

Phase I Evaluation of the John Brown Property in Akron, Summit County, Ohio

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John Brown is a polarizing figure in American history, often remembered as a catalyst that started the Civil War. Referred to as a mad man and a martyr (Gilpins 2011; Griffin 2009; McGlone 2009), Brown's role in the anti-slavery movement and use of violence has generated a controversial legacy. Prominent, brutal events sparked by Brown, such as "Bleeding Kansas" and at Harpers Ferry, exemplified and extended feelings of anger and fear that led to the Civil War (Cain 1990; Ferguson 1994; Griffin 2009; Simpson 1978; McGlone 1989, 2009).

One of the lasting pieces of Brown's heritage resides in Akron, Ohio: The John Brown House (Figure 1) (Jackson and Margot 1983; Lane 1892; Grismer 1952; McGlone 2009). This property reflects a time in Brown's life that occurred before the violent events that ultimately led to his death. John Brown rented a home from Colonel Simon Perkins from 1844 - 1854 at the intersection of two important thoroughfares: the historic Portage Path and the stagecoach route. Perkins, the son of Akron's co-founder, was a state senator who helped form Summit County in 1840 and preferred life as a farmer. In this regard, he had between 1,300 and 1,500 Merino Saxony sheep that John Brown shepherded with his oldest sons. Brown was said to know each sheep by face, would stay up all night with lambs at their birth and earned many medals for the quality of wool produced by their flocks. Born in Connecticut, but raised in the abolitionist community of Hudson, Ohio, Brown used the opportunity of working with Perkins to travel between locations in Akron and Springfield, Massachusetts to transport freedom seekers.

Brown and his second wife, Mary, shared the Akron house with up to 11 children with two children being born there, and sadly, two dying in the home. The structure was only two rooms and a loft. Their children lived there and continued to tend the sheep while Brown was working for Perkins in Massachusetts and during the short time that he was teaching free black men to farm in Timbuku, New York (North Elba). This is the location to which John and Mary Brown moved after leaving Akron.

In 1859, Brown led a group of his sons, sons-in-laws, free black men, escaped slaves and abolitionists to raid Harpers Ferry in an attempt to end slavery in the United States. While the attempt was not successful at the time and Brown was hanged for treason for the act, the Smithsonian Institution now states that the Civil War Era started with Brown's raid in 1859 and concluded with President Lincoln's assassination in 1865.

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Figure 1. The John Brown Property. (Image by Julie Judge.)

Today, the Summit County Historical Society (SCHS) of Akron, Ohio, is rehabilitating the home of John Brown. The work is being funded through a series of grants from the State of Ohio, and local foundations such as the Ohio & Erie Canalway Association (OECA), the Mary S. and David C. Corbin Foundation, and the Preservation of the Abolitionist Movement Fund at the Akron Community Foundation.

In preparation for the property to be opened to the public, SCHS has undertaken restoration and construction. This recent work has prompted archaeological investigation of a portion of the property being affected by the restoration. In April and May 2018, Kent State University archaeologists led a team of graduate and undergraduate students in the partial excavation of a 40-meter x 0.5-meter, L-shaped area in order to evaluate the potential risk for disturbing historic material while placing an electrical line.

Methods

The project area extended from the house eastward to the middle of the property, then curved southward toward a sandstone wall that lines the perimeter. The small L shaped project

area required shovel testing in small intervals to accurately cover this historic property. A datum marked N50 W50 was placed at the corner of the project area to make two lines of shovel test units that ran west and south of the datum. In total, ten shovel tests were mapped out; eight were positioned every five meters and two additional shovel tests were placed within the project boundaries (Figures 2 and 3). The location of each unit was recorded in the southwest corner using a Garmin handheld GPS unit. The shovel tests were screened ($\frac{1}{4}$ -inch mesh) in ten cm levels until sterile subsoil was reached around 30-40 cm below the surface. Observations of the soil profiles included descriptions of soil color, texture, structure, and gravel content of each unit. The two additional shovel tests were placed within the project area boundaries to investigate a possible feature and high artifacts densities on the west line of the project area. Specifically, shovel test N35 W49.5 investigated a dark soil feature that was partial visible from Unit N35 W50. Further exploration showed that the feature was most likely a filled in rodent hole rather than archaeologically significant. Shovel test N50 W32.5 investigated a high concentration of ceramic artifacts coming from unit N50 W30 and was thus placed in-between N50 W30 and N50 W35.

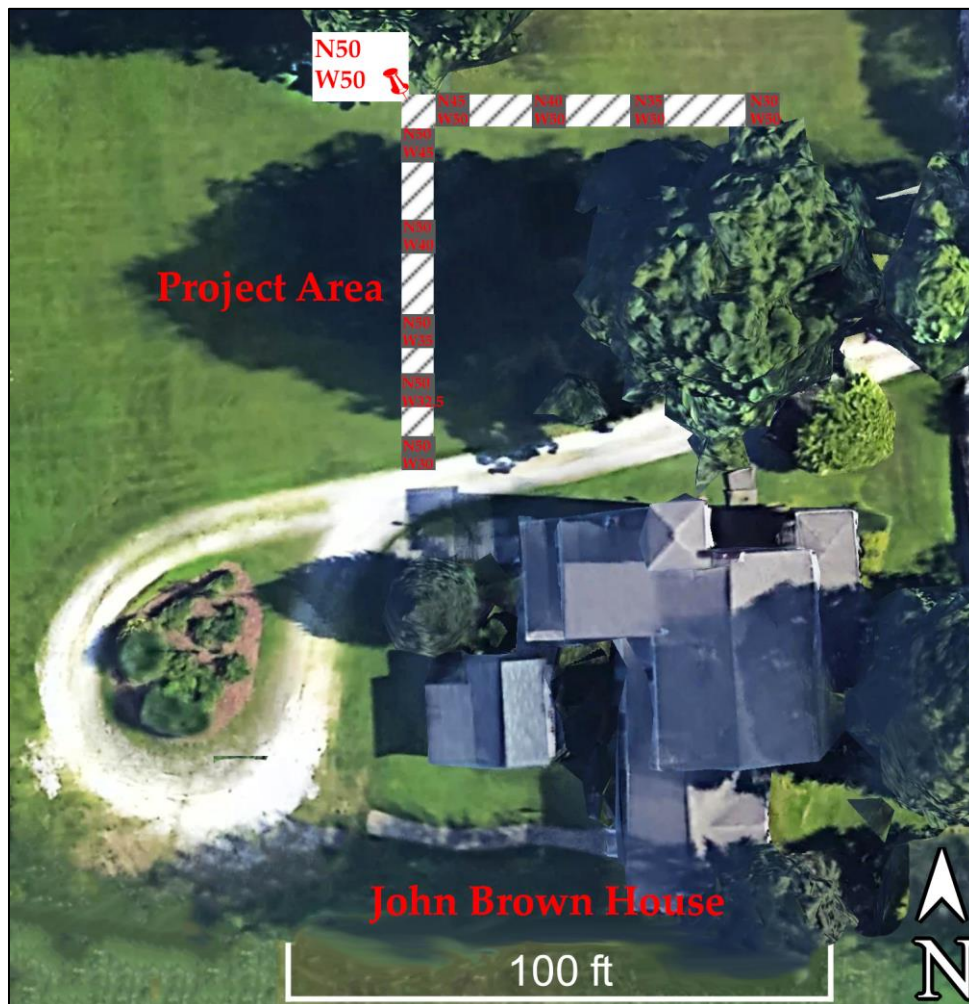


Figure 2. Project area and Shovel Test Units.



Figure 3. Shovel testing at the John Brown House.

All artifacts were bagged, labeled, and brought back to the Kent State University Experimental Archaeology Lab to be analyzed. The diagnostic artifacts were photographed (Figure 4). Two additional analyses were conducted to determine the rough age of the historic assemblage. The first analysis followed South (1977) who developed a method that uses the dates of ceramics and their frequency to formulate an approximate age for the historic component (South 1977). The second method followed Ball (1982), who developed a method that uses the thickness and frequency of architectural glass types to estimate age (Ball 1982; Weiland 2009). Upon completion of the project, all artifacts were returned to the Summit County Historical Society during the summer of 2019.

Results

In total, 291 artifacts were recovered from the ten shovel test units. The soil profiles can be seen in Table 1. The highest concentration of artifacts was found in shovel tests N50 W30, N50 W32.5, and N50 W35 that were located close to the house. Overall, the artifacts were highly fragmentary with dates ranging from early 19th to late 20th century. The diagnostic artifacts were primarily ceramics; however, a bullet casing and the architectural glass were also recovered.

These artifacts provided the most accurate information for an approximate age range of this historic assemblage.

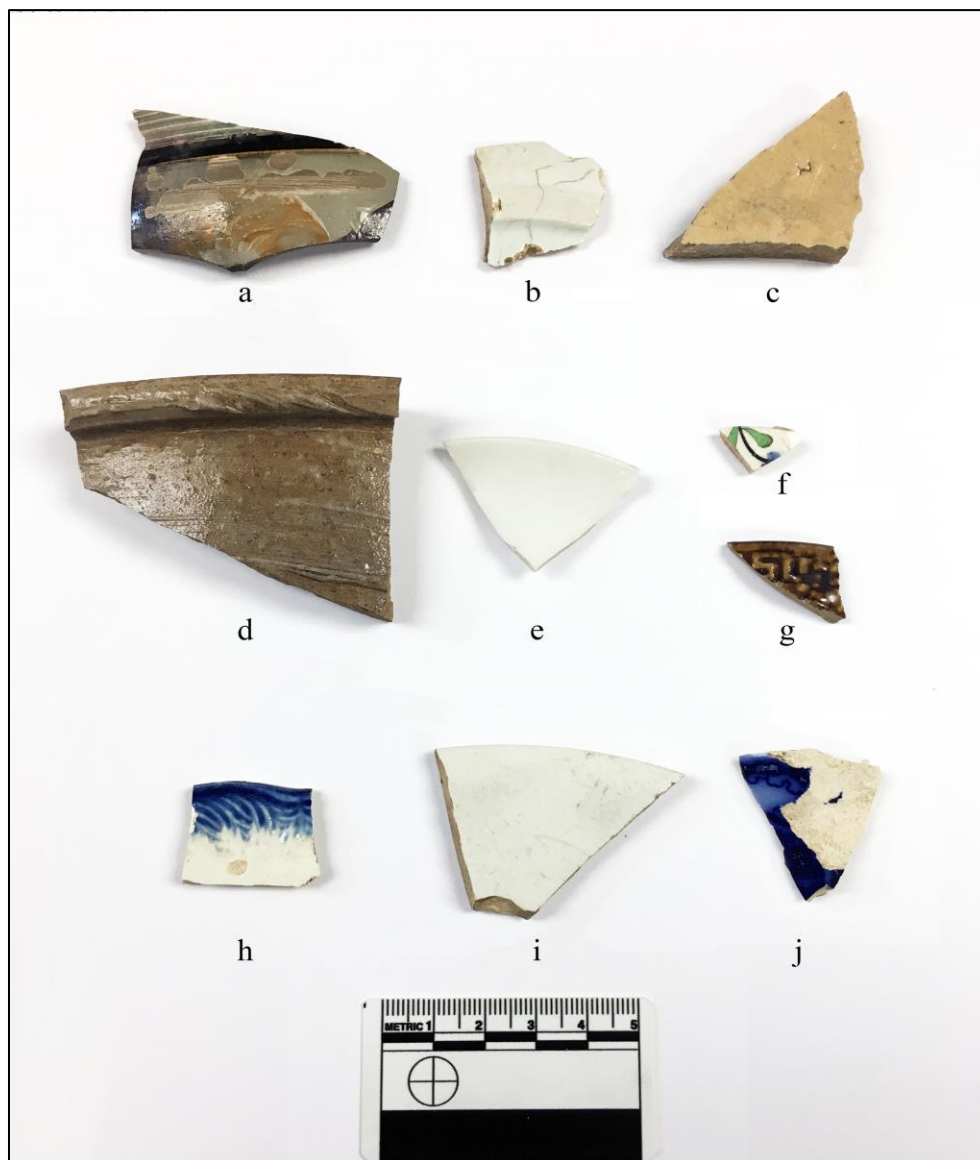


Figure 4. Ceramics recovered from John Brown House.

a, Cabled technique; **b**, Pearlware; **c**, Yellowware; **d**, Salt Glazed; **e**, Porcelain; **f**, Sprig design; **g**, Rockingham ware; **h**, Blue Shell Edge; **i**, Ironstone; **j**, Flow Blue.

A total of 181 ceramic sherds were found, reflecting a sample of the popular wares during the early 19th and 20th century. The assemblage includes Yellowware, Rockingham Ware, Ironstone, Stoneware, as well as decorative refined earthenwares and porcelain imports. The decorative wares include common design elements like sprig, flow blue, polychrome floral, shell edge and transfer printed. The frequency of the sherd types are shown in Table 2. The South (1974) Mean Ceramic Age was calculated as 1867 (South 1974).

Table 1. Description of Soil Profile

Stratigraphic layer	Depth (approximate range)	Munsell Color	Soil texture	Soil structure	Gravel content
Top layer	0-20 cm	10YR6/3 or 10YR 4/3	SILT LOAM OR SANDY LOAM	LOOSE	Gravel Fill
Bottom layer	20-40 cm	10YR 3/3, 3/4 OR 10YR 2/2	SILT LOAM	COMPACT	Sandstone

Table 2. Ceramic Assemblage Frequency Distribution

Ceramic Type	Count	Date
Pearlware	1	1782-1840
Stoneware	19	1805-1920
Ironstone	29	1840-Late 19th Century
Yellowware	21	1830-1900
Rockingham	10	1788-20th Century
Shell Edge Wares	1	19th Century
Flow Blue	8	1825-Early 20th Century
Polychrome Floral	1	1840-1880
Transfer Print	7	19th Century
Cabled Design	1	1821-Early 20th Century
Sprig	1	Post 1830s
Nondiagnostic	81	
Total	181	

A total of 73 pieces of architectural and container glass was also recovered. However, the container glass was non-diagnostic due to its small, fragmented state. The architectural glass was analyzed using the Ball (1982) method, suggesting an approximate age of 1817 (Ball 1982; Weiland 2009).

Other artifacts recovered included metal, brick, and animal bone (Figure 5). All metal and brick artifacts were non-diagnostic. One whole and one partial tooth were identified as domestic species. The whole tooth was identified as *Bos taurus* (cow). The partial fragment was associated with *Ovis aries* (sheep).



Figure 5. Metal fragments (left) and bone recovered from John Brown House.

Discussion

The test excavations yielded artifacts that reflect how the home was being used during its long history. The small amounts of animal bone found on the property are reflective of the cattle and sheep that were important to the local economy. The large number of ceramic fragments is representative of daily activities and acquired wealth. The recovered ceramic assemblage is, for the most part, likely reflective of local industry. Two of the most common ceramic types –

yellowware and ironware – were produced by the local Rowey and Baker workshop and Robinson Clay Company in the mid-1800's and the Akron Queensware Company in the late-1800's, respectively (Blair 1966). The dominance of ironstone pottery in the assemblage reflects a later temporal documentation that is corroborated by the mean ceramic age of 1882 (South 1977). The architectural glass age of 1817 provided conflicting results because the property was not built before the 1830's (Ball 1982; Weiland 2009). These types of age estimation procedures should always be viewed with caution and placed within the context of other data provide by the site. However, overall, archaeological test excavations yielded an assemblage that is reflective of a period that post-dates the property's most famous owner.

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