The McHugh Site (47WP294): Archaeology and History of a Rural Irish-American Farmstead

John D. Richards and Brooke L. Drew
Department of Anthropology, College of Letters and Science

Introduction
The McHugh site was identified during WisDOT-related compliance studies and was tested to determine potential eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Background research suggests the site is the homestead of Michael and Mary McHugh, Irish immigrants who moved to Waupaca County, Wisconsin, in 1850 after originally settling in Ohio. Archaeological investigations identified six features including the architectural remnants of a domestic structure. Excavations produced a rich artifact assemblage and a well-preserved faunal assemblage. Results suggest that the McHugh site is potentially eligible for listing on the NRHP as a rare example of a rural Wisconsin Irish occupation. The site harbors information on pioneer settlement of the Wisconsin frontier, rural Irish-American lifeways, changing agricultural practices linked to a shift from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture, the role of female heads of household in rural communities, and the experience of childhood in rural pioneer societies.

Methods
Earlier work by the Museum Archaeology Program had documented a plowzone across the site (Riggs and Meinholz 2011: 28). Consequently, a backhoe was used to remove overburden down to the base of the plowzone. Five trenches were excavated and subsurface soil stains were noted in Trench 4 and 5. This excavation was then expanded to expose an area of approximately 1600 m². Soil stains were shovel-skimmed to define feature boundaries prior to mapping and hand excavation.

Results
Excavations exposed six features. Feature 1 was identified as a rectangular soil stain approximately 8 meters X 7 meters in size. The feature appears to represent the filled-in foundation of a former structure. Features 2 and 3 were defined as 50 cm diameter dark soil stains. The features were roughly circular in plan with shallow, basin-shaped cross-sections. Feature 2 did not produce artifacts but Feature 3 contained minor amounts of wood fragments and some window glass fragments. Neither Feature 2 or 3 exhibited a cross-section suggestive of a former post and neither was deep enough to have supported a large post.

Feature 4 was defined as a 50 cm diameter, dark, circular soil stain that produced a variety of rusted iron, glass, and crockery. The cross-section of Feature 4 suggests it may represent a post hole that originated at the modern surface of the plowzone and extended 40 cm into the subsoil. Feature 5 was observed as a rectangular shaped, ashy smear that disappeared upon trenching and was not investigated further. Feature 6 was identified as a dark rectangular soil stain located east of the Feature 1 structure basin. The feature surface produced crockery, white glass, a glass bottle, a wooden pipe fragments, and faunal remains. Feature 6 was not excavated and the function of the feature is unknown.

Feature 1 (left) and feature 2 (right) with scale of plowzone

Figure 1. Compacted surface exposed in southeast corner of Feature 1

Based on the presence of a well shaft and associated artifacts including parts of a chain well pump, the excavated portion of Feature 1 may be part of the homestead’s kitchen.

Feature 1 soil stain and 40 cm cross-section of plowzone

Figure 2. Chain well pump parts from Feature 1

Conclusions
In 1990 John Wilson highlighted the dilemma faced by archaeologists involved in 19th Century farmstead studies when he reiterated the oft-heard comment of regulatory agency managers and SHPOs that “we’ve got thousands of these” so why is Site X special? Wilson’s answer was that while there may be thousands of historic farmsteads, few cases include data sets characterized by high archaeological integrity as well as associated documentary evidence (Wilson 1990:30). Wilson noted that sites occupied by a single household for 21-60 years may be particularly important since these sites “may be expected to contain somewhat more material, and may be more likely to reflect economic and social change during their longer periods of occupation” (Wilson 1990:30). The McHugh site is an example of this category and harbors data relating to:

- Pioneer settlement of the Wisconsin frontier
- Studies of the Irish diaspora typically focus on Irish immigrants in urban areas. Far less is known of rural Irish life in frontier settings (McDonald 1954; As Wyatt 1987:Vol 1; Settlement: 10-80 cafes “Because monoethic associated with the Irish are few, property retaining integrity and associated in any way to homestead settlement should be considered eligible for its Irish context”.
- Changing agricultural practices linked to a shift from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture
- During the time that the McHugh site was occupied, the American frontier moved westward and Wisconsin’s pioneer settlements became established communities. The rich material culture record of the McHugh site documents this shift.
- The role of female heads of household in rural communities
- From 1856 through 1900 Mary McHugh ran the farm as a single parent with the help of children. A close examination of Mary’s life based on both material culture and documentary evidence would provide data on the strategies adopted by Mary and illuminate the role that female single heads of household played in frontier agriculture.
- The experience of childhood in rural pioneer societies
- The archaeological record has only recently been used to consider issues related to how children experienced childhood and how children’s labor was utilized in late 19th Century America (Baxter 2005; Sufar-Derevenski 2000).

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For Further Information
The McHugh site investigations are reported in Drew, B. L., and J. D. Richards. 2014. Phase I Archaeological Investigation of The McHugh Site (47WP294), A Nineteenth Century Irish Farmstead in Waupaca County, Wisconsin. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Archaeological Research Laboratory Reports of Investigations No. 188.

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