



ARCHAEOLOGY & THE IMPORTANCE OF SIFTING FOR ANSWERS ABOUT OUR FORGOTTEN PAST

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Why is archaeology important? We should first understand just what archaeology actually is. Archaeology is for and about people. But beyond that, the science of archaeology is comprised of both theory and method. Theories include those about man and culture (since archaeology is a subdiscipline of anthropology); how remnants of past human behavior are actually structured in or on the ground (or water) and how we should interpret them. As for methods, a wide range can be used to extract the information that is sought.

When we think about archaeological remains and try to evaluate their relative importance, we are concerned with not only the artifacts, but with the context within which they occur; how they are positioned in the ground relative to other artifacts and to the various layers of soil; and how the archaeological sites relate to other sites and to recorded history. Good archaeology requires a broad understanding of method, theory, historic preservation, and the historical and contemporary written record, not to mention the complexity of their interrelationships. Someone does not become a good archaeologist simply by putting a shovel in the ground.

Unrecorded History

No written record exists at all for the vast period of human presence in what is today New Jersey, prior to the entry of European populations. While oral histories might have filled some gaps in our knowledge about American Indian history, the early and widespread introduction of disease and other social disruptions such as the early mass exodus of American Indians from areas

first heavily populated by European populations have greatly impacted the community memory of many groups. When we consider that our architectural landscape and the period for which we have a written record reflects only about the most recent 300 to 400 years, but that the history of human occupation of New Jersey began 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, the role of archaeology in elucidating our past quickly becomes apparent.

While written sources tell us much of interest about people's lives in the recent past, the completeness of the written record as a source of knowledge and information diminishes as one researches the increasingly distant past. Further, in the earlier periods of our nation's history, only the lives of "high status" individuals and events considered important at the time were typically recorded, and even then, there are many aspects of the lives of notables and events for which we lack information.

While many aspects of day to day life were considered so mundane or routine that they were not recorded, many individual events which together form a compelling social pattern have likewise gone unrecorded. By investigating this patterning, archaeology serves to modify an otherwise biased view of the past by placing the present in a more accurate historic context. It allows us to discover cultural patterning not otherwise recoverable. For example, excavation of a series of wells in Philadelphia led to the unexpected recovery of human remains revealing the practice of infanticide in the Colonial era.

The lives of most women and children, people in lower socioeconomic classes, ethnic and racial minorities, and people living in more geographically isolated locations are conspicuously underrepresented in the written record. The emerging emphasis on social history has attempted to correct this imbalance. Still, if information from which we derive knowledge of the past has gone unrecorded, only archaeology possesses the ability to find answers to important questions.

As lower socioeconomic status individuals have rarely been mentioned in histories, even the locations of their homes and communities may remain unknown, sometimes even those from the mid-to-late 19th century. Certain historic property types are consistently underrepresented on late 19th century historic maps. These include the residences of tenant farmers and recent immigrants; African-American and extremely isolated communities; buildings and structures from ephemeral industries such as the cultural remains associated with charcoal-making; and many historic period burial ground locations. The 19th century free African-American community of Skunk Hollow in Alpine, Bergen County, rediscovered by archaeologist Dr. Joan Geismar, does not even appear on historic maps!

Rapid changes in technologies which may have been of little note at the time of their initial development may also go unrecorded. Later when a specific form of technology and the individuals associated with it are recognized for the significant transformations they engendered, an understanding of their history may emerge from the archaeo-

logical study of the sites where these technologies were developed.

Similarly, a specific technology at one point in time may require local or regional adaptations to make its use feasible. For example, industrial archaeologist, Edward Rutsch has noted that sawmills in the New Jersey Pinelands which were contemporary with those in the Highlands differed in detail. In part this was because the New Jersey Pinelands possess large volume streams but limited elevational differences (so less “fall” to provide power for milling) whereas Highlands drainages possess limited volume but a much greater fall due to greater topographic differences.

The Importance of Heritage

At the same time that the gaps in our national, State and local histories are beginning to be recognized, people are increasingly realizing that history is something that belongs to everyone. Often only archaeological investigation can reveal these broad gaps in our knowledge of the lives and lifeways of certain cultural groups relative to their contribution to American and State history. Archaeological investigation of associated physical remains is extremely important, since archaeology is the only available means to identify and “read” these sites and their histories.

The symbolic importance of heritage as represented in the archaeological record has been clearly illustrated when African-American cemetery sites were encountered in Philadelphia and New York City, as well as the many recent discoveries of American Indian human and cultural remains discovered on both tribal and non-tribal lands. Ethnic groups are increasingly concerned about the disposition of the scant tangible remains of their histories and their ancestors.

In some cases, respectful care involves archaeological excavation to glean important glimpses into a past which would otherwise be lost; in

others, for instance, in the case of many American Indian burials, descendent communities prefer that the remains be left in place. For all descendent communities, the remains are of considerable symbolic and historical value. By providing a window into the past, archaeology may provide a means of redressing past omissions regarding the histories of the vast majority of Americans.

Righting some wrongs in the Historical Record

Not only were many aspects of everyday life often not recorded, but historians and their informants are capable of both accidental and intentional distortion. A good example of this came to light when Ferry Street in Trenton was investigated archaeologically by Department of Transportation in association with the construction of access ramps for Route 1 and Warren Street.

On January 16, 1873, local historian, Charles Megill, made a report before the New Jersey Historical Society stating that a rowhouse lay on the site of a French and Indian War fort. Over 100 years later, archaeologists reached a different conclusion.

The construction of row houses on the east side of South Warren Street in 1872 resulted in ... unfounded speculation that the area was the site of a French and Indian War fort. Controversy continued over the description of the supposed fort, some contending the remains represented a Dutch trading post. Evidence gathered as a result of this survey refutes these contentions as well as others, all indicating that this was the site of an octagonal stone structure 60 feet in diameter. What the survey has identified are the remains of a considerably smaller (19' x 24.5') dwelling house dating from 1712-1776 (Kalb et al 1980).

Prior to the 1980 archaeological investigation, the initial error of direct observation was repeated and debated by scholars in professional publications. Archaeology corrected the record and placed the remains at this location within their proper historical context.

Interpretive Potential

Archaeological investigation is regularly used to facilitate the accurate interpretation, reconstruction, rehabilitation, or restoration of historic and prehistoric sites in a diversity of contexts. In New Jersey these include landscape restoration and enhanced interpretation of the Battle of Monmouth (at Monmouth Battlefield State Park), rehabilitation of locks, culverts, and other structures along the Delaware and Raritan Canal, interpretation of Lenape life at the time of contact with Europeans (at Waterloo Village), and restoration of the Old Barracks in Trenton.

Like architecture, archaeological remains can also contribute to our sense of place, and pride in community. They provide us with an awareness of how others before us have lived in the same areas or even on the same piece of land.

This understanding can provide a feeling of connectedness and a link with the land and the places where we live today. As many areas become highly developed, this “sense of place” becomes increasingly important. Talk to almost anyone in historic preservation or for that matter, planners, educators, sociologists, and psychologists, and again and again they bring up the psychological consequences of rootlessness. As stated by Flavia Alaya, Chairperson of Paterson's Historic Preservation Commission, “historic preservation is an aspect of community mental health. . . One aspect of identifying with a place where you live is to have a community memory. The alternative is urban Alzheimer's”. In areas where landscapes and communities possess

greater continuity, historic preservation may be an integral complement to an already intact community life. But where community life and local landscapes have become fragmented, historic preservation and archaeology can help to restore a sense of continuity and place, and therefore a better understanding of who we are.

In spite of archaeologists' frequent emphasis on global developments and culture change over long periods of time, what many people value about archaeology is a sense of connection with time and place. Archeology can and does provide "common ground" among the many elements of diverse communities. Educators reinforce the value of archeology in teaching respect for other people and other times.

Preparing both children and adults with an appreciation for a diverse world is an important contribution that archeological knowledge can make (Barbara J. Little, "Public Benefits of Archeology", CRM No. 1-1996: 35).

Even in the absence of buildings, the "invisible remains" of archaeology can help to focus attention on community history. People are drawn to and interested in archaeological excavations in progress that promise discovery and demonstrate how archaeologists learn about the past. This quality, common to much exploration and research, feeds our intellectual curiosity and interest in who and what we are as a society and a species.

While an archaeological "dig" may be interesting and entertaining, even at times exciting, the reasons for it, especially on many of our publicly owned sites, go much deeper. Reporting the results of Monmouth County Park System's and Rutgers University's first field season at Walnford, the bustling rural commercial center turned country estate of the Waln family, Rebecca Yamin wrote: *Indeed, the past is necessarily a construction ... we cannot know what it was really like.*

But on a site like Walnford, which speaks with many voices - from those in the primary documents to the living descendants of the Waln family to the buried remains - it is at least possible to engage in a dialogue. Through that dialogue we can begin to tell stories, not made-up stories, but stories that derive their coherence from putting things together in a way that makes internal sense, sense according to other rules of other times. That, after all, is ultimately the purpose of the work at Walnford - to provide the Monmouth County Park System personnel with insights into the past that they will ultimately communicate to the public(1992).

Challenges

What are some of the challenges facing archaeologists and archaeology in the future of cultural resource management? Similar to other areas of historic preservation and most environmental areas as well, we are in a time of decreased funding and support for the natural and cultural environment. What this means for archaeologists is that we must try to get the "biggest bang for the buck". Like most good science and research, archaeology can be (but is not always) expensive. Decisions regarding the maximum public benefit are critical. This means making careful judgements about:

- 1) when to conduct surveys;
- 2) when to recommend sites eligible for their ability to yield information important in history or prehistory or for their contribution to broad patterns of our past; and
- 3) when to conduct and how to structure data recovery efforts.

It means defining the realms of public benefit and the means of making the results of archaeological survey and data recovery accessible to the public in dynamic broad-reaching ways.

Not all archaeological surveys result

in findings that write a new chapter in the history or prehistory of a region or the State. Similarly, there are no guarantees in any type of scientific research that a specific body of work will result, for example, in a cure for a specific disease.

Even in other areas of historic preservation successes are not assured and may be only temporary in nature. A successful rehabilitation today may be lost for one of a host of reasons in the future or at least necessitate periodic renewal.

What is important in all of these arenas is that we make the most of the opportunities we have to benefit the public as directly as possible, and that we pull together on the basis of our common interests and objectives. As the National Trust has said: *Concerned with the full range of past human experience and focusing on the totality of cultural history, archeology cannot logically be separated from history and historic preservation. Because practitioners share concerns, problems, resources, and data, archeologists and those who seek to preserve the substance of history and prehistory often find themselves working together to reach a common goal* (National Trust for Historic Preservation INFORMATION Sheet Number 28, 1980).

Education and Empowerment

A most important focus are children, who in their formative years are experiencing rapid change and transformed landscapes. Yet much of the focus in historic preservation has traditionally been on adults-their lives, their homes, their churches and places of business. Even much of the focus on schools, for example, has been largely on the significance of their architecture. As various groups have become "empowered", subdisciplines such as women's history or Black history have emerged. However, similar to much of

our history and historic preservation, the interpretations and uses of the archaeological record have been generally silent regarding children. (There are notable exceptions in terms of involving children, however, such as Union County's Feltville project, a recipient of a 1996 New Jersey Historic Preservation Award).

Incorporated into the archaeological programs for many projects undertaken by agencies, historical societies, and archaeologists are: public visitation; outreach to ensure public input into projects; field schools; report distributions to libraries, and other institutions; interpretative signs and exhibits; creation of self-guided tours; development of teaching materials for use in the classroom; coordination with docents, interpreters, and Friends groups for dissemination of information; lectures and workshops at both general public and professional conferences; and creation of popular reports. These direct types of public involvement and outreach are a departure from simply letting reports molder on shelves.

Public Involvement

Archaeological remains and their study are focal points around which partnerships between communities and

professionals can be forged. Archaeology can also make an important contribution to Heritage Tourism.

As historic preservationists, archaeologists need to keep the public in mind in all phases of their work in order to identify how best to serve public needs. Communities need to articulate their needs to the preservation communities which serve them in order to ensure that preservationists provide a meaningful contribution to community history and community life.

Of equal importance to the contributions of scholars and preservation professionals are the insights of grassroots activists. Quite frequently the efforts of gifted and intuitive people outside of educational institutions have stimulated scholars to expand their own research horizons. It is precisely the synergistic relationship between scholars and volunteer activists that makes this branch of preservation advocacy so rewarding (National Trust for Historic Preservation INFORMATION Booklet No. 69, 1993, page 5).

Cultural resource survey reports almost always incorporate information relating to community history. Surveys which have already been conducted for a specific area remain in the Historic Preservation Office for

use not only by archaeologists, but by historical societies, teachers, and other members of the public interested in learning about, teaching, or compiling community history.

Conclusion

Our archaeological resources are an important asset for our communities and for our children. Edmund Burke, 18th century British Statesman and philosopher, could have been talking about the importance of historic preservation when he wrote about the importance of the partnership "between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born".

Even well-controlled archaeological excavation has been likened to burning a book after having read it once. Archaeology, after all, is a destructive process. Consequently, it is important to take good notes, maintain good records, and ask the right questions. When an archaeological site is destroyed without archaeological excavation, it is analogous to burning the book without ever having read it. Together, we need to ensure that a best seller (or cellar!) does not get sold short! ■

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