

Archeology of an Industrial Town

Harpers Ferry and the New Order of Manufacturing

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Since 1989, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, WV, has embarked upon one of the largest construction and archeology projects in the National Park Service. While the archeology program serves Section 106 compliance needs, a dedicated staff of archeologists, cultural landscape architects, and historians have made significant contributions studying the material and cultural consequences of this enterprising community within the context of larger social, economic and political issues of 19th-century industrial life. Since public interpretation is a major thrust of the park's mission, interpreters use current research to focus attention on the value and importance of the park's cultural resource. Research allows park personnel to provide to the public up-to-date information which enables the interpreter to enliven their presentations. In a recent issue of *Park Science* Lois Winter (1993:9) notes that ongoing research, such as archeology, allows visitors to explore the value of the park as a laboratory for historical studies, an important park value that visitors may not otherwise have the opportunity to appreciate.

Archeologists have performed work in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park since the late 1950s. Most of these excavations have concentrated on the early-19th-century gun manufacturing industry and supporting commerce (figure 1). These investigations include the rifle works (Carson 1962; Larabee 1960b, 1961, 1962), the arsenal yard (Cotter 1959, 1960; Larabee 1960a), and industrial enterprises on Virginius Island (Hannah 1969). Work has continued through the 1980s documenting these resources as well as Civil War and post-bellum sites for future resource identification and protection (e.g. Frye and Frye 1989; Winter and Frye 1992). Since 1989 four major archeological excavations and many smaller projects have been undertaken by the division of archeology at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. Archeology in the center of the commercial district has focused upon the everyday lives of residents who lived, prospered, struggled, and worked in this small industrial town. Excavations were performed at armory worker's houses, a hotel, boarding houses, stores, and at dwellings of private citizens. Most recently work has occurred on Virginius Island, a small private industrial community that served the armory facilities as well as the local and regional economy.

The Garden and the Machine in the United States Armory

Pollen and phytolith studies (Cummings 1993; Rovner 1993) have allowed new interpretations of the changing

cultural environment within the context of industrialization (Shackel 1993). While industrialists and agriculturalists of the new republic argued whether this nation should industrialize or become the bread basket of the world, Harpers Ferry grew as an industrial town at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers, some 60 miles from the major ports of Georgetown and Alexandria. During the early-19th century industrial development in remote areas was justified as making nature productive (Marx 1964; Kasson 1979).

Examination of the archeobotanical remains provides evidence of one strategy that early Harpers Ferry industrialists may have used to create a compromise that allowed industry and nature to coexist. Pollen and phytolith data from the grounds adjacent to the armory indicates that armory officials made every attempt to provide well-groomed, manicured lawns in this industrial environment (Cummings 1993; Rovner 1993) (see figure 1). Maintaining a natural environment around



Fig. 1. A pastoral view of the early-19th-century musket factory in Harpers Ferry, WV.

the armory helped to justify the coexistence of the machine and nature within Harpers Ferry. By the 1830s, when the industrialization process and disciplined manufacturing techniques became established and industry no longer had to justify its coexistence with nature, the surrounding areas were no longer maintained (Shackel 1993). Yards lost their manicured nature as weedy plants dominated the ground's floral composition.

Domestic Sites of Armory Workers

There is evidence of the persistence of craft and home industry in some of the excavations of armorers' domestic lots. In one assemblage dating to the 1820s through 1830s, a comparatively large quantity of gun parts and tools were found in association with the workers' dwelling (Shackel in prep; Larsen in prep). Since armorers were often employed in a piece-work situation until 1841, these tools and gun parts may be evidence that piece-work manufacturing was done on the armorer's homelot. Factory discipline as we know of it today was only in its most rudimentary form in Harpers Ferry.

Evidence at the master armorer's house indicates that household residents were increasingly eager to participate in the new industrial order, purchasing the newest and most fashionable commodities transported into town by rail and canal (Lucas 1993a). In contrast, the examination of an armory worker's household indicates that his family was probably more reluctant to participate in the new consumer revolution of the 1820s-1840s. These residents acquired, used, and disposed of consumer goods that were fashionable several generations earlier (Lucas in prep). Economic constraints may be one explanation for this phenomenon, but much in the same way that residents adhered to their craft occupation, this consumer pattern may be an expression of workers' adherence to the preindustrial order (Lucas and Shackel in press).



Fig. 2. Excavation in the backyards of the 1830s hotel in Harpers Ferry.

Hotels and Boarding Houses

Excavations adjacent to a hotel that coexisted during the armory's operations located a wide range of consumer goods that were probably used by a variety of social, business, and economic groups (figures 2 and 3). The variability of goods may indicate the different roles the hotel served to facilitate cultural interactions.

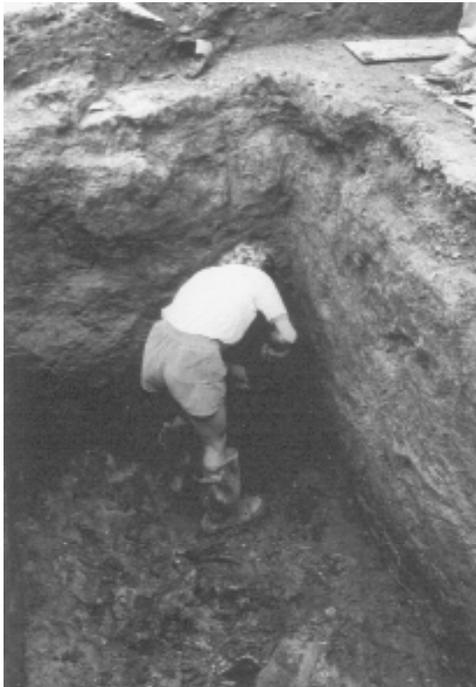


Fig. 3. Excavations of the 1830s hotel privy in Harpers Ferry.

It operated as a place for business as well as a locale for informal transactions. The variety of material goods found may have been a conscious effort by the hotel owners to maximize business potential (Larsen and Lucas 1993, in prep).

Boarders traditionally tend to be the landless, mobile, laborers of

industrial society. Examination of a late-19th-century boardinghouse privy and its comparison to an entrepreneur household's assemblage illuminates the differences in material wealth and health conditions between classes in an industrializing society (figure 4). Generally, the boarders lacked variety in their diet and had a relatively

high disease rate (i.e., intestinal roundworm and whip worm). One of the town's major entrepreneurial families living adjacent to the boardinghouse had a significantly greater variety of foods as well as a much higher parasites rate (Reinhard 1993). Other stereotypes of wealth held true when comparing these two assemblages. The entrepreneur's household had a greater diversity of higher cost ceramics while the boarders used common "thrasher's china" (Lucas 1993b). About 76% of the containers found at the boarding house were medicine-related, while only 20% of the containers were medicine-related at the entrepreneurs house. The



Fig. 4. A view of late-19th-century Harpers Ferry.

boarders also had a substantially greater proportion of pain killers and medicines for digestive disorders. These differences are a major indicator of the contrast between laborers, and non-laborers health and medicinal treatment (Larsen 1993).

(Harpers Ferry—continued from page 17)

An Archeology of 19th-Century Harpers Ferry

At the beginning of the industrial era many craftsmen felt that wage labor was “drawing the chains of slavery, and riveting them closer and closer around the limbs of free labor” (quoted in McPherson 1988:25). The development of an industrial town at Harpers Ferry affected both work and domestic life as well as the landscape and the built environment. As individuals’ lives were increasingly being driven by time discipline, they chose to either participate in these new cultural patterns, attempt to alter them, or withdraw from them. The archeology program at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park provides some interpretations of how people reacted to the new industrial order. This work addresses questions beyond Section 106 compliance needs and contributes significant information to the park’s database for interpreters’ use.

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View from Jefferson’s Rock looking toward river gap.

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(*Heritage*—continued from page 9)

Long-term Obligations

The proposed legislation seeks to help heritage areas become self-sustaining. The program itself will last only 25 years unless reauthorized by Congress. In addition, the Secretary can request that Congress withdraw the federal recognition of any area that no longer meets the criteria; that means designated units that don't prove themselves over time can be dropped.

Any Heritage Area Commissions designated by the Secretary would be dissolved after ten years (with a possible extension of five years). By limiting the length of time for which an area may receive federal funds, other areas can be added to the system over time without compounding the total federal expense.

Over the years in which the federal government provides assistance, a heritage area should develop the momentum necessary to exist independently. During this time it will have the opportunity to prove its viability, through attracting visitors, demonstrating economic and cultural value, and building local and state political support. When federal assistance ends, the area would remain a part of the national system, but would be financially and administratively independent.

Public Participation

NPS is making public participation and outreach a top priority as it seeks to respond to the widespread public interest in heritage conservation. The Service has involved a wide constituency and kept all interested parties fully informed during development of this proposal.

Over 2,000 organizations and individuals have received information about the proposal's progress and have been asked for feedback; NPS has convened five public meetings around the country to solicit the public's views and met with every interested organization that has requested information on the proposal.

Please share your ideas with us! Contact the National Park Service, Recreation Resources Assistance Division (782), Washington, DC 20013-7127 (attn: Heritage Partnerships); 202-343-3780.

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