

PRELIMINARY EXCAVATIONS AT THE NATE HARRISON SITE

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This analysis presents findings from the inaugural season of excavation at the Nate Harrison site, located on Palomar Mountain in San Diego County. Nate Harrison, a freed black slave, is one of San Diego County's legendary pioneers. San Diego State University's 2004 summer field school in historical archaeology successfully located the cobble footings of Harrison's cabin, occupied from sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century to 1920. Preliminary excavations uncovered over 6,100 artifacts, many of which shed significant insight into Harrison's daily life and into issues of community and identity for the early American Period in San Diego County.

Nate Harrison is one of San Diego County's legendary pioneers. Fabled stories abound about this former enslaved African-American from the South who lived high up the southwest side of Palomar Mountain into the early 1900s. There are numerous quaint tales of his rugged frontier life. He allegedly added lizards to his coffee grinds for extra flavor and regularly grappled with mountain lions. These anecdotal stories also hint at his role and identity in the rural community. This African-American purportedly would introduce himself to strangers along the steep and windy grade as "the first white man on the mountain" (Beckler 1958:10). In addition, he spent much time at the Pala, Pauma, and La Jolla reservations, and he allegedly married a Native American woman with two children (Day and Melvin 1981).

And then there are the pictures. Over a dozen stunning turn-of-the-century photographs of Harrison exist. He is shown sitting at his cabin, posing with white traveler-tourists, and walking his dog. Harrison is one of the most frequently photographed nineteenth-century San Diegans, black, white, or any other ethnicity. He was San Diego's Eiffel Tower; tourists had to take a picture of him to prove that they had made it to the top of the incredibly steep mountain. One of the many enigmas of Nate Harrison's legend is in how and why San Diego has continually chosen to immortalize him. Why were other African-Americans and individuals from many different ethnic minorities that predate Harrison's time on the mountain and were far more imbedded in local history forsaken for this charismatic character and his lonely homestead on the hillside?

Historical archaeology has the unique potential to evaluate, scrutinize, broaden, and deepen insights into Nate Harrison's life and legend. This preliminary analysis presents findings from the inaugural 2004 San Diego State University field excavation season at the Nate Harrison site. The three-week field school successfully located the remains of Harrison's cabin and uncovered over 6,100 artifacts that date to Harrison's late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century occupation on Palomar Mountain. Although there had been previous pothunting on the site, SDSU's excavations marked the first recorded and scientific archaeology on the property.

In the following study, these archaeological discoveries are coupled with recent in-depth historical investigations. Digging in the local archives has been equally productive in facilitating investigations into Harrison's daily life and his place in San Diego County's history during the early American and early Modern periods. Stories of Nate Harrison during the years since his passing have been far from uniform. Even their changes have been far from consistent. The changing natures of these accounts are doubly revealing. On the one hand, they contain important information about Harrison. On the other, the way these stories change is as revealing about the people that tell them as the times in which these authors are living. As always, historical context is as meaningful as archaeological context.

HISTORICAL SOURCES

There are a few primary contemporaneous records that help to contextualize Harrison's arrival and stay in San Diego County. Pervasive legends have Nate Harrison atop Palomar Mountain as early as 1850. Nevertheless, the 1880 San Diego County census places him in the region, but not on the mountain. He is recorded twice, once in the San Jacinto Township and once in the Bear Valley Township. Both refer to him as a single black farm worker around 50 years of age. It is important to note that had Harrison settled on Palomar Mountain by 1880, he would have likely been recorded at his mountain residence along with his neighbors that are recorded on the mountain in the 1880 census.

The second primary historical document is a water claim that Harrison filed for the freshwater spring associated with his land. It is dated May 26, 1892 and gives Harrison the rights to the flowing, percolating, and collecting water from a stream on the west side of the mountain. This water source was central to Harrison's role in the community. He routinely met travelers and their weary horses or overheating cars with water from his fresh spring. An 1893 homestead certificate granted the 18 ha (45 acres) on the mountain to Harrison. In addition, the December 1896 survey map shows the steep and windy grade that leads to "N. Harrison" in the top right corner. There is also

a February 12, 1897 County of San Diego consent form with the name Nathan Harrison that allows the road in the aforementioned map to be turned into a public highway. Finally, upon Harrison's death in 1920, there is a deed of sale that lists Nathan Harrison as the owner of the 18.4 ha (45.5 acres) of land sold to Frank Salmons for \$607.50. This document is dated July 1, 1921. Although it does not help to place Harrison atop Palomar Mountain, his October 22, 1894 voter registration form yields significant personal information, including his age (61 years), height (5 ft 3 in [160 cm]), and his state of origin (Kentucky). It, like all other legal documents concerning Harrison, is marked with an X for his signature.

The many recorded stories regarding the life and times of Nate Harrison stayed fairly consistent during the 30 years that followed his 1920 demise. It was agreed that he was a former slave from Kentucky who came to California through Missouri. He arrived in northern California as part of the Gold Rush before the Civil War sometime in the late 1840s. These stories each emphasized that Harrison traveled with his owner on the westward journey, yet none mentioned the name of the owner. In the 1950s, however, the details of the stories about Nate Harrison begin to change. In addition, there is a significant shift in the number of different versions recorded. The first major change is in the identification of Harrison's master. No longer anonymous, he is now a Virginian by the name of Lysander Utt. Furthermore, Nate Harrison is now deemed to be from Virginia—like Utt himself—not Kentucky. In addition, there is an explosion of inventive tales about Harrison's past, including an escape down the Mississippi like Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, an active tour of duty in the military that involved a trip around the Horn, and an adventurous covered wagon train with the Welty family where they were allegedly ambushed by hostile Native Americans. Suddenly, Nate Harrison was living in the fabled life of frontier America's most popular and best-known characters.

It is possible to seriate the historical sources to pinpoint and showcase these changes (Table 1) (Mallios 2006a, 2006b). Since the dates are known, this type of seriation gets at exactly how things change and why. For example, the seriation of historical sources regarding Harrison's state of origin reveals that over time Virginia began to replace Kentucky as his accepted place of birth. In addition, performing

Table 1: Frequency seriation of number of histories for Harrison's different alleged birth state.

Narrative Period	Kentucky	Virginia
1911-30	1	0
1931-50	3	1
1951-70	3	3
1971-90	1	2
1991-	0	1

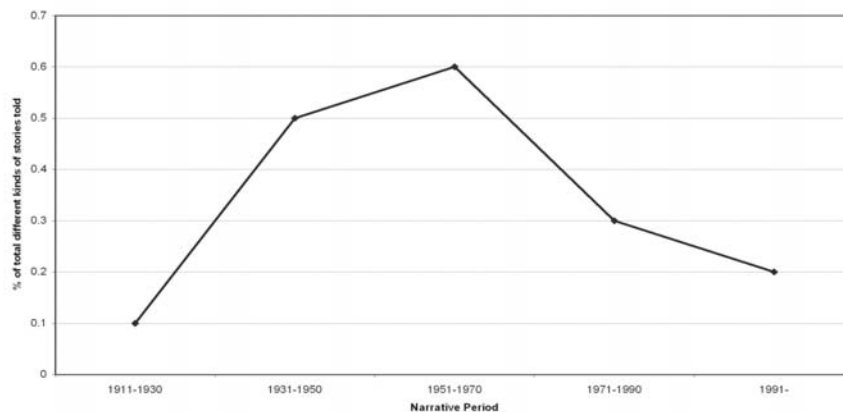


Figure 1: Index of similarity as to when new stories emerged regarding how Harrison originally traveled to California

an index of similarity on the number of stories recorded over time reveals that the 1950s marked a spike in creative attention to the Nate Harrison legend (Figure 1). The question becomes not where Harrison was from or who owned him, but what happened in the 1950s to transform these stories so significantly. It is worth noting that James B. Utt, a direct descendent of Lysander Utt, made a successful run for Congress from rural San Diego in 1952. His campaign included extensive propaganda regarding his direct familial link to San Diego pioneer Nate Harrison. Utt becomes a Congressman and in the process, Harrison is apotheosized into a local legend. Is it any surprise that during this time the name of the road that led to Harrison's place was changed officially from "Nigger Nate Grade" to "Nathan Harrison Grade Road"?

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Archaeological investigations at the site started in 2004 in an area that was completely overgrown with waist-high brush. On the basis of a few of the cobbles that were sticking out of the ground, the local lore about the exact whereabouts of Harrison's abode, and the general topographic similarity between the area with these protruding stones and the areas shown in the historical pictures, excavators began to clear off the surface debris. They immediately uncovered the stone footings of a fairly rectangular, 3.7-by-4.6 m (12-by-15 ft) structure that matched the projected extent of Harrison's cabin in the historical photographs. There were a few surface finds in the general area, including bottle glass, iron nails, and weathered leather strips.

Excavations started in opposite 1.5-by-1.5 m (5-by-5 ft) units in the area just west of the structure. This was likely the patio area of Harrison's property that appeared photographically to be a locus of high activity. In these holes, students promptly encountered large numbers of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century debris. These finds included silver-plated utensils, a horseshoe, machine-cut nails, and small arms cartridges. The units were dug in 7.5-cm (3-in) levels as the incredibly dry and sandy soil showed no natural break in the stratigraphy.

Whereas units to the west of the structural remains were artifact-rich, units to the north and east of the cabin footings contained very few material finds. The striking disparity between these areas offers two insights. First, as expected the space just to the west of the cabin was most likely a high-activity area. Second, Harrison’s primary trash dump is likely just to the west of this patio area. Units inside the structural footings were dug in alignment with the shape of the structure. In an effort to gain spatial control over potentially different living areas within the cabin, the interior space was subdivided into 12 equal-sized 7.5-by-7.5 cm (3-by-3 in) squares. Opposite interior units also demonstrated no evident distinctions in stratigraphy and were dug in 7.5-cm (3-in) levels. The units along the western and southern walls contained significantly more artifacts than those along the eastern and northern walls. The edges of the units also indicated that the footings evident at the surface had spatial continuity with those underground. Individual rock-by-rock mapping of the footings also suggests architectural integrity for the stone placement.

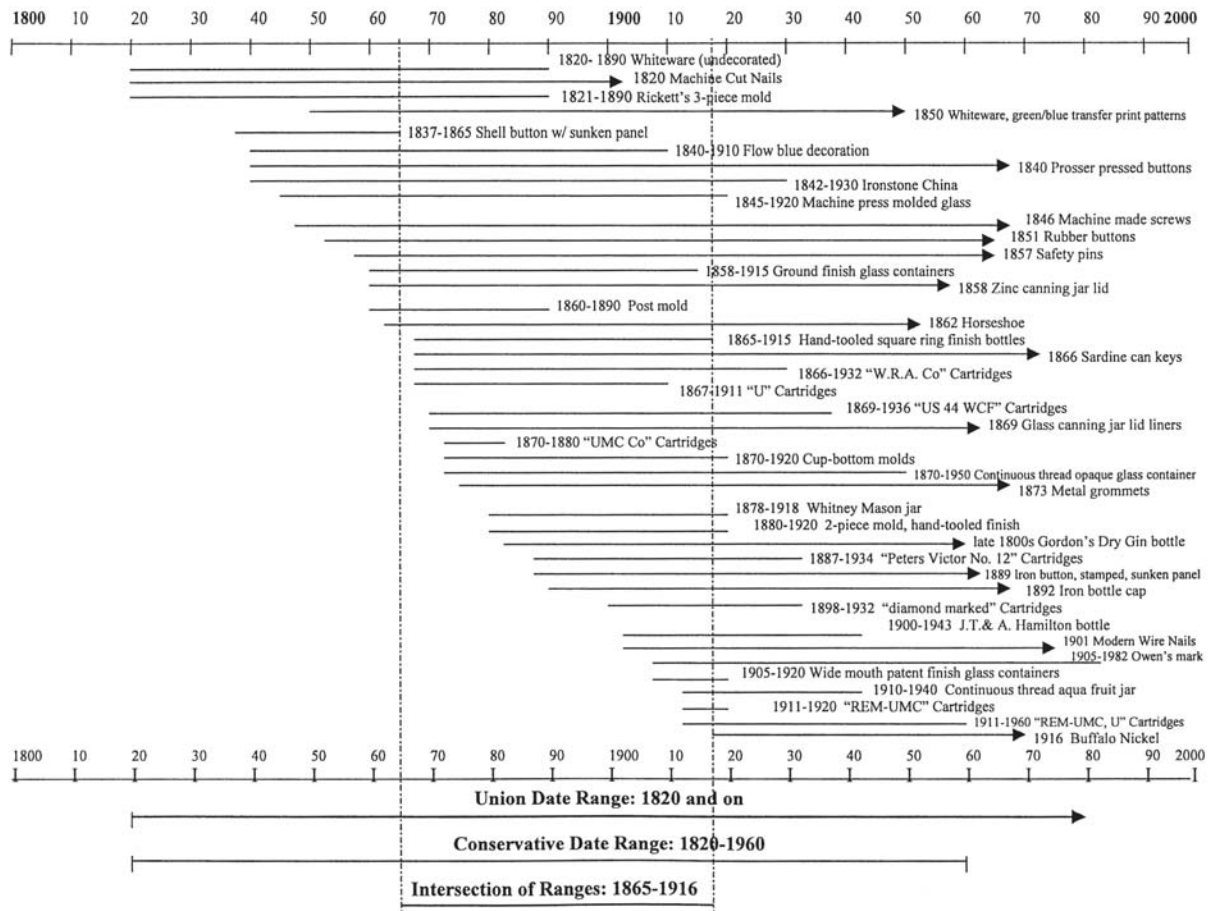
The overall material assemblage offers convincing evidence linking the stone footings with Nate Harrison’s occupation on Palomar Mountain. Production and use-related date ranges for the 6,100 artifacts demonstrate a date range intersection from 1865 to 1916 (Figure 2). This minimal range is based on the 1865 cutoff date for shell buttons with a sunken panel and the terminus post quem 1916

buffalo nickel. Discounting potential lingering or hand-me-down materials, an even tighter date range based on cartridges, pottery, and glass is 1880-1916, which corresponds remarkably well with the primary documentary evidence that had Harrison in the region from 1880 to 1920. It is worth noting that only the top 7.5 cm (3 in) of the site has been excavated, and the recovered materials may only reflect the final decades of Harrison’s life.

There are numerous artifacts that have direct correlates with the historical photographs of Harrison. These parallels go far beyond the obvious architectural correspondence. In fact, archaeologically recovered parallels abound, be it in the form of Harrison’s rubber pipe mouthpiece, his nickel watch fob, or his leather boot (Figure 3). These and other finds suggest a one-to-one correspondence between objects Harrison wore and was photographed with, and those that we have recovered from the site.

Other finds have a more indirect tie to Harrison’s daily life. For example, a small intact bottle embossed with the label, “Murine Eye Remedy; Chicago, U.S.A” was found just outside of the cabin. A Murine Eye Remedy advertisement from this era was found in the 1880s novel *Homestead on the Hillside*. Although the novel is set in Ohio, its title is eerily poignant for Harrison’s cabin, itself a homestead on the hillside. The ointment also speaks to the general time period, an era in which

Figure 2: Intersection of artifact date ranges.



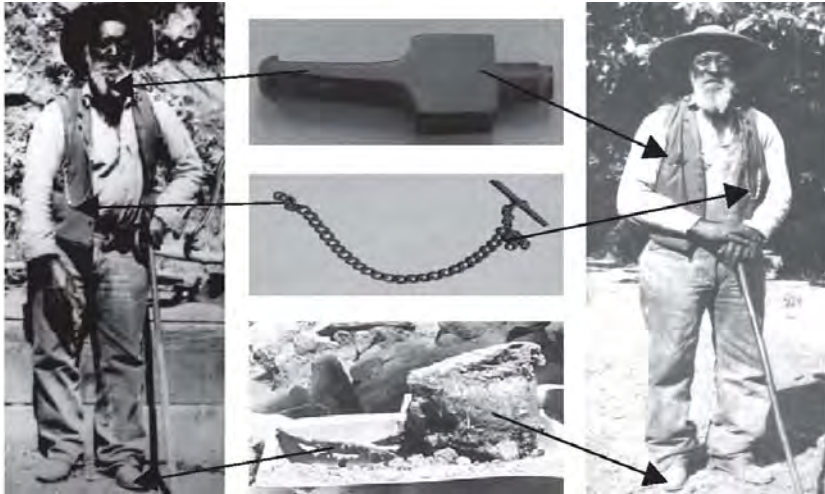


Figure 3: Circa 1915 photographs of Harrison (Kirby Collection and Escondido Historical Society) with associated archaeological artifacts from 2004 field season; from top to bottom: rubber tobacco pipe mouthpiece, nickel watch fob, and leather boot.

bottled elixirs were commonly employed to cure a variety of ailments. The advertisement reads, “To Refresh, Cleanse and Strengthen the Eye. . . Enfeebled by Exposure to Strong Winds, Dust, Reflected Sunlight and Eye Strain.” Wind, dust, and direct sunlight all typify the mountain environment that Nate Harrison called home. While none of the literary documents speak to Harrison’s specific ailments, one photograph, taken late in Harrison’s life, shows how gray the irises of his eyes had become, a condition that often occurs with the onset of cataracts.

In looking at broader cultural and historical patterns, isolated finds from the Nate Harrison site show an emphasis on time-related instruments. The watch chain and multiple clock gears parallel the attention paid to time in the late nineteenth century. This was when time zones were standardized, an act that was both highly practical and symbolic. On the one hand, it facilitated the coordination of railroad scheduling and worked with the telegraph to unite society in immediacy (Kern 1983). On the other, the sudden necessity of knowing what time it was became evident in the most remote and isolated frontier settlement. This new burden of time led contemporary authors to explore resistance to this idea. Joseph Conrad, for example, in his 1907 *The Secret Agent*, bases his plot around an individual attempting to blow up the center of standardized time, the Greenwich Observatory (Conrad 2004).

The overall artifact pattern reflects a frontier lifestyle. This is evident through multiple lines of evidence. The faunal remains are mostly wild animals. The cartridges are mostly those of small arms; in fact, many are from a Winchester model known as the Varmint Killer. The glass containers reflect an emphasis on canning and other more remote food production activities. In addition, the artifact assemblage is a wide mix of styles and types. Like other frontier assemblages, high- and low-status goods are mixed together, and there are virtually no matching ceramics, bottles, or utensils.

The primary conclusion of the 2004 field season is simple: the project has successfully identified and uncovered the remains of Nate Harrison’s late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cabin up on Palomar Mountain. However, far more complicated is the notion of situating Harrison in San Diego’s history. He is not the first African-American in San Diego County; he most likely is not the first African-

American buried in San Diego County; and he may not even be its first African-American homesteader. Yet, the celebration and acceptance of him in San Diego society during his life and continuing to this today gave him permanence in the region that was achieved by no other African-American. Whether it is because he chose to live apart and segregate himself, comforted white San Diegans with a safe Uncle Tom-like image, or some other reason is unknown. But his identity and acceptance as San Diego’s first permanent African-American perseveres.

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