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Critical Response 1 Archaeology of College Hill

Site Reports

Site reports are indispensable components of any archaeological investigation and should be as specific, detailed and accurate as possible. Considering site reports inform the work of other archaeologists conducting fieldwork within a previously excavated site or comparable geographic location, it is essential to present the information in an organized and understandable manner. A site report is generally comprised of three distinct phases: Phase I reports historical background research and a survey highlighting archaeological potential. This phase should also describe any past excavations. Phase II site reports include more detailed findings from past excavations as well as recommendations for Phase III investigations which summarize the entire project and present current findings. It is critical that site reports be accessible to the general public as well as archaeological colleagues as an informative documentation of archaeological data, fieldwork and material analysis. In this response, I critically examine two site reports and offer suggestions on the organization of the report for the 2011 John Brown House excavations.

Mary Beaudry’s 1995 site report, *Scratching the Surface: Seven Seasons at the Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm, Newbury, Massachusetts*, reveals the changing human-land relationships from the early 17th century to the present day [time of publication]. The report, while brief, provides many essential and informative components of the research, especially pertaining to the historical background of the farm. Similar to past site reports of the John Brown House, Beaudry provides a chronology of the land ownership and offers historical insight onto the continuous occupation of the house from 1635 to the present. The report is organized into distinct sections including historical background, research framework and priorities, field surveys, site summaries and potential site prospects. Curiously, she concludes the report with the *Ethical Standards of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology*.

The report is well organized and easy to comprehend, largely due to the fact that Beaudry continuously defines the terms that she uses. This is integral as it makes the report accessible to the general public, a key aspect of the ethical standards. She does not incorporate archaeological jargon and instead uses a language that is simple and concise. The site report primarily details and summarizes the results of excavations conducted between the years 1986 and 1994. The summaries were evaluated in light of the research questions that have guided the project.

Beaudry begins the paper with a brief introduction detailing the importance of the site and its archaeological potential. This is preceded by a brief abstract of the paper and followed by the site’s historical background, which includes pictures and maps, much like the past reports on the John Brown House. These figures are useful as they help readers both visualize and contextualize the fieldwork. She then describes the research framework, which includes factors such as limitations, how the archaeologists have proceeded guided by archival research as well as research priorities. An effective strategy Beaudry incorporates into her site report is the fact that she uses both present as well as past historical information to inform her work, “…the ‘life history’ approach was applied to the archaeological record through detailed analysis of site formation processes. Architectural analysis of the surviving domicile is providing yet another dimension in the interpretation in the site” (10).

The report continues to describe the two surveys performed on the site with respect to historical culture and context and Beaudry divides the property in a way that is easy to follow. She details components of fieldwork on the farm, farmyard, garden, and kitchen with figures of the remains and even a hand-drawn profile of the west wall (21). Unfortunately, the site report only briefly describes the work of a 1989 field survey, and details of the excavation are not entirely detailed. It would be helpful if more information was provided in regards to specific units, however, she does mention that the excavations are still in progress, which is likely why the results and prospects are so broad.

Susan Gibson’s 1979 *Archaeological Resource Study, Roger Williams National Memorial*, is a published report on the “known and potential archaeological resources at Roger Williams…” (1). The report, in its entirety, is extraordinarily well organized and easy to comprehend. Compared to Beaudry’s report, this one is far more complete, table of contents and all. It is clear that extensive research was completed prior to beginning the excavations of this site as historical information and documentation permeates the report. A multitude of historic maps and area replications are presented throughout the report, which contributes to its effective clarity. Information pertaining to the management or resources as well as interpretations of particular resources is included which is very useful and often overlooked.

Notable in this report is the table of contents, which enables readers to locate very specific information within the paper. The report begins with an introduction, which clearly identifies the purpose of the study presented in list format. The report does an impressive job reconstructing and subsequently documenting land use and history throughout this section of Providence. Early maps are provided at the beginning of the report, which immediately provides historical context and significance. Each figure is numbered and described in depth throughout the report in a very clear and detailed manner. The report is organized chronologically, divided into distinct time periods as well as specific geographic location. It is also helpful that Gibson offers summaries at the end of each section.

Details of particular excavation units are provided throughout the site report, although it may have been useful to include hand-drawn or pictorial summaries as well. The goals of the fieldwork are emphasized throughout the report, which makes it easy to follow. Interesting components of the geographic area include chronological elevation above sea level, hydrology reports, climate reports, southern New England cultural chronology as well as the main purpose of the archaeological work: prehistoric and proto-historic land use.

At the conclusion of the report, Gibson provides very detailed site potential: “…in the long run, probably the most significant research potential of ROWI involves changing settlement patterns in an urban maritime environment. Historical and archeological data from ROWI could be used…to test Pendery’s hypothesis… that settlement patterns can be divided into three major phases…” (78). She also describes an additional problem that can be pursued: the relationship between Roger Williams and the Native American Inhabitants of Rhode Island. The section on site potential is vital to future excavators so as to not replicate work done and also to guide their work and provide specific direction. This way, the archaeological work is a continuous and collaborative endeavor, rather than fragmented and repetitive. Gibson provides not only a works cited, but also an annotated bibliography of important sources with a brief description of the information found at each source.

In regards to the site report, or output, for the excavations we conduct at the John Brown House, I would recommend an organization similar to Susan Gibson’s site report. The organization is clear and the table of contents makes the report easy to follow and understand. I would also like our site reports to be accessible to the general population, perhaps in an online database, as the main goal of our project is to share knowledge about both the John Brown House and historic Providence. It will be important to keep accurate and compressible unit summaries and excavation forms for the duration of our fieldwork. It would be helpful to include maps, photographs and perhaps even drawings detailing specific stratigraphic levels. The geophysical surveys and magnetometry are also essential components of our site report as they have informed our decisions on where to dig. A video documentation of our fieldwork can also prove to be useful and informative. I would also recommend referring to past site reports conducted since 2008 to inform our current excavations and interpretations. Finally, I believe it would be helpful to detail the potential for future excavations conducted at the John Brown House.

References

Beaudry, Mary C. 1995 Scratching the Surface: Seven Seasons at the Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm, Newbury, Massachusetts. Northeast Historical Archaeology, 24:19-49.

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