Historical archaeology at the Thayer Homestead: Progress report of the 2010 investigations

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ABSTRACT

Inclement weather and scheduling difficulties limited spring 2010 excavations at the Thayer Homestead Site. Investigations continued in the uncellared section of the house exposing the area of a door stoop, around a collapsed masonry pier, and adjacent to the cellar wall. The work gathered artifact samples and information about house construction. An excavation unit was completed in midden deposits located downslope and west of the house where remains were discovered in deeper contexts than previously expected. It is hoped artifact analysis of that unit will reveal chronological stratification of the deposit.

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, 2008, 2010). 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

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Figure 1: Approximate Location of Thayer Site.
Figure 2: Site Map.
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, agricultural emphasis was shifted to lands at lower elevations 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 fields surrounding the site and 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, 2009).

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 the Thayer and neighboring 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 excavations in 2010 have several lesser, more focused research goals. Detailed mapping has refined the shape and size of the house and its cellar as well as the arrangement of piers used for an assumed chicken coop. Oral history about the site, particularly the structural layout, arrangement, and individual building orientation have been partially incongruous with preliminary findings and interpretations. Archaeological investigations hoped to contribute to a correlation of oral history, historic photographs, and physical remains. In the 2010 excavations, we wanted to define and orient the house and evaluate a midden or dump area near the house. If chronologically stratified, the exploration of household refuse areas and artifacts in those features would inform us about Thayer family consumer choices and economics.

METHODOLOGY

In the spring semester 2010, students from a Cherry Valley-Springfield (CVS) Archaeology elective class, under the direction of this author and social studies teacher Melissa Jaquay, conducted the majority of investigations. Jessie Pellerin of the New York State Museum’s Cultural Resource Survey Program has significantly contributed to the overall effort with GIS and mapping expertise.
The locations of excavation units and shovel tests are presented along with their date of excavation in Figure 2. In the spring of 2010, the CVS students finished two 1 x 1 meter units initiated by the previous class and completed an additional three units. One of the new units, TU 23, further examined an area of flat stones projecting north from the uncellared footer wall. TU's 24 and 25 were placed just south of the cellar wall to prospect for a chimney at that end of the house. The excavations were also to contribute information about the construction of the cellar. Previously opened units, TU 22 and 17, were finished. TU 22 had been placed to examine a pier supporting a house addition and TU 17 was indentified as a downslope midden. The test units were all 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

Previous excavations in and around the uncellared portion of the house have found the outer foundation to consist of unmortared fieldstones two or three courses thick (Figure 3; Photo 1). Stone alignments made of generally less massive stones and varying between one and three courses create internal joist supports spaced 1.5 m (5 ft). An area of flat stones projecting north from the wall alignment in TUs 15 and 21 may represent a door stoop. TU 23 exposed more of the flat stones (Photo 2). Artifact analysis is on-going but it appears that the surface scatter of small cast iron stove fragments extends out of the door. Notably, this unit did not contain the dense layer of wall plaster, nails, and window glass observed within and above the foundation.

Figure 3: Detail of Site Map and House Foundations.
Photo 1: View of Northern Wall looking East with Door Stoop in Foreground.

Photo 2: Door Stoop
The discovery of two possible masonry piers west of the house suggests the house extended further west than previously assumed (Figure 4). The extension and the recollections of Mr. William Reed throw into question our original interpretation of a kitchen function in the area surrounded with the footer wall. Artifact analysis suggests a more generalized room function. Several sections of iron piping near TU 22 leads us to hypothesize this western extension functioned as the kitchen but the orientation and layout are at odds with recollections (Reed 2006, 2009). A large hardwood tree within the addition outline was cored for an age but the borer was too short to get a complete sample. Excavations in TU 22 were completed in 2010; artifacts were sparse and limited to the upper 35 cm of soil. There was no plaster noted, therefore it appears the interior of this addition was not finished in the same manner as the main house. The rocks and boulders in this unit were not stacked or mortared. The only suggestion that this loose arrangement of stone was a pier is its alignment with the north wall and that with a more obvious pier to the south.

Previously, a midden area was identified in TU 17, at the base of a slope, west and below the house. A concentration of a great variety of artifacts was recovered from a rich, charcoal filled, organic soil. Many artifacts from this unit were burned or melted and were typically highly fragmented. Researchers found several levels of these rich soils and a layer of rocks and cobbles. Artifacts were found beneath these rocks to depths of 75 cm. This is twice as deep as cultural deposits found elsewhere on the site. Several fragments of ceramics were found with manufacturer’s marks that may provide refined production dates. The unit was dug in eight separate levels and it is hoped that their contents will define different periods of the Thayer occupation.

New excavations on the south edge of the cellar were placed to investigate the potential for a chimney at that end of the house. TUs 24 and 25 produced numerous brick fragments but also the wall plaster, nails, and window glass observed elsewhere in the house. A modest volume of artifacts were produced below the surface layer to a depth of 30 cm below the surface. A small leg trap was found in the upper level in TU 25 up against the outer foundation wall. The trap may have been set and lost or perhaps had been hung from the wall of the house. Additional artifacts such as ceramics and glass were observed in rodent burrows next to the boulder wall. No builder’s trench was identified.
Figure 4: Hypothesized Structure Placement.
FUTURE WORK

Prior to the beginning of the 2010/2011 school year, the Cherry Valley-Springfield School District suspended the archaeology elective class from its curriculum. Therefore, no fieldwork or artifact processing has been conducted during Fall 2010 or Spring 2011. However, artifact cataloguing of previous excavations continues and the hiatus in fieldwork will afford an opportunity to synthesize five years of work. Future fieldwork and educational opportunities may be found with a renewed CVS class, another local school district, or perhaps some other community organization.

Many questions remain unanswered yet within reach of solutions. Oral history of the Thayer Homestead (Reed 2006, 2009) suggested the house was configured with an uncellared central wing extending toward the creek. The long axis of the house fronted by a porch was to parallel the road up to Rum Hill. The discovery of two piers now suggests a long axis that does parallel the road however with a large hardwood tree growing within the outline. Further excavations around the house, as well as more thorough artifact analysis, may clarify the configuration of the structure as well as activity areas within the house. The central tree should be cored for a complete dendrochronology sample to ascertain its maximum age and evaluate the plausibility this area was within the house outline in 1930. Mapping should continue to refine historic features, stream boundaries, trails, and former roads.

Oral history also notes a second, larger barn was once positioned north of the Rum Hill road between the house and the hops barn. Surface surveys to date have not identified any stone pilings or foundation nor has shovel testing provided any clues. A Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) study of the area might assist with the search. A more focused effort on the hop barn area would allow pursuit of larger questions regarding the Thayer’s 19th century agricultural adaptations.

Continued research efforts at the Thayer Homestead and elsewhere on Rum Hill will eventually contribute toward our understanding of historic life, agricultural adaptations and local/regional economics. These rewards await us only after patient and diligent work and when ultimately compared and contrasted with other similar deposits.
REFERENCES CITED


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


