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York Factory Archaeology 1983

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Introduction

This year marks the sixth year of York Factory archeological research and initiates its final stage. Field work first commenced at York Factory III in the summer of 1978 when three Parks Canada archeologists were sent to assess the known archaeological resources, inventory cultural resources on Parks land and search for the earlier occupations of York Factories I and II (Research Bulletin No. 114). One consequence of this assessment was a decision to launch a mitigative research program to preserve information on site's resources being actively eroded by riverbank slumping along the Hayes River. That ensuing program was to be of five years duration, four of which would be devoted to excavation (Research Bulletins Nos. 151, 157, and 196). The last year would be a year to clean up and compile the information, fill in report gaps and produce an archaeological synthesis. That is the current project.

This bulletin does little more than describe the process of research currently being conducted. As such, it provides little direct research data and may, in fact, prove to be inaccurate in some areas as the process of research seldom follows the course laid out for it. However, it does provide some important information about York Factory research. First of all, it lets the reader know what happened to a particular project after the field work was completed. All too often this crucial piece of news is entirely forgotten by the researcher, and readers who have followed a project's progress for years suddenly lose contact. Second, it outlines the complete set (finished and unfinished) of documents that comprise the research results. That allows people to follow up as they desire. Third, it completes a set of research bulletins on one site which makes the author happy.

The Status of York Factory Archaeology

In the four years of field work, the York Factory archaeology project excavated 704 m^2 out of approximately 160,000 m^2 of used living space. The majority of this effort was concentrated on the removal of portions of nine structures. These operations included the exposure of 29 per cent of the Dog Meat House (1839-1905), 16 per cent of the Ice House (1837-ca.1920), 2 per cent of the Oil Cloth Factory (1839-1900), 68 per cent of the Boat Builders House (1840-1926), 3 per cent of the Boat House (1916-1970), and 25 per cent of one cabin. In addition, searches for the earlier occupation that dated from 1789 to 1838 revealed one cellar from the Old Octagon and possibly two associated structures.

In the course of these excavations, archaeologists also recorded over 35 features including palisades, boardwalks, drainage ditches, ovens, campgrounds and garbage middens, to say nothing of some enigmatic features as yet to be identified. A testing program along the riverbank to locate endangered resources supplemented these excavations, along with a survey of buildings, features and landscape; the inventory of an existing artifact collection; and a preliminary assessment of all cultural resources in the vicinity. Finally, over this period of study about 185,000 artifacts were collected and sent to Winnipeg for analysis.

Reporting of these field seasons has been primarily compressed into two manuscript reports (Adams and Burnip 1981, and Adams 1983b). These reports detail the various operations that were undertaken and describe the reasons for and results of each. Each operation is described separately and typically consists of an historical background of a structure or feature, its physical description, the stratigraphy that was encountered and a short characterization of the associated artifacts based upon their location and function. Survey segments are less rigidly organized but contain similar information. In addition, participants in the project and outside colleagues conducted special studies that have been reported. These include research on ceramics imported to York Factory (Hamilton 1983), tipi rings at York Factory (Adams, in press), art (Adams 1982d), Carron Stoves (Moat 1978, 1979), stoneware containers (Gusset 1982), glass medicine bottles (Lunn 1982), riverbank land use (Burnip and Adams 1980), and subfossil gastropods (Bobrowsky 1982). There have also been numerous general articles written about the site and the archaeological program (see references cited for a list).

The Final Stage

The reports that have been finished cover major segments of the excavation goals but some significant gaps

still remain. Furthermore, there is no unifying report that ties all the material together. The 1982-1983 year has been devoted to that task. To accomplish this, the process has been divided into five phases.

Phase 1 was an assessment of the archaeological field program. It was to provide an overall indication of what was accomplished and how that compared to the original goals. It also provided information on future archaeological concerns, monitoring of the site and some indication of problems still to be addressed. This is fully reported in Adams 1982b.

Phase 2 was to identify from the progress reports and the assessment, those areas of work that still had to be done and to propose a methodology. Eventually, three primary needs were identified and methods of analysis and reporting were established for each. The first problem area was the artifacts. Though there had already been some gross analysis done, and an inventory of all artifacts had been created, there was no catalogue, description or analysis of the assemblage as a whole. To rectify this, we decided to re-examine the artifacts, reclassify them when necessary and describe them in an artifact report.

The second problem was one of synthesis. There was as yet nothing created to tie together any of the archaeological information. We decided that the most useful method of synthesis was to relate the data to established themes for York Factory interpretation. A series of hypotheses was then developed using those themes. The third problem area was one of determining the needs of our clients. Up to this time, archaeological research had been directed towards assessing the site and salvaging the areas most endangered by erosion; but it had become time to present this information in a format useful to the program as a whole. This required input and feedback from other individuals who would be involved in the planning and development of York Factory National Historic Site. The problems and their proposed solutions are more fully documented in Adams and Lunn 1983.

Phase 3 was to assess the value and utility of the information that we have generated. The two crucial issues each involved an outside influence on archaeological data. The first of these was the problem of the historical documentation: York Factory is one of the best documented sites in Canada. There are approximately a half million pages of archival information on York Factory alone, including some extremely detailed information. The concern of archaeology is to avoid wasting time and money creating grand interpretation that can be more readily derived from the archives. To assess the nature of this issue, a test was done on the archival data. At 20 year intervals from 1790 to 1870, all the existing documents were examined to determine, in a broad sense, what kinds of information they contained and the consistency with which the information was reported.

For instance, it was found that the post journals consistently recorded major work activities, infrequently mentioned minor activities and never (within the sample) mentioned leisure activities. Once this information is augmented with the historical reports already completed, such as the structural histories (Ingram 1979, Donaldson 1981, 1982) and the social history being prepared, it should indicate optimum avenues of investigation.

The second issue concerned the fact that all artifacts had been previously coded into an attribute based computer file. The current analysis was to re-organize this artifact inventory by functional categories. Since the existing attributes would have to be used for functional identification, it was necessary to evaluate their validity. The first step of this routine was to run a 10 per cent test on most of the data, wherein actual artifacts were compared to their coded descriptions. This allowed us to isolate badly recorded attributes (error rates of 10 per cent or more) and make decisions about how to treat them. Sometimes it meant a total re-examination of a class of artifacts, and at other times decisions were made not to use a particular attribute. In the end, most of the codes to be used in this study had a reliability of 98 per cent, while a few were still in the 90 to 95 per cent range.

Phase 4 of the program, the one underway at the time of writing, is the classificaion of the artifacts into consistent, workable categories. The first step was to classify all artifacts by location, so horizons were devised to integrate this entire site by operation (a given structure and its environs) and by stratigraphic context. This was accomplished and the horizon codes were appended to each artifact. The second step was to devise the functional classification that would be flexible and most serviceable to our given needs. While several systems were examined, that of Sprague (1981) seemed best. Once the actual system was established the long, arduous task of assigning artifacts to categories was begun. As this is one of the most subjective aspects of archaeological interpretation, it has included considerable forethought and not a little heated discussion. For example, is an axe a woodworker's tool, a lumbering tool, a trade item, a personal tool, or a blacksmith's product? However, conflicts are gradually being resolved and the categories added to the artifact records.

Phase 5 is to be the analysis of the data. It will be conducted in two parts. The first part will be a descriptive analysis of artifact types and varieties, some of their more interpretive or analytically valuable attributes, and their historical context. Since this study is more of an inventory and resource assessment, the descriptions are not to be detailed. Rather, they are to provide enough information to assess their future interpretive and research potential, and to define the types or functional categories that

will be required for other analyses.

The primary concern of the second part of the analysis is to define the range of activities represented and to isolate areas where they were conducted. It will utilize the types defined in the artifact report, the structural information, the spatial classification, and the functional classification to aid interpretation. However, several other research objectives arising out of the study or complementary to it will also be examined. For instance, many artifact types are not indicative of only one function, but can only be functionally ascribed after activity areas have been isolated. Ultimately, it is hoped that this analysis will provide the mechanism to synthesize the various archaeological components into a single cohesive report.

Products

The six year research program will end with the creation of two products; an artifact report and a synthesis report. The artifact report is currently envisioned as consisting of four major sections. The first section will introduce the catalogues, and explain the overall format. The second section will provide the actual artifact catalogue. It is expected that the maximum amount of information that will be written about any particular artifact will be a type name, functional ascription, varieties within a type, distinguishing marks, distribution and quantity, and a description or definition of the type. It might also include some useful historical marks or references and a drawing or photograph. Of course, this is the maximum and some types of artifacts could get considerably less attention. The third section of the report is to provide a series of cross-references to the catalogue, indexes if you will, that will help identify groupings of artifacts of value to particular research or interpretive needs. While these indexes have not as yet been formalized, some possibilities include lists of complete specimens, lists by provenience, lists by theme, and so on. The actual format will evolve from that of the catalogue. The final section will be an explanation of the classification scheme, the methods and theories used to create it, a detailed description of terms used and notes on the reliability of the data.

The synthesis report is to present the substantive results of five years of research. It will likely be composed of three major sections though each could have more than one chapter. The first section will include background material, methodological and theoretical constraints, a statement of hypothesis and so on, developing a context for the next two sections. The second section will concentrate on an operational view of the site, that is a description of each operation, its associated structures and features and an

analysis of the artifacts and activities that were conducted in that area. This will in turn create a series of isolated characterizations of the site that will provide the building blocks for the third section. That division will be a thematic analysis. Here, individual hypotheses will be tested and explained to create overall interpretations of the archaeology that has been conducted.

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