College Hall Field Report

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Abstract

In the fall of 2009, the MSU Campus Archaeology Program (CAP) tested areas north and south of Beaumont Tower on the campus of Michigan State University. Testing was done as a result of sidewalk replacements in the area, carried out by MSU Landscape Services. Shovel Test Pits were dug in the areas being replaced. One Shovel Test Pit south of the tower revealed a building foundation. Additional testing was conducted to further investigate the site, revealing the northeast corner of College Hall, the first building built at what was then Michigan Agricultural College. Further testing were carried out to the west and south to find more remains of the building, in hopes of potentially conducting a field school at the site during the summer of 2010. These investigations yielded no further remains of College Hall.

This report discusses these investigations and results, and makes suggestions for further research.
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Introduction
In October, 2009, Michigan State Landscape Services Department was replacing sidewalks surrounding Beaumont Tower. The MSU Campus Archaeology Program (CAP) tested areas where sidewalks had been removed to the north and south of Beaumont Tower.

This report will discuss the results of historical and archaeological research conducted at this site. Both phases were carried out over a one month period by the Campus Archaeology Program, under the supervision of Terry Brock, Campus Archaeologist, and the direction of Dr. Lynne Goldstein, Director of Campus Archaeology.

Physical Setting and History
Michigan State University is located in East Lansing, Michigan, in the center of the Lower Peninsula. The areas investigated are located to the north and south of Beaumont Tower, which is located within the “Sacred Space,” a grassy and tree-filled open space slightly to the northwest of the current MSU Museum. It was determined in the 1870s by MAC president Theodore Abbot that this central space on campus would not be altered, and therefore considered sacred ground (Stanford and Dewhurst.
2002). As a result, the space has been preserved, and no buildings have been constructed on it since. This part of campus is characterized by large grassy openings amongst sparsely spaced oak trees. The sidewalks, along with the topography, draw pedestrians to Beaumont Tower, which is located at the highest topographic point on the grounds. The site investigated in this report, just south of Beaumont Tower, is a grassy space that slopes down from Beaumont Tower, southwest towards West Circle Drive. Two sidewalks cross this space, one running east-west and the other north-south, with a large American Planetree standing northwest of the intersection of the two pathways.

This area is of particular importance to Michigan State University, as it was the spot where the first buildings at MSU, then the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan, were built shortly after its founding in 1855. College Hall (Figure 4) was erected in 1856, becoming the college’s first building, and also the first structure in America dedicated to the instruction of scientific agriculture. The 50x100 foot structure was designed by John C. Holmes, co-founder of the Michigan State Agricultural Society and professor of Horticulture, to be the west wing of a building that he had envi-

Figure 3: Campus map from 1927 showing foundation of College Hall, which by this point had been converted to an Artillery Garage (Courtesy of MSU Archives and Historical Collections).

Figure 4: College Hall in 1856 (Courtesy of MSU Archives and Historical Collections).
sioned would include a central structure with an east wing on the other side (Kuhn 1955:13). Due to economic constraints, only the west wing was built. The building stood three stories high over a low basement (Beal 1915:265). The foundation of the building was to be built of flat stones, laid close together in ground or rubble mortar and leveled on the top with small stones and mortar (Charles Hoertz & Son n.d.). The walls were constructed using brick, which were locally made using clay from campus.

The building was plagued with problems from the start. Major flaws delayed the opening of the College. It was found that the flooring was grossly uneven and so shrunken that it did not reach the walls. In the opening months of classes, piers were placed under a sagging portion of the building where the foundation had settled in. It was not until the early 1900s, when the College began to transform the building into a student union, that the degree of poor construction became clear (Kuhn 1955:15).

The restoration of College Hall into a student union combined the interests of students and alumni, allowing the structure to become functional for current students, while preserving its historical integrity. While the restoration was being conducted, the workers found that College Hall rested on plank footings, that the foundation enclosed a standing stump, that the bricks were soft, and that the walls were hollow (Kuhn 1955:263). As a result, work was abandoned.

At 5 o’clock on August 12, 1918, the remains of College Hall came crashing down as the band played the national anthem at a war trainees’ retreat (The M.A.C. Record, August, 1918:5-6). A large portion of west and south wall had collapsed, leaving the foundations and some lower walls still preserved (Figure 5; Kedzie 1918:59). In October of 1918, MAC decided to build an artillery garage on the foundations of College Hall. The garage was 50 x 100 feet, with eight double stalls for the sixteen army trucks that required storage (The M.A.C. Record, October 1918). Therefore, the debris from the collapsed building was cleared away to make room for the new structure. A photo of the artillery garage (Figure 6) indicates that some of the still standing walls of College Hall were used in its construction, with the windows and doorways being filled in with cement.
John W. Beaumont, a Detroit lawyer and graduate of the class of ’82, did not like the fact that an artillery garage stood on the foundations of College Hall, a place that had given him the greatest pleasures of his student days (Kuhn 1955:266). With the belief that the spot deserved a more aesthetic memorial, he and his wife donated the money for the construction of a memorial tower to commemorate College Hall.

The artillery garage was torn down in 1928 in order to make way for the construction of Beaumont Tower. The tower itself was constructed where the northeast corner of College Hall once stood. The dedication of Beaumont Tower took place on Alumni Day, June 22, 1929. Today, Beaumont Tower is the most recognizable structure on the campus of Michigan State University and stands as a symbol of the principles on which the university was founded.

Previous Investigations

The MSU Campus Archaeology Program has investigated a number of sites on campus that are relevant to the College Hall site. In the summer of 2005, an archaeological field school was held at the site of Saint’s Rest, the first dormitory built at Michigan State. These excavations revealed the north foundation of the dormitory, which had burned down in 1876. Many significant factors regarding early campus life were revealed through these excavations, including the construction methods used in the building (Mustonen 2007). Additional investigations done by CAP at Saint’s Rest revealed a trash pit located in the rear of the building.

During the summer of 2009, CAP investigated areas along the Red Cedar where the MSU Landscape Services Department had planned to plant trees. One area was excavated. This site, known as Beal Street, was located along the northern bank of the Red Cedar, near the intersections of West Circle Drive and Kalamazoo Street. Unit 1 revealed the most significant amount of cultural material, including a one meter thick layer of hand made brick rubble. Along with the large amount of brick rubble, a piece of plaster was found with the letters “Moor” written on it. During archival research for this report, a picture of student graffiti (Figure 4) written on the inside wall of College Hall was
found. This picture was taken in 1918 when the debris from the fallen building was being cleared away. The graffiti commemorated the work a group of students had done repairing a section of College Hall during the period of May 13-20, 1887. The names of seven students were written on the wall, with the first name being that of Alexander Moore (Brock 2010).

The “Moor” letters written on the piece of plaster found during the excavations at Beal Street perfectly matched up with the “A. Moore” writing in the picture. This provided a link between the two sites, indicating that the remains of College Hall were used to raise the banks of the Red Cedar River (Brock 2010). Further significance of this find will be discussed in the Discussion and Recommendations section of this report.

The Campus Archaeology Program has also developed a research model in order to investigate the ways in which the campus has changed and grown over its first 100 years (Goldstein, Brock, Stawksi, Pruitt 2010). It argues that these changes should be visible in the landscape and material record. The first stage represents the earliest period of the college, from 1855-1870, when it had little in the way of funding or support. The second phase, from 1870-1890, represents a period of growth, as the college receives Land-Grant funding and is able to build more buildings. The third phase represents a dramatic increase in population and programming, and the campus begins to increase in its size and the style of the built environment. This phase lasts from 1890-1925. The final stage represents the transition from Michigan Agricultural College to Michigan State College, and the incredible increase in size and student population due to WPA funding and the GI Bill. It finishes in 1955, when the college becomes Michigan State University.
The purpose of this model is to provide a larger context for the excavations completed on campus. Because many of the excavations are small and often hard to relate to each other, this model allows CAP to investigate human behavior during these transitions. The excavations presented here will fit into this period.

**Methods and Techniques of Investigation**

Shovel Test Pit survey was conducted where sidewalks were being replaced due to the potential presence of cultural material from College Hall. The area to the south of Beaumont Tower was of particular interest because that was the place where College Hall stood. Surveys were conducted in two areas, to the north and south of Beaumont Tower. STPs were excavated on 5 meter transects.

Additional testing was carried out to the south of Beaumont Tower and included the excavation of a trench and three 1 x 2 meter units. No screening was done during the excavation of the trench, while 1/4 inch hardware cloth was used for screening on the 1 x 2 meter units.

**Results of Investigations**

**Initial Investigations**

The area north of Beaumont Tower yielded insignificant results for further testing. STPs on the southern portion of Beaumont Tower, however, produced a significant amount of cultural material.

STP C2 revealed what appeared to be small foundation stones, along with a chunk of brick and some mortar. As a result, a small trench was excavated to the east of C2 in order to reveal more of the possible foundation.

Below the sidewalk was a layer of cinder, the remains of the original walkway that predated the sidewalk that was being replaced. The next layer exposed Feature 1, which consisted of a north-south running block of small, round stones.

![Figure 8: Unit 1 placed to identify potential for a builder's trench, and also to gain a side profile of the wall.](image)
Due to the presence of mortar in between the stones, Feature 1 was most likely part of a foundation. The stones were round river stones, not cut stone, and were most likely taken directly out of the Red Cedar River to the south of the site. A broken cut nail was found sitting on top of the feature, suggesting the feature dates to the 19th century. In order to reveal more of the feature, excavations were expanded southward. A 1 x 2 meter unit (Unit 1) was excavated alongside Feature 1 in order to reveal a side profile of the foundation (Figure 8).

Unit 1 was a 1 x 2 meter unit opened up along side of Feature 1, in order to examine the side of the feature itself and any possible builder’s trench associated with the construction of the feature. Unit 1 was excavated to a depth of 54 cm. No builder’s trench appeared, although the side of the foundation wall as exposed. The rest of the wall was uncovered, exposing it until it went under the remaining sidewalk.

Unit 1 revealed *in situ* mortar and foundation stones. The foundation stones were small, round river stones, indicating that the feature was poorly constructed. This evidence suggests that the northeast corner of College Hall had been uncovered (Figure 9).

**Further Testing**

Based on the historical data indicating that the dimensions of College Hall were 50 x 100 feet, running north-south, two 1 x 2 meter units were placed in order to locate the rest of College Hall’s foundation. The first unit was placed in the area where the northwest corner of the building would have been located. This unit was very complex and contained a large amount of rubble, none of which was *in situ*, and was complicated by an old tree root. The artifacts in this unit included many stones, which were most likely foundation stones, brick, and a few cut nails. Very little mortar was found, indicating that there were no *in situ* foundations present in this area.

Our measurements running south from Feature 1 ran right underneath a present day sidewalk. After marking out 100 feet south from the northeast corner, we ran a line to the west where the southern wall of College Hall would have stood. A second 1 x 2 meter unit was placed along this southern line, just west of the present day sidewalk, in or-
order to try and crosscut the southern foundation wall of College Hall. This second unit revealed nothing of value to our investigations. The only culturally relevant material uncovered was a layer of sparse cinder, which probably came from a previous walkway in the area.

These two units were put in place in order to reveal further remains of College Hall, in hopes of conducting a field school at the site this upcoming summer. The area has been highly disturbed in recent times and contains multiple tunnels and utility lines, which influenced our selection for the location of these two units. Since no further signs of the foundation were found to the west and south of the northeast corner we had found earlier, it was determined that there was not enough material to support an archaeological field school.

Discussion and Recommendations

The historical record states that Beaumont Tower was constructed where the northeast corner of College Hall once stood. Through archaeological survey and investigations, CAP was able to confirm this, although the actual northeast corner is slightly south of the tower. The poor construction of College Hall, noted repeatedly in the historical record, was also confirmed by excavations. The foundation of College Hall was built of small, round river stones and mortar and was more reminiscent of a log cabin foundation than that of a three story building. After the building had collapsed in August 1918, the debris was removed and an artillery garage was built on top of the foundations of College Hall.

Previous investigations at the Beal Street site along the north bank of the Red Cedar River revealed a significant layer of brick fill, along with a piece of plaster with the letters “Moor” (Brock 2010). Through archival research, this was linked to College Hall. This is significant because it reveals that the debris from College Hall was reused as fill to build up the banks of the Red Cedar. This holds cultural importance,
as it means that remains from College Hall are located in three areas on campus: beneath Beaumont Tower, at Beal Street, and in the Old College Hall Room at the Student Union, where boards from the building were used to construct the room’s roof.

At College Hall, plans to build an artillery garage on the building’s foundations were made in October 1918, shortly after the building’s collapse. This factor, coupled with the need to build up the rivers banks, resulted in the removal of debris from the site. This was reflected in our archaeological investigations at the College Hall site by the small amount of rubble, particularly brick rubble, and material remains found.

There has also been a significant amount of construction in the area since the building of Beaumont Tower, and the subsequent tearing down of the artillery garage. Despite the area’s consideration as a “Sacred Space”, underground utilities have not been considered modification. A number of utilities run through the footprint of College Hall. If there was a significant amount of cultural material left from College Hall, it would have been disturbed by the installation of these systems.

Although the testing units put in place were located outside of these disturbed areas, nothing of significance was found, indicating that the destruction of the Artillery Garage and the construction of Beaumont Tower may have been detrimental to the preservation of the foundations and associated assemblages. This is confirmed by photographs of the construction of Beaumont Tower. These photos indicate that the area directly south of the Tower was excavated in order to provide a deep foundation (Figure 10). However, the location where foundations were discovered were under a walkway while Beaumont Tower was constructed (Figure 11).

This space is also significant in its value to understanding the research model developed by CAP. This site interrogates the first phase through the building’s original construction: the poor construction materials used suggest that the building was the product of an underfunded project. It also provides an interesting look into the third phase, as the campus is dealing with the expanding campus size, and the failing utility of their old campus buildings.
College Hall was too small to serve its original function, and to fragile to be renovated.

The sidewalk may continue to preserve portions of the College Hall foundation. Since this portion of sidewalk was not being replaced at the time of our investigations, it is unknown whether or not further sections of College Hall’s foundation are intact. Because of this, and because of the cultural importance of this structure, it is imperative that Campus Archaeology be notified if any additional modifications to the landscape will be undertaken. This is important because of how much of the building has been disturbed; it is important that the literal foundation of the University is protected.

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