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Site Survey as a Method for Determining Historic Site Significance

ABSTRACT

Since 1977, the Tennessee Division of Archaeology has conducted a total of six major historical archaeological site survey projects. Types of surveys conducted include: thematic (archaeological sites only); cultural resource (archaeological sites, standing buildings, and other remains related to a common theme); state-owned areas (sites only); and representative county (sites only). Each of these survey types is discussed in terms of their contribution to the problem of determining historic site significance. Where applicable, thematic and cultural resource surveys have been found to produce good information for assessing individual site significance. For dealing with the problems caused by the vast numbers and diversity of Historic period resources, a county-as-community approach is offered as one means of assessing the importance of individual sites by viewing them within a conceptual model that is smaller than an entire state or region.

Introduction

In a recent presentation, Thomas F. King (1986) notes the development of two schools of thought concerning archaeological site significance as it relates to National Register criterion (d), the information value of sites:

One school holds that a site should be considered eligible under criterion (d) if its study is likely to contribute to the solution of an important research question. Archaeologists argue about how important such a question should be in order to merit attention. . . . Those who espouse the second major school of thought argue that since we cannot predict what research questions will be important in the future, we should try to preserve a representative sample of all kinds of sites, on the assumption that this sample will be useful in addressing a range of research questions in perpetuity. Based on this philosophy, a site is significant for its information content if it fills a gap in the representative sample (King 1986:7).

King goes on to disparage the second approach because of "its potential for transforming significance determination into a sort of bean-counting."

While in a general sense these two schools of thought probably do exist, it can be argued that the two concepts are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Though admitting that the survey projects discussed in this paper may be most closely related to King's "bean-counting" school, this writer would suggest that without adequate data concerning how a site relates to some broader social system, the defining of "important" research questions tends to be a rather sterile exercise.

While there are certainly questions that can be asked concerning any historical archaeological site that have nothing to do with its historic context, such efforts tend to produce seemingly endless debates concerning significance. On the other hand, once a site's historic context is clearly understood, its information potential for questions relating to that context can usually be defined in relatively unambiguous terms. Though this sort of "context significance" may not rank very high on an anthropological theory scale, it is certainly easier to defend in the day-to-day world of cultural resource management. This author would also again suggest that even at the highest level of theoretical studies there is still a need for clear understanding of site context.

Site Survey Projects

Since 1977, the Tennessee Division of Archaeology has conducted a total of six major historic site survey projects. A repeated conclusion derived from this work is that any historic site can be assessed for its information potential in terms of at least one of two major kinds of context: its past social context or its past technological context. As defined here, site survey is a method for establishing site relationships, which may then be used as a means for determining site significance. The kind of site survey project espoused is not merely the field recording of sites but includes an appropriate amount of background studies, with a major emphasis on primary source archival research, and the compiling of the information collected in a final report. This report provides the context definition

and should also provide or make possible an assessment of individual sites.

The availability of federal survey and planning grants in the mid-1970s was the direct inspiration for an involvement with historic site survey projects in Tennessee. From the beginning, researchers were interested in regional differences that might exist in the historic site data base and in exploring particular themes (Smith and Butler 1976). Almost all previous site survey work had been directly tied to the examination of construction project impact areas, and the number of recorded historical archaeological sites was very low.

The first survey project in 1977 (Rogers 1978) focused on Tennessee's Central Basin region, which includes the state's capital (Nashville), with an examination of four thematic topics. These included: the sites of frontier stations—installations built and used between 1780 and 1795—which were the focal points for regional Anglo-American settlement; pottery kiln sites, of which relatively little was known at the time (this proved to be a very complex topic which was explored more completely in subsequent years); early town sites, which proved to be something of a disappointment in that the number of relict town sites in the Central Basin portion of Middle Tennessee is relatively small; and iron manufacturing sites, which also proved to be concentrated outside the Central Basin. This last topic, however, was another that would later be more extensively examined. The selection of these particular themes was based on a combination of assumed public interest, investigator research interest, and utility of the information collected for dealing with other types of historic period sites (e.g., the wares produced at regional potteries are likely to occur on many kinds of sites).

While the 1977 survey season was a mixture of success and failure, it was an invaluable learning experience. Probably the one lesson that made the strongest impact on all future attempts was the importance of archival data to the successful planning and implementation of historic site surveys. This lesson was immediately applied to the following season of survey, which again examined historic pottery making but on a larger scale.

In 1978, the entire year was devoted to a four-person state-wide survey of historic potteries in Tennessee. This survey began with a program of intensive archival background research which continued throughout the project. It included, among other things, a systematic search of the 1850 and 1860 census schedules for each of Tennessee's 95 counties. Beginning with the 1850 schedules, the occupations of adult males are listed on the census reports, and the census search was one method used to identify where potters had worked. In turn, each individual potter was studied as thoroughly as possible, using every kind of archival source available. Ideally this was completed before attempting to find a site, but in reality both archival research and field survey were often intermixed.

By the end of the 1978 season a total of 163 sites, ranging from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries, had been identified. These sites were categorized into two major groups referred to as industrial and family potteries (Figure 1), and the geographic, historic, and technological contexts of these sites had become very clear.

From a situation of almost no readily available information concerning historic pottery making in Tennessee, archaeologists had moved to a position of good understanding of the kinds of wares produced at different times in different regions; a variety of specific kinds of information, such as potters' marks, potentially useful on all kinds of historical archaeological sites, had been identified; and, most important, the information collected had been consolidated into a published form (Smith and Rogers 1979), available for planning whatever kind of future research might be forthcoming. In terms of the subject being considered in this paper, this same document provides a statement of context from which any of the sites recorded can be assessed for various kinds of information potential.

For example, in 1983, when the writer learned of the impending destruction of the site of a late 19th-century eastern Middle Tennessee pottery once operated by the potter John Washington Dunn (archaeological site number 40DK10), it was clear that this pottery site was among only a small number of sites that had the potential to provide answers to some very specific questions. These ques-



FIGURE 1. Early 20th-century view of a Middle Tennessee family-operated stoneware pottery, the Eli LaFever pottery, now archaeological site 40PM49.

tions had to do with an interesting evolution of kiln types in this specific region. Because so many of the sites associated with this particular regional industry had already been adversely impacted, the undisturbed condition of the John Washington Dunn site made its archaeological information invaluable.

This situation was so critical that, in spite of the

absence of any legal restraints on the planned private destruction of the site and a lack of funds for excavation, an effort was still made to organize a largely volunteer archaeological salvage project (Cella 1984). This venture proved quite successful. The project provided not only the hoped for information about kiln types, but also information that caused a total reevaluation of the evolutionary

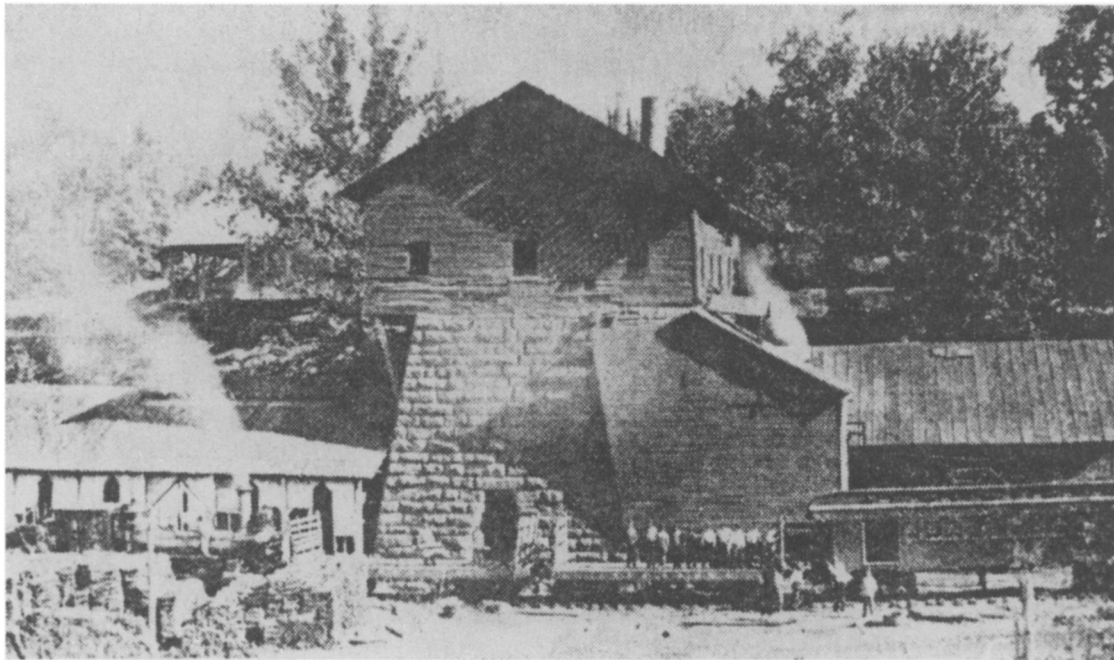


FIGURE 2. Late 19th-century view of Bear Spring Furnace, Stewart County, Tennessee, now archaeological site 40SW207.

process that had been assumed to exist (Smith 1984).

Important as this now seems, it is certain that without the original survey to provide the understanding of this site in relation to others, the John Washington Dunn kiln site would have been destroyed without receiving any archaeological work. Even if such an event had been known to regional archaeologists, without the understanding of site context, it would likely have been dismissed as not very significant. Viewed in isolation, the site's relatively late date (1880-1915) would no doubt have biased any discussion of significance.

Though there have been three other intervening seasons of historic site survey work which will be discussed later, the most recent Tennessee project has seen a return to a revised form of thematic survey. This project, a cultural resource survey of the 1790s to 1930s iron industry of Tennessee's Western Highland Rim region, was conceived during a period when the Secretary of the Interior's guidelines for archaeology and historic preserva-

tion emphasized a "resource preservation planning process," commonly referred to as RP3 (Department of the Interior 1983).

As with similar thematic surveys, the archaeological remains of this regionally specific industry were searched for and recorded. This survey includes the sites of 61 furnace operations—including the remains of Bear Spring Furnace, shown in Figure 2, while it was still in operation. It also includes the remains of 33 forge operations; the sites of a limited number of rolling mills, naileries, and foundries; and a selected sample of iron ore mines. An important distinction of this cultural resource survey, however, is that it also included the recording of 37 standing buildings and some other types of above ground structures associated with the industry (Smith 1985).

As with the state-wide pottery survey, archaeologists ended the Western Highland Rim iron industry survey with a comfortable feeling of ability to identify those archaeological remains most significant for understanding a variety of additional



FIGURE 3. Representative counties chosen for research during 1979 sample county survey.

research questions. These are again questions relating to context, most of which would not have been apparent without the survey. A final report for this project has recently been published (Smith et al. 1988).

From 1982 to 1984, there were two seasons of site survey work devoted to state-owned lands in Tennessee (Froeschauer et al. 1986). These projects employed two-person survey teams, with one recorder for prehistoric and one for historic sites. The reasons for conducting these surveys were very clear. In Tennessee, archaeological sites on state-owned lands are given legal protection status, but it is impossible to protect properly resources that have never been identified.

To cite just one example, Cedars of Lebanon State Park and Forest, in Middle Tennessee, had no previously recorded sites, but was found to contain the remains of over 60 19th- to early 20th-century farmsteads. Obviously such kinds of publicly-owned historic sites need a special kind of significance treatment, preferably with a strict approach to site preservation. Where such groups of publicly-owned sites may relate to a broader issue of site significance is at the level of approach taken during still one other type of survey, this one conducted in 1979.

The 1979 historic site survey (Stripling 1980) was referred to as a sample county survey. The basic approach was derived from earlier attempts to relate some specific Tennessee sites to their historic community context (Smith 1976:6), which seemed best resolved by reference to Arensberg

and Kimball's (1965) "Southern county community type:"

The distinctive community form of the South was and is the county. Dispersed a day's ride in and out around the county seat, that community assembled planter and field- or house-hand from the fat plantations, free poor white or [black] from the lean hills and swamps, for the pageantry and the drama of Saturdays around the courthouse, when the courthouse, the jail, the registry of deeds, and the courthouse square of shops and lawyers' row made a physical center of the far-flung community. . . . It is a mistake . . . to try to find the community of the Old South at any other level (Arensberg and Kimball 1965:106).

Applying this county-as-community concept to site survey, the next assumption made was that each of Tennessee's nine major physiographic regions would contain some environmentally induced cultural differences, which would appear when comparing the kind of historic sites that exist in the counties within these regions (the regions from east to west are Unaka Mountains, Valley and Ridge, Cumberland Plateau, Eastern Highland Rim, Central Basin, Western Highland Rim, Western Valley of Tennessee River, Coastal Plain, and Mississippi River Valley). In order to begin to understand differences between the physiographic regions, a single sample county was selected from each region for initial examination (Figure 3). The sample counties were chosen on the basis of good surviving archival data and various other considerations, and they were studied in terms of all of the kinds of relevant historical and archival information that could be examined in the time available. Those

TABLE 1
 OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORIES SHOWN ON 1850 CARTER COUNTY, TENNESSEE, CENSUS WITH
 PERCENTAGE FIGURES FOR OCCUPATIONS OTHER THAN "FARMER"¹

1850 Census Category	Individuals in Each Category	%	Probable Site Specific Categories	%
Laborer	89	35.3	—	—
Blacksmith	21	8.3	21	16.8
Minister	13	5.1	12	9.6
Hammerman ²	12	4.8	12	9.6
Collier ²	11	4.4	11	8.8
Carpenter	10	3.9	—	—
Merchant	10	3.9	10	8.0
Wagonmaker	10	3.9	10	8.0
Tailor	7	2.8	7	5.6
Millwright	5	2.0	—	—
Wagoner	5	2.0	—	—
Lawyer	4	1.6	—	—
Hatter	4	1.6	4	3.2
Miller	4	1.6	4	3.2
Physician	4	1.6	4	3.2
Shoemaker	4	1.6	4	3.2
Saddler	4	1.6	4	3.2
Midwife	4	1.6	—	—
Constable	2	.8	—	—
Gunsmith	2	.8	2	1.6
Seamstress	2	.8	2	1.6
Teacher	2	.8	2	1.6
Tanner	2	.8	2	1.6
Potter	2	.8	2	1.6
Iron Manufacturer ²	2	.8	2	1.6
Mouldier ²	1	.4	1	.8
Founder ²	1	.4	1	.8
Harnder ²	1	.4	1	.8
Justice of Peace	1	.4	—	—
Sheriff	1	.4	1	.8
Deputy Sheriff	1	.4	—	—
Weaver	1	.4	1	.8
Wheelwright	1	.4	1	.8
County Surveyor	1	.4	—	—
Bricklayer	1	.4	—	—
Cabinet Maker	1	.4	1	.8
Hunter	1	.4	1	.8
Cooper	1	.4	1	.8
Clerk	1	.4	—	—
Nailer	1	.4	1	.8
Horse Jockey	1	.4	—	—
"In State Senate"	1	.4	—	—
Total	252	100.0	125	100.0

¹A total of 618 farmers are listed for Carter County in 1850.

²Iron-producing occupations; account for 28 individuals (11.2%) and 28 probably site specific categories (22.4%).

earliest census schedules that list occupations, the 1850 schedules, were again used to provide a first look at the occupational structure of the sample counties. For example, Carter County in the Unaka

Mountains region of East Tennessee had the 1850 occupational structure shown in Table 1.

As in all Tennessee counties, the principal 1850 occupation in Carter County was "farmer," and

the farmstead site category was treated in an independent manner. In Tennessee, because of the state-lands survey data, it would appear that in some counties there may be an adequate protected sample of farmstead sites (though as yet only a few excavated examples).

Not all non-farming occupations imply site specific activities, so the third column on Table 1 attempts to address this matter. Only occupations that would probably produce discrete archaeological sites or activity areas are listed under the "Probable Site Specific Categories" column. These occupations are then retabulated in the fourth column of percentages, which provides at least one approach to selecting a representative group of sites to record. Carter County is in another Tennessee region where iron production was once common, and when all of the iron-manufacturing occupations were combined (at the bottom of Table 1) it was clear that any representative sample of mid 19th-century sites recorded should contain about 22 per cent furnace and forge sites.

During the actual field work portion of the 1979 site survey project, available time for work in Carter County permitted the recording of 49 historical archaeological sites, 37 of them representing non-domestic site types suggested by the 1850 census data (Table 1). Ten of these non-domestic sites pertain to iron production, accounting for 27 per cent of the sample (Stripling 1980:62, Table 12). This percentage compares favorably with the projected sample (22.4%). The other sites recorded in Carter County are either farmstead sites or types not indicated by the 1850 census. These last were indicated by other census reports or other kinds of historic documents. There are, of course, some types of sites that may not be indicated by surviving documents and, therefore, cannot be addressed in advance of field work.

It should be noted that use of the 1850 census data was viewed as a synchronic starting point for developing a representative sample of recorded sites. To develop a complete understanding of any county would require similar studies for all census years, as well as a thorough examination of all kinds of historic documents relevant to understanding potential site types in that county. During the

1979 survey project, it was not possible to do this completely for any county, but this comprehensiveness is still a long-range goal.

Developing a representative percentage sample of sites also skirts the issue of potential total number of sites of a certain type per county. This is obviously an extremely complex matter, but any increase in understanding of the nature of site resources in a particular county should increase the accuracy of predictions concerning that county's total site universe.

The 1979 sample county survey produced a number of interesting surprises. For example, in Wilson County (Figure 3) in the Central Basin blacksmiths and saddle makers were among the more common 1850 occupations. It was assumed that it would not be too difficult to identify some blacksmith shop sites, but a pleasant surprise was the finding of one farm blacksmith shop with all of its equipment still in place. Researchers had also expected to have considerable difficulty precisely locating any saddle maker's site and were amazed to find a 19th-century saddle maker's shop still standing.

Conclusions

To return to the central issue of this paper, it is suggested that the sample county survey has provided the beginning of a means to deal with the problem of archaeological site significance concerning those large numbers of historic sites that will not fit into some manageable thematic category. For Tennessee, and probably most southern states, almost every historic site was once part of a county community. A thorough understanding of the history of activities in that county, therefore, provides a context for assessing the significance of these sites. For the present, the data for several sample counties provide only a minimal level of understanding for making such assessments within each region of Tennessee, but potentially a much clearer understanding of each region and eventually every county could be developed. At some point the ability to gauge the significance of any individual site in terms of its historic county-community associations should become very precise.

This approach would apply not only to the recording of sites, but to the even more difficult problems associated with mitigation by excavation of sites threatened with destruction.

While there are arguments that can be made against assessing site significance in terms of historic context, this approach has the advantage of almost universal application when the county-as-community concept is added to provide a conceptual model for viewing those sites not readily understood in terms of some other theme. Compared to other forms of site assessment, significance based on historic context would appear to be a relatively objective means of evaluating sites. Its utility should continue to improve in direct proportion to increases in the collected body of archival and survey data for any particular region.

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