Economic and Ecological Intersections In the Midden: 19th-Century Tenant Foodways at the WJ Weeks Archaeological Site

Sarah Robertson, Environmental Protection Division, Barnard College, NY 10027
Dr. Allison McGovern, Environmental Protection Division, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Upton NY 11973

Abstract
This study examines the foodways of tenant farmers at a mid-nineteenth century homestead, the WJ Weeks site (also called the Yellow House). Ceramics and faunal remains from the site are analyzed alongside archival sources. The assemblage features a high ratio of locally produced utilitarian ceramics compared to expensive refined earthenware and tableware, and variation in design styles and patterns. Faunal remains create a baseline for species consumed on-site, such as cow, pig, and shellfish. These findings speak to the socio-economic constraints faced by tenants of the Yellow House and the materiality of social stratification between laborers and landowners. They also illustrate the economic and ecological networks within Long Island's historic pine barrens. Through this study, I practice key skills for historical archaeology, such as artifact identification and the integration of textual sources with archaeological data. This study supports the Department of Energy's stewardship and documentation of Brookhaven's cultural resources.

Archival Research

Diaries
WJ Weeks kept detailed journals through the 1850s, recording interactions with tenants, cord wood harvesters, and other laborers, as well as hunting, fishing, farming, and daily activities. These journals identify Edmund Ackerly and his family, who lived at the Yellow House and cut cordwood for Weeks.

Probates and Deeds
These documents help trace land ownership and the value of various inventoried goods. WJ Weeks and his father, James H. Weeks, bought large parcels of land between Yaphank and Manorville/Wampmissic throughout the nineteenth century, sometimes letting the previous owners stay on the property as tenants.

Census
Census records help track the movement of people over time, with limitations (inconsistencies in name spelling, ages of household members, and exclusion of some homesteads by census takers). From census data, we can tell Akerly family had left the Yellow House by 1860.

Ceramic Analysis

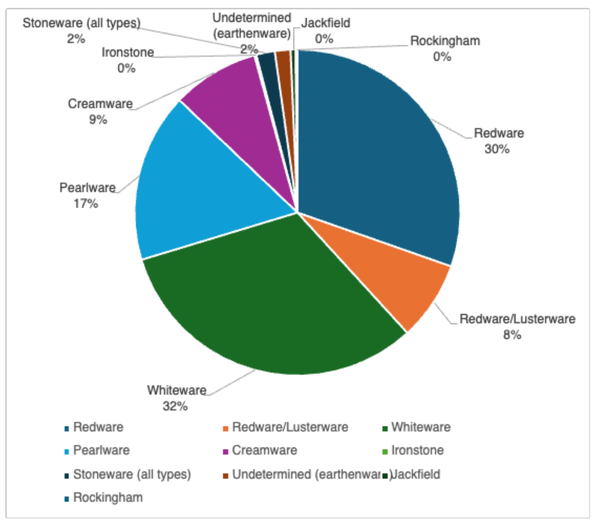

Fig. 1 Distribution of ceramic types

Refined earthenwares account for a slight majority of the ceramics (58%). Table and tea wares (plates, bowls, teacups, etc.) are most commonly in this category. Notably, there is no porcelain in this assemblage. The ratio of table and tea wares to utilitarian redwares is relatively low when compared to other domestic sites in the region. Locally produced redwares make up 38% of the ceramics. These vessels were generally less expensive and more frequently used for food preparation and storage.

Decorated sherds have high design variation but little consistency, suggesting that tenants at the Yellow House bought their table and tea wares piecemeal, at lower cost or secondhand, and with little purchasing agency beyond what was immediately available (O'Donovan and Wurst 2001:82). The Ackerlys' and their successors were unlikely in the financial position to purchase full dining sets. However, the frequency of these approximate matches conveys some interest in the appearance of completeness. The tenants may have deliberately selected similar pieces over time as an aesthetic preference or to more closely resemble the dining sets owned by wealthier neighbors.

Fig. 2 Saucer fragments with similar stippled designs

Faunal Remains

Most of the small faunal assemblage are too fragmented to identify; the site is a midden deposit and experienced looting and other disturbance before being recorded. While insufficient to fully reconstruct the diet of the Yellow House tenants, these results help identify local food sources.

Identified Species/Families:
- Cow (rib, three long bones, upper premolar)
- Pig (two premolars)
- Fish (vertebra)
- Bird (long bones)
- Hard shell clam (293 fragments)
- Soft shell clam (7 fragments)
- Oyster (23 fragments)

Fig. 3 Cow Upper Premolar

Introduction and Methods

The Brookhaven Laboratory property today is surrounded at all sides by an ecological network known as the Long Island Pine Barrens. Though consistently rhetorized as culturally and environmentally "barren", this ecosystem is deeply significant: home to 162 species, responsible for supplying Long Islanders with water, and holding, through changing materialities and significations of the landscape, memory of the long processes of human settlement. One moment in this history is marked at the WJ Weeks archaeological site—the foundations of a home also called the Yellow House. The property is first mapped in 1843, on land owned by "gentleman farmer", speculator, and rentier, William Jones Weeks (1821-1897). To better develop the lives of the Yellow House tenants, otherwise resigned to brief mentions in Weeks' diaries, this project examines the archaeological traces and the natural resources surrounding the WJ Weeks site, expanding on previous research done for a 2004 site report (Merwin and Manfra 2004). The archaeological investigation revealed traces of a residential foundation, artifact deposits from loss and discard, and a small faunal assemblage. While the faunal remains from the excavation are largely unidentifiable, due to considerable fragmentation, three partial teeth, several long bones, one vertebrae and metatarsal demonstrate representative species, though not complete counts, of the animals consumed on-site. This smaller data set is expanded with a more in-depth ceramic analysis, providing ratios of vessel types, wares, makers, and common design motifs and styles. Finally, understanding that ecological relations are also fundamentally social relations, I use natural resource histories to speculate about the economic (human and non-human) network available to the Yellow House residents. Through the perpetual redefinition and redistribution of these resources—such as cordwood and shellfish — cultural meanings are also transformed (Anderson 2015), gesturing to the gradual manipulation of inter-class labor relations as they emerge in the material conditions of individual lives.

Discussion

- This diagram, based on entries in WJ Week's diaries, shows economic and relational exchanges between various actors - mapping how specific resources move between different persons and locations.
- While day laborers like Mitchell Petty and Edmund Akerly are removed from traditional centers of power (Brooklyn) and distribution infrastructure (Long Island Railroad), they are essential to the functioning of the entire network. The movement of resources (cordwood, shellfish) depends on their labor.
- Ecological features are treated as actors in this network through their direct involvement in shaping economic relationships.

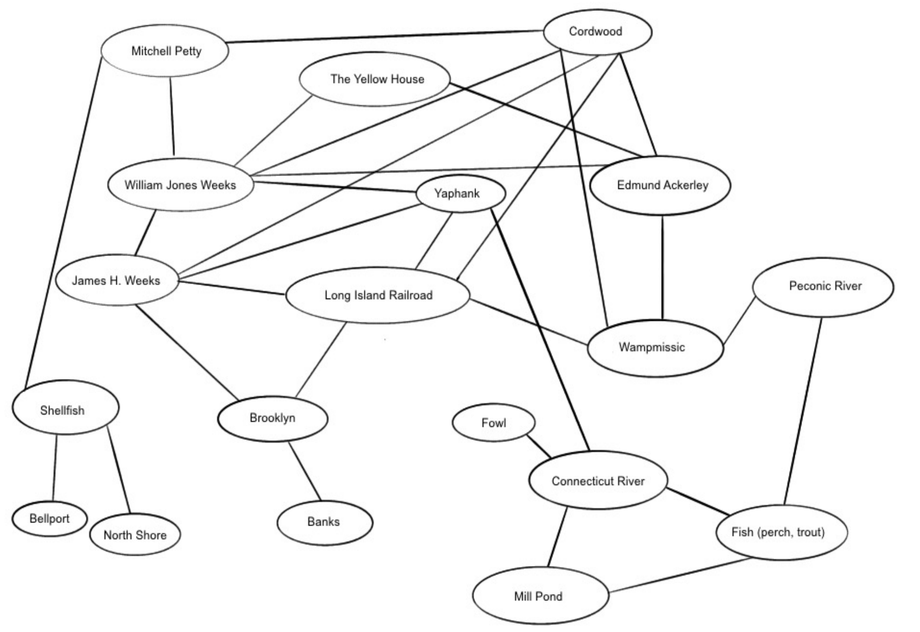

Fig. 4 Ecological and economic relationships between local and regional actors

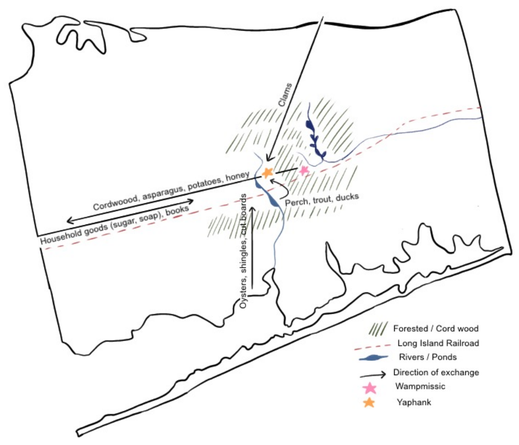

Fig. 5 Map of resource flow from Yaphank and Wampmissic

Note: Michell Petty was a Yaphank resident who regularly cut wood, assisted with farming, and completed other chores for WJ Weeks; tenant in home owned by WJ Weeks; dug and brought clams from the north shore into Yaphank

- Tenants at the Yellow House likely sourced the majority of their subsistence in the immediate area (livestock, perch and trout) but also interacted with farther locations (shellfish from the North or South shore) and regional and international markets (imported refined earthenwares, bought secondhand).

Conclusion

In his diaries, WJ Weeks writes extensively about his innovative farming methods, which are now historically framed by then-contemporary debates agricultural reform (Stoll 2002:43), and a settler culture on Long Island which equated land ownership with permanent alteration (Anderson 2015:417). While emphasizing the former in his writing, Weeks largely extracted his wealth from the latter: land ownership and the labor of his "choppers", harvesting wood sold to the Long Island Railroad and into New York City. The disparities in this system of resource movement are reflected in the material record at the Yellow House. However, beyond testifying to rural working-class hardship, the remnants of tenant foodways connect the Long Island Pine Barrens to larger networks of exchange. Tenants fished and hunted within this "barren" landscape and further modified the forest through cordwood harvesting. Future additions to this research should consider site vegetation and the possibility of foraging as an additional food source and location of ecological meaning.

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