

IN SMALL THINGS STREWN: THE IDENTIFICATION OF TWENTIETH CENTURY

EVENTS THROUGH ARTIFACT EVIDENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

The historical archaeologist has various means to date artifacts. Stratigraphic comparisons, manufacturing techniques, as well as historical and comparative studies, enable the researcher to obtain dates of production for the objects for which dates are sought. However, artifacts unearthed from upper strata on historical sites are sometime dismissed as "modern", and left undated. These objects are readily recognized as twentieth century artifacts, and archaeologists seem content with this broad chronological identification. In certain contexts, however, there exists a need to obtain a solid chronology for finds produced during this century.

In this paper, the author presents two episodes based on his experience on Canadian historic sites, where well dated twentieth century objects proved to be important chronological indicators. The artifacts were dated using aural/oral history and company records. Finally, it is hoped that this article will indicate that twentieth century artifacts are worthy of equal analytical treatment as their earlier counterparts.

RESUME

L'archéologue historique possède plusieurs moyens de dater les artéfacts. Des comparaisons stratigraphiques, techniques de production, ainsi que des études historiques et comparatives, permettent le chercheur d'obtenir des dates pour les objets qu'il étudie. Cependant, les artéfacts trouvés dans les couches supérieures d'un puit de fouilles sont souvent reconnus comme étant des produits du vingtième siècle et ne sont pas analysés. Quelquefois, l'archéologue doit obtenir une bonne chronologie afin de présenter une série complète d'événements pour un site.

Dans cet article, l'auteur décrit deux épisodes basées sur son expérience sur des sites historiques canadiens, où des artéfacts produits durant le vingtième siècle furent important dans la présentation d'une chronologie complète. Ces objets furent datés en utilisant l'histoire orale et les documents des compagnies qui les avaient produits. Finalement, l'auteur espère que cet article démontre que les artéfacts du vingtième siècle doivent recevoir le même traitement analytique que les objets plus anciens.

## INTRODUCTION

Ivor Noel Hume has defined historical archaeology as the study of material remains, of both remote and recent past, in relationship to documentary history and stratigraphy of the ground in which they are retrieved (1975:12). In the examination of colonial and later sites, the historical archaeologist and artifact analyst sometime encounter artifacts which have not been chronologically identified. Research must be undertaken to associate the unknown artifacts within a particular time frame. The researcher can date these artifacts through the use of various methods available to him: archival research, aural history, or simply their association with other artifacts recovered from the same stratigraphic context. Ideally, a combination of these methods should be used. However, the researcher must work with the information available to him.

At times, artifacts retrieved from the ground are extremely modern and do not always receive the same analytical treatment as older artifacts. In such cases, it is often thought that obtaining dates for these objects will be impossible, and the artifacts are simply identified as "modern". In the author's experience, many so-called "modern" artifacts dating to the twentieth century, have proved to be most important in the complete interpretation of historical sites. In another context, the chronological identification of "modern" artifacts saved many individuals long hours of archival research, in an attempt to locate documentation regarding the excavation of a particular site. This second example is representative of the archaeologist playing more or less the role of a modern day detective.

Two examples are taken from the author's experience on various historical sites in Canada, to illustrate the importance of identification of modern-day artifacts within a certain time frame. They are presented in this paper.

## MILK BAGS AND OLD TRENCHES

In 1978, the author was employed as one of five site assistants at the Fortress of Louisbourg, in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The author's duties included the supervision of excavations in a portion of a town block in which many properties were identified. During the excavations we encountered a trench that had been dug by other archaeologists, and had since been filled in. The trench's outline could be seen in the otherwise undisturbed area, and contained a clean fill, free of rocks, pebbles, and other debris. The trench did not appear in the documentation which had been compiled regarding the previous excavations on this portion of the site. It was re-excavated and recorded. The only artifact recovered was a small ten-ounce plastic bag which had contained chocolate milk. The bag was similar to those, larger in size, which can be purchased today in just about every grocery store.

This find proved to be most important as a time saver in our verification of the excavation records for this portion of the

property. It was known that various portions of the town block had been excavated in 1959, 1968, 1969, and 1973. It seemed that the chocolate milk bag might be a useful dating aid, as a date for the introduction of this type of packaging might be obtained from the dairy which had produced it. It seemed to be a fairly recent invention, as the author could remember chocolate milk packaged in glass bottles. Furthermore, the introduction of small plastic bags was an alternate way to sell chocolate milk, that was already being marketed in small disposable cartons.

This plastic bag showed printed lettering on its exterior surface. although the lettering had faded slightly, the inscription read as follows: "Reddy Fresh Chocolate Milk, Modern City Dairy, Sidney, N.S." The manager of this dairy was contacted, and after a long conversation, the manager assured the inquirer that he would do his best to provide a date for the introduction of this type of packaging. It was not until the next day that he returned the call and informed the author that their records showed that "Reddy Fresh Chocolate Milk", in ten-ounce bags, had been introduced in the fall of 1971.

This information coupled with our knowledge of the previous excavations on this portion of the town block enabled us to narrow down our search of the excavation records. The plastic bag could not have been deposited during the 1959, 1968, or 1969 excavations, it had to have found its way at the bottom of a trench dug in 1973. After a few hours of checking the archival records for the 1973 excavations, field notes and drawings of the trench were recovered, and were incorporated with the otherwise complete data of previous excavations of the town block.

#### BREAD BAG TIES, DOG TAGS, AND MODERN COINS

The archaeologist always attempts to present the complete chronology of a site. Again, archival research, aural history, and comparative artifact studies enable the researcher to develop a chronology. The necessity of accurate dating in an archaeological context, and the availability of dates for artifacts which might be labelled as "modern", is exemplified in this second and last anecdote.

In 1980, the author was hired to undertake excavations at the Bethune-Thompson House, in Williamstown, Ontario. This property had been purchased by the Ontario Heritage Foundation in 1977. It had been occupied as early as c. 1785, and was still in use when the archaeological work began.<sup>1</sup> During the excavations, the east side of the house was subject to intensive archaeological testing, which enabled the author to obtain an interesting stratigraphic and chronological sequence. It revealed that numerous repairs and additions to the east side of the house had been undertaken during the twentieth century.

In 1978 an archivist had assembled an historical study of the property based on documents and aural history. It was noted in this study that a new concrete floor had been built over an existing walkway in 1968 or 1969 (McGaughey n.d.:54). This information had been

revealed during a discussion with the previous owner of the house (McGaughey n.d.:54).

During the archaeological excavations, the stratigraphic sequence for the usage and development of the east side of the house was dated using various artifacts. Over the years, there had been not two, but three sidewalks in this area of the property. The oldest had been made with coal slag, a vitrified substance which is found with coal, and does not burn. It is usually sorted and discarded from a shipment of coal. The slag had been placed along the exterior of the east side of the house, and formed a better walking surface than the underlying clay. Later in time, this walkway had been covered with a thin concrete surface, about six to ten centimetres thick. It is suspected that over time, this new walking surface cracked and heaved in places, as it had been built on an uneven surface. In turn, the historical documents had already indicated that it had been covered in 1968 or 1969. The most recent walkway had been built once the area had been leveled with soil and gravel. This last walkway varied in thickness from ten to sixty centimetres.

Towards the southeastern limit of the covered porch, two large post moulds were identified. They had been dug to accommodate the installation of two posts to support the roof of the porch, while the new concrete pedestals for the roof supports were being made. Once the new wooden pillars had been installed into their new position, the posts which had been set into the ground were removed. The post holes which remained were then filled in with the same brown soil which covered the second walkway, and in turn, the entire surface was covered with the most recent concrete walkway. The underlying fill zone contrasted markedly from the underlying tan coloured clay under the two older walkways.

One plastic bread bag tie had been unearthed from the bottom of one of the two post-moulds. It proved to be one of the most important artifacts in the formulation of a segment of the chronological sequence for the east side of the house.

To the author's knowledge, bread bag ties had not been previously documented in artifact studies. It was felt that the first step in the dating of this artifact, was to establish its provenience. Through various discussions with local merchants in Williamstown, it was established that no bakery existed in the area. Bread was distributed to stores and private dwellings by an Ontario based company, which obtained its sliced bread already packaged from yet another company. The "General Bakery Company" of Montreal, Quebec, was the supplier for this area of eastern Ontario. Its distribution included such major centres as Ottawa and Cornwall. The Williamstown community was supplied from Cornwall.

The manager of "General Bakery" was contacted, and the situation was explained. He phoned back a day or two later and indicated that plastic bread bag ties, had not been used by this company until 1969. Therefore, the last concrete walkway had been built in 1969 and not 1968, as a bread bag tie first used in 1969 could not have possibly

found its way under the fill which was situated under a concrete walkway built in 1968.

The two earlier walkways were also dated from other artifacts. However, a date as close as that obtained for the most recent concrete surface was never established. It was not known exactly when the coal walkway had been made, but it was suspected that its construction had been undertaken sometime after 1830, as there was no documented evidence for the use of a basement entrance which had been blocked by the deposition of a fill zone prior to the construction of the slag walkway.

During the excavation of the slag walkway, two artifacts were retrieved amongst very few others: A dog tag, and a 1947 Canadian penny. Both were recovered on top of the coal walkway and under the first concrete surface. The 1947 penny indicated that the first man-made walking surface had been in use in 1947, and that the old concrete walkway may have been present in 1947, if the penny had been dropped during the same year it had been minted or later than 1947 after it had been produced.

The dog tag added to the information which had been obtained from the penny. It bore the following inscription: one side read "Doctor Ballard's Dog Club", while its reverse side read "LADDIE". The author was informed by the previous owner of the property, that "LADDIE" was a Scottish Terrier which had been brought over from Scotland in 1937, when the informant's family had moved to Canada. The dog tag was contemporaneous with the dog's arrival in this country.

The dog tag had to be dropped in 1937 or later, and before the first concrete walkway was built, in 1947 or later. Therefore, it was inferred that the coal slag walkway was in use from at least 1937 and probably until 1947 or later.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Was it for so trivial a question as this that I had been summoned from my work? Holmes glanced across at me. "The same old Watson" said he. "You never learn that the gravest issues may depend upon the smallest things." (Conan Doyle, 1981:1072).

It has been demonstrated that artifacts retrieved from later twentieth century contexts can prove to be extremely helpful dating-aids in historical archaeology. The researcher must take the time to date these artifacts.

In the chronological identification of the twentieth century artifacts discussed in this paper, the dates were obtained by word of mouth. The information was based on company records in case of the milk bag and the bread bag tie. Information regarding the dog tag was based on the memory of past events from an informant. Both types of

informant were very reliable, as they were familiar with, and had access to the data which was being sought. Furthermore, it was quite evident that company representatives showed a genuine interest in assisting the author in his research, while the previous owner of the Bethune-Thompson House responded to the author's inquiry out of interest in the history of the property.

It should be indicated that suspected dates, when available, were not provided to the informants. It sufficed to say that they were objects produced during the twentieth century. In this way the informants were required to undertake a thorough survey of their records and memory. They were not influenced by this archaeologist's suspicions, however correct or erroneous the latter proved to be. Thus, in this manner the informants were the specialists who could provide the dates sought. Furthermore, the dates obtained for the two plastic items and the dog tag, were relevant to the particular geographical areas for which they had been documented, suggesting that these artifacts may not have introduced contemporaneously by different firms, in different areas.

Once the dates had been obtained, the artifacts had become reliable chronological indicators. These were used to articulate conclusions about historical events which would have been otherwise incompletely documented.

Finally, the author does not claim to be totally innovative in his methods, as similar techniques of data gathering are used by ethnologists, folklorists, historians, and other historical archaeologists (Deetz 1977; Picard 1979). Furthermore, such research does not always prove to be as successful and useful as the researcher would hope it to be. It is however, an important avenue of investigation, and it deserves consideration and usage in certain historical contexts.

## NOTES

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