

DIGGING INTO THE PAST

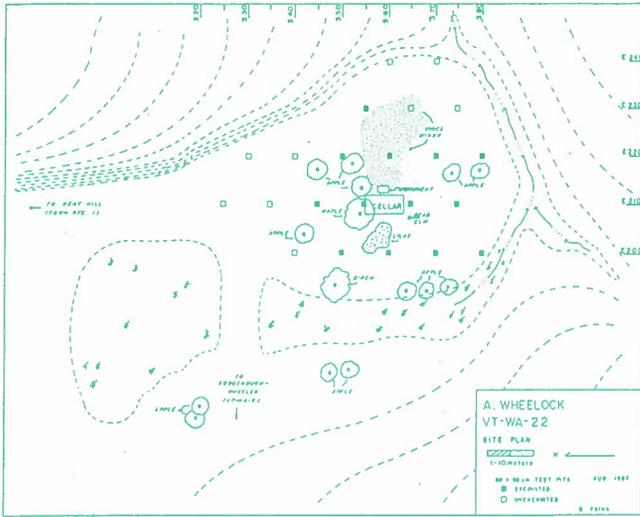
by Don Baker
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Ever wondered what it would be like to take part in an archeological dig? Have you ever wished you could experience the excitement of opening King Tut's tomb or retrieving sunken artifacts from the Titanic? My fifteen-year-old son, Michael, and I certainly have. While we haven't been able to uncover King Tut's treasures or explore shipwrecks, we were able to spend three days last summer on an archeological dig sponsored by the Vermont Historical Society in Kents Corner, Calais.

Our setting was the Abijah Wheelock homestead. Abijah Wheelock is believed to have been Calais's first permanent white settler. He built the town's first log cabin in 1788. There is little information about Abijah and his family in the Calais town records, so we were excited about the dig. Maybe we'd find some clues about how he lived. Digging permanently changes an historical site, so archeologists are careful not to undertake it until they'd studied all other possible sources of information, such as diaries, local histories, town records, and oral histories.



Michael (left) and Don Baker stop digging for a moment at the Abijah Wheelock farm site in Calais, August, 1987. Photo by Mim Kucij.



The site plan or map of the Abijah Wheellock homestead in Calais. Workshop participants surveyed and measured the site and project archeologist Douglas Frink of Westford used the information to prepare this map.

Our first day we walked over the Wheelock farm, looking and asking questions. Where would have been the best place to build a house? What piece of land might have best protected the Wheelock family from the weather and wild animals? Where would Abijah have found a year-round supply of precious water? We noted the location of apple trees, cellar holes, eighteenth-century plants that we knew were not native to Vermont (had the Wheelocks brought them from Massachusetts when they moved north?), and the location of a deep, rock-lined well. We learned a lot just by noting what was there on the landscape and brainstorming with each other.

Then we spent two days digging 30-centimeter square test pits in the ground and painstakingly sifting and searching every trowel full of soil. We sealed each piece of porcelain or pottery, every square-headed nail, and chunk of charcoal in a plastic bag and labeled it with the date, test pit location, and horizon (soil level) where it was found. Each evening we shared our findings with the other workshop par-

ticipants. With the help of the trained archeologists there we tried to identify what we had dug up. One item Michael and I first thought was common whiteware (a kind of pottery used for dishes) turned out to be a piece of an eighteenth-century clay pipe. The test pits that were empty were just as important as pits that held artifacts. Why? Because then we knew there hadn't been a house or barn there.

There will be more digs on the Wheelock farm this summer. We are still missing many clues. If you enjoy putting jigsaw puzzles together, even when some of the pieces are broken or lost, you'll like an archeological dig. Michael and I want to go back, just to see if we can uncover a few more parts of the Abijah Wheelock family puzzle.



Maya Kucij of Milton shovels soil into a screen for sifting during the archeology workshop in August, 1987. Maya is a ninth-grade student at Milton Jr/Sr High School. Photo by Mim Kucij.

Don Baker teaches sixth-grade reading and social studies at Ferrisburg Central School, where he is sponsor of the Rokeby Rebels chapter of Vermont Junior Historians. He was named an Outstanding Vermont Teacher for 1988. His son Michael is a student in the tenth grade at Vergennes High School.