

Archaeology as a Tool of Public History: How Frost Town Connects the Past and Public

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About Frost Town Archaeology

The Frost Town Archaeology Project is a collaboration between SUNY Brockport's Anthropology department and the Rochester Museum and Science Center's Cumming Nature Center to excavate and educate on the historic logging town that was once located in modern day Bristol, NY from the late 18th to the early 20th century. In its early years Frost Town was a rapidly growing and successful community due to its connections to the extensive trade routes of Western New York with wood from Frost Town sawmills being sold in across the state through the Erie Canal. As local forests were depleted the families of Frost Town either left for nearby cities or shifted to agriculture, primarily of hops, for an income. After prohibition banned the production and sale of alcohol in 1920, the remaining inhabitants of Frost Town swiftly abandoned the site which was largely forgotten until the land was purchased by the Cumming Family in the 1940s and donated to the Rochester Museum and Science Center in 1973 as a nature preserve. The Frost Town Archaeology Project began in 2017 and the first archaeological field school was held in 2019.

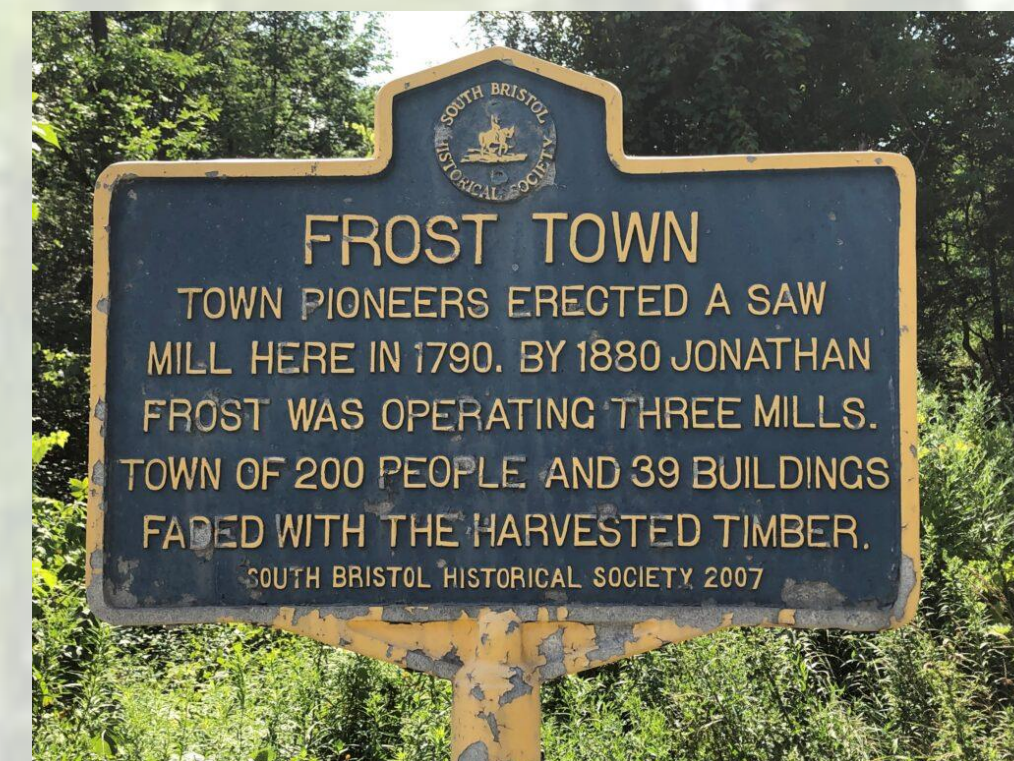


Figure 1: The sign dedicated by the South Bristol Historical Society marking where the main crossroad of Frost Town was once located

The Frost Town Archaeology project hosts archaeological field schools and conducts excavations at the Cumming Nature Center site for students of SUNY Brockport and middle schools from the Naples area where students get hands-on learning in archaeological methods from the process of digging, to the lab work of cleaning and databasing materials. Frost Town Archaeology has also held public events such as the *Frost Town: History and Ecology of a Ghost Town* exhibit and the Frost Town Symposium as well as several Public Archaeology days at the nature center. The Frost Town Archaeology Project focuses on combining the practices of history and archaeology with public education and engagement to further connect the public of the Western New York area to their local histories.



Figure 2: The crew of the 2019 archaeological field school at the site.

Frost Town Archaeology Lab

Cleaning and Preservation of Materials

The data collection of the Frost Town material culture occurs in the lab at the Cumming Nature Center site or in the Anthropology department lab at SUNY Brockport. Artifacts that come in from the Frost Town field schools, summer camps, and public archaeology days are organized by date excavated and are cleaned, measured, documented, and stored so that they can be used for future study and research. Students learn the proper methods of cleaning and preserving artifacts based on material in order to preserve them for future study and exhibition. Objects such as brick, glass, ceramics, and mortar are wet-brushed and allowed to thoroughly dry, objects which are metal and prone to oxidation are dry-brushed to remove excess dirt and dust, and delicate objects such as wood, leather, and charcoal are not treated to excess cleaning to avoid damage. Students learn the significance of being able to preserve the artifacts once they are excavated so that the knowledge that these objects can provide is not lost for future generations.



Figure 3: Frost Town Archaeology intern Thomas Verhay demonstrates the cleaning and preservation of Frost Town artifacts in the SUNY Brockport Anthropology lab

Gathering and Preserving Data

The Materials are categorized in the database by information such as material and purpose. Materials which are considered diagnostic, meaning they are identifiable and provide us with new or significant information about an area of the site, are recorded in more detail, given unique artifact numbers, and photographed. This lab work allows Frost Town students to experience the analytical aspects of archaeology while also gathering data which is used to draw conclusions about life at the site. This data is significant because it preserves information about these artifacts which can be saved, shared, and utilized by many people without having to have constant access to the materials, it also allows for these objects to be preserved digitally so that they may be taught and learned about long after the objects themselves are gone.

Figure 4: A lab bench in the SUNY Brockport Anthropology lab filled with artifacts from the 2022 field school waiting to be cleaned and databased



Public History and Education at Frost Town

Frost Town: The History and Ecology of a Ghost Town

The exhibit *Frost Town: The History and Ecology of a Ghost Town* which is on display in the Cumming Nature Center was created by two previous Frost Town students and interns of Dr. Smith of the SUNY Brockport Anthropology department, Evelyn Patterson and Natalie Klein. The exhibit teaches about the history of Frost Town from before its founding to when the site was abandoned and uses historical records and artifacts from the site to show aspects of daily life at Frost Town. The exhibit also includes displays which allow the audience to interact in order to learn more including a phone receiver with recorded interviews of community members who grew up or had family who lived in Frost Town. The opportunity for an audience member to engage with the testimony of someone from the time period which they are learning about helps to humanize and educate about the people of Frost Town in a way which traditional forms of historical education struggle to do. Other parts of the exhibit display objects found that demonstrate the cultural aspects of life at that time such as the "Frozen Charlotte" or "Penny Dolls" which are small porcelain dolls common among young girls in the 19th century, being able to see an object which the audience can connect to our own society and children today creates a cultural connection and understanding of the people who once inhabited the site.



Figure 5: Frost Town intern and co-curator of *Frost Town: The History and Ecology of a Ghost Town* exhibit, Natalie Klein, at the opening of the exhibit and symposium at Cumming Nature Center

RMSC Public Archaeology Days

Hosted by the Rochester Museum and Science Center and held at the Cumming Nature Center, public archaeology days are where local families can experience archaeology first-hand and learn from nature center staff and Frost Town student volunteers about the history of the site and the process of working on an archaeological excavation. These events are important to our mission of public history and education because it provides an affordable, local opportunity for the public to participate in the processes of history making which are typically reserved for individuals in higher education. They provide accessibility to members of the public of all ages to learn and engage with their own local history as a community. Family archaeology days provide us the opportunity to work with and educate members of the public more closely and develop relationships which contribute to and benefits our work.



Figure 6: A family attending public archaeology day, the parents help their children sift and search for artifacts near a trench

Frost Town Symposium

The Frost Town Symposium was held on May 13th, 2023, at the Cumming Nature Center and marked the opening of the Frost Town: The History and Ecology of a Ghost Town exhibit. Guest speakers from many institutions presented including Bekah Mertus (Ohio State), Seth Price (SUNY Brockport), Timothy Sandiford (Rhode Island School of Design), Emily Yahn (SUNY Brockport), Damian Webster (Tonawanda Seneca, Turtle Clan), and Daniel Tyree & Ryan Horan (Monroe Community College). Members of Cumming Nature Center staff and the Bristol community presented on the local history including Christopher Clarke (Frost Town Historian), Shariee Edersheim (CNC), Rory Stave (CNC), and Ron Goodman (Frost Town Wilcox Family). The keynote lecture was given by Dr. Alexander Smith of the SUNY Brockport Anthropology department and head of the Frost Town archaeology project. Speakers discussed topics including the Indigenous ties of the Haudenosaunee to the land of Frost Town (Webster), the use of new technologies such as drones and survey technology at the site (Price and Sandiford), the use of artifacts to understand daily life at Frost Town (Yahn), and the use of databasing technologies to make Frost Town data more widely accessible (Tyree & Horan). Many members of the Bristol, Rochester, and Brockport communities attended, and the event was successful in demonstrating how projects such as the Frost Town Archaeology Project can be used to build connections between the local communities and descendants of historic sites and those within academic institutions who study them.



Figure 7: Previous Frost Town intern and SUNY Brockport alumni Emily Yahn presents at the Frost Town symposium on her research regarding "Frozen Charlotte" dolls

Frost Town Archaeology Website and Database

While the primary efforts of the Frost Town Archaeology Project have been to bolster engagement and education through archaeological field schools and public events such as the summer camps, public archaeology days, and the exhibit, the data collection and research of the Frost Town project have been made even more accessible with the launch of the Frost Town website: frosttownarchaeology.com. The website contains information about past seasons work on the excavation sites at Frost Town, pictures and information about artifacts recovered from the site, the full history of the site from pre-settlement to modern day, and information on the Frost Town: The History and Ecology of a Ghost Town exhibit and symposium. The website allows for anyone to access information of the project from anywhere, even without having physical access to its objects or databases. While the website is a step forward in the preservation and accessibility of information, it has run into struggles regarding funding and ownership which has made it more difficult to maintain.

While the website is undergoing a pause due to funding and time constraints, there are still aspects of the website which the Staff of Frost Town has hopes to expand in the future, one of these being data storage and access through the site. The hope is that a condensed version of the Frost Town Archaeology database will be available on frosttownarchaeology.com which will make the data of the Frost Town Archaeology Project and the research of the students and staff of the project publicly available to both the public and other researchers and archaeologists in the Western New York region who could use the data to further understanding about the regions history. The push to create more public accessibility to data and information makes the work of the Frost Town website and database important because it allows us to meet the needs and wants of the public and the academic community as a whole and allows and promotes local communities to learn about their histories without having to access it through the red tape or paywalls that often come with higher education.



Figure 6: Frost Town intern Bailey Hartman enters data on objects from the 2022 field school into the Frost Town database in the SUNY Brockport Anthropology department lab



For More Information

For more information about the Frost Town Archaeology Project, you can visit the SUNY Brockport Anthropology department homepage or go to <https://frosttownarchaeology.com/>. For updates on events and the work of the Frost Town archaeological field schools including the upcoming 2024 field school season check out our Instagram [@frosttownarchaeology](https://www.instagram.com/frosttownarchaeology). For information about the Cumming Nature Center including exhibit hours and public archaeology days visit <https://rmsc.org/cumming-nature-center/>. For all other information scan the QR code to visit our website.

Acknowledgments

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