



Historical Archaeology in Deerfield



In 1982, then Executive Director Donald R. Friary, future President Philip Zea, Director of Education Programs J. Ritchie Garrison, eminent archaeologist Michael Coe, Architectural Conservator Bill Flynt, and I, a new professor of anthropology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, gathered at Historic Deerfield to discuss establishing a long-term project to explore the historical archaeology of Deerfield. Historical archaeology is the archaeology of North America after the arrival of Europeans, a kind of archaeology that excavates in the ground, studies written documents, collects oral histories, analyzes standing buildings, and works with collections of antiques. It is always best done as a team effort, and the curatorial staff at Historic Deerfield and the students and faculty at UMass Amherst could be just such a team. Deerfield offered a wealth of material on the history of European inhabitation of this area, and equally impressive material on the even longer history of the lives of the Pocumtuck people and their ancestors. As the

meeting was finishing on this productive note, Ritchie mentioned that workers at the Hinsdale and Anna Williams House, who were excavating a crawlspace as part of the house's restoration, were discovering interesting artifacts. Off Bill, Ritchie, and I went to take a look, and this was the start of what has been a 27-year collaboration between Historic Deerfield and UMass Amherst.

This wasn't the first archaeology to be undertaken by Historic Deerfield. In the mid-1970s, archaeologist Brooke Blades worked with an intrepid crew of volunteers and investigated a privy on the Dr. Thomas Williams property and the dooryard of the Frary House/Barnard Tavern (to which we have returned in recent years). And in the early 1980s, Historic Deerfield had worked with my colleague at UMass Amherst, Art Keene, in his study of the history of the Pocumtuck people of the Deerfield Valley. Art's study was done as a Summer Archaeological Field School that taught students how to excavate and record sites as well as how to conduct significant research. The project

schools have as their central question how the Europeans settled the land. What did the village look like over time? What was its mixture of homelots, churches, stores, streets, and public utilities? And on these specific lots, where did the rural residents locate their houses, sheds, barns, dooryards, gardens, walkways, and fence lines? Where did they throw out their trash, locate their outhouses, and obtain their water? How and why did they alter their homelots and village, by moving and tearing-down structures, building up terraces and digging out cellars, planting new crops, keeping new animals, and creating lawns and ornamental gardens? And what happened to these landscapes as farming went into decline and Deerfield became a center for education in its schools and museums?

Studying these landscapes also addressed another pressing concern. Historic Deerfield, like other prominent museums around the country, realized that the artifacts, buried foundations, abandoned trash pits, and traces of fence lines around their historic

Celebrating Three Decades of Research

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Top: Quentin Lewis, Field Director of the 2009 field school, discusses an issue with a student at the Frary House/Barnard Tavern site.

Bottom, left to right: Partially reconstructed case bottles, Chinese export porcelain saucer, and etched glass tumbler from the privy/trash pit at the Williams House site.

nicely paralleled Historic Deerfield's well-respected Summer Fellowship Program that teaches young scholars how to conduct primary source research, making use of the wonderful collection of manuscripts, maps, and books in the Memorial Libraries. A Summer Field School in Archaeology has been a regular feature of Deerfield's calendar for nearly 30 years, alternating between emphasizing Deerfield's Native past and that of its European settlers. Nearly 300 students have taken, and more than 25 graduate students have helped teach, the field school, all contributing to our knowledge of Deerfield's past.

The historical archaeology field

buildings had stories to tell about the past just as enticing and engaging as those found in the manuscripts, objects, and houses they had been so carefully collecting over the years. But caring for the archaeological evidence meant knowing just where these resources were located. Studying the archaeology of changing homelots was a very compatible research goal to meet the museum's curatorial needs.

We held the first Summer Field School in Historical Archaeology in the village at the Hinsdale and Anna Williams House in 1983. All went well enough in the first years that Don Friary, Ritchie Garrison, and I embarked on fundraising to support a



Above: A 10,000-year-old spear point fragment recovered from sand used as fill to build the barn ramp in 1850 at the Williams House.
 Below: A set of nested creamware plate fragments recovered from the privy/trash pit at the Williams House site.

larger, village-wide survey of the documentary and archaeological evidence of the changing landscapes of all the homelots up and down the Street and of the village itself. Along with Rita Reinke, then doing graduate work at UMass Amherst, and Amelia Miller and Susan McGowan, researchers at Historic Deerfield, we received a substantial grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Our first step was to obtain a low-altitude aerial photograph and map of the village to use as a base map to plot our

findings. We also assembled thousands of documents, organized by each homelot, that tracked who lived there and what they did to their house, out-buildings, and landscape. With this in hand we then conducted archaeological surveys at seven lots to assess their potential for future archaeological work: the Williams homelot, the Common, the Frary House/Barnard Tavern homelot, the Nims homelot, Sexton's Tavern, the Joseph Stebbins homelot, and the Arms homelot.

Shortly after receiving this grant, Ed Hood and I received a grant from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities to develop an archaeological walking tour of the village. Ever since, we've conveyed the results of our studies to all who want to hear, during Massachusetts Archaeology Month, around Columbus Day, and during the summer when the field school is in session on the Street. The results of this work have provided the basis for reports, student term papers, masters' theses, and a doctoral dissertation, and have helped Historic Deerfield curate and interpret its houses.

Certainly the oldest artifact we have found is a 10,000-year-old spear point made by ancestral peoples of the Pocumtuck. It was in the sand that Francis Stebbins (then owner of the Williams homelot) used to build a ramp for his hay barn built in the 1850s. You can still see the ramp when you visit the Hinsdale and Anna Williams homelot; it leads from the driveway up to the big double doors of the current barn. Unfortunately this spear point had lost what archaeologists call its context, the land surface and the other objects scattered on it when a person long-ago dropped the spear point. The context vanished when the Stebbins's dug up the sand from some unknown location, and brought it to their homelot to build the ramp. If we had the context, we could describe that ancient landscape, and determine whether the spear point was lost dur-

ing hunting, was accidentally left behind when changing homesites, was part of a trade with neighbors, or was deliberately buried as part of a ritual. Of course, when archaeologists excavate a site, we too destroy the context of artifacts. But we try and observe that context and record it as we dig, and that is why archaeologists dig so slowly and carefully, with precise measurements, straight-walled pits, rolls of graph paper to record the soil strata, and screening of the dirt so as not to miss any artifacts.

The oldest English artifact, and for me the most interesting, was much larger than the spear point. It was the cellar we found at the Nims homelot, during the excavation that was part of the National Endowment for the Humanities grant. Importantly, we first studied the documents with Mimi Miller and Susan McGowan to discover any written clues about how the homelot had been used. Only then did we begin our archaeology, but not by digging. First we studied the ground using instruments that did not disturb the soil, but did give clues about where to dig. For instance, a resistivity meter allowed us to look for buried foundations and buried trash pits by studying the electrical properties of the soil. A stone foundation resists the passage of electrical currents, but water in the looser soils of a buried trash pit more readily conducts electricity. A magnetometer allowed us to look for buried iron metal, like nails or hinges, by studying the soil's magnetic properties. Based on carefully studying the documents and the results from these geophysical surveys, we planned where to dig our pits.

At the Nims homelot these methods highlighted areas surprisingly far from the house; closer to the White Church in part of the lawn that documents and oral history suggested should have been undisturbed. That proved not to be the case. We started with a small pit to investigate what



A foundation wall from the Nims House that burned in the 1704 Raid.
Courtesy of University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of Anthropology

caused the odd signatures on the instruments, and in it found burned soil, artifacts from the 1700s, and odd-est of all, large well-laid buried stones. Over the next two summers we carefully opened up more pits and uncovered a big surprise, a buried stone-lined cellar with a sandstone floor. The flecks of charcoal on the floor, the early 1700s artifacts, and the scanty and imprecise documents about Nims family houses told us that this was the cellar for the Nims house that burned in the 1704 French and Indian raid on the village. This was a very exciting find, the first tangible evidence in the ground of this important event, and the earliest English artifact found to date. There was something else about the cellar that was unanticipated. Today, all of Deerfield's buildings, from the oldest to the most recent, are facing the same way, with their facades parallel and other walls perpendicular to the Street. But not this cellar. It was oriented in such a way that none of its walls paralleled the Street. This building would stick out like a sore thumb if it were on the Street today! Why did the Nims family build their house this way? We've looked in the Library at maps

and photographs and found evidence of a few other buildings, long since removed, set at an odd angle to the Street. Field schools have excavated part of a building on the Frary/Barnard homelot, and part of a fence line on the Williams homelot, from the earliest English occupations, also at odd angles to the Street. We know the Street has not changed in the 340 years of English occupation. So it appears that before the raid in 1704, the English settlers, or at least some of them, oriented their houses to face the sun. But since the early 1700s, and especially after the 1704 raid, they began building their structures to face the Street, the increasingly important source of energy flowing into the village from the larger world of the growing capitalist Atlantic economy. This very different look and feel for the early years of the village was news. No one in the early 1700s took the time to write about changing the orientation of their houses, and as a result we only know about this change by doing archaeology.

The most common artifacts we have found are fills and cuts. Technically, fill is dirt and artifacts that humans have dug from one place and

deposited in another, like the Stebbins ramp sand. Cuts are evidence of where dirt has been cut out of the soil. Every site we have investigated in Deerfield has had fill deposited and soil taken away from it. The deepest deposits we have seen are just south of the Hall Tavern, where under nearly 4 feet of fill we found a portion of an early English foundation, possibly for a tannery. The Nims cellar was under 3–4 feet of fill while at the Williams homelot between 3 and 12 inches of fill was used to create terraces on the south lawn, providing a stately setting for the elegant house. The Williams's also took care to cover a privy/trash pit in their backyard in which we found sherds of splendid bowls, plates, wineglasses, and tumblers, discoveries that helped Historic Deerfield curators furnish the house.

For archaeologists, the most useful artifacts we find are ceramics. Ceramics, especially broken tableware, are often preserved so well that they provide very interesting clues about life in the past. The ceramics are almost never whole plates or bowls or serving platters, but rather broken pieces. When people threw out many pieces of an



old dining service, like in the Williams's privy/trash pit, you can reassemble nearly whole vessels. We also found large pieces of ceramics at the Williams site and in the shed of the Moors House (a field school site for several summers at the turn of the 21st century), lying on buried old land surfaces that were covered quickly enough that they were not trampled by people or animals into fingernail-sized ceramic sherds. These, too, provide particularly clear insights into the past.

One reason ceramics are so useful is that they allow archaeologists to date soil layers. The ceramics industry went through rapid change in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Large factories, at first in England and then later in the United States, mass produced ceramics for the dining table, for the toilet, and for electrical devices. Manufacturers were experimenting with clays, glazes, shaping, and decorating processes. Study of these experiments by today's archaeologists, museum curators (Historic Deerfield curator Amanda Lange's expertise in ceramics is a great boon to our work), and antique collectors, allows us to know when ceramics of different clay compositions, glazes, shapes, and decorative patterns were first made and when they went out of production. With this information we can make informed estimates of when deposits that include these types of ceramics were placed in the ground. Sometimes the sherds have an even better clue, a maker's mark telling us the name of the manufacturer which can enable us to more precisely date the ceramics and their associated deposit.

Ceramics are also helpful because they tell us about the people who bought and used them. Debbie Rotman has studied how people changed their dining table settings between the late 1700s and the late 1800s by studying ceramics from Deerfield homelots. At some homelots she noted that earlier ceramics were earth-colored earthenwares and stonewares but later ones included whiter ceramics. She also noted changes in the decorative patterns from plate edges adorned with plain and shell patterns to those edged with Gothic paneling. Later table settings also included more kinds of plates and specialized serving dishes.

In making this change, Deerfield families were following a more general change in American society, one from an earlier colonial way of family life to a more modern way of family life. Colonial households had a very hierarchical organization, where fathers and husbands were reckoned closer to the Almighty than mothers and wives, who themselves were superior to children, servants, and slaves. But more modern

Above: students work on an excavation unit in front of the barn at the Williams House. Courtesy of University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of Anthropology. Below: Susan Hautaniemi points out large pieces of ceramics in the shed of the Moors House. Courtesy of University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of Anthropology

middle class families were ones in which husbands and wives shared in managing the household by having charge of separate spheres of life; the husband being responsible for earning a living in the emerging marketplace, and the wife managing the household and guarding the family's morality. This change in family life was accompanied by the creation of a new family ritual, the evening meal, when the father would return home from work and the children from school. Evening dinner became the main meal of the day, nourishing the family and restoring their social ties and morality. This especially differs from rural family meals in colonial times, when the mid-day meal was often the large meal of the day without the same sense of reunion, since the members of the family had been working with one another during the day. This new evening meal of reunion and renewal required new, elaborate table settings with whiter toned ceramics and Gothic paneling on their edges.

It was especially the better off middle class Deerfield families, Rotman noted, that followed this new way of setting their dinner tables. But others, for instance farming families where husbands and wives worked cooperatively together, were not as likely to embrace the material trappings of families in which husbands' and wives' work was separated. And young families with meager incomes who separated wives' and husbands' work, were not always able to afford respectable dining services for their evening meals of reunion. In making these observations, archaeology at Deerfield has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of this change in American family life.

Historical archaeology in Deerfield has told us about these and many other aspects of life in the past. In general, the village we see today has marked continuities with the earliest English village as well as marked differ-

ences. The Street is where it was laid out in the 1660s by Dedham surveyors, who were no doubt working with the paths, homes, and fields of the Pocumtucks who had recently resided on the Deerfield plateau. The homelots have also remained much the same, long narrow lots running perpendicular to the Street. But the houses have changed. The earliest English oriented their houses differently to the Street than they are today, giving the Street a very different feel. The house styles would also have been different, since the earliest standing houses on the Street today were built after the 1704 attack. What we know about the 17th-century architecture is from the few photographs of houses that lingered into the 1800s on the Street, and the yet largely untapped evidence of architectural remains that are underground, as we discovered at the Nims site. During the 1700s, Deerfield became much more like the village we see today. Familiar houses began to appear oriented in today's fashion, to face the Street. Husbands and wives developed more egalitarian, if also more separate, lives supported by the new family ritual of reunion meals that made use of elaborate table settings.

These fancy table settings, many from the potteries of England, tell of another constant in Deerfield, its involvement with the world beyond the Deerfield Valley. Deerfield of the 1600s and 1700s was populated by English, French, and Native peoples along with people captured from Africa to work in this different world. The mix of people shifted over time, with Scandinavians, and then Irish, and then Eastern Europeans joining the constant background of English and Native peoples. All Deerfield residents lived in conversation with the standards of this larger world, with some, like the Williams family, building stylishly respectable homes placed on landscapes shaped by fills and cuts to create decorative terraces and gardens. The less

well-to-do lived in the ells and attics of these larger homes and in more modest accommodations along the Street.

At first it was the fur trade and the products of the forest that were the cause of these far flung relations. When fur trading became less lucrative, intensive farming and pastoralism took its place, with wheat, stall-fed oxen, onions, tobacco, and dairy cattle replacing one another as dominant agricultural products. And with these changes were changes in the rear of the homelots as barns, stables, and sheds changed their shape and configuration, burying what came before, as when the Stebbins's "modern" barn ramp sands buried the ancient spear point along with the foundations for the Williams's stall-fed oxen barn. When agriculture became less lucrative the village turned to producing ideas and educating people, with its schools and museums. These new practices also changed the artifacts and landscapes of the village, with C. Alice Baker's remodeling of the Frary House/Barnard Tavern according to her ideas of an earlier time. Then only to have many of her interior redecorations taken out and deposited in the back yard by later curators at the museum who had different ideas about what an historic house should look like. Now these deposits are being found again by present-day archaeologists.

It is the more recent world of Deerfield's schools and museums that has enabled us to conduct archaeology and better understand what we know about the people of the past and the village they built, used, and modified. Catching glimpses of these long-ago worlds, and understanding how ours is built on theirs, is what for me has been the excitement of conducting historical archaeology in Deerfield, with my students, friends, and colleagues at Historic Deerfield and PVMA, and the many members who have visited our sites over the years.