

# EXCAVATIONS AT THE NORTH RANGE SOLDIERS' BARRACKS SIGNAL HILL, ST. JOHN'S

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Signal Hill's dominant position overlooking the harbour of St. John's, Newfoundland, assured that the hill would become an important part of the defence of the town that lay at its base. The process of fortifying the summit of Signal Hill began at the end of the eighteenth century. The scale of fortifications on Signal Hill increased throughout following century, until the military was withdrawn from St. John's in 1870.

For the third season in a row, students participated in Memorial University's Archaeology Field School at Signal Hill National Historic Site. This project is a joint venture between Parks Canada and Memorial University; both of these institutions provided funding, logistical support, and assistance. Memorial University graduate students Eric Guiry and Amy St. John provided invaluable assistance in the lab and the field.

This season, we returned to the North Range Barracks site (1A51), which is located on the top of Signal Hill, on a terrace just below Ladies' Lookout (Figure 1). This was a British soldiers' barracks, used from 1799 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, and then excavated intensively by the 2009 Memorial University Archaeology Field School (Ferguson 1986). These field seasons

had determined that the site preserved several features that could be attributed to the barracks. Comparisons with extant historic maps indicated that excavations had uncovered one external stone wall of the barracks, and a rectangular stone base that formed the foundation for one of the barracks' four chimney stacks. By the end of the season, though, it was not clear if we had exposed the single-hearth chimney base at the end of the building, or a larger double-hearth chimney base from the middle of the building. Guided by the historic maps, we attempted to locate the end wall of the barracks, with little success.

Thus, the goals of this season's excavations were to resolve this uncertainty. The first task was to locate a second chimney base, and compare its dimensions to the base excavated in 2009. A series of trenches uncovered the second mortared stone chimney base. At over three meters wide (on its north-south axis), the 2010 chimney base was over a meter longer than the base excavated in 2009 (Figure 2). This suggested to us that the 2010 chimney base supported a double-hearth fireplace, while the narrower 2009 chimney base supported a single-hearth fireplace. This in turn indicated that the 2009 chimney base was indeed located near the end of the building, where the historic maps showed the single-hearth fireplace. Accordingly, we opened a large trench near the 2009 excavations to try and locate the end wall of the structure. Our trench encountered unexpectedly deep (and



*Figure 1 Excavating at the North Range Barracks site, on a terrace at the summit of Signal Hill, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.*

frustratingly compacted) deposits that had clearly been disturbed during the construction of a gun emplacement during the Second World War. Over a meter below the present ground surface, we finally located the southwest corner of the barracks building. Only the bottom two or three courses of stone remain intact, but fortunately the interior deposits below this level remain undisturbed.

The 2010 excavations uncovered rich deposits of artifacts and ecofacts, representing the remains of items stored (and discarded) in the building's cellar. 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), convalescent veterans (for whom this was a residence for a short while), or 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 consistent with a nineteenth-

century occupation. The majority of the ceramics are typical early- to mid-nineteenth century types, including undecorated creamware, decorated pearlware, and decorated whiteware. We also uncovered buttons and other uniform-related artifacts marked with regimental insignia, some of which were not known to be in Newfoundland (Figure 3). 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. We also found other personal belongings, such as clay marbles and ceramic plate fragments with initials scratched into them. Another curious find was the mouthpiece of a ceramic whistle, with a roughly-cut finger hole remaining. After the artifact was cleaned in the lab, we determined that the whistle was still functional and emit-



Figure 2 The south face of the double-hearth stone chimney base.



Figure 3 A plate from a shako-type hat, bearing the insignia of the 99<sup>th</sup> Regiment, *in situ*.

ted a piercing noise when used.

Ecofacts were recovered from the cel-

lar 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 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 was likely a problem in the barracks.

In the end, we hope to achieve a better understanding of the world of the British soldier in Newfoundland. Life on the exposed summit of Signal Hill, in constrained living quarters, presented more than the usual com-

plement of problems for the soldiers garrisoned there. To this end, we will combine further artifact analysis and research in the Provincial Archives to further draw out their story. For further details, please visit our site blog at

<https://signalhillarchaeology.wordpress.com/>

### ***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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1986 *An Archaeological Inventory of Signal Hill National Historic Park, St. John's, Newfoundland, 1984*. Parks Canada, Ottawa. 