

# IN SMALL THINGS REMEMBERED

June 30, 2012 A Venovcevs Commercial Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2012, Historical Archaeology, Anthropology, Archaeological culture, Archaeological sub-disciplines, Archaeology, Artifact, CRM, Egyptian temple, Excavation, History, Ontario, report writer and a material culture analyst, Syro-Palestinian archaeology, Toronto

Among other things, I chose archaeology for one primary reason – I did not want to be stuck in an office working nine to five. Inundated with commercial television, I assumed, as many, that archaeology was all about traveling to exotic places to solve ancient mysteries of long-lost civilizations. Archaeology, not dissimilar to the adventures of a certain Dr. Jones, was about adventure and big, spectacular discoveries. My 18-year-old self would probably be horrified to learn that I do, in fact, work nine to five and much of the discoveries I deal with are neither ancient nor big. In fact, now, I commute on a bicycle, work in an air conditioned Toronto office, and get to sleep in my own bed every night. I work in commercial (aka CRM) archaeology as a report writer and a material culture analyst and I get REALLY excited if my Euro-Canadian site pre-dates 1800 AD. Despite all this, I am happier and much more self-fulfilled than my 18-year-old self ever imagined myself being.

Today, I spent my day analyzing artifacts from a survey of an 1830s to 1850s Euro-Canadian farmhouse located about an hour's drive north of Toronto and as far as big ancient mysteries were concerned, it was neither big nor ancient nor particularly mysterious. In fact, it was a scatter of early-to-mid nineteenth century artifacts that was sparse by any standards. The occupants of the site, tenants who were among the earliest settlers in the area, lived a frugal existence in a sparsely occupied landscape that did not warrant a large accumulation of material goods. The number of tenants that occupied the site is unknown and the site's name comes from an individual who is listed on the property only once in an 1837 directory for the area. This is no grand Egyptian temple.



*Ceramics, a bottle base, buttons, a pipe, and some nails: A small sample of the artifacts from an early nineteenth-century Ontario farmstead.*

Yet, this small site is an excellent example why archaeology, especially historical archaeology, is important. Much of all written history was written by the privileged elites who, through their perceptions of what is significant and fundamental left to us a written record that has narrowed our vision of the past by reproducing in us what they considered important. Archaeology challenges the bias of written history since the disposal of refuse is a universal activity done by everyone within any given society. While the archaeological record can be obscured, manipulated, and altered, the traces of past human activities remain to be discovered and interpreted. By that fact, the study of that refuse, archaeology, is an incredibly democratic process.

Nowhere is this more true in historical archaeology than the excavation of lowly log cabins of early European settlers. From politics, economics, cultural norms, and the geography of the land itself, the work and social interactions of countless of individuals in the recent centuries has transformed the economic and social landscape into what is recognizable today. Over the years, historical archaeology has contributed to the understanding of a variety of topics including the development of modern foodways, the growth of industrial capitalism, and the institutionalization of present day socio-economic hierarchies. Yet, these studies have started through the analysis of simple sparse farmsteads occupied by more-or-less nameless individuals such as the one I'm working on. The lives of the people that discarded these ceramic sherds and pieces of bottle glass

had a lasting effect on the sorts of lives we experience today. These people have lived as long and as complex lives as we have and yet we do not know who these people are and have only vague ideas about their daily lives. Their non-degradable material on farmstead and concrete covered urban lots is the only record they left behind for archaeologists to study. It is through this record we can know something about them and thus know something about ourselves. Every day, the work of contract archaeologists continues to discover and document humble homes of lowly individuals and it is up to us to tell their stories and interpret our findings, we owe them that much for all the world they have created.



*Pen, paper, and plastic bags in front of a computer: The necessities for analyzing artifacts.*

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