Max Mankin
Archaeology 1900: The Archaeology of College Hill
Response Paper One: Week Two

Historical archaeologists, such as we who excavate at the John Brown House (JBH), often rely on a wide spectrum of resources to supplement the excavated material record in interpretations of the people of the past. Additionally, supplementary resources are sometimes used to guide the way in which excavations are performed by providing a pre-dig indication of the location and function of remains. Such supplementary resources include legal documents, maps, newspapers, financial documents, and oral history. Such sources each have their own nuances and subtleties to which archaeologists must pay attention when incorporating them into their analyses. Thus, as Wilkie (2006) states, it is difficult to know which types of research questions are appropriate to ask of various types of written sources.

One category of supplementary resources are what Wilkie (2006) refers to as "mundane sources," which primarily include legal records such as plat maps, deeds, grants, census records, and tax forms. From such legal documents, it is possible to locate individuals in space and time, for instance by tracking property ownership, habitation, and employment. Similarly, tax records and other financial documents help archaeologists place individuals into a socioeconomic context by comparison with other tax payers' finances from the time. Additionally, financial records may indicate social relations of production and trade, shed light on prices and commodities, and help track the flow of goods and other items (Mrozowski, 2006). Of course, such mundane sources may be unreliable due to carelessness or prejudice, as illustrated by Wilkie's (2006) discussion of Silvia Freeman and Lucretia Perryman, two African American women who lived in the Southern United States during the mid to late 1800s. Census and other legal records concerning their lives are embarrassingly incomplete, and Perryman was even referred to as a man on her death certificate.

Maps are another type of evidence often employed to aid in archaeological interpretation. Maps are obviously applicable for locating people, properties, and structures in space and, if the date of compilation is known, time. Less obvious may be that maps may also reflect the manner in which people of the time were thinking. For instance, a map of Boston dating to the years before the Revolutionary War displays good places for troops to fortify their position but is seemingly unconcerned with residential information (Seasholes, 1988). Of course, this bias on behalf of the cartographer may render the information provided by maps incomplete, not to scale, stylized, misleading, or even incorrect (Seasholes, 1988). For instance, fire insurance maps show buildings but not landscape features, while maps drawn for sailors may reflect ports, piers, and boating hazards but neglect buildings, landscape features, population information, or streets.

Articles and advertisements in newspapers are another form of the written record which archaeologists use to aid in their interpretations of the past. Advertisements by vendors give an idea of price ranges, commodities, and style as a function of date while articles help to place events and people at specific points in time (Mrozowski, 1988). Lastly, newspapers help archaeologists understand times and places by understanding the perspective of people at the time and helping to place a site-scale context into the greater context of the time period and the region, which can range from a neighborhood to an entire country (Wilkie, 1988). However, newspapers have their downsides too. For instance, even in the first paragraph of Mrozowski's 1988 article, he cites the 1732 Rhode Island Gazette which calls for "Gentlemen of Capacity and Leisure" to "communicate their thoughts." Obviously, in 1732 Rhode Island, the gentlemen of capacity and leisure being called upon were white males of high social, political, or economic status. In addition to frequently favoring a particular demographic and following their publisher or editor's agenda, newspapers tended to favor a particular geographical area, either urban or rural, further rendering newspapers difficult to interpret at face value.

Archaeologists also take advantage of oral history to study the origins of cultural practices, beliefs, or stories and to reconstruct history from the perspective of the people who pass stories down rather than the people who wrote about it (for instance Mrozowski's gentlemen of capacity and leisure mentioned above) (Wilkie, 1988). In addition, it is possible to get to know historical people on a personal level simply by asking about them and to get information which may not be available in the written record about a site. Naturally, just like the game of Telephone, oral history is often misleading if it is exaggerated or twisted after being passed from generation to generation.

In the context of our JBH excavation, supplemental evidence has been used extensively to explain object biographies as well as the history of the house (Yellin, 2008). Given that the JBH was home to wealthy business magnates, documents indicating that the lawn housed servants should be taken seriously. Simply knowing that servants lived on the lawn is helpful to interpretations, as we can now place the objects we find within the socioeconomic context of the servants. However, in all likelihood, the documents in question were not unbiased as they may have been written by any number of people ranging from the elite residents of the JBH and their lawyers and business partners to government workers taking a census to craftsmen who repaired an outhouse on the property. As seen in the above discussion, economic, social, political, and racial bias as well as carelessness and misinformation often contribute to such documents. Thus, documentary portrayals of the property and the people on it should be interpreted with this in mind.

As seen by successful prehistoric archaeology, archaeologists do not always need supplemental information to make informed interpretations about the people of the past. However, cautious analysis of the written record and oral history can be useful to situate people, items, and events into their socioeconomic and temporal contexts. While sometimes unavailable, knowledge of the author or cartographer himself or the audience for which the writing, story, or map was intended is helpful to recognize the resources' limitations in contributing to interpretations of the archaeological material record. Especially considering that both elites and servants lived at the JBH, we must be especially wary of the resources we employ to help us understand what we excavate. As such, information about authorship and audience will be critical to accurate interpretation. While we as historical archaeologists have significant resources at our disposal in the form of these written and oral supplements, improper use of the resources by allowing them to answer inappropriate research questions would be a disservice to the people of the past who we are trying to study.

References

Mrozowski, Stephen A. **1988**. "For gentlemen of capacity and leisure: the archaeology of colonial newspapers." In M. Beaudry, ed., "Documentary archaeology in the New World," CUP: Cambridge, 184-191.

Mrozowski, Stephen A. **2006**. "Individuals in context: the world of eighteenth-century Newport." in "The Archaeology of Class in Urban America." Cambridge: CUP, 19-36.

Seasholes, Nancy S. **1988**. "On the use of historical maps." In M. Beaudry, ed., "Documentary archaeology in the New World," CUP: Cambridge, 92-118.

Wilkie, Laurie. **2006**. "Documentary archaeology." In D. Hicks and M. Beaudry, eds., "The Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology," Cambridge: CUP, 13-33.

Yellin, S. **2008**. "Historical Background of the John Brown House Property." In K. Ryzewski, ed., "John Brown House Archaeological Report," Providence, RI: Brown University, 13-41.