Slicing through Our Past: Knives and Other Flatware at the Collier Lodge Site (12PR36)

Andrew J. Webster and Mark R. Schurr, The University of Notre Dame

Background

- The Collier Lodge Site is located in northeast Indiana near the town of Kouts and on the banks of the old Kankakee River.
- In the 1830s, settlers built a log cabin on the site.
- The land changed hands many times over the next half-century.
- In this time, the surrounding area known as the Grand Kankakee Marsh was rich in game and became a popular hunting destination to the site.
- To house these new visitors, expensive lodges were built for private hunting clubs.
- Built in 1804 by the Collier family, Collier Lodge was the only public inn and restaurant in the area.
- After the river's course was changed in 1916, game became less prevalent and hunting less popular.
- At this time, the Collier family converted their inn to a public inn.
- The lodge's past use as a residential, public, and culinary space makes cutlery artifacts especially prevalent in the archaeological record, inviting further study.

Dating Methods

1) Company of Origin

- If an artifact had a test engraving, it could be traced back to its company of origin.
- Cutlery companies often changed names, were bought out by other companies, or went out of business, making them useful in dating.
- These are especially helpful when an artifact's pattern could not be dated.
- The pattern on Spoon X could not be dated, but its engraving was discovered under microscope to read "SIMEON L. & GEORGE H. ROGERS COMPANY."
- This company was founded in 1806 and taken over by William A. Rogers Limited in 1918, followed by Oueida in 1919.
- This dates the production of Spoon X to between 1900-1918.

2) Patterning

- A distinctive shape or pattern, when present, could be used to date an artifact.
- Some websites devoted to antiques, especially silverware collecting, have limited photographs of cutlery with company and pattern names.
- Patterning can often be used in conjunction with engraving to date an artifact.
- Spoon X has an engraving that was reconstructed as "TUDOR PLATE." OUEIDA COMMUNITY.
- Photographs of Oueida spoons led to the identification of Spoon X's patterning.
- Spoon X's patterning was discovered to be "Queen Bess II," first produced by Oueida Cutlery in 1946.

3) Archaeological Context

- Many artifacts could be dated through their proximity to other datable artifacts.
- This method is most effective with artifacts found in deeper, undisturbed levels.
- Common datable artifacts used to date the flatware include cut or wire nails, fine earthenware, coins, and even shotgun shells.
- Due to their general lack of discernable engraving or patterning, almost all knives were dated in this way, such as Knife I, a pocket knife with a wooden handle.
- Knife I was found with cut nail fragments, dating it to at least before 1890.
- The knife was also found with whiteharrow sherds that date to 1830-1835.
- Confirming this date range are two pennies, one from 1838 and the other from 1848, that were found one level above Knife I.

Discussion

- In total, many more knives were found at the site than any other type of flatware, portraying the knife as a multipurpose tool for the pioneer or hunter.
- Surprisingly, of the 12 knives that were found, none appeared to be hunting knives, despite Collier Lodge's proximity to hunting grounds.
- This may be because hunting knives were either highly valued and guarded by their owners or were lost or broken but not at the lodge.
- Of the knives that were recovered, it is possible that Knives C, I, and Q could each have been used for hunting, but all of them could have just as likely been used instead for culinary and domestic purposes.
- The vast majority of flatware found at the site was made of iron, a common material in flatware production that was less expensive than silver.
- The artifacts vary in condition from good as new to practically falling apart, and it remains a mystery why some flatware were discarded.
- Most of the artifacts, however, are in poor condition.
- Many artifacts were found near Feature 25, the cellar of the log cabin.
- This may be due to the large number of historic trash pits found, in the vicinity of Feature 25, but it may also be due to the larger number of excavations that have taken place near Feature 25.

The Future of Flatware Analysis

- Flatware, like most metal artifacts, is susceptible to rust and does not always preserve well in the archaeological record.
- There is no one universal way of dating flatware.
- Due to its durable and reusable nature, the production date and discard date of an artifact could potentially be decades apart, complicating dating efforts.
- Datable differences between nineteenth and twentieth century cutlery are primarily technological, rather than stylistic in nature. These subtle technological differences are difficult to see when the artifacts are in very good condition.
- Between 1870 and 1920, there were very few large technological changes in cutlery production. Many of the artifacts in the Collier Lodge collection come from this time period, making more specific dating difficult.
- There is a complete, reliable, and academically database of flatware patterns.
- Parry has written on historic ceramics and fine silverware, but not much has been published on the analysis of common flatware, and as such there are few if any true experts in the field.
- Flatware is not present at every archaeological site, and even when it is, flatware artifacts are not usually discussed in detail in site reports and other publications.
- This leads to a lack of easily available comparable material for researchers to study.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Mark Schurr, Dr. Ian Kofj, Dr. Dibb Rommer, John Hodson and the Kankakee Valley Historical Society, The Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts at the University of Notre Dame, the Kankakee Valley Historical Society, and Andrew J. Webster for their generous support and time.

Image Credits

Thanks to John Hodson and the Kankakee Valley Historical Society for providing the two historic photographs of Collier Lodge as well as the pictures of the discovery of Knife Q. More pictures can be found at www.kankakeevalleyhistoricalsociety.org. All other photographs and figures are my own. A complete list of works cited is available upon request.