

Frost Town Archaeology: The Preliminary Findings from the 2022 Field Season

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The College at
BROCKPORT
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



What is Frost Town Archaeology?

As a project and as an archaeological field school, Frost Town Archaeology investigates the historical archaeology of the remaining features, structures, and artifacts of Frost Town, an abandoned logging settlement located in Bristol, New York. Founded in the late eighteenth century, Frost Town was prosperous while the original old growth forests were still available to be logged. After being processed at the nearby sawmills, the timber would have floated north toward Honeoye, Canandaigua, Rochester, and the Erie Canal. Once the timber reached the Erie Canal, it would be able to be transported and traded anywhere across the state from Albany to Buffalo.

This prosperity did not last. Once the timber resources of the Old Growth forests around Frost Town became near exhausted, many families began to leave for nearby towns like Naples and Bristol. With fewer prospects for logging, the remaining residents transitioned to agriculture and animal husbandry. The sawmills in Frost Town continued to operate until the mid-20th century but were eventually completely abandoned.

Today, what remains of Frost Town can be found within the forests owned by the Cumming Nature Center, which is an affiliate of the Rochester Museum and Science Center. The Nature Center is in the town of South Bristol, NY. Within the 900 acres of forest at the Nature Center are what remains of sawmills, multiple scattered 19th-century houses, and a cemetery just outside the property of the Nature Center.

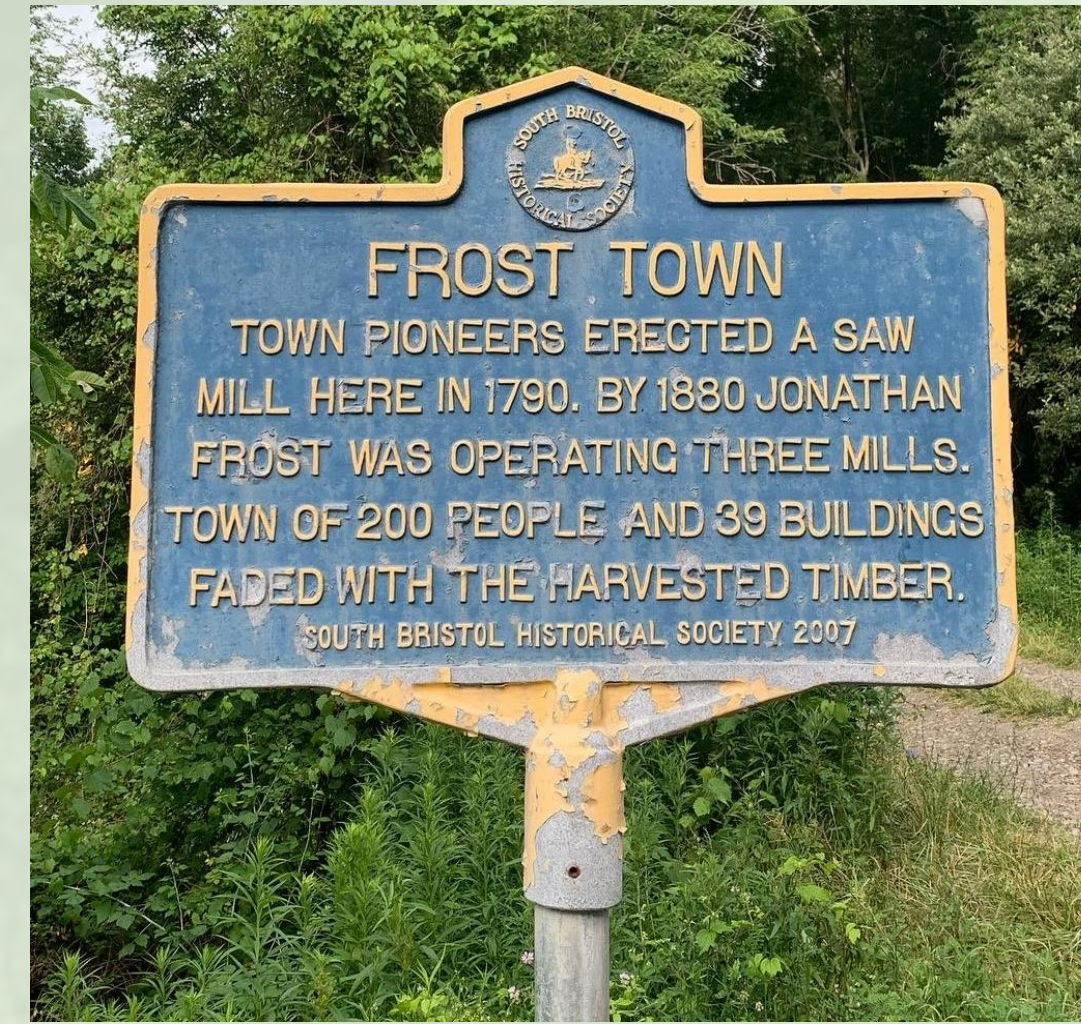
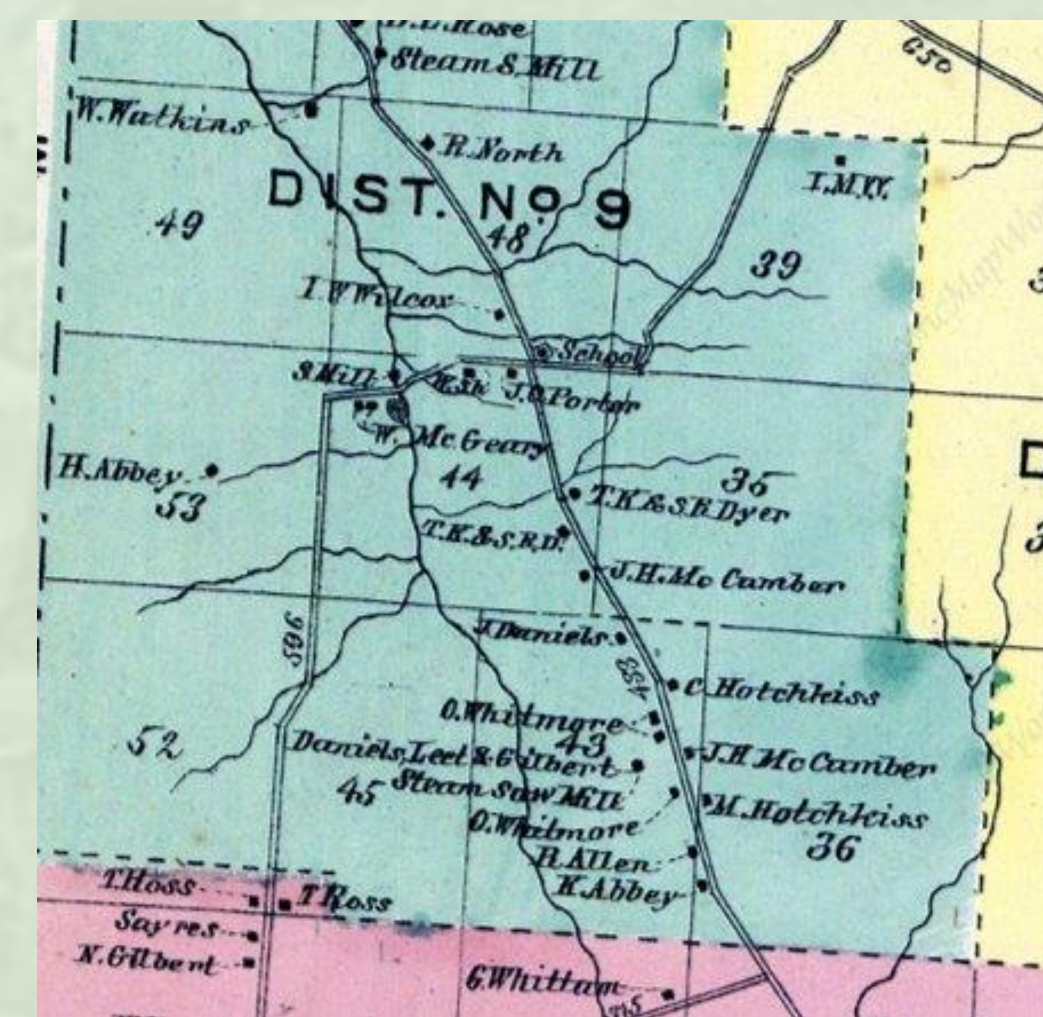


Image 1: Frost Town sign at the entrance to Frost Hill Road, which leads into the Cumming Nature Center.

Image 2: This image is part of a map of Ontario County by Pomeroy Whitman and Co. from 1874.



The Main Site of Excavation: The Hall Residence

The Hall Residence is the main site of focus for the field school, and it is in the northern area of the Cumming Nature Center, and across the pathway from the abandoned cemetery. The predominant feature of the Hall Residence is the remaining dry-stone foundation in the ground, separated into an eastern portion and a western portion. The residence was possibly built by the farmer Simon Hall, although the exact date of construction is unknown, and it has been lived in by multiple owners over time.



Image 3: The visible remains of the dry-stone foundation of the Hall Residence, with the eastern sections towards the front and the western section in the back next to the tree.



Image 4: Trenches O21 (left) and P21 (right) in the western room of the Hall Residence foundation.

For the first time in 2022, two new trenches were opened in the western room of the Hall Residence foundation (trenches O21 and P21). This has not been done in the past due to safety concerns about the stability of the remaining foundation and due to time constraints and focus on other areas of the site. Both O21 and P21 produced materials which were consistent with domestic life. An abundance of flat windowpane glass indicated the presence of windows in the residence, shell and painted buttons may have come from clothing, a large spring could have been from a mattress, and there were several nails with wood still attached which may have come from old wooden walls or floorboards.



Image 5: Shot of the sixteen trenches opened to the south of the hall residence foundation in 2022 (including the original nine from 2019). These are P11-P15, Q11-Q15, R15, and S11-S15.

New Excavation Units Opened During the 2022 Field Season

In the previous 2019 field season, nine trenches were opened to the south of the remains of the Hall Residence dry-stone foundation. These trenches were opened according to an alpha-numeric system with letters running west to east and numbers running south to north, also known as the wheeler box-grid method. The entire site can be overlaid by this grid system to create a series of one-meter by one-meter trenches that can then be excavated and documented systematically.

This grid system was used during the 2022 field season to locate the previous excavation units from 2019, as well as to determine new trenches to be opened and excavated. During the 2022 field season approximately twenty new trenches were opened, along with the previous nine, and all were brought down several soil contexts to a sterile context (a soil context with no artifacts). These trenches produced a multitude of materials such as glass, metal, ceramics, bricks, leather, charcoal, and animal bones.

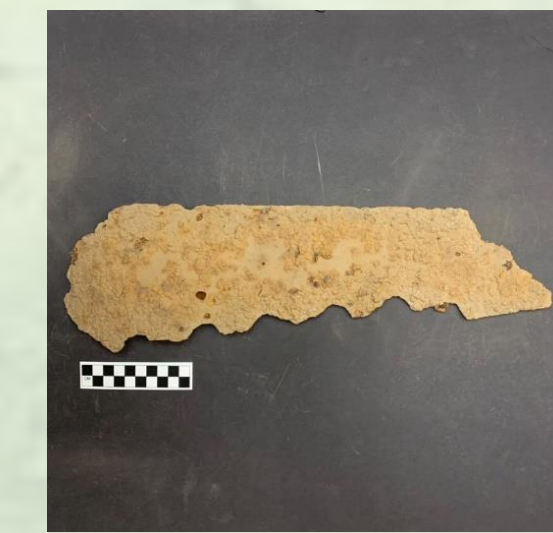


Image 6: Rusted metal saw blade.

Image 7: Unidentified metal farm tool.



Image 8: Metal coin.



Image 9: Two distinct types of wheels found at the Hall Residence site.

Predominantly, there was an abundance of construction materials such as window glass, nails, and even numerous whole bricks from the P, Q, R, and S rows of trenches. A variety of glass types were uncovered, from the flat windowpane glass to curved or even patterned vessel and bottle glass. The assemblage of glass and large pieces of farm equipment, nails, horseshoes, other small metal pieces, leather shoe soles, pig and sheep bones, bricks, and pieces of ceramics has changed the previous theory about the structure that was located to the south of the Hall Residence foundation.

Updated Findings for the Previous Scullery Theory

During the 2019 field season, the prevailing hypothesis was that the last possible use of the area next to the Hall residence site was a scullery, also known as a summer kitchen. The most recent hypothesis, based on excavations conducted throughout the 2022 field season, has been that it was a refuse area. The artifacts found over the summer include various types of ceramics, farm tools, an assortment of bricks, animal bones, glass, metal slag, nails, multiple sets of shoes, buttons, costume jewelry, coins, and a small ceramic doll (a Frozen Charlotte). While similar objects found during the 2019 field season had pointed to the possible existence of a scullery, the variety of artifacts found over the 2022 field season makes it much more likely that it was a refuse area used for many years.



Image 10: A small broken ceramic "Frozen Charlotte" doll.

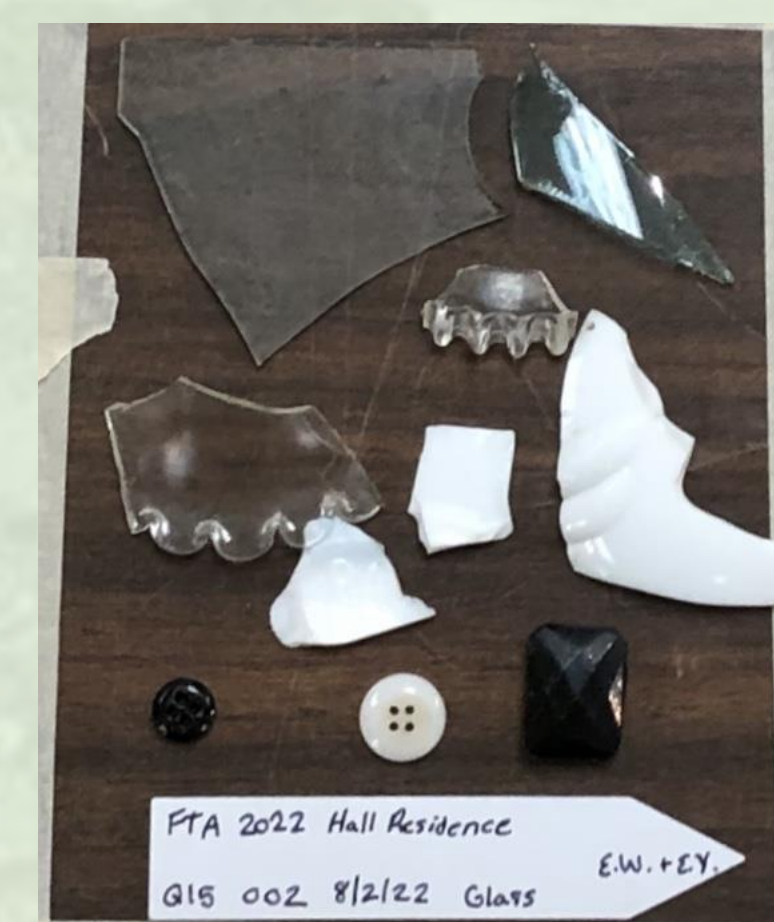


Image 11: An assortment of various types of broken glass, buttons, and costume jewelry.



Image 12: Shards of a broken ceramic saucer with a partial pottery stamp.



Image 13: An assortment of buttons.

While we may find it strange to throw trash out so close to a house in the 21st century, it is good to remember that there were no garbage collection agencies in Frost Town in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The area around a house in a logging settlement during this time would have been more utilitarian than how we would use it today. Much of the trash thrown out (like food scraps) could easily be ingested by livestock, like pigs, or local wildlife. Everything else, like ceramic shards, shoe soles, and metal, would be trampled on and eventually buried in the dirt where they lay. Over time, this leads to a pile of refuse that can tell us a lot about the people who occupied the area. The refuse area hypothesis is also supported by what we have not found, which is evidence of a foundation that would be indicative of a more permanent structure next to the Hall residence.

New Drone Technology Used to Map the Features of the Site

These aerial images of the Hall Residence show how a drone using thermal imaging can assist in finding human-made features. While thermal imaging has difficulty getting through dense foliage, like tree leaves, it is good at getting through thin foliage, like short grass. From these images (14A, 14B, 15A, and 15B), we can see areas of disturbed dirt (some of which is the backfill dirt collected in piles underneath our wooden sifters in the lower portion of Image 14A and 14B).

Rocks absorb and hold heat longer than foliage. Because of this, the unidentified pile of rocks in the exploratory trenches (known as "Hell Trench" by those who excavated there) appear brighter/hotter than the surrounding area. From what we can see from the thermal imaging in Image 15A, "Hell Trench" is an apt name, as the heat index around the rocks was much higher than the surrounding area due to its exposure to direct sunlight for many hours each day.

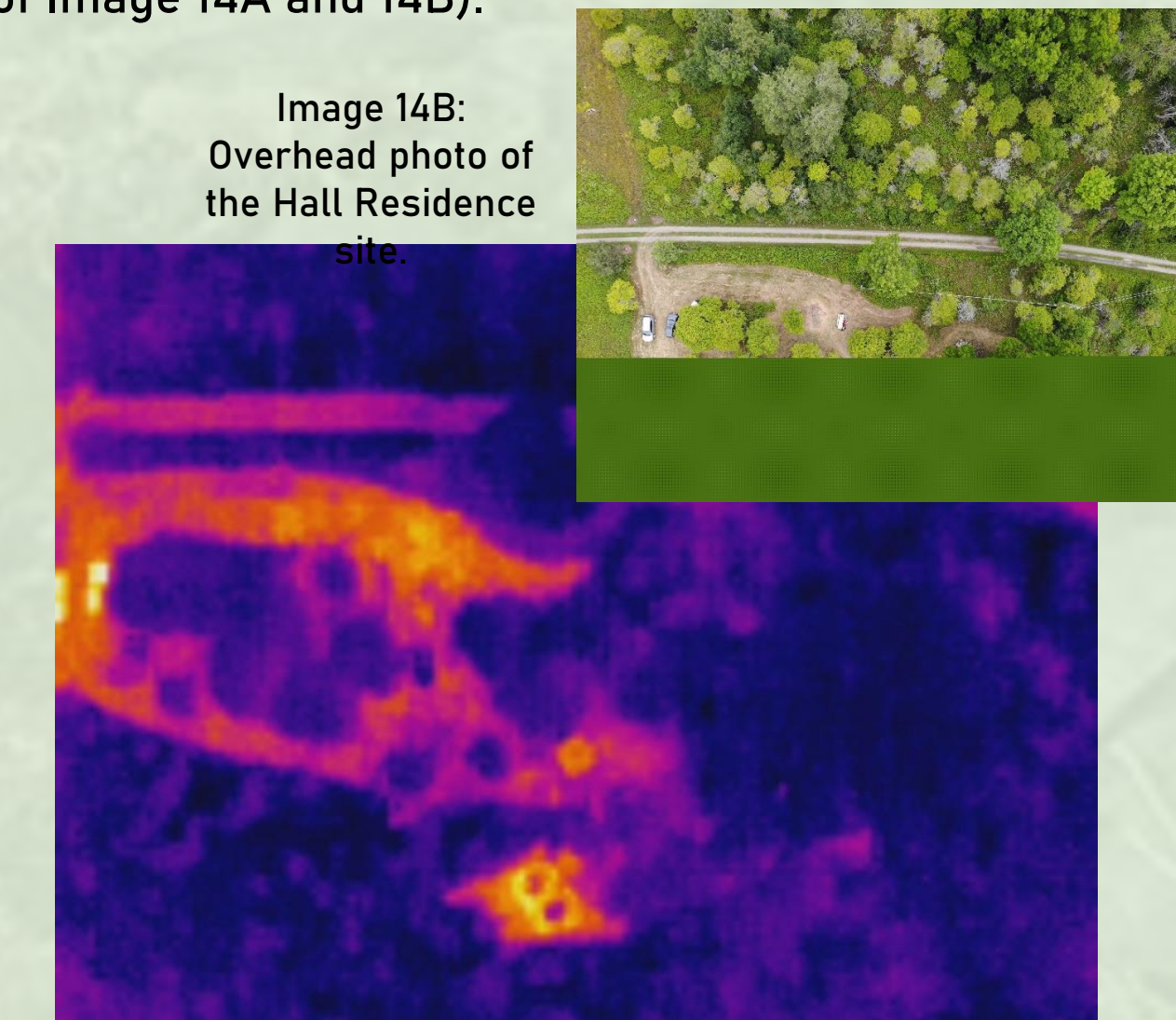


Image 14A: Thermal photo of the Hall Residence site.

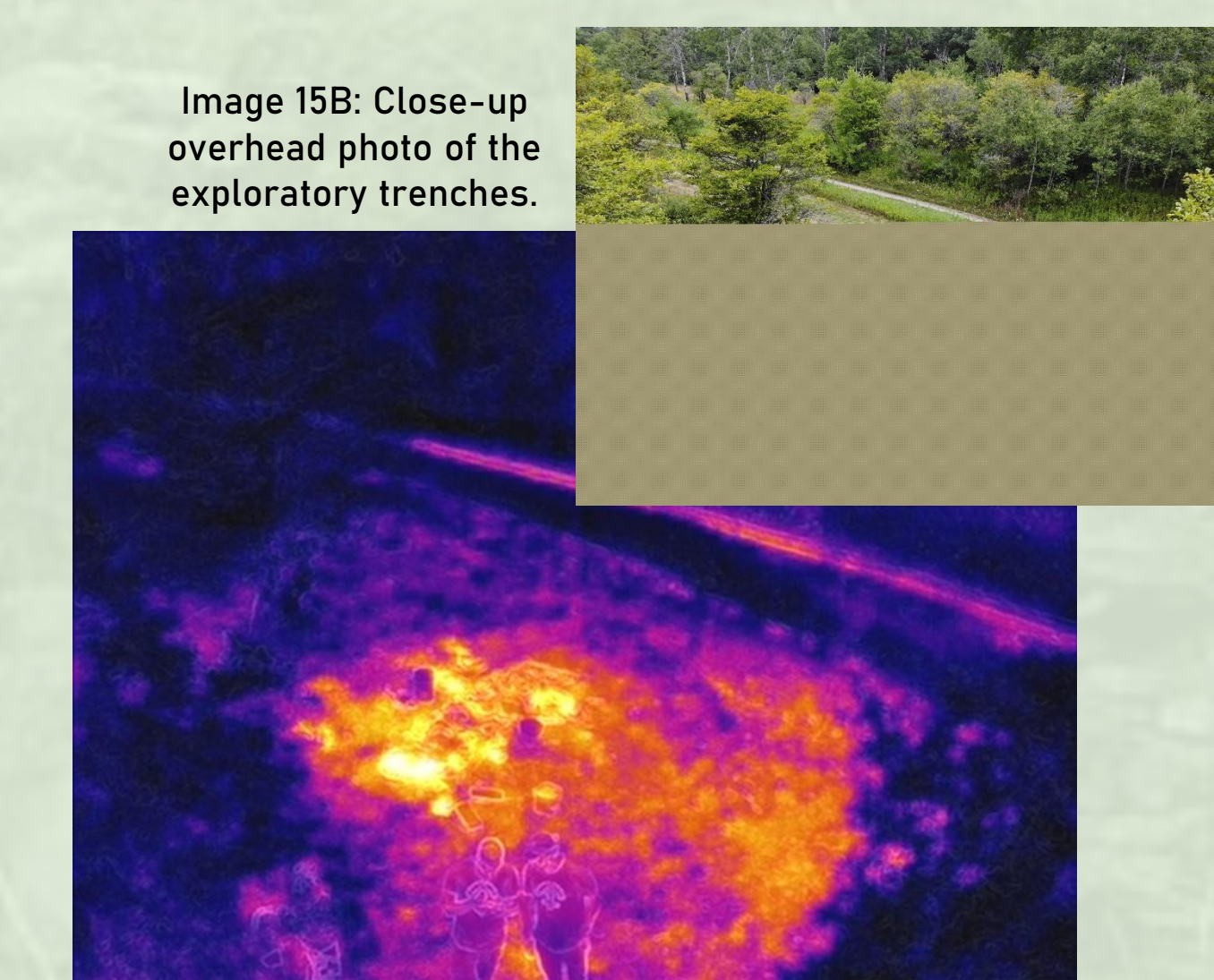


Image 15A: Thermal photo of the exploratory trenches.

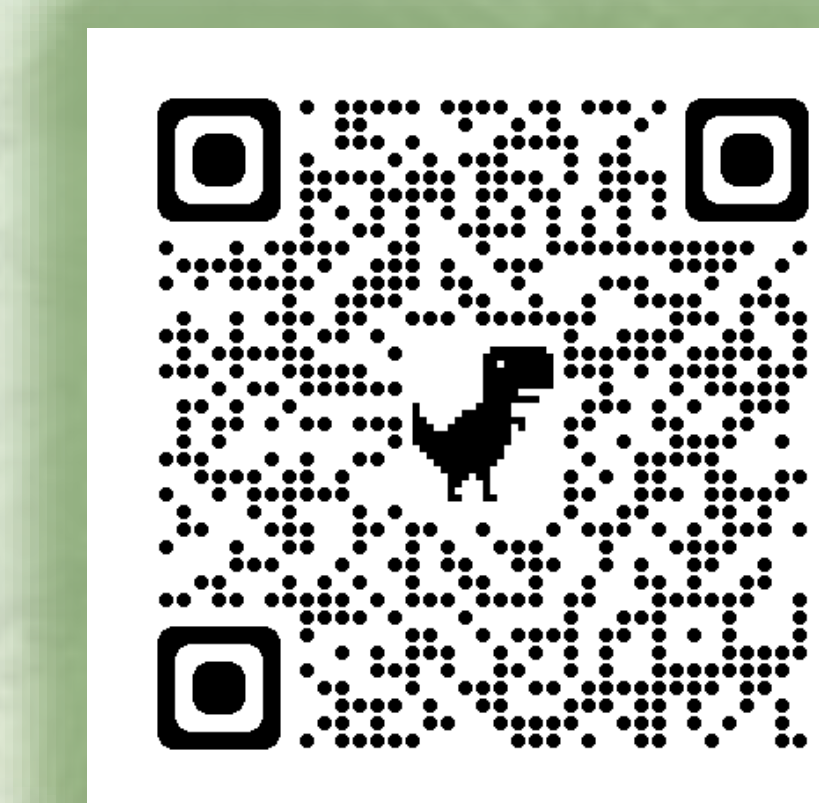
These exploratory trenches, and the backfill dirt piles around the wooden sifters, are good examples of how thermal imaging can help archaeologists spot features. Image 14A shows how wood can appear much cooler/darker than soil through thermal imaging. In Image 15A, the close-up of the exploratory trenches, we can see that stone can appear hotter than the soil around it, but only marginally. This difference in thermals can aid in the detection of human-made features. For example, if a thermal image of a particular area shows a collection of dark points in a clearing, it may be evidence of wooden support posts for a house or other structure.

Moving Forward with Frost Town

Predominantly, there was an abundance of construction materials such as window glass, nails, and even numerous whole bricks from the P, Q, R, and S rows of trenches. A variety of glass types were uncovered, from the flat windowpane glass to curved or even patterned vessel and bottle glass. The assemblage of glass and large pieces of farm equipment, nails, horseshoes, other small metal pieces, leather shoe soles, pig and sheep bones, bricks, and pieces of ceramics has changed the previous theory about the structure that was located to the south of the Hall Residence foundation.

In the coming years, the Cumming Nature Center will continue to hold Community Archaeology Days at the Hall Residence and Gulick Road sites; and the field school through SUNY Brockport will continue there.

Online Engagement



Scan to visit Frost Town Archaeology online!

During the 2022 field season, Frost Town Archaeology had the chance to collaborate with SUNY Brockport to produce a video which discusses the experience of participating in an archaeological field school. The video features Dr. Alexander Smith, SUNY Brockport student Evelyn Patterson, and other students and volunteers who give insights into the impact of archaeology and the purpose of the field school. This video contributes to the existing online engagement and social media, and aids in continuing to broaden the reach of the field school to the public and to students. The video can be found on the SUNY Brockport Anthropology department homepage or at <https://frosttownarchaeology.com/>. More information on Frost Town can be found at the website frosttownarchaeology.com or @frosttownarchaeology on Instagram.

Acknowledgements

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