THE BUSINESS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

June 30, 2012 Michelle Touton Commercial Archaeology, Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2012, Historical Archaeology, Maritime Archaeology, Post Medieval 1840s-1850s site, a development specialist, absent archaeologist, and our maritime archaeologist consultant, Anthropology, archaeologist, archaeologist and a businesswoman, Archaeology, architectural historian, artifacts, awesome site, construction site, CRM, Excavation, excavation equipment, fieldwork, heavy equipment, historic site, historical archaeology, Independence Day, labwork, looting, manager a list, manager at a contract archaeology company, maritime archaeologist for review, office manager, overnight security guard, overtime, Planning Department, principal investigator, printing field forms, privy, project manager, public agency, Richard MacNeish, security, Senior Archaeologist, stone tools, Time management, United Kingdom, United States, urban site

While surveying, you sometimes find unexpected things– like blueberries! Yum.

I'm a project manager at a contract archaeology company, which means I have to be both an archaeologist and a businesswoman. Anathema to purists, maybe, but in the United States most archaeology is done commercially, as part of an industry called Cultural Resource Management (CRM), and businesses need people doing business-y things to keep them running. In CRM, developers hire archaeologists and architectural historians to help them deal with cultural resources that will be affected by their development project, in much the same way as they hire environmental scientists, traffic engineers, and architects. We work for the developer, but our first duty is to

the resources.

For me, the 2012 Day of Archaeology was pretty typical. My primary task for the day, as it has been for the last month or so, is to continue editing a site report. The archaeologist who wrote the report works mostly on prehistoric sites, but this report is about a historic site. Since it's her first historic-period report, we're taking our time with it to teach her how to do it right. Historic-period artifacts require completely different analysis knowledge than prehistoric artifacts (e.g., learning to recognize mold seams on bottles or differentiate fabric types in ceramics, vs. categorizing edge flaking in stone tools), which takes time to learn. You also have more lines of evidence (in the form of historical maps and records) that you need to bring in to your analysis. Work on the report has been slow-going because I often am too busy with other things to get a chance to work on it.

THE DAY BEGINS

My first task upon getting to the office–after brewing a pot of tea, of course–is to check in with our people in the field. Today we have two field projects going on, both of which are in the monitoring stage. "Monitoring" means that an archaeologist watches the construction crew as they dig, in order to spot any emerging resources (artifacts/sites/etc.) before they're damaged or destroyed. Monitoring is usually done after we've already done testing and evaluation of anything we know is on site, and is largely a failsafe to protect things we didn't know were there.

Of our two monitoring projects today, one is a big housing development at the outskirts of a suburban area, which had previously been ranchland, so the developer has had to do a lot of digging in order to install utilities and level the ground. We've had one or two monitors out at that site almost every day for over a year.

The other monitoring project is in an urban area; they're digging down pretty deep because the building they're working on will have an underground parking garage. When we did our testing out there, we found lots of foundations and trash deposits dating to around 1850-1900. Since they were so extensive–covering almost all of the lot–it was inefficient to try to expose them all before construction started. So, with an idea of where the interesting stuff is, we're letting the construction crew do their digging (with a monitor watching) and when they get close to a resource we bring in a team to excavate and record it.

I also check in with the people who are working in the office/lab today. Our osteologist and one of our summer interns are working on mortuary analysis for human remains from a historic cemetery that had to be removed recently; a senior archaeologist is analyzing and writing up artifacts from an 1840s-1850s site; and a lab tech is sorting through tiny bits of rubble from wetscreening. The rubble is what's left after you wash away the dirt and take out the big/visible artifacts, but can contain important things like beads, little rodent bones, and bits of worked stone. On a typical day this week we also had a senior archaeologist working on a testing plan, another archaeologist analyzing wood beams from a site, our other summer intern refitting and identifying ceramics using the Transferware Pattern Database, and two or three lab techs working on the wetscreening rubble. However, this is the weekend before the Independence Day holiday in the United States, and a bunch of people have taken the day off.

Pieces of "diagnostic" ceramics from a site. These particular ones were manufactured in England and imported here to the U.S. in the late 1800s.

THE BUSINESS-Y STUFF

Once I'd confirmed that everyone was where they were supposed to be and had everything they needed, it was time to check email and see what happened overnight. Two potential clients have asked us to prepare proposals to do work for them. One proposal is for a client we work with a lot, involving utility replacement. I get together a map of the utility alignment, a description of the archaeological requirements for that jurisdiction, and the final budget and report from another project we completed a couple years ago for the same client in the same utility district. I give all

these things to the Principal Investigator, who'll come up with a scope of work and budget for the client to approve.

The other proposal is for an on-call contract with a public agency. Rather than have to go through a months-long process of soliciting bids, evaluating them, putting them up for public comment, selecting a preferred vendor, negotiating costs, etc., every time they need work done, most public agencies will set up multi-year on-call contracts. They just have to go through the process once, and then when something comes up they just go to their on-call archaeologist (or whatever) and say "We need you to do this job, and we've already got your rates, so go do it." Oftentimes for archaeology, nothing will come up during the on-call period, so getting an on-call contract doesn't mean you're necessarily going to actually get any billable work. Since for this proposal we're working as a team with other companies–an architectural historian, a development specialist, an environmental firm, and an engineer–our portion of the proposal is pretty small. I give our office manager a list of similar projects we've worked on, hourly rates, resumes, and references, and she'll format them to match the materials from the other companies and then send them on.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY STUFF

With business matters taken care of, it's time for me to put on my archaeologist hat. One of our senior archaeologists has been working on a testing plan for a project near the waterfront. Sites near the water have different kinds of resources than inland sites–especially in places like here, where the current waterfront area used to be underwater before people filled it in. The city's Planning Department records all known and expected maritime resources–like ships and wharves–in a GIS database, portions of which they make available to archaeologists working in the area. An email arrives from Planning with a screenshot of what they think is in our project area, and it turns out there are more ships than we thought there were. The archaeologist who's got the lead on this project is one of the ones who took the day off, so after a quick flurry of emails and texts to Planning, the absent archaeologist, and our maritime archaeologist consultant, I rewrite a portion of the testing plan for her and send the new version to the maritime archaeologist for review. Our clients for this project have tried to design their project around the anticipated ships so they won't disturb them, so they're not going to be happy to hear that there are probably more. We won't know until we go out and test, though, so no point in redesigning their project again just yet.

THE PRIVY

This feature, from a site we excavated in 2009, was originally built as a well. After the well silted up and was abandoned, it was used as a privy. The feature was pretty stinky.

Lunchtime comes and goes, but is cut short by a phone call–our monitor at the urban site has found a privy. Privies, or "outhouses" in modern American vernacular, are a great source of information about the people who used them because, before municipal trash collection, all sorts of things used to get thrown down them. And since the pits are usually relatively narrow, everything stacks up quickly, so there's often a clear stratigraphic difference between a broken plate thrown down in one year and an empty medicine bottle thrown down the next. That means we can pinpoint dates easily. The downside to excavating privies is that, depending on soil conditions and age, they can smell absolutely disgusting. Our monitor found this one by smell rather than sight. Unpleasant for her, but on the other hand she caught it so early that it wasn't damaged by the excavation equipment at all.

I check with our Principal Investigator, who decides that we should leave it in place until Monday. We're short on hands today, so we don't have anyone free to go out and help the

monitor excavate it; plus, it's near the end of the day for the construction crew (who usually work 7am-3pm). The monitor directs the construction crew to work on another part of the site, and covers up the privy to protect it–and anybody who might venture on site and fall into it–over the weekend.

THE PUBLICITY PROBLEM

Leaving the privy over the weekend is a gamble, though. Our monitor has witnessed fresh potholes on site when she arrives in the mornings–bottle hunters have been breaking into the site overnight, digging holes, and stealing artifacts before we have a chance to find and record them properly. This, despite the fact that the construction site has an overnight security guard. This isn't at all an unusual situation, and is why professional archaeologists have to be careful about what information we publicize. We would all like to involve the public in our work–it's fascinating, and belongs to everyone in our community–but if we tell the news crews that we're working on an awesome site, we'll come back the next day to find the whole place looted. In the United States, archaeological information is privileged. The National Register of Historic Places will tell you the address of every historic bridge, house, and monument, but the locations of sites are confidential. Similarly, when developers submit their technical studies to planning departments for public review, the archaeological maps are omitted. There's just too much danger that a site will be damaged or destroyed if its location is made public.

So. What to do about this privy? We don't trust the on-site security to keep it safe, since they haven't done a terribly good job of protecting the archaeology so far (their primary task is to protect the equipment and materials, and on this site the "security" consists of someone driving by every once in a while and seeing if anything looks amiss). Our usual strategy is to cover it up with a board or tarp, bury it, and park a piece of heavy equipment over it. No go–since it was found at the end of the day, by the time we were ready to cover it up, the construction crew had all gone home. The Principal Investigator emails the developer to let them know that the privy exists and is potentially in danger.

THE PLAN OF ACTION

The developer calls a couple of hours later to discuss strategy for the privy. It turns out he's got three different companies scheduled to be working on site on Monday, and there won't be space for all of them to do their jobs with the privy there. So he asks us if we can get a crew together to excavate it tomorrow–which is Saturday, and therefore overtime. Now, at this point it's 4:30pm

on a Friday afternoon before a holiday weekend, so getting a crew together is problematic. I check with everyone still in the office: no luck. I call all of our regular crew: one person can work all day and one can work a half-day. I call all of our on-call crew, who bounce around from job to job (a.k.a. "digbums" or "shovelbums"): no luck. Everyone's either working for someone else, or out of town for the weekend, or entertaining guests. Two hours of phone calls and texts later, all I can come up with is 2.5 people, with the possibility of one more who's not answering her phone. That's enough to get a decent amount of work done, so I call the developer to let him know we'll be on site at 7am tomorrow morning. Then, after confirming start time with each of the crew, I spend another hour collecting field gear and printing field forms.

Finally, well into Friday evening, I'm ready to shut down the computer and go home.

I never did get around to editing that report.