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WHO EDITS THE EDITORS? SNAKE HILL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORTS

Al B. Wesolowsky

A review of Snake Hill: An Investigation of a Military Cemetery from the War of 1812, edited by Susan Pfeiffer and Ronald F. Williamson, provides a coign of vantage regarding two aspects of particular concern to historical archaeologists. One is the increasing number of historical cemeteries that, because of recent legislation and a broadening of research domains, are being investigated by archaeologists. The other, closely related, aspect is the need for strong editorial oversight in preparing for the press reports that comprise the contributions of diverse specialists. Snake Hill was a good project that resulted in a report that, while useful, bears deficiencies that underscore the necessity for thoughtful compilation of edited volumes.

Un examen de Snake Hill: An Investigation of a Military Cemetery from the War of 1812, un ouvrage édité par Susan Pfeiffer et Ronald F. Williamson, fait voir deux choses qui intéressent particulièrement les archéologues. L'une consiste dans le nombre croissant de cimetières historiques qui, à cause de législation récente et de l'élargissement des champs de recherche, font l'objet d'investigations de la part des archéologues. L'autre, qui s'y rattache de près, c'est que la rédaction des communiqués de presse qui font état de la contributions de divers spécialistes exige une étroite surveillance. Snake Hill a été un bon projet de recherche dont il a été rendu compte dans un rapport qui, quoique utile, comporte des déficiences qui font ressortir la nécessité de procéder avec soin à l'établissement des textes publiés.

Snake Hill: An Investigation of a Military Cemetery from the War of 1812. Susan Pfeiffer and Ronald F. Williamson, eds. Durndun Press (1991), Toronto and Oxford. 442 pp., illustrations, tables, bibliographies, no index. No price given. ISBN 1-55002-090-0.

Introduction

Snake Hill joins a small but burgeoning literature that has developed over the last decade and which treats historical cemeteries in North America as archaeological resources examined by archaeological methods. Almost without exception, excavation of these cemeteries is necessary because of the threats posed by construction activities or other alterations to the landscape, such as highway construction (Elia and Wesolowsky 1991), fluvial erosion (Rose 1985), new buildings in urban areas (McReynolds 1981), reservoir impoundments (Fox 1984; Earls et al. 1991), making repairs to historical structures

(Cybulski 1988) and in the case of Snake Hill, construction of dwellings.

Until recently, such graves would have been dug up by morticians and the skeletal remains placed into a container for reinterment elsewhere, with no attendant involvement by archaeologists. The loss of archaeological information when morticians do the work, even with archaeologists observing, is noted by Fox (1984: 12):

At this point, bone fragments were appearing, and the archaeologists requested that they be allowed into the grave to remove and record the bone and any related artifacts. The burial appeared to have been badly disturbed and fragmented in the past.

Observations were severely limited by the speed with which the grave contents were shoveled out under the instruction of the mortician, and no assessment of age was possible. All bone was removed to a concrete grave liner, along with some of the soil from the grave. Artifacts found while

this operation was going on were taken to one side to be photographed and recorded, then were put into the grave liner with the burial.

Sprague (1989: 131) comments:

[T]he most obvious reason for using archaeologists instead of morticians is that, unlike archaeologists, morticians do not have any industry-wide procedures for removing graves. Since the profit motive is the driving force, most morticians grab the big pieces and move on with little or no concern for the sensitivities of the relatives of the deceased or for any loss of information. After observing both archaeologists and morticians removing ancestral graves, the American Indians in the Pacific Northwest have uniformly required all grave relocations to be done by archaeologists and specifically not by morticians.

The recognition of these cemeteries as archaeological resources that are amenable to archaeological excavation has only recently, and unevenly, been given the force of law in some states (Elia 1991: 4–10; Rounds 1988: esp. 176–177, 187–189), but not all relocations of historical graves are now performed under archaeological auspices. Only in those circumstances where public monies are being expended, or cemeteries are of unknown or uncertain age, or other criteria satisfied are archaeologists involved. As a rule, historical cemeteries in North America have a long tradition in law of being afforded certain protections not afforded to prehistoric ones; the participation of archaeologists in the removal of cemeteries represents a broadening of these protections.

Snake Hill

Snake Hill, edited by Susan Pfeiffer (a physical anthropologist) and Ronald F. Williamson (an archaeologist), reports on a small, forgotten military cemetery that resulted from the American occupation of Fort Erie, opposite Buffalo, New York, during the War of 1812.

Fort Erie occupied an elongated area bordering the lake shore and river bank,

some 850 m long by 200 m wide, with stone barracks supplemented by earthworks and palisades. Snake Hill is the name of the locality at the southern tip of the fort, and this is where burials were encountered in 1987 during the construction of houses along the lakefront. The legal circumstances of the excavation are not presented very clearly. The burials were located on what seems to have been private land, 700 m to the south and slightly west of the stone barracks that comprise the regional historical park of Old Ft. Erie [figure 2.1]. Williamson, however, mistakenly locates the cemetery “700 metres west of Old Ft. Erie” [p. 21], a spot that would be some 800 meters northwest of Snake Hill.

The Cemeteries Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations recommended to the town of Ft. Erie that development be halted until the nature of the burials could be assessed. The town engaged Archaeological Services Inc. of Toronto to delineate the cemetery and excavate the burials. Just what laws were involved, and whether governmental archaeologists were involved are not discussed.

The discovery of American military accoutrements with the skeletal remains led to arrangements for an international team, directed by Archaeological Services Inc., to perform a thorough scientific excavation and analysis. The remains were identified as those of Americans and were eventually repatriated to the United States for reinterment in the military cemetery at Bath, New York.

The report forms a confluence of the several streams of enquiry common to the investigation of historical cemeteries: archaeology, physical anthropology, history, and documentary research. Another tributary involved collating Canadian and U.S. military records. Coordinating the research and preparing this volume for the press was a formidable task. As Marc C. Micozzi notes in the foreword [pp. 15–16]:

Study of the systematic processes of disease, injury and medical therapy that determine the gross morphology of bone, as well as the taphonomic influence on bone

postmortem, are becoming better understood as natural sciences. These sciences, which draw upon traditional anatomy, anthropology and archaeology, can provide a basis for historical interpretation. The critical factor, necessary of effective research, is the integration of these approaches.

The disparity of approaches at Snake Hill has, in some instances, resisted efforts to make the several contributions conform to a single standard of the scholarly apparatus. On the other hand, it is a tribute to the energy of the editors that the scope of the project was so well-defined and the analyses so interesting and important that the merits of this volume survive deficiencies in its assembly.

History and Archaeology

In "Part 1: The Historical Setting" Joseph Whitehorne's chapter on the military history of the Niagara Frontier in 1814 is a lively, informative account of U.S. strategy and military life in the campaign. But in 30 pages of text I saw not a single reference to any of the 79 books, 75 articles, or 101 archival sources listed in the bibliography for this one chapter. There are, however, citations to three published works on page 39 (manuals of drill published in the 18th and 19th centuries) that do not appear in the bibliography. Even direct quotations, such as those from the journal of a Lt. Douglass [p. 45] or those from the orders to a quartermaster regarding the antiscorbutic properties of potatoes [p. 39] are not given specific sources in the text. Even were we to consult the edition of Douglass' journal listed in the bibliography, we would not be able to locate the quotes without reading the entire work. For the paraphrased citations, we do not even know *what* to read.

A "Note on Sources" [pp. 54-55] to this chapter comments on the relative reliability of the sources and asserts that the chapter "...relies on the documentation produced by those responsible for the daily operations [in 1814]. . . ." I have no reason to question the accuracy of Whitehorne's

account, but the manner of presentation is troubling. A researcher hoping to build on the work will be required, presumably, to reexamine the 255 bibliographic entries in order to reconstruct the sources for the present study.

The book needs a better plan of the study area, one with more detail than Figure 2.1, in which the fort and cemetery combined occupy approximately 8% of the area of the full-page illustration. We are shown what I take to be modern roads as far afield as 2 km from the fort, and the plan is covered with unexplained wiggly lines, likely intended to represent contour intervals.

A contemporary plan of Fort Erie is provided as Plate 2.1, but it is reproduced at a scale so small that it is little more than a curiosity. What this chapter really needs is a plan of the fort, with the cemetery area indicated, and with the position of different fort structures and unit disposition shown.

Adrienne Noe's chapter of eight and a quarter pages, "Medical History," contains 11 citations in the text, but the bibliography for the chapter lists 79 books, 76 articles, and ca. 136 archival sources. One has the impression that the editors despaired of remedying the approach to citations of sources in these two chapters and took the regrettable step of leaving it all to the reader and subsequent researchers to work out. This is a pity, since Whitehorne's chapter is essential to those like myself who knew little of the Niagara campaign; I was poorly served by his approach to citations of sources.

Noe's chapter, while discussing a topic with which I am more familiar, is tantalizing in its brevity, especially since excavations yielded the remains of amputated limbs and indirect evidence (the patterning of clothing fasteners found with the skeletons) of medical attention prior to burial. Her subject called for a more substantial contribution, one in which the development of battlefield medicine, field sanitation, commissary requirements, and military hospitals are presented more fully and brought into the context of the archaeological work.

"The Archaeological Investigations," by Stephen C. Thomas and Ronald F.

Williamson, plunges in *medias res* in the second sentence with the stripping of topsoil from the burial site. The site was discovered in April of 1987 [p. 22], and the remains were repatriated on 30 June 1988 [p. 302], but when did the excavations take place? The only clue I could find were the churchboards in some of the field photographs, giving dates in late November and December of 1987 [plates 4.7, 16, 20, 21].

There is no description of the site nor are any general photographs of it presented. And where, exactly, in relation to the fort were the burials? The site plan of Figure 4.1 cannot be tied in with the rectangle marked "study area" on Whitehorne's Figure 2.1; in fact, the latter has its long axis at right angles to the rectangular area of the site plan. Surely the archaeologists prepared a proper topographic map of the site. Why was it not included in this volume? The absence of basic information about the project should not have escaped the attention of the editors.

This chapter presents evidence from not a single other archaeological site; one would think that this was the only military cemetery ever excavated in North America. Or, for that matter, the only historical cemetery ever excavated on this continent. In fact, the chapter contains only two references, one to a publication about buttons, the other to one about military uniforms. While great reliance is placed on A. H. Albert's 1975 *Record of American Military Uniform and Historical Buttons*, the bibliographic entry for it appears, inexplicably, in the sources for Part II of the book, "Biological Anthropology."

In any event, a better and more recent treatment, apparently not consulted, is Martin A. Wyckoff's 1984 *United States Military Buttons of the Land Services 1787-1902: A Guide and Classificatory System*.

I have the impression that the editors pulled in a preliminary, unpublished CRM-type report (likely the one cited, again, in the biological anthropology bibliography, as by "Archaeological Services Incorporated, 1988") for this chapter. In any event, the chapter lacks a developed essay of the relevant literature and presents nothing on the post-cemetery use of the area (except the post-WWII houses) and

there is nothing on deed or probate inventory research.

There is an odd approach to reproducing some drawings of the skeletons in situ: the same base drawing of a skeleton will be reproduced twice, in two separate figures, one showing the locations of buttons and the other showing the location of any non-button artifacts. Were the latter category ever present in such quantities that a single plan would be difficult to read this approach would be sensible. In two cases, however, only a single artifact was present (the common grave of Burials 7, 12, and 13 yielded a musket tool; Burial 8 had a gunflint).

The analysis of the graves depended in large measure on detailed observations of the position and arrangement of clothing fasteners. Readers who are not familiar with the details of 19th-century military dress may wonder just where the fasteners are on a "coatee," a "roundabout," or an "overall." There is in the chapter by Whitehorne a modern illustration [plate 1.4] of an infantryman taken from Ent (1979), but this does not specifically identify the articles of clothing, or, more to the point, their fasteners. What is more, the text reference [p. 32] to this illustration specifies the 5th Pennsylvania Volunteers but the plate is captioned "1st Pennsylvania Volunteer"; presumably there was little difference in uniforms within a division. Thomas and Williamson note in passing [p. 72] that the reader may consult Elting (1977) for illustrations of military uniforms, but this does the general reader little good. What was needed here were a few pairs of simple line drawings showing front and back views of each type of garment, as worn, and where the fasteners would be located.

But the fieldwork was done carefully, as the detailed description of each grave and the photographs attest. The drawings are quite professional and the care given to tabulating button types produced a most intriguing development that demonstrates the potential for careful excavation and meticulous documentation in the adduction of the state of dress of the corpse. Patterns of presence and locations of buttons indicated the arrangement of clothing at

the time of burial. The absence of, say, coat buttons in their normal position when the garment is worn suggest that the coat was removed during battlefield surgery or that the individual expired after a hospital stay.

Alternatively, the arrangement of fasteners for overalls in some cases suggests that the garment was unbuttoned during treatment of an abdominal wound. A skeleton with only non-military buttons implies that the individual belonged to a militia unit that did not receive regulation-issue uniforms. A cluster of buttons appropriate for a single garment but not found in a "wearing" position likely represents an unserviceable garment, possibly ruined and bloodstained and rolled up for use as an emergency dressing for a wound or otherwise buried with a corpse, perhaps its owner.

One skeleton, while otherwise well preserved, had an entire leg missing (Grave 12). Another had a shattered and incomplete leg with the bones in a position that indicated the maimed limb was included with the remainder of the corpse for burial (Grave 13).

Of the 31 "graves," three were identified as "Medical Waste Features" containing, among other items, stray bones and the remains of amputated limbs. Eleven of the 31, though each is shown on the site plan, are not illustrated; two (30 and 31) were badly disturbed before the archaeologists arrived, so drawings might convey little useful information. But others (2, 5, 14, 15, 26, and 28), as well as the waste features (9, 22, and 25) should have had drawings reproduced. A photograph of Grave 2 shows it to have been in an excellent state of preservation, and a photograph of the thorax of Grave 5 indicates that it, also, was well preserved.

In any event, there are detailed descriptions of each grave, with accounts of the posture of the skeleton and descriptions of buttons and other objects. One would have wished, however, for some more basic skeletal data here—age at the time of death, stature, and pathology—much as is given in a later chapter's Table 5.1. As it stands, basic information relating to any one skeleton is divided among several

chapters and blocks of illustrations. Much page-flipping could have been eliminated had each of the grave descriptions in Chapter 4 contained just the extra sentence or two of data summarized for each grave in Table 5.1. The value of Chapter 4 would have been much enhanced as a result of this small change.

The failure to illustrate each of the graves and the absence of background, comparanda, and a summary of the archaeology chapter gives one the impression of hasty preparation of the book and a want of consistent, strong editorial oversight. Pfeiffer and Williamson (presumably; the section is anonymous) credit no fewer than five other editors in the "Acknowledgments" [p. 14]. The "human wave" approach does not always work, it seems.

Biological Anthropology

"Part Two: Biological Anthropology" comprises several chapters by specialists on aspects of the Snake Hill remains, and I was pleased to see these written with a non-specialist reader in mind, but without sacrificing clarity for the specialist. Pfeiffer's short "Estimation of Age at Death" serves as a good example of this style, and her presentation of the results of blind tests by four of her colleagues evaluating the age at the time of death by inspecting articular surfaces is eye-opening. I would have expected *some* variation, but not as much as what she found: "In no instance was there agreement within a five-year range among all five investigators" [p. 171]. Clearly, further work is needed, but it is refreshing to read of the potential for differences of opinion resulting from any analytical technique.

There was an unexpectedly high proportion of tall (180+ cm) individuals, when compared to historical reports and comparative collections. Shelly R. Saunders suggests that there may have been selection for taller men before and during the siege, a circumstance that may explain the presence of tall men in the cemetery sample. One might argue that selection (in the sense of a heightened

chance of survival) was operating in favor of *shorter* men, who survived the campaign. An interesting study would be to compare the stature of casualties versus that of survivors for military units for which this kind of data exist. Taller men may make more visible targets than their shorter comrades.

With the exception of traumatic injuries and amputations, skeletal and dental pathology seem unremarkable for a 19th-century series. Schmorl's depressions (suggesting strain on the spinal column) and benign cortical defects on the humeri (suggesting heavy, repeated work) are consistent for what we might expect from a sample involved in strenuous labor [pp. 205–209].

Chapters on bone chemistry with reference to stable isotopes of carbon and nitrogen, lead, and isotopes of oxygen present intriguing results on differences among Europeans, Americans, and Indians that may be of assistance in evaluating the origins of skeletal series. The findings are preliminary, and there is little comparanda, but archaeologists will find these three short, simple expositions of provocative interest.

The Lesson of Snake Hill

In summary, I have two impressions of the Snake Hill report. First, it is a solid piece of archaeological reportage, despite some serious difficulties with the historians' apparent insouciance towards acceptable practice in bibliographic accountability and an archaeological chapter that is little more than a grave catalogue. The basic data are here, and the studies range from the traditional (but necessary, for all that) to the new and intriguing.

The second impression, however, is less favorable. There are problems with this book that I think stem in large measure from the complexity of its subject matter and the difficulties of integrating results across interdisciplinary boundaries. Historical cemeteries, when excavated, require a closely-coordinated approach in fieldwork that, for the project to achieve

its potential, must be carried over into the analysis and publication stages. Not only are the overseers of such a project expected to do first-rate, exacting work in the field (as witness the care with which data on button provenience was collected and the detailed descriptions of skeletal posture) but also have the task of coordinating and collating the product of even more diverse specialties during analysis and editing.

As Pfeiffer says: "As our perspectives have widened, it has become more important to develop interdisciplinary research networks. No single researcher would have had the skills or resources to pursue the full range of analysis presented here" [p. 164]. But we need more than networks. We need research managers who can solicit, commission, and assemble the findings from diverse fields, maintain editorial integrity over a complex, complicated report, and present readers with a single, unified document that takes full advantage of the streams that flow into the whole.

Snake Hill did not achieve this goal. The deficiencies in the two historical chapters I have already discussed. The archaeological chapter reads more like a CRM completion memorandum than a fully developed, integrated archaeological report. The chapters on human biology are professionally documented, but some are so short (fewer than 10 pages in several cases) as to be little more than research notes. Since the analytical techniques involving assays of isotopes are quite new to archaeologists, one would have hoped for a more fully developed exposition. But, in light of these shortcomings, should the book not have been published? Of course not.

The absence of an index to the volume is another deficiency, and one for which it is difficult to imagine an acceptable explanation. True, the table of contents is detailed enough to guide a reader to the appropriate chapter in many instances, but not for finding a specific point. For instance, I wanted to know when the remains were repatriated to the United States; after some searching, I was able to locate the relevant passage on page 302. Durndun Press deserves praise for producing

this book, but also some censure for not having insisted on an index.

The design of the book is amateurish, with the text for each chapter in one block and the illustrations and tables in a block following the relevant chapter. The captions, often sketchy in any event, and tables are set in a large, domineering sans serif typeface quite at odds with the Roman type of the text pages. Some of the plates have two captions, one above the illustration identifying it, and a second, longer one in italics providing exegesis beneath the picture. Since the same paper stock was used throughout the book, there is no technical reason why the illustrations and tables could not have been located near the relevant passages in the text. Cost could have been a consideration, though, and again, the press made the correct decision in getting the book out. Still, I have never before seen the title page of a book precede the bastard title. Nor have I ever seen a book that begins numbering its pages with the title page. These departures from the conventions of book design suggest that Durndun is a young press, albeit one with good intentions.

Historical cemeteries in North America, as noted at the outset, are now coming under increased archaeological scrutiny. In part, this is the result of a paradigm shift as well as a growing awareness that these cemeteries are not only amenable to archaeological examination but that there is an interesting array of data that may be extracted from them. It is somewhat ironic that this new constellation swims into our ken at a time when the conservation ethic has become a mainstay of the attitudes that govern archaeology and preservation. On the one hand we realize that these sites are wholly appropriate for research and on the other we would rather not excavate them if they are not endangered.

Often these cemeteries are sprung upon us. In those cases where a long-term project is involved, the appropriate surveys and documentary research can be done and plans for the cemeteries integrated into the work of the project at an early stage (Fox 1984; Earls et al. 1991). But not always. Elia (1991: 5, fig. 2) notes that in the case of the Uxbridge, Massachusetts, Almshouse

Burial Ground, an historical, deeded cemetery with standing gravestones escaped detection by archaeological survey crews even though it was located squarely between the north- and southbound lanes of the proposed highway.

More often, however, these cemeteries are encountered accidentally, in the course of development, and archaeologists must be able to respond quickly to the requirements of the resource. Even in the absence of an opportunity for advance planning, though, archaeologists can apply procedures and techniques that will serve well for specific cases. And once the excavations are done, one might suppose that the laboratory analysis can proceed under less pressure. But Fox (1984: 2) notes that the human remains had to be reburied on the same day they were exhumed; Guendling et al. (1985: 27 and fig. 1), had the relative luxury of 24 hours between excavation and reinterment.

Whether the excavations are planned or engendered by emergency, the structure of archaeological enquiry remains much the same. The dimensions that are added when historical cemeteries are the subject, however, are where we need to be especially careful. What I think happened at Snake Hill—at least as far as the publication is concerned—is that the archaeological excavations were handled well, likely they were exemplary, and a number of specialists were engaged to produce certain reports that fell outside the strict requirements of field work. This is all straightforward enough.

The problems arose when the diverse reports were being assembled and prepared for the press, and here we see how multidisciplinary approaches contain within themselves the rifts that can be overcome, or at least bridged, by a well considered and conscientiously applied scholarly apparatus.

If we should not expect a synoptic view from an edited volume of specialist reports, it is not too much to expect the volume to provide a consistent narrative that follows the usual requirements of scientific writing. The chapters in *Snake Hill* resemble a group of strangers crowded together into a room, not at all the diverse yet articulated system of exposition and documentation

that it could have been.

And here is the object lesson that the volume crystallized for me: the necessity for overarching editorial authority when dealing with what would have been in a simpler age, a single-author monograph. The demands on scholarship are now too diverse and too particularistic to permit a single individual to write such a book as *Snake Hill*. All the more reason, then, for the exercise of redaction that will bring these individual contributions into a consistent whole that will not only satisfy the demands of scholarship but will also give us a work that is a valuable research resource, not a hodgepodge of poorly-documented discussions with inflated bibliographies or short research notes that could stand more adequate development and integration into the fabric of the whole.

Can this be done by an editor outside the project, such as might be supplied by the publisher? I do not think so. The task of assembling and coordinating the publication of a project like Snake Hill probably has to be taken up by one or more members of the research team, as was in fact the case. But a clear vision of the goals is needed, and the editor or editors must be willing to coax the contributions into a consistent style. Earls et al. (1991) is an exemplar of how this can be achieved, and in a CRM report, at that. This report is synthetic, consistent, well organized and informative. True, it does not contain the sophisticated analyses of skeletal remains that are in the Snake Hill report, but these are not a failing with *Snake Hill*. The shortcoming with the latter report is poor organization of the publication.

In quite another context, Thomas W. Laqueur (1989: 201) remarks:

But a common historical ground appears if we juxtapose humanitarian narratives of the sort I have been discussing with a science of the heart, as John Wesley called it.

A strong organizational hand wouldn't hurt, either.

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