

Fragments of the Past

The archaeological dig in Robertsville is complete. For four years Marc Banks' team labored under the hot summer sun and braved the bitter winds of late autumn before being driven off the field by winter's snow. The fifth year was spent (Saturdays, usually) cleaning, sorting and identifying the many thousands of shards left behind by the men and women who worked to provide the necessities of war for General Washington. Shards is the correct word here, as the number of complete objects could be counted on one person's fingers. I can almost reconstruct the list from memory; four coins, two or three buttons come to mind and not much more. There is a reason for this; the buildings were all destroyed by fire in August of 1781, and although all were rebuilt within the following three months, all of their possessions were rendered useless, and most lay within the cellar holes or immediately adjacent to them. Even with this nearly complete destruction, a great deal can be interpreted from the broken fragments of dishes, pots, fireplace ironware, and nails.

Perhaps most important were the pieces of plates and cups, not only greatly fragmented, but also pitted with small craters, the result of the intense heat of the fire that caused their destruction. Even so, it is impressive how much information can be teased from such rubbish when a trained archaeologist does his magic.

From the very beginning, it became apparent that this was not going to be an ordinary dig; the pottery that turned up was of British origin, and of relatively high quality. Why should they be out here in almost total isolation at a period in our history when the average farmer or woodsman ate off of wooden slabs called truncheons, or even pieces of white birch. These were items normally found in the larger cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Charleston. The list included such items as glass or crystal glasses, two and three-tined forks and one table knife. At least we knew the source of the material we were unearthing – the store at the site was in reality a satellite to the store in Salisbury, where the blast furnaces and iron mines were located. We know this from the ledger book of the Salisbury store, which covers the years between 1779 and 1783, and therefore know what they were supplied with, but not why.

Among the earliest china dishes was a type known as "Weildon ware", first made by a young Josiah Wedgwood in 1740. He had yet to perfect his process, and the result gives the impression of the surface having been dobbed with a light brown pigment. Then there were the basically white dishes, but decorated with a single blue line around the edge, this was known as an "added value" piece. Also present were large amounts of pearl ware, salt glaze, cream ware and red ware. In the corner of one house cellar were found two or three quite large red pottery storage crocks consisting of surprisingly large fragments, laying where they met their fate by the falling debris of the collapsing house. Many of the dishes were hand painted, although quite a few contained transfer prints.

The four coins (everybody wanted to hear about any coins we had unearthed) were all half pennies, a copper coin about the size of a quarter. All were badly worn – not by going through a fire and then laying buried for 225 years, but by long and hard usage at a time when

there was little hard cash and most transactions were by the barter system. One was from the reign of England's King George II, who died in 1760; the other three were from the reign of his son, George III and dated from the late 1760s.

Buttons turned up intended for identifiable types of clothing such as overcoats, women's frocks and men's jackets. One in particular, the size of a dime, had a convex glass surface, etched on the inside with a fleur-de-lis which was held by the flange of the base. After it had been cleaned up, it could have been reused.

The types of construction nails were as extensive then as today, there were many small nails about one inch long, and not much bigger than a brad, others slightly longer used for nailing up plaster lath (that's another surprise – why should we be finding plaster walls and ceilings out here in the boondocks?), then the equivalent of our 6 penny, 8 penny and 12 penny hand-wrought iron nails. All nails were hand made until shortly before the turn of the nineteenth century. An American, who had returned to England, invented a machine for making iron nails, and like all such labor-saving inventions, caught on in about every nation that was exposed to it. Overnight the world ceased to use handmade nails, and around here, any building having machine made nails can be assumed to have been built not earlier than 1805.

Apparently some of the inside partitions were one board thick, as we unearthed several large nails that had been obviously turned up or curled up so as to act as a hook. These all indicated a board of about 1 ¼ inches thick.

The basement of Marc Banks' home in Simsbury is in reality a laboratory, designed to house artifacts from several different active archaeological sites around the state; it is here that all artifacts are cleaned, identified and placed in individual plastic zip-lock bags to be recorded in a computer program later on. In our case, much of this operation was performed by Lynne Landgraf, widow of Walt, who, as many of you already know, was the initiating force behind this entire dig. Walt died just weeks prior to the commencement of the Richard Smith dig, and not a week went by without one or the other of us lamenting the fact that Walt couldn't be here to share in the joy we were experiencing.

In the near future Marc will have his summation paper completed, and it will be passed on to all of you who have waited so patiently all these years.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg