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Archaeology of College Hill

9-19-12

**SITE SELECTION REPORT**

For a site of possible survey and excavation I suggest the “south end of middle campus” (Plat), or what would now be referred to as the College Green or Main Green. This site likely contains the remains of the cellar and foundation of the first constructed iteration of Slater Hall.

 

Fig 1

Brown University Campus buildings in 1879. The original location of Slater Hall is circled in orange and the current building is in red. The proposed site would examine

**History of the Site**

This site was originally chosen for the placement of Slater Hall, the seventh building on campus and second dormitory. Slater Hall was conceptualized and built under the tenure of President Ezekiel Gilman Robinson. The funds for the dorm were provided by Horatio Nelson Slater, son of the so-called “Father of the American Industrial Revolution Samuel Slater. Horatio Slater tempted Dr. Robinson to come to be the president at Brown with a gift of $25,000. After eventually coming in 1871 the money had accrued enough interest to begin work on a dorm in 1877 (Bronson 392).

While modern day Slater hall currently occupies the site situated between Rhode Island Hall and University Hall, this was not the original intended location. An initial site was chosen on the “south end of middle campus” with a cellar dug and foundation laid in the autumn of 1877 (Bronson 392). Records from the Brown University Corporation of Sept. 4th, 1878 note “the foundation was laid according to contract in a substantial manner, completed in the following month, December 1877, at a cost of $2000” (Corporation Records).

However, work was arrested because of public outcry over the location of the proposed building. An article in the *Providence Journal* published on November 17th, 1877 proclaimed “whatever concerns the welfare of Brown University is a matter in which the public should be interested” (Providence Journal, November 17th, 1877). This citizen, who only signs the opinion piece TAX-PAYER goes on to demand a halt in construction and change of location for the building, for the building would “obviously violate hygienic laws…and would grossly offend the public sense of propriety and taste” (Providence Journal, Novemember 17th, 1877). Additionally, the fellow continues on by lamenting the possible loss of sight to the old college yard if the structure were to be built.

According to Bronson, a petition was signed by many of the most influential residents in the city (393). In this same report, he mentions that President Robinson published an “ironical rejoinder”, the publication of which is not mentioned (393). Eventually, the placement of the building was changed to its present location and work was finished in 1879. The 1879 building was built by the architects Stone and Carpenter. While no architect has been listed for the first iteration of the building, there is a possibility that Stone and Carpenter were also commissioned.

**Reasons for Excavation and Research Questions**

*The Providence Journal* article mentioned that the dimensions of the original Slater Hall site was to be about “125 feet in length and not far from 50 feet in width”. This large area, for which a foundation has been laid and subsequently covered, is currently situated in an area of campus that has seen no further development, except possible routine utilities placement, upkeep, and management (Burlingame). The utilities placement for this area is still pending from the Planning Office. Correspondence with a University Archivist stated that it is likely the remnants of the foundation are still in existence and were not removed.

Excavating a part of Brown’s history that was never able to come to fruition would be valuable in envisioning one imagined path the University could have veered. Unfortunately written records are sparse, but the ones that remain germinate many questions that excavation and further research could answer. How did this initial plan mimic or differ from other architectural and campus trends across the country and what was the reason this site was initially chosen? What was the plan of this building, as no records exist? How much does it alter from the current Slater Hall? As a modern university very much embroiled in conflict with Providence residents, studying similar discord centuries earlier could provide insight into the role Brown and other Universities have played in their community throughout their histories.

Furthermore, the College Green has been a continual site of activity for much of the College’s history. To echo James Deetz, this site of occupation, revelry, and relaxation has doubtless traces of the small things forgotten (4). Beyond the architectural remains and the material culture associated with construction in the late 19th century, the site would hopefully yield the mundane of student life, whether it be refuse from a meal or lost school supplies. What are students leaving behind? Are there remnants of farming from periods before this site was used for collegiate purposes? If more than one site was chosen, a comparative analysis of material culture could help elucidate questions of site use. How do different spaces on campus change over time in their use and what can the material found tell us?

**Further Work and Research**

Preliminary research has been conducted in consultation with the Brown University Archives in the John Hay Library, which have yielded the Corporation Records regarding the initial building. However, research conducted thus far at the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Hay has yet to yield any architectural plans or drawings for the site. Further research needs to be conducted to determine if any such plans are in existence. Additionally, utilities placement from the Brown University Planning Office needs to be obtained to determine the exact excavation locations.

Upon acquisition of these utilities records, there would be multiple ways to approach the site. If focusing solely on this one site, and not others around campus, I would recommend digging two trenches: both that bisect the foundation edge in different peripheral locations. Initially, I would suggest one side closes to the current face of Rhode Island hall and the other facing George street, as refuse from the street might be found. Additionally, I am under the belief that the periphery would include much of the fill excavated when the building was being initially built. However, this might not necessarily be the case depending on how the foundation was later filled and how the landscaping and grading occurred in the following decade which has been recorded in Bronson’s history.

Before excavation begins, I would use geophysical survey to determine what, if any, of the foundation and cellar exist. This would be integral in deciding whether to continue pursing the site and could also be informative deciding where to test pit and eventually excavate.

**Conclusion**

The southwestern end of the main green has continuously be apart of the Brown University campus ever since the land was acquired in 1770. For much of this period it was considered the “back” area but in the second half of the 19th century development began to arise, reconstituting this area as the heart of campus. Choosing this site will not only uncover the remnants of a past building but will hopefully provide material evidence of how use and activity levels of this area changed ad the central focus of the campus changed.

**Bibliography**

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