2009

Book Review: Excavating the Sutler's House: Artifacts of the British Armies in Fort Edward and Lake George by David R. Starbuck

Richard Veit

Follow this and additional works at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha>

Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Veit, Richard (2009) "Book Review: Excavating the Sutler's House: Artifacts of the British Armies in Fort Edward and Lake George by David R. Starbuck," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 38 38, Article 12.
<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol38/iss1/12> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol38/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Northeast Historical Archaeology by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

on this, but she was a good sport when cornered in front of the students.)

There is probably no more effective way to sensitize a college campus to archaeology and the history under our feet than to put on a live demonstration of techniques right next to where everyone has to walk. Did we find anything spectacular? Probably not, but every artifact predated the existence of the university. We recovered much 19th-century pottery, lumps of coal, nails (all types), and virtually nothing from the 20th century. Recent grounds crews have been too diligent in removing modern artifacts!

Every college campus has the potential to reveal something new. It is impossible to read *Beneath the Ivory Tower* without imagining how easy it would be to do digs on *every* campus. As we seek to make our courses as hands-on and relevant as possible, the selection of on-campus sites for archaeological digs will certainly increase, and research questions will no doubt grow in sophistication. This really is an inspirational volume because we can all see our own futures in what these pioneering scholars are doing.

David Starbuck is an Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Social Science at Plymouth State University, part of the University System of New Hampshire. He specializes in the archaeology of military and industrial sites, and his most recent books are *Excavating the Sutlers' House* (2010. University Press of New England) and *The Archaeology of Forts and Battlefields* (2011. University Press of Florida). He is currently directing excavations at Fort William Henry, site of the massacre in "The Last of the Mohicans."

David R. Starbuck
Department of Social Science
Plymouth State University
Plymouth, NH 03264
dstarbuck@plymouth.edu

EXCAVATING THE SUTLER'S HOUSE: ARTIFACTS OF THE BRITISH ARMIES IN FORT EDWARD AND LAKE GEORGE, by David R. Starbuck, 2010, University Press of New England, Lebanon, New Hampshire, 132 pages, 161 illustrations, 4 half-tones, 157 color, \$24.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Richard Veit

Historical archaeologists working in the Northeast have come to expect regular publications from David Starbuck, one of the field's most prolific authors. He has written about topics as diverse as colonial glassworks, Shaker lifestyles, the French and Indian War, and the American Revolution. His latest publication, *Excavating the Sutler's House: Artifacts of the British Armies in Fort Edward and Lake George*, is a significant contribution to the archaeology of 18th-century military life. It is also a must have book for anyone interested in the material life of the colonial soldier. The book is beautifully produced with full color photographs throughout. Indeed, the volume is worth buying simply for the incredible artifact photographs. However, this is not a coffee table book; it is a brief but scholarly treatise on the lives of sutlers and their role in the supporting 18th-century armies in the field. I suspect it will also be a much-referenced volume for anyone interested in material culture or militaria. My copy is already becoming well thumbed.

Excavating the Sutler's House takes an interesting but overlooked topic, the role of sutlers, or merchants, in supplying colonial armies during the French and Indian War, and gives it a thorough examination. Starbuck uses his own work at a site in Fort Edward, New York, likely associated with a Mr. Best, as the lens through which to examine this topic. He also draws upon collections from other sites in Fort Edward and Lake George, New York. The richness of these collections is hard to fathom. Everything from gun parts and musket balls to bayonets, coins, compasses, tools, and musical instruments has been recovered. They are all illustrated here in full color providing a useful reference for scholars working on sites from this time period.

The book follows a logical organization. It begins by introducing the British encampments

in Fort Edward and Lake George and then looks more closely at the value of artifact studies and the origins of historical archaeology in northern New York. Next it examines the archaeological sites themselves, especially, Fort Edward, Fort William Henry, Fort Gage, and the Lake George Battlefield Park. Starbuck then introduces us to the important role sutlers played in supplying the troops. A substantial sutling house occupied in the late 1750s and carefully excavated by Starbuck's team is then explored. Starbuck associated the structure with a Mr. Best and concludes that it operated from 1757 until 1759, when it appears to have been destroyed in a fire. Eight years of excavation revealed a rich collection of artifacts associated with this complicated feature.

Having situated his site historically, geographically, and culturally, Starbuck goes on to examine the weapons and ammunition that have been archaeologically recovered from this and other contemporary sites in northern New York. Although many will be widely familiar to historical archaeologists (gunflints, scabbard holders, and musket balls) others, such as halberds, are simply extraordinary. Next, Starbuck introduces the ceramic and glass finds unearthed at these sites, artifacts that in many ways reflect a more sophisticated and urbane lifestyle than one might have expected on the military frontier. At times questions are raised and left unanswered. For instance, Starbuck notes that dot, diaper, and basket pattern white salt-glazed stoneware is rare at any of the military camps (p. 56). This reader wondered why this was the case as this is a fairly common pattern on civilian sites from this time period. Curious finds, such as a fish bone called a preoperculum, are illustrated (p. 57) but left this reader searching for a dictionary. The preoperculum turns out to be the front bone of a fish's gill cover.

Other chapters deal with tools and equipment—everything from a book clasp to shovels; architectural hardware and building materials; and personal items including buckles, buttons, cufflinks, and combs. Coins, all too often given short shrift by non-numismatically-inclined archaeologists, warrant an entire chapter, as do miscellaneous artifacts: beads, mouth harps, and the like. This detailed analysis of particular classes of artifacts is commendable.

Starbuck's conclusions lay out his argument for assigning the sutling house to Mr. Best and expand upon what these artifacts can tell us about the lives of soldiers during the French and Indian War. He contrasts these finds with the much-less-rich collections often recovered from 18th-century campsites and battlefields. The book contains a useful bibliography and an appendix listing totals of artifacts in particular categories. It might have been useful to provide minimum number of vessel counts for ceramics and glassware in addition to the raw counts of artifacts. While Starbuck makes good use of contemporary diaries, particularly that of Jabez Fitch which he interweaves with the archaeological evidence, he does not reference officers' guides of the time which sometimes note sutlers.

Excavating the Sutlers' House is a well-written volume and should appeal to professional and avocational archaeologists, reenactors, military historians, and indeed anyone hoping to learn more about British military artifacts of the 18th century. Starbuck's interpretations are sound and the photography is superb. This book will be an important addition to the libraries of historical archaeologists throughout the Northeast.

Richard Veit is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Anthropology Program Coordinator in the Department of History and Anthropology at Monmouth University. He also directs the university's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. A historical archaeologist, his research interests include early American gravemarkers, military sites archaeology, industrial archaeology, and vernacular architecture.

Richard Veit
Department of History and Anthropology
Monmouth University
West Long Branch, NJ 07764-1898
rveit@monmouth.edu