Feature This

INTRODUCTION
Archaeology plays an important role in learning about past cultures. The layers of soil that build up over time yield artifacts that provide archaeologists and historians with evidence concerning the history of a site, how people lived, and the things that people owned, used, and ate. Various features on an archaeological site contain different types of artifacts. In this lesson, students will gain an understanding of the characteristics of three different types of archaeological features, a well, a trash pit, and a privy. Students will discover what kinds of artifacts are often found in each feature.

OBJECTIVES
As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:
1. Identify types of artifacts found in eighteenth-century wells, trash pits, and privies.
2. Describe how archaeological artifacts reveal information about eighteenth-century life.

MATERIALS
Well Information
Well Diagram and Artifacts
Questions about the Well
Trash Pit Information
Trash Pit Diagram and Artifacts
Questions about the Trash Pit
Privy Information
Privy Diagram and Artifacts
Questions about the Privy
Archaeological Feature Graphic Organizer

STRATEGY
1. Divide the class into 6 groups. Assign 2 groups to work with the Well materials, 2 to work with the Trash Pit materials, and 2 to work with the Privy materials.

2. Distribute a copy of the Well Information to each student in the 2 groups assigned to work with the Well materials. Distribute a copy of the Trash Pit Information to each student in the 2 groups assigned to work with the Trash Pit materials. Distribute a copy of the Privy Information to each student in the 2 groups assigned to work with the Privy materials.

3. Ask the students to read the material on their assigned feature for the following information:
   • What are the characteristics of the archaeological feature?
   • Are there kinds of artifacts that survive only in this type of feature?
   • If so, why?
   • What can be learned from this kind of feature?

4. Distribute the Archaeological Feature Graphic Organizer. Instruct each group to talk about what they
5. Ask the students to examine their feature diagram and artifacts sheet. Have them answer the questions about their feature by utilizing the handouts and the completed Archaeological Feature Graphic Organizer. Have the students record their group answers and select a group spokesperson to share their answers with the rest of the class.

6. Have each group report their feature information from the Archaeological Feature Graphic Organizer and question answers to the whole class. The teacher can record this information on the board, a flip chart, or butcher paper.

7. Conduct a whole-class discussion of the information that students have learned about the three kinds of archaeological features.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of the Feature</th>
<th>Types of Artifacts That Can Survive Only in This Feature</th>
<th>What Information Can Be Learned from This Feature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Site:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Archaeological Feature Graphic Organizer

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WELL INFORMATION

Wells are particularly rich sources of archaeological information. In the eighteenth century, there were wells on most properties. Sometimes wells ran dry. More commonly, their brick sides collapsed, leaving the water muddy and unfit to drink. Once they were no longer a source of clean water, people filled abandoned wells with garbage.

What can archaeologists learn from a well? First, they can learn whether one family or many people lived on the site. A single family’s garbage would contain a mix of food-related items (animal bones, seeds, etc.) and personal items (buttons, ceramic fragments, nails, wine bottle and tobacco pipe fragments, etc.) If the site had been used for manufacturing—brass founding, for example—they would expect to find a lot of coal dust from the fires used to melt the metals and many unfinished pieces of metal. If many people had used the site, as might be the case with a tavern, they would expect a very large number of drinking-related items (wine bottles, stoneware mugs, wine glass fragments, spigots, etc.) Taverns also served food, so archaeologists would expect to find many plate fragments and animal bones. Wells are so valuable to archaeologists because many organic materials (fabric, paper, leather, leaves, etc.) that would quickly decay in the soil are preserved in a well.

Artifacts help answer other questions. Bones and seeds can tell what foods people ate at the site. Some artifacts can provide evidence of children living on the property. Objects that were well worn by the time they were thrown away might indicate that the people on the site had little money to spare. Objects or pieces of objects that were rare or expensive in the eighteenth century (clocks, mirrors, spices, porcelain, etc.) suggest a higher standard of living. Some organic materials, especially leaves and branches, indicate what kinds of trees were growing on the site.
WELL DIAGRAM AND ARTIFACTS

Layer A
- 72 tobacco pipe fragments
- 49 ceramic mug fragments (stoneware)
- 58 ceramic plate fragments (porcelain)
- 15 wine glass stems
- 2 candle snuffer fragments
- 139 wine bottle glass fragments
- 184 pig bones
- 297 cow bones
- 24 ceramic punch bowl fragments (delftware)
- 3 spigots (used to tap wine barrels)
- 64 drinking glass fragments
- Cuttings (branches) from locust, elm, and red maple trees
- Grape vines and grape seeds

Layer B
- 2 worn ceramic plate fragments (stoneware)
- 1 small piece of a striped blanket
- 8 ceramic plate fragments (delftware)
- 3 buttons
- 57 cow bones
- 23 pig bones
- 8 tobacco pipe fragments
- 1 child’s shoe
- 4 clay marbles
- 1 well bucket
- 16 wine bottle glass fragments
- Cuttings (branches) from locust and elm trees
- Peach pits, gourd seeds, grape seeds, and cherry pits
You are an archaeologist who has just excavated a well. The attached Well Diagram and Artifacts sheet shows a profile, or side view, of the layers of trash in the well and contains a list of the things found in each layer. Use the Well Diagram and Artifacts sheet to answer the following questions about the people who once lived on your site.

**Which was deposited first, Layer A or Layer B?**

Do you think the same people deposited Layer A and Layer B?

How do you think the site was being used when Layer A was deposited? (Options: house site, gunsmith’s shop, tavern, or store.) What makes you think so? Hint: Look at the artifacts list.

How do you think the site was being used when Layer B was deposited? (Options: house site, gunsmith’s shop, tavern, or store.) What makes you think so?

What do you know about what the people ate?
TRASH PIT INFORMATION

What is a trash pit? Before the days of curbside garbage pick-up, most people deposited their trash in the backyard. Abandoned wells or privies or natural features like ravines were convenient places to dump the potato peelings, broken plates, and bones from last night’s supper. Most of the time, people simply threw the trash in the yard where it would get trampled on and be broken into tiny bits and ground into the dirt.

Trash pits are depressions or holes in the ground that are filled with trash. Because it is hard to imagine living around trash, it is tempting to think that people dug holes intending to bury their trash to keep it from smelling bad. In the eighteenth century, however, people were probably more accustomed to smells. Most archaeologists believe that trash pits are not holes dug to bury trash, but depressions in the ground where a large quantity of trash settled on its own.

Finding features such as trash pits, wells, and privies is exciting for archaeologists. Artifacts are buried in depressions and, because they were not walked around on as much as other artifacts, the pieces that are found tend to be bigger and more likely to mend together. That makes the archaeologists’ job easier. Wells and privies do offer some advantages that trash pits do not. Because wells and privies are wet, some artifacts are better preserved in them. Cloth, paper, leather, and leaves normally would decay in trash pits but might survive in the wetter conditions of a well or privy.

Still, trash pits can provide a lot of information about who lived on a site, what took place there, and what life was like. They can also inform archaeologists whether the site was used as a home, tavern, or industrial site. A single family’s garbage usually is a mix of food-related items such as animal bones and maybe seeds, and personal items like buttons, ceramic fragments, nails, and wine bottle and tobacco pipe fragments. If the site was used for manufacturing—brass founding, for example—archaeologists expect to find a lot of coal dust and many unfinished pieces of metal. If many people were using the site, as might be the case with a tavern, they expect to see a large number of food and drink-related items—wine bottles, stoneware mugs, wine glass fragments, spigots, plate fragments, and animal bones.

Once archaeologists know how the site was used, artifacts can help them answer other questions. Bones and seeds tell what foods people ate at the site—if they were eating there at all. Artifacts on manufacturing sites indicate what kinds of products were being produced and how they were made.
Layer A
Stopper from a perfume bottle
Dress hook
24 tobacco pipe fragments
14 assorted gun parts
9 ceramic mug fragments (stoneware)
34 wine bottle glass fragments
9 gun flints
18 pig bones
29 cow bones
Large quantity of coal and coal dust
Oyster shells

Layer B
2 worn ceramic plate fragments (stoneware)
8 ceramic plate fragments (delftware)
Coal
3 buttons
17 cow bones
23 pig bones
Mold for casting a lock plate (part of a gun)
Quantity of fish bones from a striped bass
8 tobacco pipe fragments
8 gun flints
8 clay marbles
1 Jew's harp (musical instrument)
20 gun parts, unfinished
2 thimbles
5 straight pins
QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TRASH PIT

You are an archaeologist who has just uncovered a trash pit. The attached Trash Pit Diagram and Artifacts sheet shows a profile, or side view, of the layers of trash in the pit and contains a list of the things found in each layer. Use the Trash Pit Diagram and Artifacts sheet to answer the following questions about the people who once lived on your site.

Which was deposited first, Layer A or Layer B?

Do you think the same people deposited Layer A and Layer B?

Did people live on this site, work here, or both?

What kinds of special activities seem to have happened on this site? (Options: tavern keeping, gunsmith’s shop, or store.) What makes you think so? Hint: Look at the artifacts list.

Can you tell anything about the people? Do you think that only men used this site? Were children here? What makes you think so?

What do you know about what the people ate? Do differences in diet show up in each layer?
If you walked into an eighteenth-century house, you would not find a bathroom or toilet. Instead, people used privies. Workers dug a hole 4 or 5 feet deep and placed a wooden structure with 1 or 2 seats over it. When a privy became full or smelled too bad, the homeowner usually had someone clean it out. Eventually, a new hole had to be dug. The old pit would then be filled with garbage from the house to keep the odor down and to prevent neighbors from falling in.

Privies are treasure troves of archaeological information. Items such as wine bottles or tobacco pipes that fell or were hidden in the privy while it was in use would not have been retrieved—except by the very brave! Consequently, archaeologists sometimes find unbroken artifacts in the bottom layers of a privy. Privies are damp environments and help preserve organic materials such as fabric, paper, leather, and leaves that would quickly decay in the ground.

What can be learned from a privy? If the privy is located on a house site (as opposed to a site where people were manufacturing things), the trash that fills the upper layers reveals details about what life was like in the house. Bones, seeds, and preserved pollen can tell archaeologists what foods people. Broken pieces of toys can provide evidence of children in the house. A large number of rare or expensive objects such as clocks, mirrors, spices, or porcelain often indicate that the people who lived on the site were wealthy. The presence of parasites in the soil can be an indicator that the people who lived on the site suffered from disease. Archaeologists can even determine how quickly the privy hole was filled in. If artifacts from the top and bottom layers can be glued back together (mended), then the privy was probably filled in very quickly.
Layer A
16 tobacco pipe fragments
21 ceramic plate fragments
(stoneware). Some match pieces in Layer B
12 ceramic plate fragments (porcelain).
Some match pieces in Layer B
3 wine glass stems
4 mirror glass fragments
19 wine bottle glass fragments
21 pig bones
32 cow bones
23 nails
Oyster shells
1 pewter button

Layer C
5 whole wine bottles
24 tobacco pipes, most nearly complete
Blackberry seeds
Pollen from broccoli and capers
Evidence of parasites

Layer B
8 ceramic plate fragments (stoneware).
Some match pieces in Layer A
11 ceramic plate fragments (porcelain).
Some match pieces in Layer A
4 ceramic plate fragments (delftware)
9 ceramic mug fragments (stoneware)
29 wine bottle glass fragments
18 nails
8 straight pins
11 tobacco pipe fragments
14 pig bones
20 cow bones
Fish bones
2 clock parts
QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PRIVY

You are an archaeologist who has just uncovered a privy. The attached Privy Diagram and Artifacts sheet shows a profile, or side view, of the layers of trash in the privy and contains a list of the things found in each layer. Use the Privy Diagram and Artifacts sheet to answer the following questions about the people who once lived on your site.

Which layer was deposited first, A, B, or C? Which was deposited last?

How do you think this site was used (Options: house site, gunsmith’s shop, tavern, or store.) What makes you think so? Hint: Look at the artifacts list.

Does it appear that the same people deposited all three layers?

Do you think these people were gentry, middling sort, or slaves? Why?

What do you know about what the people ate? Are there differences in diet that show up in each layer?

Were the people healthy?
We at Colonial Williamsburg would very much enjoy receiving copies of some of your students’ work from any of the lesson plans in this packet. If you would care to share examples of their work, please send them to:

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