

# Farmstead Archaeology

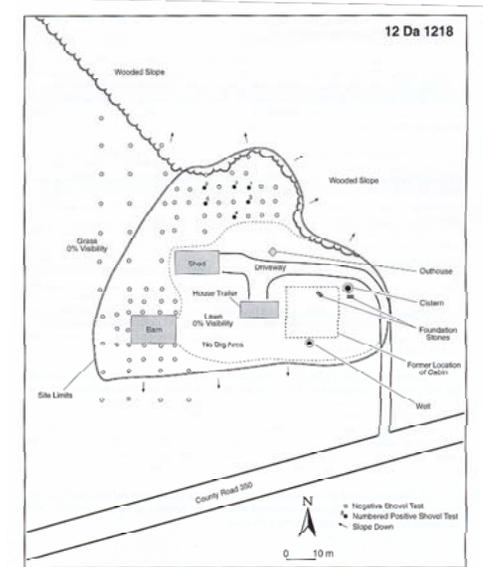


Ball State University archaeologists excavating at the Bronnenberg House, Madison County<sup>1</sup>

When one thinks of archaeological sites, one usually thinks of deeply buried ancient remains from cultures different from one's own. However, some of the most fascinating archaeological investigations conducted today consist of the study of Indiana's historic rural farmsteads. Rural farmstead sites differ from stereotypical archaeological sites in that, 1) they may only be a few centuries old or less; 2) they may have standing structures and features; 3) they are found in our communities, towns, and backyards; and 4) they are seemingly common in occurrence. So why study rural farmsteads?

One answer is that the archaeological study of rural farmsteads can answer important and interesting research questions regarding Indiana's history, the migration of ethnic groups, social change, trade and interaction, social class, and gender. Another answer is that rural farmsteads may not be as commonplace or alike as one might think. Each one tells the unique story of a family that came to Indiana from another state or country, settled in rural locations to pursue the American Dream, and contributed to the larger regional and even international society and economy.

*The archaeology of agriculture, culture, and economy in Indiana's history*



Archaeological site map of a farmstead site, Daviess County<sup>2</sup>

Research by Indiana archaeologists has illuminated the state's rich and varied history. French-Canadian families were some of the earliest Euro-Americans to settle in Indiana, setting up farmstead communities in the Wabash Valley by the early 1700s. A survey conducted by University of Indianapolis archaeologists documented two different French-Canadian settlement patterns: trading posts for trading furs with Native Americans, and frontier farmsteads arraigned on long-lots (rather than British-based townships), Long lots are still present on the landscape near Vincennes<sup>3</sup>.

The pioneer settlers of the early 1800s were mostly European Americans originating from the southern states<sup>2</sup>. These settlers were subsistence farmers – farms that were able to take care of most, if not all, of their family needs through farming, house gardens, and hunting. The main crops were corn and the



Ceramic artifacts from a 19<sup>th</sup> century farmstead site<sup>2</sup>

main animal product was pork. These farmsteads were situated as widely dispersed homes across the landscape, connected by trails (often Native American trails), rivers, and the occasional roads to early towns, churches, and schools. Weekly visits to towns and churches provided a way for pioneer families to bring their agricultural products to market, barter for goods, socialize, and share in communal faiths.

Dr. Deborah Rotman, University of Notre Dame, has investigated dozens of rural farmstead sites, including those of African-Americans, and has documented a major social and economic shift after the mid-nineteenth century. Prior to the 1850s, rural farmsteads were largely self-sufficient and the early towns were devoted to an agricultural economy. After the 1850s, subsistence farming gave way to larger-scale competition requiring new technologies, accompanied by the industrialization of cities and towns. Smaller farms could not compete, and in the 1880's

large numbers of families migrated from rural areas into the growing cities<sup>4</sup>.

Archaeological research on rural farmsteads and rural communities has shown the wide diversity of ethnic groups that settled in Indiana. When families migrated to Indiana, they brought their communal way of doing things with them, such as shared style in architecture, making furniture, and using household goods. Many early settlers were from Ireland and Germany, and particular sets of artifacts can be associated with particular groups. For example, expensive tea sets are markers for Irish sites in Lawrenceburg, Dearborn County, and illustrate how important the social ritual of tea was for the community<sup>5</sup>.

Work conducted at various times by Ball State University<sup>4</sup>, the Indiana State Museum<sup>6</sup>, and the Forest Service<sup>7</sup> in the Hoosier National Forest have revealed ethnic signatures in the material remains of early free African-American and Quaker farmsteads and communities. Recent research by Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne archaeologists has documented a nineteenth-century Swiss farmstead in, not surprisingly, Switzerland County<sup>8</sup>.



Late 19<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse and archaeological site, Daviess County, Indiana<sup>9</sup>

Unlike other farmsteads, which centered on growing crops such as wheat and corn, many Swiss families were initially growing grapes for commercial wine production.

When conducting research on farmsteads, archaeologists rely not only on the remains of houses, barns, and artifacts, but also on written and graphic history, such as early maps, historic photographs, census data, land titles, inheritance records, and even oral history. Archaeological research on historic farmsteads has also centered on the manner in which men and women use space and technology differently in their daily activities, how differences in class and social status has shaped Indiana's history, and the economic contribution of farmsteads to the wider world market.



Archaeologists excavating a historic farmstead site in Knox County, Indiana<sup>9</sup>

Together, these different investigations tell the story of how the various ethnic groups that settled Indiana eventually grew to share an American culture, while at the same time retaining a sense of historical identity. For example, many Hoosiers may attend churches originally built by their historic Irish ancestors, or enjoy the occasional German dish for dinner.

So, the next time you drive past an old rural farmstead and barn, remember that the farmstead represents an archaeological site that may have an important and surprising story to tell about Indiana's history.

## Sources

Cover. Ariel photograph from the GyroAmerica Website:  
[http://www.gyroamerica.com/log\\_14-in.htm](http://www.gyroamerica.com/log_14-in.htm)

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