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October, 2011

**Where The Tinder Was Lit: Archaeological  
Excavations at the Wesleyan Chapel, Women's  
Rights National Historical Park, Seneca Falls, New  
York**

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**Where the tinder was lit: Archaeological excavations at the Wesleyan Chapel, Women's Rights National Historical Park, Seneca Falls, New York.**

By: Megan E. Springate, University of Maryland, College Park

Presented at the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology conference, Utica, New York, October 2011

**Abstract:**

The Wesleyan Chapel, built in 1843, was the location of the First Women's Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. It is now one of several significant structures that make up the Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls and Waterloo, New York. Over time, the form and the function of the Chapel building has changed – often dramatically. Archaeological investigations at the Wesleyan Chapel have revealed both the extent of these changes and information about the people associated with the property. Results of these excavations, particularly those conducted in 2008, are presented in the context of the site's history and significance as the birthplace of the formal struggle for equal rights for women.

[Slide 1 : Title] Good morning. In this presentation, I will be discussing archaeological excavations conducted at the Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, New York. This report was accomplished with assistance from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. The statements, findings, conclusions, recommendations, and other data in this report are solely those of myself and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service.

[Slide 2: Regional map] The park is located in New York's Finger Lakes region. This is the heart of what is known as The Burned-Over-District because of the intense social and religious reform movements that swept like wildfire through the area in the early nineteenth century (Cross 1950; Noel 2006). Created by Congress in 1980, the park consists of several properties associated with the first women's rights convention held in Seneca Falls on July 19 and 20, 1848 (Kuttner and Ackerson 1980).

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[Slide 3: Park Properties] These properties include: the Hunt House where the convention was planned; the M'Clintock House where the Declaration of Sentiments was written; the home of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the organizers; and the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel where the convention was held. The National Park Service has conducted archaeology at all of these properties (Markell and Williams 2006; Springate 2009). In this paper, I focus on the archaeology done at the Wesleyan Chapel. It was at the Chapel that the tinder of the early American women's rights movement (see, for example, Ginzberg 2005) caught flame, sparking a movement that continues today (see, for example, McMillen2008).

[Slide 4: 1978 Chapel] The National Park Service purchased the property in 1985. Shortly after, a national design competition was held to determine how the Chapel and surrounding property would be developed. The winning design included the removal of all structural elements not associated with the original Chapel building (Orcutt et al. 2007; Springate 2009).

[Slide 5: First NPS Chapel] Archaeologists from the National Park Service excavated several units at the Chapel in 1985 and 1987 prior to the structural work (Zitzler 1989). At the completion of the process in the early 1990s, the Wesleyan Chapel looked like this.

In the early 2000s, the Park Service began to explore the possibility of rehabilitating the Chapel, to create an interpretive space incorporating surviving original elements and what they had learned through archaeological and documentary research (Orcutt et al. 2007). In advance of construction, Richard Grubb & Associates excavated a series of shovel test pits and excavation units at the Chapel (Springate 2009).

[Slide 6: Second NPS Chapel] The rehabilitation was completed in the Spring of 2011, and the Chapel was re-dedicated and opened to the public this past July. This is what the Chapel looks like today -- a far cry from its incarnation as a laundromat before the park was open to the public.

[Slide 7: Schematic] This graphic shows the surviving elements from the various periods of the building's history, as they appeared when the Park Service acquired the building. This hodge-podge reflects almost 140 years of expansion, demolition, renovation, and significant changes in use and hints at the tangled stratigraphy that we found below ground.

[Slide 8: Periods] Six major periods in the history of the Chapel have been identified, each corresponding to key structural modifications (Springate 2009; Zitzler 1989). I will present a brief overview of these periods and the associated archaeological deposits with an emphasis on Period 1, the Wesleyan Chapel years.

[Slide 9: Pre-Contact] During the 2008 excavations, the tip of a chert projectile point and a small amount of debitage were recovered from a mixed context. Located on upland soils within a few hundred feet of what was once the Seneca River, evidence of pre-contact occupation at the site was not unexpected. The waters of the Seneca River through Seneca Falls were channelized in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and now flow through the Cayuga-Seneca Canal connecting Ithaca and Seneca Falls to the Erie Canal and beyond (Springate 2009).

[Slide 10: Period 1] In February of 1843, the first formal meeting for the organization of the Wesleyan Methodist Church took place in Andover, Massachusetts. The split from the main body of the Methodist Episcopal Church was over disagreements about slavery: the Wesleyans denounced it

and called for members to promptly free their slaves, while other Methodists continued to benefit from America's "peculiar institution." The month following the split, in March of 1843, the First Wesleyan Methodist Society of Seneca Falls was organized. Wasting no time, within two months the fledgling Society had purchased a vacant lot near the western edge of town. By July, the construction of the brick chapel was well underway and on 14 October 1843, the newly completed Wesleyan Chapel was dedicated (Brown 1987; Yocum and Wong 1992).

In addition to regular worship services the Seneca Falls Wesleyans hosted lecturers and meetings. Topics included natural philosophy, politics, the abolition of slavery, and temperance, earning the Chapel the nickname "The Great Light House" (Brown 1987).

[Slide 11: The First Wave] In July of 1848, the first Women's Rights Convention, organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary Ann M'Clintock, Lucretia Mott, Martha Wright, and Jane Hunt, was held at the Chapel. The purpose was to "discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women" (n.a. 1848 [Report of the Woman's Rights Convention]). Approximately 300 people attended the two-day convention. At the end of the two days, sixty-eight women signed the resulting Declaration of Sentiments. Thirty-two men, including Frederick Douglass, signed in support. The Declaration proclaimed the self-evident truth that all men and women were created equal, and demanded that women's unequal treatment under the law be remedied. These remedies included implementing women's rights to vote, to own and control their own property even (and perhaps especially) in marriage, to be responsible for their own actions and decisions, to have access to higher education, and to be profitably employed (Brown 1987; McMillen 2008; n.a. 1848).

[Slide 12: Conjectural Floor Plan] Archaeological excavations have confirmed that the Chapel measured 64 feet by 44 feet (Zitzler 1989). No builders' trench has been identified archaeologically, suggesting that the foundation excavation into the site's heavy clay subsoil was made only just as large as needed (Springate 2009). While little is known about the interior of the Chapel, a conjectural floor plan has been created based on structural and documentary evidence (Brown 1987; Yocum and Wong 1992).

[Slide 13: Period 1] During the 1985 excavations, several early artifacts possibly associated with Period 1 were recovered, predominantly from mixed contexts. Excavation at the southeast corner of the Chapel identified deposits that would have been outside the building during Period 1, but which were later enclosed. Artifacts from this context included pearlware, straight pins, pipe fragments, window glass, and cow and pig bones-- both butchered and not. These fragmentary artifacts were interpreted as possible roadside debris, perhaps pre-dating the 1843 construction of the Chapel (Zitzler 1989).

Archaeological investigations in 1987 identified portions of a stone foundation associated with this long, narrow building shown on an 1856 map of the property (Zitzler 1989).

[Slide 14: Carriage Shed Plan] The relatively insubstantial nature of the foundation and the shape and location of the building led researchers to interpret it as a carriage shed. Surrounding the foundation were intact soils; while none of the very few artifacts recovered were diagnostic, based on the map and the stratigraphy, these soils were determined to be associated with Period 1 (Zitzler 1989).

[Slide 15: Carriage Shed Photos] Here are some examples of church carriage sheds to give you a

sense of what the building may have looked like. These examples are from Connecticut and New Jersey (Changewater United Methodist Church n.d.; Town of Bethany 2007).

No intact deposits associated with Period 1 were identified during the 2008 excavations. Soils consistent with those around the circa 1856 carriage shed were identified in two shovel test pits. A total of five artifacts were recovered from these soils, including fragmentary brick, mortar, shell, pearlware, and a piece of pressed composite that may have been associated with a floor or wall covering. These excavations indicated, however, that this deposit had been truncated by grading during the first Park Service treatment of the Wesleyan Chapel (Springate 2009).

[Slide 16: L to R stoneware] As in 1987, several secondary deposits of artifacts consistent with the Chapel period were identified during the 2008 excavations. These appear to be Period 1 contexts redeposited as disturbed, but period-wise, temporally intact deposits during the transition to Johnson Hall. Architectural materials including broken glass, bricks, and mortar -- deposited as portions of the original Chapel structure were demolished -- dominate the artifacts recovered from these deposits. Also recovered were quantities of domestic objects such as tableware and glass vessels, faunal remains including pork, beef, mutton, and chicken, coal and coal by-products identified as heating-related materials, and personal artifacts (Springate 2009).

[Slide 17: Pie Chart] The presence of architectural materials, heating related materials, and the small number of personal artifacts from these Period 1 deposits were expected, given the history of the Chapel. The relatively large quantities of food remains and domestic tablewares initially seemed anomalous. The Wesleyan Chapel, however, was used not just as a place of worship, but also as a site for lectures, meetings, and other activities associated with various reform and social movements.

At least one of these events, the first Woman's Rights Convention, extended over multiple days.

[Slide 18: Conjectural Floor Plan] Approximately 300 people attended the Convention, and with the pews, partitions, stoves and altar space it seems unlikely that all were inside at once. Instead, people could likely be found milling around and discussing the events of the day in the Chapel yard (Springate 2009). It is also possible, though there were breaks for meals, that food and drink was consumed at the Convention as well as at other Chapel events and services. Faunal remains indicate that, at least on some occasions, the food consumed at the Chapel represented meals and not just snacks or casual foods. Given the lack of space within the Chapel, in good weather food was likely consumed outdoors. In this context, it no longer seems anomalous to find food and food service remains outside the Chapel. A similar assemblage of food-related material was recovered at a courthouse excavation in New Jersey, documenting the use of the property for various public gatherings and events (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2007).

Pearlware and creamware recovered from Chapel deposits pre-date its 1843 construction (Miller 2000). This doesn't mean that they were deposited before the Chapel was built. Indeed, improvements to the streets adjacent to the Wesleyan Chapel, including the installation of sidewalks, did not take place until after the Chapel had been built (Cowing 1904). An alternative explanation is that food brought to the Chapel was served and/or eaten from older creamware and pearlware vessels that would not have been considered a great loss if they were broken, rather than more contemporary and fashionable whitewares, white granite, and porcelains.

[Slide 19: Period 2] The Wesleyan Methodists sold the Chapel in October 1871. They continued to

hold services in the building until January 1872 when they moved to their new church a few doors away. By the end of August 1872, extensive changes had been made to the Chapel. These included: the demolition of the original south wall; the construction of two, 2-story storefronts; the replacement of the second floor Chapel gallery by a full second floor; and extensions on the east and west sides of the building housing second-floor stair access. The north end of the building was extended over a new basement with a stone foundation. When the renovations were complete, the Johnson Hall theatre occupied the second floor. First floor tenants varied, and included a furniture store and fire company (Bailey 1904; Brown 1987; Yocum and Wong 1992; Zitzler 1989).

[Slide 20: Period 3] In the summer of 1890, fire engulfed downtown Seneca Falls destroying several buildings, missing Johnson Hall by half a block. Renovations were begun almost immediately to transform Johnson Hall into the Johnson Opera House replacing another venue in town that had been destroyed. The most significant of these renovations was the construction of a two-story expansion on the north end of the building. Other improvements were made throughout this period, including some following a 1901 fire caused by celluloid film, though the footprint of the building did not change. During Period 2, the Opera House occupied the second floor. Ground floor tenants included the fire company, a bowling alley, roller rink, movie house, repair shop, furniture store, and plumber (Brown 1987; Yocum and Wong 1992; Zitzler 1989).

The ca. 1892 building that appears to the north of the Chapel was used for many years as an undertaking establishment or mortuary. The lot it sits on was sold in 1891, perhaps to help fund the Opera House conversion. Other Period 2 impacts to Chapel-related deposits included the 1916 construction of Fishers Theater on the previously vacant lot immediately to the west and the house lot beside it. Fishers Theater took up so much of the adjacent lots that its façade almost touched that of the Opera House. It burned in the 1970s and was replaced by the Strand Theater, a small

concrete block building in the northwest corner of the lot (Brown 1987; Yocum and Wong 1992; Zitzler 1989).

Beneath what were the eastern steps to the second floor built in Period 2, the 2008 excavations identified deposits consistent with the other redeposited Period 1 contexts discussed previously. In general, later objects were found closer to the top of the deposit, but no distinct interface could be identified. This was interpreted as the gradual accumulation of artifacts beneath the stairs that took place through at least Period 4 (Springate 2009).

[Slide 21: Artifacts from Under the Stairs] Artifacts consistent with Period 1 found beneath the stairs included creamware, pearlware, and whiteware ceramics (Miller 2000), a pre-1830 pin, and the lid from a pre-1850 needle case (Beaudry 2006). Artifacts dating from later periods include this post-1850 glass syringe plunger perhaps lost by Dr. Albert Frantz who had his office in the building during Period 4 (Wilbur 1987).

[Slide 22: Period 4] By late 1917, the Opera House had become the Regent Movie Theatre. Changes to the building included reconfiguring the main access to a wide center entrance and a shift in the theatre space to street level. Two storefronts continued to occupy the ground floor and a series of office suites were built upstairs (Brown 1987; Yocum and Wong 1992; Zitzler 1989).

[Slide 23: Photo SW Excavations] It was during this time that a concrete-walled basement was built under the southern portion of the building destroying the original 1843 foundation. The Regent quickly failed, and from 1919 through 1958 a series of car dealers and repair shops occupied much of the building. In order to accommodate cars, the second floor was rebuilt for automobile storage

and an access ramp was built (Brown 1987; Yocum and Wong 1992; Zitzler 1989). On ground level, a thick concrete floor was poured. Black cinders were used to fill in the remaining Chapel crawlspace and to provide a level surface for the concrete floor. As a result, any remaining features or sub-floor deposits between the northern end of the 1917 basement and the southern end of the 1872 basement were sealed. Possible features include those associated with the support system for the Period 1 Wesleyan Chapel balcony. This area has not been impacted since, and remains sealed beneath the current Chapel floor (Springate 2009).

[Slide 24: 1978; Period 5: 1948-1985] The building again underwent extensive modifications in 1948, though it remained in use as a car showroom and service center. The new floor plan included display rooms on the first floor, service departments on the first and second floors, and the construction of an electric freight elevator (Brown 1987; Yocum and Wong 1992; Zitzler 1989).

By 1961, the Seneca Falls Laundromat had opened on the ground floor fronting Fall Street. The rest of the first floor remained in use as a garage. The irony of the site of the First Women's Rights Convention becoming a laundromat has not gone without comment. In 1971, the second floor was converted to ten apartments (Brown 1987; Yocum and Wong 1992; Zitzler 1989).

As already mentioned, this is what the property looked like when it was purchased by the National Park Service in 1985. Renovations to the Chapel based on the winner of the national design competition began in 1991. They included the removal of all elements post-dating Period 1 and the demolition of both the circa 1892 mortuary and the adjacent theater.

[Slide 25: 1992 Renos] Subsurface disturbance associated with this work was extensive, impacting

previously identified archaeological deposits including the Period 1 carriage shed foundation.

[Slide 26: 1993 Renos; Another look at the work done in the early 1990s] During the 2008 excavations, we did find evidence of this work in the form of discarded coffee cups and soda cans that made their way into the black fill material used across the site.

[Slide 27: First NPS Chapel, completed]

[Slide 28: 2008 Reconstruction Work] As mentioned in the introduction, the Wesleyan Chapel recently underwent further changes. The current rehabilitation -- designed for interpretive and preservation purposes -- incorporates most of the surviving Chapel elements, which remain visually distinguishable from later additions (Orcutt et al. 2007).

[Slide 29: Completed Chapel] The Wesleyan Chapel is nationally significant as the location of the First Women's Rights Convention held over two days in the summer of 1848 (Kuttner and Ackerson 1980). Despite extensive excavations in and around the Chapel no material evidence tied directly to the Convention has been recovered. This is a common problem faced by archaeologists investigating discrete, short-term events rather than longer-lasting occupations or processes. In addition, very few intact archaeological resources associated with the Wesleyan Chapel period have been identified. The examination of Period 1 contexts disturbed and re-deposited at the very beginning of Period 2 provide what amounts to a summary overview of activities during the Chapel period. These include the presence of food at Chapel events; that the food consisted not just of snacks but occasional meals of beef, pork, and mutton; the use of decent dishes (but not the best china) for on-site consumption of food; and the use of the Chapel yard during events. The amount

of information available from disturbed contexts needs to be considered before assuming they are necessarily insignificant. Finally, the Wesleyan Chapel is an example of the power of place and memory. With the original building subsumed into and heavily altered by later construction at the site, there was nothing physically about the building to suggest it had once been the Wesleyan Chapel - site of the First Women's Rights Convention. People remembered though, and continued to meet at this corner to commemorate the event. As a National Park, the site has become part of our collective memory. That, however, is the topic of another paper altogether.

**Acknowledgments:**

I am indebted to many people for their input into this project and this paper. Special thanks to the field and lab crew for their hard work, and also to Dr. Vivien Rose, Chief of Cultural Resources and Anne Derosie, Historian at Women's Rights National Historical Park for their assistance and input. All errors and misinterpretations are my own.

Women's Rights National Historical Park can be found online at:

<http://www.nps.gov/wori/index.htm>

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