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Archaeology of College Hill

Critical Response 2

In her article, Laurie A. Wilkie discusses the field of documentary archaeology. This term, she explains, was introduced by Mary Beaudry who believed that text could serve archaeology instead of only the other way around. (14) Wilkie goes on to explain the importance of different components of documentary archeology such as; historical imagination, the expansion of an idea through research, oral histories, and archival research. She especially mentioned the importance of a “comparative study of probates”. (17) Wilkie’s ideas on the importance of diversity in sources are supported by the other authors’ use of historical writings in archeology.

The other authors suggest research and analytical techniques to insert people into archeological interpretations. In regards to historical archaeology, Mrozowski addresses the use of historical newspapers. He discusses the value in using ceramic advertisements to refine dating techniques, and in using opinions reflected in newspapers. He explains how opinions in newspapers can give insight and appropriate context into gender relations and other cultural differences. In her article, Nancy S. Seasholes discusses the use of historical maps in historical archaeology. She explains how maps are particular valuable in a situation where it is known that the site is in existence. Seasholes explains the value of both contemporaneous and reconstructed maps, since they can lend insight into the environmental and man-made changes on a site. However, she cautions that archeologists must be wary of potential incorrect information on historical maps. Seasholes and Mrozowski both discuss how historical knowledge can aid traditional archeology. As Wilkie suggests, real value can be obtained through the diversity of research and information, though archeologists must be wary of incorrect data.

Our interpretations of the John Brown House could be significantly influenced by the knowledge that servants lived in on the lawn since then we would know to look for small outbuildings in that area. Also, if we found the Hail Ives house remains with more recent artifacts we could entertain the idea that old buildings from the Hail Ives house were used to house John Brown’s servants or that the outbuildings from his servants were used for something else. In general, understanding the context of the site would aid our thought process and our decision making in our digging and analysis of the artifacts we find. It is extremely important, as Mrozowski explains, to understand the cultural opinions around servants at this time, in order to properly analyze the findings from the site.

It is hard to generalize what documents and research archeologists may need to make informed interpretations. As Mrozowski explains, it is important to read documents with the context of the culture and not just take them at face value. If an archeologist can accomplish this, with the help of outside research, documents can be extremely valuable in interpreting archeology. There can be value “read” from a document though. As Wilkie explains, “comparative study of probates” can give specific information about the details of the rooms of a house. However, this must be read with an understanding of the rhetoric of the time used in writings probates. Overall, documents and diversity of research can significantly the aid of an archaeological site, including our site at the John Brown House.