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WHAT ARCHEOLOGY CAN DO TO EXPAND HISTORICAL RESEARCH*

Stanley South

We might begin our examination of the relationship between archeology and historical research by looking at some of the areas where archeology is limited in its contribution to our knowledge. In the excavation of a church, for instance, the archeologist is able to determine specific information as to the architectural features of the structure at ground level and below, but his interpretations from this as to the religious belief of those who constructed the building and came to worship within its walls, must be based on analogy and historical research. Similarly, the excavation of a courthouse ruin would likely provide specific information as to its location, its size, the number of rooms, and the materials used, but would provide little toward our understanding of the social structure, the political organization, or the legal framework of the people who once used the courthouse building as an important center within their culture. The archeologist is often at a loss in interpreting directly from archeological data very meaningfully into these areas of culture; his evidence in this regard must be based on historical research, through the very thin thread of analogy from architectural features.

In the excavation of St. Philips Anglican Church ruins in the eighteenth-century English colonial town of Brunswick in North Carolina, details of interior construction were found in the form of floor and roof supporting footings, remains of paved aisles, window glass and wrought nails used in construction, and a few fragments of plaster moulding, but these will not, except through analogy on a very general level, carry the archeologist successfully into the ideology and beliefs represented by these remains. The courthouse ruin at Brunswick Town revealed the fact that it was the only square structure thus far found in the town, which would have set it apart from the house ruins and a partition wall pointed toward an unusual division of the area above. However, other than these clues, not a thing was found to aid in the interpretation of this structure as a courthouse; this information had to come from historical research, through correlation of the feature with an eighteenth-century map of the town. Now, without historical evidence the archeologist may have interpreted the structure as that of a public building, possibly that of a courthouse, and if through analogy he was able to do this, he then could, if he dared, project a general eighteenth-century colonial picture of political organization and legal and social relationships known to have been involved in courthouse generally; but the ice would be so thin without a firmer archeological support, that he would likely soon find himself swimming in the cold water of reality amid the jibes of his colleagues. This reality being that archeological data does not usually lend itself

to interpretations extending very far into the area of religious, political or social organization.

What then, was archeology able to contribute toward the understanding of the situation relative to the courthouse at Brunswick Town? The historical references indicate that the courthouse was authorized with the creation of Brunswick County in 1764, and that it was blown down in a hurricane in 1769, and its location is shown on a 1769 map; nothing else is known from history. Archeology revealed that the structure was a building twenty-five feet square, with virtually no midden material inside the ruin other than a few fragments of eighteenth-century wine bottles. Outside the ruin, however, around the entire building, china from the 1790's to the 1820's were found, but none were found inside the walls of the ruin. Also found in abundance were objects from the period of the 1860's. These were buttons, bullets, percussion caps, etc., lost during the occupation of the site of Brunswick by Confederate forces at Fort Anderson, built over the ruins of the town. From this information the archeologist was able to construct the sequence of events as they apparently occurred at the courthouse site. It was used as a courthouse from the time of its construction (shortly after its authorization in 1764) until it was blown down in 1769. After this time its use is uncertain, but it is evident that it was covered by a floor during the period from around 1800 to about 1830, when the yard around the structure was used as a trash disposal area. This utilization could have come from someone living in the courthouse structure itself (from the fact that artifacts from this period did not find their way beneath the floor). The structure was possibly still standing in 1862 when construction of Fort Anderson began. At any rate, a structure was either built or added on the courthouse foundation at this time using cut nails of the period. It was used during the occupation of Fort Anderson, with midden and artifacts accumulating around it in considerable concentration. After the Civil War what was left of the structure may have rotted down, and for a hundred years no other artifacts found their way inside the foundation walls until the arrival of the archeologist.

This information still does not tell us a great deal about the courthouse as a public building, but it does reveal something of its use as a structure. The presence of occupation midden, therefore, has made a considerable difference in what the archeologist can say about the history of the structure. Through the recovery of physical objects, a sequence of events relating to the structure is now known that was not perviously available. For example, buttons from the period of the Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War, found in the yard, along with other artifacts, contributes toward a more specific knowledge than the two facts that the courthouse was built in 1764 and blown down in 1769.

In summary of the points made thus far, we see that archeology can contribute certain types of specific information relative to a particular place, such as the details of architectural features as well
as pinpointing their exact location, a temporal relationship, and something of the use in some cases to which the structure was put; but archeology is limited in its contribution outside the technological area. Archeology sometimes makes a considerable contribution in our understanding of the technology of particular crafts at various periods of time through the excavation of shops and industrial waste sites. The waste casting sprues and fragments of castings from a brassfoundry or silversmith shop, or the kiln waster dump of potters are valuable repositories for information relating to the evolutionary development of these technologies. Our attention tends to become focused on these sites due to their value to the archeologist. Such sites are those which he can "get his teeth into" as well as his trowel, in that they lend themselves to quantification and stratigraphic analysis as well as their basic "time capsule" character. However, there are other sites which do not so dramatically yield positive results. For instance, at the town of Bethabara in North Carolina, an eighteenth-century Moravian settlement, the maps and records revealed the location of the gunsmith shop, the Brothers' House, the blacksmith's shop, the millwright's house, the tailor shop, the Gemein Haus (church), the apothecary shop, the doctor's laboratory, and the pottery shop; with the exception of the pottery shop, the excavation of all of these ruins did not reveal a single clue that would have been sufficient to allow the archeologist to properly interpret the use of these structures! This would appear to be a somewhat dismal record for archeology, were there not other questions of interest than the limited one involving the specific function a particular structure served within the community of which it was a part.

One of these questions centers around the temporal relationship of the site, and is often one of the primary reasons the sponsors of archeological projects give as the reason for excavation. The means of determining this relate to the basic archeological method of stratigraphy, through which temporal relationships are most effectively established. This stratigraphic interest is also related to typology, through which the relative position of forms in time and space are studied. Therefore, besides its interest in establishing specific spatial locations and descriptions of historic sites and structures, historical archeology is also concerned with the temporal sequence that occurred on the site being studied. Studies of recovered artifacts in context from archeological sites can be made emphasizing the association of certain artifact types with particular individuals. This emphasis is frequently found in research for restoration, where the emphasis is often one historical figure associated with an historic site. There is a broader study, however, that is also of concern to the archeologist in terms of artifact analysis, and this is his concern for establishing general relationships between artifacts in time and

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space which will be of value in future excavation interpretation by archeologists, and will have a feedback value on a broader level than that relating to a specific individual. The one relates closer to history in its concern with specifics, and the other to science in its general application.

The historical research on the colonial town ruin of Brunswick revealed a map of the town drawn in 1769, deed records for property in the town mentioning lot numbers, description of events that occurred in the town and of one house, the Royal Governor’s mansion. The records did not include a description of the town, a description of an average citizen’s house, a description or designation of any shops in the town, or data on the material objects which made up the household goods of the citizens. Through an analysis of the clues in the deed records, the lot plan for the town was reconstructed, thus allowing for the assignment of certain lots to individuals at particular periods of time. Through the correlation of a curved lot line on the 1769 map with a curved stone wall, a relationship between the lot plan and the ruins on the site was established, allowing for the association of particular ruins with individuals. Such relating of documentary data and archeological clues is characteristic of historical archeology, and constitutes a fascinating challenge for the archeologist, though such an emphasis is only one facet of the gem.

Through archeology at Brunswick, the positioning of lots and ruins in relation to each other was established, and ovens, smokehouses, wells, and major structures were located that were not shown or mentioned in any historical record. Architectural features of Brunswick Town houses were so well revealed that for the first time the type of houses built there was known, and conjectural drawings and models were constructed to illustrate this important information. The recovery of artifacts revealed that the major source of material objects for the Brunswick Town citizen came from England, with a small number of objects from Portugal, Italy, Boston and Philadelphia, China and the Malay peninsula, reflecting Brunswick’s use as an important English colonial port. These objects were valuable as archeological anchors around which the interpretation of the eighteenth-century way of life in Brunswick was effected through exhibits in the visitor-center museum on the site.

The ceramics from an archeological site, as well as the glassware, brass objects, animal bone, plant seeds, and pollen all reflect the life pattern of the occupants who once lived there. In the case of Brunswick Town, where most of the homes were occupied only between the 1730’s and 1775, this information can be closely related in some cases, to particular families and individuals. From an examination of the ceramics from the Brunswick Town houses on a more general level, through quantification, additional data has been recovered. By establishing the percentage relationship between various ceramic types from individual ruins in Brunswick Town and comparing these, it was established that these relationships were quite consistent in ruins that had a similar
time-span, and varied as the time-span varied. From this ceramic quantification data, it is now possible to arrive at a general temporal period for a ruin of unknown date on the Brunswick Town site. Such statistical studies are not often carried out under conditions controlled enough for meaningful results to be forthcoming, but the evidence is clear that statistical studies of ceramic types can produce data of value, and more such studies are being undertaken in order to further expand and test our data-recovery from historical sites. Bone, seeds, pollen, and cysts from human and animal parasites recovered from garbage dumps, privies, and cesspools have just begun to reveal their data through archeological recovery and analysis. Questions relating to social and health conditions, disease, parasites, diet, the source and availability of food in relation to the ecology of the area, as revealed through archeology and correlated with the historical references, are increasingly being asked by social scientists. Historical archeologists are trying to meet this broader challenge, allowing a more penetrating view into some of the areas of past patterned human behavior than has hitherto been possible through dealing with the traditional archeological materials. The historical archeologist has an increasingly expanding responsibility to inquire beyond the mere validation of an historic site through correlation with documentary evidence; beyond merely listing the presence or absence of artifact types for establishing the temporal position of the site; beyond the revealing of architectural features for the purpose of reconstruction and restoration; beyond exposing ruins for the entertainment of the visiting public to historic sites; and beyond the process of recovery and preservation of relics from the past hoarded into repositories and museums! His view must be as broad as the questions being asked by archeologists, sociologists, anthropologists, ecologists, biologists, archaeo-parasitologists and other scientists who are increasingly turning to historical archeology to reflect some light on their special problems and spheres of interest. However, although historical archeology is broadening its scope, the primary emphasis will continue to be in the area of material culture where so much must still be explored on the basic level of typology and stratigraphy in order to arrive at a better understanding, definition and temporal position of artifacts of many types found on historical sites. Too few historical archeologists are intimately involved with this basic level of the archeological process; this level of determination of the temporal position of artifact forms in time and space through typology, stratigraphy and historical research. Excellent examples of this basic approach are seen in John Goggin's classic studies of the Spanish Olive Jar and Spanish Majolica in the New World.


4John M. Goggin, Spanish Majolica in the New World. Yale University Publications in Anthropology, No. 72 (New Haven, Conn.: 1968).
where quantification, seriation and stratigraphy, basic archeological tools, were combined with documentary evidence to produce these masterful studies. Such work forms the backbone of historical archeology, demonstrating vividly the contrast between those studies oriented primarily toward a localized historical perspective, and the high-level, quantitative analysis of broader scientific applicability. Some practitioners see the historical archeology process as an extension of history, involved in the specifics of historical interpretation; others utilize the process as a search for broader goals involving the understanding of the evolution of forms in time and space as this development relates to a broad range of cultural and historical data. Neither the approach of history nor that of science should be emphasized as the orientation of historical archeology; rather the nature of the quest requires a utilization of the method and concepts of both history and science for the most effective execution of the process of historical archeology.

Although broader goals, such as those exemplified in John Goggin's work, are basic to historical archeology, the nature of many projects is such that the archeologist is often called on to elaborate more specifically an historical reference, and it is here that impressive results, from an historical point of view, are sometimes obtained. Historic shipwrecks, for instance, are ideal "time capsules" reflecting material culture at a specific time and place; the 1715 Plate Fleet wrecks off the Florida coast, for example. At the Moravian town of Salem, North Carolina, records dated 1793 include "A Collection of Faience-China Glazing Formulas," which had long been thought to be an item of passing interest to the Moravians, but not necessarily indicating that faience was made in Salem. However, during the excavation of the Fifth House in Salem in 1965, one sherd of tin-ash glazed ware was found, apparently of local manufacture. This discovery led to a greater interest in the 1793 formulas, and further research turned up an inventory of the Salem pottery in 1829 which listed white, blue, green and yellow faience glaze. Further excavation on the lot of the Fifth House carried out in the summer of 1968 revealed a deposit of six green-glazed faience bottles or vases thrown into a ditch as fill, having been taken from a kiln waster dump. Only a few more sherds of faience were found during the excavation, indicating definitely that the kiln for the manufacture of this ware was located elsewhere than on this lot, probably across the street where a kiln is known to have stood in the 1790's.

This example illustrates the value of historical archeology in expanding our knowledge of specifics in regard to historical research. We now know that not only was faience being made in Salem between 1793 and 1829,
but we can point to specific examples of the ware, and hopefully, when more excavation is carried out in Salem, the kiln waster dump itself will be found. An interesting fact in regard to this ware is that no known examples of this particular type ware is known to have survived in collections and museums.

A similar example is the evidence from historical research that the potter Rudolph Christ made a "fine pottery" at Bethabara from 1786 to 1789, but it was not until archeology revealed the kiln waster dump of this potter that the appearance of the "fine pottery" was known. Again no surviving pieces were known, but as a result of the knowledge of the ceramic forms revealed in the excavation, a mug of Rudolph Christ was recognized recently at an auction, and purchased by Old Salem, Inc.

An additional example of the way in which historical archeology can expand historical research through specifics is seen at Old Salem. The historical research revealed that William Ellis, an English potter, had demonstrated to Gottfried Aust, the Salem potter, the method of making "Queensware", and "tortoise-shell" ware on a visit to Salem in 1773. The 1968 excavation was carried out with the primary intention of locating a special kiln that was built for this purpose, and to, hopefully, find the kiln waster dump for this "fine pottery," either made by William Ellis himself, or by Aust and Rudolph Christ in later years. After a summer's excavation to a depth of from four to six feet over the entire Fifth House lot, a kiln was located, and nearby was a waster dump. However, the waster dump was older than the construction of the kiln, which was associated with an addition to the pottery shop known to have been added in 1797, but this fact did not diminish the importance of the objects recovered from the pre-1797 kiln waster dump. Here was found some of the finest pottery known to have been made in America in the eighteenth century, and the closest in form to that made by the Leeds and other creamware factories in England in the 1770's; here, indeed, was a dump of the "fine pottery" complete with double intertwined reeded handles and a variety of terminal and bisque spriggs, and fragments of true "Queensware" type plates with feathered edges. A mold for a sprigg was found by Brad Rauschenberg at the excavation of the First House in Salem in 1967, on the back of which were the initials "R. C.," indicating that Rudolph Christ was indeed capable of producing this finest of the "fine pottery," and pointing to this master potter as the creator of this excellent ware.

The role of archeology in expanding historical research in instances such as this is obvious; the historical research becomes the stimulus to open doors through which flows a wealth of data of inestimatable value, significantly increasing our knowledge.

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These examples reveal an emphasis oriented toward the recovery, through historical archeology, of specific information relative to specific potters and their forms at a particular time and place; such a search is indeed an extension of history. However, if our goals relate only to these specific Moravian individuals and the ceramic wares produced by them in a limited period of time, then our concern is with the unique events of history. If we go beyond this particularized data collecting on the specific time and place level, and relate the study to the broader questions of direct diffusion, stimulus diffusion, acculturation, and social change within the Moravian community of Salem, we can see the light of the impact the English pottery making tradition had on a German ceramic base. If we see the specifics in reference to changing forms in time and space, then we are dealing with a process of broader scientific applicability; the process that is evolution. In either case, it is not the data that is the variable, but the theoretical framework through which we organize it that makes the difference between whether our results have an historical perspective or a broader generalized application.

Through historical archeology, we are indeed able to expand our research through an increased specificity as well as a broader understanding through greater generalization. If we limit ourselves and interpret our data only as it relates to specific individuals and events at a particular time and place (speaking only of the potters Aust and Christ and their individual wares), then we are distorting our view of the past by looking through a too narrow window of history, utilizing archeology only as a data collecting tool. In order to view the past fully through historical archeology, we not only utilize the specific theoretical tools of history, but also the broader generalizing concepts of history and scientific theory (speaking of the potters Aust and Christ so much as of the ceramic traditions each represents, and the expression of their forms in terms of these traditions seen against the background of the insulating culture in which they lived). It is through such a blending of the concepts of history and archeology, of the specific and the general, of pots and potness, that historical archeology makes its significant contribution in our continuing search for knowledge.