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# Introduction to Archaeology of the Revolutionary War Period

by Charles L. Fisher

## INTRODUCTION

In October 1983 the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology met at New Windsor Cantonment State Historic Site, near Newburgh, New York. This site was the last winter cantonment of the Continental Army during the American Revolution and 1983 marked the 200th anniversary of the occupation and abandonment of this site. Currently administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, New Windsor Cantonment was considered an appropriate place to discuss the Revolutionary War period as an archaeological subject and the effect of the Bicentennial on archaeological research.

The seven papers in this volume were among the dozen reports on the topic of the Revolutionary War period presented at the 1983 meeting. They reflect the diverse research interests of archaeologists who have focused on subjects relating to this time period. Represented here are material culture studies, survey methodology, settlement pattern studies, and an anthropological analysis of historical archaeology. This study, by Dr. Bert Salwen, was the keynote address of the conference and raised the question of the relationship between historical archaeology and the Bicentennial. The political context in which we all worked during the last decade is evaluated by Dr. Salwen in terms of "lasting" effects on the practice of historical archaeology. This assessment of archaeological research undertaken during the 1970s and its relationship to the development of historical archaeology is an important "mirror" for the emerging discipline of historical archaeology.

The influence of historic preservation in archaeology was obvious in many of the papers presented at the conference and is reflected in both papers here that deal with survey. Both Sopko and Seidel discuss efforts toward non-destructive field survey. At the cantonments at Pluckemin and New Windsor, historical documentation, photographic recording, surface mapping, soil chemical and geophysical surveys were employed in combination with subsurface investigations. Similarly, the study of both sites is directed toward long-range preservation of these resources.

Two papers (Smith and Cohn) represent the continued archaeological interest in

material culture, but with a significant difference. Both discussions emphasize the meaning of material objects to the people who used them. In the case of British glassware, meaning is attributed in terms of differential drinking practices, differential access to alcoholic beverages, and the structure of social relations within the military and between the military and civilian populations of the second half of the eighteenth century. Cohn suggests archaeologists will see material evidence of women and children at military sites of this period as soon as we seriously look for it. The modern notion of separation of military and domestic spheres has influenced archaeological interpretations and created a past which frequently mirrors the present.

The paper on the exploration of the Defence, by David Switzer, is the first discussion of nautical archaeology to appear in the journal Northeast Historical Archaeology. The material culture of this ship is related to daily life during the Revolutionary War period both on land and sea. Detailed information concerning ship building in New England during this period is also contained in this paper. The issues surrounding the preservation of the Defence, which remains in its aquatic environment, hopefully will be the subject of a future article.

The Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology expresses its sincere thanks to the organizations and individuals who supported the conference at New Windsor and this publication. The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Palisades Interstate Park Commission and New Windsor Cantonment State Historic Site co-sponsored the 1983 meeting with the Council. The efforts of Jim Gold, John Lovell, Howard Miller, Don Loprieno and the staff of New Windsor Cantonment State Historic Site were crucial to its success. Our appreciation is also extended to the Office of Colin Faulds, Orange County Historian, for a grant which greatly aided this publication.

I would like to thank my co-workers at the Bureau of Historic Sites for their aid. Paul Huey, Lois Feister and Dennis Wentworth served as the editorial board for this volume. The conference benefited from Lois' experience and efforts, along with those of Joseph Sopko and Joseph McEvoy.