

University of Maryland at College Park

From the Selected Works of Megan E. Springate

January, 2012

Resorts and Reform: Archaeology at the Wiawaka Holiday House, Lake George, New York

Megan E. Springate, *University of Maryland - College Park*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/meganspringate/17/>

Symposium: Home Away From Home: Archaeology of American Hotels

Organizers/Chairs: Megan E. Springate

American hotels developed from the colonial inns and taverns at the turn of the nineteenth century. Features that distinguished hotels from their tavern predecessors included private sleeping rooms, accommodation of travelers, grand architecture, social stratification, and the inclusion of spaces for female guests. In his book *Hotel*, Sandoval-Strausz (2007) argues that hotels serve as expressions of human relationships, ideologies, and as scenes of social conflict, reflecting a distinctly American vision of mobility, civil society, democracy, and space. In this session, we will explore the similarities and differences among and between American hotels from a variety of times and places, serving a variety of populations and functions.

Resorts and Reform: Archaeology at the Wiawaka Holiday House, Lake George, New York

By Megan E. Springate, University of Maryland, College Park; arch@digitalpresence.com

Presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology Conference, Baltimore, Maryland 2012

Abstract: The Wiawaka Holiday House on Lake George, New York is among the oldest continuously operating women's holiday retreats in the United States. The Holiday House was founded on the grounds of a failing resort hotel at the turn of the twentieth century by wealthy women largely from industrial families to provide factory "girls" opportunities for healthful vacations in the countryside. Before the Holiday House was established, the property was the site of two resort hotels; their histories, spanning much of the nineteenth century, reflect the rise and transformations in the Adirondack resort hotel business. Presented in the early stages of doctoral research, this paper describes the current state of history and historical archaeology at the property and explores avenues of research related to the meanings and uses of leisure time in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as questions of gender, class, power, and labor.

I struggled in preparing this paper, trying to describe my dissertation research site in terms of tidy boxes into which it resolutely refused to fit. Since I organized this session to be about American hotels, I tried to first describe the site as an example of a resort or hotel, but it didn't quite fit. So I tried to describe it as a reform site, and again it didn't quite fit. The site is both, and by virtue of being both, doesn't fit the definition of either. This pattern of being both and neither extends to simultaneously being: a site of leisure and a site of labor; a working-class site and an upper-class site; a site of woman's reform and a site of women's control.

These complications make Wiawaka – a woman's retreat founded on Lake George, New York in 1903 -- a particularly rich site for investigation. Wiawaka is the oldest continuously operating

women's holiday retreat in the United States (Sayers 1998). While it still remains in operation as a gender-segregated woman's retreat, this discussion generally refers to the site's early history from 1903 to the 1920s. Wiawaka, variously translated as "The Great Spirit in Woman" or "the spirit of God in Woman," was founded on the grounds of a failing resort hotel by a group of wealthy women largely from Troy, New York. Mary Wiltse Fuller, the never-married daughter of a Troy industrialist, spearheaded the founding of the site. The purpose was to provide the factory "girls" from Troy and nearby Cohoes opportunities for affordable and healthful vacations in the countryside. Almost 200 guests stayed at Wiawaka that first summer. Guests were housed in a wing of the old resort formerly known as the Crosbyside, as well as in three guest cottages and what is now known as Fuller House, a residence for the hotel's owner, all of which were built on the site in the 1870s. In 1905, fire destroyed the Crosbyside, one of the original guest cottages and several outbuildings. Wiawaka continued to operate out of the remaining buildings, and guests today can still stay in either of the two surviving guest cottages or Fuller House (Sayers 1998; Wiawaka Holiday House archives).

Wiawaka was founded as a part of the Girls' Friendly Society or GFS, an international Episcopalian organization. Part of the mission of the Society was to protect single working girls – in Troy, often young Irish immigrant women – from the dangers of urban life. These dangers included idleness and pre-marital sexual activity. GFS meetings and activities held in the cities during much of the year served to educate the girls on proper etiquette and household management as well as to literally keep them off the streets. Wiawaka was one of several Holiday Houses operated by the GFS across the country. The GFS found holiday houses particularly important, as many of the regular meetings and activities were curtailed during the summer months when the organizers went on holiday (Girls' Friendly Society in America 1912/1913). The holiday houses were a means for working girls to experience the healthy benefits of consuming leisure and nature, while still being under the moral supervision and direction of the GFS. The working women who stayed at these holiday houses were

referred to as "girl guests;" GFS organizers were known as associate members (Girls' Friendly Society in America 1912/1913; Sayers 1998). A housemother managed the day-to-day operations of each holiday house. The reference to single women as girls was consistent with the ideology of the day – females were not considered grown women until they married. Class played a role in the designation of women as girls – the founder of Wiawaka, Mary Wiltse Fuller, never married, but would not be included in the category of unmarried women inscribed by the term "girl." Girl members of the GFS were required to be "virtuous" (code for virginal) and were expelled from the organization if they became "unvirtuous" by being sexually active outside of marriage (Richmond 2007).

Accommodations at Wiawaka consisted of rooms with one or two single beds, shared bathroom facilities, and communal meals served at set times. Structured activities at Wiawaka in the early years included formal teas, boating, hiking, and pageants (Sayers 1998). Guests were expected to perform work at the site during their stay – something certainly not done at more traditional hotels or resorts. "Work," wrote founder Katrina Trask in describing the ideology of Wiawaka, "is the criterion of character. It makes no difference what that work is, whether it is making shirts, making collars, writing books, sweeping the floor... or painting pictures – so long as it is well done" (Wiawaka Holiday House archives). While all guests were expected to work at Wiawaka, the nature of that work could vary widely, and I can only wonder how many associate members could be found sweeping the floors.

To help me think productively about the contradictory aspects of the site, I use Foucault's idea of heterotopias or "other spaces" (Foucault 1984). These are sites in which the relationships generally understood to exist in society are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."

Heterotopias complicate "real sites" and act as mirrors reflecting society back on itself. The "real

sites" or relationships being represented, contested, and inverted are those that frame people's lives - "oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example between private space and public space . . . between the space of leisure and that of work" (Foucault 1984). In his discussion of the various characteristics of heterotopias, Foucault describes them as "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 1984). In his 2009 article, "Secure from All Intrusion: Heterotopia, Queer Space, and the Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century American Resort" Kevin Murphy (2009) also applies Foucault's idea of heterotopias to resort sites, though in his case to those associated strictly with elites. He describes these as separate spaces - places of refuge for men and women who wanted to be apart from the heterosexual social rituals of resort life. Although the specifics differ between the sites described by Murphy and Wiawaka, all are purposeful creations of homosocial resort sites as places of refuge from the performance of heterosexuality.

In a sense, histories can be considered as describing relationships understood to exist in society, and therefore may be thought of as "real sites." Indeed, Foucault describes heterotopias as functioning "at full capacity" when people "arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault 1984). Museums and libraries – repositories of histories – are given as examples of "indefinitely accumulating time" (Foucault 1984). I think that is enough of an entrée to extend his definition from places that hold histories to the histories themselves.

The traditional master narrative of the history of American resorts and leisure situates them relative to the experiences of the elite and the upper-middle classes (see, for example, Carson 1994; MacCannell 1976; Sears 1989; Terrie 1997; Urry 2002). The major themes in this master narrative are:

- tourism as consumption – of nature, of leisure, of opportunities for networking or self-improvement;
- the link between tourism and resorts, conspicuous consumption, and capitalism -- which itself both formed and was formed by the middle classes and elites; and
- the eventual democratization of tourism and resulting inclusion of the lower classes in the performance of this all-American capitalist consumption, made possible in part by expanding transportation networks (also the creators and servants of capitalism).

This traditional master narrative normalizes the experiences of the white, male middle class.

Heterotopic histories of American tourism and leisure, including Cindy Aron's (1999) *Working At Play* expand the discussion to explicitly include the experiences of women, the working class, and to some extent those who were not white. Other historians, including Kathy Peiss (1986) in her book, *Cheap Amusements* look specifically at the leisure and tourism experiences of working women.

In the recent theme issue of the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* focused on the archaeology of travel and tourism, Maria O'Donovan and Lynda Carroll further complicate the master narrative:

Consumption and leisure [they write] tend to dominate concepts of tourism. They... are generally viewed in opposition to production and work but ... opposition and dichotomy only reproduce capitalist ideology. Once beyond the glitz of the tourist veneer, we can see the labor of leisure, its role in creating productive landscapes and relations, and its general connections to capitalist formation and ideology (O'Donovan and Carroll 2011: 192).

There is very little literature dealing with the labor of leisure. Two exceptions from outside archaeology are Jon Sterngass' (2001) history, "African American Workers and Southern Visitors at

Antebellum Saratoga Springs” and Thea Sinclair’s (1997) edited economics volume, *Gender, Work, and Tourism*. These, however, are scattered pieces; there is no historical context for looking at the labor of leisure (Wurst 2011: 255).

A recent article by LouAnn Wurst describes archaeological investigations at the Cataract and Niagara House hotels in Niagara Falls, New York. In her analysis, Wurst finds “vast numbers of employees living in the hotels” (Wurst 2011: 255). By examining the archaeological materials recovered in the context of Niagara Falls’ changing tourism industry, Wurst concludes that the experiences of the laborers -- who created the tourism and leisure experiences of others -- have left material traces. Archaeology, then, has something to contribute to this understudied part of the American experience (Wurst 2011: 265). In the same volume of the *IJHA*, Maria O’Donovan (2011) explores the development of the Jewish resort area in the Catskills known as the Borscht Belt. O’Donovan complicates one type of vacation accommodation, the cook alone summer boarding house, by describing the experiences of women. Far from enjoying a leisurely escape, women staying at these kuchalyns labored to create their own leisure – and that of their children, who stayed with them, and their husbands who often worked in the city during the week and traveled on weekends to vacation with their families. These women, invisibly perhaps to their husbands and certainly to historians, cleaned, cooked, looked after the children, and did laundry without the benefit of familiar tools, surroundings, or social support networks (O’Donovan 2011: 272, 274). Stacey Camp, in her dissertation, also touched upon the archaeology of tourism laborers at a corporate-run vacation camp in Southern California (Camp 2009, 2011).

At Wiawaka, the connection between labor and leisure is different. Unlike at the hotels at Niagara Falls or the kuchalyns of the Borcht Belt, the relationship between labor and leisure was never hidden or mystified. In fact, the relationship between leisure and work and moral value is explicitly part of

the site's ideology. Girl guests were expected to help out at Wiawaka – they served tea, helped at the dairy farm and in the garden as well as partaking in structured leisure activities including walks, pageants, and boat rides. They consumed nature, health, and directed self-improvement as part of their leisure but were also explicitly the producers both of their own vacation and leisure experiences and those of other guests. Wiawaka and the other GFS Holiday Houses were not alone in this, and there are many examples of vacation sites that were also reform sites, if we define a reform site simply as having the purpose of reforming or bettering those they served. Other contemporary sites include those founded by settlement houses; private groups like the YWCA; corporations including International Harvester (Aron 1999); and labor unions including the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (Kessler-Harris 2007: 47). There is, therefore, a whole subset of heterotopic leisure sites that are also sites of reform, of labor, of working class and higher classes, etc.

Stays at Wiawaka were reformatory experiences for both the girl guests and the associate members. During this period, many middle-class vacationers, described as being uncomfortable with idleness, were choosing self-improvement vacations. The stated purpose of Wiawaka was to improve the lives of the girl guests. Not only were the “girls” removed from the corrupting influences of the cities and of the workplace (often described as dangerous for women) they were schooled by example and direct instruction in appropriate womanly (and not coincidentally, middle-class consumerist) behavior through performances such as teas and pageants. Participating in the improvement of the girl guests also reformed the associate members and other upper-class visitors (for a discussion of taste, virtue, and reform see Koistinen 1998).

Only virtuous girls were welcome to be guests at Wiawaka while it was under the auspices of the Girls' Friendly Society, and part of the mission was, as already mentioned, to keep them from becoming fallen women. There was an ongoing and heated debate within the GFS throughout its

nineteenth and early twentieth century history whether they should allow fallen but repentant women to become members. Until 1936, the fallen – repentant or not – were excluded (Richmond 2007). An almost directly comparable institution of reform (without the added layer of being a vacation site) is the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia founded in 1800 and excavated by Lu Ann De Cunzo. In the early twentieth century, the Society shifted their mission from taking in fallen women and rehabilitating them for domestic service to taking in young women and teaching them domestic skills while protecting them from sexual temptation (De Cunzo 2001). There is some archaeological data from this later period that can be used as a comparative assemblage, opening avenues of discussion of how reform sites like the Magdalen Society (itself a heterotopia) compared to reform and leisure sites like *Wiawaka*.

Formal archaeology at *Wiawaka* has so far consisted of a compliance survey that did not identify potentially significant deposits (Black 2007). Some artifacts –including this burnt porcelain room number -- have been recovered during maintenance and gardening work on the property. Because the site has remained in continuous operation, I took the opportunity to do some archaeology in the cupboard. These hotel-ware dishes were purchased after the housemother complained in 1957 that too many dishes were being broken each season. Indeed, annual reports indicate that many multiple dozens of plates, cups, and bowls needed to be replaced each year, presumably at some expense and inconvenience (*Wiawaka Holiday House archives*). By 1961, *Wiawaka* had shifted from using off-the-shelf generic hotel wares like this Saratoga-pattern plate to these custom-made wares. Although the site remained a place of respite and reform where working women could vacation at reduced rates, the *Wiawaka* board chose to have custom dishes produced in the tradition of the finest hotels and railroads. This speaks to the continuing heterotopic nature of *Wiawaka* as a place of leisure for working women as well as a place of respectability and middle- and upper class experience.

How, then, does Wiawaka as a heterotopia reflect back the reality of the early twentieth century? What “real sites” or relationships does Wiawaka invert and complicate? The ones that I have structured this paper around are tourist sites and reform sites. Through the lens of Wiawaka, we can examine the relationships of labor and laborers in the production and consumption of leisure time and tourism. We can also examine reform and philanthropy as a type of leisure and also as a form of control. In both cases, aspects of class and gender are made explicit at Wiawaka that might otherwise remain obscured in other contexts. Information about these relationships explored at Wiawaka and other similar sites can be used as a looking-glass to explore relationships at more traditional hotel and reform sites, as well as more general relationships based on class, gender, industrial labor, and perhaps on immigrant or marital status and age.

I am currently preparing for preliminary fieldwork to begin this coming summer at Wiawaka. In addition to excavations, research at the site will include an analysis of the property as a powered cultural landscape (see, for example, Spencer-Wood 2010) and will trace the lives of the women who visited the property using the extant guest books and genealogical information. In the mean time, I invite you to visit the Wiawaka Project website (www.wiawakaproject.com) that contains additional information about the site and is updated regularly with research notes and findings.

References:

Aron, Cindy S.

1999 *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States*. Oxford University Press, New York City.

Black, Andrew T.

2007 Condensed Phase I Cultural Resources Survey, Wakonda Lodge, Town of Lake George, Warren County, New York. On file, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, Waterford, New York.

Camp, Stacey Lynn

2009 *Materializing Inequality: The Archaeology of Citizenship and Race in Early 20th Century Los Angeles*. PhD diss., Stanford University.

2011 *Materializing Inequality: The Archaeology of Tourism Laborers in Turn-of-the-Century Los Angeles*. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15(2): 279-297.

- Carson, Barbara G.
 1994 "Early American Tourists and the Commercialization of Leisure." In *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J Albert, 373-405. University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville.
- De Cunzo, Lu Ann.
 2001 On Reforming the 'Fallen' and Beyond: Transforming Continuity at the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, 1845–1916. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 5(1): 19-43.
- Foucault, Michel
 1984 *Of Other Spaces* (1967), *Heterotopias*. Translation by Jay Miskowiec of "Des Espace Autres," originally published in *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuïte* (October 1984).
<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>
- Girls' Friendly Society in America
 1912/1913 Girls' Friendly Society in America Associates' Record. Various issues.
- Kessler-Harris, Alice
 2007 *Gendering Labor History*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana.
- Koistinen, Janice H.
 1998 'The Good is Not Always The Beautiful': Social Reform, Good Taste, and Social Identity in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century American Literature. PhD diss., University of Michigan.
- MacCannell, Dean
 1976 *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Murphy, Kevin D.
 2009 'Secure from All Intrusion' Heterotopia, Queer Space, and Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century American Resort. *Winterthur Portfolio* 43(2/3): 185-228.
- O'Donovan, Maria
 2011 A Trip to the Mountains: Travel and Social Relations in the Catskill Mountains of New York. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15(2): 267-278.
- O'Donovan, Maria and Lynda Carroll
 2011 Going Places: The Historical Archaeology of Travel and Tourism. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15(2): 191-193.
- Peiss, Kathy
 1986 *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Richmond, Vivienne
 2007 'It Is Not a Society for Human Beings but for Virgins': The Girls' Friendly Society Membership Eligibility Dispute 1875 – 1936. *Journal of Historical Sociology* 20(3): 304-327.
- Sandoval-Strausz, A.K.
 2007 *Hotel: An American History*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut.

- Sayers, Mary L.
1998 National Register of Historic Places Nomination - Wiawaka Holiday House. On file, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, Waterford, New York.
- Sears, John F.
1989 Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst.
- Sinclair, M. Thea (ed.)
1997 Gender, Work, and Tourism. Routledge, London.
- Spencer-Wood, Suzanne M, and Sherene Baugher
2010 Introduction to the Historical Archaeology of Powered Cultural Landscapes. International Journal of Historical Archaeology 14(4): 463-474.
- Sterngrass, Jon
2001 African American Workers and Southern Visitors at Antebellum Saratoga Springs. American Nineteenth Century History 2(2): 35-59.
- Terrie, Philip G.
1997 Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks. The Adirondack Museum/Syracuse University Press, Syracuse.
- Urry, John
2002 The Tourist Gaze. Second Edition. Sage, London.
- Wiawaka Holiday House
Various Wiawaka Holiday House Archives. Rensselaer County Historical Society, Troy, New York.
- Wurst, LouAnn
2011 "Human Accumulations": Class and Tourism at Niagara Falls. International Journal of Historical Archaeology 15(2): 254-266.