

**HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY
AND THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY,
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS**

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Abstract

Archaeological testing and mitigation of a three-block area designated for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum complex in Springfield, Illinois, were completed from 2001 to 2004. The project area includes Blocks 1, 2, and 12 of the Original Town Plat, City of Springfield. Archaeological investigations documented a wide range of subsurface archaeological features dating from the late 1820s through the early twentieth century; domestic, commercial, and industrial components were all identified. Most significantly, the nearly complete stripping of multiple, contiguous city lots allows for serious discussions of temporal changes in site structure associated with these lots. This paper summarizes the project fieldwork and presents several research topics currently under development.

Introduction

In early 2000, the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency began planning for the construction of a new presidential library and museum complex to commemorate the life of Abraham Lincoln, the nation's sixteenth president, and one of Springfield's favorite citizens. The site for the proposed Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum complex was a three-block area located in Springfield's downtown commercial district within sight of the Old State Capitol (Blocks 1, 2, and 12 of the Original Town Plat, City of Springfield). In compliance with both Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and Section 707 of the Illinois State Agency Historic Resources Preservation Act, it was the responsibility of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency to assess the impact of the proposed construction activity on the historic resources within the proposed project area. As the project area was located within an urban environment—and completely encapsulated by the built environment (buildings and pavements), the project presented several obstacles. Nonetheless, over a four-year period, Phase II testing and subsequent archaeological mitigation was conducted on all three project areas (library, museum, and parking garage).

The four-year fieldwork project has documented a wide range of subsurface archaeological features dating from the late 1820s through the early years of the twentieth century, and significant domestic, commercial, and industrial components were identified. This paper summarizes the fieldwork phase of the project, and identifies the various research topics currently being explored.

The Literature Search

As the project area was located within an urban environment—and completely encapsulated by the built environment (buildings and pavements), a traditional Phase I archaeological survey was not possible. In an effort to assess the proposed construction activity on the potential below-ground subsurface resources within the multi-block area, the IHPA contracted with Fever River Research to conduct a literature search to identify potential archaeological resources that might be expected within the project area. The results of this literature search were presented with an historical context for the early settlement of Springfield as well as a predictive model for potential archaeological sites within the three-block project area. As a result of this literature search, subsurface archaeological investigations (consisting of a hybrid Phase I survey and Phase II testing strategy) were recommended for each of the three individual blocks within the greater project area.

The Library Project Area

In mid-March 2001, Fever River Research conducted Phase II archaeological testing of the proposed location of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in downtown Springfield (North Half, Block 12, Original Town Plat, City of Springfield). At the time of the fieldwork, the entire project area (consisting of the north half of the block) was an

asphalt covered surface parking lot.¹ Over a two-day period, four backhoe trenches were excavated across the north half of the block in areas thought most likely to yield information regarding the potential integrity of the underlying cultural deposits. These test trenches documented the presence of extensive fill deposits overlying the original (circa 1820s) ground surface (which was 3' to 5' below the existing surface). Several early nineteenth century features (including a cistern, well, a large rectangular pit, stone foundations, and several distinctive middens) were encountered at this time. One of the middens encountered consisted of a concentration of redware waster sherds, kiln furniture and burned brick associated with the John Ebey pottery. Based on these investigations, the north half of the block was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and Phase III archaeological mitigation was recommended.

Over an intensive three-week period in early April 2001, Phase III archaeological research was conducted at the site of the proposed Presidential Library. During the course of these investigations, two large blocks were stripped of their overburden to expose the underlying archaeological features. As the Phase II research had indicated, although a large section of the four lots located in the project area had been disturbed by the construction of several later nineteenth century commercial structures with basements (such as the Chatterton Opera House), large sections of the project area remained undisturbed. The Phase III archaeological investigations documented a wide range of early to late nineteenth century features that included numerous privy pits (associated with both residential and commercial structures), cisterns, wells, structural foundations, and distinctive middens. The earliest features (including a well, small earthen cellar, multiple privy pits, and a midden) appear to document a small urban house site from the late 1820s and 1830s. Potentially associated with this house was a distinctive midden representing discard waste from John Ebey's redware pottery. One particular redware sherd had "1831" scratched into it. A second, and just as distinctive early midden was also found during these investigations. This second midden, which consisted of a dense concentration of blue shell edge dinner plates marked "Adams" probably was associated with the early Jabez Capps occupation, as Capps was one of Springfield's early merchants. Additionally, remains of both Simeon Francis' residence and his adjacent newspaper office building (including the physical remains of the press foundations) were recovered. Francis was the founder and editor of the *Sangamo Journal*—one of Springfield's early newspapers.

The Museum Project Area

In late October 2001, Fever River Research conducted Phase II archaeological testing of the proposed location of the Presidential Museum (Block 1, Original Town Plat, City of Springfield). Although the south half of this block had been disturbed by the

¹ The project area also extended onto a portion of the south half of the block where a nineteenth century brick commercial building, which had been the home of the Cozy Dog diner since the 1930s, was located. This building was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and a Illinois Historic American Buildings documentation package for this structure is currently being prepared by Fever River Research.

construction of early twentieth century buildings with deep basements,² the north half of the block appeared to have been less disturbed and the potential to contain significant subsurface deposits in this area was thought to be high. With this in mind, four backhoe trenches were excavated within the asphalt-covered parking lot located on the north half of the block. These test trenches documented the presence of fill deposits of varying depth overlying the original (circa 1830s) ground surface. Along the eastern edge of the block, this ground surface was located immediately below the thin asphalt pavement. Backhoe trenches at this location exposed a distinctive, artifact-rich, domestic midden containing substantial amounts of wood ash and dating from circa 1830 through the 1840s. The quality and diversity of the artifacts suggested the presence of a relatively well-to-do family. Besides this distinctive midden, several structural foundations, an early cistern, a small cellar, and at least one privy pit were documented. Based on these investigations, the north half of the block was determine eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and Phase III archaeological mitigation was recommended.

During February and March 2002, Phase III archaeological mitigation was conducted at the site of the proposed Presidential Museum. During the course of these investigations most of Lots 1 and 2 was stripped of its overburden exposing a variety of subsurface features. Although archival research has not been finalized, it appears that the early domestic (and potentially commercial) midden identified during the Phase II archaeological investigations on both of these lots was deposited by John Williams and his family. Williams, an early merchant in Springfield and partner with Elijah Iles (one of the town's founders), may have occupied Lots 1 and 2 during the 1830s. Stone house foundations, a well, numerous privy pits, and an early drainage system document the early domestic component at this site. Additionally, the archaeological excavations documented several middle to late nineteenth century commercial and light industrial (blacksmithing) activity areas. Several distinctive, double-vaulted, privy-like features were found associated with the blacksmith shop. Williams was a typical entrepreneur of the period and dappled in a great variety of enterprises, including leather manufacture. There is some thought that these pits may have been associated with the processing of hides.

The Parking Garage

As originally designed, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum's parking garage was to be located below ground on the adjacent Block 2 (current site of the Union Train Station). As plans were developed, it became apparent that the parcel of ground was not sufficiently large, and a new site across the street to the north (East Half, Block 2, Ninian Edwards Addition to Springfield) was chosen. As this parcel of ground was not covered by the original literature review, a new literature review was conducted for this parcel of land, and based on the literature review, subsurface archaeological

² One of the buildings on the south half of the block was the City of Springfield's 1930s municipal jail, which had also been determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. An Illinois Historic Buildings Survey documentation package for this building is being prepared by Fever River Research.

investigations (consisting of a hybrid Phase I survey and Phase II testing strategy) were recommended.

Over a three-day period in July 2003, ten backhoe trenches were excavated in the area thought most likely to yield information regarding significant subsurface features. These test trenches documented the presence of fill deposits of varying depth overlying the original circa 1830s ground surface. At least 15 privy pits, multiple cisterns, two wells, and several house foundations were documented by this fieldwork. Based on the literature review, it would appear that these features were associated with early domestic as well as commercial components. Besides merchant class housing, the literature search documented the presence of an early public or boarding house (the Farnsworth House) in the project area. Based on the Phase II testing, several of these features appeared to date from the 1830s to 1840s period, and the site was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

During the months of September and October 2003, Fever River Research conducted Phase III archaeological mitigation on the proposed site of the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum's parking lot (East Half, Block 2, Ninian Edwards Addition). This parking lot was located immediately north of the original central business district and, by the 1840s was the location of two dwellings (each occupied by a prominent merchant class family) and a large commercial structure occupied by the Farnsworth House—which was a boarding and/or public house catering to the better-class, albeit transient visitors the newly established state capitol was drawing to the community. As part of this work, the greater part of five city lots were stripped of overburden, and a wide variety of subsurface features exposed and excavated. During the early years of the twentieth century, one of these lots had had a large commercial building constructed upon it. This building—which had no basement—had encapsulated the earlier nineteenth century cultural deposits. After the demolition of this building, and upon excavation, the foundations of the early house and suite of early to middle nineteenth century features were completely exposed. Unfortunately, the construction of several early twentieth century houses (with basements) had disturbed the front half of the other lots. Although the preservation of the earlier deposits were impacted on the front of these other four lots, the rear half of the lots exhibited good integrity and a wide variety of mid- and rear-yard features were exposed and excavated. Of particular interest were a couple of privy pits (with excellent bone preservation) that appear to have been associated with the occupation of the Farnsworth House.

Shortly after completing the archaeological mitigation of the east half of the block, project designers determined that it, too, was not large enough for their needs, and the west half of the block was incorporated into the project design. The earlier literature search for the east half of the block was expanded, and based on the new archival research, Phase II testing was recommended for this area as well. Subsurface archaeological investigations (consisting of a hybrid Phase I survey and Phase II testing strategy) were recommended and carried out during a two-week period in March and early April 2004. Upon removal of asphalt and gravel parking lot overburden, a relatively thin historic midden overlying an intact nineteenth century ground surface was

encountered throughout almost the entire area investigated. Additionally, several subsurface features (including at least 33 privy pits, one cistern, several trash pits, and the brick foundation walls of an early nineteenth century dwelling) were documented. Based on the Phase II testing, several of these features appeared to date from the 1830s to 1840s period, and the site was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Beginning in mid-March and continuing through early June 2004, Fever River Research conducted Phase III archaeological mitigation on the second half of the proposed site of the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum's parking lot (West Half, Block 2, Ninian Edwards Addition). This work was conducted in two phases—first the parking lots were stripped and exposed features excavated. After that had been completed, and the extant buildings demolished, the areas located beneath these structures were stripped of their overburden. The construction of two commercial buildings and their associated parking lots during the early years of the twentieth century had encapsulated the earlier nineteenth century cultural deposits. As part of this work, the greater part of four urban lots was nearly completely stripped of overburden exposing a wide variety of domestic features. Foundations of three pre-Civil War houses, several ancillary outbuildings, and multiple privy pits were excavated. These features document the transition of the neighborhood from one dominated by upper class, single-family residential dwellings, to a combination of working class multi-family residential and commercial buildings.

Summary and Conclusions

To summarize, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum project was very demanding. Political agendas and construction schedules during the course of this project created very demanding and often fairly unrealistic schedules. Although both state and federal laws mandated that the affect of the project undertaking on cultural resources be assessed, the state's construction managers gave little attention to the subsurface archaeological resources within the project area during the initial phases of this project—in stark contrast to the acceptance of any significant above-ground resources.³

Although fairly well understood in other areas of the country—and by many Illinois archaeologists—the perception in Illinois by most city planners and construction managers is that the urban archaeological resource is often badly impacted by later construction activity. As this project has illustrated to Illinois planners, that is often not the case. On the contrary, the unplowed urban contexts in downtown Springfield yielded extremely well preserved resources from the initial era of settlement that are generally not preserved in the rural plowed environment. As such, the preservation was actually better than what has been seen in other rural contexts. Shallow cellars, privy pits, and middens that would have been destroyed by plowing, have survived in these unplowed

³ Although the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum project was being constructed for the Historic Sites Division, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, the construction planning and general construction oversight was conducted by architects from the Capital Development Board.

urban settings, and contribute significantly to our understanding of the early development of Springfield.

As our previous paper has emphasized, the study of urban archaeological resources in Illinois has been fraught with difficulty, and is poorly documented in the literature. Many of the problems outlined in this earlier paper are, in many ways, endemic to the study of historic archaeology throughout the state—whether urban or rural in character. Clearly, although a distinctive methodology was developed for conducting survey and assessing site significance within the urban environment of Springfield, it is the process of urbanization that we are interested in.⁴

Understanding the variability in feature types is imperative in our basic understanding of the urban environment. It is our contention that basic, “thick” description of feature types—and their relationship to one another—is necessary to understand the evolution of the urban landscape. Although it should be self-evident and not necessary to state here, too many of our colleagues in Illinois confuse feature descriptions with feature interpretations. Stating that a particular feature is the physical remains of a privy or cistern is not a description, but an interpretation—and interpretations are not always correct. Such misinterpretation can confuse the basic understanding of the site structure. The current project has allowed us to identify a wide range of feature types, and speculate as to their potential functions. Many of these features are commonplace and represent the physical remains of privies, cellars, wells, and cisterns. But some of the feature types are relatively new to us, and although some of them are relatively easy to interpret (such as the newspaper press floor), some are much more difficult to interpret and will require more archival and field research to interpret (such as the large pit). Particularly interesting feature types to us were the identification of several distinctive middens—such as that associated with the early Cabez store and Ebey pottery.

Conversely, there is a strong need to understand the structure of urban sites on both the household and community level. Walking cities such as early Springfield—with working class and merchant class families living side by side with small commercial and trades-related workshops interspersed among them—were very different than today’s modern city with its homogeneous neighborhoods and uniform setbacks. Although it seems fairly self-evident, one needs to excavate the entire site to understand its structure—and one of the more significant aspects of the research conducted during the course of the investigations discussed here is the near complete excavation of multiple urban lots. The large-scale excavation of the entire urban lot obviously leads to a more holistic

⁴ During the course of the investigations discussed here, the distinction between the survey (Phase I) and site assessment (Phase II) phases of traditional compliance-driven archaeological research became blurred, and the literature search (or Phase IA) became the first step in the process, followed by a combined field survey (Phase IB) and site assessment (Phase II) which occurred at the same time. As the project developed, it also became apparent that small block excavations (in contrast to test trenches) were better suited to the Phase IB/II research—particularly if one suspected that subsequent Phase II archaeological mitigation was likely. The excavation of test trenches and the placement of backdirt between the trenches made subsequent stripping of the entire site more difficult than if one had excavated a series of small block excavations instead.

understanding of the resource, and will eventually lend itself to a better understanding of the variability in site structure.

Not to belittle Abraham Lincoln and his contribution to Springfield, Illinois and the nation as a whole—it was enlightening to see some research in Springfield that, for once, did not focus on Lincoln and his contribution to the local history. The archaeological investigations conducted during the course of this project has resulted in the collection of a wide range of data that will allow us to discuss the social well being—and diversity—of the early inhabitants of Springfield. The social history contexts that are being developed here will compliment the Lincoln-specific research that has been done in the past, including the extensive archaeological research that has been conducted within the Lincoln Home neighborhood.

Several research themes are currently being pursued, and will only briefly be discussed here. One of our major research interests, as discussed above, is identifying variability in urban site structure, and, along with other quantifiable data sets (such as ceramic and glass consumption patterns and foodways differences), make some hopefully relevant statements about quality of life standards and diversity within the pre-modern city. Springfield has always been a political town, and material culture themes related to group identity will also be pursued. Key to this discussion is the growth of Springfield's downtown levee-district—which consisted of a concentration of bars, gambling houses, and houses of prostitution—all of which contributed to the “darker” side of Springfield life. Alcohol consumption, its acceptance and/or tolerance in Springfield will also be explored. Also, our research is focusing on the character and type of often-non-documented trade-related activities present in these early urban neighborhoods. Of particular interest is the multitude of blacksmithing and mechanic-related activity areas (as well as the remains of an early redware pottery and a potential tan yard) that were documented within these neighborhoods. Finally, on a larger community-wide level, the effect of changing transportation systems, the introduction of city services (particularly water, sewer, and trash disposal), and the introduction of new fuel sources (such as coal and natural gas) all have had a dramatic affect on the transformation of the pre-modern Springfield to the city we recognize today. The greater evolution of the urban landscape, as viewed from the archaeological record, will also be documented as part of this research.

During the course of this project, we excavated over 125 privies, and numerous wells, cisterns, cellars and related features—and have over 200 boxes of artifacts awaiting analysis. As the artifact analysis and report preparation phase of this project was only recently funded, the post-fieldwork artifact analysis and report preparation phase of the project has only just been started. A final report on the results of this research is not anticipated until late 2007. I suspect I better get back to work...

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