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Recovering Information Worth Knowing: Developing More Discriminating Approaches for Selecting Nineteenth-Century Rural Domestic Sites and Farmsteads

Cover Page Footnote

We want to thank Terry Klein and Sherene Baugher for the help and encouragement given to us in pursuing a dialogue in New York State on the value of the archaeology being done on 19th-century farmsteads and for inviting us to deliver a paper on NYSDOT concerns at the 1998 CNEHA meeting in Montreal. In addition, we thank all of the participants in the 1998 Farmstead Session for so willingly sharing their thoughts, ideas, and draft papers. We also want to acknowledge the New York State Museum's Anthropological Survey Division and the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University, New York, and their consultants, for consistently providing professional high quality cultural resource surveys to the NYSDOT.

Recovering Information Worth Knowing: Developing More Discriminating Approaches for Selecting 19th-Century Farmsteads and Rural Domestic Sites

Karen D. McCann and Robert L. Ewing

Pursuant to the requirements of The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) has sponsored hundreds of archaeological surveys as part of its cultural resource survey program. By the 1990s, the type of sites identified by such surveys had shifted from the predominantly prehistoric and colonial periods to sites associated with mid to late 19th-century farmsteads and rural domestic residences. This shift was connected to a change in the scope of highway projects in New York State from interstate and infrastructure construction designed to connect urban centers, to a focus on the modernization, rehabilitation, and maintenance of the existing transportation system.

This article examines the difficulties faced by one state agency (NYSDOT) when the primary focus of a cultural resource survey program shifts from managing rare and clearly significant archeological sites to a cultural resource survey program that addresses the more commonly found historical archaeological sites associated with mid to late 19th-century farmsteads or rural domestic residences. While the primary purpose of this article is to examine the value of doing archaeology in front yards, it briefly explores the broader question of the value of the archaeology being done on mid to late 19th-century farmsteads and rural domestic sites. It encourages a critical review of cultural resource survey results in order to develop meaningful and effective selection criteria for deciding how limited public funds should be allocated for cultural resource surveys.

Conformément aux exigences de l'acte de préservation historique nationale de 1966, le département des transports de l'état de New York (NYSDOT) a commandité des centaines de reconnaissances archéologiques à l'intérieur de son programme de d'évaluation des ressources culturelles. Dès les années 1990, les types de sites identifiés par ces reconnaissances étaient passé de sites principalement de types coloniaux et préhistoriques aux sites associés aux fermes du XIXe siècle et aux résidences domestiques rurales. Ce virage était relié à un changement de l'envergure des projets autoroutiers dans l'état de New York pour la construction d'une autoroute et d'une infrastructure destinée à relier les centres urbains, à une concentration sur la modernisation, la réhabilitation et l'entretien du système de transport actuel.

Cet article examine les difficultés auxquelles a fait face une agence d'État (la NYSDOT) lorsque le centre d'intérêt principal d'un programme d'évaluation des ressources culturelles passa de la gestion de sites archéologiques rares dont l'importance est évidente à un programme d'évaluation des ressources culturelles qui traite de sites archéologiques historiques généralement associés aux fermes ou aux résidences domestiques rurales datant du milieu à la fin du XIXe siècle. Alors que le but principal de cet article est d'examiner l'avantage de pratiquer de l'archéologie dans les cours avant, il explore brièvement la question, dans son sens plus large, de l'avantage de pratiquer l'archéologie sur des sites archéologiques historiques généralement associés aux fermes et aux résidences domestiques rurales datant du milieu à la fin du XIXe siècle. Cet article favorise un examen critique dans la prise de décision au sujet de la manière dont les ressources publiques limitées devraient être allouées pour l'évaluation des ressources culturelles.

Introduction

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) New York State Division and the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) sponsor about 200 cultural resource surveys every year to assess the effect that transportation projects have on cultural

resources, including archaeological sites, that are eligible for or listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Once these resources are identified through cultural resource surveys, alternatives to avoid or minimize impacts to these properties are explored fully. This work has been ongoing since the early 1970s, and the NYSDOT is proud of its

record of identifying and protecting NRHP properties from impacts resulting from needed highway construction.

The NYSDOT highway transportation construction program changed significantly during the last 30 years. In the 1970s, there was a national need for interstate and infrastructure construction designed to connect and service urban areas between and within states. New roads were designed to cut through the countryside, avoiding direct impacts to towns and communities. Today, "(m)odernization, rehabilitation and continued maintenance of the State's existing transportation system are among the most important transportation issues facing both the State and the nation" (New York State Department of Transportation 1996: 27).

Mid to Late 19th-Century Roadside Archaeological Discoveries

In the 1970s and 1980s the NYSDOT cultural resource survey program identified an abundance of sites from the prehistoric and colonial periods of New York history. As project types changed in the 1990s the areas of the potential project impacts changed as well. Archaeological surveys moved from open countryside to narrow strips adjacent to roadways.

Archaeological surveys of these roadside strips often recover a scatter of historical artifacts or sheet middens in the front yard areas of map-documented or extant farmsteads or residences that date from the second half of the 19th century. These roadside historical artifacts and sheet middens are ubiquitous. For example, in one 11.3 km (6.7 mi) long project in western New York, the cultural resource survey identified over 30 19th-century sites (Public Archaeology Facility 1995).

Too often, cultural resource management (CRM) archaeologists interpret these historical artifact scatters and sheet middens to be potentially significant and recommend more intensive archaeological survey (site examination). As no clear criteria for evaluating these types of sites have been developed by the professional archaeological community, review archaeologists generally accept the recommendations of the CRM archaeologists. These recommendations reflect a prehistoric bias among

both northeastern archaeologists doing public archaeology and agency reviewers. As noted by George L. Miller and Terry H. Klein (this volume), such a bias is to be expected as the majority of archaeologists doing historical archaeology received their education and training in prehistoric archaeology. Review archaeologists also often share this prehistoric background.

Over the last several years, the recovered road side artifacts and sheet middens dating from the mid to late 19th century have become the most prevalent site type encountered in the NYSDOT cultural resource survey program. In an effort to better manage their cultural resources survey program, the NYSDOT has established a database of archaeological sites recommended for site examination. This database includes both prehistoric and historic sites. Of the over 150 rural historical listed sites, 85% are represented by discoveries in front yards.

This high frequency is in marked contrast to the Pennsylvania experience as reported by Mark D. Shaffer. He notes that in Pennsylvania about 25% of discovered 19th-century historical sites were in the narrow strips of land located near the existing highway while the other sites were identified during cultural resource surveys of much larger side and rear yard areas. Although it appears that Shaffer is examining surveys of much larger farmstead areas, it is interesting to note a similarity to the New York State situation. Many of the sites he examined were considered to be potentially significant and subjected to more intensive investigation, but relatively few were actually recommended as eligible for listing on the NRHP.

Assessing the Research Potential of Front Yards

CRM archaeologists have unrealistic expectations that the front yards of mid to late 19th-century rural farmsteads and residences will yield significant information about history. As a consequence, they usually recommend intensive archaeological excavation (site examination) when they identify artifact scatters or sheet middens during reconnaissance cultural resource survey. Usually the inclusion of 19th-century ceramics in the recovered

material is the primary basis for recommending more intensive archaeological surveys. This narrow perspective ignores other relevant factors about 19th-century front yards. Other significant factors that can affect the research potential of these front yard sites include size and location of project impact area, structure of the archaeological site encountered, site association, historical use of front yards and the presence of archival material. Each of these factors is examined below.

Size and Location of Project Impact Area

The boundaries of roadside archaeological sites found during testing for transportation improvement projects are usually defined by the limits of the proposed project impact area, generally only 5-15m (15-45ft) from the curb or road shoulder. CRM archaeologists are understandably frustrated by the narrow project survey areas characteristic of many highway projects. Before recommending archaeological survey, CRM archaeologists need to critically consider if these narrow project areas are of sufficient size to yield important historical information.

The location of the project impact area also needs to be carefully considered before recommending further investigations. For projects along roadsides, the CRM archaeologist needs to critically evaluate the potential for previous disturbances from landscaping, utility construction, road grading, or other sources that have compromised the integrity of the site. Unfortunately, this is not always done. As has already been pointed out in an earlier reference to Shaffer, a small number of the 19th-century sites subjected to site examination are actually found to be eligible for the NRHP. Disturbance is a primary reason why many site examinations conclude that sites are not eligible for listing on the NRHP. Given the location of proposed impact areas in relation to the road, many of these "not eligible" conclusions might be reached without intensive testing if the potential for disturbance is more thoroughly examined.

The Structure of the Archaeological Site

Highway rehabilitation projects usually impact only a small part of mid to late 19th-century rural sites. The rest of the site lies outside the project area in the landscape of the farmstead or rural domestic residence. When cultural resource surveys are limited to only a portion of front yards, the results are poten-

tially misleading since the bulk of the discarded material and intact features may not be found in these surveys. To paraphrase Moir and Journey (1985: 55-59), study of farmsteads for the Richland Creek Archaeological Project in Texas, site interpretation from one small part of a site is apt to lead to distorted or false conclusions since artifact classes and types are not evenly distributed across a site but rather form clusters within the use area of the site.

When CRM archaeologists identify front yard artifacts or middens as potentially significant sites, they need to keep in mind that subsequent, project-related investigation will not extend beyond the boundaries of the project area. There will not be a study of the entire site's features, middens, landscape alterations, and artifacts, which together and in juxtaposition to one another, best represent the historical activities of the site. As a consequence, researchers will be forced to interpret the lifeways of site inhabitants based on a small slice of a site in a non-randomly distributed universe. Such interpretation may be fragmented, misleading, and erroneous.

Site Association

CRM archaeologists need to critically consider the possible origin of the artifact deposit at the road edge. The artifact scatter or sheet midden may be associated with those who occupied the area, but it could also be the product of years of discard by those who traversed the byway.

Even if it can be determined that the artifacts are occupant generated, important questions still remain before deciding if a site warrants further investigation. CRM archaeologists need to assess the likelihood that they will be able to associate recovered material with a specific occupant or occupants. This association becomes even more important when combined with archival research. As noted by Miller and Klein (this volume), "...our greatest opportunity to understand the relationship between people, their social and natural environment, and material culture comes from well-documented sites that have rich intact deposits."

Many of New York's historical sites have been occupied by a number of different households. Because of this pattern of multiple occupations, front yard sites, especially sheet middens, containing materials that span over 100 years must be approached with caution. Such sites are likely to have dubious interpre-

tive potential if the artifact deposits are not temporally separated. Unless there is fair certainty that the recovered artifacts can be associated with particular households for analysis, CRM archaeologists should avoid assessing these sites as having the potential to provide important information about past life ways and/or cultural change (such as changing social status/power in the 19th century). This is an impossible goal when the site represents numerous different households and the potential to associate isolated site remains with specific occupation is masked.

Use of Front Yards in the Mid to Late 19th Century

Another factor to consider when recommending cultural resource investigations in the front yards of mid to late 19th-century farmstead sites is the changing practices in land use and refuse disposal. Based on the results of the cultural resource investigations at farmsteads at Fort Drum, in northern New York, the archaeologists (Louis Berger & Associates 1993) observed a change in the location of archaeological deposits associated with farmsteads that they attributed to the rising awareness about health related problems and waste disposal during the second half of the 19th century (Louis Berger & Associates 1993: 2-19). On 12 farmsteads that dated from 1850, Louis Berger & Associates found that productive archaeological deposits were located in the back and side yards only, with one exception being a front yard deposit found at a farmstead dating from the early 19th century (Louis Berger & Associates 1992).

To examine changing disposal patterns, Kelly and McCann (1983) analyzed the results of the cultural resource reconnaissance surveys conducted in rural communities for New York State Department of Environmental Conservation/US Environmental Protection Agency Pure Waters Construction Program. The cultural resource surveys were conducted on individual house lots within rural villages where on-site wastewater systems were to be installed. Kelly and McCann found that artifacts were not randomly scattered or found in front yards, but rather tended to cluster in locations peripheral to the dwelling in rear or side yards. From their documentary research into health and sanitation, Kelly and McCann found a significant increase in the number of articles in journals on health and sanitation during the second half of the 19th century.

They proposed that these articles suggest that a new ethic of cleanliness evolved in the second half of the 19th century as waste and refuse became increasingly viewed as unclean and a public health hazard.

The results of these two studies suggest that during the second half of the 19th century the refuse disposal pattern changed from expedient discard to intentional disposal in back and side yards. Both studies propose that this change may reflect a concern about health, sanitation, and cleanliness. But we also recognize that other possible explanations may exist for the minimal archaeological material found in the mid to late 19th-century front yards. For example, it may reflect a presence in New York of the New England "formal front yard" concept identified by Hubka (1984: 70-77) for connected farm buildings. Regardless of the explanation, there seems to be agreement that a conscious effort to organize and control the use of the yard areas was taking place in New York after the mid 19th century and front yards were no longer being viewed as locations of casual refuse disposal.

Archival Research

In addition to critically analyzing the value of archaeological investigations in the front yard area of mid to late 19th-century farmsteads and rural domestic residences, CRM archaeologists need to more thoroughly examine archival sources to determine what is known about the occupants. If the historical record about a household is sparse, interpretation of recovered material will be very restricted. If there is a wealth of good historical documentation, then the researcher needs to critically assess the value of doing extensive archaeological excavation. To quote Moir and Journey (1985: 7), "Archaeology is expensive, and historical archaeologists do not need to recreate history when it is already recorded."

Generally, we have found CRM archaeologists reluctant to accept the value of the written sources for interpretation when making decisions to mitigate impacts to archaeological sites. Miller and Klein (this volume) consider this professional "skepticism" to be the basis for relegating documentary evidence to a secondary role.

We note that some of this professional skepticism is changing. At a proposed bridge replacement project near Syracuse, New York (New York State Museum 1997: 37-61), survey testing identified seven, map-documented

structures (MDSs) closely clustered within a fairly restricted project area. One of these MDSs was identified as a farmstead site associated with a canal-related store/warehouse scheduled for removal as part of the project. Initial mitigation discussions promoted what we would call a traditional data recovery plan involving extensive archaeological excavation with archival research in a supporting role. Given the potential problems with site interpretation, however, and the project's final design plans showing fill placed over most of the archaeological sites without subsoil excavation, CRM and review archaeologists agreed to mitigate the effect on the NRHP resources through a combination of archival research and architectural analysis of the extant building, instead of extensive archaeological excavation.

As the canal store and associated archaeological sites are located in a state park, this mitigation will also provide information on the history of the area that can be shared with the public through interpretative signs and pamphlets. We are also hopeful that the results of this mitigation plan will encourage other CRM archaeologists to recognize the strength and value of the written records for providing important information about history.

If CRM archaeologists critically consider the location and size, structure and association of mid to late 19th-century archaeological sites in front yards while examining the archival record, the selection of sites for intensive investigation will be more defensible and the results of these additional studies more likely to yield information that is important to history.

Transportation CRM managers must ensure that the expenditure of public resources on archaeology is warranted and appropriate. This is difficult to do if a significant portion of their cultural resource survey program is spent addressing sites found in the front yards of mid to late 19th-century farmstead sites.

The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VAOT) has initiated a research program to study the value of front yard archaeology with limited public resources. The VAOT has contracted Louis Berger & Associates (2000) to identify key issues related to the archaeology of front yards, develop guidelines for future investigation of front yard deposits, and identify when it is appropriate to do archaeology in front yards. This research program should

provide valuable guidance for evaluating front yard archaeological sites.

A Broader Question: The Value of Doing Archaeology on Farmsteads

While the VAOT research program and this paper are focusing on the question of the value of front yard archaeology at 19th-century rural sites, other state transportation agencies are addressing the broader question concerning the value of doing archaeology on farmsteads. We are particularly interested in this question because we realize that only through the study of entire farmstead sites will we begin to understand the structure of these sites and the temporal variation in the disposal pattern that will help resolve the question of the value of conducting archaeological research on the fragmented front yards encountered in highway rehabilitation and maintenance projects.

The Minnesota DOT (Mn/DOT 1997) has initiated a major research program to provide a structure for addressing historical farmsteads. The scope of this program includes developing written contextual narratives, evaluation criteria, research questions, and a method for archaeologically exploring farmstead sites (BRW, Inc. 1998: 2). The Mn/DOT research program will provide useful guidelines for identifying those rural archaeological sites that merit study.

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) also has questioned the value of the archaeology being done on farmsteads. A proposal submitted to the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) in 1996 (PennDOT 1996) identified historical archaeological sites associated with 19th-century farmsteads as a particular concern because this site type is frequently encountered during field studies and the criteria for establishing significance in such sites is weak and leads to uncertainty about the value of further research. The NCHRP proposal, that to date has not been funded, includes developing a detailed context that would provide a framework for assessing site significance (PennDOT 1996: B3-3).

The Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office shares with PennDOT a frustration in trying to manage this ubiquitous resource. While hundreds of Pennsylvania's farm sites have been archaeologically tested through their state's cultural resource management process, Shaffer finds it difficult to estab-

lish what important information, if any, has been gained.

Given the mounting concern about the high expenditure of public resources on archaeological surveys, it is time to carefully consider what is being learned from these investigations. As Vergil Noble (1996: 75) states, "There exists a crucial distinction between facts that ratify and facts that reveal. We must have the wisdom to separate in our minds what can be known archaeologically from what is worth knowing." Tom King (ACRA-L on the Internet, 8/31/98) also addressed this concern as follows:

I don't think there's any doubt that you can get information about economic processes, ethnicity, lifeways, etc. out of nineteenth century farmsteads; I think the real question is, so what? What is such information good for? Who cares? What makes the information worth spending the taxpayer's or ratepayer's or anybody else's bucks to recover.

We would answer that many researchers and members of the public do care as demonstrated by those individuals who are actively pursuing these and similar questions about 19th-century farmsteads. The conferences and workshops discussed in the article by Terry Klein and Sherene Baugher (this volume) give testimony to the growing level of concern about the management of archaeological farmsteads sites. The CNEHA took the initiative on this issue in 1997 when it held a workshop at its annual meeting in Altoona, Pennsylvania. At this workshop, participants examined research topics and problem statements associated with current approaches to the archaeological investigation of 19th-century farmsteads.

A week after the CNEHA meeting, the New York State archaeological community and cultural resource managers met for the first time at a colloquium sponsored by the New York State Museum that provided a forum for professionals to present their research on 19th-century domestic archaeology. As time for discussion was limited at this colloquium, the NYSDOT, in August 1998, organized a round table discussion on the archaeology of 19th-century rural sites, particularly farmsteads, inviting representatives from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYSOPRHP), New York Bureau of Historic Sites, the New York State Museum (NYS Museum), as well as CRM consultants

and universities. The following objectives were formulated during this round table discussion:

- Consider whether the traditional three stage design (reconnaissance survey to identify archaeological sites, site examination to determine if the site meets the NRHP criteria, and data recovery), used extensively in New York for cultural resources surveys, is the best approach for studying 19th-century farmsteads and rural domestic sites.
- Identify those research questions that are being asked by historians that could suggest research topics for farmstead archaeology.
- Establish a central New York State site file database that includes 19th-century rural sites so archaeologists can evaluate what is being learned from research on these sites.
- Undertake a pilot study that will examine entire farmsteads to provide the comparative data needed to decide on appropriate research goals for this site type.

Progress is being made in addressing some of these objectives. The NYSOPRHP has established a state-wide database and is working with NYSDOT and the NYS Museum to make the database available to cultural resource professionals. As part of this statewide database effort, the NYS Museum provided their site file data to the NYSOPRHP.

NYSDOT, in consultation with the NYSOPRHP, has developed a research design to study farmsteads that will be implemented in one of the few new interstate projects in western New York. This interstate project proposes a new road alignment, approximately 45km (28mi) in length from Springville, Erie County to Salamanca, Cattaraugus County, that will cut through the historic, agricultural community and provide a unique opportunity to study entire farmsteads instead of just road frontage. The proposed archaeological research design collapses the stages of survey and employs a consistent testing strategy and intensive archival research to fully examine a representative sample of farmsteads. Using background research that included an analysis of historical maps and atlases, the CRM consultants (Fisher and Peña 1998) have drafted a contextual study, identified site types, and outlined preliminary research goals. Using the contextual study and the results of the background research, farmstead sites will be selected for study based on their location, affiliation, size, environment, and agricultural

system. The intent is to include a representative sample of all site types. Preference will be given to farmsteads with extant structures. A variety of testing methods will be used based on the landscape and features encountered. For example, since we expect to locate sheet middens on the farmsteads, based on the results of previous cultural resource surveys conducted in this area, we will draw upon the research of Moir and Journey (1985) for the testing of these features. The CRM consultants will undertake interviews and extensive archival research. Extant associated buildings will be recorded (Fisher and Peña 1998). This project provides us with the unique opportunity to explore entire farmsteads, to not be restricted by the three stage approach to survey, and, as recommended by Mary Beaudry (this volume), to consider farms as farms.

Conclusion

We are encouraged by the growing interest in discussing the archaeology of 19th-century farmsteads, illustrated by the conferences that led to this volume. We are particularly excited about the ranking system proposed in this volume by Miller and Klein to establish an objective procedure for evaluating the research potential of farmsteads sites. To this end, we have redesigned our NYSDOT site examination database to include their recommended data fields. We are hopeful that this system, in combination with the vast amount of ongoing research already discussed, will lead to a much needed and improved selection criteria for New York, particularly for mid to late 19th-century front yard archaeological sites. We hope this brings us to a point where meaningful recommendations will become the norm.

As to our primary concern, the ongoing work on roadside sites in New York, we are extremely pleased to see the VAOT research program addressing the value of doing archaeology at mid to late 19th-century rural sites in front yards, and look forward to the results of the study.

Lately, we have also seen increased rigor demonstrated by CRM archaeologists in the assessment of mid to late 19th-century farmsteads and rural domestic sites. We are hopeful that this is the beginning of a trend that will spread so that limited public resources will be spent on recovering information worth knowing.

Acknowledgments

We want to thank Terry Klein and Sherene Baugher for the help and encouragement given to us in pursuing a dialogue in New York State on the value of the archaeology being done on 19th-century farmsteads and for inviting us to deliver a paper on NYSDOT concerns at the 1998 CNEHA meeting in Montréal. In addition, we thank all of the participants in the 1998 Farmstead Session for so willingly sharing their thoughts, ideas, and draft papers. We also want to acknowledge the New York State Museum's Anthropological Survey Division and the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University, New York, and their consultants, for consistently providing professional high quality cultural resource surveys to the NYSDOT.

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