into a war zone, a moonscape, a desecration. Why had they dug for so long before anyone noticed? For so long without public outcry? Because to the looters, Slack Farm was only an Indian burial ground and the people in those graves were not important.

From the very beginning, Native people were involved at Slack Farm, and this involvement was another aspect that set the site apart. In 1987, American Indians faced many challenges – poverty, alcoholism, access to education and adequate healthcare – but they were beginning to find their common voice and speak out, exercising their political muscle. An especially emotional issue was the desecration of Indian graves that was taking place all across the United States, and the thousands of boxes of Indian bones held in American museums.

Dennis Banks, an activist leader, teacher, and author, was living in northern Kentucky when reports of the looting at Slack Farm began to surface. An Anishinabe, Banks worked on the national stage for Indian causes and Indian rights and was, at that time, best known for co-founding
the American Indian Movement (AIM) and leading the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. In the months ahead, Banks would play an important role at Slack Farm, serving as one of the major American Indian spokespeople during the events following the looting.

When Banks remembers what he saw at Slack Farm, he is visibly moved. He speaks of feeling physically ill because of the extent and magnitude of the destruction at the site and the deep, emboldened disregard and disrespect for Indian people it represented. Many Native people shared Banks’ response.

With the recovery of the evidence, Slack Farm was now a crime scene. The State needed to collect additional evidence from the site to continue with criminal proceedings against the looters. Specifically, it needed to determine how many Native American graves they had desecrated. There were research questions to be answered, too – Who were these people whose village and graves the looters had destroyed? – but questions would have to take a back seat to the criminal investigation.

By February, Pollack and Munson had formulated a plan of how to proceed. The task ahead of them was enormous, but straightforward. To support evidence collection, the Heritage Council allowed Munson to redirect her grant funds to the case, and it awarded grant monies to the University of Kentucky to assist. University of Kentucky bioarchaeologist and Anthropology Museum director Dr. Mary Lucas Powell agreed to supervise the analysis of the human skeletal remains. Between them, Munson and Pollack had nearly a half century of archaeological field experience at diverse site types in a variety of settings. They would jointly direct the day-to-day site operations. Five experienced archaeologists from Indiana University and the University of Kentucky joined the project as permanent crew members. As capable as they were, however, Pollack and Munson knew this crew would not be enough. They would need volunteer labor.

In 1987, unlike today, volunteering to work on an archaeological site in the Ohio Valley was uncommon. The number of people who had damaged the site and its graves had been small – 12 men, more or less, working continuously for almost two months. The number of people it would take to undo their desecration was 50 times that. So, Pollack and Munson scheduled the work-week from Thursday to Monday to accommodate volunteers. Then the calls went out.

People heard about the site and wanted to help. Over the course of fieldwork alone, some 500 people volunteered. They came from many walks of life
and from all across the region. Retired IBM executives. College students. Local citizens. Girl Scout troops. Professional archaeologists from Kentucky and surrounding states. One woman came so often, she got to pick where she worked on the site. A mother and her home-schooled son came nearly every week for a day or two. Some volunteers came so often they became regular crew members. In time, Pollack and Munson assigned them to special tasks as befitted their skills: Pat Ritz, for instance, became the team’s burial cleaning specialist, and a retiree was given the responsibility for bagging and proveniencing artifacts.

Archaeologists were uniquely qualified to recover the evidence for the case against the Slack Farm looters, for like detectives, archaeologists, too, collect “evidence” about peoples’ lives. They are trained to read the soil and to recognize artifacts. Archaeologists feel soil changes with their trowels. Drawing on experience gained at other sites, they can anticipate and recognize patterns. They dig square holes, not round ones. They do not dig indiscriminately, keeping only the pretty artifacts. They meticulously excavate with shovel, trowel, and brush, screening the soil, taking care to label each bag of artifacts so they know exactly where the artifacts came from. Taking notes and photographs, making maps, and recording and organizing all their observations are what archaeologists do. Pollack and Munson wanted to apply all these standard archaeological methods at Slack Farm, but they knew they could not. Their objective was first and foremost to collect evidence in a criminal investigation.

Slack Farm presented Pollack and Munson with challenges few American archaeologists had experienced prior to that time: digging out and documenting looters’ holes to collect evidence. The site also represented a strange reverse situation – the holes had already been dug. There were backdirt piles, but the soil in them was unscreened. Some objects had been removed, but no one knew what or from where. Above all, there were no maps or notes, no forms that recorded what had been encountered. Munson and Pollack and their team brought their experience to this mayhem, and order to it all: each hole got its own number, and an adjacent pile was linked to its hole by the same number and a letter.

Looking back on it now, I remember how odd it felt not to spend the time I’d ordinarily spend excavating and documenting a hearth, a trash pit, a house floor. At Slack Farm, the drill was this: presented with a hole, your job was to clean it out, and that meant removing all the loose soil to find the end of the
looters’ destruction. Perhaps, if the soil had been freshly disturbed, this job would have been easy, but by the time evidence collection began, some holes had been open to the elements for six months. Rain had washed the backdirt piles. The sides of some holes had slumped inward, like wounds drawing closed in healing. Throw the disturbed soil, shovelful by shovelful, into a nearby screen; pit-mates screen the soil, putting artifacts in one bag, human bone in the other. Given the density of materials in some parts of the site, buckets substituted for bags. Once cleaned out and ready for a photograph, the empty hole revealed some of what the looters had destroyed there: edges of storage pits, the base of hearths, lines of posts (the housewalls) and what the looters had left undisturbed in the graves: half a leg, a torso. Take notes. Move on to the adjacent pile of soil the looters had deposited. Screen the soil, often into an adjacent already-documented hole. Buckets and buckets and buckets of bone.

The permanent crew did most of the mapping, on strange-looking graph paper selected purposely for ease in drafting circular features. The fieldwork started in February and lasted into May. There was snow, frost, sun, and rain. Each day brought another media representative. Media coverage was fierce, especially in the western Kentucky-southwestern Indiana-southeastern Illinois tri-state area. Radio, television, and newspapers focused a constant spotlight on Slack Farm. The site garnered national attention, too, appearing in Time magazine while fieldwork was in progress, and in Archaeology magazine and National Geographic not long after it concluded.

Boxes of bones and artifacts steadily accumulated, each one assigned a unique inventory number – physical testimony to the damage that had occurred. Mounting too, were the field notes. By the end, they would fill 11 bulging binders – ironically, only one less that the number of looters – maps, lists, descriptions, and hunches waiting to be verified or disproved by the analysis that would take place in the decade ahead.

Was the magnitude of the desecration of Indian graves at Slack Farm a tipping point in the minds of Native individuals like Dennis Banks: “Enough is enough: this must stop”? In the wider scheme of things, after all, the damage done by the Slack Farm looters was no worse than looter impacts to burial grounds throughout the Ohio valley or in the Puebloan Southwest. Or was it because Slack Farm was located east of the Mississippi River, in a region not commonly associated with looting on this scale? Was it because of the media coverage? Was it because of Native peoples’ growing confidence to speak out and take action against the injustices they
had endured for centuries? Whatever the impetus, the Native American community responded *en masse* to the disrespect the Slack Farm looters had shown toward indigenous people and the graves of their ancestors. Native peoples wanted the looters prosecuted and the bones reburied.

It is important to remember that in 1987, Indian-archaeologist partnerships were rare in the U.S. They were even rarer in Kentucky, one of the few states that lack Indian reservations, a state that, until recently, routinely taught its children that Native peoples never lived in Kentucky permanently, but only hunted there. Linking living Native peoples to the human bones the looters had tossed out of the way was not what Kentucky’s citizens would have done at that time.

NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, would not arrive to compel such partnerships until 1990. Dialogue is common practice now; but back then it was not, and the call for the reburial of the bones was controversial. The bones were evidence that had to be collected and analyzed for the case against the men. The Indian representatives agreed that this work needed to be done, but they were concerned about how long it would take before the remains could be reinterred at the site.

In the end, what was decided was unusual. There would be a Native presence during fieldwork at Slack Farm. Native people occasionally would lead ceremonies at the site and make offerings of tobacco, song, and prayers, and sometimes the archaeologists could join them. Considered unclean because they were working among disturbed graves, everyone – archaeologists, volunteers, even visitors – and all the boxes of bones were periodically “smudged” by reverently passing a small bundle of smoking sage over person and box alike.

After four months of fieldwork, ceremonies, media attention, and volunteer support, the last hole was cleaned out and documented; the last back dirt pile was screened. The most visible phase, truly the shortest phase of the Slack Farm project, had concluded. But Pollack and Munson now faced a mountain of documents and boxes. They had to sort it all out: both for the criminal investigation and for the archaeological research.

Their first challenge was to get everything washed and sorted. In the field, it is hard to determine whether dirt-covered objects, especially small ones, are fragments of bone or pottery, or even stone. The University of Kentucky’s archaeology lab at that time was in the American Building, a rambling, former tobacco warehouse, its lower level covering a couple thousand square feet; it was perfect for the task of processing and analyzing the Slack Farm artifacts. Again,
the project depended on the aid of volunteers. To encourage participation, Pollack instituted “Slack Farm Wash Night”: every Wednesday night, folks gathered at the lab from 6 to 9 p.m., to wash and sort artifacts. Scores of UK students and community volunteers, especially members of local amateur archaeological societies, spent more than three years washing and sorting the millions of artifacts recovered from the site.

Astonishingly, in 1988, it was only a misdemeanor to disturb graves in Kentucky. But at least in Kentucky, a grave was considered any place where someone was buried – marked or unmarked, regardless of biological or ethnic affiliation, it didn’t matter. In neighboring states, it was not illegal to disturb unmarked graves. And in some states, even if marked, graves older than a certain date that were not located in a perpetual-care cemetery deserved no protection. The sobering truth was that in 1987, in the neighboring states of Indiana and Illinois, and in most other states, what the men did at Slack Farm would not have been illegal.

In the end, the fact that the men had been charged with breaking Kentucky laws did not matter. Someone has to be willing to prosecute. The Commonwealth’s Attorney for Union County was reluctant to pursue the case. He did not consider the destruction of the ancient cemeteries at Slack Farm a punishable offense. It was also deeply frustrating to learn that he had the discretion to turn the case over to the Kentucky Attorney General’s office, but chose not to do so. And so the men who looted Slack Farm, although put on probation and prohibited from digging for five years, were never prosecuted.

Pollack and Munson’s second challenge was to analyze, write up, and make some sense out of the masses of data collected as part of the criminal investigation. The money they had cobbled together was only to get the evidence out of the ground. After the fieldwork was completed, they had to return to the day-jobs they had put on hold during their response to the crisis. Eventually, they were successful in acquiring funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities to analyze the artifacts, and tell the story of the lives of the people who lived at Slack Farm: to the archaeological community, to the citizens of Kentucky, and beyond. They secured the expertise of specialists to analyze the pottery, the chipped stone,
the carbonized plant remains, and the animal bones. They sent samples of burned wood and corn for radiocarbon dating, metal European trade goods to chemists for source analysis, and pottery to specialists in neutron activation analysis for the identification of trade wares.

I had a small hand in this phase of the project, too, helping analyze the pottery and assisting with the analysis of textile impressions on particular vessel forms. I am a ceramic analyst by trade, and the Slack Farm assemblage is, by far, the largest sample of ancient Native American pottery with which I have ever worked. From other sites, I would be lucky to have 20 or 30 fragments large enough to analyze, and I’d squeeze every bit of data I could from the very tiniest diagnostic specimens. The Slack Farm collection consisted of many hundreds of large fragments of every kind of vessel the Caborn-Welborn potters made: jar, bowl, pan, bottle. With a sample like that, I saw the theme, and all the variations on it. It was a delight.

I came to appreciate the diverse techniques the Slack Farm potters used to achieve the look they wanted. There were so many ways to make that beaded rim decoration on hemispherical bowls, to thicken pan rims, to decorate jar necks. I came to recognize the hand of true artists, of master craftsmen, and of serviceable yeomen. I thought of how the people who had used these vessels would have recognized these differences, too, and maybe appreciated the truly well-made examples, as I did.

My introduction to the analysis of the impressions of ancient fabrics on pottery was through my work on the Slack Farm collection. My previous experience had been with cord-marked sherds. Specimens with textile impressions, when present at all, were not very big, and the textiles themselves were not that impressive – a simple basic fabric made from a twisted or “twined” weft over a stationary warp. The world of Caborn-Welborn textiles was another story altogether: impressions of exquisite fabrics with bird’s-eye motifs; geometric designs, with stripes of varying widths; broad bands with repeating patterns of zigzags; and dense heavy mats and coarse bags. I suppose, at some level, I knew Native peoples had worn something else besides deerskin leather and furs, but the textile-impressed fabrics on the Slack Farm pottery made it undeniable. The Caborn-Welborn people made and wore clothing decorated in an array of designs and used all kinds of fabrics.

Then, I would remember how it was that I came to be analyzing these artifacts, and it broke my heart. It renewed my disgust for the men who had looted Slack Farm, and who had gotten away with it.
In the end, whatever happened to the men, to the Indians, to the archaeology, to the site? The men who leased digging rights to Slack Farm moved on to other sites, the market in Indian relics ever ready to absorb their “product.” It is perhaps justice served that, four years later, some of the men involved in the Slack Farm case were convicted of looting a burial mound in southwestern Indiana and spent some time in jail. In comparison to the enormous destruction they had caused at Slack Farm and at the Indiana mound, I felt it was small consolation, but consolation nevertheless.

Approached by The Archaeological Conservancy to set aside Slack Farm as an archaeological preserve in perpetuity, Lambert showed little interest. His son now owns the site. A move in the late 1990s to list Slack Farm on the National Register of Historic Places failed. That is because listing requires landowner support, and none was forthcoming: indeed, Lambert’s son objected.

If measured by these developments alone, it would be hard to see any positive outcomes from the “Slack Farm Incident”: no one went to jail, and the site has been afforded no special protection. But there are other ways to measure the impact and legacies of Slack Farm. The positive outcomes were enormous and far-reaching.

Because of Slack Farm, in 1988, Governor Wilkinson and the Kentucky Legislature strengthened Kentucky’s laws dealing with the protection of cemeteries. It is now a felony to loot or disturb human remains. Other states soon followed Kentucky’s lead. The scale of destruction, the publicity, and the presence of Native Americans at the site during fieldwork raised peoples’ awareness of the looting of Indian burial grounds and archaeological sites – in Henderson and Union counties and across the river in Evansville, Indiana; throughout the Ohio Valley; and across the nation.

I believe that in some way, the destruction at Slack Farm helped individuals who were working on federal legislation to protect Native American burial grounds and sacred artifacts. Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) two years after the conclusion of fieldwork at Slack Farm. Controversial at the outset, NAGPRA has opened channels of communication between archaeologists and Native peoples on an unprecedented scale. Because of NAGPRA, the way archaeologists in the US treat human remains and the way American citizens view them has changed, and I think Slack Farm had a hand in that change. Slack Farm is the perfect example to use in teaching historic preservation law (as I found out recently while researching readings for a law enforcement workshop): this Kentucky case brings the ongoing issue of site looting close to home. The project ended years ago, but Pollack and Munson continue to receive requests from authors of books, textbooks, and magazines to use the iconic aerial photo showing the extent of the pockmarked, moonscape of a field.
On a personal level, the archaeological investigation of Slack Farm compelled Pollack, Munson, and me to prepare the first of what would become a series of public-oriented booklets on Kentucky archaeology. Kentucky Educational Television in 1994 produced *A Native Presence*, a documentary that still airs today, highlighting issues surrounding the looting of graves and archaeological sites and examining the Native American presence in Kentucky. State-wide and nationally, Slack Farm prompted the American archaeological community to do a better job of educating the public about the state’s and the country’s rich archaeological heritage and the need to enlist help in protecting these fragile resources.

The Slack Farm artifacts, notes, photographs, and forms are curated in perpetuity at the William S. Webb Museum of Anthropology on the campus of the University of Kentucky, and the collection is available for researchers to study. The recovered materials became the foundation of Pollack’s dissertation research, which was supported by the National Science Foundation, and a subsequent book on the Caborn-Welborn culture. The site assemblage also has been the focus of student theses and papers and public exhibits. There is so much more to learn. The work that has been done to date has only scratched the surface.

And, finally, what of the site itself? Shortly after the completion of fieldwork, the Indians’ request was realized: the bones of their ancestors were reburied. Hundreds of boxes holding the remains of over 900 men, women, and children were returned to the site and reinterred in the largest looter holes, as part of a private reburial ceremony overseen by Chief Shenandoah of the Haudenosaunee. Native people return to the site periodically to remember. Despite the intense destruction of the village cemeteries and some of its habitation areas, over ninety percent of this fascinating site remains undisturbed. Today, Slack Farm is an unremarkable Union County agricultural field on a terrace adjacent to the wide Ohio River. Local law enforcement officers occasionally drive by to check up on it – given past events, who would loot it now? There are no markers, no signs, no evidence of what happened there decades ago.

But I remember. And, now, perhaps so will you.