

Doing Historical Archeology

George Sabo III, Ph.D. (Arkansas Archeological Survey)



Van Winkle's Mill ca. 1880. Photo courtesy of Buford Van Winkle.

What Is Historical Archeology?

Historical archeologists try to answer questions about the recent past by using archeological evidence from the ground and historical evidence from documents (maps, records and texts, pictures and artworks, etc.) and from people's memories. These are all very different sources of information, so how can we study them together?

Start with a Question ...

One useful method is to start with a question, based either on archeological or historical clues. Then work back and forth using additional sources of evidence, refining the question or asking new ones as necessary, until a satisfactory answer is reached. This method produces a synthesis based on all available information. The result is much better than using one source merely to confirm another source or to fill in a gap. Let's see how this works.

A House Foundation at Van Winkle's Mill

Peter Van Winkle built the first steam-powered mill in northwest Arkansas for sawing lumber and milling grain in the early 1850s. From its beginning up till the Civil War, Van Winkle's Mill was operated by free workers and by African-American slaves, many of whom lived on the site. The Van Winkle family and many of their slaves fled to Texas during the Civil War, but returned afterward and rebuilt the mill. Some of the former slaves now worked as paid laborers.



Archeologists from the Arkansas Archeological Survey discovered the remains of a mill worker's house at the Van Winkle's Mill site in 1998. The house was designated Feature 9 and excavations were conducted there between 1999 and 2001. The way we interpreted the evidence we found demonstrates the question-and-answer method.

Our Series of Questions ...

Our first question sprang from the archeological evidence: We unearthed the stone foundation of a house with fireplaces at both ends. We wanted to learn "Who lived here?"

Feature 9 (house) foundation at the Van Winkle site, showing fireplace remains.



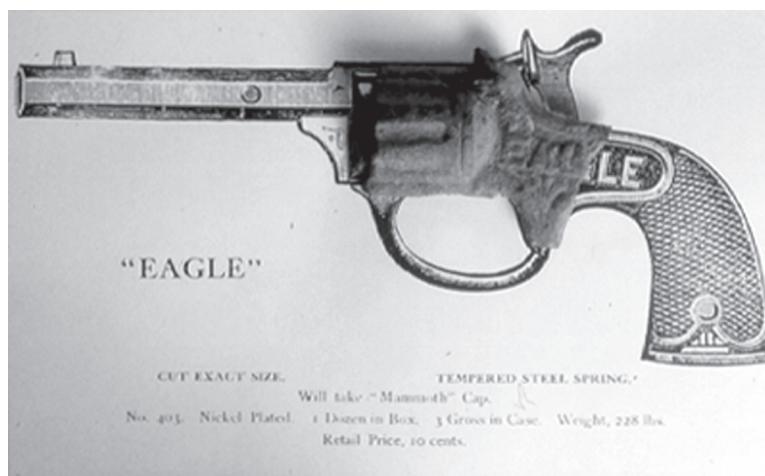
What archeological facts could we establish that might help answer this? First, the artifacts included nails and other materials used in the building of the house, women's clothing fasteners and sewing equipment, and children's toys, in addition to tableware and kitchen utensils. From this evidence, we determined that a mill worker's family with children lived in the house.

Feature 9 artifacts included child's rings, a doll fragment (upper left), a child's alphabet plate (center), a marble, and a toy gun fragment (lower right). All suggest a family with children occupied the house.



We already knew the mill was in operation for a long time, both before and after the Civil War. So our next question became: “When was the house occupied?” The manufacture dates of the artifacts we found mainly fell between 1870 and 1900. (We could tell this based on information from documents like factory records and manufacturer’s advertising.) This date range was confirmed by the manufacture dates of building hardware, including nails and window glass.

Toy gun fragment superimposed on an 1895 advertisement.



Then we asked: “What families lived and worked at the site between 1870 and 1900?” To answer this, we looked at information that is available in U. S. census records, which are produced at ten-year intervals. Several families are identified in the local census records for 1870 and 1880, but only one family is recorded in both: Aaron and Jane Van Winkle and their children.

1870 U.S. Census of Mill Workers	1880 U.S. Census of Mill Workers
John & Mary Steele (no children)	
Joel & Lucinda Leming (no children)	
Charles & Marth Dackel (children)	Simm & Susan Stevens (children)
Perry & Agnes Van Winkle (children)	Norman & Maggie Van Winkle (children)
Aaron & Jane Van Winkle (children)	Aaron & Jane Van Winkle (children)

Aaron “Old Rock” Van Winkle was a former slave who became a foreman following the return to the millworks at the end of the Civil War. He remained a close associate of the Van Winkle family even after Peter Van Winkle’s death in 1882.



Back to the Archeology ...

Looking again at the artifact assemblage, we note that the Feature 9 house was occupied by a family that was comparatively well off, such as a foreman's family might have been.

The artifacts and house remains also suggest occupation by just one family; there is no sign that different families lived in the house during successive intervals, such as periods of abandonment or significant rebuilding.

Synthesis: A Satisfying Answer

The series of questions that took us back and forth through the archeological and documentary sources suggest that the Feature 9 house was occupied from 1870 until the turn of the twentieth century by a family that may well have been **Aaron and Jane Van Winkle and their children**.

Scientific research is never really finished—we always want to learn more. So, like many projects, ours needs additional study to confirm our hypothesis and shed additional light on what life was like for a nineteenth century black family in northwest Arkansas. This research will continue the “question and answer” method. Understanding of Arkansas history is a project well worth our effort. Historical archeology can add details not recorded in documents, and give voice to the otherwise forgotten lives of people who may not have been considered important enough to write about during their lifetimes.

For Further Reading

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