Meet the Jacksons

Deed and genealogical research on families living on the lot enabled us to propose that the images in the daguerreotypes and ambrotypes are most likely of members of the Jackson family. The southern half of the building on Cole’s Hill was occupied by Judith Smith (Stetson) Jackson (1817-1890), her husband, Edwin Jackson (1812-1887), and their children Elizabeth (Lizzie) A. Jackson (1842-1897), Henry H. Jackson (1845-1877), and Mary E. Jackson (1849-1853).

The artifacts of jet were most popular during the mid-Victorian period (1861-1880) when the death of Prince Albert and the beginning of the American Civil War brought an end to the Romantic period (Rosen 2013). These combined factors imply that the act of depositing these artifacts occurred during a single event.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dennis Piechocka, the archaeological conservator at the Fiske Center, for his incredible work on these artifacts. Unless otherwise specified, all of the photographs were also taken by Piechocka. We would also like to thank Dr. David Landon and Dr. Christa Beranek, the project directors, for their support and encouragement. These excavations were on property belonging to Pilgrim Hall Museum, and we thank them and the Town of Plymouth for their support of the project.

Introduction

During Project 400 excavations, carried out by the Fiske Center for Archaeological Research at the University of Massachusetts Boston, archaeologists uncovered a cache of deeply personal items from the 19th century on Cole’s Hill in downtown Plymouth. This collection of over 100 artifacts consists of Victorian-era jewelry, clothing items (a belt, numerous buttons), two daguerreotypes, two ambrotypes, and several very fragile paper, leather, and textile fragments. This unexpected cache provides a rare glimpse into the town’s rich history that continued beyond the 17th-century Pilgrim settlement.

Fieldwork

The excavations on Cole’s Hill consisted of five 1 x 2 m units placed to investigate features identified through GPR and FDEM surveys and to test the rest of the lot for other features or deposits. The unit containing the memorial cache, excavation unit 3, was located in the northwest corner of the lot. There was a strong signal from the FDEM indicative of a concentration of metal, probably caused by pieces of slag in levels 2 and 3. The upper three layers consisted of topsoil and two layers of fill with gravel and slag inclusions and a notably lower artifact density than other nearby units. Beneath these three layers, a concentration of cobbles running east-west divided the unit into northern and southern contexts. In the northern context of EU3, in a pit cut into the subsoil, a cache consisting of three distinct organic sections, a syringe, numerous pieces of jewelry, clothing items, a thimble, daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, and eye glasses emerged.

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Conservation

Under the direction of conservator Dennis Piechocka, the authors mechan-ically cleaned the artifacts of soil matrix and applied archival consolidants, e.g., Paraloid B-72, to strengthen those artifacts too fragile and embrittled for normal handling. The daguerreotypes and ambrotypes were stabilized by specialists in photographic conservation at the Northeast Document Conservation Center.

Interpretation

Currently, this deposit is being interpreted as a memorial cache possibly dedicated to mourning a member of the Jackson family. The number of items made of materials associated with mourning and the evidence for the intentional breakage of several of the artifacts including the key, the metal chatelaine fobs, and the double-sided silk fabric, all support the notion of this as a cache of mourning. The discovery of three distinct organic materials underlying the artifacts leads us to believe that these items were purposefully placed in this pit. In addition, the stack of daguerreotypes and ambrotypes was wrapped in paper and topped with the braid of blonde hair prior to deposition. The coiled belt in the corner of the north wall also supports the idea of careful, purposeful placement. Given the TQP of 1885 from the belt buckle and the terminus ante quem of 1920 when the house was demolished due to eminent domain, the date range for deposition is 1885-1920. These combined factors imply that the act of depositing these artifacts occurred during a single event.

Resources

Additional information about the excavations and artifacts can be found on our blog: http://blogs.umb.edu/fiskecenter/