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Archaeologists and the Archival Record

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Archaeologists study the material record, bits of things that have been either intentionally or unintentionally modified by human beings to become artifacts. In a word, stuff. Practitioners are expected to become familiar with a vast range of stuff and the characteristics thereof: from the flowing ripple marks left on a fragment of stone after it has been hammered off of a larger piece to produce a flake, to the peculiar, stretched cross-section that indicates a square nail has been machine-cut rather than hand-forged. One particularly important subset of stuff is the archival record which, besides consisting itself of artifacts of paper and ink, conveys a great deal of information relating to much of the rest of the stuff in the world.

When archaeologists make use of the archival record, they usually are doing so for one of two reasons: pure research or cultural resource management (CRM). The first is familiar enough to anyone who has ever done historical or genealogical research, so I will not elaborate on it here. The second, while most people might not realize it, is increasingly the driving force behind most of the archaeology that is done in the United States. Laws are in place requiring that archaeological resources be "taken into account" whenever projects on federal land, or projects supported with federal funds, threaten those resources. Project examples include the federally-subsidized construction of highways, bridges, and dams, and logging on National Forests.

For archaeological resources to be taken into account, they must be found and evaluated for significance, as only those considered to be significant are important enough to warrant their avoidance or excavation (both potentially costly propositions). Determining the significance of archaeological sites is thus the CRM archaeologist's most important – and most intellectually challenging – task. How does one determine whether a particular assemblage of artifacts of a particular age in a particular locale is significant? Why is one handful of stuff more important than another handful? While a vast literature has been produced in an on-going effort to address the nuances of such questions, the essential aspects of the most useful responses can be encapsulated in a single word: context.

Context refers to the relationships existing between any one artifact and all other artifacts. Two pieces of a broken spear point at the same site would be contextually close, for example, while the relationship between that spear point and, say, the anchor of the Queen Mary, would be nil. In a more general but equally important sense, context also refers to the "degree of belonging" between any particular archaeological phenomenon and its natural, archaeological, or historical setting. For example, the types of prehistoric materials one typically finds on a terrace adjacent to a major stream might be quite different from what is found on a ridge top high in the uplands. The former might include an enormous number and variety of artifacts reflecting a multitude of tasks carried out over centuries at a long-term habitation site (e.g., pottery, projectile points, drills, grinding stones, hammer stones, animal bones, hearths and house remains, burials, etc.). The latter might have a much more limited array of artifacts reflecting the short-term, special-purpose nature of the upland site: for example, a few broken projectile points and a handful of resharpening flakes might be all that would be recovered at a 2,000 year old hunting camp. The geographical setting thus provides both a physical and an ideational context within which the archaeological record can be interpreted: long-term, sedentary settlements were located on well-drained terrace soils near permanent water, while short-term, special-purpose sites are located in the adjacent uplands. Within that contextual framework, hypotheses can be generated to test assumptions of site function, occupational duration, and expected artifact assemblage characteristics. Within that contextual framework, significance can be evaluated (e.g., "We think that upland sites had a special function within the prehistoric settlement system. To better model the system in its entirety, we need to

understand what that function was. Therefore, we need to preserve and investigate more upland sites. Therefore, intact upland sites are potentially significant").

What the archival record does for CRM archaeologists is to provide critically important context for understanding and evaluating the significance of Historic period archaeological remains (beginning with the time of initial European settlement and continuing up to the present day). Say that an archaeologist conducting a survey on a National Forest prior to a timber sale discovers a late 19th century house site. Is it important enough to worry about? How is that determined? What if five other house sites of similar age also were found? Which ones, if any, should be preserved or excavated? The path for answering such questions for the majority of Historic period sites leads, inevitably, to the archives.

What types of archival records are most useful to archaeologists? That depends on the level of significance that one tries to establish. There are several criteria that can be used to determine if a site is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places via the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The one most often invoked for archaeological sites is criterion "d", which holds that a site "has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history." That is a broad statement, to say the least: any site may yield important information, since every site is unique. The question becomes, information important for what? If every site had to have national significance in order to be listed on the National Register, then many sites considered important by local communities might have no protection under the law. To avoid this problem, implementing regulations allow for site significance to be argued at any one or more of three levels: local, regional, and national. Some historical sites obviously have national significance (e.g., Monticello, the Gettysburg battlefield). Others obviously have great regional significance (e.g., a well preserved plantation complex). For more mundane sites, such as a Depression-era farmstead in the North Central Hills of Mississippi, significance is often argued for at the local level, with general reference to broad-scale regional or national events. A site also can be considered to be significant if it is associated with a person of historical note, again at any one or more of the three levels.

Let me give an example of a Historic period site I encountered when I worked as an archaeologist with the U.S. Forest Service and how I used the archival record to help establish its significance. In 1997, a cultural resource survey was carried out on the Trace Unit of the Tombigbee National Forest in Chickasaw County. The survey was conducted in preparation for a timber sale. Several prehistoric and Historic period sites were found, including one very unusual one. In the middle of the woods, on a lonely ridge top overlooking a deep valley was found a single, marble slab lying flush with the ground. The slab was inscribed as follows: "Sacred to the memory of Thomas Ivy, who departed this life at his residence in Chickasaw Co., MS, on the 21st of Sept. 1836, aged about 50 years."

Several things were unusual about this site. First of all, 1836 is a very early date for the area, as the county was only created in February, 1836, following cession of the land by the Chickasaw four years earlier. Second, there was no evidence of a house site or any other graves nearby. Third, there was no mention of a grave in any Forest Service records or maps that I had seen in my seven years on the job. Fourth, the slab had obviously cracked and been repaired at some point in the past. Was it in its original location, or had it been moved into the woods for some reason? Who was Thomas Ivy, and what was the significance of this peculiar site?

The answers lay in the archival record. Beginning with Atkinson's "A History of Chickasaw County, Mississippi to the Civil War" (1968) and following up with other local histories (e.g., the Chickasaw County Historical and Genealogical Society 1985), I found that Ivy was one of five commissioners appointed by the Mississippi legislature to organize the newly created county. The five men "assembled near present-day Old Houlka at the home of Mila [or Malcolm] McGee, a half-breed Indian. A large oak stump is said to have been used for a table in recording the proceedings of this conference" (Atkinson 1968:29). At the meeting, "the group ordered an election for the purpose of choosing a Board of Police which would serve in a capacity similar to that of today's Board of Supervisors. Their immediate duties were to hold an election to select other county officers and to select the site for a county seat" (Chickasaw County Historical and Genealogical Society 1985:3).

Thomas Ivy was thus seemingly a person of considerable local historical importance. I was unable to find out much about his earlier life. He was listed in the 1836 Assessment Returns of Chickasaw County as "Thomas Ivy (over 45 yrs of age)" (Springer n.d.:1). According to family history, he came originally from Georgia, moved first to Old Memphis, Alabama, then to "the rich Chickasaw lands" of Mississippi in 1832 (Ivy 1985). His great-grandson, Robert Ivy, writes that:

> Thomas Ivy had built a log house near the old Natchez Trace in 1832 when he took up large holdings in that area. He later was listed as the largest landowner in Mississippi at that time. He was around forty-five years old when he came with his wife, Drucilla Pryor Gardner Ivy and his nine children to Chickasaw County (Ivy 1985:152).

The grave is listed in the Chickasaw County cemetery compendium, which states that Thomas Ivy actually was born in 1783 in Warren County, Georgia. It also states that "this is probably the oldest marked grave in Chickasaw County" (Chickasaw County Historical and Genealogical Society 1992:76).

Robert Ivy was so interested in his forebear that at some point, probably in the late 1960s, he organized an expedition to locate and refurbish the grave site. In a short piece entitled, "The Oldest Grave in Chickasaw County (Ivy 1985)," he recounts how he located the grave with the help of local county residents and how he and his family set out to repair the marble slab, which had broken. They carried spades, shovels, "bushwackers," saws, cement, and other items out into the woods on a Saturday morning. After a day of labor, they found they had not carried enough water with them to properly mix the concrete. After some thought, a young family member suggested using the canned Fresca brought along for refreshment: thus was "the oldest grave in Chickasaw County" repaired. I can testify that at the time of my survey in 1997, the unique mortar mix was still holding its own against the elements.

Another descendent provides this narrative:

> This Thomas Ivy was the first of the name to come to Chickasaw County, Mississippi. He was born 1783-1786 in Warren County, Georgia; married first Margaret (Peggy) Gibson on 18 October 1810, Warren County. They had two children – Margaret and Byrd – both of whom were born in Warren County. Peggy died in 1814 in Warren County. Shortly after her death Thomas moved to Old Memphis in Pickens County, Alabama. He served in the War of 1812 from Warren County.
>
> In 1818 he went back to Warren County and married Drucilla Pryor Gardner who was born ca. 1798 in Warren County, a daughter of Sterling Gardner and Mary (Polly) Neal. Drucilla must have been a remarkable woman of healthy, hardy stock as she rode horseback all the way across the states of Georgia and Alabama to reach Old Memphis. Here they lived until moving to Noxubee County, Mississippi, about 1833, where they lived about a year. They then moved about 1834 to the Pontotoc Ridge country of what was to become Chickasaw County and settled on land Thomas had just bought from the Chickasaw Indians. His land was just east of Old Houlka near the Natchez Trace. When he died 21 September 1836, he was the largest landowner and wealthiest person in northern Mississippi. His is a lonely grave near where his log cabin once stood. Thomas and his good friend, Thomas Gates, were two of the five commissioners appointed to map and organize Chickasaw County and locate its county seat, Houston (Humphrey 1985:379).

The reference to Thomas Ivy's log cabin is interesting, since no other evidence for such an early Historic period site was found during the survey. No fields or other improvements are shown in the near vicinity of the grave site on the original 1834 General Land Office survey map, but this is not surprising

since the field work for the map was conducted in 1833, prior to Ivy's moving to the area. At this point, the location of Thomas Ivy's cabin site remains unknown.

Cemeteries are usually not considered to be eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places due to the fact that "familial and cultural descendants of the interred often view graves and cemeteries with a sense of reverence and devout sentiment that can overshadow objective evaluation" (Potter and Boland 1992:1). Exceptions to this general direction can be made, however, if a cemetery or grave should have outstanding historical, aesthetic, stylistic, or architectural qualities. For example, one reason why a burial place might qualify for inclusion on the National Register is if it is a "grave...whose survival is a significant or the only reminder of an important person, settlement, or event" (Potter and Boland 1992:3). Specifically, this would fall under Criterion B of the National Register criteria, that "Properties may be eligible...if they are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past." Criterion D also might apply in the case of an isolated grave, if historical investigation revealed "information important in...history." Potter and Boland (1992:16) state that

> To qualify [under Criterion D] for its age, a cemetery must date from an early period within its geographic and cultural context. The age of a burial place might be considered early relative to the period for which we have information about human activity, or relative to the exploration, settlement, and development of an area by a particular group.

They go on to list several examples of cemeteries that "likely would meet Criteria Consideration D requirements if adequately documented" (1992:16). Two of the examples they list might pertain to the Ivy burial site:

> A historic cemetery containing the graves of a number of persons of outstanding importance – those whose activities determined the course of events in local, state, or national history; or those whose activities were especially important in reflecting significant cultural events of the time.
>
> A cemetery possessing important historic associations from a community's early period of settlement, or which reflects important aspects of community history (Potter and Boland 1992:16-17).

I considered the Ivy burial site to be eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places following these criteria, since Thomas Ivy obviously was a person of local historical importance and since we evidence from the archival records indicated that the site retained sufficient integrity. In short, a context for the site was built using a variety of archival sources: county histories, tax records, family histories, cemetery records, and old maps. I also talked to descendants of Thomas Ivy to find out what I could from them. Following submission of my report (Peacock 1999), the Historic Preservation Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History agreed with my assessment, and the Ivy burial site is now officially considered to be eligible for listing on the National Register.

I hope this brief example has shown what a valuable resource the archival record is for archaeologists. Especially at the local level, that record holds the context within which most Historic period sites can be evaluated for significance. Once that significance is established, sites important in the historical development of Mississippi can be preserved for the future. Such sites are a material link to the past that is strengthened through the use of archival records, which, metaphorically speaking, put flesh on the bones of our forebears and bring our history to life once again. Archaeologists, and all citizens concerned about historic preservation, owe a debt of thanks to all those who labor to preserve the archival record against the vagaries of time.

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