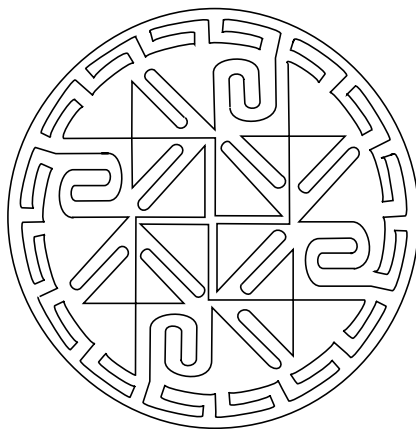


Historical Archeology



Arkansas Archeological Survey

Coordinating Office, 2475 N. Hatch Ave., Fayetteville, AR 72704, Phone: (479) 575-3556, Fax: (479) 575-5453
www.uark.edu/campus-resources/archinfo

Historical Archeology in Arkansas

by Leslie Stewart-Abernathy

The French, Spanish, and Americans who settled in Arkansas beginning in the 1700s left us official and personal writings about their activities, and yet this evidence is incomplete. Too often the documents tell only of political leaders and legislative and judicial activities. While these affairs are important, the ordinary and fascinating details of how people lived frequently remain unknown. What was life really like on the frontier, in early towns, on antebellum farms and plantations? What was American Indian life like at that time? Historical archeology can help to answer these questions.

The sites of towns, farmsteads, trading posts, and Civil War camps or any other place people have lived, worked, or played contain physical evidence of every day life.

This evidence is in the form of ruins, bricks, nails, mortar, window glass, broken dishes, cups and bottles, tools, buttons, animal bones, and all the other broken, bent, discarded, lost, and abandoned things that people made, used, and threw away. These people have left us tangible and eloquent evidence of their lives, and it is literally under our feet.



Historical archeology is not dependent solely upon written documents and excavations of sites, however. Much is often learned from interviewing people who remember what happened in the past or whose relatives have told them about the past. By combining these sources of information--documents, ruins, and memories--a more

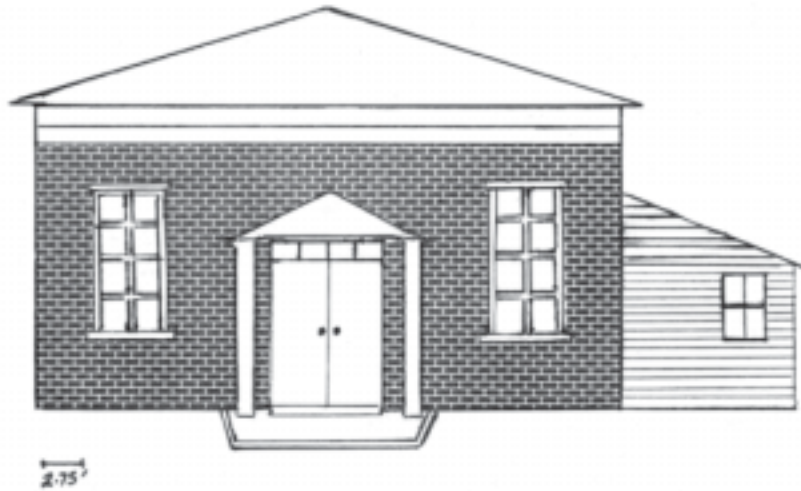
complete story of the past can be obtained. Historical archeology is concerned with the people who were living here or who came here from the time of the first Old World contact with America to the present. We, you and I, are much closer to this subject than to a study of prehistory, because in a sense WE are the subject since it is our ancestors who were here or who settled here.



The possibilities for historical archeology in Arkansas are many since few of the French posts, Spanish or pioneer American farmsteads, or contact period Indian sites have been located or studied. Historical archeology assists in the accurate restoration of historic buildings, and it is often concerned with the culture of minorities such as Indians after their contact with Europeans, blacks in slavery and freedom, and the various ethnic groups who came to Arkansas after the Civil War.

If you know of a site where people lived, worked, played, or fought in the past, please report it to the Arkansas Archeological Survey (2575 N. Hatch Avenue, Fayetteville, AR 72704-5590), the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program (1500 Tower Building, 323 Center Street, Little Rock, AR 72711) or your local historical organization. Each site is an unopened time capsule, and each should be handled carefully if we are to bring to life the people in the historical past of Arkansas.

ARCHEOLOGY OF MOUNT COMFORT CHURCH: AN ANTEBELLUM MEETING HOUSE IN NORTHWEST ARKANSAS



Archeological Reconstruction of Mount Comfort Church, ca. 1848.

The Mount Comfort Church (3WA880) excavation is the first time the discipline of archeology has been incorporated in a study to document the architecture and associated uses of an antebellum public building in the Arkansas Ozarks. Few of these once important community buildings are known to be standing today. Archival information provides useful data about these early Arkansas churches but oftentimes is lacking in detail. Archeology, therefore, can be of great value to learn more about the architectural plans of these former structures and how they were used.

Excavation of the second Mount Comfort Church site was conducted in 1991-1993 as part of Arkansas Archeology Week activities. The site was recorded and the excavations conducted at the request of members of the Mount Comfort Presbyterian Church. This church (still used today) was built a few years after the Civil War and is located just south of the archeological site. Our research objective was simple and twofold: 1) to discover the basic architectural plan of the building, and 2) discover the various activities, chronology and use of the public building and surrounding site by the analysis of recovered artifacts. A total of 33 two-by-two meter squares were excavated to an average depth of 15 cm. This depth was sufficient for recovery of artifacts associated with the construction and use of the church.

An important element of historical archeology is the interplay between the written record and what is found underground. We were somewhat fortunate in that there are a few documents that describe the brick church and the use of the building. One source is an autobiography by Ann Marshall who briefly describes the building when she taught school there. Ann James (the maiden name of Ann Marshall) opened the Mount Comfort Female Seminary in 1848 in the “airy” brick church that measured 33 feet square in which she added a music room upon opening the female seminary. Another useful source is the 1941 WPA Mount Comfort Church history found in Special Collections of Mullins Library, University of Arkansas. These sources led to others, especially early editions of the Van Buren Intelligencer, that provide tantalizing leads about the use of the building as a public meeting house in the early 1840s.

Architectural details gleaned from over 6000 artifacts indicate the brick structure was indeed, as was noted in Ann Marshall’s autobiography, about 33’ square. The front of the building faced east with central doors that opened onto a small wooden porch. Two to three windows occurred on all sides of the building with dressed sandstone lintels. A lack of nails suitable for wainscoting in excavation units within the church indicate

the interior walls were left as bare brick. Evidence of a wood addition 27' long and 10' deep was found on the north side of the brick structure consisting of foundation stones, wall plaster, pane glass, ash, flooring nails and one charred floor joist. One heavy iron door hinge discovered between the brick wall and the wood addition indicates a large door connected the interior of the brick church to the addition. Slate tablet fragments, lead pencil nubs, marbles and an iron bell clanker attest to the use of the wood addition as a schoolroom. We feel certain this was the room added in 1848 for the Mount Comfort Female Seminary noted in Ann Marshall's autobiography. Non-architectural artifacts discovered in the church and just outside the brick walls included decorated plate fragments, thimbles, harmonica reed fragments, scissors, and a needle. These document the use of the building for social and church affairs, including sewing bees and covered dish dinners.

The most surprising finds were several Civil War era personal artifacts discovered in the ash floor remains of the wood addition. These included buttons, a bullet mold, lead slag for making bullets, a fragment of uniform decoration, food container fragments, coffee pot lid, and a spoon. Also found within the ash flooring of the addition was a small medicine bottle embossed "Dr. C. F. Brown's Eye Water." This was an especially exciting find after discovering from a local Confederate newspaper known as *The War Bulletin* that the surgeon in charge of the Mount Comfort Hospital was a Dr. C. F. Brown. The Goodspeed histories published in 1889 mention Dr. Charles Fox Brown had a practice in the Van Buren area before the war and later served as a Confederate surgeon. In 1859 his practice was near a sulphur spring outside of Van Buren where the water was used for medicinal purposes. "Dr. C. F. Brown's Eye Water" was likely marketed and sold in specialty produced embossed bottles like the one we found at Mount Comfort. In a January 1862 issue of *The War Bulletin* Dr. Brown reported the deaths of 12 men since the organization of this hospital. Since there were several public buildings in the Mount Comfort area during the war, the discovery of the embossed bottle, in addition with other Civil War artifacts, confirm that the church served as Mount Comfort Hospital. Confederate use of the building ended in February 1862 when troops left



"C. F. Brown's Eye Water" embossed medicine bottle AAS photo 935454

the Fayetteville area. It is possible Union troops also utilized the building as a field hospital after the Battle of Prairie Grove in December 1862. Fourteen Fayetteville area buildings were established as Union hospitals and one was noted as "the brick church." Whether or not this or one of the other Union hospitals was in the Mount Comfort Church is unknown, however, it seems likely that if the building was still standing after being vacated by the Confederates it would have also been used by Union troops.

The demise of the church building was by fire as evidenced by charred wood, ash and numerous burned nails and window glass fragments. Military Civil War artifacts found within the ash layer suggest these items were accidentally left in the building at the time of the fire. Whole brick and other salvageable building material were taken from the site and used elsewhere. The WPA church history notes the bricks were salvaged by the Union to build barracks in Fayetteville. This would have been during the Union occupation of Fayetteville between 1863-1865.

Information obtained through investigations at Mount Comfort show a pattern of material culture that reflects the history and use of the building. Prosperity and growth of the church in the 1840s, the importance of education within the community, and the disruptive effects of the Civil War are all part of the history of the building as reflected in the archeological record.

Doing Historical Archeology

By George Sabo III

What is Historical Archeology?

Historical archeologists try to answer questions about the recent past by using archeological evidence from the ground and historical evidence from documents (maps, records and texts, pictures and artworks, etc.) and from people's memories. These are all very different sources of information, so how can we study them together?

One useful method is to start with a question, based either on archeological or historical clues. Then work back and forth using additional sources of evidence, refining the question or asking new ones as necessary, until a satisfactory answer is reached. This method produces a synthesis based on all available information. The result is much better than using one source merely to confirm another source or to fill in a gap. Let's see how this works.

A House Foundation at Van Winkle's Mill

Peter Van Winkle built the first steam-powered mill in northwest Arkansas for sawing lumber and milling grain in the early 1850s. From its beginning up till the Civil War, Van Winkle's Mill was operated by free workers and by African-American slaves, many of whom lived on the site. The Van Winkle family and many of their slaves fled to Texas during the Civil War, but returned afterward and rebuilt the mill. Some of the former slaves now worked as paid laborers.



Van Winkle's Mill ca. 1880 (photo courtesy of Buford Van Winkle).

Archeologists from the Arkansas Archeological Survey discovered the remains of a mill worker's house at the Van Winkle's Mill site in 1998. The house was designated Feature 9 and excavations were conducted there between 1999 and 2001. Our interpretation of the evidence we found demonstrates the question-and-answer method.

Start with an archeological question...

Our first question sprang from the archeological evidence: We unearthed the stone foundation of a house with fireplaces at both ends. We wanted to learn "Who lived here?"



Feature 9 foundation showing fireplace remains

What archeological facts could we establish? First, the artifacts included nails and other materials used in the building of the house, women's clothing fasteners and sewing equipment, and children's toys, in addition to tableware and kitchen utensils. From this evidence, we determined that a mill worker's family with children lived in the house.



Feature 9 artifacts including child's rings, doll fragment (upper left), a child's alphabet plate (center), a marble, and a toy gun fragment (lower right).

The mill was in operation for a long time, both before and after the Civil War. When was the house occupied? The manufacture dates of the artifacts we found mainly fell between 1870 and 1900. (We could tell this based on information from factory records and manufacturer's advertising.) This date range was confirmed by the manufacture dates of building hardware, including nails and window glass.



Toy gun fragment and an 1895 advertisement.

What families lived and worked at the site between 1870 and 1900? This information is available in U. S. census records, which are produced at ten-year intervals. Several families are identified in the local census records for 1870 and 1880, but only one family is recorded in both: Aaron and Jane Van Winkle and their children.

| 1870 U.S. Census of Mill Workers | 1880 U. S. Census of Mill Workers |
|--|--|
| John and Mary Steele (no children) | |
| Joel and Lucinda Leming (no children) | |
| Charles and Martha Dackel (children) | Simm and Susan Stevens (children) |
| Perry and Agnes Van Winkle (children) | Norman and Maggie Van Winkle (children) |
| Aaron and Jane Van Winkle (children) | Aaron and Jane Van Winkle (children) |

Aaron “Old Rock” Van Winkle was a former slave who became a foreman following the return to the millworks at the end of the Civil War. He remained a close associate of the Van Winkle family even after Peter Van Winkle’s death in 1882.

Back to the archeology ...

Looking again at the artifact assemblage, we note that the Feature 9 house was occupied by a family that was comparatively well off, such as a foreman’s family might have been.

The artifact and structural evidence also suggest occupation by just one family; there is no sign that different families lived in the house during successive intervals.

Synthesis

The series of questions that took us back and forth through the archeological and documentary sources suggest that the Feature 9 house was occupied from 1870 until the turn of the twentieth century by a family that may well have been Aaron and Jane Van Winkle’s. Scientific research is never really finished – we always want to learn more – so like many projects ours needs additional study to confirm our hypothesis and shed additional light on what life was like for a nineteenth century black family in northwest Arkansas. This research will continue the “question and answer” method in an effort to expand our understanding of Arkansas history.