

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Poland Schoolhouse Renovation

Personal Experience

O H 939

JOHN WHITE

Interviewed

by

Michelle Blum

on

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B: This is an interview with Dr John White for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Poland Schoolhouse Renovation, by Michelle Blum, on April 9, 1984, at 1 00 p m

You have been involved in working with several of the projects locally, the Austin Log Project How has archeology helped with that project?

W Historically, we have been involved in half a dozen projects locally All of which are now national registered sites Archeology has played an important, if not dominant, role in the successful restoration of every one of the sites I am talking about

The first one we did was Eden Furnace in Yellow Creek That will not entail any restoration, at least not in the foreseeable future. That is literally so much of an archeological remain that the only information that could be learned from it was from actually digging it There is not any structure there to be restored They thought, at one time, of putting a pavillion over the site and preserving it as a permanent ruin

After we did the Eden Log House, we went to Austintown and did the Austin Log House The invitation was from people in Austintown who, in the 1970's, were razing the house and, in taking down the gingerbread from the outside, they saw that there was actually a two story log house underneath They decided to try to restore it and to learn as much as they could about the site, so they called us out To make a long story short, we went out there with a government grant to specifically answer questions such as the age of the site They never quite knew how old the structure was They wanted to know how old it was It was not part of the written record, history could not help them there We also wanted to try to see if we could tell them what kind of uses the land on which the cabin was located was put to during the course of years that the cabin was there

We dug out there for two summers and uncovered thousands of artifacts, uncovered the remains of the old barn, uncovered the remains of a well, a stock well in the field, half a dozen sheds that they did not know existed, two privys that they did not know existed, and were not part of the historical record. If you are not digging Monticello, you do not have maps of where the old privys were located The only way things could have been turned up is by archeology Then we wrote a report, which Ken Zinz probably told you, is going to be published In fact, its date of publication is the first week in May The data we recovered archeologically is really all the data they have about the cabin, other than the structure itself The artifacts we found we brought back to the lab and cleaned up and repaired and restored to their old historical restoration, broken pottery and stuff like that That is going to go on exhibit In fact, it is on exhibit now at the Austin Log House The second floor is a museum In the cases are the artifacts that we recovered archeologically

That kind of work serves two functions it specifically gives you data about the sites you are digging, both hard and soft data, that they themselves can use, and secondly, and perhaps even more important, every time you do a site like that, it adds to the general data bank of archeological restoration in general There is no reason why a guy in San Fransisco would not be interested in our work at Austintown because we have learned

something about digging sites that will be helpful to him all the way out there. Every time you dig a site, you learn a new methodology or technique that helps with the next site. You get better at it and you refine your techniques through time. The information, again, is both helpful, site-specific and in a general way.

When we were done with the Austintown Log House, I think our next job was the Barnhinsel House in Girard. The Barnhinsel House is a national historical site in Girard, right across from the old Girard Leatherworks. They thought they had a site house which had been a way-station on the underground railroad during the Civil War. We told them we would look in the basement to see if we could find any tunnels. While doing that in the winter of 1979, we found they did not have tunnels, which did not mean they were not a way-station on the railroad, it just meant that they did not have tunnels that were part of it. While we were [there] we discovered the remains of a razed wing that had once been attached to the house and no one knew about. During the spring of 1980 and the summer, we dug a wing and from it, we took out thousands and thousands of artifacts that gave some [information] of the occupation of the house up until it was razed in 1930. The monograph from that is a couple hundred pages long. They will put those artifacts on display, also. In this case, if you were restoring the Barnhinsel House, you would not have known without archeology that it, at one time, had a wing on it.

Then we did Lanterman's Mill. They got six hundred thousand dollars to restore that. Before they put the money in it, they wanted to know whether or not they would have to put a turbine in there or a water wheel. As you know, there is a water wheel in there now. They did not know if the first mode of power for the mill was streaks, water powered turbine, or waterwheel. They called me on the phone and wanted to know if there was any way to tell. If there was a waterwheel, then they would have a mill raze, head raze attached, and it would be here where it would be expected to be found. We went out in the spring of 1981 and we excavated and we excavated the following spring and we discovered the old head raze leading from the river right into the side of the wall. We uncovered it, we dug for several months and now that is uncovered. If you go to the mill now, you can see the raze we uncovered and the water coming through it. We knew then, then it was a waterwheel instead of a turbine. I can remember as though it were yesterday the day that they had about a dozen engineers and the members of the fund who were giving the six hundred thousand dollars. They stood up on the bank and I got down in my excavation pit and they said, "Convince us that there was a waterwheel here and not a turbine. Because we are going to spend the money." As it turned out, they spent fifty or sixty thousand on the waterwheel. I told them why the waterwheel was there in ten minutes and gave them the whole explanation and they said, "Sold." Here archeology was able to tell them something that they did not historically know.

Our next role after that was a series of digs that I started in Western Pennsylvania in a place called Quakertown, in which we have eight hundred acres of a settlement that originated in 1700 and ceased to exist in 1930. We are excavating on a year round basis, we have for the last three years, excavated different houses out there. Everything that has ever been known about Quakertown can be done in two single-spaced pages. There just is not much about a rural community that ceased to exist in 1930.

B That seems strange, that there is so little information about it.

W What happens in a case like this, a rural community, never had a newspaper, it reached its peak about 1875, all the people that lived there worked in Lowellville. All it was was a community made up of individuals, of which, we know more about. The relations to the people who lived there know something about their family. The biggest pile of information we have got has been from talking to people who told us about their family life. The geneologists go so far, geneologists do not tell you at all about house structures or how many rooms houses had. As people die off who lived there, the relationships to them cannot help us. We have talked to the grandson of the guy who founded it and he does not know, he knows less about the place than I do.

The last restoration project, and the ideal example of the one that you are talking about, is in Mansfield where we dug the Oak Hill Cottage. I took a crew over there and had government grant money. This doctor owned it who was one of the founding families of Mansfield. They were putting a lot of money into restoring that site. The rooms are all going to be done in the Victorian frame. They have all the costumes in the period. The house, when it was given to them, was literally full of stuff. It was like somebody stopped a clock in 1890. The house is absolutely stunning. They did not know anything about the grounds though. It is located in the middle of downtown Mansfield now, but it was once an estate of about sixteen acres, of which is now maybe an acre and a half surrounding. They wanted to know if there were walkways. Our excavation tended to be aimed toward showing them where their gardens were, where the walkways were, where the carriage house was, where the privys were and that sort of thing. The reason I mention this one is the guy who was in charge of this project was an historical landscaper from New York. He presented his recommendations as to what they should do landscape-wise, but in there as an appendix was my archeological report and my sixteen recommendations that I made based on the archeology. The long and the short of it is that archeology is an integral part of restoration. You cannot do it successfully without.

B Are you familiar with the little red schoolhouse project?

W Yes, I am. I will tell you two things about that, years ago when they first discovered its importance, that was about five years ago, when they first got interested in it. It was given over from the community to the board of education. When they got interested in it there was a nice article by Janie Jenkins in the paper and I called the people who were connected with it. I told them I would dig it out there for them and do a nice supportive dig around it and find any outbuildings and privys and anything that could be restored. They have a nice chunk of land and they have the opportunity to landscape it. When I was there it was landscaped, by that I mean there were paths, there were plots. It behooves their restoration to return it from the way it is now to what it was before, the only way to do that is to dig it, to find out where the trails were, where the paths were, where the privys systems and wells were. I told them I would, but I did not hear from

them because it was in limbo as to who had jurisdiction. Then they started to put it on the national register. I am on the government's advisory board for site preservation. I wanted to put it in the register and they said, "No, we are doing it. We will take care of that." That was ironic, but as it turns out I was called down because they were just not accomplishing it. Just a couple of weeks ago they turned the little red schoolhouse over to one of my entrained people, Evelyn Mangia, who is from Poland. She is now doing the work to put it on the national register of historic places.

We have a course here called Cultural Resource Management, which is given about every two years, and when you take that course, it teaches you everything there is to know about preservation and restoration laws, and how to satisfy state and federal requirements on preservation and everything like that. We give it and each student takes a site locally and they have to walk it all the way through to present it in Columbus. They go down with me and they make the presentation and they go from taking a photograph of the archival research, the whole background, and they all pick a favorite site of theirs; to get an A you have to have that done by the end of the quarter. It does not necessarily have to get on the register. If there is some reason why it does not openly get on, that still does not keep you from getting an A. What an A constitutes is that I have it in my hand, I think it is a beautiful, nominable job, and what they decide ultimately does not kill. We have put Stambaugh on, Jones Hall on--that is the most recent, we have put Ohio One on, the White Cemetery Bridge in Poland on, and we put on Hamilton Dam in Poland, Ohio. In the winter of next year we will have probably eight or ten students in that class.

B You are doing historical archeology work. Why is there no connection with the History Department?

W I do not know why. Archeology which is a technique which arises out of the anthropological discipline, but the data of historic archeology is historical data, that is, I can just as easily be working for a history department as what I do in historical archeology. I do prehistoric too, I do anthropological archeology. When I do a building like the one in Mansfield, I am doing as much for the historians. That is not the ideal state. The ideal state would be . . . we had a course here called Historical Archeology, it had a field course in the summer and it dug for five weeks. There was a course elective highly regarded by the history department. I do not think they do not have it because they do not like me, I have always had a good rapport with the history department. I think it is because no one has ever taken the initiative. In other places like William & Mary, they also have an M.A. program in historical archeology.

I am digging all the time. I am digging at the Beede house in Boardman, the barn I dig every summer for eight weeks at Quakertown. If a historical person went along with me on this and went along not just to dig, but at the time they were digging to look for content for an M.A. thesis, they would have themselves a bonus. More of the history majors should be taking archeological digs with me, historical ones anyway. Up until a few years ago, I was the only historical archeologist in the state. Up until a few years

ago, whenever they had these restoration projects, they would call me, but I could not go to all of them

B How does historical archeology differ from prehistoric?

W Its major difference is always in the time frame that is involved. That makes the difference. That sounds like a quantitative difference, but it is such a big difference that it becomes qualitative. You may say, well, its only the difference between one that is two thousand eyars old and one that is two hundred years old. But that difference can be measured in the face that in one case you dig nothing but soil and you pay a lot of attention to the detail of soil horizons and pollen in the soils and microscopic diffeerences and differences between the way a point is made, a flake stone tool, that is prehistoric. In a historic, you are talking about walls that are three feet thick and made out of limestone, flags that are stuck, walkwats, things of such gross nature that they overwhelm you. It is technically different digging a hole in the ground in which the artifacts seems to be suspended in dirt, and one where you dig and you have walls and a cement floor. The techniques are the same, you dig with a shovel, a trowel, and a wisk broom, and you record your data where it is found. Then you interpret why it is there. In historical data you have records to go to to compare it with, you have all kinds of analysis you would not have in prehistoric. For example, if you find prehistoric pottery

B Thank you

End of Interview