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ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT
SHERIDAN SQUARE:
A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT SHERIDAN SQUARE:

A PRELIMINARY REPORT

I. INTRODUCTION

In the summer and fall of 1982, archeological investigations were conducted at Sheridan Square Triangle in New York City's Greenwich Village. The triangle is bounded by Barrow Street on the east, West 4th Street on the south, and Washington Place on the north.

The Sheridan Square Triangle Association, a community group, in association with the New York City Department of Transportation, was planning to install a viewing garden in this heretofore paved area. Preliminary documentary research conducted by Regina Kellerman, Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Trust for Historic Preservation, indicated that no structures had ever been built within the triangle. Therefore, the site had a unique potential for yielding undisturbed archeological deposits which could provide valuable insights into life in historic Greenwich Village. There was also a possibility that deposits dating to the prehistoric period were present. Since the planned construction would disturb any such deposits, it was decided that archeological testing would be appropriate.

The excavations were directed by three archeologists: Dr. Anne-Marie Cantwell of Rutgers University, Arnold Pickman and Diana Rockman, both of New York University. The directors agreed to donate their time and professional experience to this project for a number of reasons. They understood that unlike other such archeological projects undertaken in New York City, funds were not available from public or private sources. Also they believed that the site, the first to be excavated in Greenwich Village, could yield valuable archeological information and, further, that the project would provide an important opportunity to involve the community in the excavation of Greenwich Village's history.

The field crew consisted of both professional archeologists and interested members of the community, both of whom volunteered their time. We are grateful for the enthusiastic efforts of these community members which helped make this project possible.

The excavations were sponsored by the Greenwich Village Trust for Historic Preservation. Additional support was provided by the New York City Department of Transportation. New York University kindly loaned us the excavation equipment and is currently providing facilities for the laboratory processing and temporary storage of the collection. Greenwich House generously provided space to store equipment during

the excavations. Community Board #2 and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission were also helpful in initiating this project.

II. THE EXCAVATIONS

Excavations at the Sheridan Square Triangle site began on July 4, 1982, with preliminary test probes on the eastern portion of the site. Results suggested that deposits of archeological significance were in fact present on at least a portion of the site. Because of scheduling considerations, it was not possible for all of the existing pavement to be removed at the start of the project. Initially, jackhammers were used to remove the pavement from six five-by-five foot squares in the eastern portion of the squares. The results of this phase of excavation confirmed the results of our earlier test probes.

The pavement was then removed from the remainder of the site and we began implementing an excavation strategy aimed at providing a representative sample of the deposits uncovered during the initial phase of the project. This strategy also included the examination of the western portion of the site to determine its archeological potential. Additional archeological resources uncovered in this area were also more extensively sampled.

In total, our excavations at the Sheridan Square Triangle site involved the placement of 23 excavation units which sampled ca. 620.5 square feet of the site's surface. In addition, a number of smaller shovel tests and probes were conducted as part of our sampling design. The site was dug stratigraphically and all of the deposits were screened through 1/4 inch mesh. Flotation and soil samples were taken from the deposits when appropriate. Profiles of the excavation units were drawn and the site was mapped. The field work was completed on October 6, 1982.

III. RESULTS OF THE FIELD WORK

The excavations at the Sheridan Square Triangle site uncovered a number of archeologically significant deposits. Based on our field observations we have made the following preliminary interpretations of these deposits:

A) Early 19th Century Ground Surface. The northern portion of the site contained a deposit of dark brown sandy loam which yielded artifacts dating to the late 18th to early 19th centuries. This deposit was overlain by a layer of coarse red sand, over which were the concrete and blacktop layers representing episodes of 20th century paving. Below the brown loam stratum, we encountered culturally sterile sub-soil. In some excavation units, we encountered a series

of parallel lines impressed into the underlying, lighter subsoil. We interpret these lines as plow scars and the overlying dark brown stratum as the topsoil which existed when this area was farmland.

We placed a total of 11 excavation units (Test Cuts 1, 5, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 24), covering ca. 261.5 square feet of surface area, to sample this ground surface. These excavation units and other smaller probes indicate that the dark brown sandy loam deposit covered a total of approximately 1625 square feet, as indicated on the accompanying map. Therefore, we excavated approximately 16% of the area of this deposit. This deposit was confined to the northern part of the site in the area bounded by Test Cuts 12 and 14, Shovel Test 9, and The Con Edison trench. Our tests showed it to be thicker (approximately 11-14 inches) in the most northerly part of the site, becoming progressively thinner to the south. The deposit was not present in the southern and extreme western portions of the site. Our preliminary interpretation is that the areas where this deposit was found represent lower lying portions of the original ground surface. At some point during the paving episodes, the area was graded and the deposit of brown sandy loam was removed from the higher areas in the southern and western portions of the site. Documentary research indicates that

the first paving episodes took place in the 19th century although the existing pavement was laid down during the present century.

B) Post Holes. During the excavation of our first six test cuts in the eastern portion of the site, we encountered intrusions in four of these units (Test Cuts 1, 3, 5, 6). These intrusions began at the top of the red sand (located immediately below the 20th century pavement) and extended through the dark brown sandy loam into the culturally sterile sub-soil below. In the middle of each was a second intrusion, rectangular in cross section, and measuring ca. 6-8 inches. This intrusion, which in many cases consisted of red sand similar to the uppermost red sand stratum, usually terminated on a large stone slab or rock. Our preliminary interpretation is that each of the larger intrusions represented a hole dug through the red sand for the purpose of placing the slab and a post (represented by the second intrusion) which rested on it. The slab apparently served to spread the weight of the load borne by the post. Subsequently, the post was removed, and the soil which filled the resulting hole constituted the smaller central intrusion. More of these "post hole" features were uncovered in subsequent excavation units (Test Cuts 13, 16, 18, 20).

In order to locate more of these features and to plot

their distribution, we systematically scraped off the rubble which overlay the red sand after removal of the pavement. Since the post holes were dug through the red sand, we were able to locate them by noting the differences in the soil at the top of the red sand stratum. The unexcavated "post holes" were probed using a soil auger. This confirmed the presence of stone slabs at the bottom of each. The locations of these "post holes" are indicated on the accompanying map. The pattern shows that they were located approximately parallel to the present site perimeter. The posts could have served to support a fence, rail or structure. However, their function at this time remains undetermined.

C) Possible Farm Boundary. A second set of intrusions was noted in four of the excavation units (Test Cuts 2, 4, 12, 14). Unlike those described above, these intrusions began beneath the red sand and were oblong in cross section. The majority of them contained numerous cobbles. As can be seen on the accompanying map, they ran diagonally across the site from the southeast to the northwest. Nineteenth century maps indicate that the boundary between two farms belonging to the Warren and Herring families ran approximately along this line in the 18th and early 19th centuries. It is possible that this set of intrusions represents the remains of markers of the boundary between these farms. The

nature of these boundary markers is uncertain. If fence posts were used, the stones which we encountered may well have been chinking stones, used to support these boundary posts.

D) Brick Fountain. After the pavement was removed from the western portion of the site, the top of a circular brick construction was exposed immediately beneath the pavement. Subsequent excavation showed that this "feature," ca. 52 inches in diameter, contained a slotted opening on its southern side. A pipe entered this slot from the west. A second section of pipe found extending upwards in the slot presumably had been attached to it. Surrounding this brick feature was a ring of hard packed mottled tan soil. In order to examine this brick construction, we placed trenches (Test Cuts 13 and 8) perpendicular to it on the west and south sides. These trenches showed that the structure was approximately 3 feet in total depth. We removed some of the bricks to determine if there was a hollow space inside the structure. This procedure showed that, except for the slot, the structure was solid. The hard packed tan soil surrounding the feature proved to be backfill which was deposited in the pit dug to install the feature. In fact, the base of this tan soil deposit coincided with the base of the brick feature.

We then followed the course of the pipe which extended southward from the feature. It continued past the boundary of the site and under the present course of West Fourth Street. Our preliminary interpretation is that this brick structure served as the base for a fountain. Water was supplied to this fountain through the metal pipe. The date of construction has yet to be determined.

E) "Trench". Immediately to the west of the brick structure discussed above, an approximately rectangular hardpacked area of mottled soil was noted at the top of the red sand stratum (see accompanying map). After the removal of the pavement and manual clearing of the rubble, an excavation unit (Test Cut 8) was placed abutting the brick feature and cutting across the intrusive deposit in an east-west direction. Excavation of this deposit continued until we reached the base of the intrusion and encountered sterile subsoil. This occurred at a depth of approximately 9 feet below the surface. The intersection of this "trench" and the circular pit which was excavated to install the brick feature, showed that the installation of the brick feature post-dated the filling-in of the trench. Relatively few artifacts were recovered during the course of excavation of Test Cut 8.

At the top of this trench was a deposit which appeared

to be later. This soil was darker and much more compact than the underlying trench fill. More artifacts including major portions of several ceramic vessels were recovered. Therefore, we placed Test Cuts 20-22 to obtain a larger sample of this deposit. Our tentative interpretation is that this deposit accumulated after the filling in of the "trench" and may have been related in some way to the use of the fountain.

F) Drainage Field. During the excavation of the eastern part of the site, ceramic pipes were encountered in Test Cuts 2, 3, and 6. During subsequent investigations, we followed the course of these pipes, which were intrusive through the red sand. The pipes sloped downward from west to east and their arrangement suggests that they provided drainage for the site area, presumably after it was initially paved. The slope of the pipes suggests that the drainage field probably had its outlet beneath the present location of Barrow Street.

IV. CONCLUSION

The artifacts recovered from the excavation are currently stored in the Anthropology Department at New York University. As of this date the artifacts have all been processed (cleaned and catalogued). As part of our continuing

research, the artifacts will be analysed and both the artifactual and stratigraphic analyses will be combined in the final interpretive report. The results of the documentary research by Regina Kellerman will be completed and included in the final report as well. In common with the field work and artifact processing, all of these efforts will be carried out on a volunteer basis.

SHERIDAN SQUARE TRIANGLE

Test Excavations: June-September, 1982

New York County, New York

