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Critical Response 2 – Historical Archaeology Resources

Because historical or “documentary” archaeologists examine sites that date to the last few centuries, the prevalence of primary documents and other contemporary resources in research projects is high (Wilkie 2006: 13). In addition to traditional excavation evidence, historical archaeologists are also able to delve into archival resources, such as residence maps, administrative records, census reports, probate inventories, church registrations, vital statistics, business accounts, old newspaper articles, and even oral histories (Wilkie 2006: 16-17; Mrozowski 1988). The inherent connection between the excavation results and the archival resources is recognized and utilized by the careful historical archaeologist, and ultimately yields a more holistic understanding of context, culture, and individuals of the past than just excavation or research alone. This relationship and, more specifically, the strengths and weaknesses of different documents in historical archaeological processes are explained by Wilkie, Seasholes and Mrozowski in their works (2006; 1988; 1988; 2006). The authors highlight the “humanizing insight[s]” these resources can have on archaeological interpretation, explaining how they can provide not only names, dates, and even the personal opinions of past individuals whose property is currently being excavated, but also information on *where* to start excavating in the first place (Wilkie 2006: 22).

Some of the most frequent types of primary resources are maps. Seasholes presents various types of maps, such as city, directorial, atlas, insurance, and birds’ eye view (1988). From each type of map, specific information can be drawn telling the reader how streets were laid out, how many houses were built in a certain area, or what were the names and professions of the people who lived there (Seasholes 1988). Seasholes also warns, however, that one must be ever conscious of potential biases or mistakes embedded in maps because of the cultural context in which it was created, the intended audience, and the general opinions and/or skill of the cartographer (1988: 93). Seasholes’ case studies stem from various maps of Boston; an example of needed wariness is seen when examining a map that is meant to promote specific ideology, like a Loyalist map during the American Revolution that highlights Anglican-based businesses and churches (1988: 93). Still, maps can be very useful when trying to trace architectural and topographical changes within a period of time, and they definitely should be considered before and during excavation.

Newspapers, too, aid archaeologists in reconstructing a historical past. Newspaper advertisements provide an excellent example of what the cultural preferences were during the time – what people were willing to pay for, etc (Mrozowski 1988: 185). Ads can also help when trying to trace the origin of material finds such as pottery, like what has been done at the John Brown House (Mankin, et.al: 18). On a more personal, humanizing level, newspaper articles can offer an individual’s voice and personal opinion, as seen in the example of the tradesman whose wife spends too much on fineries (Mrozowski 1988: 186). This example, too, shows how newspaper ads can further provide information on popular opinion, as the story of the husband-wife pair shows some unpleasant gender realities of the time period. Other personal documents, such as journals, doctors’ receipts, travel accounts, and even death certificates can yield this same level of personal information for individuals, providing specific detail and context to the material remains a person left behind. (Wilkie 2006: 21-22).

The two sets of resources – excavation and archival research – are indeed especially important when examining a specific property or homestead, such as the Tate and Brown households from Mrozowski 2006, the Oakley Plantation from Wilkie, and, of course, the John Brown House (2006: 40; 2006: 20). It is important that historical archaeologists make as clearly informed interpretations of lived spaces as possible. While it is good archaeological practice to identify and understand historical contexts and cultures, there will inevitably be generalizations in the final interpretation. Interpreting a private property, conversely, provides an opportunity to examine the “subtle but important differences” between the household in question and other contemporaries (Mrozowski 2006: 55). The comparison of the privies of the Tate and Brown households, for example, yielded the same archaeobotanical remains that would have been found in many backyards of the Colonial time period. Yet the unique ratios of pollen samples found in each provided those “subtle but important differences” that led to the conclusion that the Brown family was healthier and therefore wealthier than the Tate family (Mrozowski 2006: 57-58). This interpretation is further supported by looking at the archival records of the two families: Tate worked as an artisan and was constantly in monetary struggles with Newport’s influential merchant John Banister, as evidenced by account records; records on the Brown family show that James Brown was a merchant and militia captain and therefore fairly well-off (Mrozowski 2006: 23, 19). Here, interpretation is formed first from archaeological evidence, then supported through cross-checking archival work.

The Oakley Plantation, discussed in Wilkes work, is another example of a combined effort of excavation and more historical research that resulted in a stronger interpretation (2006:20). Here, the two research methods happened simultaneously, cross-referencing facts and interpretation. Because of the relatively recent nature of the site, Wilkie was actually able to speak with several former tenants of the place (2006: 22). The tenants were able to not only confirm that the archaeology team was indeed digging in the place where the kitchen used to be, but also provide information on the presence and personalities of the individuals who worked there (Wilkie 2006: 22). Armed with this historical confirmation, the archaeologists were able to more effectively humanize the material remains that were found.

Each resource has the potential to provide valuable information, to “provide that essential link between material culture, its use, and the attitude hold in common about it” (Mrozowski 1988:189). Thus far at the John Brown House, the past excavation classes have employed these dual techniques, making use of archives, both prior to excavating and after. This system of research should definitely continue, since they two methods truly complement each other, providing that greater holistic approach to ultimate analysis. For example, past excavations at the John Brown House have found “a marked shift in the types of ceramics found…in the yard” that might “be indicative of servant occupation” there (Mankin et.al 2010: 18). This theory developed because cheaper ceramic remains found seemed out of place on the wealthy property. The presence of potential archival evidence (pictures, written records, etc.) would indeed lay weight to Mankin et.al’s theory. Additional excavation work, too, could also provide further support. It is important, therefore, that current and future JBH excavation teams remember that 1) the research methods will only be most beneficial when they are used in tandem – one ought to support, encourage, and clarify the other – and 2) it is still important and necessary to keep an open and critical mind when examining evidence, that the archaeologist is still responsible for analyzing all that research and excavation data in a thoughtful and objective matter.

References

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