Rural, but Not Isolated: Connectedness at the Armstrong Farmstead (15Fa185) in the Central Bluegrass Region of Kentucky

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Abstract

A variety of interesting ceramic wares and patterns were recovered from the Armstrong Farmstead in central Kentucky. These material objects presented conflicting testimony to the history of the site as a rural farmstead. The stone wares were largely from local, family based manufacturers. However, the refined earthenwares – and other material classes – suggested that the Armstrong family was connected to broader commercial markets. This paper examines the data from these investigations and attempts to reconcile the apparent contradictions observed in the material assemblage. The consumer choices made by the family reveals the complexity of the social relations operating at the farm – their social position, ethnicity, and engagement in the world economic system.

Introduction

As the abstract for this session stated, "rural" contexts are often defined in contrast to "urban" ones. Rural is understood to be simple, homogeneous, agricultural, passive and past; while urban is complex, stratified, industrial, active, and future (Wurst 1994:1). The material evidence from the recent archaeological investigation of a farmstead in central Kentucky, however, has provided conflicting testimony as to its "ruralness".

In this paper, we utilize data from the Armstrong Farmstead in Fayette County to re-examine current understandings of rural lifeways. We begin by

attempting to define our "rural" setting. Next, we provide a brief history of the Armstrong Farmstead and the people who resided there. Finally, we puzzle through what living in a sparsely populated context along a major transportation corridor seems to have meant for the nineteenth century residents of this site.

What does it mean to be rural?

Historians have used low population densities and occupations based primarily on agriculture to define the meaning of rural (Swierenga 1982:496; Barron 1986:141; Baker 1991:4 following Wurst 1994). Swierenga (1982:496) characterizes the rural way of life as "physical if not social isolation, extended family networks, simple social organizations, seasonal labor patterns and unceasing hard work." Hahn and Prude (1985:9) take issue with these criteria, contending "that many of the attributes once thought to be distinctly rural, including extended family networks and communal values, are also found in urban settings."

LouAnn Wurst (1994:3), in her 1994 SHA session from which this symposium grew, challenged us to look beyond simple rural/urban dichotomies – that rural is agrarian, while urban is industrial; that rural is family oriented, while urban is profit motivated; that rural is egalitarian, while urban is stratified; that rural is homogenous, while urban is heterogeneous. These dichotomies over-simplify the complexity of social relations that were operating in rural America.

LouAnn reminds us that there is "always some level of truth to dichotomies and they exist for a reason. However, all dichotomies obscure as much as they

attempt to capture" (Wurst 1994:9). Williams (1973:289) further states that "Our real social experience is not only of the country and city, in their most singular forms, but of many kinds of intermediate and new kinds of social and physical organization."

We seek to challenge simplistic assessments of "rural" through our examination of the Armstrong Farmstead in central Kentucky. The results of preliminary analyses at this site indicate that the Armstrong family resided in a sparsely populated area of Fayette County and engaged in agricultural production as an integral part of their livelihood. The Armstrong family did indeed appear to be "rural", but were by no means isolated from the social, economic, and political worlds beyond the boundaries of their farm.

The Armstrong Farmstead: A Brief History

The Armstrong Farmstead was occupied by John and Mary Armstrong and their descendants from ca. 1846 until after the turn of the twentieth century. John, a native of Ireland, was a physician and farmer. He kept horses, mules, milk cows, beef cattle, and hogs. He grew crops such as wheat, corn, oats, and potatoes (Allgood and Kirkwood 2002). Mary was a seamstress and native of Vermont (Fayette County Tax Assessment Book 1849; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1860a). The archival data, particularly county tax assessments and census records, seemed to indicate that John and Mary Armstrong were relatively affluent or at least solidly middle class (Table 1) (Fayette County Tax Assessment Book 1849, 1862, 1865; U. S. Bureau of the Census 1860a, 1860b,

1870a, 1870b). The couple owned a 44-acre tract of land as well as a variety of farm implements and livestock.

Table 1. Assessed values for the Armstrong property during John's lifetime.

	Land	Personal	Slaves	Farm Tools	Livestock
1849	$1,800		$600		$100
1860	$3,520	$12,900		$125	$840
1862	$1,680		$600		$100
1865	$2,500		$100		$200
1870	$6,000			$200	$700

The Armstrong home was located along the Paris Pike, an important transportation corridor during the nineteenth century, which connected Lexington to Maysville on the Ohio River (McBride and McBride 1990:600). Although a few towns are scattered along its length, historic Paris Pike traversed many miles of rural agricultural and pastoral land.

John Armstrong died in 1875. His heirs continued to occupy the property into the twentieth century.

A former manager of the current Clovelly farm indicated that a well at the western edge of the site – seen fenced in here in the center background – was the halfway point between Paris and Lexington (LeRoy LeCour, pers. comm. 2002). As such, passers-by would stop at the farm to water their horses. Nancy O'Malley (1987:88) reported similar findings, suggesting that, since a tollhouse had been located across the street, the well may have been used to water horses from stagecoaches. Many early inns and taverns were "latchstring" taverns operating out of private homes and the Armstrong farmstead appeared to have served as on such inn and tavern. The Paris Pike, therefore, connected the

Armstrong family to commercial markets for acquiring materials goods as well as linked them to larger social and economic networks.

Archaeology at the Armstrong Farmstead

Archaeological investigations were conducted at the site of the Armstrong Farmstead (15FA185) as part of the proposed widening of US 27/68 (Paris Pike), in Fayette County, Kentucky in collaboration with the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet. The site was originally recorded in 1986 by the program for Cultural Resource Assessment (PCRA), Department of Anthropology, at the University of Kentucky (O'Malley 1987). Early in 2001, the location of the Armstrong Farmstead was further delineated by Cultural Resource Analysts through shovel testing and remote sensing. Shovel testing indicated the possibility of two historic domestic occupations within an intact, stratified A-horizon. Remote sensing revealed the presence of at least two possible structures and several possible fence lines that may have defined the house lots (Bybee 2001; Day and Rotman 2001).

Phase II investigations at the site conducted in the summer of 2001 included a series of backhoe trenches and 1 x 1 m hand-excavated units. During this investigation, three possible structures, a cellar, a trash pit or privy, a stone/brick walkway, and several midden/activity areas were identified. The recovered materials indicated the site had been occupied during the mid-nineteenth century and abandoned by 1930.

Phase III investigations conducted in early 2002 consisted of the hand-excavation of 129 1 m by 1 m units, utilized to document structural elements and features as well as obtain samples of artifacts and other materials. Data recovery efforts concluded with mechanical stripping to reveal foundations, remove overburden, and expose additional subsurface features. Analysis of the materials from the phase III investigation is on-going.

The Materiality of "Rural" Life at the Armstrong Farmstead

In attempting to understand the rural lifeways of our farmstead residents, we were immediately confronted with a conundrum. The heart of our dilemma lay in the site's location immediately adjacent to the Paris Pike.

Yes, the surrounding area was – and historically had been – sparsely populated. The site was situated amongst the bucolic rolling topography of the horse farms for which the central Bluegrass is world-renown. Yes, John Armstrong was a farmer and agricultural pursuits were an important aspect of the daily lives of the Armstrong family. Yet, the family's location immediately adjacent to the Paris Pike and the apparent use of the home as an inn or tavern were certainly inconsistent with any notation of "rural isolation."

So we turned to the archaeological literature for models for the materiality of "rural" and "urban" life to help us understand where the Armstrong farmstead might appear along this continuum. The balance of this paper briefly documents that journey.

Country tavern?

One aspect of the site's history that was of particular interest to us was the possible role of the Armstrong farmstead as an accommodation for travelers – such as a "latchstring" tavern or inn. O'Malley (1987:91) reported that the site appeared to have "served as a watering place for stage horses and probably also served as a way-station for passengers. The site owners may have taken advantage of their location near a toll house to capitalize on the stagecoach trade". Traditional Irish hospitality that involved a ready availability of food and inviting anyone present to share a meal may have also played a role (Gallagher 1982).

Diana Rockman and Nan Rothschild (1984) contended that rural and urban taverns served very different functions. That is, "urban taverns may have served somewhat more specialized functions, being dominated by 'meeting place' activities, while more rural taverns served more generalized functions, mixing accommodation activities with those of the meeting place" (Rockman and Rothschild 1984:116). They asserted that the proportions of pipes and ceramics would reflect the differences between visiting as the focus at urban taverns and the serving of meals as the focus of rural taverns. Urban taverns would possess markedly greater proportions of pipes than ceramics, while rural taverns would have many more ceramics than pipes (Rockman and Rothschild 1984:119).

We compared the data from the Armstrong farmstead to this model. Ceramics dominated the assemblage (N=5546; 99.5%), while pipes were

scarcely represented at all (N=27; 0.5%). Clearly, according to this model, the location of the Armstrong farmstead was unequivocally rural.

Yet, we were still bothered by the close proximity of Paris Pike. How could a site be situated on a major transportation corridor be rural? We sought answers from additional models in the archaeological literature.

Stonewares and Home Food Preparation as “Rural”

The difference between rural and urban may be most clearly defined in the kitchen and pantry. By the mid-eighteenth century, prepared foods and complete meals that could be eaten out or delivered to the home were readily available to urban populations (Jones 1992). In contrast, rural populations had space available to grow a garden and raise animals for meat, milk, or eggs, as well as space to build a springhouse or root cellar. As such, rural dwellers were far more likely to have a temporary surplus of fresh food, which could be put by for future use. Activities such as home canning, pickling and salting require specialized vessels and utensils that can be recognized in the archaeological record.

Stoneware by definition is a heavy, dense, opaque ceramic. Made of better quality clay than coarse earthenware and redware and fired at a higher temperature, stoneware is more durable and heat resistant. As such, stoneware is well suited for utilitarian uses, particularly those involved in food preparation and storage.

By the time the Armstrong family occupied the Paris Pike location, stoneware had become the workhorse of the nineteenth-century kitchen, pantry,

and springhouse. A number of stoneware fragments were recovered during the phase II and phase III investigations (Table 2). Except for the three bottle fragments, which may have been used to contain non-food liquids, the represented vessel types could all be associated with food storage and preparation. Jars, crocks, and jugs which are used to store food and liquids constituted the highest number of identifiable fragments (N=64). Mixing bowls (N=19) would be used in food preparation. The pitchers (N=2) could have been used in either capacity. Since cross mending has not yet been completed, it has not yet been determined how many of the "other utilitarian vessel" fragments may be associated with the identified vessel fragments. Non-food utilitarian vessels or objects – such as cuspidors, doorstops, chicken waterers, or match holders – were not identified in this assemblage.

Table 2. Stoneware vessel type and frequency.

Vessel Type	Number of fragments
Jar/crock	53
Necked jar	2
Canning jar	1
Jug	8
Mixing bowl	19
Misc. bottle	3
Pitcher	2
Other utilitarian vessel	300

The initial estimated capacity of these vessels was between ½ to 2 gallons with an projected diameter between 23 to 27 cm. Further analysis is necessary before it can be determined if larger vessels such as those used to preserve meat in a salting solution were present at the Armstrong Farmstead. It is suggested that these larger vessels may have been left in place, while the

smaller ½ to 2-gallon size containers would have been used to transport food from storage to the kitchen and during the actual food preparation. This would have resulted in a higher rate of breakage and a greater representation in the assemblage. The alternative would have been the use of metal or wood food storage and preparation items, such as flour barrels (Fitzmaurice 1889) or tin butter churns (Franklin 1991).

It appeared that the Armstrong farmstead possessed a substantial number of stoneware vessels and that this data would support the hypothesis that these vessels illuminate a “rural” pattern of home preparation of foods rather than a reliance on commercially available products. Unfortunately, stonewares – along with redwares, yellow wares, and essentially any NON-refined earthenwares – are rarely included in detailed ceramic analyses. Suitable comparative assemblages have not yet been found.

The proportion of commercial containers (N=21) to home canning closures (N=69) – more than three times the number of home canning closures as commercial ones – in the assemblage also seemed to corroborate the assertion that the Armstrong family resided in a “rural” setting. In addition, an analysis of the faunal remains revealed few sawn cut marks as well as several cattle teeth and lower limb elements – all of which indicate that animals were butchered on site (Allgood and Kirkwood 2002:9). Together with the stoneware, there seems to be evidence for primary reliance upon home-prepared foods.

There was also some variation in whether these stoneware vessels were produced by small potteries with local distribution (Ketchum 1970, 1993) or by

large centralized operations with wide trade networks that utilized transportation routes such as the Erie Canal (Raycraft and Raycraft 1987). Smaller potteries in particular may have distributed their wares through middlemen called "pot sellers" or "jug dealers" (Walthall et al. 1991). Vessels that were serviceable but imperfect, or seconds, could have been purchased directly from the pottery for a reduced price (Raycraft and Raycraft 1987).

Almost none of the recovered stonewares had any decoration or makers mark, which was common for stoneware. Three fragments had impressed makers marks and capacity stamps. Two of these were on wheel-thrown pieces that had a salt glazed exterior and an unglazed interior. Three sherds had variations on the maker's mark seen here. Hackley (1997) reported that an Isaac Thomas and his son, David, produced salt glazed, and occasionally slip glazed stoneware impressed with "I. Thomas" in Waco, Kentucky, between approximately 1834 to 1876. Waco is located in Madison County approximately 33 miles to the southeast of the Armstrong Farmstead. During the nineteenth century, at least eight other potteries produced stoneware in or near Waco (Hackley 1997). Additional potteries were located within 50 miles of the Armstrong farmstead, which were located in Lexington, Danville, and Clintonville (Kentucky Pottery 1997). Stoneware was more durable than redware and other coarse earthenwares and traveled better. Yet, since these vessels were quite heavy long distance transport except by water was usually prohibitive. The location of the Armstrong farmstead on Paris Pike would have allowed them to

purchase the stoneware items they required through traveling salesmen selling local potters' wares.

Thinking about the distribution of coarse earthenwares got us thinking about market access and other commodities. So we turned our attention to yet another model to understand the rural and/or urban-ness of our farmstead occupation.

Market Access as an Indictor of "Rural" (?)

We tabulated all the objects from the Armstrong Farmstead that possessed maker's marks, embossing or other attributes that enabled us to determine their origin of manufacture in an attempt to get a glimpse of the breadth of markets to which the site occupants were utilizing. There were only 33, a terrifically small proportion of an assemblage with more than 34,000 artifacts (Table 3). These objects included 22 ammunition fragments (almost exclusively from Connecticut) as well as five ceramic sherds, five glass bottle fragments, and one button (Table 4).

Table 3. Summary of artifacts by region of manufacture.

Region	N
Local (Lexington, Paris)	0
Immediate Region (OH)	2
Mid-Atlantic (VA, NJ, PA)	7
New England/Northeast (NY, CT)	22
Foreign	2
Total	33

Table 4. Summary of artifacts whose origin of manufacture could be determined, by material type.

Artifact	N
Arms/ammunition	22
Ceramics	5
Bottle glass	5
Button	1
Total	33

This line of inquiry was not especially productive for two reasons. First, we clearly could not draw meaningful conclusions regarding the purchasing habits of the Armstrong family based on a sample that represented less than 1/10th of one percent of the total assemblage. And second, market accessibility models have been criticized for being too simplistic (Klein 1991:84-85). Riordan and Williams (1985) noted that degree of access to markets was a complex issue including such matters as the type of commodity involved and the nature of transportation networks, among other factors. Mark Bograd (1989:8), in his analysis of consumerism in the Connecticut River valley, furthermore, observed that local markets were linked to major urban markets by the mid-18th century. Surely given the close proximity our site to the Paris Pike – this major transportation corridor in the central Bluegrass – the Armstrong family was also well connected beyond local markets by the time they occupied the site in the mid-nineteenth century.

An examination of the maker's marks from the site, however, was useful in that it got us thinking about the histories of the objects – the artifact biographies, if you will – that appeared in the material assemblage. One item – a brass, added shank, domed button – was particularly intriguing. The button was from a uniform to the Hargrave Military Academy – an educational institution for young

men in Chatham, Virginia. Nothing could be gleaned from the archival records to substantiate that a member of the household had attended this academy. The button must have come from a visitor to the site. As such, a look at the origins of manufacture for consumer goods brought into relief that the Armstrong family not only had access to goods from elsewhere via their proximity to Paris Pike, but also to people who traveled this thoroughfare.

Discussion

Our exploration of the Armstrong farmstead is just beginning. Analyses of the materials recovered during the phase III excavation of the site is still on-going.

Preliminary results have gotten us thinking about life for this site's nineteenth century residents. A comparison of ceramics and pipe fragments clearly indicates that the site is consistent with a rural tavern. The stoneware, container closure, and faunal data indicate that much of the food eaten on the site was also processed there; a pattern that appears to have been more rural than urban. Despite their location in a sparsely settled countryside, the Armstrong family was not isolated. The major transportation corridor of the Paris Pike linked them to the larger social, political, and economic worlds beyond the boundaries of their farm. As we continue our research, we will seek additional ways in which the Armstrong farmstead defies simple rural/urban dichotomies and elucidates our understandings of the complexities of places, which are neither rural nor urban as well as both.

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