

Podcast Reviews

The Boghouse podcast. Matt Dunphy and Melissa Dunphy, Hosts. <https://boghouse.thehannah.org/>. Season 1 (2019). Accessed October 31, 2019.

“Every time someone asks us the question, ‘Where do you live?’” begins *The Boghouse*, a podcast hosted by spouses Melissa and Matt Dunphy, “I’m always like, ‘oh, shit, sit down, because I have to respond to your question with a really long story.’” And what a story it is. The Dunphies begin the nineteen-episode first season of *The Boghouse* with a story about real estate: how they came to buy a brick rowhouse—a former magic theater—nestled under a highway overpass near the Delaware River in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The podcast evolves with their story, moving from real estate financing to criminal magicians, construction, history, and murder.

But most of all it is an archaeology story. After managing to purchase the house in the face of impressive and sometimes humorous barriers and then beginning excavations to install a new system of structural framing—and bottoming out their bank accounts—the Dunphies found something in their basement that surprised them: two eighteenth-century privies (the brick-lined shafts used as toilets and trash depositories in early Philadelphia). With this discovery, *The Boghouse*—whose name comes from one euphemism for a privy—becomes a public archaeology podcast. “Take a seat,” Melissa and Matt invite us at the beginning of each episode, “you’re in the boghouse.”

The Dunphies are exactly the advocates that archaeology needs. Young, irreverent, profane, and endearing, they bring a raw and infectious enthusiasm to their discussion of the broken pottery and animal bones they found (and continue to find). Moreover, as much as they love the artifacts in and of themselves, they seem to intuitively know the real treasure of archaeology—the human stories behind the objects. They follow the ownership of their house and the changes of their neighborhood through the stories of Quakers, soldiers, sex workers, and immigrants. Redware and porcelain get their play, but it’s really the people that the Dunphies want you to hear about. Their storytelling is nontraditional, sometimes nonlinear, and intended for adults who can stomach things like tales of grisly murders told with regular and creative expletives.



Matt and Melissa Dunphy in one of their privies. (Photo by Mike VanHelder)

Nonetheless, the essential question a public historian should ask about *The Boghouse*—or any undertaking by amateur historians and archaeologists—is whether the world (or even just Philadelphia) would be a better place if more people were like the Dunphys. It’s a more complicated question that you might think. After all, Melissa and Matt are gregarious, dedicated to good historical storytelling, and by all appearances thoroughly enjoying their historical discoveries. But they also dug up a privy in their basement with no archaeological training. Years ago, when I was first studying and practicing archaeology, I would have seen this as an unforgiveable sin. Archaeologists (not amateurs digging in their basements) learn to detect the most subtle changes in soil and the precise spatial context of each artifact in relation to others and the site itself to learn as much as possible about what they are excavating and how to approach it. And you only get one chance. Archaeology is unusual in the sciences in that it irreversibly destroys its subjects in the course of their study. As first-time diggers more interested in artifacts than context, I could not help but wonder what the Dunphys might have missed in their excavations.

The Dunphys are also friends with avocational “privy diggers,” part of a community of hobbyists who dig both in places threatened with imminent destruction and on less endangered private sites—sometimes with the permission of land-owners and sometimes secretly, at night or when sites are not guarded. Looters like these destroy archaeological resources for the sake of intact bottles and

ceramics, often selling these objects and almost never leaving behind any field notes or publications for later study. Most of the time, this is entirely legal. In Philadelphia, and in many other places in the United States, a private landholder owns anything beneath the surface of their property, including priceless historical treasures and in many cases even human remains (unless they're relatively recent interments or Native American). Unless you need a permit or oversight for a project from a government agency that requires archaeological mitigation, you can dig or destroy almost anything you own.

Philadelphia is the scene for countless competitions between archaeological and architectural heritage and the aspirations of contemporary developers (and the rights of private landowners). Since the mid-twentieth century, development has destroyed hundreds of historic structures and thousands of archaeological features in the city. The Dunphies are more sensitive to this than most, perhaps because they live in a neighborhood with older homes sandwiched between Interstate 95 and the city's rapidly redeveloping waterfront. Philadelphia is still in the throes of a decades-long era of urban development that has involved the regular destruction of the archaeological heritage of the country's only World Heritage City. In 2017, for example, an apartment construction project on Arch Street in Philadelphia's Old City neighborhood destroyed a large portion of an eighteenth-century burial ground before public outcry led to limited salvage archaeology.¹ Philadelphia has no city archaeologist, and the best advocates of the city's buried resources are public interest groups, like the Philadelphia Archaeological Forum and the Philadelphia Preservation Alliance. Looters take advantage of this situation for personal enjoyment and profit.

I've tempered my views on the subject of avocational digging somewhat since leaving professional archaeology for museum work. I still think it's inexcusable for people to dig archaeological sites just for fun or for profit, and *The Boghouse* interviews with active privy diggers made me squirm (though not as much as their extended discussion of a brutal nineteenth-century mass murder). If we only get one chance to harvest a resource, it should be for the widest possible benefit. Even though most archaeological studies never come to the attention of the public, they provide priceless data for the future, waiting on shelves like our other archives—manuscripts, digital files, actively practiced forgotten skills and trades, preserved specimens of extinct animals, frozen heirloom seeds—for a future whose needs and technology we cannot expect or predict.

No one documents most archaeological resources because homeowners and landowners can destroy what lies beneath their property with little ethical or legal quandary. The Dunphies didn't document or excavate their privy as carefully as trained archaeologists might have, but they did something quite rare: they

¹ For a recent article on this, see Jennifer Pinkowshi, "A Colonial-Era Cemetery Resurfaces in Philadelphia," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2019. For updates on the study of the human remains that were recovered, see the Arch Street Project, <http://archstreetproject.org/>.

appreciated the resource—a small piece of our communal heritage—that they owned. They were relatively careful excavators: they kept even the small, broken things, and the resulting collection remains, as of this writing, intact and in their personal possession. Perhaps most importantly, they are doing an enormous amount to share the results of their dig with a wide audience.

The city of Philadelphia—and all of us—would be worse off if more people wanted to dig up privies for fun like the Dunphies. But the world would be a better place if more people had the raw wonder and enthusiasm of the Dunphies and if more people recognized the value of preserving and digging up privies. More people would take care of the resources they own when they expand their own homes and properties. More people would realize how exciting and precious our shared archaeological heritage actually is. More people would contribute to museums, dedicate public funds to archaeological work, vote for political representatives who value cultural and historical stewardship, and hold accountable those who squander these shared and finite resources. In the end, after all, it turns out we're all in this boghouse together.

Tyler Rudd Putman, Museum of the American Revolution

Time to Eat the Dogs podcast. Michael Robinson, Host. <https://timetoeatthedogs.com>. Season 1–3. Accessed November 2019.

As a devoted dog lover, I could easily be offended by the title of this podcast. But as a historian of science, I immediately knew the reference. Dogs were vital resources in polar exploration. As working animals, they pulled the sleds, transporting both humans and supplies across the frozen landscape. More darkly, however, when they were injured, they became food. Sometimes this was out of necessity—a last effort to stave off starvation—but sometimes it was part of a cold, calculated plan regarding a strict schedule of timing and provisions. Exploration can be a deadly pursuit.

Michael Robinson, a historian of science and exploration and host of this podcast and blog, clearly understood the implications of his provocative title. His first book, *The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture*, tells the history of Arctic exploration in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century. At the University of Hartford, he teaches global history, Atlantic history, and living in extreme environments.

With *Time to Eat the Dogs*, Robinson moves beyond the poles to examine the broad nature of exploration. His stated goals are interdisciplinary, examining how anthropologists, artists, literary scholars, scientists, and explorers themselves talk about exploration. For more than a year he has interviewed various authors, speakers, and thinkers about exploration. The episodes often run approximately thirty minutes, but that is not a strict time constraint. Depending on how the