

An Archaeology of Institutional Confinement: The Hyde Park Barracks, 1848–1886

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AND TIM MURRAY

Sydney University Press, Sydney, Australia, 2013. 118 pp., 90 figs., 28 tables. \$40.00 paper.

Archaeological studies of 19th-century institutions provide unique perspectives on the structures and influences of colonial expansion across continents. Equally as important is the examination of the lived experiences of the people consigned to these institutions and their behaviors as they navigated the rules, regulations, and routines of institutional life. This monograph (the fourth in the *Studies in Australasian Historical Archaeology* series) provides an institutional snapshot of daily life at the Hyde Park Barracks in Australia from 1848 to 1886, when the former convict barracks was converted to an asylum for female immigrants. Peter Davies, Penny Crook, and Tim Murray have drawn on more than 30 years of research, excavations, and cataloging of material culture to provide a rich history of the Hyde Park Asylum and the women, both staff and inmates, who called the institution home.

The Hyde Park Barracks was originally built to accommodate convicts in the early 1800s. When this proved to be ineffective the buildings were turned over for other uses, eventually being refitted to house female immigrants, orphans, and aged and infirm women. This provides the focus for the authors, whose approach acknowledges the multiple dimensions

of power struggles, reform, and labor relations often studied in institutional archaeology, but for whom the “context of an archaeology of refuge” (p. 1) provides a more holistic approach. Within this context, Davies, Crook, and Murray invoke a sense of compassion for the many women who spent time at the Hyde Park Asylum, and as the narrative progresses and the history of the institution is revealed the reader is reminded that this was a place full of human endeavors, emotions, life, and death. Grounding this understanding is an impressive archaeological assemblage uncovered from beneath the floorboards of the barracks. More than 80,000 artifacts including paper, textiles, and other organics were conserved in the dry cracks, crevices, and spaces under the boards. Buttons, beads, pins, paper clips, bottles, etc. represent 40 years of human interaction within the confinement of Hyde Park Barracks. The summary of artifacts in the total assemblage is staggering, and the diverse array of objects clearly validates the authors’ claim that “it is the largest, most comprehensive, and best-preserved archaeological assemblage derived from any 19th-century institution in the world” (p. xiii).

As expected from an historical archaeology case study, the chapters progress in a recognized pattern. The first three chapters set the context in which to consider the history of the institution and the subsequent archaeology. The authors outline the history of institutional control, the various occupant groups, as well as physical modifications and renovations to the main buildings, demonstrating the complexity of the barracks’ historiography. Colonial expansion during the 19th century often relied

on repurposing buildings to accommodate changing societies, and the Hyde Park Barracks was not immune to remodeling as Australian authorities were forced to provide refuge for the poor and destitute and hundreds of young immigrant women.

Focusing more closely on the operational workings in the institution, chapters 4 and 5 describe the administration of the women's asylum and detail the roles of staff and other occupants. The authors introduce us to Matron Lucy Applewhaite-Hicks, a prominent figure in the institution, whose story is intertwined with the history of the barracks. Matron Hicks influenced all aspects of asylum life during her 24-year tenure, sometimes, but not always, to the benefit of the inmates. Of the inmates little is known. Typical of colonial institutions during the 1800s, there are scant biographical details of the women who coalesced at Hyde Park, and the few profiles presented by the authors engender sympathy for the misfortunes of the sick, the poor, and the displaced. This perception is augmented by the archaeological evidence. Lice combs, pharmaceutical bottles, and ointment labels recovered from the site are in keeping with the need to treat and prevent diseases within the institution. Similarly, cutlery items found under the floor in the dormitory suggest that some women were confined to their beds during meal times. Other artifacts exemplify daily life in the asylum including recreational smoking, sewing, mending of a variety of clothing items and different fabrics, hatmaking, reading, and religious or spiritual practices. All of these activities were regulated by the matron. Chapter 6 provides a more intimate look at the private life of Lucy Hicks, her family, and home within the barracks.

Chapter 7 positions the authors' contributions to the historical archaeology of institutions. Davies, Crook, and Murray argue that the recognized tenets of institutional confinement do not necessarily apply in the case of the Hyde Park Asylum. They state that the administrative and physical reorganization of the barracks over time shifted the focus of the institution from discipline or punishment to simply a place of temporary refuge for disadvantaged and vulnerable women. In the canon of reform institutions, the Hyde Park Asylum is considered an anomaly, straddling the concepts and routines imposed in total institutions and affable respite from poverty, illness, or abuse. In this case, the women experienced a modicum of compassion, respectability, and control over their material lives.

This is, undoubtedly, an impressive and exemplary study of the material culture representing the Hyde Park Barracks during its peak as an asylum for women in the mid-1800s. In the growing repertoire of studies on the institutional life of women during the 19th century, *An Archaeology of Institutional Confinement* contributes to our understanding of the internal workings and goals of such places while sculpting an alternate view of care for marginalized individuals. It synthesizes previous work on the Hyde Park Barracks and builds on the stories of convicts and immigrants in Australian society. Listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List because of its significant role as a convict site, the Hyde Park Barracks served a unique function in the mobilization of Sydney's convict population, but its history in forced migration, colonization, and institutional confinement is tempered by the welfare culture that existed during the women's asylum tenancy.

Overall, this book will be of value to historical archaeologists interested in the workings of 19th-century institutions. More specifically, archaeologists examining the lived experiences of women who attended institutions where confinement was a neces-

sary component will find this to be a worthy comparative study.

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