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# The Archaeology of 19th-Century Farmsteads: The Results of a Workshop Held at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology

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## The Archaeology of 19th-Century Farmsteads: The Results of a Workshop Held at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology

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*A workshop was held at the 1997 annual meeting of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology (CNEHA) to address the question "What do we do with 19th-century farmsteads in the Northeast?" The workshop involved several brainstorming sessions in which the participants examined topics and problems associated with current approaches to the archaeological investigation of farmstead sites. These brainstorming sessions examined questions such as: "What is a 19th-century farmstead?" "What are the research and public values of these sites?" "Which sites should be examined?" and "How should these sites be investigated?" The workshop ended with the development of an action agenda with recommendations on how we as a discipline, and CNEHA as an organization, should proceed with the research, interpretation, and preservation of these types of sites.*

*Lors de la rencontre annuelle du Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology (CNEHA) en 1997, on a tenu un atelier afin d'aborder la question suivante : « Que faire avec les fermes du nord-est? ». L'atelier a donné lieu à plusieurs réunions de remue-méninges pendant lesquelles les participants ont examiné des sujets et des problèmes associés aux approches courantes utilisées dans l'investigation archéologique des sites de fermes. Ces réunions de remue-méninges ont examiné des questions telles que : « Qu'est-ce qu'une ferme du XIXe siècle ? », « Quelle est la valeur de ces sites au niveau de la recherche ainsi que pour le public ? », « Quels sites devraient-on examiner? » et « De quelle façon devrait-on procéder à la recherche de ces sites ? ». L'atelier s'est terminé avec l'élaboration d'un programme d'action contenant des recommandations à propos de la façon dont nous, en tant que membres d'une discipline et le CNEHA, en tant qu'organisme, devrions procéder dans la recherche, l'interprétation et la préservation de ces types de sites.*

As noted in the introduction to this volume, there have been no comprehensive and focused discussions on the issues associated with the archaeology of 19th-century farmsteads since a 1983 symposium held at the California University of Pennsylvania (Grantz 1984). Clearly, it was time to have such discussions once again, especially given the many farmstead investigations conducted throughout the United States and Canada since 1983. In response to this need, a workshop on the archaeology of 19th-century farmsteads was held at the 1997 annual Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology (CNEHA) meetings in Altoona, Pennsylvania. The workshop involved several brainstorming sessions in which workshop participants discussed and examined research topics and problem statements associated with current approaches to the archaeological investigation of 19th-century farmsteads in the CNEHA region of Canada and the United States.

Brainstorming is a technique often used in business to collectively identify and solve problems quickly, creatively, and in a fun way. *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines it as "the unrestrained offering of ideas or suggestions by all members of a [group] to seek solutions to problems" (Guralnik 1970: 171). The 40 workshop participants were divided into six groups, each with a facilitator to keep the discussions moving and focused on the issues being examined.<sup>1</sup> Each group brainstormed on a given topic by simply throwing out random ideas, observations, and comments that were all listed on flip charts by a recorder, without any discussion or comment. Participants were asked to be creative, posing even the craziest ideas, as no idea was wrong or incorrect.

<sup>1</sup> Several individuals facilitated the discussions within the groups: Mary Beaudry, Wade Catts, Lu Ann De Cunzo, Dena Doroszenko, George Miller, and Mark Shaffer. Terry Klein served as the overall workshop facilitator.

After the brainstorming, each group discussed and organized its ideas and observations. The results of this effort were then shared with the larger group and followed by a general discussion of the topics. The items listed on the many pages of flip charts generated independently by each group were subsequently typed into a series of consolidated tables, which are presented below.

### Brainstormed Comments

The following four tables and summaries present the raw data that resulted from the brainstorming.

#### Question Set 1

What is a 19th-century farmstead? What are the characteristics of farmsteads in terms of location, activities, occupants, and components?

The most commonly identified characteristics of 19th-century farmsteads were: rural; agricultural production; family owned; tenant occupied; domestic dwelling; barns; outbuildings; trash pits and dumps; fencing and walls; and fields (TAB. 1). During the large group discussion, there was a consensus that the term "19th-century farmstead" was not very useful because it masked a wide range of farm types and farming areas within the region. These sites are complex, are in no way homogeneous, and cannot be lumped together.

#### Question Set 2

Why are 19th-century farmstead sites important? What are the research values of these sites?

The groups came up with the two primary reasons why these sites were important (TAB. 2). First, the majority of the 19th-century population of the United States and Canada lived on farms; therefore, these sites represent the material manifestation of the majority of the countries' citizenry. Secondly, these sites can uniquely help us to understand the transition from subsistence to market farming, the relationships between material culture and ethnicity, and the impact of technology. A concern was also voiced that we do not know how to move from individual sites to the "big picture." That is, we have not successfully linked

Table 1. Characteristics defining 19th-century farmsteads.

| <i>Location / Activity</i>               | <i>N*</i> |
|--|-----------|
| Rural                                    | 4         |
| Agricultural production                  | 6         |
| Physically bound                         | 3         |
| Frontier                                 | 2         |
| In transition                            | 2         |
| Settled communities                      | 3         |
| Subsistence farming                      | 2         |
| Market farming                           | 3         |
| <i>Occupants</i>                         |           |
| Family owned                             | 4         |
| Tenant occupied                          | 5         |
| Slave occupied                           | 1         |
| Ethnic affiliation                       | 1         |
| Religious affiliation                    | 1         |
| <i>Components</i>                        |           |
| Domestic dwelling                        | 5         |
| Farmhand housing                         | 1         |
| Slave dwelling                           | 1         |
| Gardens, orchards                        | 3         |
| Barns                                    | 5         |
| Sheds, cribs, silos                      | 4         |
| Wells, cisterns, water towers            | 3         |
| Dairies, spring houses                   | 4         |
| Privies                                  | 3         |
| Trash pits, farm dumps                   | 4         |
| Sheet midden                             | 3         |
| Resource piles                           | 1         |
| Kitchens, bread ovens, smokehouses       | 3         |
| Root cellars, sugar shacks               | 3         |
| Lanes, paths, roads                      | 3         |
| Fencing, walls                           | 5         |
| Fields                                   | 4         |
| Drainage ditches, ponds, icehouses       | 3         |
| Family cemetery                          | 2         |
| Pens, livestock                          | 1         |
| Saw mill, black smith, potter, distiller | 2         |
| Equipment and tools                      | 2         |
| Wood lot                                 | 3         |
| Lime kiln, brick clamp                   | 3         |

\* Number of groups identifying this issue out of six groups.

the archaeological remains of a farmstead with the character and events of a region's agricultural society or of society as a whole.

#### Question Set 3

How do we involve the public in the investigation, interpretation, and preservation of farmsteads?

The key mechanisms for public involvement identified by the workshop participants

included appealing to the public's sense of history, working with local historical societies and museums, site tours, performing oral histories, encouraging volunteers on archaeological projects, local school presentations; and newspaper articles (TAB. 3). During the large group discussion, it was pointed out that what we should be doing as researchers is benefiting the public. We need to demonstrate that archaeological research on farmsteads is worth doing and is meaningful to local communities. This is especially important because a great deal of farmstead archaeology is accomplished with funding from tax dollars.

#### Question Set 4

Which sites should be examined during initial surveys? How should these sites be investigated? What are the processes and tools we should be using to determine the significance of these sites?

The most frequent response from the groups in terms of which sites should be examined was "all of them" (TAB. 4). The key research tools that were identified included 1) development of a research design; 2) the use of documents, historical maps, historic aerial photographs, and oral history; and 3) in terms of fieldwork—shovel testing. In particular, the groups stressed the need to better integrate the documentary record with the archaeological record and reminded us that the purpose of archaeological work is not to confirm what we already know from documentary evidence.

One interesting aspect of this discussion on methods and tools was the value of "mixed" deposits. These farmstead sites are not to be treated like prehistoric sites where "mixed" deposits are ignored and discarded. Such deposits often represent deliberate changes to the farmstead landscape. Therefore, these deposits have the potential to provide information on physical changes to farmsteads, changes that may be linked to changes in the social and economic character and make-up of the farm's occupants, and to processes and events occurring within the agricultural society of a region. So, it is important for us to determine how to handle such deposits in our work.

The large group discussion on this last set of questions also focused on the importance of historic contexts. There is clearly a critical need for usable, local and regional historic contexts in which to place these sites. The problem is, who will develop these contexts?

Table 2. Significance and research values of 19th-century farmsteads.

| <i>Significance reasons</i>                       | <i>N*</i> |
|---|-----------|
| Majority of population were farmers               | 5         |
| Local importance and nostalgia                    | 3         |
| Help connect present and past                     | 2         |
| Sites isolated, little intrusion from other sites | 2         |
| Often among earliest sites in an area             | 1         |
| <i>Research questions about change</i>            |           |
| Transition from subsistence to market farming     | 5         |
| Consumption patterns                              | 3         |
| Changing use of space                             | 3         |
| Changing foodways                                 | 3         |
| Presentation of self                              | 1         |
| <i>Other research issues</i>                      |           |
| Ethnicity   | 5         |
| Impact of technology                              | 5         |
| Transition from rural to urban                    | 3         |
| Social class                                      | 2         |
| Gender  | 2         |
| Religious differences                             | 2         |
| Landscape   | 2         |
| Disposal patterns                                 | 1         |
| Temperance  | 1         |
| Immigration patterns                              | 1         |

\* Number of groups identifying this issue out of six groups.

Who has the time and money? As one possible solution to this problem, it was recommended that, in the United States, the State Historic Preservation Offices should develop historic contexts on farmsteads since they are generally the keeper of each state's historical and archaeological data. The staffs of the State Historic Preservation Offices are already very over-worked and under-funded, however, so this may be very difficult to accomplish. It was also recommended that on large-scale archaeological data recovery projects, for example, some portions of the monies that could have been used for the excavation of a site would be directed toward the development of historic contexts for an area or region.

#### An Action Agenda

The workshop ended with the identification of an action agenda. The group discussions focused on two questions: 1) How do we, as a discipline, proceed with the research, interpretation, and preservation of these sites? 2) What specific actions should an organization like CNEHA take?

Table 3. Steps to involve the public.

|   | N* |
|---|----|
| <i>Local approach</i>                                 |    |
| Work with local historical societies and museums      | 6  |
| Appeal to sense of history                            | 5  |
| Oral history  | 5  |
| Site tours, invite local Grange                       | 4  |
| Encourage volunteers                                  | 4  |
| Local school presentations                            | 4  |
| Show and tell and artifact identification             | 3  |
| Hire locals for field and lab work                    | 2  |
| Docents or interpreters on site                       | 2  |
| Donate collections to local museum                    | 1  |
| <i>Media</i>  |    |
| Newspaper articles                                    | 5  |
| Internet postings                                     | 3  |
| Readable CRM reports                                  | 3  |
| Magazine articles                                     | 2  |
| Radio and TV interviews                               | 2  |
| Video presentations                                   | 2  |
| Popular publications                                  | 1  |
| <i>Other approaches</i>                               |    |
| Cultivate local officials and planners, zoning boards | 3  |
| Develop school curricula                              | 3  |
| Donate time to Boy Scouts                             | 2  |
| School type collections                               | 1  |
| Develop organizational partnerships                   | 1  |
| Tie into state archaeology week events                | 1  |
| National Register nominations                         | 1  |
| Award system for locals that have helped              | 1  |
| Pro bono work   | 1  |

\* Number of groups identifying this issue out of six groups.

Table 4. Sites to be investigated and tools to be applied.

|  | N* |
|--|----|
| <i>Sites to investigate</i>                                      |    |
| All of them  | 5  |
| Inventory sites in project area                                  | 1  |
| Contribution beyond historical record                            | 1  |
| Sites eligible for the National Register                         | 1  |
| Sites with visible architectural remains                         | 1  |
| Sites with short-term occupation                                 | 1  |
| Sites with long-term occupation                                  | 1  |
| <i>Processes and tools for investigation</i>                     |    |
| Documentary research, historical maps and aerial photos          | 6  |
| Develop research design  | 4  |
| Oral history   | 4  |
| Shovel pit testing   | 4  |
| Develop historical context                                       | 3  |
| Remote sensing, soil chemistry                                   | 3  |
| Dialogue with SHPO's office                                      | 2  |
| Proper test interval for site and research                       | 2  |
| Sampling plow zone, then strip                                   | 2  |
| Establish levels of disturbance                                  | 2  |
| Set priorities to reflect budget                                 | 2  |
| Use state plan for placing sites                                 | 1  |
| Dialogue with client   | 1  |
| Dialogue with other archaeologists                               | 1  |
| Use vegetation patterns  | 1  |
| Standardize testing data   | 1  |
| Standardize dating artifacts                                     | 1  |
| Focus on plow zone distributions                                 | 1  |
| Start with house, move to landscape, cultural geography approach | 1  |
| Large-scale excavation units                                     | 1  |

\* Number of groups identifying this issue out of six groups.

The workshop groups developed a list of action items and noted the organizations and agencies that should be involved in implementing these action items. The recommended action items were 1) publish a summary of the workshop in the CNEHA journal; 2) encourage the Society for Historical Archaeology to set up a committee on historic farmsteads; 3) computerize existing data files and develop a bibliography of the gray cultural resource management literature on farmstead investigations; and 4) develop broader approaches to the study of farmsteads, based on both historical and archaeological data. It was felt that CNEHA could take the lead in some of these areas.

### Summary

As can be seen in Tables 1 through 5, there was both a consensus and a lack of agreement

on many of the issues discussed during the workshop. Tables 1 and 2 show a general consensus on what constitutes a 19th-century farmstead and why these sites are important. This suggests that there is little need to belabor these two issues further, as these results suggest a general agreement among historical archaeologists in the region. As a discipline, we seem to agree on the physical aspects and functions of the sites that fall under the rubric "19th-century farmsteads," understanding that this overall site category encompasses a wide range of occupants, locations, activities, and features. Further, there is no dispute (at least among those who attended the workshop) on the value of these sites in terms of understanding our country's agrarian past. Also, these sites require greater consideration in the context of historic preservation decision

Table 5. Action agenda for farmstead archaeology.

|   | N* |
|---|----|
| <i>Actions to be taken within the profession</i>  |    |
| Publish a summary of workshop in <i>Northeast Historical Archaeology</i>  | 3  |
| Develop broader approach to the study of farmsteads, not just archaeological data   | 3  |
| Encourage the SHA to set up a committee on historic farmsteads  | 2  |
| Computerize existing data files, develop a bibliography of the gray literature on farmsteads  | 2  |
| Do more with artifacts dealing with human behavior, consumer patterns, human systems  | 2  |
| Define and summarize the major issues identified from workshop  | 1  |
| Publish a special volume on farmsteads, state of the field, status of farmstead sites   | 1  |
| Evaluation of existing historical contexts, e.g., Delaware's comprehensive model  | 1  |
| Establish information needs   | 1  |
| Develop check list for evaluating farmstead sites   | 1  |
| Develop guidelines for historical research  | 1  |
| Develop information on how to deal with mixed contexts  | 1  |
| Request CNEHA to take action  | 1  |
| Further farmstead workshops at CNEHA and at the SHA   | 1  |
| Appoint a farmstead action committee to establish where various states are on this issue  | 1  |
| Article on the good, the bad, and the ugly in terms of farmstead reports  | 1  |
| Standardize evaluations of significance and research questions in farmstead archaeology   | 1  |
| Develop a master plan that would reach across broad cultural regions  | 1  |
| Look at farmstead winners and losers  | 1  |
| Encourage the excavation of representative samples of range of farmstead types  | 1  |
| Be willing to volunteer   | 1  |
| <i>Outreach to other organizations</i>  |    |
| Encourage SHPOs to undertake study in each state (seek federal funding)   | 6  |
| Request National Park Service director to initiate National Historic Landmark theme study   | 3  |
| Work with the American Council for Historic Preservation, the Society for State and Local History, the Society for American Archaeology, and other interested organizations | 2  |
| Lobby government agencies to hire experienced historical archaeologists (see Ohio model)  | 1  |
| Public outreach, SHPOs, clients, academia, the public   | 1  |
| Work harder on public education   | 1  |
| Identify public issues  | 1  |
| Hire a public relations person  | 1  |

\* Number of groups identifying this issue out of six groups.

making both in Canada and the northeastern United States. Boucher and Klein note in this volume, however, that a consensus on the value of these sites clearly does not exist outside historical archaeology. In fact, some of our fellow archaeologists do not recognize 19th-century farmstead sites as significant historic resources (*i.e.*, eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places).

Given the problem that the public and many of the individuals and agencies involved in historic preservation see little value in these sites, it is a bit discouraging that there was somewhat less agreement among workshop participants in terms of how to involve the public in our research and preservation efforts (TAB. 3). This suggests that there is much work that needs to be done in terms of engaging the public and in terms of educating decision makers in historic preservation. There was also less agreement among the workshop par-

ticipants concerning which sites should be excavated and what tools and processes should be used in the investigation of these sites (TAB. 4). This is unfortunate in that these issues need to be fully addressed in order to make reasonable research and historic preservation decisions involving these sites, and to successfully engage the public in our work. Simply stating that all of these types of sites should be investigated (which was the overall consensus of the workshop participants) does not address the problems of limited monetary and personnel resources. Intensive study and dialogue among the players involved in historical archaeological research and historic preservation, including the public, will be required in order to determine where to focus these limited resources. What form this study and dialogue should take is unclear at this time, as is evident in the results presented in Table 5. There was little agreement on what

future actions need to be taken, except in terms of one item. All agreed that it was important to encourage State Historic Preservation Offices to undertake studies of 19th-century farmsteads in each state and to seek federal funding to perform such studies. As will be noted in several of the articles that follow, implementing such an action will not be easy.

In summary, this gathering of historical archaeologists highlighted those areas where, as a discipline, we have reached a consensus on 19th-century farmstead sites. Our task is to now build upon this consensus in terms of forwarding research on and preservation of these sites. The workshop also clearly identified the fundamental problems of our field when it comes to these sites, as demonstrated by the lack of agreement shown in Tables 3, 4, and 5. The articles that follow, particularly the summary article to this volume, provide some guidance on the steps that need to be taken in order to address these complex issues. This guidance on "What to do next" builds upon the consensus that exists among northeast historical archaeologists in terms of the nature and value of 19th-century farmstead sites.

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