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Archeology of the Village of Gilboa—An Overview

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The area surrounding the Gilboa Reservoir has a rich and diverse history. During the nineteenth century, farmsteads, houses, churches, schools, shops, and industries defined the landscape. In the early twentieth century, the village was abandoned and the Gilboa dam and reservoir became the dominant landmark in the area. The reservoir submerged many buildings, while structures outside of the reservoir were demolished, erasing most of the visible traces of this historic village. However, portions of the structures outside of the reservoir survive to this day buried beneath fill and soil. This has preserved a different kind of historic record, accessible through archeology, that tells the story of the people who created, worked, and lived in the village. The items these residents made, used, and discarded document lifeways beyond what is included in written records.

For the past five years, archeologists from the Public Archeology Facility (PAF) at Binghamton University have been excavating the remains of the village and areas related to the construction of the Gilboa dam to uncover this history and recover artifacts of everyday life. We use buttons, bottles, ceramic dishes, and other items to learn about life in this nineteenth-century village—what people ate, how they dressed, and how they socialized with others in the community. In looking at these items, we find that they did not live a life much different from ours, but used the land and materials they made or purchased to deal with some of the same challenges we face today. The historic context sets the stage for understanding the beginnings and the ending of Gilboa village.



Archeological crews excavating one of the Gilboa sites.

Major settlement in the Town of Gilboa did not begin until the nineteenth century. In the 1840s, the Village of Gilboa began to flourish. The village developed a rural industrial economy with the establishment of cotton mills, tanneries, blacksmith shops, and other mills. Such industries were lofty attempts at increasing the local economy, but natural events, such as floods and the lack of a railroad entering the village hindered any large-scale industrial development. The flood of 1869 destroyed the Gilboa Cotton Mill Company and much of the local infrastructure. The result was the loss of the local cotton industry and a refocusing of the economy on agricultural industries.

Village life ended in the early twentieth century. While major non-agricultural industry bypassed Gilboa, New York City had become one of the world's centers of industry. Calls for increased sanitation and water sources strained the city's local resources and prompted plans for Catskill dams and reservoirs. By tapping water sources in the Catskills, New York City could increase its access to clean water. For those remaining in the Village of Gilboa, the city's offer to buy their property became an opportunity for a better life outside the village. With the village purchased and abandoned, New York City's Water Bureau began construction of the Gilboa dam in 1917 and finished in 1927. The dam's resulting reservoir submerged most of the village and over the years, trees and brush reclaimed the area around the dam. Gilboa's farms, roads, and building foundations became overgrown, hiding the village's historic past. Those who lived in the village have long since passed, and much of the memory of life in the village during the 1800s has faded away. However, the village's unwritten history awaits rediscovery, and that process has begun.

Archeological crews from PAF have had success in identifying some of the individual residences of those who lived in the village during the nineteenth century. We have also found trash dumps and work sites related to

the construction of the dam. At one site we have also identified possible soil deposits related to the 1869 flood. The foundations and artifacts found on these sites help us to understand what life was like in the nineteenth century. While historic documents provide information on the names and occupations of those who lived in the village or even who worked on the dam, there is limited information on their daily lives. People usually detailed extraordinary or major events in their lives, such as births or marriages. They seldom recorded the more mundane activities, such as what they ate, how they did housework, what they liked to buy or how they relaxed.

For example, the Hugh Nawn Construction Company of Boston was the contractor that built the Gilboa dam. In our research, we have found documents on workplace accidents and promotions, but nothing on how they fed and housed their employees. To find this information, we must look at the refuse left by those who worked on the dam. Their cans, bottles, and personal items tell us that they ate mostly prepared foods from tin cans and drank soda and mineral water. Most of their supplies were brought in from the Hudson Valley. Many of those who built the dam were immigrants from Italy or Southern and Eastern Europe. We can use personal items to see how these workers were expressing their ethnic identity in a community primarily defined by construction and industry.

We have also used the material remains related to house foundations to discover aspects of life in the village during the 1800s. The area once called Church Hill and the location of the Gilboa Cotton Mill were not submerged under the reservoir. The dam's builders demolished the homes in these areas, but the foundations and the yards remained relatively untouched. These yards are important to archeologists. Many families in the 1800s did not rely on trash dumps to dispose of their refuse; rather they tossed their garbage out of doors and windows into their yards. From these yards, what archeologists call "sheet middens," we can identify the material items used and discarded everyday. For instance, maps, deeds, and census records tell us that Solomon Mackay and his family lived in one of the properties on Church Hill from 1866 to the early 1900s. He was a "gentleman" farmer who owned land throughout the area. The historic records are silent about the personal history of this family of wealthy farmers.





Buttons and clothing items recovered from one of the Gilboa archeological sites.

Over the forty years the Mackay family occupied the property, they left a large amount of material in their yard. Some of this was tossed in the yard as trash, but other items, such as coins, were accidentally dropped during daily activities. The ceramic and glass dishes recovered from the Mackay's yard show that they could afford to buy fairly expensive dishes, based on the design and decorations. However, they probably did not have complete or matched sets of dishes, suggesting some restraints on their spending as the household attempted to piece together the best table settings they could afford. Animals bones recovered from the site tell us that they raised pigs, goats, and cows for their own use. The large number of clamshells we found on their property suggests they also bought food from a market. Other items, such as porcelain doll pieces, a wooden toothbrush, and knick knack figurines, help us to determine the daily activities of those living at the house, including children, and how people decorated their homes. In these findings, we see that the Mackays were a farming family trying to achieve the best life they could with limits established by income, lifestyle, and access to markets. More can (and will be) learned from the archeological record of this and other sites.

This article's limited space has led to a shortened discussion on our research at the former Village of Gilboa. In future articles, archeologists from the Public Archeology Facility will discuss other sites related to the 19th century village and the dam's construction in more detail.

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