The Analysis of Vanished Culturescapes

John R. McGregor, Indiana State University

Abstract
Traditional surveys are of little value in locating historic sites on which the early buildings have been demolished. This is particularly true of rural sites, since the historical documentation for them typically identifies only the sizeable landholdings on which the sites were located. In such instances, the location and analysis of sites and their characteristics requires the combined use of the available historical information, intensive surveys to locate historic debris fields, and analysis of the site debris (material culture) to identify the periods the sites were occupied as well as the site activities. Both pioneer rural residential sites and early stoneware pottery sites in the Lower Wabash Valley of western Indiana were located by this combination of techniques from historical geography and archaeology. It was then possible to analyze the site characteristics and patterning.

Introduction

Structures and related features of the earliest periods of European historic settlement in the United States have typically been demolished. This seems to have happened irrespective of the locality and the time periods involved. The early, seventeenth century historic sites along the James River in Tidewater Virginia serve as one example. Virtually nothing remains there of the plantation and farmstead buildings of the initial century of settlement. Bacon's Castle and the church tower at Jamestown are among the few remaining examples of buildings surviving from the 1600s in that area.

In the Lower Wabash Valley of western Indiana, few pioneer buildings survive. Rural residential structures rarely survive in the area from the late eighteenth - early nineteenth century, and no pre-1850 artisan and industrial structures remained on over 4,000 located historic industrial sites.

Among the numerous other possible area and period examples, few if any of the buildings and facilities of the early twentieth century ranches and farms survive in the volcanic uplands near Flagstaff in Northern Arizona. It would appear that irrespective of the location and period of early settlement, few of the houses, churches, stores, mills, forts, roads, docks, artisan works, and other facilities which characterized those times and areas have survived. The initial "culturescape" generated by the beginning of European expansion in diverse areas and period of settlement has largely vanished.

However, even where obvious historic features on the early sites are lacking, it is still possible to develop analyses of their spatial characteristics. The approach requires identification of site and settlement areas from the available local documents and histories, intensive field surveys to locate the debris fields of historic sites in those areas, and analysis of recovered site debris (material culture) to verify both the periods that the sites were occupied and the kind of activities which occurred on them.

Two examples of such early site location characteristics and spatial patterning in the Lower Wabash Valley are reviewed here. They include (1) pre-1830 (pioneer) rural residential sites, and (2) post-1820 stoneware pottery sites. The multi-county surveys (Figure 1) on which that research was based were developed between 1984 and 1993. Only four in situ early pioneer structures were located within the research area, and each of the log buildings was so modified that its early origin was not apparent from its exterior. No buildings or features of the early stoneware potteries survived at the time of the surveys, although one descendent company was still in operation. Following a brief discussion of the historic context of the area and the available historical documentation, the approach to locating the sites and the analysis of their material culture are presented in turn. The pioneer residential and stoneware pottery site characteristics are then summarized.

The Historic Context of the Lower Wabash Valley

Permanent European occupation of the Lower Wabash Valley began in 1732 with the establishment of the French post at Vincennes. The concentration of settlers in the village was consistent with the French colonial pattern. Only a few outlying farms and trading posts in the area were occupied by the French (Ekberg 1998 88; Esarey 1947 10). A scattering of British squatters and traders also apparently moved into the area during both the French colonial period (to 1765) and the brief period of British control (to 1779). However, excepting the village, the colonial occupation of the area was minimal, and too few sites were occu-
Figure 1. The Extent of Pioneer Rural Residential and Stoneware Pottery Site Surveys in the Lower Wabash Valley

Legend

- Pioneer Rural Residential Site Survey Area
- Counties Included in the stoneware Pottery Site Survey
- National Road
- Terre Haute and Richmond Railroad
- County Boundary
- River
- Town Noted

© McGregor 2000
plied to support an analysis of colonial French and British rural site locations in the area.

George Rogers Clark's Revolutionary War victory at Vincennes in 1779 opened the Lower Wabash Valley to American settlers. From 1779 until the Indian threat ceased at the end of the War of 1812, pioneers in the area were intermittently at risk. The period of rural pioneer settlement ended about 1830 when extensive occupation of the area had been established.

By then, farms were widespread, towns with their merchants were established, and pioneer industrial complexes processing area materials for shipment downriver to the New Orleans market had been developed (McGregor 1992). The progression from raw frontier to extensive settlement was accomplished in approximately 50 years.

Site Documentation

The surviving descriptions of colonial Vincennes and the few occupied rural sites of the period were provided by traveler's accounts of the late 1700s, the published local histories, and a few unpublished documents available in area libraries (Barnhart and Riker 1971:170; Somes 1962:56). As well as providing information on Vincennes, they included references to the approximate locations of the scattered trading posts and farms along the Wabash and its tributaries.

The French records kept at Vincennes have apparently not survived. Some were lost in a flood at Fort Chartres, others were destroyed by mildew in a New Orleans vault, and still more disappeared when the "Recorder" at Vincennes suddenly decamped with all his records.

Documentation of Lower Wabash Valley settlement during the pioneer period was considerably better. The use of property tax records proved to be an effective means of identifying the landholdings in a county where improvements (e.g. buildings) had been developed. Taxes began as soon as local government was established, and title to property established. These annual records indicate the owners name, the location of the property, the land value, and the value of improvements. Accordingly, it was possible to identify the landholdings, in both the towns and the rural landscape, where early buildings had been constructed. Even a single year of early county tax records provided a considerable data base on early settlement in that county.

It was also possible to define a substantial number of early landholdings and settlement areas from other sources. Town and county histories, church histories, and early newspapers, maps and atlases were used to piece together data on individual urban and rural landholdings, settled rural areas, and pioneer towns. The same types of sources were used to generate locational information on the stoneware potteries. In addition, local historians (e.g. Stringfellow 1984), studies of the area industry (Davies 1981; Lee 1893), early Sanborn maps, and a study of the Indiana clays (Whitlock 1933) were particularly helpful resources for identifying and locating the sites of some of the potteries and the clay resources they once used.

Verification of Site Locations - The Field Work

The verification of historic site locations necessarily involved field inspection of the areas identified in the diverse literature. Site verification was provided by the location of debris fields which contained artifacts from the periods of interest. Outside the towns, the references to site locations ranged from specific but large individual landholding to rural neighborhoods or areas in which sites had been established. That array of possibilities guided the field work as the surveys progressed.

The locational characteristics of the pioneer residences and the potteries in the area were not known at the outset, and their definition was one of the research objectives. The initial field work necessarily involved a systematic process of trial and error as various locational hypotheses were tested. The documentary information was gradually supplemented by site information provided by local individuals who ranged from farmers familiar with their land and the immediate neighborhood to local historians and amateur archaeologists concerned with a wider area. In addition the process of "reading the ground" was essential to the survey process. The presence of an old house or cemetery, remnants of planted vegetation, soil colors which did not fit the local pattern, and gate markers where a lane no longer existed are each examples of landscape features which suggested the location or nearby presence of an historic site and which helped guide the survey.

As suggested, the owner or tenant of an area under investigation was sometimes aware of locations where historic artifacts had been found on the property. Lacking that, traverses of present building sites, of land adjoining them along the roads, and of higher topography near the present building sites were made. Where that was not productive, traverses along the existing roads, of other higher ground, and along parallels to stream channels were developed. It was hypothesized that later structures would be built near the earlier sites, and lacking that the pioneers would be
influenced by the convenience of road locations along
the survey boundaries, the attractiveness of higher
ground for home sites, and the ready availability of
surface water.

This initial approach served to locate a number of
pioneer rural residential sites. Their locational
characteristics helped to refine the field hypotheses,
and the rate of early site location gradually improved.
However, the pioneers did occupy diverse areas across
the Lower Wabash Valley, individuals exhibited
idiosyncracy in site location, and the available land
diminished as settlement expanded over the long
(1779-1830) pioneer period.

In each area, it was essential to continue to work
with local informants and to read the ground. The
process of site location never became routine, even
though the recognition of local patterns did facilitate
the work. The success rate in the search for rural
pioneer residences was reasonably good, as material
culture recovered from 75 of the 328 rural residential
sites located between 1988 and 1993 included items
diagnostic of the pioneer period. Many later rural
residential sites were, of course, established in the areas
of pioneer settlement and they were also surveyed.

The search for the early stoneware potteries was
developed using the same basic field approach. The
primary difference was that some locational
information had been developed on the Clay County
potteries by Davies (1983) and the Parke and
Vermillion Counties by Stringfellow (1984). In those
instances the field investigation could be focused on a
small area from the outset. In addition, some of the
pottery locations were adequately defined by either
identification of the town lots which they once
occupied or from the locations shown on historic maps.
In the research area, multiple stoneware pottery
operations continued from about 1820 to 1910, and site
documentation improved over that period. However,
locational verification from site debris remained
essential when historic documentation identified areas
rather than specific sites, and this proved necessary on
18 pottery sites. A total of 38 of the 43 potteries
identified in the literature were located in the surveys.

Verification of Site Type and Period - Material
Culture Analysis

Wherever people live or work for any appreciable
time they generate quantities of debris. In humid areas,
organic objects such as those made of wood, cloth, and
paper will decay unless they are situated in saturated
ground. In Midwestern historic sites, pottery, glass,
metal, and occasional stone objects comprise the bulk
of the early debris. While a few in tact objects may be
recovered, the materials collected during a site survey
are typically fragments of objects which have been
broken and discarded.

The premise that material culture varies with the
people involved, the time period, the region, and the
activities on the site is fundamental to archaeology.
Accordingly, collections from site debris fields can
serve as the basis for identifying a site location,
determination of its activity (residence, pottery, etc.),
and "dating" the period it was occupied.

Fortunately, pottery and glass artifacts are common
artifacts on residential historic sites. Where the soil is
exposed, and especially where it has been recently
plowed, a surface collection of site materials can be
generated with a series of walking traverses of the site.

The French colonial, pioneer, and mid-nineteenth
century pottery types are well documented and are
distinctive. For example, French colonial ceramic
assemblages include utilitarian stoneware, red and
brown earthenwares, and tin glazed decorated
earthenware (Faulkner, A., and G. Faulkner 1982; 
Gums 1988). These differ from the utilitarian redware
and decorated English creamware, pearlware, and
refined white earthenwares which were characteristic of
the pioneer period sites (Gums 1991 106; Noel Hume 
1970 123-131; Price, C. R., 1881). In turn, thick,
utilitarian American stoneware (Greer 1981), ironstone
pottery, and an variety of later earthenwares were the
characteristic types of the mid-nineteenth century (Rice
1987).

Since pottery was the most abundant type of debris
on residential sites and the pottery types in use varied
over time, the artifact collections provided a
straightforward means of identifying the period or
periods a residential site was occupied. The mix of
utilitarian and (sometimes) higher quality ceramics,
shards of bottles and other glassware, occasional
household metal objects (thimbles), and even toy
fragments (such as doll heads) served to define the
residential use.

Stoneware potteries also generated distinctive
debris (Greer 1981 218-223; Noel Hume 1987 169).
Specialized objects, collectively known as kiln
furniture, were needed to stack unfired pottery into the
kilns and successfully produce finished stoneware.
Fired stoneware rings made it possible to stack items,
and irregular fired stoneware wads and spool or
mushroom shaped spacers kept them separated
horizontally. Without the separation provided by the
kiln furniture, the new pottery would have fused with
adjoining pieces where they were in contact during
firing.

31
Kiln furniture was the diagnostic ceramic debris at the early pottery sites, and entirely lacking elsewhere. An accumulation of stoneware pottery shards also occurred on the sites, and, where a residence occurred on the site, a mix of residential debris would also be present. The periods the site was in operation could be identified in part from the glazes used on the stoneware. Salt glazes, often combined with clay slip interiors, were followed by both exterior and interior clay slips, and ultimately (after 1880) by objects finished in part or in total with the white Bristol glaze. The sequence is approximate, since individual potters followed their own inclinations as alternative glazes became available in the area.

Thus, as evident from the examples considered, the analysis of material culture from historic sites can provide approximate dates of occupation as well as indications of the type of activities occurring on the site. It requires only familiarity with the various material culture assemblages which characterized the periods of occupation and the site types in a research area. Accordingly, use of the concepts and methods of historical archaeology makes it possible to extend the geographic analysis of site locations and settlement patterns into periods of early historic settlement. Given the virtual lack of pioneer buildings and other apparent early site features such as the pottery facilities, traditional surveys would provide little evidence of the early occupation.

Generalized Site Characteristics

Rural residential sites were selected with sufficient consistency by the pioneers that their locational characteristics provided insights into the settling process (McGregor, 1999). For example, they consistently avoided northern slopes, steeper slopes, and flood prone areas. Conversely, they selected sites in areas of substantial local relief, well up in the topography, thereby gaining access to diverse resources, good air circulation, and often an attractive view. Typically, the nearest stream was first or second order rather than the higher order streams which had developed flood plains in the research area.

They were, however, normally within a mile or two of access to water transportation (third or higher order streams) and mill streams (fourth and higher order). Soils rated as having moderate restrictions for residential construction (44 of 75), and even severe restrictions (11), were selected for sites in an apparent trade-off for higher soil yields. And, in localities where early surveys were mixed with Public Land Survey areas, 94 percent of the early sites were located on the early surveys. Gaining legal title to the land was obviously at issue.

Because pioneer occupation of the area was extensive, the pioneers were clearly not restricted to occupying a single environmental niche. Although the general site scenario clearly indicates considerable expertise in locational choice, it describes locational propensities rather than requirements. The pioneers were capable of varied types of rural economic activities, had their individual locational and activity idiosyncrasies, and were able to establish themselves throughout the diverse local environments of the Lower Wabash Valley.

Analysis of the stoneware potteries which operated within five counties of the Lower Wabash Valley (McGregor, 1996) provided a second example of early site characteristics. The industry in the area started in the late pioneer period (1820), expanded substantially, and then began its slow decline in 1860. Only one pottery (at Clay City) continued in operation after 1910.

Pottery production was widespread in the area. The sites were each located close to water, stoneware clay deposits, and wood sources, and most were on the margin of an early town. Materials, fuel, and market concerns were clearly met at the identified locations. While the pattern of individual stoneware potteries which operated in the area varied over time, production within a number of areas was maintained. Given that pattern, the early potteries apparently had a marketing advantage within an approximate 15 mile radius of their sites. The regularity of the observed area pattern clearly related well to the central place marketing model.

After 1840, a post-pioneer concentration of stoneware potteries also developed in the Brazil, Indiana area. Improved transportation was first offered in 1840 by the extension of the National Road to Brazil, and then in 1850 the Terre Haute and Richmond Railroad. Both were apparent factors in the development there of a local cluster of 14 stoneware potteries. The combined capacity of the potteries far exceeded local demand, and they necessarily served a more extensive market.

Conclusions

The analyses of pioneer rural residential sites and early stoneware potteries are examples of research on historical site locational characteristics where the obvious site features no longer exist. The results provided insights into the pioneer rural residential site characteristics and the settling process, as well as the
locational characteristics and markets of the potteries.

The basic approach developed in the research should be applicable to the analysis of early historical sites in other areas. The specific methodology in any future work would necessarily vary with the area, the period, and the type of site involved. However, the use of site debris and archaeological concepts would necessarily be consistent elements of such research wherever the apparent site features have been demolished and the locational references are not precise.

Literature Cited


Davies, M., 1981. *Clay County, Indiana Traditional Potters and Their Wares.* Brazil, IN: H. Garmong and Son, Inc.


---


---


---


---


---


Stringfellow, Tony, 1984. Personal communication.


---

Dr. John R. McGregor is Professor Emeritus, Department of Geography, Geology, and Anthropology, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana. He received both his undergraduate and graduate training at the University of Illinois.