

**TOWARD AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE POCUMTUCK HOMELAND:
CRITICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE UMASS ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD
SCHOOL**

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ABSTRACT

In the 17th century, what is now known as the town of Deerfield marked the center of the homeland of the Pocumtuck people. The story of the Pocumtuck has been largely a footnote to the history of the English expansion into the Connecticut River Valley. Ethnohistoric representations have been scanty and archaeological sites scarce. Here we report on our efforts to write an archaeology of the Pocumtuck homeland. We describe long-term research at the Pine Hill site—a multicomponent site located at the center of the historic homeland—and summarize findings on Late Woodland artifact variability, feature function, and subsistence.

PREFACE

In his new book entitled *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen (1995) exposes and interrogates the escalating struggle over how American history is to be constructed and how it is to be taught. Loewen (1995) cites conservative critics like Lynne Cheney who charge that the current National History Standard is not sufficiently patriotic. He notes that the US senate recently passed a resolution condemning the same standard for “lacking a decent respect for U.S.

history's roots in western civilization" (Loewen 1995). Similar critiques have lately been prominent in a variety of popular media (e.g., Wiener 1995). A common target of the conservative critique has been the growing inclusion of pre-Columbian Native American societies in U.S. History texts. Loewen (1995) rightly notes that with all of the clamor over whether Native Americans *should be* included, little attention has been paid to *how* natives have been represented (or misrepresented) within this inclusionary trend.

For the last decade researchers associated with the University of Massachusetts Archaeological Field School at Historic Deerfield have been attempting to contribute to a history which is sensitive to the systematic exclusion of Native voices from historical writings *and* which critically reflects on how the writing of the histories of the region's first nations might transcend the hegemony of conventional/Eurocentric stories and historical methods. In the 17th century and probably for at least 500 before that and possibly for 10,000 years, what is now the town of Deerfield, Massachusetts, marked the center of the homeland of the Pocumtuck people. The story of the Pocumtuck has been largely a footnote to the history of English expansion into the Connecticut River Valley. Ethnohistoric representations have been scanty and laden with European ethnocentrism. In the next few minutes, we'd like to report on our efforts to construct a critical archaeology of the Pocumtuck Homeland by first identifying some of the components of a critical archaeology and then showing how we applied these concepts to our fieldwork in Deerfield and to our interpretive work within the community.

SOME COMPONENTS OF A CRITICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Our definition of a critical archaeology embraces those previously offered by Paynter (1995) and by Handsman (1991): "Critical studies seek to unmask thinking that does the

intellectual work of the powerful, and communicate these unmaskings to society at large” (Paynter 1995). A critical perspective attempts to recognize “the diverse ways in which other people's lives and histories are misrepresented and to explore the reasons for why this happens” (Handsman 1991:16). We'd like to highlight four components of a critical archaeology that have been central to our work in Deerfield. They are (1) story telling, (2) incorporation of Native Voices and world views, (3) archaeologies of place, and (4) public engagement. We address each of these in turn.

Story Telling

The t-shirts of the UMass Archaeological Field School are emblazoned with the slogan “telling a different story.” They highlight that for us, telling stories about the past is a central component of the archeology we do. We work within a community where historical narrative informs everyday life. As others will note here today, Deerfield is a community in which the past and the present are in constant interplay. The past is the raw material from which present identities and attitudes are shaped. Conventional or dominant presentations of both European and Native histories tend to reaffirm the perception of Natives as people without history (Wolf 1982). Consider the specifics of Deerfield as just noted in Paynter's presentation (Paynter 1995). On one side, we have a rich historical narrative, populated by diverse individuals with names and personalities and complex life histories all centered in a tangible, restored, built environment. On the other side we have inventories of artifacts and site locations and generalized evolutionary trends. It is no wonder then that we think nothing of collapsing 10,000 years of pre-Columbian history into a 45 minute presentation—and no wonder that this does not seem incongruous to our audiences, even though such an encapsulation would be regarded as folly for the 226 years that

encompass the European settlement of Deerfield. What we're saying here is that even after demonstrating long-term native presence in Deerfield prior to the arrival of Europeans it is difficult for our audiences to envision this pre-Columbian landscape as populated by people who have any depth, or diversity or complexity or to imagine that anything of consequence happened prior to the European landfall.

When Keene first came to Deerfield in 1980, there was a singular story and the role of Native Americans in that story was quite clear. Native Americans were a foil—marginal, caricatures in a morality tale that glorified the English colonial project and simplified it to a battle of civilization vs. savagery, progress vs. stagnation, good vs. evil. The community itself stands as a monument to the determination and ingenuity of the early English settlers who spoke on the one hand of bravely taming the wilderness and noted on the other their good fortune to settle in a valley with fertile lands that had been previously improved by Indians who subsequently vanished. The centerpiece of the story was the Deerfield Massacre—which, as Paynter just mentioned, was the outcome of a conflict between two competing colonial powers—the English and the French—but which until recently has consistently been represented as an assault by savages on an outpost of civilization. The story of defeat, captivity, endured hardship and redemption is imbued with biblical metaphor and serves as a foundational myth for what Robert Bellah et al. (1986) have called a community of memory.

The histories *we* wish to write are counter-hegemonic—they are neither derived from conventional telling nor conventional academic practices but instead illustrate how such telling and such practices serve to constrain discourse about Native America. Our aim is not simply to put Natives back into the story (add Natives and stir), nor simply to demonstrate the considerable

time depth of Native land tenure preceding the European incursion. Our aim is also to challenge our audiences to read Native history *and* European history in a way that is neither Eurocentric nor dependent on European observation. Our aim is to write a history that emphasizes Native American actions, initiatives, and variation in resisting, accommodating and initiating change. There are many ways to write counter-hegemonic stories. Let us give you just one example.

Toward A Counter-Hegemonic Story While settled village life, political confederacies, permanent fortified settlements, intensive corn agriculture, warfare and other trappings of complexity could be found among the Connecticut River Valley's neighbors from at least 1000 AD onward, such features were simply not evident in the pre-colonial period in the valley. The so called failure of Algonquian peoples of New England to adopt the trappings of complexity of their neighbors (right up through the 17th century) has often marked this region as an evolutionary backwater and these absences have been noted as a reason for why the histories of the valley's people are less interesting than those of their more dynamic neighbors like the Iroquois. Within the dominant progressive discourse, not much happened here. It is our hypothesis is that it is this very absence of what some define as interesting, or important, or as progress, which marks the Valley as an interesting place where people actively resisted the forces—both internal and external—that would drive them to adopt such behaviors. The flexibility in economy, politics, and kinship (Johnson 1993) combined with mobile, transitory occupation within homelands would all be effective strategies for mediating what we have come to call the intensification of social relations. The Pocumtuck may well represent an important example of people who succeed in sustaining a communal mode of production mode in the face of external pressures (Keene 1991; Saitta and Keene 1990).

Our different stories are populated by people who are active agents in the construction of their social reality. Our tellings are informed by concepts like agency, resistance, gender, class and overdetermination which are typically absent from the dominant story. We'll return to the kinds of stories we can tell in a minute when we discuss the results of our recent excavations in Deerfield.

Native Voices

For us, a critical archaeology in Deerfield must include Native voices and Native world views. We seek this inclusion as a corrective to the overwhelming dominance of a European gaze within the village of Deerfield and also out of responsibility to the people whose history we are attempting to restore. However, unlike Kevin McBride, or Jeff Bendremer and Melissa Fawcett, who are working on tribal lands in southern New England with the Pequot and Mohegan nations respectively, we have been less successful in enlisting Native partners for our work thus far. Most of the Pocumtuck nation was driven out of its homeland in the 17th century and as Carlson will note in an upcoming paper—those that stayed or returned were systematically ignored and purposefully made invisible, so that it became conventional wisdom that there were no Indians in the Valley after the 18th century. We have tried to recover bits and pieces of Pocumtuck oral tradition from ethnohistoric sources. We are currently making efforts to track descendants in New England who trace Pocumtuck identity within their own oral tradition. And where we lack a broad body of oral literature specific to the Pocumtuck homeland we have borrowed liberally from Algonquian tradition from elsewhere in New England. If we cannot yet ascertain that the myths that we ascribe to the Pocumtuck were indeed told by the Pocumtuck at specific places and specific times—we can effectively convey for our audiences that the

Pocumtuck were people who told stories, who had depth of tradition and whose sacred locations dotted the landscape and that the homeland might have been rich in activity even if this activity was low in visibility.

Archaeology of Place

We are indebted to Russell Handsman for illustrating how a critical archaeology of Native Americans in New England must step outside of the bounds imposed by contemporary perceptions of space (like town boundaries or built environments). Handsman (1991) notes that the study of ancestral homelands provides a different frame for exploring the long-term histories of indigenous resistance and survival, encouraging archaeologists to study long-term cultural and social continuities that conventional histories gloss or disguise.

Handsman (1991) contrasts the image within the dominant story of a wilderness waiting for redemption with that of a vibrant traditional homeland. For Pocumtuck he imagines a core of 5-10 square miles centering on what is now Deerfield, containing an important central place where clan meetings and elder's councils were held. Dispersed throughout the core were corn fields, communal cemeteries, sweat lodges and sacred places. People resided in small hamlets and scattered wigwams that were continuously shifting across the landscape. An extensive network of paths linked each clan's members and joined Pocumtuck people to their kin who lived in nearby homelands of Norwottock, Squawkeag, or Woronoco (what is now Northampton or Northfield or Westfield). To an untrained western eye, such activity might be invisible. A dynamic Native landscape might well appear to be wilderness. An archaeology of place helps correct this conceptual blindspot (Handsman and Harrington 1995).

Public Archaeology

Our last point about critical archaeology in Historic Deerfield is that it is public and engaged. Our work is quite literally out in the open. This year we will be working on “The Street,” engaging tourists as well as more permanent residents on a daily basis much as Robert Paynter and Edward Hood have done with their historic work in Deerfield. Our work is constantly engaging the public and by extension—dominant or hegemonic stories—and is guided by a critical self-awareness of this engagement and its possible effects. Let's briefly explore how these concepts have been applied at our work at one of the sites that the field school has been excavating in Deerfield, The Pine Hill site.

The Pine Hill Site When folk take a tour of Old Deerfield, they often see a fragment of the old proprietors map which depicts the original land grants laid out in neat linear east-west parcel along the street matched by larger linear grants along the Deerfield River. The astute observer will note that almost every available square foot of land has been apportioned to settlers. An exception is the oblong area in the Flood Plain of the Deerfield River north of town. This is Pine Hill. Pine Hill stands in stark contrast to the floodplain that surrounds it. At an elevation of 250 feet above sea level, it stands above the cleared planting fields encountered by the first Europeans and affords a commanding view in most directions. Its steep sides suggest an ideal location for defensive purposes. It may well have been a central place within the Pocumtuck homeland.

Pine Hill was associated with the Pocumtuck people, and has archaeological remains dating from at least as early as the Late Archaic Period (5000 years BP) onward. However, the most intensive utilization of the site appears to have taken place during the Late Woodland

period (1200-1600 AD). What is most remarkable about Pine Hill is the high density of large pit features and the absence of conventional village debris like middens and hearths.

Nearly every test pit excavated on the north terrace of Pine Hill has yielded a pit feature. The pits average 1 meter in diameter and depth. Almost all contained several distinct lenses of fill and some appear to have a thin clay lining. Pottery, lithic tools and flakes, fire cracked rock, and charred floral remains were recovered in small quantities from inside the features. Our current interpretation is that these represent either storage or food processing pits. Postmolds were scattered throughout the site in a low density. A total of 43 postmolds have been encountered, and they reveal no clear pattern. Flotation analysis from one of the pits also revealed non-hardwood charcoal and a high concentration of burned huckleberry seeds, suggesting possible controlled burning for clearing. Ethnobotanical work is now in progress. For the moment, we hypothesize that this may indicated either clearing for planting fields (i.e. Pine Hill itself may have been used for planting fields), propagating certain kinds of plants or animals, or for clearing an important social site within the homeland. Noteworthy among the artifacts from Pine Hill is the prevalence of chert flakes and finished tools made of Hudson Valley cherts, suggesting extensive prehistoric social contacts and/or population movements between people in the Deerfield and Hudson Valleys. Several hundred small ceramic sherds were found at the site and Chilton has analyzed the ceramics as part of her dissertation research. A total of 56 minimum vessel lots were identified from 487 analyzable sherds.

What kinds of stories can we tell about Pine Hill? Some preliminary suggestions:

(1) At this point we are able to map our Algonquian resistance model onto the Deerfield data. There are more than 117 archaeological sites in Deerfield, yet we have yet to find one that in

anyway resembles a permanent village. Handsman's (1991) concept of dispersed settlement within a homeland holds up well against the archaeology. Concerning the of evidence for large, Late Woodland villages in the region, archaeologists used to claim that they had not yet been found or, as Ritchie claimed for the Hudson Valley, that they had been obliterated by the large-scale destruction of sites as a result of Euroamerican settlement and digging by amateurs (Ritchie 1958:7; see also Snow 1980:320). Nevertheless, our inability to "find" sites may be a direct result of our inability to accurately interpret the remains we do encounter (or our inability to step outside of evolutionary or progressive discourse). Instead of large farming villages, archaeologists encounter highly variable and short-term settlements that do not fit established cultural classifications. While warfare is endemic in neighboring New York State it is absent in the Pocumtuck homeland prior to the European arrival. We suggest that these differences do not result from extreme isolation. There is ample archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence that there was social interaction and trade between the Iroquois and the middle Connecticut Valley Algonquians. Therefore, we interpret the cultural differences as purposeful, creative Algonquian resistance to settled village life and to rigid social structure.

(2) The apparent high density of storage features is unlike other Late Woodland sites we are familiar with in New England. Storage - and especially subterranean storage which limits visibility - invites all kinds of questions about the machinery of production and distribution. Centralized storage at Pine Hill may simply represent an effort to store foodstuffs above the flood plain but it also suggests communal production, communal processing and curation and communal appropriation and distribution (what Saitta and Keene [1990] have called communal class process). Centralized subterranean storage may, as Deboer (1988) has noted, say more about intent to hide something from outsiders than about relations among insiders. It invites

exploration of the themes of the communal production and appropriation—which offer an interesting contrast both European ways of life.

(3) Pine Hill was adjacent to Native planting fields and may possibly have contained planting fields. Carlson (1994) and Handsman (1988) have demonstrated how the archaeology of Native planting fields implicates gender and forces us to focus on questions of division of labor and sexual politics that are frequently absent from conventional tellings. While we have yet to engender our narrative about Pine Hill in a satisfying way we are at least raising issues which give Native history a texture and complexity that is equivalent but definitely not identical to stories about Europeans. That is, we find division of labor, sexual politics and political economy, agency and dynamism in native societies. Demos's (1994) treatment of Deerfield's unredeemed captive offers a hint of how exploration of Native sexual politics gives us a new lens through which we can explore European sexual politics. Nevertheless, we *have* noted the following:

- (a) that our discussions of pre-Columbian New England are strikingly androgynous.
- (b) that Algonquian populations generally engaged in an egalitarian sexual politics which was often incomprehensible (and hence to a degree invisible to Europeans).
- (c) that entanglement with Europeans led to opportunities to subvert the political power and autonomy of indigenous women—leading to internal struggles re: gender.

(4) Finally, whatever interpretations we map onto Pine Hill it is apparent that Pine Hill was a special place for the Pocumtuck for thousands of years. While there is no evidence for year-round site use, apparently the site was used as a place of congregation and was perhaps one of

the important central places alluded to by Handsman. As Carlson will point out in this session, the Pocumtuck people continued to visit the site well into the 18th century. Handsman reminds us of homelands filled with sacred sites and special locations that may not have conventional archaeological signatures. At the very least we can say that Pine Hill was a key locus in the cognitive map of the Pocumtuck.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that our work in Deerfield makes a difference in how the occasional tourist and the established member of the community comprehend history. The stories that are told by folk other than critical archaeologists have changed since we began work in the early 80's.

We have managed to challenge three common presumptions:

- (1) that we are talking about societies and behaviors which because they are neither dominant or clearly visible are no longer extant or viable.
- (2) that the disappearance or low visibility of these behaviors is an indication of their inferiority or insignificance.
- (3) that history consists of one progressive story.

Within Deerfield:

- (1) Natives are now included in the story, if for no other reason than to affirm long-term human presence in the valley.

(2) If Native cultures are not yet widely represented as rich, dynamic, and diverse neither are they caricatures they were previously. The massacre and the discourse on civilized vs. savage are less central to the community's official history.

(3) Our work in Historic Deerfield continues to be visible and public which removes the alternative story from the shadows. Natives, rather than being a foil offer an opportunity for critical reflection on dominant histories and issues like gender, communal class processes and the intricacies of power which were previously glossed in the dominant heroic myths of the town. We would not claim that our work is responsible for all of the ongoing revisionism—especially given the current popularity of Native America issues in popular culture—but our continued presence is at the very least a stimulus to ongoing engagement with the issues. Such engagement is all the more timely, all the more essential given the current efforts that we noted at the outset, to reappropriate history and re-silence the voices that have been enabled by a critical history and a critical archaeology.

POSTSCRIPT

It is interesting that the stories we tell have so far met with minimal resistance, unlike the experiences mentioned by Loewen (1995) at the outset. However, we think that the challenge is yet to come. On the surface, our stories may seem benign and should not be threatening to any but the most reactionary audiences. Natives were here for a long time before white folk. They had rich diverse and substantially different cultures. They were dispossessed of their lands unfairly and often brutally. And yet before we congratulate ourselves on our successes must consider whether the impacts are significant in terms of how history is digested and how it is used in shaping our modern life. Will our critical archaeology lead to critical thinking among

our audiences? After all, Loewen (1995) and others have noted the tendency of consumers of our product to shape what we tell to fit what they already know.

There is a curious re-invention taking place within Deerfield as hegemonic history meets critical archaeology. This year the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association adopted a new theme in their annual commemoration of the Deerfield Massacre. The new celebration was promoted as a multi-cultural festival in which the heritage of all communities involved, English, French Canadian and Native American could be remembered and celebrated. It was as if the celebrants were trying to find that peaceful space in which the conflicts that the competing stories posed need not be confronted - as if we can retain our old cherished dominant story while including others that were previously excluded. The stories of course will not be able to coexist. Each challenges the other and the contradictions must sooner or later be confronted.

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