

Doing Archaeology During a Pandemic

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Archaeological knowledge is built on the development and maintenance of relationships and friendships. I would even go so far as to suggest that archaeology itself is a form of friendship. Archaeology, as a discipline, is *secondary* to that primary category of social connection and discourse. This is fundamentally different from a prevailing model that stresses critique and conflict as motivational forces in the production of knowledge. The importance of relationships becomes even more clear as we contend with the alienating nature of so-called "social distancing" during the pandemic. This is an endorsement of the 'build-up' rather than 'tear-down' model of discourse. When given an opportunity, we are all grateful to have real, live, human contact. Working on Hurricane for a week this summer offered a reprieve -- as it has in the past -- from the cares and concerns of the world. I was also very impressed by the seriousness, care and caution taken by all of the staff and stewards with respect to the very real dangers posed by the present virus. I felt safe and protected there.

Industrial archaeology is a discipline that combines archival research with survey and excavation. Doing research on Hurricane Island this summer under the present circumstances quite naturally caused me to think about public health there during the nineteenth century, and how workers and residents coped with the environmental stresses of granite quarrying, carving, polishing as well as the numerous diseases that were prevalent during that time, such as typhus, tuberculosis and cholera. As I began my work, one passage from Richardson's "The Town That Disappeared" piqued my interest:

The reports of the State Board of Health between 1885 and 1905
.... have little to report. The records for Hurricane show a much
lower incidence of infectious diseases, no doubt as a result of its

being insulated by 12 miles of ocean. There was no doctor on Hurricane.

While it is certainly possible that there was no doctor in a traditional Western medical sense on the island (Richardson further notes that serious cases were rowed to nearby Vinalhaven for treatment), a town of over 1000 inhabitants must have had a system of care and health for those who suffered illness, pain and hardship in the quarries or production sheds (not the least of which was silicosis). This historical puzzle provides a perfect opportunity for an archaeologist to step in and see what may be learned "in small things forgotten" (Deetz 1977) as well as 'in small texts forgotten.' This also points to an interesting distinction between different forms and flows of information, as articulated by Scott in his distinction between the "public transcript" and "hidden transcript" (Scott 1990). The hidden transcript of Hurricane Island is in the soil and the air, that which hides and sparkles in the roots after treefalls, the coal dust that blows in our faces, the apple trees growing in silent foundations, the brittle stalks of foxglove standing like sentries in the island valley. Are they trying to remind us of something?

In his evocative memoir of the island, Harold Vinal conjures personalities and imagery that help us to understand the depth, variety, and richness of the cultural life there, including the strong possibility of a folk medicine tradition. In his introduction, Vinal orates:

Once flowers issued here, the bluebell shook
its fluted bells; the rose, imperial
upon its stem was here; the goldenrod
gleamed in this island valley, Great-Grandfather.
What flowers for a funeral, my Sire! (Vinal, 20)

Vinal's work is reminiscent of Edgar Lee Master's "Spoon River Anthology" (1915), published a decade before Vinal's work. It is quite possible that Vinal was influenced by this series of poems that memorialize the deceased residents of an imaginary town. However, unlike Masters, Vinal notes that the characters in his prose poem are composites of real people; each individual character includes qualities and vignettes from multiple people who once lived on the island and whose personalities and exploits were still held in recent memory at the time of its writing.

Vinal's preoccupation with the botanical remains that haunted the island in 1936 allows us to do the same, and to pose the question: Are some of the flowers and herbs that grow on Hurricane the remains of folk medicine practices that were prevalent during the granite industry's peak years of activity? A description of one of Vinal's composite characters, Maud Beverage, offers a clue:

Daytime was different, she got through the day,
for lost among her foxgloves and her roses,
she nursed the earth. And burying her hands
in island soil, she seemed to come alive,
finding a sudden solace then, in watching
blue leap into a fountain of swift light

from the thin stalk, the flower come to birth.
(Vinal 82)

For those familiar with the island, there is a rather prominent stand of purple foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) just beyond the ice pond, as well as several scattered instances elsewhere. *Digitalis* is just one of several non-native herbs and vascular plants on the island as enumerated in Ben Lemmond's comprehensive ecological survey of Hurricane (Lemmond 2016, Appendix A). *Digitalis* a well known folk remedy, and has been used for heart ailments for centuries (Withering 1785), but this is just one of many possible medicinals to be found on the island; and the possibility (or probability) of a vibrant folk-medicine practice on Hurricane is a question that warrants further research.

During my visit this summer, I stumbled across Euell Gibbon's "A Wild Way To Eat," which was one result from his association with Outward Bound. The conspicuous presence of edible and medicinal plants on the island -- some of which are mentioned in Gibbon's work -- makes one wonder if Gibbon's "wild" plants are truly so, but are rather persistent living memories of domestic and cultivated spaces during and previous to granite production.

(*Or* -- just perhaps -- the impulse to search for and assign qualities of past domestic and human associations to plants that are doing just fine without humans is misguided. Perhaps Gibbons' use of the term "wild" is justifiable. To take this full circle, does the century of separation of these plants from sustained human use and scrutiny -- this moment of neglect -- constitute a kind of re-wilding of historical and archaeological evidence? Are they not wild after all?)

While some of these thoughts are conjectural, it has been well argued by Marko Marila that the speculative cannot be held as grounds for dismissal (or "point of elimination") in archaeological research (Marila 2020, 13). This allows us to think a little bit more seriously about the folk-medicinal or shamanistic implications surrounding Vinal's composite character of Maud Beverage. In a later passage, Vinal relates an interaction between Beverage and a neighbor, Abbie:

Well, I'll be goin', Maud; I only came
to ask yer for some ointment, Reuben's ill.
His legs haint what they were.

O no, don't go....
here is the ointment; don't put on too much;
better'n anything. Come round agin.
(Vinal 84).

One of the artifacts that occupied my time during my week at Hurricane this summer was a small bottle with the embossed words: "Johnson's American Anodyne Liniment." The presence of this bottle -- along with several others that once contained large amounts of morphine, alcohol and other opium-based pain killers -- allows us to pursue an *archaeology of anaesthesia* as one way of understanding the rapidity of industrialization and the sensory transition into industrial processes across the country (and possibly

beyond). Shards of sensory renunciation remain littered across Hurricane and continue to emerge from the rocky soil with every Spring thaw. This one particularly powerful liniment was intended "For Man Or Beast" (Worthpoint 2020) and was intended to be used internally or externally (Gould 2020). The ubiquity of these medicinals on Hurricane in conjunction with the presence of herbaceous plants offer the possibility that (the composite character of) Beverage was simultaneously dispensing multiple forms of pain management as well as cultivating her own herbal remedies.



Maud Beverage is not the only composite character in Vinal's work that evokes qualities of healing. Earning the jealousy of the island's other female residents, Hulda Larssen, an immigrant from Norway, appears to be a practitioner of 'the oldest profession,' but it also seems that her character is possibly something more complicated and nuanced:

You were a languorous field where they might lean,
draining delight; you were a field of flowers.
Bosomed with earth, you bosomed them, and healed them,
and so they rose up and returned to ships...
(Vinal 65)

This is the second instance of a direct association between plant life and healing -- with the woman folk-healer as medium -- in Vinal's long poem. The persistence of this theme in the text allows us, at the very least, to delve into this question a bit further. To elaborate upon Lemmond's survey of the plants that remain living on the island, we could also conduct pollen analysis and microbotanical research to see what other species were being cultivated there in the past.

Archaeology has the propensity to collapse time; to bring researchers into direct contact with the time periods of the objects and sites being researched. In a certain sense, artifacts carry their respective temporalities with them, causing the archaeologist themselves to live in a temporal space consisting of multiple textures, paces, horizons. For this reason, archaeology can bring the past into the heart of the present, and archaeological finds are often relevant to contemporary narratives and concerns.

As I am understanding it, it seems that archaeology's contribution to scientific and humanistic discourse is just as much qualitative as it is quantitative: it seeks to take part in the overall tone of discourse, the concerns and problems of society as our challenges unfold. Within the context of the pandemic, archaeology is well suited to discuss issues of public health and healing, for it is within the earth, water and air that the remains of past struggles are imbedded. I offer this research as one small part of this work.



I would like to express my gratitude to the Hurricane Island Foundation for the invitation to come out to the island for another summer's week of archaeological research. As always, the staff and stewards on the island were more than hospitable and helpful, and we had many fascinating conversations about the island; it's past, present and future. This was a week of dialogue with people who know far more about Maine than I do, but I'm learning more year by year. I am also grateful to my fellow archaeologists Fred Koerber and Arthur Anderson. Fred began the archaeological research on Hurricane and Arthur and I co-taught last year's field school there. I hope to continue our collaborations in the years to come. Finally, we are all very grateful to the Gaston family for their continued support of all of the scientific and educational activities on Hurricane Island.

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