

# Further archaeological investigations at the Thayer Homestead: Excavations at the Hop House/Barn

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## ABSTRACT

Detailed mapping and limited excavations were conducted during 2006 at the Thayer Homestead Site. The subtle outline of a barn foundation was cleared and documented. The rubble alignments suggested the barn was composed of two rooms or spaces on the ground floor. Excavations bisecting one of the alignments found a totally dissolved wall with no apparent stacking or linear integrity. The foundation was casually constructed of dry laid, undressed, irregularly sized and shaped, rounded, locally available stone. Rather than a load-bearing component of the structure, the wall likely functioned to fill spaces between fieldstone piers, sill members of the barn superstructure, and the ground surface. Greater quantities of cut nails and other architectural artifacts were found on the wall mound and the interior of the wall. Unlike areas tested in the south end of the barn, no modern wire nails and roofing materials were recovered indicating that only that end of the barn was remodeled. Oral history regarding the site correlates with the archaeological findings and adds much detail to the record.

## INTRODUCTION

The Thayer Homestead is one of several apparently well-preserved 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

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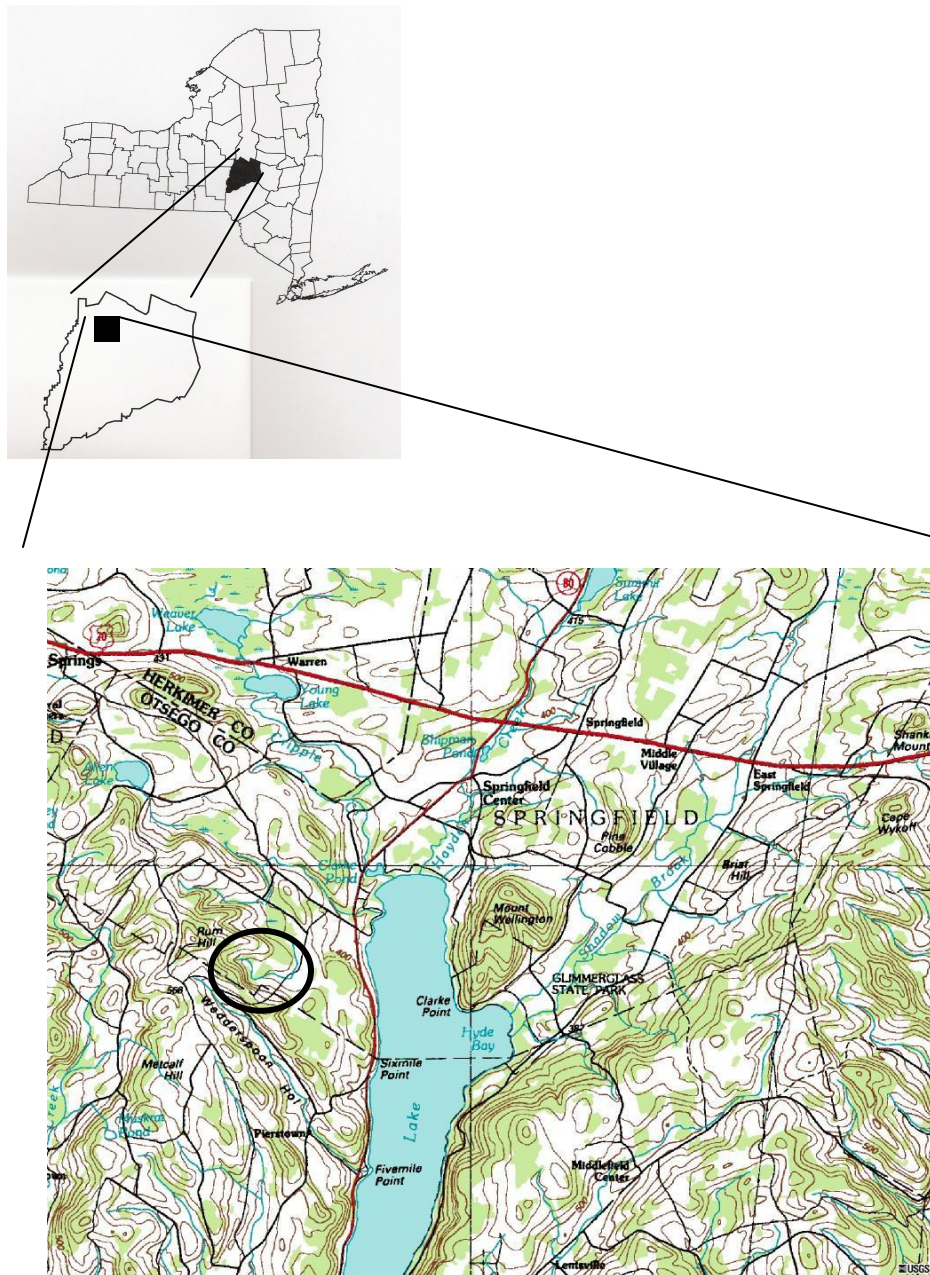


Figure 1. Approximate location of Thayer site.

The overall history, context, and research goals for the Thayer Homestead project have been outlined previously (Staley 2006). In brief, the Thayer Homestead site consists of a house foundation, several barn foundations, chicken coop, and pigsty. A variety of historic artifacts such as glass, ceramics, metals, and farm machinery parts can be observed across the site. Based on historic maps, census materials, and oral history the Thayer homestead property was purchased in 1807, the house built in 1814, and used throughout the century by generations of the Thayer family (Reed 2006). Typical of post-Revolutionary War settlers of New York, the Thayers had emigrated from

Massachusetts as an extended family to settle on the rocky, steep, upland locations similar to the lands they had left behind (VanWagenen 1963; Ryan 1981; Parkerson 1995). The Thayers were also typical in their balance of agricultural production and the sequence of agricultural adaptations and choices (McMurry 1995). 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 hops, and then dairying and the production of butter and cheese (U.S. Federal Census 1850, 1870; Reed 2006). These transitions were typical of agriculture in this part of New York. At some point in the early 20<sup>th</sup> 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. Christiana (Dingman) Thayer, wife of Marcena Thayer and the last occupant of the house, died in 1914. The various agricultural structures on the property were used after this date. The house stood until the 1930s, the hop house/barn until at least 1940 (Reed 2006).

## RESEARCH GOALS

Some of the larger, broader research questions approachable from the perspective of the Thayer site regard 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? 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?

The limited excavations of the past year have much more humble research goals. Investigations hoped to refine the dimensions of a barn foundation, gather information about construction style and techniques, the age of barn construction and modifications, and perhaps recover information about function.

## METHODOLOGY

The area of the barn foundation was cleared of tall grasses, branches, and woody debris exposing the low mounds and aligned rocks and boulders. The on-site grid was extended across the area of the barn foundation and the mounds and boulders were mapped. Students from a Cherry Valley-Springfield (CVS) Archaeology elective class, under the direction of social studies teacher William Nelson, excavated two test units. The test units (TUs 1 and 2) were positioned on the grid and straddled one of the low linear mounds suspected of being a barn foundation (Figure 2). These tests were 1 x 1m in size, dug to sterile soil, and students recorded artifacts recovered *in situ*, positions of rocks, and variations in soil strata. All sediments were screened with ¼ inch mesh.

Artifact analysis, treatment, and preparations for curation followed standards set forth by the New York Archaeological Council and the New York State Museum. The CVS students from the 2007 class conducted basic cleaning, stabilization, attribute analysis, and cataloguing.



Figure 2. Site map.

## RESULTS

Subsequent to clearing, alignments of linear rubble mounds, isolated rubble mounds, and massive individual boulders were revealed as a rectangular outline measuring approximately 10 x 18 m (33 x 60 ft) (Figure 3). An interior wall, one of the more vertically intact and stacked segments, indicated the structure was separated into two rooms or areas. The smaller space or room on the south side of the barn measured approximately 10 x 5 m (33 x 16 ft). A swale or an open-ended depression in the mound might represent an entry centered eastern wall of the main barn space. It may also

represent a crawl space feature or an early manure removal feature. Although highly conjectural, the barn superstructure may have been sized and positioned as shown on Figure 4. The barn outline approximates a 9 x 17 m (30 x 56 ft) footprint.

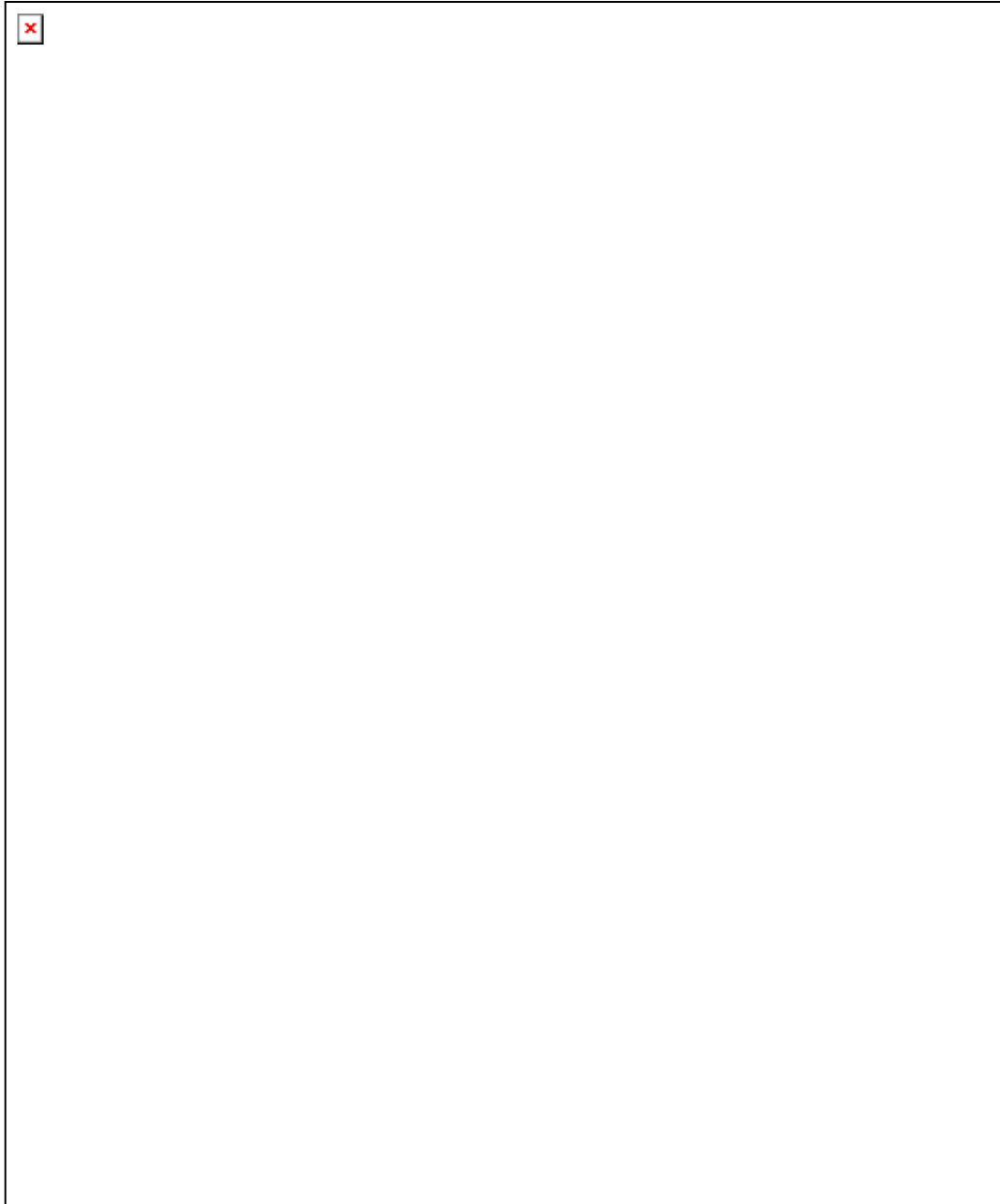


Figure 3. Barn foundation ruin.

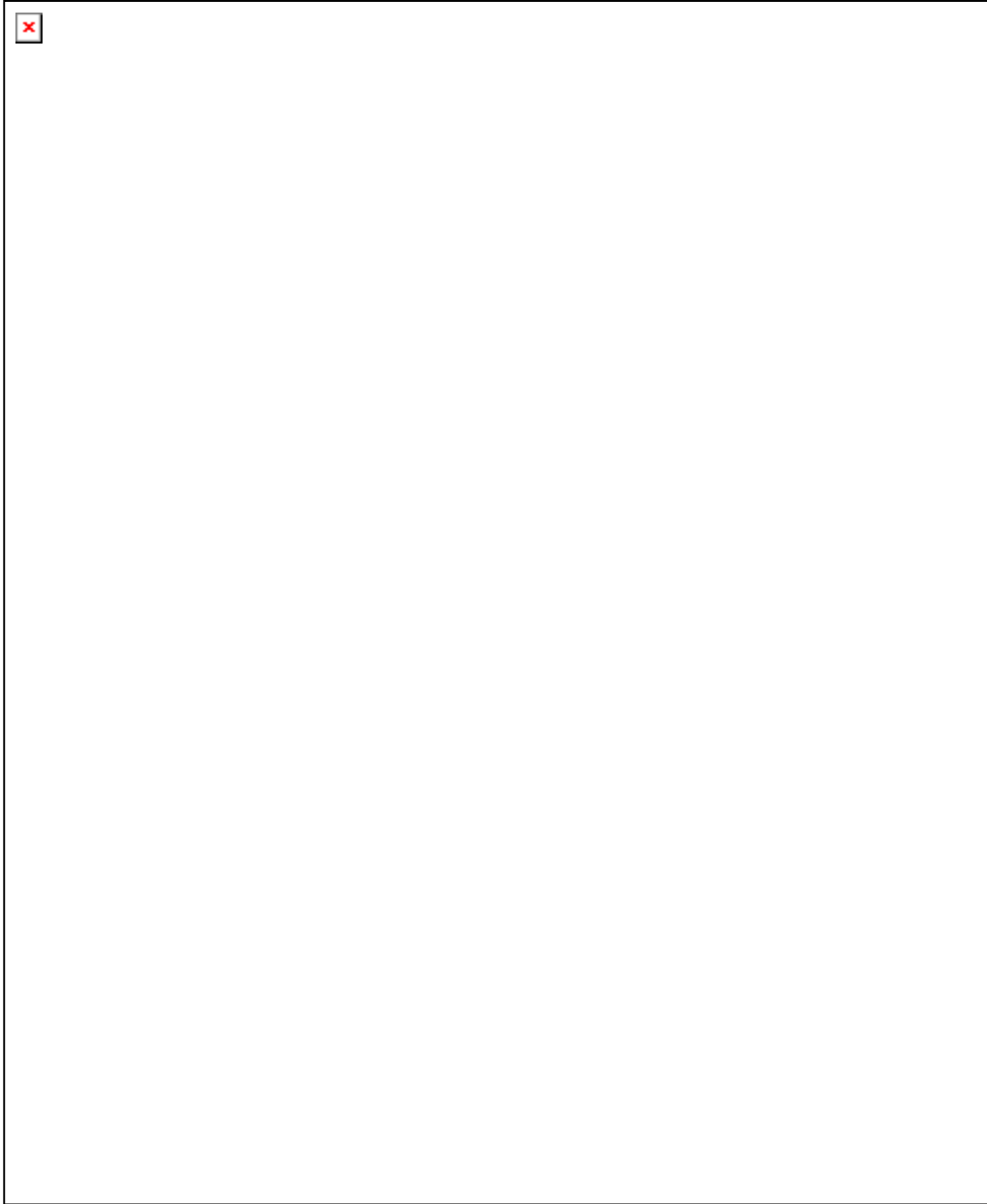


Figure 4. Presumed superstructure location.

Two test units (TUs 1 and 2) were excavated spanning a segment of barn foundation. No evidence of an intact wall was observed. The rocks and boulders were of multiple sizes, rounded to irregular in shape, were not dressed, and there was no evidence of mortar. None of the stones were obviously stacked or sorted with only a slight concentration of larger rocks and multiple layers in TU 2 (Figure 5).

The tests found that the artifacts were confined to the compacted and rocky upper levels and thinned with depth. As expected for a barn, artifacts were largely of an architectural class. TU 1, in what might be assumed to be the exterior of the barn, soils were noted as a black silty loam. The arbitrary upper level averaged 14 cm thick and

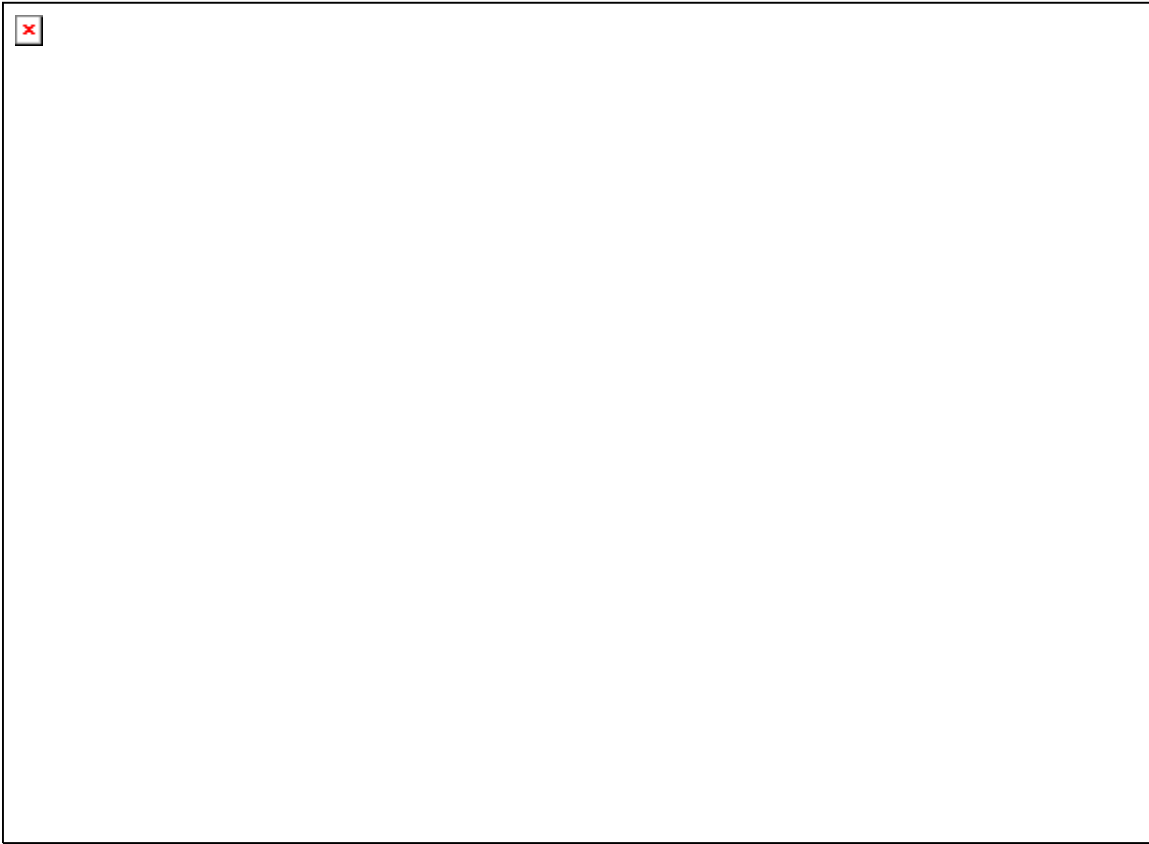


Figure 5. Plan View of Test Units 1 and 2.

contained eight cut nails, two cut nail fragments (with one of these appearing cinched), one large wrought nail that had been cinched. Cinched nails were historically used on batten doors and to fasten hardware. The upper level also contained an iron clasp or link similar to horse tack and a trace of charcoal. The lower level, excavated to 30 cm below the surface, contained four cut nails, and two cut nail fragments and a brick fragment.

TU 2, positioned more toward the interior of the barn, contained soils described as a dark yellow brown clay loam matrix surrounding rocks and cobbles. These compacted soils contained greater numbers and varieties of artifacts in both levels. Artifacts recovered from the upper 15 cm included five medium sized brick fragments, one large cut nail, two medium cut nails, a fine cut finish nail or brad (possible upholstery nail), three cut nail fragments, a gimleted screw, a single fragment of aqua colored window glass, and a possible piece of window glazing. The lower level revealed two more brick fragments, seven cut nails, 11 cut nail fragments, and two small pieces of tarpaper.

## DISCUSSION

Oral history provided by William Reed (Reed 2006), the grandson of William J. Thayer or William III (b. 1858), describes some aspects of the barn layout, construction, and function. Mr. Reed recalls the barn located and oriented in the manner of this

foundation. The barn was originally a hop house of two floors and no cellar. It was changed into a general barn by his grandfather when he stopped growing hops around 1920. The barn was used after that time to store hay in the loft and grain in bins in the front and to house farm equipment. He specifically recalled a two wheeled racing sulky and a horse drawn grain drill stored in the barn. The barn was built on timber sills supported by a fieldstone foundation made of stones gathered from nearby agricultural fields. A large door faced the road or away from the creek with a smaller door above providing access to the hayloft. There were horse stalls near the front of the barn on one side. At least one window was located on the side facing the house although there were likely others. The interior of the barn was partitioned and separated from the rest of the barn by an interior door. Mr. Reed recalled it being “full of stuff” as his “grandfather would have been considered a pack rat in today’s parlance.” The barn, as well as other buildings, had wooden shingle roofing until at least 1930. Any repairs or modifications would have occurred afterward. Mr. Reed recalls the barn as the last standing structure on the property around 1941.

The data gathered through archaeological investigations correlates with Mr. Reed’s boyhood recollections. The predominance of cut nails and the use of clinched wrought nails corroborate the construction of the barn in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is interesting to note that the more modern wire nails and roofing materials have been found only in the southern portion of the barn from STP 3 (Staley 2006; Sardella 2005) suggesting that perhaps only a portion of the barn roof was modernized. The window glass and the glazing suggest a window along this section of wall. The brick fragments remain a puzzle although might be related to any hearth used to provide heat in barn when it functioned as a hop house. The iron clasp, buckle, or link probably functioned to connect a strap, chain, or rope related to horse traction. Further work could precisely identify this unique artifact. The dissolved remains of the fieldstone wall did not suggest a great deal of construction effort or permanence. It seems likely this segment was not a load-bearing component but functioned to fill spaces between fieldstone piers, sill members of the barn superstructure, and the ground surface.

## 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 discovered some facts about the barn and oral history has provided some rich details about the Thayer Homestead. However humble our basic research questions and results, it is hoped that they will ultimately contribute to the greater questions regarding agricultural adaptations. This season’s work will include further mapping, testing, and excavations near the house, barns, and outbuildings focusing on the correlation of oral history and the physical remains at the site. The continued involvement of Mr. Reed is greatly anticipated. The field investigations and continued analysis will involve SUNY Oneonta Anthropology students and high school students from Cherry Valley – Springfield Central School.

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