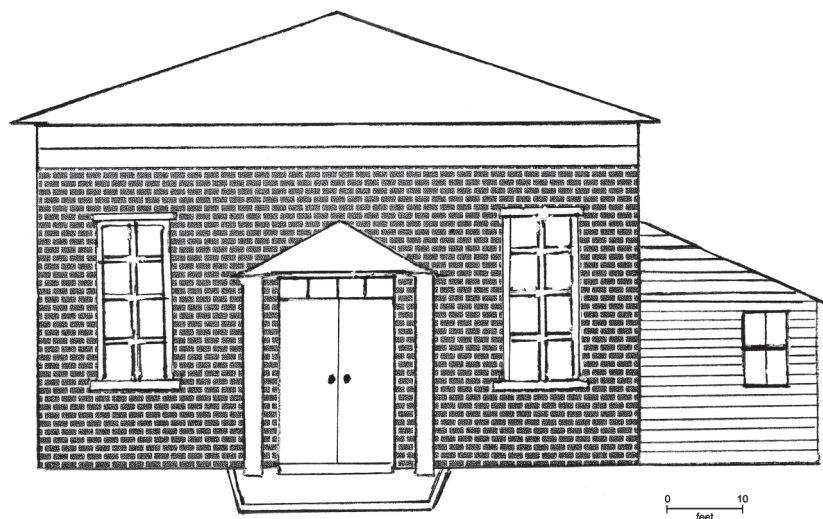


Archeology at Mount Comfort Church: An Antebellum Meeting House in Northwest Arkansas

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Reconstruction of the Second Mount Comfort Church, ca. 1848, based on archeological evidence.

Excavating an Antebellum Public Building in the Arkansas Ozarks

Excavation of the second Mount Comfort Church site (3WA889), conducted from 1991–1993 as part of Arkansas Archeology Week activities, was the first time the discipline of archeology has been incorporated in a study to document the architecture and associated uses of an antebellum public building in the Arkansas Ozarks. Few of these once important community buildings are known to be standing today. Archival information provides useful data about these early Arkansas churches but oftentimes is lacking in detail. Archeology can be the only way to learn more about the architectural plans of these former structures and how they were used.

The site was recorded and the excavations carried out at the request of members of the Mount Comfort Presbyterian Church. This church (still used today) was built a few years after the Civil War and is located just south of the archeological site. Our research

objective was simple and twofold: 1) to discover the basic architectural plan of the antebellum building, which is no longer standing, and 2) to discover the various activities, chronology and use of the public building and surrounding site through analysis of recovered artifacts. A total of 33 two-by-two meter squares were excavated to an average depth of 15 cm. This depth was sufficient for recovery of artifacts associated with the construction and use of the earlier church.

Complementary Sources: Documentary and Archeological Evidence

An important element of historical archeology is the interplay between the written record and what is found in the ground. We were somewhat fortunate to have a few documents describing the former brick church and the various uses of the building. One source is an autobiography by Ann Marshall who briefly describes what the building was like when



she taught school there. Ann James (the maiden name of Ann Marshall) opened the Mount Comfort Female Seminary in 1848 in the “airy” brick church that measured 33 feet square, to which she added a wood-frame music room. Another useful source is the 1941 WPA Mount Comfort Church history found in Special Collections of Mullins Library, University of Arkansas. These sources led, in turn, to others, especially early editions of the Van Buren *Intelligencer*, that provide tantalizing leads about the use of the building as a public meeting house in the early 1840s.

Architectural details gleaned from over 6000 artifacts indicate the brick structure was indeed, as noted in Ann Marshall’s autobiography, about 33 feet square. The front of the building faced east with central doors that opened onto a small wooden porch. There were two to three windows on each side of the building, with dressed sandstone lintels. A lack of nails suitable for wainscoting in excavation units within the church indicate the interior walls were left as bare brick. Evidence of a 27 x 10 foot wood-frame addition was found on the north side of the brick structure, consisting of foundation stones, wall plaster, pane glass, ash, flooring nails, and one charred floor joist. One heavy iron door hinge discovered between the brick wall and the wood addition indicates a large door connected the interior of the brick church to the addition. Slate tablet fragments, lead pencil nubs, marbles, and an iron bell clacker attest the use of the wood addition as a schoolroom. We feel certain this was the “music room” added in 1848 for the Mount Comfort Female Seminary, as noted in Ann Marshall’s autobiography.

Non-architectural artifacts discovered in the church and just outside the brick walls include deco-



Embossed medicine bottle: “C.F. Brown’s Eye Water.”

rated plate fragments, thimbles, harmonica reed fragments, scissors, and a needle. These document the use of the building for social and church affairs, including sewing bees and covered dish dinners.

The most surprising finds were several Civil War era personal artifacts discovered in the ash floor remains of the wood addition. These included buttons, a bullet mold, lead slag for making bullets, a fragment of uniform braid decoration, food container fragments, a coffee pot lid, and a spoon. Also found within the ashy floor area of the addition was a small medicine bottle embossed “Dr. C. F. Brown’s Eye Water.” This was an especially exciting find, as it helped to determine that Mount Comfort Church had been used as a hospital during the Civil War.

Where Was the Hospital?

We discovered from a local Confederate newspaper known as *The War Bulletin* that the surgeon in charge of the Mount Comfort Hospital was a Dr. C. F. Brown. The Goodspeed histories published in 1889 mention a Dr. Charles Fox Brown, who had a practice



in the Van Buren area before the war and later served as a Confederate surgeon. In 1859 his practice was near a sulphur spring outside of Van Buren, and the spring water was used for medicinal purposes. “Dr. C. F. Brown’s Eye Water” was likely marketed and sold in specially produced embossed bottles like the one we found at Mount Comfort. In a January 1862 issue of *The War Bulletin* Dr. Brown reported the deaths of 12 men since the organization of the Mount Comfort hospital. The trouble was, we were not certain exactly where Mount Comfort hospital was.

There were several public buildings in the Mount Comfort area during the war. The references in the written documents were not enough to determine which one had been pressed into use as the hospital. The discovery of the embossed bottle, along with other Civil War artifacts, at the Mount Comfort Church site confirm that this was the place.

Confederate use of the building ended in February 1862 when troops left the Fayetteville area. It is possible that Union troops also used the building as a field hospital after the Battle of Prairie Grove in December 1862. Fourteen Fayetteville area buildings were established as Union hospitals, one of which was referred to as “the brick church.” Whether or not this, or one of the other Union hospitals, was in the Mount Comfort Church is unknown; however, it seems likely that if the building was still standing after being vacated by the Confederates it would have been used by Union troops.

What Happened to the Second Mount Comfort Church?

The demise of the 1848 church building was by fire as evidenced by charred wood, ash, and numerous burned nails and window glass fragments. Military Civil War artifacts found within the ash layer suggest these items were accidentally left in the building at the time of the fire. Whole brick and other salvageable building material were taken from the site and used elsewhere. The WPA church history notes the bricks were salvaged by the Union to build barracks in Fayetteville. This would have been during the Union occupation of Fayetteville between 1863 and 1865.

Information obtained through archeological investigations at Mount Comfort show a pattern of material culture that reflects the history and use of the building. Prosperity and growth of the church in the 1840s, the importance of education within the community, and the disruptive effects of the Civil War are all part of the history of the building as reflected in the archeological record.

Read more about it :

Hilliard, Jerry E.

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