

Learning and Community: Exploring the Materiality of Rural Education in America

by

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Introduction

The idea for this paper began with a contract archaeology project in Jessamine County, Kentucky. Along our project corridor – the widening and expansion of US 68 by the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet – there were numerous interesting historical sites. In addition to the expected domestic residences and farm complexes with their assorted outbuildings and slave accommodations, there were also a number of community-oriented sites, including a tavern, a scales, a toll house, and a one-room school.

The schoolhouse was of particular interest to us despite the fact that no archaeological work would be necessary at that location. As we toiled over our test units at other historic sites along the project corridor, we conversed about the role of that schoolhouse in the nineteenth-century community of which it was apart. What functions did it serve? What exactly could an archaeologist excavating a schoolhouse expect to find in the material record? And what are the kinds of research questions that data from this type of site might answer? Although we did not have an opportunity to archaeologically investigate a schoolhouse during our project, these conversations led to an interest in rural education in America.

This paper begins with a brief history of education in the nineteenth century and summarizes some of the archaeological research that has been conducted to date on this matter. The rest of the presentation focuses upon some of the ways we might use the archaeology of schoolhouse sites to understand the past.

Rural Education in America: A Brief History

Education in America was neither standardized nor well-organized prior to about 1830. In the rural Northeast and the new Midwest, the district school – like this ca. 1820 school in Gloucester, Massachusetts – was the norm. It was organized and controlled by a small locality and financed by some combination of property taxes, fuel contributions, tuition payments, and state aid. In the South, a different model prevailed. Itinerant schoolmasters selected a location on their own initiative and set tuition rates for parents who chose to send their children for an education. Similarly, a schoolmaster might be engaged by a group of parents to teach a term in a neighborhood school. (Kaestle 1983:15; *School* 2001).

The structures themselves were frequently made of logs or unpainted clapboard and the quality of their construction varied dramatically. Schools were often situated on plots of land that were not suitable for any other purpose – next to roadways or on swampy ground (Kaestle 1983:13-14). Sarah Hale, in 1829, commented upon the selection of the site for a district school:

The only requisite was, to fix precisely on the center of the district;
and after measuring in every direction, the center had been discovered
exactly in the center of a frog-pond. As near that pond as safety would
permit, stood the school house (Hale 1829; Kaestle 1983:14).

The Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of Michigan remarked in 1848 that schoolhouses were “sometimes adjacent to a cooper’s shop or between a blacksmith’s shop and a sawmill” (Mayhew 1848:110; Kaestle 1983:14). The poor location of many schoolhouses was often cited as evidence of the public’s indifference toward education prior to the mid-nineteenth century. School was occasionally held in private homes or conversely, the school served as the private residence for the teacher (Gulliford 1996). These arrangements, however, were in the minority.

Children were often sent to school by their parents as much out of a desire to keep them out from under foot as from an eagerness to have them educated. Without a standard age for beginning school, it was not uncommon for teachers to supervise children as young as three years old. One teacher, however, found this less than desirable and referred to these pupils in her diary as “trundle bed trash” (Nelson 1902:305; Kaestle 1983:15). Similarly, without compulsory attendance, older children (that is, beginning at about age 10) would only attend school two or three months a year – often during the winter session when farm work slackened (Kaestle 1983:15). Furthermore, access to education was restricted on the basis of class, gender, and ethnicity, such that boys from affluent white families were the primary recipients of educational training until approximately the 1830s (*School* 2001).

The curriculum was also haphazard and lacked standardization. Materials were often limited, inadequate, and outdated; frequently they consisted of whatever primers and books the teacher possessed (*School* 2001). In some country schools, “discipline was lax and learning incidental, but other schools were orderly, efficient, and staunchly supported by the community, offering children an opportunity for [an] education that few of their parents had enjoyed” (Gulliford 1996:35). The teachers themselves frequently doubled as farm laborers, tavern

keepers, prospectors, and craftsmen. Often they were chosen for the position because they were one of the few members of the community who could read or they were unemployed (and sometimes unemployable) (*School* 2001).

However, in the 1830s and 1840s, a push toward statewide education had begun. By this time, important educators such as Horace Mann in Massachusetts, Samuel Lewis in Ohio, and Henry Barnard in Connecticut had come to view education as a public enterprise – as did Emma Willard, Catherine Beecher, and Mary Lyon, who urged women to become teachers (Gulliford 1996:39-40). Education reformers of this era argued that only an educated electorate could make responsible choices with their votes. However, the idea of “taxing one man’s property to educate another man’s child” resulted in significant public opposition (Gulliford 1996:40). Horace Mann offered a rather ingenious solution to this problem by suggesting that the public have control over their local schools. In addition, reformers linked education to ideas of national progress by using slogans such as “every schoolhouse opened closes a jail” (Gulliford 1996:40).

By the 1860s, the struggle over a free public education had largely been resolved. However, the Civil War and associated aftermath significantly disrupted efforts to improve and standardize education in America. Progressives began to turn their attention to educational issues in the 1890s, but these efforts did not reach rural areas until after the turn of the 20th century. (Gulliford 1996:40-41; Kaestle 1983:203; *School* 2001).

Clearly, this brief summary does not do justice to the complex history of education in America. The point, however, is that education in the nineteenth century – even after efforts of education reformers in the 1830s and 1840s – was not entirely standardized. There was tremendous variation in the construction of the school building, the quality of the curriculum, the length of the school year, the qualifications of the teachers, and so on. One thing, however, that

most schools had in common was that they served as a focal point of the communities in which they were situated.

Schoolhouses as Representative of Communities

Schoolhouses during the nineteenth century were more than places of education. They were also the center of social, dramatic, political, and religious activities in their communities (Tyack 1974:15; Gulliford 1996:79). In one-room schools all over the nation, ministers met their flocks,

politicians caucused with the faithful, families gathered at Christmas parties and hoe-downs, the Grange held its baked bean suppers, Lyceum lecturers spoke, itinerants introduced the wonders of the lantern-slide and the crank-up phonograph, and neighbors gathered [for] spelling bees (Barber 1953:1; Tyack 1974:16).

Furthermore, “as one of the few social institutions which rural people encountered [almost] daily, the common school both reflected and shaped a sense of community” (Tyack 1974:17). Consequently, the material records of schoolhouses need to be examined with this scale of human interaction in mind.

James Gibb and April Beisaw (2001) recently published an article on the materiality of schoolhouses in *Northeast Historical Archaeology*. Their work is significant for a number of reasons. First, they acknowledge that “one-room schoolhouses once figured prominently in the history of American education and in the American imagination, but have received little attention in the archaeological literature” (Gibb and Biesaw 2001:108). Second, their article summarizes the few technical reports and published papers on schoolhouses in the Northeastern United

States. Third, they begin to suggest theories, methods, and historical questions relevant to an anthropological inquiry of this site type. Finally, they recognize the importance of schoolhouses as community institutions.

The primary conclusion of their research is that architecturally related debris is the best source of data for understanding and interpreting the use of a school lot. Architectural objects, they argue, provide evidence of lighting, heating, furnishings, sanitary facilities, modifications and repairs to the structure, and so on. More importantly, however, these details “represent community attitudes towards public education and larger social issues, [such as] the length and seasons of the school year, length of the school day, separation of the sexes (Pena 1992), sanitation and public health, and abstract learning versus manual training” (Gibb and Beisaw 2001:123).

Gibb and Beisaw (2001) noted that analyses of non-architectural debris from schoolhouse sites has been disappointing. Often, there is little material evidence of students educational or recreational activities “beyond a few slate pencils and writing slate fragments, and the odd marble or two” (Gibb and Beisaw 2001:124). Therefore, the authors suggested that:

Archaeological investigations should not abandon the search for domestic artifacts and the behavioral patterns that those objects represent, but greater attention must be drawn to the architecture of the schoolhouses and associated structures such as fuel storage sheds and coal bins, privies, fences, wells, and other special use buildings (e.g., dormitories, chapels, and gymnasias) (Gibb and Beisaw 2001:125).

Although I don't exactly disagree with the authors on this point, I see greater utility in the domestic artifacts from schoolhouses – despite their dearth – for telling ALL the stories of the site's past use, not just its history as an educational institution.

Meaning in the Minimal

Domestic artifacts are deposited in school yards in a manner that is different from that which is observed at residential homelots and other archaeological sites. Cultural materials result from its regular use for educational purposes as well as for special events – rather than from the daily activities associated with the maintenance of a household. Therefore, the artifacts from schools seem to be particularly meaningful and deliberate.

For example, when examining the artifact assemblage from a schoolhouse site, it is easy to imagine that Mrs. Emily Johnson, brought her mince-meat cookies to a May Day celebration on a blue shell-edged whiteware plate. Or that Mrs. Madeline Wright spilled her sewing basket during the quilting bee and lost a number of her pins and needles in the grass. Mr. Moses Stevens and Mr. Francis Casey – two elderly farmers no longer able to work in the fields – may have met at the school for an afternoon of companionship, playing checkers and smoking tobacco (resulting in the loss of a gaming piece and the breaking of a pipe).

Although these are fictional characters, they represent real events and illustrate that domestic artifacts recovered archaeologically from schoolhouses have a kind of *deliberateness* in their *accidental* loss or breakage. So, as we examine assemblages from these sites, we should be cognizant of the kinds of events and circumstances that brought the objects *to* the site as well as led to their deposition. Furthermore, there can be a tremendous amount of information in what at first glance appears to be a dearth of domestic artifacts.

We as historical archaeologists have a great many methodological and theoretical tools available to us. I would like to suggest some of the ways in which we might apply these tools to the data from schoolhouses.

Ceramics are one potentially useful data class about which a great deal of research has been conducted, particularly at domestic sites. Anne Yentsch (1991) has done some wonderful work with correlating vessel colors and functions. She observed that earth-toned vessels in the Virginia Tidewater region were used for private tasks such food preparation and storage, while white-toned vessels were used for public displays – as with the dishes of formal dining. Diana Wall (1991, 1994) determined that decorative motifs were associated with gender ideologies – specifically that Gothic-paneled ironstone was a symbol of sorts for the cult of domesticity. Similarly, we are familiar with George Miller’s (1980, 1991) ceramic price indexing – a method for determining the relative cost of ceramics in archaeological assemblages, which contributes to an understanding of socioeconomic status.

In the context of the schoolhouse and the activities that took place there, one might expect the material culture to reflect “one’s best foot forward,” so to speak. Mrs. Johnson may have chosen a whiteware plate for her mince-meat cookies rather than a redware platter, because the May Day celebration was a very public and formal event. Perhaps she did not choose her Gothic-paneled ironstone plate because she felt that its use was most appropriate for her family’s breakfast table or entertaining close friends. Or perhaps she chose the shell-edge platter because it was her proudest possession – the most expensive and impressive serving piece she owned.

I am not suggesting that we should do psychic archaeology and try to get into Mrs. Johnson’s head to figure out why she brought those mince-meat cookies on a shell-edged plate.

Rather, I am suggesting that we apply what we know from our investigations at domestic residences to levels beyond the homelot – notably that of the community.

Cultural expressions, political statements, reflections on worldviews, gender ideologies, social rituals, and so on occurred within individual homes during the nineteenth century, but did not do so in a vacuum (Rotman 2001). Therefore, we can expect that these human behaviors not only *have* material expressions, but in order to understand them we need to examine both arenas – the homelot and the community . . . and vice versa. Schoolhouses are ideal sites for this type of anthropological inquiry since they so effectively represent the communities in which they are situated.

A Look at the Literature

We have not yet had an opportunity to test these hypotheses on schoolhouse sites in central Kentucky. Gibb and Beisaw (2001:113-121), however, provided a comprehensive review of the available literature on schoolhouse archaeology in the Northeastern United States. A cursory examination of the data sets presented suggests that the idea of “artifact biography” – that is, that domestic artifacts recovered from schoolhouse sites represent unique and deliberate activities or events – may have tremendous utility in the analysis and interpretation of these important community resources.

For example, Bigelow and Nagel (1987) excavated the Letchworth Park School site in Genesee Falls, New York in 1986 (Gibb and Beisaw 2001:113). The domestic artifacts recovered from this site included “three whiteware sherds, 24 bottle glass fragments, and 6 fragments from a colorless glass tumbler” (Gibb and Beisaw 2001:114). Similarly, “a sherd of Jackfield-type redware, a pearlware cup handle, several ball clay tobacco pipe fragments, and

buttons” were among the domestic objects in the assemblage from a one-room schoolhouse in LeRay, New York excavated by Hartgen Archaeological Associates in 1990 (Pena 1992; Gibb and Beisaw 2001:114-115). When we imagine that schoolhouses functioned as more than loci of education and training, these domestic objects take on new meaning – as possible vestiges of Christmas parties, baked bean suppers, spelling bees, and other events important to the communities in which these schoolhouses were situated.

Conclusions

There are two points of which we should be mindful as we continue our investigations of the materiality of education in America during the nineteenth century. First, schoolhouses are not merely loci of education. Rather, they are active community centers. As such, the archaeological record reflects a variety of social, dramatic, political, and religious activities, just to name a few. And second, although we can apply the knowledge we have gained from our investigations of domestic sites, we must also be aware that the behavioral processes that lead to artifact deposition in school yards are different from those at residential homelots. Since the schoolhouse does not generally represent an occupation, the objects recovered archaeologically had to be brought to the site with a degree of deliberate intention. Therefore, an apparent dearth of domestic objects may yield considerable information.

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