
David P. Staley

ABSTRACT

Excavations continued during 2007 season at the Thayer Homestead Site. An uncellared section of the house was investigated exposing the outer foundation and several of the lesser internal stone foundations which supported floor joists. A ubiquitous layer of wall plaster, nails, and window glass marked the demolition and salvage of the superstructure which occurred in the 1930s. Basic analysis of deposits found underlying this level is ongoing; however, artifacts included bottle glass, crockery, glass tableware, and ceramic tableware all dating to the 19th century. Notable artifacts included various buttons, wire loop fasteners like those found on bib overalls, beads and a pocket knife. A human second left mandibular or lower molar was found underlying this part of the house. Analysis of the tooth revealed age, wear patterns, plaque, caries, and fractures suggestive of mechanical extraction. Excavations in an area of surface bricks at the edge of this section of the house found a jumble of bricks and brick fragments with no cohesive patterns suggesting the location of a hearth, a collapsed chimney, or an organized stack of salvaged brick.

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 overall history, context, and research goals for the Thayer Homestead project have been outlined previously (Staley 2006, 2007). In brief, the Thayer Homestead site consists of a house foundation, several barn foundations, chicken coop, and other outbuildings (Figure 2). 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 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. 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 the house, gather information about construction style and techniques, recover information about room function and the surface brick mound, and recover artifacts that would inform us regarding Thayer family consumer choices and economics.

METHODOLOGY

The area of the uncellared section of the house, a possible kitchen ell, was cleared of branches and woody debris exposing the low alignment of rocks and boulders forming the outer foundation. Six 1x1 meter excavation units were placed in and around the foundation and the surface alignments sketch mapped. Students from a Cherry Valley-Springfield (CVS) Archaeology elective class, under the direction of social studies teacher William Nelson, excavated five tests and another team of SUNY Oneonta Anthropology Department students under the direction of Dr. Renee Walker initiated a test unit downslope from the cellar entrance (Figure 3). The 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.

RESULTS

Internal floor joist supports were found to reach east to west across the uncellared section of the Thayer house. This portion of the house is hypothesized as being a kitchen ell. These support structures were spaced 1.5 m (5 ft) and were unmortared fieldstones only one to three courses thick. The exterior foundation was made of more massive stones, wider and was more typically two or three courses. Nearly all units had a layer of wall plaster, nails, and window glass. The window glass seemed to be found more proximal to the outer wall. The plaster often featured the imprints of the wooden lathe.

Many thanks go to Mr. Nelson, now retired, for two years of leadership and commitment to local history, students, and this project.
A metal hinge fragment and a bracket for a window blind were found within the plaster level and add to the architectural picture of the Thayer house. This layer likely represents the demolition and salvage of the wooden superstructure that occurred during the 1930s (Reed 2006). No foundation trench was discerned in profile with these units. Beneath this layer, an assortment of fragmentary bottle glass, glass tableware, ceramic tableware, and crockery were recovered. Several personal items such as beads, buttons, wire bib overall fastener, and a pocket knife were also found. Several pieces of cut bone were found in this context. Notably, they also featured gnaw marks suggesting that the crawl space under the house was a dining sanctuary for one of the Thayer family dogs. Of further note is the glaring absence of artifacts typical of 19th and early 20th century
domestic sites, tin can fragments and tobacco pipes. Further analysis of recovered artifacts is ongoing and more patterns and observations await that analysis.

A single human molar was recovered from Unit 7 (Photo 1). This lower left or left mandibular 2nd molar had a large caries lesion in the ecclesial surface. Second molars typically erupt between the ages of 12-18 years. Flattened occlusal wear facets were limited in area suggesting the individual was fairly young when the tooth was lost, perhaps in their early 20s. The lesion extended into the pulp chamber and was likely very painful. The tooth also had dental calculus or mineralized plaque, evidence of a diet high in carbohydrates like sugars and poor oral health care. Also present on the surface of the tooth are several fractures in the enamel that radiate across the crown. Some of the fractures extend longitudinally from the edge of the cavity on the top of the tooth down to the bottom of the crown near the root. Others radiate laterally around the bottom edge of the crown. The fractures appear to have been made by a force applied to the sides and/or back of the tooth suggesting that the tooth may have been extracted by mechanical means (Lisa Anderson 2007).

Photo 1: Thayer Tooth.
One of the units was placed to test the mound of brick rubble visible on the surface. Excavations revealed a large amount of brick, brick fragments, and crumbs in no particular arrangement. The bricks were both commercially manufactured as they had brands and frogs and homemade or irregular local bricks. Some had mortar adhering to the surface whereas others were clean. None of the bricks were fused to each other. The brick feature appears to represent a loose pile of brick perhaps concentrated in an informal cache of building materials that were never completely retrieved.

CVS students and their instructor presented their findings with a paper and a tour during the 28th Conference on New York State History (Staley et. al 2007). This provided an opportunity for the students to experience a professional meeting and bring their research of local history to a larger audience.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the artifacts and their distribution is incomplete and preliminary. Cataloguing is ongoing and will be incorporated into results from 2008. It is interesting to conjecture about dental healthcare during the 1800s. What was it like having a serious toothache and having it extracted by a visiting dentist or family member with a simple pair of pliers? How did the tooth, as well as the other various fragmentary household refuse, become deposited under the floorboards of the house?

Oral history of the Thayer Homestead (Reed 2006) suggested the kitchen ell extended toward the creek. Surface evidence for an uncellared section of the house indicated a northward extension. Further excavations in this area, as well as complete artifact analysis, may clarify this possible contradiction. Ultimately, we should be able to define the function of this portion of the house when compared deposits from other parts of the house. It may be that the kitchen ell actually extended south cantilevered or on wooden posts and this ell was used for another function. The stream course may have shifted also creating some confusion for 80 year old memories.

FUTURE WORK

After two short seasons of fieldwork, we continue to find ourselves short of conclusions in regard to any of our overall research questions. We have discovered some facts about the house and some details about life at the Thayer Homestead. Continued perseverance will answer simple questions and clarify oral history. Ultimately, the mass of work will contribute answers to the greater questions regarding agricultural adaptations. This season’s work will include further mapping, testing, and excavations near the house focusing on the correlation of oral history and the physical remains at the site. The field investigations and continued analysis will involve SUNY Oneonta Anthropology students and high school students from Cherry Valley – Springfield Central School.
REFERENCES CITED


Reed, William. 2006. Personal communications with the author. September 24, October 6, and October 20, 2006.


