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# ARCHAEOLOGICAL INFORMATION FROM THE CONSTITUTION HALL STATE PARK SITE

By WILLIAM H. WESLEY

Four months of small scale archaeological testing on the Constitution Hall State Park site in the block bounded by Franklin and Madison Streets and Gates Avenue in the Spring of 1971 brought to light over 3,000 bits and pieces of material that, for the most part are the remains of buildings and accouterments from nineteenth century Huntsville.

There are numerous ways in which past events are preserved for the members of current societies. The items that become buried in the soil at some locations where human activity has been especially intensive can serve as one form of stored information. The Constitution Hall site is such a storehouse.

History is usually considered to be factual information, yet, we are familiar with the various phrases indicating that history is often rewritten. This is simply the admission that human frailty allows the recording of inaccuracies and mistakes, and often one person's opinion of what happened at a given point in time just isn't a fair interpretation of what actually happened. In scientific writing one sees often, "In the light of new information, we now find that ---." History is no different. The events themselves are not changeable, but what is known about events and how they are viewed, do change.

The many artifacts now buried on the Constitution Hall State Park site may not have the potential capability of changing history, but on the basis of items removed in the archaeological test project, much interesting information about what daily life was like in the last century could be available, and specific information relating to activities on the site could be a worthwhile contribution to the long term informative value of the State Park. Certainly, displays of artifacts from the site would make the events of the past more realistic to future visitors to this site where Alabama became a state.

Based on the artifacts and other evidence unearthed, it seems that some of the citizens in the vicinity of this half block area of Huntsville, near Big Springs, were people who smoked clay pipes, dipped or sniffed snuff and drank wine. Some of the men carried pocket knives and firearms, and the women did a lot of sewing. Some of the meals eaten included duck, squirrel, fish, eggs, pork, beef, squash and fruit. Gourds and jimsonweed grew in the immediate vicinity or somewhere nearby, and someone played a harmonica.

The many ceramic fragments from the pits show that meals were served on dinnerware typical of the period and included blue and green "shell edge" or "feather edge" ware, and "willoware." A typical mid nineteenth century newspaper advertisement is this one from the Huntsville Advocate: "A splendid assortment of queensware, glassware, hardware, wooden and willoware can always be found at S. W. Thompson's, Power's old stand N.E. corner public square. Having bought, painted, repaired, and refitted the building known as Power's old stand, the highest prices are now always paid in cash for butter, eggs, chickens, potatoes, etc."

Rather than changing history, historic archaeology most often serves to support or verify written history, and it is amazing that so much information concerning man's activities accumulates in the soil. In the case of the Constitution Hall site, the four small (5' x 5') test pits excavated have tended to support the existing facts and impressions relating to the site's history. Pieces of foundry type, many with the letters and digits still readily discernable, bring vivid reality to the former existence of the Alabama Republican newspaper office at this location. Fragments of brick with heavy gray glaze give an idea of how trim work on some of the brick buildings may have looked, and numerous bits of thick plaster reveal something of the interior appearance of the buildings. Flat window glass fragments with patches of green, yellow, black, and white paint suggest lettering on the windows of some of the buildings. A brass "A" two inches high, with a slant and a slight old English appearance may have been part of words over a doorway, or on a sign hanging near a boardwalk - such words as "Alabama Republican, Constitution Hall, Cabinet Shop, or Library" - all establishments that once existed on the site.

A wedge-shaped brick removed from the rubble in one pit may have been part of a well or cistern, since such bricks were used to build round structures by laying them with the narrow end pointing inward and the wide end to the outside. If such is the case, such a well or cistern would have been in use before c. a. 1830 when Huntsville's cedar pipe water system was constructed. If a well or wells did exist, they were sure to have been filled with trash and rubbish when they were no longer needed and are storehouses of archaeological information. The lower portion of any such well would very likely have the brick walls still

in place.

Bullets of the "minnie ball" variety and several percussion caps that had been fired, were found. Such ammunition was in use for a number of years prior to the Civil War, but could well have been a part of military activity that took place in Huntsville during that period.

Very small brass screws and a small brass lock plate from the area of the cabinet shop provide visible evidence of this activity from the now distant past.

A large glass bowl or possibly a chandelier is represented by seventy-two pieces of clear, thick glass. In either case, large punch bowl or chandelier, such an item would lend a touch of elegance to past events.

The archaeological literature is filled with references to the fact that every archaeological project is unique, and there are indeed some unique circumstances that tend to enhance the archaeological potential at this particular site. The first test pit excavated chanced to reveal the foundation of a building judged to be the remains of a cotton warehouse built in the 1890s. This foundation consists of the brick wall base and a thin layer of mortar on the inside area, which serves as a perfect temporal dividing point. Everything above the mortar is almost entirely from the early twentieth century and all below it is from the nineteenth century. Other such building remains probably exist here.

Another plus factor is that the lime in the mortar and plaster from the old buildings has contributed to the alkalinity of the soil on the site, which means that organic material has been better preserved than it might otherwise have been. This accounts for the presence of such perishable material as leather and

fabric.

The four 5' x5' pits excavated as a test project on this important site represent less than 1/2 of 1 percent of the surface area contained in the 1/2 block area, and excludes that portion presently covered by concrete. The very small sample of archaeological information produced so far from this small fraction of the Constitution Hall site has not proved to be exceptionally surprising, but somehow it seems very much worth having, and to allow the vast amount of remaining information to be destroyed by the construction that will be necessary for making the state park a reality, seems to be something like setting fire to a library filled with rare books. After all, this is the only spot in the world where Alabama became a state. What will become of this storehouse of buried history? If it develops that more archaeology can be arranged on a large enough scale to salvage this important part of Alabama's past it will be a definite asset to the future of the site as a state park.