Introduction

Between 31 May and 1 July, 2005, the Murray State University Archaeological Laboratory (MSUAL) conducted a survey and testing field school project on the grounds of Columbus-Belmont State Park (CBSP), Hickman County, Kentucky. The Park had been experiencing problems with metal detector enthusiasts vandalizing the property in search of artifacts, and CBSP staff are not trained in archaeological recovery methods. Therefore, the MSUAL agreed to conduct a demonstration project towards educating interested community members about how an archaeological project should be conducted.

For CBSP, the goals of the project also included recovery of Civil War related artifacts for display in the museum, and attempting to locate the bivouac areas of the troops that were stationed there. In addition, limited test excavations at the former dispensary site were planned to aid in building a regional database for 19th-20th century domestic sites in western Kentucky.

Research goals included:
2. To locate encampment areas utilized by the troops stationed at CBSP. These areas should be signified by increased levels of domestic refuse (kitchen, personal, and non-military activities items) compared to other areas of the fort.
3. To conduct limited test excavations at the former dispensary site, 15Hi73.
4. To perform limited test excavations at any other area of the park in which survey might indicate deposits of interest. These excavations would be conducted in consultation with the Park manager and only with her approval.

Brief background

Columbus, Kentucky, was founded in 1804 on the floodplains of the Mississippi River and incorporated in 1820, opening a post office in that year.
In September, 1861, General U. S. Grant occupied Cairo, Illinois, preparing to enter western Kentucky to secure it for the United States. To forestall Grant, General Leonidas Polk moved troops to the bluffs overlooking Columbus, as a strategic point for defending the lower Mississippi River for the Confederacy. With as many as 19,000 troops, Polk created Fort DeRussey, a heavily fortified point above Columbus, and an encampment on the other side of the river at Belmont, Missouri. Grant attacked Belmont on November 7, 1861, but withdrew after an inconclusive fight. Fort DeRussey was never attacked directly, but in February of 1862 Polk withdrew his forces. Grant occupied the fort on March 3, 1862, and Union forces held it for the rest of the war.

The town of Columbus was devastated by a 1927 flood, and relief efforts brought attention to the earthworks. Some 330 acres were added to the state parks system as Columbus-Belmont State Park in 1934. Civilian Conservation Corps laborers cleaned up and enhanced the earthworks to an unknown degree.

Historians have spared very little attention to the site of the fort in either the pre- or post-Civil War periods. The house now serving as the museum was occupied as early as 1852. The house was used by the Confederate army as a dispensary, and perhaps by the Union troops. It continued in use as a residence, occupied by an African-American family after 1903 until it was sold to the Park in 1933-34 (McBride 1990). A note in the Hickman County Gazette’s 100th Anniversary Edition (1953) reprinted a report of the condemnation of 16 acres of property “held by negroes… in the heart of the great fortifications,” but it is not clear whether these acres included the dispensary. (I thank John Ross for bringing this notice to my attention.)

McBride (1990) surveyed the site of the dispensary and also the location to which it was subsequently moved and now occupies as the Park museum. He obtained the OSA site number 15Hi73 for the site then occupied by the house. However, CBSP personnel told me that the house had already been moved once; 15Hi73 therefore is not the in fact the house site, and the house’s original location has not been verified archaeologically.

A number of questions about the grounds of CBSP remain to be answered. First, where is the original house site? Second, what pre-and post-Civil War occupation may be represented in the archaeological record? The post-war African-American occupation would be of considerable interest, because little or no African-American archaeology has been done in western Kentucky.

Further questions concern the Civil War occupation. Where were troops bivouacked? The figure of 19,000 Confederate troops suggest that they and their facilities (horse corrals, munitions and supplies storage, latrines, etc.) must be spread over a wide area. Maps from the Union period suggest more substantial quarters, including barracks, but the maps may be more schematic than accurate.

Finally, to what extent did the CCC work, and subsequent construction for developing the state park, impact the original ground surfaces and archaeological resources of the Park?
Methods

We began the project by establishing spatial control stations located by GPS (thanks to Andrew Kellie, MSU, for help in this task). Each area of the park to be surveyed was prospected with metal detectors. Each "hit" was marked by a wire flag, mapped by use of a TopCon GTS total station and issued a field inventory number associated with its coordinates.

Find spots were then excavated as shovel test pits (stp). All soils removed by stp were screened through 1/4" mesh hardware cloth. Any artifacts recovered were bagged and labeled with the stp number, date and recovery team's initials. Depth of stp and any observable stratigraphy were recorded on the MSUAL "posthole/shovel test data record" form. Screened soil was replaced in the stp, with covering sod as intact as possible.

In fact, metal-detector "hits" were so numerous that the team abandoned efforts to test every one. After the initial set, we shifted to a strategy of excavating every 10th hit. If a 10th stp was not visible to the total station due to a view blocked by a tree or structure, the nearest visible point was excavated.

Further excavations followed standard procedures as employed by other excavations conducted by the Director (see Wesler 2001). Briefly, excavation unit coordinates were mapped according to the same coordinate system employed in the survey, using the total station. The excavation began by shovel-skimming immediately beneath the sod, until features were identified. All soils were screened through 1/4" hardware cloth. Materials recovered were bagged by unit and level, or by more specific provenience (e.g. piece-plot, feature) as appropriate. Bag labels included site designation, provenience, date, and excavators' initials.

Each excavation level was mapped and photographed, and the excavators recorded final profiles to scale. Additional photographs and drawings record features or other special situations as needed. Excavation units were backfilled after completion, with sod replaced as well as possible.

All materials recovered were transported to the MSU Archaeology Laboratory for post-field processing according to standard MSUAL procedures (manual available on request). Field notes and related records, including catalogue data, are curated at the MSUAL. The artifacts will be returned to CBSP as a curation-ready collection, with digital records (catalogue and digital photos) and a list of artifacts that may be of interest for exhibit. A report of the project will be filed with CBSP, OSA and KHC, and kept on file at the MSUAL. The Project Director will consult on display and interpretation of the project and artifacts recovered if requested by the staff of CBSP.

Results

Artifacts recovered in 2005 are still being washed in the MSUAL. Therefore, results and conclusions are only preliminary as of this writing.

We conducted metal-detector and shovel-test survey in four areas of the site (Figure 1). We began in the area of the picnic pavilion in the main recreational section of the Park. Not surprisingly, in this area many metal "hits" located modern trash, although some historic
artifacts, particularly minie balls, were recovered. On the other hand, at least one minie ball had no evidence of corrosion and was a reenactor’s or other visitor’s lost item (reproduction minie balls are sold in the Park gift shop).

The surveyors moved to the northern area of the Park, inside the fortification known as Arrowhead Point. We surveyed two areas within and one outside the embankments (Figure 1). We began numbering stps in each area with a new thousand for ease of reference (area 2 began with 2001, etc.). These areas produced a scatter of artifacts, including bullets and spent percussion caps, but much less modern trash than the first survey area.

The standard soil profile of the stps was a shallow sod/topsoil underlain by loess subsoil, indicating either no midden development or previous grading by CCC or subsequent operations. However, a lack of midden would be expected from the brief military occupation, and the spread of military items in the Arrowhead Point area suggests that the surface is indeed approximately the Civil War surface.

The single exception to the shallow soil profile was Stp 2110, in the north flanking embankment of Arrowhead Point. Stp 2100 penetrated 60 cm before encountering subsoil, and the excavators recovered numerous artifacts from a dark, midden-like matrix. This was the only feature encountered in the survey. Knowing, at this point, that 15Hi73 was not the original location of the dispensary/house, in consultation with Cindy Lynch, CBSP Park manager, we decided to place an excavation to investigate this feature.

We placed a 4 x 4 meter excavation block roughly centered on Stp 2110, with Kentucky State Plane (South Zone—Zone 1602) coordinates 553,652.28-553,656.28N 200,083.00-10,087.00E (abbreviated as 52-56N83-87E for ease of recording). We stripped off the sod and then a Level 1, maintaining provenience within 2 x 2 m units, recovering roots and a scatter of artifacts similar to those recovered in the survey. With dwindling time remaining, we restricted Level 2 excavations to two 1 x 2 m units with a 1 x 1 m extension.

At the base of Level 2 we defined two features (Figure 2). (Feature 1 was defined at a higher level, and turned out to be a shallow, amorphous stain of no evident significance.) Only a section of Feature 2 is visible in the excavation, and clearly extends south, east and west of the exposed area. It was Feature 2 that Stp 2110 encountered. Due to time constraints, Feature 2 was excavated to a layer of heavy brick rubble, and the excavators reached subsoil/pit edge only along the edges. The base of the excavation was covered with a tarp before backfilling at the end of the season.

Feature 3 was a circular feature north of Feature 2. It was excavated in two levels: Level 1 to a zone of heavy brick rubble, Level 2 to subsoil at a depth of 45 cm below the base of excavation Level 2. One large piece of ornamental iron was recovered at the base, as well as numerous artifacts still in processing in the lab.

It is premature to offer a definitive interpretation of these features. Strictly speaking, they are not necessarily associated in a stratigraphic sense (see Harris Matrix, Figure 3). However, we may speculate. Feature 3 is about the size and shape to represent a barrel sunk into the
ground, and its distance from Feature 2 suggests that it was placed under the eave of a structure potentially represented by the latter. Given that little sign of domestic occupation was found by numerous stops in the vicinity, that the brick rubble and other artifacts appeared to be quite similar in the two feature fills, and that the excavation is located in an area of barracks in the Union map of the fort (Figure 4), it is a reasonable hypothesis that Feature 3 is a barrel cistern for a Union barrack occupying Feature 2. Both features would have been filled by the destruction of the military facilities after the war (immediate destruction is presumed but not documented).

Analysis of the artifacts and extension of the excavation are required to test the hypothesis.

Closing remarks

The artifacts recovered from the 2005 project are currently being washed in the MSUAL. Washing and cataloguing will be completed in Fall semester 2006.

The 2005 project saw the first use of the brand-new total station by an MSU project. We are still having trouble making full use of the total station data due to software incompatibilities. We are working on this problem.

In the post-season analysis, the Director began experimenting with Harris Matrix-style contextual recording methods, resulting in Figure 3. In 2006, we will implement these procedures in the field, along with a more computer-based records system in general. The final report of the project will reflect the ongoing work in the laboratory.

References

McBride, W. Stephen

Sussenbach, Tom, and W. Stephen McBride

Sussenbach, Tom, W. Stephen McBride, and Jack Rossen

Wesler, Kit W.
Figure 1. Survey areas in Columbus-Belmont State Park.
Figure 2.
Figure 3. Harris matrix relations for excavation.

Figure 4. Union Army map of Fort Halleck, 1864, showing barracks behind Arrowhead Point.