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Archaeology of College Hill

Response #2

Integrating various types of historical evidence

We read about a variety of archaeological resources this week, and each type of evidence can aid archaeologists in inserting people into their interpretations of the past. Seasholes showed how assembling a series of historic maps can, in spite of various inaccuracies in individual maps, help archaeologists map the change of a site over a long period of time. Mrozowski used historic newspapers to take a humorous look into strain on marital relationships as colonial wealth grew, and colonists worried more about maintaining and demonstrating their status. His other article extracts a wealth of information a sales ledger; this research enabled him to write about colonial financial relationships in general, and also about particular individual’s consumption of material goods. Later in the article, he also shows how organic human waste can let us examine and compare the health patterns of past families. Finally, the importance of oral history plays into Wilkie’s article, as he attempts a very specific and somewhat personal comparison of the lives of two individuals.

Each of these sources provides archaeologists with a unique insight, but the sources become even more potent when used in concert. For example, Wilkie was able to combine archaeological, oral and documentary evidence and create surprisingly nuanced portraits of two women who lived over a century ago. If he had only used one of these sources, he might have been able to make some inferences about the lives of these women, but would have nothing to check those claims against, and would have only been able to research a short portion of each woman’s life.

Our excavations at the JBH have been informed by documentary evidence suggesting that the lawn of the house was inhabited by servants and served as a locus for several household activities. This information might affect our interpretations of what we find at our units in many ways. Knowing that the servants lived in outbuildings, we wouldn’t incorrectly indentify rooms in the house as belonging to servants. We can view the servants as having divided lives – work in the house vs. familial life in the outbuildings – and see how that plays out in the material evidence. We could also compare the lives of the servants who lived in the out buildings to the lives of the Brown family and any servants that lived in the house. If we chance upon a privy, or can determine lengths of residencies in the outbuildings, perhaps we could address a health comparison between the servants’ and the house residents.

I’m curious as to whether we might find remnants of personal objects of the servants’ during our digging this semester. It seems like most of these objects would likely use common materials and be of relatively low quality, but it will also be interesting to see if any fancy or valuable artifacts show up in the lawn pits. How might those objects have gotten there? Theft? Accidental deposition? What was the range and quality of the servants’ possessions?

I will also be interested in the quality and orientation of any remnants of out buildings we find. This will open up a range of questions: Were the servants’ quarters well-built? How were they maintained and repaired, if at all? Were they warm in the winter? Were the servants’ houses oriented away from or towards the JBH, or South, in the same *direction* as the JBH? How many people could have comfortably lived in this space? How many people *likely* lived in this space? Knowing that servants lived on the lawn allows us to keep all of these questions in mind *as* we dig and, later, identify the objects.

Archaeologists don’t absolutely *need* documentary evidence to make informed interpretations; if this were the case, prehistoric archaeology would be a total bust. But while it’s not necessary, the various readings from this week and the information we already have about the JBH have shown that documentary evidence can give us a lot of useful information that will help with excavation. Also, as Wilkie points out, it’s not always what is written in documents, but *how* they are written that matters: “texts are not only sources of information, but are also artefacts that have been produced in particular cultural-historical contexts” (p. 14).

Sometimes, what we “read” from documents has less to do with the actual information on the page, and more to do with how and why the documents were written. Seasholes tells us, for example, that, even if a map has inaccurate information, it’s always worth looking at who produced it and why. Did a certain person from a certain industry commission the map? Is the map trying to tell us something particular about a place, while incorrectly representing other information because it wasn’t important to the purpose of the map? Also, as Mrozowski explains in the article on newspapers, it’s not so important whether the griping author was being objective or not. The fact that his account was published suggests that there is some grain of truth in his humor; his nagging, status-obsessed wife reveals a lot about how attitudes about status were changing in the colonies as wealth and social stratification increased.

In short, documentary evidence is one of many types of evidence available to an archaeologist. The readings this week suggest that the most informed archaeologists will draw on a variety of sources that will inform their digging. This point also connects back to the theme of engaging other disciplines in archaeology. Just as a geophysicist can use technology to make archaeology more precise, documentary historians also inform the practice, and the best archaeologists learn to understand and integrate these disciplines into their work, as well as practice them on their own.