

1974

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Recommended Citation

Hanson, Lee (1974) "Outhouses in Rome, New York," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 3 3, Article 3.
<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol3/iss1/3> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol3/iss1/3>

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OUTHOUSES IN ROME, NEW YORK

by Lee Hanson

During the excavation of Fort Stanwix, located in downtown Rome, New York, we had the opportunity to excavate 14 privies associated with 19th and 20th century residences on the site (Figure 1). These spanned the period 1802 to post-1910 and since they were not all contemporaneous, they presented an opportunity to document changes in artifacts during the 19th and 20th centuries on the site (Figure 1). These residences spanned the period 1802 to post-1910 and since they were not all contemporaneous, they presented an opportunity to document changes in the artifacts during changes in artifacts during the 19th century for a restricted locality. This report is an examination of the privies themselves, as a basis for future studies of the artifacts found in them. Dates for these privies were obtained from city maps, directories and histories and dated ceramics, bottles and coins found in them. In many cases, the houses which these privies served were still standing in 1970 and the privies were obviously closed prior to that. City records indicate that the sewer system for this area was installed ca. 1895 but most of the outhouses were closed ca. 1870 and it is interesting that most trash dumps on the site have post-1870 refuse in them, suggesting that the pattern of garbage disposal changed. Several dates are important in interpreting the privies (Wager 1896: 163-167). The town water system was established after 1871 but a town sanitary sewer system was not installed until

1899. The Rome Gas Company was organized in 1852 and electricity was introduced after 1885. The question arose as to what happened between the early 1870's when many of the privies were apparently closed and 1895 when installation of the sanitary sewer system began. Two clues that bear on this are an 1884 receipt in the Rome City Engineer's files and a report of the Stanwix Engineering Company in 1892 to the Common Council on the sewer system put into effect in 1895. The receipt is a printed form which lists, among other things, bathtubs, water closets, and urinals. These would only be possible with some kind of cesspool or sewer arrangement. The 1892 plan alludes to existing sewers that would be incorporated into the new system and notes that these flow into the canals, Erie and Black River, both of which ran within half a block of the area under study. There are other references in the Common Council minutes of 1892 to some storm sewers being used for "foul water" and sewage. It would appear that after city water became available, indoor plumbing, in the area under study, became the rule and most of the privies were closed. Waste was then disposed, without regulation, into former cisterns and wells, storm sewers, and possibly private sanitary sewers. There was no archaeological evidence for cesspools.

These 14 privies do not reflect a total sample for the block excavated. For one thing, the entire area was not dug and there could well have been more privies in the unexcavated parts of the site, although probably not more than six. Several of the houses on the site were expanded in the late 19th century and these could have eradicated earlier privies that had stood in the back yard. For example, the Stryker House, built in 1839 (Anon. 1894), had a floor area of 1200 square feet. This was expanded to 3200 square feet by the 20th

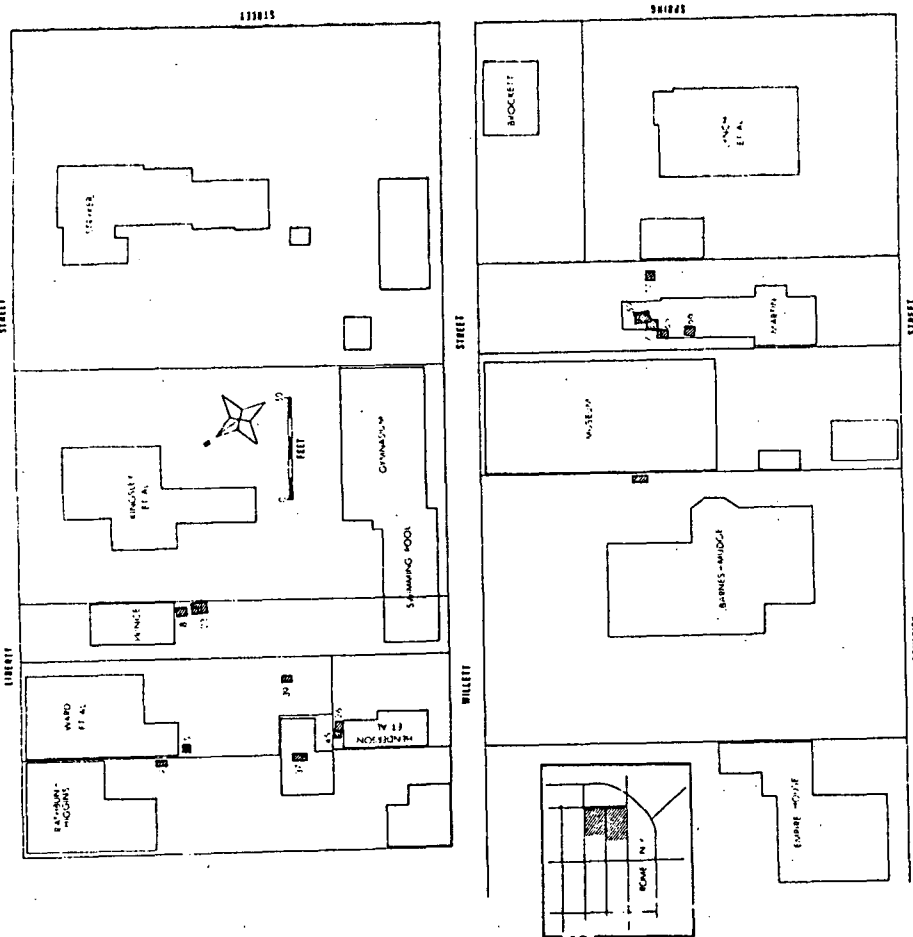


Figure 1: Block of Rome, N.Y., showing location of major structures, privies (numbered), and property lines as of 1874 (city map).

All the privies were either square or rectangular and were lined with wood or stone. The stone-lined ones were dry laid with either cobblestones or field stones used in their construction. The wood-lined privies generally had horizontal planks held in place by corner posts nailed to them from the inside. The preservation of the wood was too poor to permit a detailed study of the construction. We do not know, for example, whether the corner posts were sawed, hewn, or unmodified logs. There is some evidence that a stone-lined privy was an indication of economic status and at least one household went from a wood-lined privy to a stone-lined one.

For the sake of identification we have retained the feature numbers assigned to these privies in the field as they were found. These are not in consecutive order nor do they indicate any relative temporal ordering. The basic description and analysis which follows is for the purpose of acquainting the reader with the structure in order to evaluate the artifact descriptions that will be done later. All measurements are interior dimensions

PRIVY 1

This was a stone-lined privy measuring 7 feet long 4 feet wide and 8 feet deep. The walls consisted of a course of cobblestones after every two or three courses of fieldstones (Figure 2). Garbage was concentrated in the bottom 2 feet of fill with largely sterile soil above this. It was located 20 feet behind the original house. The house this privy



Figure 2: Privy 1, showing stonework. Note intrusive ca. 1908 pipe in the wall to the right.

Figure 3: Bottle seal with the initials of James Lynch, made at the Mt. Vernon (N.Y.) Glass Co. from the fill between privies 71 and 77. Green glass; width: 37mm. (1 7/16").



served was built ca. 1828 (Wager 1896:52) and was torn down in 1971. The artifacts indicate that the privy was used until at least 1885 and probably until ca. 1890. The upper 3 feet were disturbed ca. 1908 for a drainpipe (Waite 1972:17) and in recent years by a gas line but the sterile zone protected the lower deposit. The owners, Wheeler Barnes and Alva Mudge, were well-to-do and could be considered upper class for a town the size of Rome.

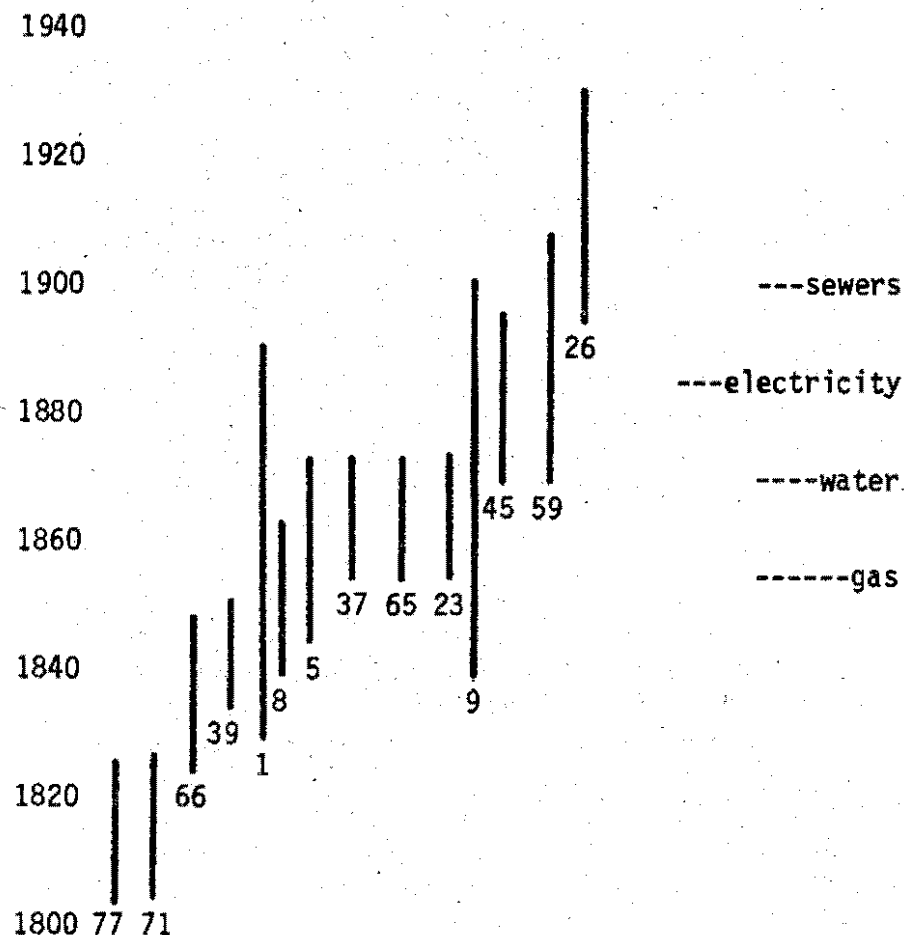
PRIVY 5

This was a wood-lined privy 4 feet square and 8 feet deep. Garbage was concentrated in the lower 2.5 feet of fill with sterile soil over this. Settling had produced a depression which was leveled in the 20th century with junk and ashes. The privy abutted the back wall of a house built in 1841 (Wager 1896:115) and torn down ca. 1892 (City Directory) although the contents suggest it was in use until 1861 and probably until ca. 1870. The house was used primarily as a middle class boarding house sheltering clerks, lawyers and salesmen.

PRIVY 8

This was a wood-lined privy 6 feet long, 5 feet wide and about 8 feet deep. The garbage was piled against the southwest corner and had layers of lime in it (Hsu 1971:18). The fill was remarkable for its great amounts of animal and fish bones, clam and oyster shells and window glass. Above the garbage was sterile soil. Although we removed the upper layers with a bulldozer while clearing fill from the ditch of Fort Stanwix, the operator spotted the lime and called our attention to it before he disturbed much. The house for this privy was built in 1840 (Anon. 1894) and moved from the site in 1871 (Wager 1871). The privy was used until at least 1846 and possibly until 1860. It was replaced by privy 23. This privy was located about 15 feet behind the house judging from old maps

Figure 4: Seriation of privies at Rome, New York



of the area, although we found no trace of the house foundation. The house was occupied by Daniel Prince, a builder or contractor, which may account for the high concentration of window glass and the use of lime. Judging by the cuts of meat and oyster shells, he maintained a high standard of living.

PRIVY 9

This was a stone-lined privy 5 feet long, 3.5 feet wide and 5 feet deep. It was lined with cobblestones. Artifacts were concentrated in the bottom 2 feet of fill with sterile soil over this. There were a large number of canning jars in the fill. A ca. 1900 gas line (dated by artifacts in the trench fill) cut through the top of the privy but did not intrude into the artifact bearing zone. We did not excavate the house for this privy but city maps indicate the privy was about 15 feet back from the house. The house was built ca. 1839 (Wager 1871) and torn down in 1960. The privy was in use until 1890 and perhaps as late as 1900. The house was occupied by L. S. Rathbun, a grocer and vinegar manufacturer, who was replaced ca. 1872 (City Directory) by John D. Higgins, superintendent of the local gas works.

PRIVY 23

This was a stone-lined privy 5.75 feet long, 4 feet wide and 6 feet deep. The walls were lined with fieldstones. Garbage was concentrated in the bottom 3 feet with sterile soil over this. This privy was just behind privy 6 and the garbage was also piled higher in the southwest corner which led us to conclude that it was associated with the same house. It also had a lot of clam and oyster shells, although not as much bone. The datable artifacts indicate that this privy was later in time than privy 8 and probably was in use between 1860 and 1871 (Anon. 1871) although it may have been opened as early as 1850.

PRIVY 26

This was a wood-lined privy 4.5 feet long, 4 feet wide and only 3 feet deep. There was a 2 foot thick deposit of artifacts in it. It was lined with vertical planks which, with its depth, makes it unique. It is possible that it was only a storage cellar later filled with trash since the artifacts indicate use from after 1890 to possibly as late as 1930. It may have been opened after 1900. One corner of this feature intruded into privy 45 and it was located beneath a shed extension of a house built ca. 1870 (City Directory) and torn down in 1971. It was occupied by a succession of laborers with the exception of a brief occupation in 1877 (City Directory) by an attorney.

PRIVY 37

This was a stone-lined privy 4 feet long, 2.5 feet wide and 7 feet deep. It was lined with fieldstones. Artifacts were concentrated in the bottom 2 feet with sterile soil above, which had been distributed to a depth of 4 feet by a ca. 1900 gas line (see privy 9). There is no documentation on this privy but the datable artifacts suggest it was in use from ca. 1850 to ca. 1870.

PRIVY 39

This was a wood-lined privy 5 feet long, 4 feet wide and 3.5 feet deep. Artifacts were in the bottom foot with sterile fill above this. There was no documentation on this privy but the datable artifacts suggest use from ca. 1830 to ca. 1850. Wager (1871) alludes to a small house in this vicinity which was later moved but gives no dates. The first occupant, A. H. Brainard, was in Rome by 1828 (Wager 1896:52). He started as a carpenter but was later a contractor and owner of a furniture factory.

PRIVY 45

This was a wood-lined privy 5 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 6 feet deep. Most artifacts were concentrated in

the bottom foot with a foot of ashes and tin cans above this. The horizontal wooden planks were nailed together to form a casing before they were placed into the privy and there were no corner posts. The privy was located just behind a house built ca. 1870 (City Directory) and torn down in 1971. The artifacts indicate that the privy was closed ca. 1890. See privy 26.

PRIVY 59

This was a stone-lined privy 6 feet long, 4 feet wide and about 7 feet deep. Artifacts were concentrated in the bottom foot with ashes above this. There was an abnormally high concentration of glass lamp chimneys in the midden. The walls were a mixture of fieldstone and cobblestones. The privy was located behind a house occupied ca. 1870 and torn down in 1964. The artifacts indicate that the privy was not filled until after 1893 and possibly as late as 1910. The occupant was Patrick Martin, the owner of a livery stable. See privy 65.

The top of this privy and the next three were torn out by a backhoe trench dug in 1965 in an effort to locate the remains of Fort Stanwix.

PRIVY 65

This was a wood-lined privy 6 feet long, 5 feet wide and about 7 feet deep. Artifacts were concentrated in the bottom foot with sterile fill above it. The privy was located in the vicinity of privies 59 and 66. The contents suggest a date from ca. 1850 to ca. 1870 but the city directories for this period do not show the area as being occupied. There are city maps dated 1851 and 1858 which show a structure which may have been the office associated with privy 71 but an 1852 map does not show this structure. It seems likely that there was nearly continuous occupation of this property from ca. 1802 until 1964 even though the directories do not list occu-

pants. See privy 65. The top of this privy was disturbed by the 1965 backhoe trench.

PRIVY 71

This was a cobblestone-lined privy 5 feet square and about 8 feet deep. The garbage was confined to the bottom foot of the fill with sterile soil above this. The privy lay somewhere behind an office erected ca. 1802 (Cookinham 1912:224) and used as such until 1826 when the land was sold (Waite 1972:39). This structure was eradicated by a later building (Wager 1874) and no trace of it was found. The office served Dominick Lynch, a wealthy land speculator, and bottle seals bearing the initials of his son James Lynch (Figure 3), who was the local manager, were found in this privy. The top had been disturbed by the 1965 backhoe trench.

PRIVY 77

This was a cobblestone-lined privy 3 feet square and 5 feet deep. Garbage was piled against the northeast corner about 2 feet high with a lens of lime in it. This privy was located between the office described under privy 71 and a house built ca. 1802 (Cookinham 1912:224) which burned in 1825 (Waite 1972:39). It was about 60 feet from the house and probably much closer to the office. The house was owned by Dominick Lynch and occupied by James Lynch, whose initials were found on bottle seals in this privy. The artifacts in privies 71 and 77 leave no doubt that they were used by the same household.

SENTINEL PRIVIES

In the 300 block of West Dominick Street, where the Rome Daily Sentinel was building a new plant, bulldozers uncovered at least one and probably more privies. When we reached the scene the material had been redeposited in two truckloads of fill. We salvaged all we could from the fill in one day with a group of volunteers. Although disturbed, there were a number of interesting finds which increased our knowledge of 19th century artifacts. The datable ceramics indicated a time

span of ca. 1840 to ca. 1900 for this material

SUMMARY

If any generalization could encompass the privies from Rome, N.Y. it is that they are diverse; in construction technique, the economic status of their users and time. Consequently, the quality and quantity of the artifacts recovered vary greatly between privies, making studies of these artifact difficult beyond a mere descriptive level. Nevertheless, we hope in the years to come to chip away at the mass of material recovered in a manner similar to the two articles already published (Hanson and Hsu 1971 and Hanson 1971). The dates for privies 1, 5, and 8 have been refined since 1971 with new data.

Great similarities were found between the three privies used as a basis of the reports cited above (the only ones dug at that time) and it turns out that they were roughly contemporaneous at a time when not many others of the excavated privies were in use. Consequently, there is little additional material to be added to those studies. Figure 4 represents a seriation of the privies excavated to show their temporal relationship.

Seven of the privies were stone-lined and seven were wood-lined. In one instance stone replaced wood (privies 23 and 8) under the same ownership but in the only other case of possible replacement (privies 66, 65, and 59) it could not be demonstrated that they were owned by the same person. The latest of this sequence, based on seriation, was stone-lined.

On an economic level it was decided on the basis of job and position in the community that the owners of privies 1, 8, 9, 23, 59, 71 and 77 were relatively wealthy and the owners of privies 5, 26, 43, 65 and 66 were relatively poor. There was no data on the other two privies. In the "wealthy"

group all but one had stone-lined privies and the exception, whose economic status improved while on the site (Anon. 1894), replaced his wood-lined privy with a stone-lined one. In the "poor" group only wood-lined privies were used. It should also be noted that a large majority of the occupants of the site were in the "wealthy" class and to this extent, at least, the data is biased.

Time did not seem to be a factor in whether stone or wood was used. Three of the earliest seven privies and four of the latest seven were stone-lined which is not significantly different for such a small sample.

Despite the bias of wealth and social position we feel that the artifacts recovered in Rome are representative of the kind of material that would be found from Albany to Buffalo along the Erie Canal. Their description, then, would provide a basis for comparison in any future work done in this corridor.

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1857-1970 A complete set of city directories covering this period are on file at the Jervis Library, Rome, NY. They provided information on occupants of buildings, occupations and size of households.

City Maps

Maps and birdseye views of Rome dating 1851, 1852, 1858, 1873, ca. 1888, 1899, 1907, 1909, and 1904 are on file at the Rome Historical Society and Fort Stanwix National Monument,

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