

Preliminary archaeological investigations at the Thayer Homestead

David P. Staley¹

ABSTRACT

Reconnaissance, mapping and shovel testing were initiated during 2005 at the Thayer Homestead Site. The outline of the residence has been found to extend beyond the stone masonry cellar and that surface room likely contained a brick hearth. Surveys around the residence have found possible features near the creek edge. Initial shovel testing identified several areas with thicker sedimentation and bearing denser midden deposits. Noticeably thin cultural deposits uphill from the house may represent a front yard and the late 19th century pattern of a clean and neat public space. Tests near the barn foundations suggest early 20th century roof repairs to the building and that the structure eventually burned. Barn foundations have been prepared for mapping, documentation, and more extensive testing in 2006.

INTRODUCTION

The Thayer Homestead is one of several apparently well-preserved 19th century historic farmstead sites located on SUNY Oneonta Biological Field Station's Rum Hill property in the Town of Springfield, Otsego County, New York (Figure 1). This investigation comprises part of a multi-year, multi-site, cooperative archaeological and historical research effort that will provide basic interpretive data about the sites for the Biological Field Station's ongoing ecological educational program, contribute knowledge regarding historical agricultural practices, human ecological adaptations, illustrate to visitors the methods, techniques, and utility of archaeology and historical research, and will also provide educational opportunities for local primary and secondary school children.

The site consists of a house foundation, several barn foundations, and a dark stained soil presumed to be a privy location. A variety of historic artifacts such as glass, ceramics, metals, and farm machinery parts can be observed across the site. Based on preliminary archival analysis of historic maps and census materials, the Thayer homestead was likely occupied at least by the early 1800's and remained occupied throughout the century by generations of the Thayer family. The population censuses and the agricultural schedules from the mid 19th century provide demographic information about the families and detailed inventories of the farms holdings, stock, and crops.

¹ Archaeologist, Project Manager. New York State Museum, Cultural Resource Survey Program, Albany, New York.

were well drained. Prior to mechanization, there was really no need for large, uniformly cleared parcels of cropland. The Thayer family, like many emigrants of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, moved and settled a locality as an extended family (Ryan 1981). William Thayer (b. 1773) and several brothers probably moved to northern Otsego County with their young families in the 1790s. By 1840, William Jr. (b.1793 in Massachusetts) had firmly established his own household of eleven on the homestead (U.S. Federal Census 1840) (Figure 2). One of his sons, Marcena, eventually inherited the property and remained through the 19th century. Wood products supported the farm's establishment; however, the Thayer's broad balance of production shifted through time with an emphasis on grain, sheep and wool, and then to dairying and the production of butter and cheese (U.S. Federal Census 1850, 1870). These transitions were typical of agriculture in this part of New York (McMurry 1995). At some point in the early 20th century, the homestead and the upland lands were abandoned and the family occupied lower portions of their land closer to the more developed roadways and lake.

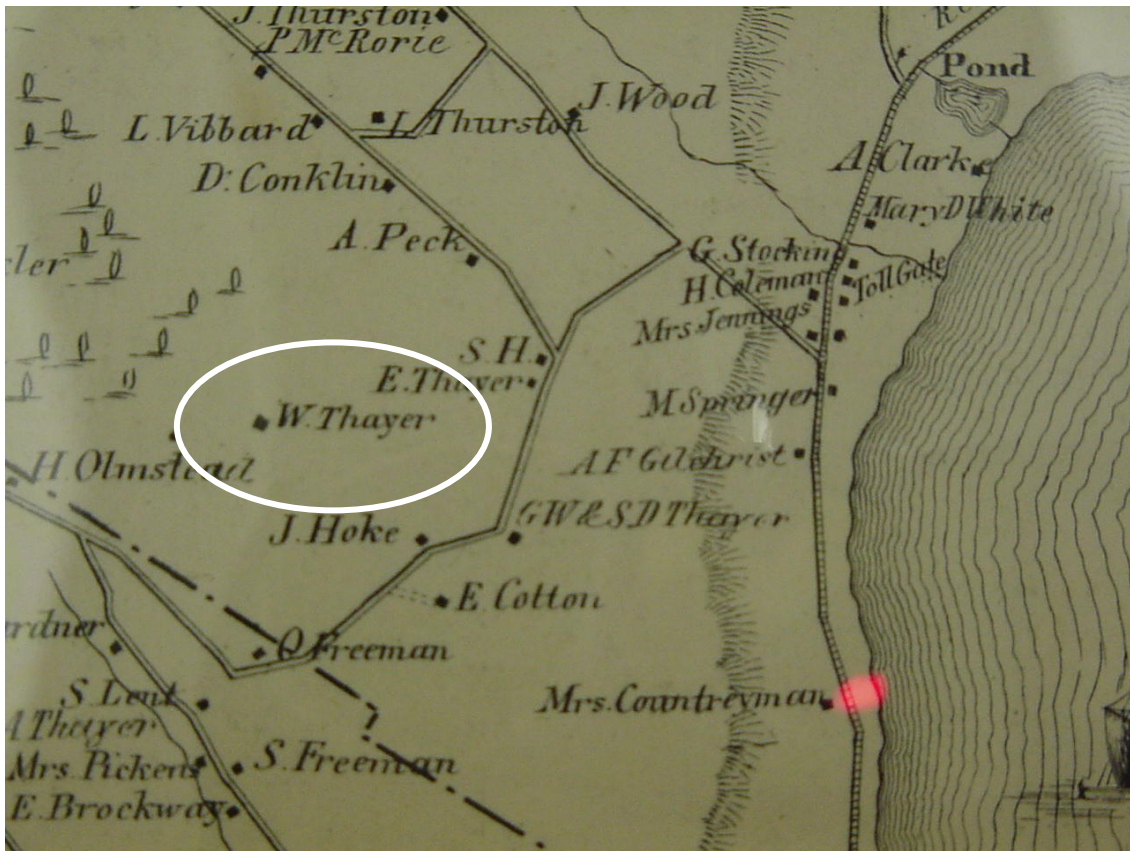


Figure 2. 1856 map of Otsego County.

RESEARCH GOALS

The archaeological remains at the Rum Hill sites and historic records pertaining to the families and agricultural production chronicle the transition from simple yeoman subsistence level farmers of the colonial and homespun eras to that of market surplus farming of the industrial age and into the early 20th century. The Thayer Homestead site has the potential to chronicle the transition of farmers from nearly complete self-sufficiency or competency to dependency upon market commodities.

Beyond the fundamental questions regarding who, what, when, and where, the Thayer Homestead and the other Rum Hill sites have the potential of answering more broad questions about the homespun period and the evolution of farming in Otsego County and in New York. What was the nature of the agricultural and cultural adaptations on these upland properties? Can the relative involvement in the emerging marketplace be traced at both sites? What are the archaeological differences between the Thayer and the neighboring properties and do these provide clues as to the greater longevity, continuity, and success of the Thayer property? Parkerson (1995) has hypothesized that agriculturalists became more successful when they brought more acres into cultivation, invested in more tools, and made use of migrant family labor. Is there any archaeological or historical evidence that the Thayers used any of these strategies to a greater extent than the neighbors? McMurry (1995) has argued that it was early family commitment to cheese manufacture that initiated many social shifts, brought rural New Yorkers into the 19th century cash economy, and transformed agriculture in New York. Can the influence of cheese manufacture be archaeologically observed at the Thayer property? The basic ecological conditions and agricultural limitations of the Rum Hill farms can be compared to those of the lower farm. Can the archaeological record at the Thayer site reveal anything about the transition of agricultural practices and ultimately provide clues as to why this portion of the property was abandoned?

In addition to the above stated broad research goals, we intended that the proposed program at Thayer Homestead would contribute to the Biological Field Station's ecological education mission. The historic impact of farmer settlers on the landscape is an important part of the current ecology of the property. A more thorough understanding of the intensity and extent of the historic agricultural impact would provide baseline data to many of the Field Station's investigations. Further, the program at the sites would provide a working laboratory for the staff and students of SUNY Oneonta's Anthropology Department and the Graduate Program at Cooperstown to learn and practice archaeological and historical methods. The incorporation of local secondary school involvement in the program would extend that learning experience to children and young adults. It would provide an opportunity for SUNY's teachers in training to mentor and guide these young historians and archaeologists.

As practical first steps in this program, our 2005 research goals were simply to initiate reconnaissance, some basic mapping on the site, and begin probing the site with shovel tests. The shovel tests were intended to gather preliminary stratigraphic information, prospect for buried features, and identify areas worthy of further testing.

METHODOLOGY

After an offsite datum was placed near the site and a preliminary grid established, the SUNY Oneonta Anthropology Field Methods class under the direction of Dr. Renee Walker, refined and extended the grid using a transit and stadia. Students excavated six shovel test pits (STPs) in various locations around the site. These tests were approximately 50 x 50 cm in size, dug to sterile soil, and students recorded variations in soil strata. All sediments were screened with ¼ inch mesh. The STPs were placed to investigate the area proximal to the barn foundations, uphill from the house foundation, down slope from the house foundation near the cellar entry, and near a subtle, creek side depression and associated rock pile (Figure 3).

Artifact analysis, treatment, and preparations for curation followed standards set forth by the New York Archaeological Council and the New York State Museum. One of Dr. Walker's students, Jerry Sardella, conducted basic cleaning, stabilization, attribute analysis, and cataloguing (Sardella 2005).

RESULTS

Reconnaissance survey identified an alignment of stones on the north side of the cellar foundation suggesting an uncellared portion to the Thayer home (Figure 3). A concentration of bricks at the north end of that foundation may indicate the location of a hearth. The room may have functioned as the year round kitchen, or a summer kitchen, as often the pattern for 19th century homes. Away from the residence, several sets of faint stone alignments marked barn foundations. Some ground vegetation and debris was removed from the area in an attempt to clarify the arrangement. Additional work will be needed in 2006 to more clearly delineate the foundations. A low rock wall or alignment was identified along the creek edge. No artifacts were observed to identify the function of that feature. Another rock cluster was identified and mapped to the west. The stack of three or four rocks was associated with a scythe blade and a shallow depression.

Three shovel tests (STPs 1-3) were excavated near the barn foundations. The tests found that the artifacts were confined to the compacted and gravelly upper levels. As expected for a barn, artifacts were largely of an architectural class. In three tests, the only domestic artifacts were two pieces of redware ceramic and a single shard of green glass. In contrast, 61 nails, three brick fragments, fragments of roofing tar and four roofing washers were recovered. The nails included both cut nails, and wire nails suggesting an early to mid 19th century construction with a late 19th to early 20th century roofing repair to the barn. An abundance of charcoal suggests the superstructure may have burned.

The rock cluster and depression were investigated with STP 5. Artifacts were recovered from two levels here with 14 cut nails, a green, food storage jar rim, and a clear

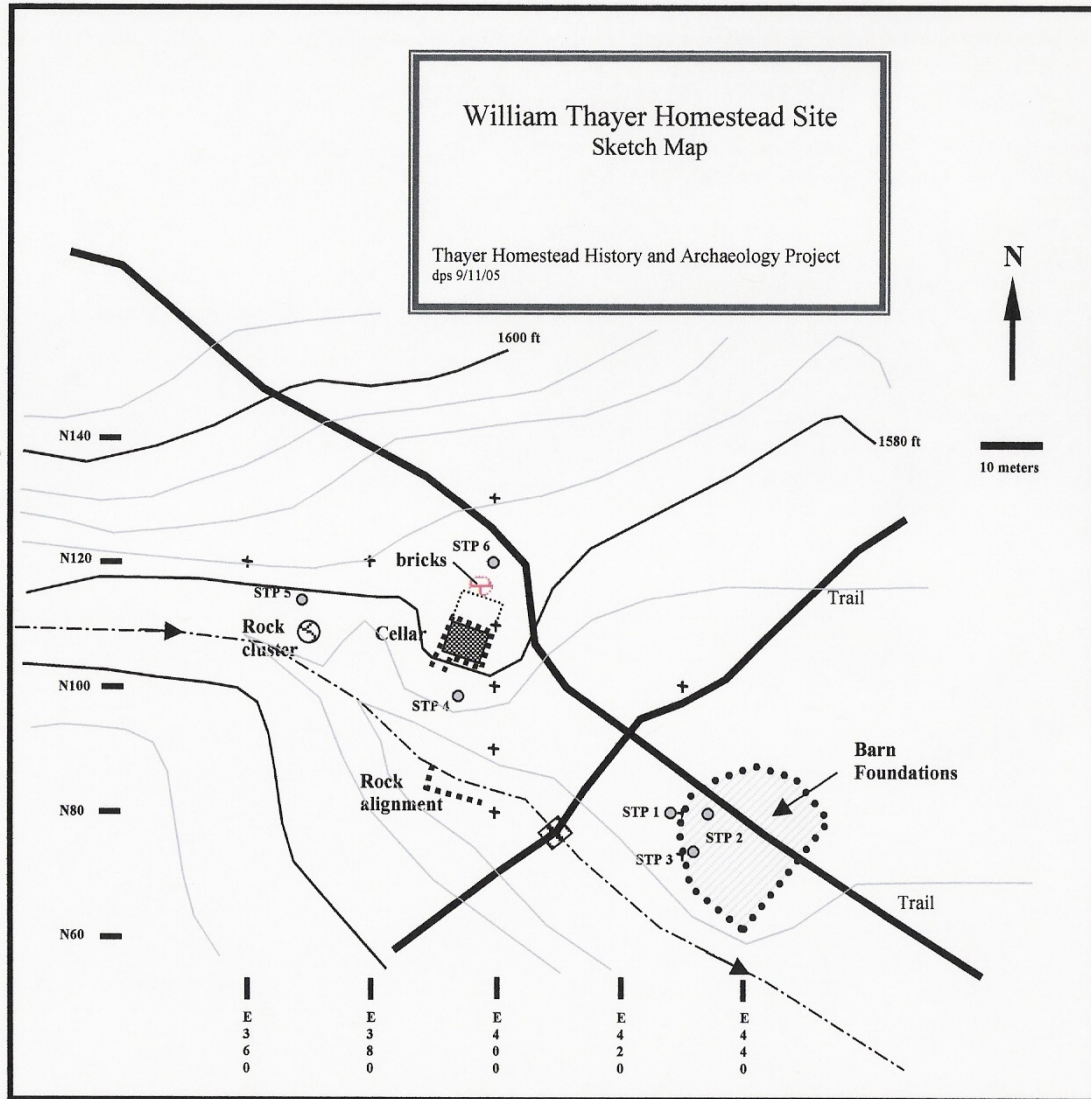


Figure 3. Thayer Homestead Sketch Map.

glass fragment, brick crumbs, charcoal, and more roofing tar were recovered. The deposit might represent the remains of a building or a trash dump. No clear function could be determined but the area should be subjected to further testing.

One test, STP 6, was placed slightly uphill from the house and another, STP 5, located just downhill from the house and to the side of the cellar entry. The uphill test was found to have very shallow soil level and contained a single redware sherd. The downhill test was found to contain much deeper multi-layered culture bearing deposit. A wide variety of artifacts were recovered from this test including 24 pieces representing six varieties of ceramics; buff stoneware, brown stoneware, ironstone, whiteware, annular blue whiteware, and hand-painted blue and green whiteware. Green glass (n=7), a piece

of clear glass, cut nails (n=7), brick fragments (n=101), and a piece of shoe leather were also identified. The distribution may merely be due to gravity or, as is the case with most late 19th century households, may be related to a Victorian social ideal of a clean and tidy front yard (Versaggi 2000).

FUTURE WORK

At this stage in the program, we are unable to draw conclusions in regard to any of our overall research questions. We have initiated basic reconnaissance and mapping activities. Preliminary testing has refined our plans for further tests by identifying dense midden deposits below the house and moderate deposits adjacent to our mysterious depression and rock pile. If the single front yard test is actually found to represent a larger consistent pattern of front yard cleanliness and order, then the Thayer residence, even in its relative isolation, would be conforming to the late 19th century pattern so often observed in more highly public locations. The program has been able to involve local elementary and middle school students in some of the reconnaissance efforts. Cherry Valley – Springfield Central School summer C.R.O.P. participants identified features and surface artifacts at the site. SUNY Oneonta Anthropology students conducted reconnaissance, mapped, tested, and analyzed artifacts.

Plans for 2006 include further mapping and testing at the site, delineation of the barn foundations, and more extensive test excavations in and near the barns. SUNY Oneonta students will continue their involvement with the site and a high school elective class from Cherry Valley – Springfield Central School will participate in the spring investigations.

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