

4th Annual Runkle Woods Symposium

Conservation of Archaeological Sites in the Wright State University Woods

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Introduction

[slide 2—woods] Currently, Wright State University property includes over 200 acres of woodland. Dr. Tom Rooney, a former professor of Biological Sciences here at Wright State, said that the woods represent “that really rare forest that is less than 1/100th of 1 percent left in Ohio.” The woods include old-growth forest; much of it with trees over 100 years old, and some are over 300 years old. The woods are an important space for numerous species of flora and fauna, including some endangered species such as the Indiana bat.

Just as the campus woods are an important natural resource, the area is also an important cultural, or archaeological, resource. The old-growth areas haven’t ever been developed, and in some cases not even plowed. This means that archaeological sites are largely undisturbed, which adds to the significance of what Dr. Rooney called a “really rare forest.”

In this paper I want to briefly discuss what we know about the archaeology of the campus woods, and then talk about why protection of these cultural resources is so important and make some suggestions on how conservation can be achieved. I’ll also talk about a few past and current threats to archaeological sites on campus and about federal legislation, such as the National Historic Preservation Act, which created the National Register of Historic Places and protects cultural resources in certain circumstances.

[slide 3—PPKs] I, with my co-author Bryan Beverly, presented a paper at the 3rd Annual Runkle Woods Symposium on the archaeology of the woods. There we discussed what we know about the cultural resources on campus. Artifacts observed in the woods date human occupation back to at least 9,500 years ago.

[slide 4—creek] The terrain, the waterways, and the wild game attracted prehistoric people to the area. For thousands of years, Native Americans hunted game and collected other resources here. This long span of time, from nine or ten thousand years ago to 2,500 years ago, is called the Archaic Period by archaeologists.

[slide 5—Achilles Hill 1] A large-scale excavation carried out on campus provided important information on prehistoric uses of the area. In 1987, Dr. Bob Riordan, then a Professor of Anthropology and the archaeologist on staff, spent part of the archaeology field school having his students excavate a site on the eastern side of campus. Part of the landform was going to be used as fill-dirt for the construction of a section of Route 444, so parts of the site were excavated. Dr. Riordan found evidence of human occupation during the Archaic Period: lithic tools such as spear points and hundreds of lithic flakes, made of chert or flint, that represent lithic-tool production on site. The site also contained a much later prehistoric occupation.

[slide 6—Achilles Hill 2] Two postholes were radiocarbon dated to 600 or 700 years ago. This dates to the later prehistoric culture that archaeologists call the Fort Ancient Period, when Native Americans in the area were practicing agriculture.

[slide 7—students digging] I teach a class called Field Methods in Archaeology, and I often take my students into the woods on campus to learn how to understand a landscape and how it has been modified by people in the past. Occasionally we do small-scale excavations called shovel-test pits, or STPs, which is basically digging a hole with a shovel, screening the dirt and recovering the artifacts. We record the location of each shovel-test pit, so we know where artifacts came from. In almost every STP, we have recovered at least a few artifacts, usually lithic fragments made of flint, artifacts used by Native Americans during the prehistoric era. To me, this signifies the richness of the archaeological resources on campus: there are probably hundreds of archaeological sites here.

[slide 8—Native-Americans map] During much of the historic era, Ohio was home to numerous Native American tribes, including the Shawnee, Miami, Wyandot, Delaware, and others. The late-18th-century Shawnee towns of Piqua and Chillicothe are less than 15 miles from campus. As whites crossed the Ohio River and invaded Native land, many tribes moved from the southeastern to northwestern part of the state. The last Native groups were forced out of Ohio by the mid-19th century. Currently, no historic archaeology related to Native American groups has been identified on campus.

[slide 9—1855 map] We have identified historic archaeological sites, dating from the early 19th-century, when white settlers were moving into the area, through the 1960s, when the property was purchased for the construction of Wright State University. Most of these are house sites associated with small farmsteads. Some of the first white settlers included the family of

Mary and Martin Rockafield, who were living in Bath Township by 1807. One of their sons, John, owned much of the land that would become Wright State campus. The location of his house appears in this 1855 map of Greene County. We georeferenced the map with an outline, in red, of Wright State campus, which gives us an idea of where the house was located.

[slide 10—Burly] Burly, the Bur Oak, which professor Don Cipollini has identified as approximately 200 years old, is one of many important natural resources on campus. It is very close to the original house site of John Rockafield, who settled here in the early 1820s. These two events mark the first white settlement on what would become Wright State campus. Because the woods are so old, these sites are well preserved. However, they rarely leave any above-ground remains, so they are often difficult to identify and therefore in danger of damage.

[slide 11—brick and slag] Across the campus woods we have discovered scattered evidence of architecture and of local industry. In several areas are scatters of handmade brick, probably made on site. In other areas are pieces of clinker, the waste material produced during smelting of iron and blacksmithing. These artifacts reveal a lot of local industry was occurring in the woods during the early to mid-19th century.

[slide 12—trail and artifacts] During this time, the people living here made largescale modifications to the landscape, some of which are still visible today, such as roadbeds, trails, fence lines, and midden deposits all attesting to the vibrant community that existed here throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

[slide 13—Wrightstock Reborn] Some events that date to the Wright State era have left significant archaeological traces. Wrightstock, a music venue in the spirit of Woodstock, was held on campus in 1970. The following year, Wrightstock Revisited was even larger. It lasted for three days and was attended by over 30,000 people. Archaeological excavations have been performed at Woodstock in New York, and the same could be done here on campus. The site of Wrightstock Revisited is now over 50 years old and may be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

[slide 14—Rockafield Cemetery] A few sites are still highly visible. The best example is the Rockafield Cemetery, a community cemetery that was started in the 1820s by the Rockafields and other families. I want to talk briefly about the damage to some of the sites on campus and then discuss ways to protect sites in the future. The Rockafield Cemetery has largely been neglected since the property came under Wright State ownership.

[slide 15—headstone and missing fence] Although historic documents show that there are about 50 graves, less than ten have standing headstones. The split-rail fence that once encircled the cemetery is now almost completely gone and so the boundaries of the cemetery are unknown. Ideally, a ground-penetrating radar, or GPR, survey would be performed and the locations of graves identified so they could be protected.

[slide 16—gravel and moved stones] However, last year a gravel trail was laid down in the cemetery. The gravel makes a GPR survey much more difficult because the gravel blocks the radar signals. In at least one case, the gravel path was put in around a standing stone, and many broken fragments were moved to make way for the path, making it more difficult to identify the locations of specific graves.

[slide 17—plaque and brush piles] The bronze plaque that describes the cemetery has recently been damaged, and brush from a fallen tree has been piled up in an area that may contain graves.

[slide 18—Rockafield House] Rockafield House was built in the late 1960s as the residence for the president of the university. In 2012, then-president David Hopkins decided to live off campus and gave the property to the Wright State Alumni Association, who used it as a headquarters and meeting space. The house was damaged by a treefall in 2015 and fell into disuse. In Summer 2020 it was torn down and the area was green-spaced. The administration argued that it would be too costly to repair. However, there was little notification that the building would be destroyed and therefore no chance to document the structure. It was architecturally significant and potentially eligible for the National Register. Ideally, the entire structure would have been recorded from an architectural standpoint before it was demolished.

[slide 19—disc-golf photos] Development on campus continues to threaten archaeological resources. Recently, the administration completed the installation of an 18-hole disc-golf course, extending from the residence halls on the west side of campus to the traffic circle. The installation included both the baskets and the tee boxes. Each of these included digging into the ground for installation. The amount of soil disturbed was relatively small, but it has already been documented that prehistoric and historic sites are buried all around campus. Also, many of the holes were placed in the woods. The installation included widening some paths and creating new ones. This part of the process could have also potentially damaged archaeological sites, many of which are only an inch or two below the ground surface.

[slide 20—amenities building map] Another project that is slated to begin soon may have a much greater impact on archaeological resources on campus. The new real-estate company that is in charge of most residence halls and apartments on campus, Crawford Hoying, is planning on building a new “student amenity building.” Their plan is to build it on the northwest side of campus, near the Village Apartments.

[slide 21—amenities building area] This large structure will be built on a prominent natural rise that very likely contains archaeological deposits. The project may involve federal licensing which would initiate federal laws on the protection of archaeological resources. I’ll talk about that in a minute. Even if it does not, however, ethically, the potential for damaging or destroying archaeological deposits should be taken into account. Crawford Hoying is also considering the construction of what they call an “outdoor fitness trail” which could have an additional impact on cultural resources in the Wright State woods.

[slide 22—NHPA] Federal legislation has been in place for decades that protects archaeological resources. The main piece of legislation is National Historic Preservation Act, passed in 1966. The Act created the National Register of Historic Places, to document significant archaeological and architectural sites in the US. The Act also declares that, if any development project involves federal funding or licensing, an archaeological survey must be performed prior to development, to make sure significant sites that may be eligible for the National Register are not damaged or destroyed. This involves any federal agency, including the Department of Transportation, the Federal Communications Commission, and the US Army Corps of Engineers. So, when roads, bridges, cell-phone towers are built, or development is occurring along waterways, archaeological survey is federally mandated prior to development.

[slide 23—cemetery] Even when not required by federal law, the significance of the cultural resources on campus makes it incumbent on Wright State to care for them. I have two recommendations that would greatly advance this goal. First, a detailed procedure involving several stakeholders needs to be prepared and put in place regarding all potential future impacts to these resources. At the minimum, a group of people that includes members of the Wright State Facilities Operations, the Buildings and Grounds Committee, and the Woods Committee, should prepare a procedure or protocol. This could become part of Wrightway Policy, just as the protection of natural resources was written into Wrightway Policy in Section 7310.7.

[slide 24—woods] Second, a conservation easement would be ideal in protecting archaeological sites. An easement would protect portions of the woods from development in perpetuity. Such easements have been established in the Wright State woods before. In 2017, a conservation easement was established for 15 acres in the woods to protect endangered species from development. The idea of a larger-scale conservation easement on campus has been discussed, but so far, the administration has balked at the idea.

[slide 25—map] It would also be a good idea to involve Native American voices in the conversation. This area was occupied by numerous Native groups in the past and their descendants are members of several federally recognized tribes in Oklahoma and other states. The university administration is currently discussing a land acknowledgment statement, recognizing that the land owned by Wright State was taken from tribal populations. A way to honor that statement would be to give the descendants of those dispossessed of their land a voice in what happens to it now.

[slide 26—woods] Conservation of cultural resources is an important issue. Just as the Wright State woods, a “really rare forest”, provides a habitat for numerous faunal and floral species, it houses countless archaeological sites that reflect the people who have lived here for thousands of years. Just as conservation of natural resources has expanded at Wright State, the same should happen for cultural resources. I think, for a lot of people, these resources may not be as well understood or even known, in comparison to the species of plants and animals that reside in the woods. Education about and awareness of these archaeological sites would be an important step in protecting them.