

Olana Archaeology

Laying the Groundwork

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The home of Hudson River School artist Frederic Edwin Church is a model of historic preservation, a site so alive with original content that new discoveries might seem impossible. Visitors enjoy scenic carriage roads designed by Church himself, the same interiors seen in 19th century photographs, and the artist's personal collection. Olana's archives are equally comprehensive, communicating past events through journal entries, letters, scrapbooks, bills and receipts. Less evident though, is the wealth of information beneath Olana's celebrated landscape, out of view, yet poised to offer unexpected details about the Churches' material environment.

Staff archaeologists from the New York State Bureau of Historic Sites have conducted excavations at Olana since 1969. Much of the excavation done here is known as "rescue archaeology" and precedes such projects as installing utilities, building a new education center, and even planting trees to ensure critical archaeological resources are not destroyed. Interpretive archaeology, excavations specifically conducted to gather information, most notably served to locate Church's first painting studio, a single-room structure that stood from c. 1865-1888. This excavation relied heavily on primary sources and led to one document's reinterpretation. Plan of Olana, a map drawn by the artist's son in 1886, depicts the studio to the south of what appears to be the present-day exit road. After an entire field season of few results, archaeologists discovered that this road had at some point been reoriented. The studio site was across the street, on the north side of the present road. In this way, archaeology helps reconcile historic information with modern conditions.

Olana supplies fertile ground for archaeological research, expanding the cultural record and finding new meaning in familiar documents. Over the years and across the far reaches of the landscape, archaeology has been instrumental to the preservation, interpretation, and restoration of Frederic Church's greatest masterpiece.

1. A Creative Breakthrough

- a. Archaeologists have uncovered a variety of objects associated with Frederic Church's career as a painter. Small finds include a brass piece of a paintbrush, a slate pencil, and an ironstone pot with blue-gray and ochre paint on its surface. A tube containing fine white lead paint was found along the east foundation wall of the artist's studio. Its top had been cut to enlarge the opening, evidence of Church's methods as well as the type of materials he used. Collapsible zinc paint tubes became available in 1841 as an

alternative to dry pigments. This invention made painting less messy and labor-intensive, particularly for landscape artists sketching *en plein air*.

Filling in Blanks

- b. The excavation of Frederic Church's first painting studio yielded much new information about this absent building. Along the stone foundations, archaeologists unearthed painted plaster fragments that once covered the studio walls, the first indication of the studio's interior appearance. The traces of deep red paint are a valuable remnant of Frederic Church's working environment during his painting career on this property. "I am always anxious to see my pictures in another studio and another light before competing them," Church wrote, and this archaeological evidence engages us with the surroundings that were so influential in his creative process.
2. From the Ground Up
 - a. Before breaking ground on the Wagon House Education Center, archaeologists excavated the site to help inform plans for an historic reconstruction. The new building would replicate Frederic Church's original Wagon House, which stood from the 1860s until the 1950s. These structures were integral to the Churches' lives at Olana, but are not well documented. Excavations were required to determine the exact location and condition of their original foundations. Archaeologists discovered a brick and dry-laid stone substructure, and this historic construction technique was applied to the contemporary building. Through archaeological findings, Olana's education programming today enjoys a state-of-the-art facility that honors its roots. The excavations also uncovered artifacts that provided information about the farming activities at Olana during Church's life.
 3. What Lies Beneath

Archaeology offers critical evidence of how Olana's landscapes were formed. One excavation uncovered a 19th century layer beneath coal ash, cinders, and household garbage beneath a carriage road, which evidently served to sculpt and fortify its ridges. This profile drawing depicts how concentrations of bottles (shown in red) appear strategically embedded under the road's crushed shale surface. Archaeologists have also found that the terraced grounds surrounding the mansion are built up and supported by underground retaining walls.

19th Century Medicine

In the 1800s, mineral water was fervently consumed for its professed healing powers. It is no surprise that Frederic and Isabel Church participated in this trend, as both suffered from various chronic ailments. Bottles found near the mansion date to an era when New York's Saratoga region dominated this business, c. 1850-1890. Saratoga Mountain Glass Works was the bottling plant that sustained this regional industry. Their vessels appear most frequently in emerald green, were cork-sealed, and are heavy for their size—generally pints or quarts.

4. Food for Thought
 - a. The names of many 19th century businesses surface at Olana through such artifacts as a glass bottle manufactured by McAllister's, a birdseed supplier that operated in New York City from 1875 until the late 1890s. Clearly labeled, the bottle once contained food

for mocking birds, which Frederic Church raised along with parakeets, canaries, parrots, and an owl. Apart from its relationship to Church's exotic birds, this bottle is interesting for its physical features. Screw-threaded bottlenecks appeared circa 1850, allowing vessels to be sealed with a zinc lid rather than a cork.

5. Lost and Found

- a. In 2004, archaeologists uncovered a two inch porcelain figurine near Cosy Cottage. This doll, called a Frozen Charlotte, was produced in Germany and England from 1840-1900 as a dress form for girls learning to sew. Archaeological context shapes interpretation of the object. The natural conclusion would be that it belonged to Church's daughter downie. But by the time she was old enough to own this doll the family lived in the mansion. Cosy Cottage then became a guesthouse and later housed farm families. Any number of children could have misplaced Frozen Charlotte here, such as six-year-old Edith Sabine, who stayed at Cosy Cottage during the summer of 1875.