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Paradoxes in Designs for New Philadelphia National Historic Landmark

By Kathryn O. Fay and Christopher C. Fennell
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New Philadelphia, Illinois, established in 1836 by Frank McWorter, was the first town planned in advance and legally founded by an African American in the United States. The history of this community entails compelling stories of African Americans and European Americans residing in a town founded by an exceptional figure during times of extreme racism. Members of the local and descendant communities, archaeologists, historians, and genealogists have worked together for the past decade to advance research into this remarkable crossroads of families, merchants, farmers, and artisans, and to enhance their place in our national memory and heritage. In considering ways to present the town site and its lessons to broad audiences of visitors, divergences in design preferences can emerge among popular views held by community members and professionals.

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Abstract

New Philadelphia, Illinois, established in 1836 by Frank McWorter, was the first town planned in advance and legally founded by an African American in the United States. The history of this community entails compelling stories of African Americans and European Americans residing in a town founded by an exceptional figure during times of extreme racism. Members of the local and descendant communities, archaeologists, historians, and genealogists have worked together for the past decade to advance research into this remarkable crossroads of families, merchants, farmers, and artisans, and to enhance their place in our national memory and heritage. In considering ways to present the town site and its lessons to broad audiences of visitors, divergences in design preferences can emerge among popular views held by community members and professionals.

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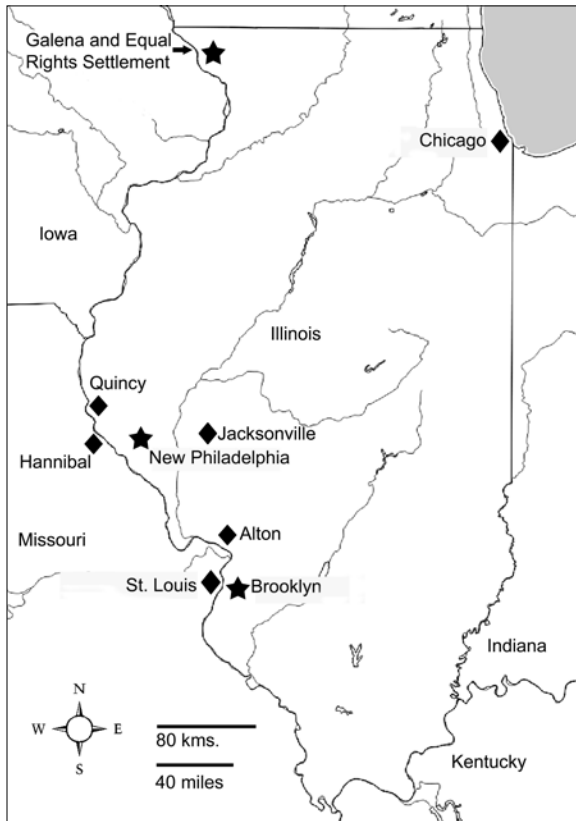


Figure 1: Map of location of New Philadelphia National Historic Landmark Site. *Image by C. Fennell.*

“It’s a love story.” With admirable concision, Patricia Likes captures her view of the meaning and significance of the New Philadelphia National Historic Landmark site in rural Pike County. Likes is a resident of the local community surrounding New Philadelphia in western Illinois, and she has spent years educating area children on the story of Frank McWorter. Born into slavery in South Carolina in 1777, he succeeded in his life-time in purchasing first his wife Lucy’s freedom, and then freedom for himself and fourteen children and grandchildren. These outlays required a total expenditure equal to over \$300,000 in today’s currency. As part

of his ventures to raise more funds for this exhausting effort, he acquired 160 acres of land in western Illinois in 1830 and moved a portion of his family there. Seeing the potential for increased proceeds of land sales through town planning, he was the first African American to plan in advance and legally found a town in the United States. In 1836, he filed a plan and survey for a town called Philadelphia (later called New Philadelphia on local maps) to turn undeveloped prairie into a 42-acre, grid-shaped, cultural landscape of blocks, lots, alleys, and streets (Figure 1) (Fennell et al., 2010; Shackel, 2010; Walker, 1983).

As Likes emphasizes, love of family and love of freedom instilled Frank McWorter with remarkable drive, ingenuity, and perseverance. His planned town grew from the 1840s through the late 1800s as an integrated community of African-American and European American families. New Philadelphia grew as a modest crossroads and commercial hub in a rural location halfway between the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. During its existence as a town, it included a blacksmith, wheelwright, wagon maker, supply store, carpenter, shoemaker, preacher, school teachers, a number of households, and a peak population of somewhere between 70 and 160 people over several decades.

The community stood in the midst of a region torn by racial strife. Illinois gained statehood in 1818 as a “free” state, and yet deployed extensive “Black Code” laws hostile to African Americans. Western Illinois was a battleground of racial tensions in the nineteenth century, with abolitionist advocates in Quincy and Alton combating pro-slavery groups in nearby Hannibal, Missouri, and elsewhere in Illinois (Figure 1). Residents of Jacksonville and New Philadelphia reportedly assisted people escaping slavery on their route north to Canada, while Illinois and federal laws permitted bounty hunters from the slave state of Missouri to traverse Illinois soil at will. After the Civil War, New Philadelphia was bypassed by a new railroad built through the area in 1870, and the merchants and residents moved away thereafter. Persuasive evidence indicates that this bypassing of the town may have been motivated by racial dynamics. By 1885, a large portion of the landscape was declassified as a town and



Figure 2: Aerial view of New Philadelphia National Historic Landmark site with town plat boundaries highlighted.

Photograph courtesy Dr. Tommy Hailer; overlay by C. Fennell.

reverted to use as large agricultural fields. By the late 1990s, no remains of the many buildings of New Philadelphia survived above ground. Yet, a rich archaeological record of the community lay in repose beneath the soil (Figure 2) (Fay et al., 2009; Fennell et al., 2010; Shackel, 2010).

The New Philadelphia Archaeology Project was initiated in 2002 with principal research efforts combining anthropology, archaeology, history, and African-American studies. This project was launched in response to the initiatives and requests of members of the local and descendant communities who wanted to see more research undertaken. The archaeology project has been conducted through regular and intensive collaboration with community members; we consulted them at each turn on research priorities and developing interpretations of the data uncovered in our investigations. Such intensive collaborations with interested communities enhance both archaeology projects and museum designs (e.g., Lavine, 1992; Mullins, 2004). The project has sought to understand the past life ways of this

racially integrated community and to examine the contours of racism in the past and present. This multi-year archaeological project, sponsored in part by the National Science Foundation's program of Research Experiences for Undergraduates, has located many intact features, such as building foundations, the remains of wells, pit cellars, and concentrations of artifacts from the town's occupation. Archeological investigations uncovered more than 150,000 artifacts (Fay et al., 2009; Fennell et al., 2010; Shackel, 2010).

Archaeological work from 2002 through 2011 revealed the locations of 21 house and business structures, including numerous residences, a store, and a blacksmith operation. A number of general findings can be summarized here. There appears to have been no racial segregation of property locations within the town. The locations of residences and businesses of African Americans and European Americans were spatially interspersed in the town. The residents did experience the impacts of segregation in their cemeteries and their schools. We uncovered no archaeological evidence of violent destruction of properties within the town, even though the community was located within a region sharply impacted by racial strife (Fay et al., 2009; Fennell et al., 2010; Shackel, 2010).

Before the construction of an integrated schoolhouse in 1874, the children of African-American families were educated in a separate schoolhouse established within the town by McWorter. Learning about the location and history of that schoolhouse was a high priority for the descendant community. Archaeology also revealed early house sites not evident in historic-period documents, such as deeds and tax ledgers. Most structures and occupation sites appear to have been concentrated in the north-central portion of the town. Residents enjoyed access to local, regional, and international commodities from the outset of settlement of the town. Ceramic housewares were similar in style, expense levels, and types of assemblages across house sites of both African Americans and European Americans (Fay et al., 2009; Fennell et al., 2010; Shackel, 2010).

Based upon the success of the archaeological investigations, which built upon earlier historical studies, the project succeeded

in placing the New Philadelphia town site on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005. In 2008, the nomination of the town site to National Historic Landmark status was approved by the National Historic Landmarks committee in Washington, DC. Patricia McWorter (2008), a fifth-generation descendant of Frank and Lucy, presented an eloquent statement on behalf of the McWorter family at that hearing on the powerful legacies of New Philadelphia and its founder. The nomination received final approval in 2009. Federal legislation is now pending to authorize the National Park Service (NPS) to consider how New Philadelphia could be developed as an “outdoor museum” for presentation of its lessons to broad audiences of site visitors. The many research collaborators and members of the descendant and local communities now ponder what such a presentation might entail.

The archaeology project has already succeeded in communicating the value of scientific methods and investigations in efforts to understand the American past. Such news coverage and public outreach efforts have dramatically increased many Americans’ knowledge of the remarkable history of New Philadelphia and ongoing efforts to combat the formation of racial ideologies in today’s society. For many descendant community members, this project entails experiences that traverse scales from the personal to the global. Abdul Alkalimat (2010, p. 156), a leading scholar in Black Studies and a fifth-generation descendant of Frank McWorter, put it this way:

This is both a family drama and a scientific drama, as the story of Frank McWorter becomes part of the iconic structure of the African American narrative. This is a challenge to all African American families to rediscover the freedom impulse in their family history, to trace its movement across the generations, and to nurture it now and for the future.

New Philadelphia thus entails profound legacies of achievement, stories of the community’s life ways, and tangible evidence retrieved from buried remains. A number of options emerge as stakeholders discuss possible approaches to developing the site

for a broad audience of visitors. These alternatives confront ways of balancing tangible and intangible heritage. With no surviving structures existing above ground, should site managers for New Philadelphia undertake conjectural reconstructions of residences, a blacksmith shop, a wheel wright's operation, and work areas? Should visitors instead be presented with an unaltered expanse of grounds, annotated with exhibit signs and smaller-scale, structural models that convey the stories of the McWorters and New Philadelphia?

This article includes three case studies of other archaeology sites presented as outdoor museums and the ways in which such contrastive approaches have developed, starting with New Salem, Illinois, where many residents of Illinois have fond memories of visiting its large-scale reconstruction of a prairie village dating to the 1830s, followed by the experiences of the Cane River plantation sites in Louisiana and the Levi Jordan Plantation site in Texas. Potential lessons learned from these sites are discussed throughout and further considered in a final section of concluding observations.

Archaeologists often face a particular quandary in these deliberations. We specialize in bringing tangible evidence to light that can enhance our understanding of the past and its lessons for our future. Yet, archaeologists often take a particularly circumspect view of creating reconstructions of past built environments. We often can tell you the exact location and outline of a building's foundations. Matters grow more conjectural when we speculate on whether the upper stories were built of horizontal log or wood frame designs, or what the house façade would have looked like. Trained in the rigors of the scientific method of inquiry and proof, we tend to shy away from proposals for large-scale, speculative reconstructions. Yet, at New Philadelphia we work hand-in-hand with impassioned members of the descendant and local communities. They want above all to see the highly significant stories—the intangible heritage—of the McWorters and this community conveyed to broad audiences. To communicate those legacies on-site, one first has to attract visitors to such a remote location. Standing in the prairie grass that covers New

Philadelphia, one wonders: If you don't build it, will they still come? Are there other options?

To Walk in Lincoln's Footsteps

New Salem, Illinois, presents a reconstruction of a "prairie village" as it was believed to have looked in the years 1830–1837, when Abraham Lincoln lived there. Located just outside the state capitol of Springfield, New Salem is a premier "living history museum" for residents of Illinois and the surrounding region. When we ask members of the local and descendant communities how we might develop New Philadelphia, the reconstruction of New Salem springs readily to mind for many.

New Salem was a small, rural village that existed, by coincidence, only during the decade in which Lincoln held interests there. Shortly after he departed a new county seat was developed nearby, and residents moved away and abandoned the buildings in New Salem. Those remains were largely scavenged away and deteriorated over time, leaving little above ground. Interest in the remains of the village emerged shortly after Lincoln was assassinated and began to be viewed as a national martyr. In the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration assigned teams of the the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to conduct extensive archaeological excavations at the village site. The CCC then reconstructed numerous horizontal log structures to represent the houses, shops, and mills of New Salem as they may have looked in the 1830s. These reconstructed buildings capture the imaginations of many visitors today (Mazrim, 2007). As anthropologist Edward Bruner (2005, p. 132) observes, "the physicality of the site lends credibility, power, and immediacy to the story" of Lincoln's years in New Salem.

New Salem also employs paid and volunteer individuals to act as "interpreters" distributed across the reconstructed village site. These interpreters wear clothing like that worn in the 1830s and speak with visitors about the life ways of that period. They demonstrate craft enterprises, such as sewing and blacksmith work, in the log buildings. This interactive presentation of New Salem has contributed significantly to the site's success in

attracting and engaging visitors (Bruner, 2005). When an advisory panel proposed in 1979 that the New Salem buildings be removed and the site restored to its original appearance before the CCC reconstructions, a public outcry thwarted the plan (Bruner, 2005, p. 143).

Archaeologist Robert Mazrim has worked extensively on historic-period sites throughout Illinois, including locations within New Salem. He also works as an outreach coordinator for the Illinois State Archaeological Survey. Mazrim generously conducted walking tours for many of our New Philadelphia project participants over the years. While visitors find the reconstructed buildings very attractive, Mazrim points out the discretionary choices made by CCC teams in building these structures. Some buildings are not located where all the evidence would place them, and may have been positioned for more pragmatic reasons during the 1930s work by the CCC. Moreover, the interiors of many of the structures were constructed in an exaggerated scale, in part to accommodate a flow of visitors and their interactions with interpreters (Mazrim, 2007).

Mazrim finds these reconstruction designs represent a fascinating statement of the perspectives of early twentieth century historians and the public they served, rather than as a representation of archaeological data. He has conducted new archaeology in locations in New Salem where the CCC had not investigated. Mazrim uncovered the remains of two newly discovered house sites. After concluding the investigations, he avoided suggestions of creating yet another reconstruction of an 1830s dwelling. Instead, he designed a less obtrusive exhibit that presents an archaeological perspective on the site. Preserving the archaeological record of the house site, he avoided placing exhibition displays into the ground of those remains. Instead, he designed a display sign immediately adjacent to the site. A transparent glass inset has an image of a log cabin etched upon it. When a visitor stands before the sign to read the information provided, the perspective superimposes the etched image onto the view-shed of the exact ground on which the house stood. This provides a tangible connection of an image of the house with its archaeological

footprint without disturbing the archaeological record. The simple lines of the etching further remind the visitor that this depiction of the house façade is speculative (Mazrim, personal communication, 2011). In contrast, visitors who step into and out of a CCC reconstruction cannot help but think they have just fully experienced an “1830s moment” (Bruner, 2005).

New Salem thus presents the dilemma of archaeologists’ negotiations between the tangible and intangible. We work to uncover tangible evidence buried in the ground. We work further to interpret the significance of that evidence to produce accounts and stories—new forms of intangible heritage—to convey to broad audiences. Yet, influenced by our training as scientific investigators, we shy away from presenting such information through settings that are both tangible and conjectural. Studies of living history museums have shown that visitors very frequently misconstrue speculative building reconstructions as the original structures from a distant past (e.g., Davis, 1997; Horning, 2001). Signs on reconstructions that emphasize they are speculative appear to have little effect in displacing this impression. As a result, other sites, such as the Ben Franklin Court in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, have utilized more abstract forms of reconstructions, called “ghost structures.” These displays consist of wood or steel beams that only provide the possible outlines of a building’s dimensions (Davis, 1997). Other sites avoid such structural displays altogether and instead rely on signs placed adjacent to the locations of the archaeological features (Davis, 1997). Mazrim’s design at New Salem provided an intriguing combination of a ghost-like outline embedded within an exhibit sign.

With an expanding availability of small, tablet-size computers, one could also speculate about their use at sites like New Philadelphia or New Salem. Such tablet computers often have Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) receivers installed within them. Presentation packages could be designed to load onto such tablet computers to present layers of detailed maps, images, reconstruction drawings, historic-period photographs, audio-video interviews, and additional textual and archaeological information for specific locations as a visitor traversed the

grassy fields of a past town site. This approach could convey a broad array of display selections for each location to a visitor and yet have little deleterious impact on the integrity of the buried archaeology record (Heritage Daily News, 2012; RCAS, 2012). For example, while walking over the space of Louisa McWorter's mid-1800s house site at New Philadelphia, a GPS receiver in the tablet would highlight the general location and visitors could select to watch a video-recorded interview with a McWorter descendant detailing family histories about Louisa's life and accomplishments. A detraction of such an approach might involve a form of the "digital divide" and questions of how many visitors would own such devices. To address this, a number of such devices could be available for loan to those visitors who do not own one.

Learning from Community Engagement at Plantation Sites

Dale Philips is the NPS Superintendent for the Lincoln Home National Park. He has worked in design, management, and stewardship for NPS for 35 years in a diversity of sites and subjects, including battlefields, memorials, and the legacies of Lincoln. Philips generously participated in our 2011 New Philadelphia speaker series to address current trends he has observed in site development. He spoke enthusiastically about the development of the Cane River Creole National Historical Park and recommended we look to the facets of their successes when deliberating over potential approaches to New Philadelphia (Philips, personal communication, 2011).

The Cane River Park, established in 1994, consists of three separate sites in Louisiana: the Park Headquarters and Conservation Facility in Natchitoches, Oakland Plantation in Bermuda, and the outbuildings of Magnolia Plantation in Derry. The two plantations, dating from the 1700s onward, demonstrate facets of the history of colonization, the frontier period, French and Creole architecture, agriculture, slavery, land tenancy, and changing social practices. The Park consists of multiple cultural resources, including historic vernacular buildings, cultural plantation landscapes, family and plantation records,

and an extensive collection of material culture objects. The Park illustrates the changing culture of the region, influenced by Native Americans, French and Spanish colonists, enslaved Africans, and later, Americans. The Park specifically highlights Creole culture, which is considered not as a historical, racial category, but rather as a cultural concept tied to genealogy, colonial heritage, and religion (Gates, 2002).

The 1994 federal legislation that created the Park was enthusiastically supported by local and descendant communities and also called for the NPS to coordinate a comprehensive research program on the complex history of the region. The NPS continues in the spirit of collaboration with those stakeholder communities, using the Park to not only educate visitors on the history of the area, but also to host school groups, music festivals, and family reunions, and to encourage community interaction by utilizing volunteers in Park clean-up days and multiple other activities (CRNHAC, 2012). A national heritage area is a place recognized by Congress for its unique contribution to the American experience, and continued use of the area by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscapes enhances the significance of those places (NPS, 2012).

The Cane River National Heritage Area Commission is the managing body of the Park. The Commission works to keep discussion and collaboration open with multiple local groups and to allow the Park to stay attuned to changing cultures and opinions (CRNHAC, 2012). They have considered a variety of approaches to public presentations at the Park. Some community members wanted to model the Park, especially the plantation sites, after other southern plantation sites, complete with costumed interpreters (Gates, 2002). This approach was declined in an effort to better represent the various cultures that inhabited the area, especially the Creole life ways. Interdisciplinary research and outreach efforts have allowed the Park and community members to collaboratively develop a story that will undoubtedly continue to evolve.

The New Philadelphia project has achieved strengths similar to those of the Cane River project by embracing a collaborative and community-based campaign to spread information about the

site and to engage scholars, descendant family members, and other interested parties in ongoing interactions. A variety of voices involved in the discussions of the research and presentation of the town site has allowed the project to be more inclusive in the stories it tells and the types of information that are shared among all collaborators. This same type of relationship is demonstrated at Cane River, and such an ongoing commitment to continued collaboration with multiple community organizations, local landowners, and descendant families can greatly enhance the experiences at New Philadelphia.

The Levi Jordan Plantation site, located in Brazoria, Texas, approximately 60 miles south of Houston, has also provided an array of considerations for the New Philadelphia project. The Jordan site has been the focus of a multi-year historical and archaeological project by archaeologists, historians, descendant and local community members, and interested volunteers. The plantation began in 1848 with a focus on sugar production. A main house, dwellings for enslaved laborers, and several outbuildings were built by 1854. By that time, there were approximately 100 people on the plantation, including over 90 enslaved laborers. African Americans lived in a “quarters community” at the plantation, worked as enslaved labor until emancipation, and later lived and worked at the site as tenant farmers. African-American residents appear to have abandoned the quarters area suddenly, in 1888, in a manner which caused them to leave most of their belongings behind. A large portion of the laborers’ quarters and portions of the surrounding yards were investigated in research projects by Kenneth Brown and his colleagues, revealing a great deal of information about the daily lives of those living within the African-American community at the plantation (Brown and Cooper, 1990; McDavid, 1998).

The Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society (LJPHS) was organized in 1993 as a non-profit organization to manage the use and presentation of the site. African-American members of the descendant and local communities were initially reticent to collaborate in such research and outreach projects. They had experienced earlier frustrations with projects concerning

other heritage sites in the region, and perceived that their contributions had been undervalued or ignored in those projects. The LJPBS addressed this reticence by asking members of the African-American descendant community to choose their own representatives to serve on the LJPBS managing board. Such commitments to move power into the hands of community members significantly expanded the collaborative efforts and interactions (McDavid, 1998).

To enhance the scope of the project, Carol McDavid worked to foster discussions and feedback through public archaeology websites. Her work was pioneering at the time and has been followed by many subsequent projects. McDavid wanted to test the idea that the internet was a valid and useful medium for communicating archaeology and fostering robust collaborations. Such internet resources could also serve interested parties who could not visit the site and collaborative meetings in person. Discussions through internet exchanges also yielded helpful debates. Some terms used by project staff, such as “slaves,” raised contentions, leading to the adoption of more appropriate terminology, such as “enslaved people.” The dangers of a “digital divide” and access to the website were also addressed by designing the internet resources to be as user-friendly as possible (McDavid, 2004).

Community members feared they would lose their voice when the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) later took over ownership and management of the Jordan site. The LJPBS provided advice, but no longer managed the site, and stakeholders perceived the new TPWD representatives as “outsiders” (McDavid, 2004). The plantation site was closed to public visits while the TPWD decided how to manage and present the site to public visitors. More recently, management of the site has been transferred from the TPWD to the Texas Historical Commission. A primary concern for the project remains the question of whether the grassroots organization that started this initiative will continue to have a say in its future.

The New Philadelphia project followed in McDavid’s footsteps in broad utilization of internet resources to enhance collaboration and public outreach. We also actively deliberate on the

ways in which park agency professionals could contribute to the broad goals of the community. The confidence that NPS professionals like Dale Philips express concerning the collaboration at projects such as Cane River provides a heartening counter-point to the difficulties African-American stakeholders experienced with the TPWD. We hope that the ingenuity and creativity of the descendant and local communities for New Philadelphia will help us navigate these varied interests in ongoing discussions with research, museum, and design professionals.

Concluding Observations

An additional challenge is to engage site visitors as collaborators. Recent studies of successful museum practices emphasize the importance of presentations that facilitate dialogue with visitors and of significant investment in interactive formats. Visitors can respond to exhibits through comments and through their own stories contributed in guest books, video recordings, comment cards, and online web logs. More powerful still are designs that prompt visitors to pose their own questions and to pursue those themes across a site. Such contributions and feedback will be meaningful to past and future visitors if the site managers incorporate these expressions into evolving, on-site exhibition content (Hein, 2012; Silverman, 1995).

A site like New Philadelphia addresses profound subjects of racism, subjugation, perseverance, and accomplishment in the face of adversity. The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) engages with the importance of such sites worldwide. The ICSC (2005) describes its mission in terms that resonate strongly with the sentiments of the descendant communities of New Philadelphia:

The Coalition supports initiatives that use the power of places as catalysts for citizens to confront the contemporary legacies of what happened at those places. We believe that when visitors explore the architecture and landscapes that shaped or bore witness to the development of human rights and democracy, they may better recognize where similar struggles are occurring today.

Further, we believe that places of memory have special power to inspire human connection to larger issues, and therefore to move people to participate in addressing these issues.

The strength of collaboration by the descendant and local communities of New Philadelphia over the past decade of research explorations holds great promise for future plans to communicate the legacies of that remarkable community to broad audiences in meaningful, interactive approaches.

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