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SCARS UPON THE EARTH:
PHYSICAL EVIDENCE OF DRAMATIC CHANGE AT
THE STRATTON TAVERN

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This conference intends, as I understand it, to present current concerns and practices in the archaeology of the Northeast, aiming at the higher objective of developing an informed and responsible program for future work. My contribution to that shared goal is a historical archaeological example. I present it primarily for the methodological considerations it raises for our discipline broadly conceived. The site-specific contents of this report are therefore to be viewed more as illustrative than definitive.

Historical archaeology is not permitted the security of operating within the structures of a single discipline. It is, even by the narrowest definition, bi-disciplinary (Dymond 1974: 75-105; South 1977: 1-25). As practiced responsibly, however, it is even more than multi-disciplinary: it is better termed synergistic. A holistic perspective frames the strategy of the investigation and permeates the methodology to effect all sets of techniques employed. Therein lies both its effectiveness and its difficulty, its caution and its challenge.

The techniques and the methods utilized in such a holistic investigation have been respectively honed to proficiency in radically different disciplines. A tight research focus is necessary in order to collapse the disciplinary provincialisms into a common effort without dulling the cutting edge of any one discipline's contribution. Difficult as that is to accomplish, it is not impossible, and it seems to me to be
the only responsible course to pursue in our attempt to reclaim authentic understanding of past cultural complexes. No individual and no event, much less in any culture process, ever existed within the confines of an academic discipline. So, any attempt at surrounding an archaeological problem with a mono-disciplinary methodology—no matter how many adjuncts are appended after the fact—is doomed to partiality.

I'm fully prepared to accept the accusation that one motivation for my complaint is sour grapes. Prehistorians know that they accommodate the techniques, and apply at least some of the theoretical approaches, of both the "hard" sciences and the "social" sciences. Therefore, they should be able to muster some empathy for the harassed historical archaeologist who must add as well those of a spectrum of historians, of the humanities and the arts. Too many of the situations and types of materials deriving from the problems that I am investigating fall directly under those "other" disciplinary mandates for me to ignore them. I refer to more than just the presence of documents. It is also the elaborate means of access to cultural information that sound scholarship in those fields has devised.

Techniques for recognizing patterning and specific bias in documentary material provide a good example. I find the modern social historian doing remarkably effective "anthropology." (Cooperative research being undertaken at Old Sturbridge Village constantly reminds me that anthropology is too big to be left to anthropologists alone!) Their techniques provide a powerful complement to the techniques and methods that I regularly employ which are familiar to prehistorical archaeologists. But in order not to allow one sort of method, one disciplinary perspective, to tyrannize or prejudice the other, a holistic strategy is imperative (Worrell, forthcoming). Again, the intrinsic value of a given discipline's methodology must be granted integrity in its own research, while the problems must be framed by the strategy agreed upon by diverse disciplines. At a minimum, such an endeavor will keep the archaeologist alert, growing, and humble.

The investigation of the Stratton Tavern site in Northfield, Massachusetts by Old Sturbridge Village serves as my case in point. This is a research project which I now report at mid-stream, so my observations take more the form of working hypotheses than conclusions. But they will serve to illustrate the methodology and some of the ways in which synergistic researches radically define the possibilities and refine the probabilities. Working within parameters being progressively secured in conversation with social historians and with natural scientists, I have been spared the embarrassment of wild goose chasing on numerous occasions. And since our museum's end objective is the presentation of a physical interpretation, organically integrated into community process, (Kelsey 1975; Larkin 1978) the holistic perspective follows naturally from beginning to end in the project. Archaeologists investigating all cultural situations recognize that their most indicative information relates to change. Our critical predicament is how to assess change. The problem of generalization is a two-way street: how to fit a single site into broad societal patterns and how to infer patterns from the evidences of the specific site. The key probably
resides in the ability to recognize change in change itself—to determine those hitches in the regular or predictable rhythm of process. This is no more nor less of a problem for historical archaeology than for prehistorical. Rural historical sites, in fact, might best be thought of as proto-historical due to the dearth of credible historical research. Their interpretive framework has been traditionally drawn from urban situations, which I am coming to consider as an alien culture to most agrarian communities. Unproven biases so derived have tended to be eloquently reinforced by the application of documentation derived from similarly inappropriate settings. Meticulous archaeology, therefore, not only provides the only direct access to much of New England's rural historical culture, but also is the necessary corrective to standard assumptions improperly demonstrated.

Nevertheless, we who work within the so-called "historical" time frame do have access to varieties of information unavailable to prehistorians. These can assist us in testing our models in new ways which may provide corrective insights beyond our own situation. I have been regularly averted from many potential cul-de-sacs, and probably from some outright errors, by the rigid application of the techniques of the social historians. This has been especially the case in determining change patterns and recognizing their fit into the concentric rings of consequence in the socio-economic context of the site.

The Stratton site as reconstructed at Old Sturbridge Village will have as its principal intention the interpretation of social and material change. Such diverse disciplines as demography, economic history and aesthetics, therefore, all provide primary resources for the archaeological investigation and its holistic interpretation.

The family that inhabited this site and utilized it for varying functions is thus not viewed as a static model for inferential assessment. Instead, the objective of the project is to determine interacting units of process, including the personalities directly and indirectly involved; the material changes and functional changes through time in the structures, in the economic base and in the biota; and alterations in preferences, priorities and more within the effective context of the site.

I readily begin with the premise that assisting documentation is biased. It can be persuasively argued that all documentation is biased by the subjectivity of the author and the caprice of preservation. The same caveats may be entered regarding artifacts. In either instance the trick is to learn to read the bias and to analyze it as a rightful information source. Bias itself, properly understood, is a most revealing kind of data. The key to denouement is in the sampling strategy and understanding the system to which the information is indigenous. We have come up with numerous surprises at the Stratton site. Several of these are given some clarification from comparative material culture studies, some from scouring the court and tax records, some from other archaeological sites and contexts, some from historical experimentation, and some from the vast body of research into social patterns. However, it is in the cumulative effect produced by the
interaction of these perspectives that the best control and most persuasive conclusions reside.

Research designs are regularly constructed according to priorities framed by resource management exigencies or by problem interests of principal investigators or sponsoring institutions. The Stratton project is no exception. Old Sturbridge Village is a museum of early rural New England lifeways. It reconstructs a community caught up in the social and economic ferment at the end of the 18th and beginning of 19th centuries. In this period rural villages were initiating practices which were to distill into a specifically American socio-economic structure (Parks 1976). The living history concept intends dynamic interpretation by reproducing the organic interaction of all components in the community system. The museum utilizes diverse technical perspectives to research and to accomplish that objective. Therefore, close interdisciplinary communication is of the essence of the enterprise. It provides an inclusive system in which to do experimentation as well (Worrell 1979b, 1979c). For our research purposes in archaeology, it means that many of the usual barriers of disciplinary compartmentalization have already been bridged.

Rural New England of the early historical period involved internal cultural interfaces distinct enough to warrant being considered as a "contact community." The agrarian and proto-industrial economies vying therein represent quite separate mind-sets (Deetz 1977; Henretta 1978). Over a long period the rural household had adapted to diverse labor forms. Pre-industrial technologies played a large part, yet were actually an integrant in an agrarian system. Low technology industries such as shoemaking, wheelwrighting, redware and brick manufacturing, blacksmithing, construction trades, saw- and gristmilling, among others, were actually vital supporting components of the agrarian communal economy. They were practiced on the farmstead, for the most part, as an adjunct to those activities that we more regularly associate with agriculture (Bidwell 1916: 262-268). Without cognizance of the fact, these rural communities came to provide a laboratory in which a system of industrialization was being progressively refined (Parks 1976).

Social change fermented over a long period, but when it broke, the disjunction in values, priorities and self-evaluation was radical. As one agriculturalist lamented, it made "the old race of milk maids and working girls extinct" (Colman 1833: 11), undercutting one vital leg of the agrarian household economy (Colman 1833: 23-24). It further diminished the male labor force, giving options which removed essential cheap labor and making farming impractical in many places (Colman 1833: 19-20; 1842). It even changed the fundamental concept of work as a commodity quantifiable by the clock rather than the job, ordered by someone rather than by nature. This is the recognition of culture in transition which has provided a powerful context for our investigation of the Stratton site and the interpretation of the dramatic physical alterations found there. But those cultural changes, both the economic and the less tangible elements, were held in tension over a long time and irregularly left their marks in evidence accessible to the archaeologist. Here, again, a reciprocity develops between the refinement of site interpretation and that of historical generalizations.
The Stratton site was a farmstead-tavern. This ubiquitous rural New England phenomenon—the farmstead tavern—is an enigma. They have usually been interpreted according to information derived from urban, center-village or stage-coach service establishments. We have reason to doubt the validity of functional, social and economic assumptions thus derived. Our investigations suggest the stronger probability that the tavern-keeping function of these rural sites was more directly in complement to a rounded agrarian economy and social structure than to the commercial ventures with which it has usually been compared.

The myth of the self-sufficient farm is rapidly evaporating. Tax and probate records show that it was the community, not the family or farm, that was self-sufficient. Practically all farmers, no matter their position on the tax list, lacked the necessary balance of facilities, animals, tools and crop land for instance, but the community tended toward a balance (Bushman 1978). The neighborhood provided the critical economic and social unit. This is a matter of proxemics and practicality (Hodder and Orton 1976; Langhorne 1978), and is probably explained more facilely in terms of statistical probability than by covering laws (Clarke 1977: 13-28; Fletcher 1977: 55-59). However, it provides a reasonable framework for investigation and assessment. In removed rural areas we would expect to find a neighborhood complement of low-technology support included, having those activities performed on the farmsteads (Bidwell 1916: 260-276). The farmstead-taverns, providing an analogous service in that kind of community, is better understood as completing a neighborhood network than as opening to a broader market. The Stratton Tavern site is impoverished, so far as documentation is concerned. But the physical evidence, while in no place yet "conclusive" of anything beyond the site, is excitingly supportive of the contained-neighborhood model. Yet it suggests a transition which has bold implications for our interpretation of general trends, particularly in the early 19th century.

Field research strategies for the archaeological investigation of the Stratton farmstead-tavern have been framed to optimize the diversity of resources employed (Worrell 1979a). It is in the technical aspects of investigation design and of recording that such a project may move beyond "multi-disciplinary" to "holistic." The problems proposed and confronted are informed by specific and general historical questions, by geographical, topographical and geomorphological observations, by architectural and material culture considerations, and by the information priorities as ranked for this particular site and its known history. The definition of the problems, as well as the attack upon them, has been devised in concert by the various disciplines involved. The intricate recording system is organized both to maintain controlled segregation of data as collected, and eventually to allow optimal access for integration toward informing the multi-dimensional questions being asked.

After two 17th century attempts to settle Northfield ended in tragedy at the hands of Indians, a permanent settlement was enclosed in a stockade in 1714 (Temple and Sheldon 1875). Hezekiah Stratton was one of the initial settlers. In 1757 he willed a tract of land in Northfield Farms to his son, a second Hezekiah. This is apparently as soon as the Indian threat abated enough to allow settlement of that outlying
The first tavern license was issued in 1767 to the second Hezekiah. His son, in turn a third Hezekiah, received the place upon his father's death in 1800. He became one of the leading land-holders in the entire town, was involved in several other enterprises (some attested to in documents, some only from the archaeological record), and willed the home site to his son Arad upon his death in 1825. Within six years Arad was out of the tavern business, had lost the property, and was scything hay to pay off debts. This rapid rise and fall of the family's fortunes gives us some fine questions to deal with! (Parks 1978a, 1978b).

What follows is a quick overview of a few of the more significant disclosures after two seasons in the field:

Three discrete excavation areas have produced evidence that the earliest activity in domesticating the site was to burn it off. Such specific information would normally be lost to ensuing activities of man and processes of nature on an intensively utilized site. Our information comes in the form of a regular horizon of thoroughly-charred mixed-organic material immediately overlying sterile soil. The thinness of the layer indicates no prior tilling. Its preservation comes only in areas in which activities immediately subsequent have deposited a depth of soil on the char sufficient to protect it from deterioration. Even the outlines of containers of dirt, etched in char, were found just as they had been deposited—adjacent to the original chimney base. The Pine Meadow area, on which the site borders, remains today one of the most fertile agricultural parts of the region. An early source cites the quality of soil in Northfield as "exceeded by few, if any, in the commonwealth" (Dickinson 1818), even though by the 1830s lamentation about its exhaustion had begun (Cohmer 1833). Population pressures and desire for access to these fertile lands set the stage for its rapid exploitation immediately upon the abatement of the Indian threat (Temple and Sheldon 1875: 219-224, 280-283, 284-310). It remains to be determined how widespread the burn-off may have been and whether the burn-off was a factor in expediting soil depletion.

Problems of land use and soil impoverishment demand an understanding of the kinds of physical residue that may be indicative of the range of potential situations and alterations that a given set of data might imply. Surficial evidence of field and farmstead boundaries, erosion patterns, chemical and depositional variations of the soil and degrees of natural and artificial alterations all come under consideration. Explicit historical documentation regarding land use for the site, and even for the locality, is apparently non-existent, but regional information provides a helpful context for inference. It is noted that soils were already being artificially improved in the vicinity by the very early nineteenth century (Dickinson 1818; Cohmer 1833, 1837a, 1837b, 1842). Decreased available water also appears as a factor about this time as is evidenced by complaints of diminishing flow along small brooks. Sloping and marginal lands suffered more and earlier than better situated plains. Technological change accompanying the nascent progressive farming movement put such locations at a further disadvantage.
Transportation systems were undergoing transformations that can only be termed radical (Parks 1966, 1967). Turnpike networks preceeded railroads in altering traffic flow and created a decidedly, if unintentionally, inequitable access to markets and goods (Russell 1976: 262-268). Marginal farms were frequently situated to be most disadvantaged by those changes. It is important, therefore, for us to ascertain traffic patterns directly involving our site. The history of Connecticut river traffic and portage is a record of extreme variability and periodic fluctuations. A "Meadow Road" running westward through our site is referred to cryptically in an 1825 document. Although it does not appear on any maps, its mention implies public access. Excavation and sampling have revealed roadway changes, the overall impact of which remains to be sufficiently understood.

The particular kind of agriculture being undertaken in a given locality, including crop diversity and variability, often may have been the factor tipping the balance of viability. Cultivation of fruit trees, especially of apples for cider and brandy, must be considered in this light. While specific farms and localities have yet to be pinpointed, Northfield did enjoy a reputation for apple growing. As one observer of Northfield in the early 1800's remarked: "And of the production of these, besides a supply for cider and all culinary purposes, considerable quantities are annually employed for the distillation of domestic turmoil, intemperance and not" (Dickinson 1818: 5-6). The outlines of a huge orchard on the site have been fixed by our survey and several vestiges in the form of ancient trees bearing a variety of strains have been identified. Soils analysis, dendrochronology and material culture studies into archaeologically derived artifacts from the site combine to put this problem into perspective. The third Hezekiah Stratton died shortly after the harvest season in 1825. His probate inventory shows him in possession of 65 barrels and 6 hogsheads of cider along with a still and all the apparatus for converting it to brandy. Early in the history of the tavern phase of our site there were as many as eight licenses being held in Northfield. When Arad Stratton gave up his tavern-keeping in 1831, only two remained. The nascent temperance movement may have gotten an early start in Northfield and suggests a further piece for our puzzle (Carson 1966).

Other related questions hinge on types of artifacts, their functions, aesthetic and monetary values, and probable sources of supply. These are beginning to assist in our consideration of the way the proprietors viewed themselves, their clientele and their function. Ceramics, recovered by excavation, for example, disclose the high ratio of hollow vessels that might be expected of a tavern. Surprisingly for the farmstead setting, however, relatively expensive British imports predominate over local redware. This is at least the case for the early nineteenth century materials. The late eighteenth century materials have yet to be acquired and examined in sufficient quantities to determine whether ceramics indicate the self-conscious change in the intention of the site about 1800 that other evidences suggest.

The edged tableware and annular hollow vessels represented for the early nineteenth century do conform, however, to a preference and
availability pattern which was discovered earlier by Old Sturbridge Village researchers, preparatory to establishing the Asa Knight store interpretation in the museum. Commercial documents and inventories for that establishment in Dummerston, Vermont (roughly 30 miles north along the Connecticut River from the Stratton site) were compared to many others from throughout rural New England and from Boston importers. Those records and our ceramics uniformly testify to decorative taste that was generic rather than specific. Perfectly matched sets were apparently not being ordered nor sold in the rural sector. Similarity of decoration was consistently sought, but there seems to have been no concern for precise matching. In our collections from the excavation, for example, identical patterns on edged tableware or on mocha mugs are rare in the extreme. But several similar and contemporary styles are the rule. This correlates with the observation that merchant orders, shipping records and various inventories all evidence a strong functional, as opposed to aesthetic awareness (Nylander 1978). Our particular problem remains, to what degree did Hezekiah Stratton adjust the usual preference patterns of his neighbors, or, to what clientele did he intend to appeal?

The organization of space is itself the most informative of artifacts. Our fullest complement of information to apply to an interpretive problem is provided by the scars left upon the site by a total reorganization of its features. Stratigraphic, artifactual and architectural evidences combine to place the changes just about the turn of the nineteenth century. The fact that the enterprising third Hezekiah Stratton took ownership at his father's death in 1800 assumes more than passing significance.

In what appears to be a single comprehensive engineering effort, every sector of the clustered farmstead underwent physical and functional alteration at that time. The nucleated farmstead expanded dramatically. The topography was drastically altered by the moving of hundreds of tons of earth and stone. Artificial terraces were formed surrounding the central structure on both sides and the rear, regularizing what had been an uneven grade of as much as 20 degrees. The public road itself may have then been removed a distance of several yards from an earlier passage nearly in contact with the doorstep. An interesting system of domestic hydrology was added, moving water through wooden pipes from a holding reservoir across the road. The new system carried a constant flow of water into a basin in a shed, and then out through a stone drain to an elaborate dispersal system. This last feature was constructed in back of the main structure and shed by grading the terrain so that it had only a slight slope in three directions. The flattened terrace was then covered with multiple thicknesses of stones of varying sizes. That formed a sort of reverse French drain which served to disperse the waterflow evenly in all directions into a surrounding ornamental garden. This last piece of interpretation combines evidences derived from soils analysis, sedimentation and stratigraphy with family correspondence remembering the nineteenth century. Stratified materials indicate that it remained in use until the end of the nineteenth century, although its existence was unknown to recent inhabitants and neighbors.
A brief brick-making effort apparently took place at the same time as the comprehensive expansion, probably producing the brick for the massive chimney stack in the new wing of the house. The structural additions more than doubled the existing floor space. Its appointments reflect a vernacularization of high style. The divisions that were introduced into larger rooms of the early portion of the structure may testify to the widely publicized shift in conventions of privacy (Flaherty 1972: 45-112) such as that which provoked the storied innkeeper's lament that lawyers were now refusing to sleep three-in-a-bed. Our further plans involve dismantling the structure itself in a controlled "above-ground excavation." We intend to use recording conventions and problem-solving methodology sharpened in meticulous stratigraphic excavation, in order to subject the structure to functional and sequential investigation. It is hoped that the coordination of the architectural and dirt excavation will allow an integrated answer to questions, recognizing that a structure and its environs exist and change systemically and reciprocally in use.

A terrace artificially built inside the "L" formed by the large rear-wing addition provided a most fortuitous stratigraphic record. It preserved sequentially the residue from the actual construction of that addition and of a deep ice cellar which the terrace included. The intention of the terrace and ice cellar were apparently part of a unified building scheme, so the construction residue and cellar excavation debris were used in succession for terrace-building. The sequence is demonstrated stratigraphically in the composition of the terrace: the chimney base and stack were first constructed. Next the cellar was excavated, its walls erected to form the foundation for the structure which finished the house addition. All the while, a ramp was retained, opening out of the new cellar. A temporary retaining wall was built by stages as the terrace was raised, keeping the dirt away from the area in which the ice cellar was to be situated. The latter was then built of dry-laid flat field stones. The final ice cellar construction was more than ten feet deep, approximately half of that being dug into the natural gravel substratum, the remainder being contained within the artificial terrace. Drainage was provided by gravel around the structure in a trench that increased in width as it progressed downslope. The trench had been formed by the retaining walls which held back the dirt as the terrace was being elevated. This structure represents a little-documented early type of storage which preceded the use of the ice plow and saw. Technological improvements and improved understanding of thermal properties during the 1820's served to bring ice storage facilities up out of the ground for efficiency and better insulation. This one is surprisingly early and large, at least for its rural location, raising further questions of the ambitious intentions of the grand expansion project.

The net effect of all this prodigious alteration manifests a striking change in the economic focus of the site. It strongly suggests a situation much more appropriate to the standard conception of a "tavern" than earlier evidences and the socio-economic context of such a farmstead institution would otherwise warrant. The rapid incline and decline in the family fortunes and the radical changes in economic structure
permeating all of rural New England during the early decades of the
nineteenth century are well-attested. The physical evidences at the
Stratton site evince a bold risk that struggled with some success against
the current of agrarian neighborhood decline for a brief time. But,
ultimately, it too succumbed.

Any of these discoveries in the dirt or in the documents might be
exciting in its own right, at least to the archaeologist. But each by
itself raises more questions about the site than it answers—questions of
typicality, functional priorities, the economic system involved. Viewed
together, in a synergistic effort at problem-solving, however, a set of
strong behavioral and preferential patterns emerges, considering the
documentary evidences that probabilities can be differentially weighted.
In the context of demonstrated socio-economic networks, and of the
processes being observed by demographers and social historians, some
inferences become more compelling. And while the historical-cultural
patterns provide inferential clues for interpretation, the tight
archaeological data defines the accuracy of specific assumptions and
applications.

We have presently come a lot further toward locating the problems
than we have in providing conclusive answers. But that is the essential
first step, and it is frequently the most elusive and neglected. We know
that exhausted land, technological change, increasing labor costs,
mechanization, travel patterns and transportation shifts, the temperance
movement, and specialization are all factors that must receive more
attention. And we may also be dealing with intangibles such as degrees
of respective human competencies. But we are now able to frame tight
contexts for questions such as: What stimuli motivated the dramatic
changes at the turn of the nineteenth century? And how does this inform
our understanding of local and regional shifts in the agrarian-industrial
tension? Contrary to what might have been inferred from the
archaeological evidences or the historical context alone, a strong case
is shaping up to indicate that the third Hezekiah Stratton was
participating in a daring hedge against the collapse of the culture he
knew. Investing and diversifying at a time when conversion and
specialization was deemed wise, he may have been seeking the autonomous
self-sufficiency to continue an agrarian lifeway which had depended
previously on a communal structure now all but collapsed. He may further
have been attempting entry to a market which our vantage observes as
futile. This is the general hypothesis being tested severally by a
variety of techniques, and ultimately in the holistic application of them
all.
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