

Documents, Historiography and Material Culture in Historical Archaeology

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Consideration of context, local, regional, national or even international, is critical to explanation in historical archaeology. As archaeologists we can and should use site specific documentary material to construct the lifeways represented by the archaeological data from sites under investigation, but all too often such documentary data are simply combined with the site specific archaeological data and little is done to establish the broader context in which both records were formed. We are all familiar with situations where the documentary record is thin or non-existent, as is the case in some Virginia counties which lost their records in the Civil War, or where for some reason the occupants of a site left no written trace of their passing, slaves being among the most common example. Yet the people who occupied sites which have little documentary evidence are not lost to history, for they did leave a record, in things rather than words, which can be understood if one only considers the broader history of the region, or even nation, in which they lived. People did not live in complete isolation, but were subject to forces and events which took place far beyond their immediate world, and the recollection of this fact enables us to look for explanations which transcend confirmation of the site specific documentary data.

As a modest example, consider for a moment wine bottle seals which bear the initials of their owner. We have all attended illustrated presentations where a slide of such a seal is shown, and the point made that this is evidence that indeed the site where it was found was occupied by the individual whose initials were molded in glass, although the documentary record had already amply demonstrated that fact. Little new is provided by such an artifact in this case. On the other hand, a wine bottle seal can add to our knowledge of not only the site which produced it, but also of events in the larger world of which the site was a part. Consider a seal marked "John Hood 1751," recovered from a trash pit on the largest site at Flowerdew Hundred Plantation in Virginia. Hood was known to have been one of five identified owners of half-acre house lots in what was known as Powhatantown, located somewhere on the Flowerdew Hundred property. This town was one of a number of communities which were planned by the General Assembly to move trade from the private plantations to public centers. While the plan seems not to have been fully realized, something was established at Flowerdew Hundred, and the John Hood seal would seem to indicate that it occurred at the site where it was found. Since the site is the largest by far on the property—at least over five acres in extent—and the dates based on the artifacts match the known facts, the discovery of the Hood seal has made it quite probable that the location of Powhatantown has been established. We know very little about how such communities were laid out, and further archaeology at this location is likely to be very informative on the matter. So it is that the John Hood seal

connected a specific site to the implementation of government policy, one that applied over the entire colony.

This example is just that, and nothing too profound is intended in offering it, but it does serve to demonstrate that the same kind of object can function in different ways depending on how one goes about using it. The connection of site specific data of both types is, in a sense, a “horizontal” operation, relating two bodies of material which reside at the same level of specificity. Relating either to the larger context in which it is situated is by contrast “vertical”, in that it involves moving up to a higher level of generality. In this respect, it is rather like, if not identical to, what is referred to as “Middle Range Theory” in archaeology. We are not suggesting that this kind of thinking about data is never done, but rather that it could be done more frequently, and indeed, given a choice between “horizontal” linkages and “vertical” ones, one should opt for the latter, for it is at the more general level that one can begin to speak of culture, that outmoded but still useful concept that we feel should shape and guide our explanation of the material with which we work.

A much more substantial example of how such connections can be made is provided by a series of sites at Flowerdew Hundred. While the results of this analysis have been published (Deetz 1988, 1993) it is still useful to emphasize just how they were arrived at. It is also important to note that these sites have very sparse documentation, but yet, taken together in the context of Chesapeake history, they can inform us about their anonymous former inhabitants and the way they were subject to the forces of events and circumstances. The eighteen seventeenth and earlier eighteenth-century sites in the Flowerdew Hundred bottomlands can be grouped into three sets, based on shared Harrington-type histograms. These sets are clear and unambiguous, and the earliest and latest contrast with the intermediate one in having a different spatial distribution pattern, so that settlement pattern further validates the sets. The earliest group of sites, seven in number, show settlement fairly evenly spaced out along the bottomlands. All were occupied during the second quarter of the seventeenth century, and all were abandoned at roughly the same time, shortly after mid-century. The six sites in the second group are located near the river at the northern and southern ends of the bottoms, and were occupied for a longer time, overlapping the sites of both the first and third group. The third group of sites, five in number, show a spatial distribution more like those of the first group, and, like them, a briefer period of occupation. Even if there were ample documentary material for these sites, it is doubtful that an explanation of this pattern in time and space would have been arrived at without placing them in a wider context. With the little documentation available, it is virtually certain that any explanation would not have been forthcoming without considering the history of the Chesapeake as a region. The dates of site groups one and three match two important events in Chesapeake history. The abandonment of the first group of sites occurred at a time of falling tobacco prices and it seemed as though there might be a connection between the two. The build up of occupation in the third period coincides with the time when the importation of African slaves increased sharply. These two causes were, thus, tentatively advanced to explain the two groups of sites, and formed the basis for looking at the archaeological record for further support and substantiation. Such was forthcoming in both instances. Group one sites that have been excavated all show earthfast construction, a building type amply demonstrated to have a strong association with tobacco monoculture (Carson et. al., 1981). Every one of the five sites of group three has produced

examples of Colono ware. While there is still some controversy surrounding the identity of makers of this pottery, there is general agreement as to who used it, and those people were slaves of African origin. The intermediate set of sites, showing a longer occupation, seemed different from their contemporary sites of group one in that they suggest a more permanent mode of settlement, not tied closely to the production of tobacco. Two of the six sites have been excavated, and in each case, a very different type of building was encountered, as well as some evidence of manufacturing activities. While a causal relationship had been established between the site specific data and regional history, what could not be determined was the degree to which the people at Flowerdew might have shared in this pattern with other communities in the region. Studies of pipe stem histograms at Martin's Hundred, Virginia (Edwards and Brown, 1993), have shown rather convincingly that they did indeed share the pattern, and that what is seen in the two places may well be a regional pattern of settlement and demographic change.

An even broader historical perspective and context was necessary in attempting to explain the contents of an ice house at Flowerdew Hundred, abandoned and filled with refuse sometime in the late 1820's. The explanation borders on speculation, but has considerable merit nonetheless. The ice house is but one of a number of similar features encountered along the eastern seaboard from New Hampshire to Georgia. All are characterized by rich fill comprising large numbers of fully restorable items, usable tools, building debris and faunal materials showing varying degrees of weathering. Certainly site specific explanations are not powerful enough to account for these features; they all appear to date to almost the same time, and do not occur in the archaeological record from dates earlier or later than that time. They indicate that at least some people were disposing of quantities of serviceable items, remodeling their houses and cleaning up the house lots at about the same time. Seeking an explanation for this phenomenon certainly required moving beyond site specific archival data, although it has been suggested that some major "life event" such as marriage, death or property transfer might have been the causal agent. However, such an explanation cannot account for the near contemporaneity of such dumping events in a number of places at widely scattered locations. Earlier attempts at explanation were little more successful when a regional or even national scale was used, and it was not until the context was broadened to one that involved comparing the history of two English frontiers that any convincing explanation, however speculative, could be suggested. A dump sharing all of the features with those in America was excavated in South Africa at the village of Salem, situated some fifteen miles from Grahamstown, capital of the eastern Cape, on the nineteenth-century English frontier. The date of the deposit is circa 1870, and there are definite indications that others are awaiting discovery, dating to about the same time. The question that was asked of these data was how the 1820's and 1870's might have been significant dates in America and South Africa respectively.

One strong possibility that would take into account the material in both places is that each date is some fifty years—two generations—following a kind of separation between England and her colonies on the two continents. The separation was political in America, the outcome of the Revolutionary War. In South Africa, while still affiliated politically with England, the settlers, who arrived as a group of some 5,000 in 1820, were far more isolated and cut off from the Mother Country than were the Americans, even after the Revolution. In both places, there would have been a group of people reaching maturity who were never

English in the stricter sense, but rather the carriers of a culture combining elements of both England and the colony of which they were a part. If this explanation is at all tenable, what the two dates indicate is that time when the colony ceased being a simple extension of England, and became a distinctive colonial culture in its own right.

So it is that a single South African refuse deposit, with a very close resemblance to a number in America, permits a tentative explanation of events in both places. But given that, the far more persuasive American evidence also lends support to the explanation as it applies to South Africa. It remains then to look at other aspects of South African archaeology and material culture to see if they too are consistent with the explanation advanced. Excavations in the front yard of the lot on which the Salem dump was located provided clear evidence that there had been significant landscape modification in circa 1870, in the form of raising the level of the ground evenly across the entire lot by about a foot. Furthermore, at about the same time, a major addition was made to the house in the form of a two-thirds I house, almost certainly producing some of the structural debris—mortar, plaster, roofing material—in the dump fill. At the Observatory site (a Cape Regency building remodeled to an elaborate multistoried store/dwelling house) in downtown Grahamstown, excavations in the rear lot produced evidence of both landscaping and remodeling of the building, also around 1870, although no massive refuse deposit was encountered.

The slow process of Africanization of the British settlers can also be observed in other material culture categories. While occasional hall and parlor houses are to be seen in the area which were built in the early years of settlement, the most common form to develop was a central hall I house as seen from the exterior, but one which has had one of the hall walls omitted within, giving a hall and parlor type of spatial organization. In Grahamstown, this unexpected modification of the symmetrical, ordered Georgian interior appears to have continued in a number of houses until the 1860's to 1870's when a shift takes place and houses are remodeled with cast-iron verandahs and elaborate window moldings, and new ones built in various Victorian styles which included a central hall.

Another pointer to the process of change is seen in the modification of interior domestic spaces (Scott, 1993). The majority of the settlers were from a working class background, and in England their houses were characterized by the presence of a living room/parlor-kitchen which for generations had been the hub of family life. On the English Cape frontier, however, by the mid-century, a very different pattern of room usage was emerging. Although the hall and parlor layout was retained behind the Georgian facade, the kitchen was separated from the living space of the family, either by a partition wall being erected, use of one of the other rooms, or a separate room being added to the building. This can probably be attributed to a combination of two factors. First, with a readily available supply of cheap labor in the form of indigenous people, the formerly working class settlers became more mobile socially, creating interior spaces more similar, at least superficially, to those of the English middle class as they were organized from at least the late eighteenth century. The emerging kitchen on the British frontier in South Africa differed, however, from its English counterpart in being very sparsely furnished, as shown by probate inventories. Whether this difference is based in economic factors, or, as is more likely, attitudes which developed toward a servant class from a completely different cultural background, is not clear. If the latter, this is yet one more difference accountable to the settlers accommodating to a

different cultural environment. A second development with regard to the spatial organization of the English settlers on the eastern Cape frontier which is of relevance is that a pattern of separate dining and parlor room usage was *not* emerging in the increasingly gentrified households in Grahamstown. This non-development suggests that something else was going on in the minds of these first generation English settlers, and that their changed pattern of room usage, from living room/parlor-kitchen to parlor-dining room, reflected a continued adherence to the corporate lifestyle which they had known for generations past in England. Although the industrial revolution which, through a growing export market, was bringing to the Cape furnishings and style guides which were fast gentrifying urban England, the English colonists, despite their upward social mobility, were selecting a corporate, as opposed to individual, use of interior spaces.

Ceramics provide another indicator of changes which were taking place on the English frontier in the eastern Cape as one culture encountered another and became increasingly distinct from its origins. The majority of the ceramics exported to the Cape and to America were made in the English Staffordshire potteries. A preliminary comparison between early nineteenth-century ceramic samples excavated in Grahamstown and Salem with those found in America has shown that in South Africa, apart from a very early 1820's use of blue and white wares, colorful wares predominated. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in America where white molded wares become more common as the century goes on. The colorful selection shows a variegated palette which is consistent with the corporate, shared lifestyle reflected in the spatial modifications seen in the vernacular housing of the English Cape frontier. Gravestones are equally diverse in material used, with slates in a variety of hues. Certainly by mid-century, a very distinctive frontier culture was beginning to emerge, which in its material aspects was very different from its American counterpart, as well as from its English antecedent.

So it is that in a number of material culture categories we can see that the society of the eastern Cape frontier became a very distinctive one, markedly different from both its American counterpart and the parent society of Britain. The explanation put forth for this difference derives from data that far transcend the site specific, and indeed, numbers of sites had to be considered in terms of shared characteristics as they relate to broader aspects of regional, national and even comparative international historiography.

It might be useful to coin a new phrase at this point, the "material event." Material events can be of differing degrees of significance, and their significance is in turn a function of the extent that the event was more than idiosyncratic. For example, if John Goddard broke his chamber pot (an historical event), its presence in the refuse pit where it was thrown (a material event), is of little or no significance in our construction of history through the use of archaeological data. But when the planters of the Chesapeake embraced tobacco as their main cash crop, that historical event produced a material event of major significance, the construction and subsequent abandonment of hundreds of earthfast buildings throughout the region. This relationship between historical and material events, occurring over an entire region, allows us to say some things about Chesapeake history in the seventeenth century which could not have been said in the absence of this relationship. Over-reliance on site specific documentary data puts us at risk of dealing with material events of inconsequential

significance since these may well have been the product of historical events unique to a single site and thus not reflecting in any way the larger course of events in which they took place.

Other examples of significant material events come easily to mind. The striking similarity in layout of early seventeenth-century English frontier settlements in Ulster and America speaks to shared concerns both military and commercial. The appearance of Colono Ware over the American South in the later seventeenth century is a material event that can be explained in terms of the historical event of changing social relationships between master and slave. The difference in timing of stylistic replacement in New England gravestones allows us to pinpoint with greater accuracy when and to what degree various communities were affected by the Great Awakening. Other examples, discussed above, include the shared settlement pattern suggested by pipe stem histograms at both Flowerdew and Martin's Hundreds and mass dumping and remodeling.

In a sense, an archaeological site, or an old house, is simply a collection of material events, some of which are seen again and again at other locations, and others which are not. And while we should document our sites to the fullest extent possible, this is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. Only when we distinguish between those material events which are highly significant by virtue of being encountered over a wide area and thus the result of larger scale social forces, and those which attest only to happenings in one place, can we begin to make the most out of the true potential of the archaeological record.

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