

**ARCHAEOLOGY AT SIGNAL HILL NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE, ST. JOHN'S,  
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Signal Hill's dominant position overlooking the town and harbour of St. John's has ensured that it has played an integral part in the defense of the town for centuries. From the seventeenth century until the Second World War, the military has played an important role on the Hill: fortifications and military structures were erected at various locations; battles between British and French troops were fought here; and British, Canadian, and American military troops lived and served on Signal Hill.

During July and August of 2009, the Memorial University Archaeology Field School was held at Signal Hill National Historic Site in St. John's, Newfoundland for the second year in a row. This was a joint venture between

*Figure 1 Excavation trench at the Emberley 4 site (1A64) with stone wall collapse in the foreground (Photo courtesy of Rob Ferguson) (Crompton)*



Parks Canada and Memorial University; both of these institutions provided funding, logistical support, and assistance.

Parks Canada was able to secure funding to hire additional supervisory staff this year, which allowed us to conduct excavations at two locations at the same time. Working in conjunction with Parks Canada Archaeologist Robert Ferguson, we selected sites for this year's excavation.

One site that we explored is one of four sites recently reported by a frequent visitor to Signal Hill's trails, Mr. Emberley. The Emberley sites collectively consist of several surface-visible stone walls, with possible cellar-like depressions, and one long drainage trench. None of the historic maps of Signal Hill show marked structures at these locations. As a result, excavation was required to determine the date and function of these undocumented sites. We selected the Emberley 4 site (1A64) as a good candidate for excavation. Emberley 4 has several collapsed stone walls that are still visible on the present ground surface. Our crew excavated a long trench through the centre of the site to try and determine the site's date and function (Figure 1).

Our excavations quickly revealed that the site was of 20<sup>th</sup> century date, marked by wire nails, plywood fragments, asphalt shingles and electrical insulators- and a curious absence of eating or drinking vessels. We suspect that this structure perhaps served as an electrical waystation or as some sort of communications station on Signal Hill. The structure appears to have burned down at some point, as many artifacts are burned and the site's topmost layers contains much charcoal.

The other site we explored in greater depth was the North Range Barracks site (1A51). This site is located on the top of Signal Hill, on a terrace just below Ladies' Look-



Figure 2 The North Range Barracks (1A51) covered the entire terrace. Our excavation trenches are located at the southern end (Crompton)

out (Figure 2). This was a British soldiers' barracks, used from 1800 to approximately 1842. After this, the building's use is not clear, but it was certainly abandoned by 1870, and likely collapsed after 1880 (Candow 1979). This site had been tested in 1984 by archaeologists Robert Ferguson and Martha Drake (Ferguson 1986). Their excavations uncovered the corner of a masonry feature, and a separate mortared stone wall. Preliminary interpretations suggested that these features were the southeast corner of the building and a retaining wall built on the very edge of the terrace.

Our plans were to expand the trench laid out by Ferguson and Drake in 1984, so that we could expand our excavations along the south and east walls of the structure, and to expose part of the single-hearth end-wall chimney in the south wall. Fortunately, we were able to re-locate the 1984 survey pins with the help of a metal detector, thus allowing us to re-use the original site grid. Our excavations expanded on the Ferguson and Drake test trench with three additional suboperation trenches, and several smaller suboperation squares laid out to locate key architectural features.

What our excavations revealed was not the southeast corner of the barracks building, but rather the remains of a large double-hearth stone chimney base, which would have been located inside the barracks building (Figure 3). We also located part of the east foundation wall of the building. The deposits located around the chimney base contained particularly rich deposits of artifacts and ecofacts, and appears to represent the remains of items stored (and discarded) in the building's cellar. An 1805 report records that due to lack of room in other buildings, "provisions have been moved to a cellar under the barracks" (cited in Candow 1979:41). These provisions, utensils, and personal goods would have been the property of military personnel of varying backgrounds: either officers (who resided in the building for a time), by convalescent veterans (for whom this was a residence for a short while), or by the infantry soldiers and their families, who also lived in the barracks building.

The substantial artifact collection includes ceramics, bottle glass, and tobacco pipe fragments dating almost exclusively to the first half of the nineteenth century. The majority of



Figure 3 The mortared stone chimney base at the North Range Barracks (Crompton)

the ceramics are of undecorated creamware or decorated pearlware. Decorative styles are all of a period that predates the middle of the nineteenth century (see Figure 4). We suspect that this deposit accumulated rapidly, as the lowest occupation deposit in Suboperation E returned a mean ceramic date of 1807.6 and the topmost occupation deposit in Suboperation E returned a mean ceramic date of 1818.2. Bottle glass fragments which are complete enough to provide temporal data all support the date ranges derived from ceramic evidence.

A few coins and tokens were recovered from the site; though not well-preserved, enough detail was present to permit identification. They are represented by two George III halfpennies and one George III penny. Tokens are represented by: a one sou 'Banque du Peuple' token from Montreal (struck in 1838); an 1813 George III half-stiver from British Guiana (which matches another token found on Signal Hill in other excavations); and finally, an 1811 George III bank token that is made of copper with silver plating (research so far indicates that this is likely a counterfeit token).

The site also produced an impressive array of uniform buttons from a variety of British regiments, some of which were not known to be in Newfoundland. We suspect that the latter examples probably represent the use of surplus supplies or informal exchange between

soldiers, rather than the undocumented presence of regiments. Research on the regimental insignia displayed on the buttons, and the maker's marks found on the reverse of some fully support the dates derived for the site thus far. Additional uniform-derived artifacts include shako hat hardware (chin strap scales and fragments of shako plates) and other copper uniform hardware.

Other personal artifacts include gaming artifacts, including clay marbles (some of which were marked with x's), as well as a bone domino piece from a double-nine set. Some artifacts were marked with the owner's initials, including a bone utensil handle and a creamware plate. Personal items also include a bone comb with tightly-spaced teeth (suggesting it was perhaps to be used to remove lice), a large number of bone buttons, and two button punches (see Figure 5 for selected examples).

Ecofacts were recovered from the cellar deposits as well, though they are remain largely unidentified and unquantified at this point. Preliminarily, we can say that this part of the site contains abundant faunal material (which appears to have preserved very well), but little in the way of paleoethnobotanical remains (for which there is apparently poor preservation). The faunal remains certainly demonstrate that the cellar was used for the storage of food supplies. Initial information derived during cataloguing suggests the assemblage contains plentiful mammal and fish bone. The discovery of rat bones and rodent-gnawed bones suggest that rodent infestation may have been a problem in the barracks.

At the close of excavations, the 2009 field season at Signal Hill accomplished a great deal. We were able to explore some of Signal Hill's undocumented occupations at Emberley 4. We were also able to add to our understanding of the North Range Barracks, and gain an appreciation of its significant future research value. This season's work has shown the North Range Barracks to be a large, well-preserved site that deserves further research. For all of



Figure 4 A representative sample of creamware and pearlware ceramics recovered from the North Range Barracks (Crompton)



Figure 5 Some of the artifacts recovered from the North Range Barracks. From top row, left to right: burned bone utensil handle with incised 'T B'; bone comb; shako plate reading "UBIQUE"; bone domino; button of the 20<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot; creamware sberd bearing the scratched letter 'A' (Crompton)

the questions that we were able to answer this season, more remain. Where is the south wall of the building? Comparing the location of our chimney base with historic maps of the barracks leads us to conclude that the south wall of the building is located off of the end of the terrace. Is this the case? Given that documentary evidence indicates the building was standing until the 1880's, does the barracks building have any deposits elsewhere that post-date 1850? How can we account for this gap in the archaeological evidence? Future seasons of fieldwork and more time spent in the Provincial Archives are needed to help resolve some

of these questions. Ultimately, we hope to be able to build on the success of these excavations with further seasons of fieldwork in the future.

#### **References**

Candow, James

1979 *A Structural and Narrative History of Signal Hill National Historic Park and Area to 1945*. Parks Canada, Ottawa.

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