St Lawrence archaeological project: background, progress and future directions

ALEISHA BUCKLER

St Lawrence is a small Australian town, established as a port on the coast of Central Queensland in the early 1860s. The now sparsely populated settlement has a rich archaeological record through which to disentangle and understand life in colonial Queensland. This paper presents a brief background report on part of ongoing historical archaeological research at St Lawrence, which investigates the movement of people, information and material culture into, and out of, the settlement prior to the arrival of the railway in the early 1920s.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

St Lawrence is located on the coast of Central Queensland, approximately 650 km north-northwest of Brisbane, between the regional centres of Rockhampton and Mackay (Figure 1). The town sits on the bank of St Lawrence Creek, one of four tidal estuaries that drain into the vast bay of Broadsound, which has the largest tidal range in eastern Australia (Cook and Mayo 1977:28; Royal Geographical Society of Queensland 2009). The settlement faces an extensive coastal plain dominated by mangrove swamps, mudflats and coastal grasslands.

The archaeological investigation reported in this article forms part of a larger research project which aims to investigate the ways in which the residents of St Lawrence were connected with places and entangled within processes that linked them to the wider world. Specifically, the research aims to determine how and to what extent the residents of St Lawrence were both isolated from, and integrated within, broader networks of economic and social activity prior to the arrival of the railway in 1921, and in what ways these networks of interaction shaped material life in the town. This project is informed by recent calls for historical archaeological research that explores connections and processes of globalisation using multiscalar, network approaches (see Casella 2013; Orser 2010). As a former port, St Lawrence was a nexus of interaction, facilitating the flow of people, information and commodities across local, regional, national and international boundaries, and is thus an ideal setting to examine connections in the past.

Ports also form a central position in Australia’s past. They were (and still are) extremely important to the development of the Queensland economy – an economy principally underpinned by the exploitation and exportation of its pastoral and mineral resources (Prangnell 2013). The establishment of port infrastructure along the coastline during the nineteenth century was fundamental to the development of primary industries, and in turn, the expansion of the capitalist economy within Queensland. Despite their historical importance and prevalence in the landscape, ports remain somewhat understudied in Australian historical archaeology (but see Nayton 2011; Prosser et al. 2012), as do rural towns, with studies often favouring more urban contexts. The placement and infrastructure of coastal ports, the development of port towns, and the lifestyle of port inhabitants, are all topics to which historical archaeology can contribute valuable and unique information (Schacht 2010:72).

HISTORICAL SETTING

St Lawrence was established c.1862 as a rudimentary landing place on St Lawrence Creek to service the local pastoral trade that developed in the region following the purchase of runs by southern selectors. Around this time, copper was found at Peak Downs, near Clermont, marking the first major copper discovery in Queensland, and the first outside of South Australia, with mining operations commencing in 1863 (Blainey 1970:303; Pearson 2003:122). St Lawrence was officially proclaimed a Port of Entry and Clearance in this year (Queensland Government Gazette 1863 v4:183), and soon became the main shipping outlet for the Peak Downs copper trade. Ore was conveyed by horse and carriage teams to the township, from there by steamer to Rockhampton, and then onwards to Sydney. A township quickly developed at this ‘out-of-the-way little place’ (Rockhampton Bulletin 7 June 1864:3) with the construction of a number of commercial and government buildings, including public houses and stores, Customs Office, Court House, post and telegraph office and school.

The price of copper reached its peak in 1872 (Pearson 2003:128), and trade through St Lawrence hit record levels.

1. School of Social Science, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland 4072. a.buckler@uq.edu.au
Town prosperity was not to last, however, as on 22 January 1874, a cyclone hit the settlement, washing away the already deteriorating wharf, and destroying much of the township. Port facilities were subsequently shifted from the basin of St Lawrence Creek to Waverley Creek, approximately five kilometres south-east of the township.

The prosperity of the port during the mid-nineteenth century was largely dependent on this regional pastoral and copper trade, for which it competed with Rockhampton – the chief port of Central Queensland. The difficult carriage route from the mines to the port, the dynamic tides of St Lawrence Creek, and the destructive impact of the 1874 cyclone left St Lawrence at a significant disadvantage, and the town was ultimately unable to retain the rich hinterland resource trade. The extension of the central railway inland from Rockhampton further reduced market access and the trading opportunities of St Lawrence, and no export activity was recorded from the port during the 1880s.

In an effort to boost the economy of the district, a meatworks was established near the new wharf area on Waverley Creek in early 1894. The meatworks at St Lawrence was one of the first of many established in Queensland, following a major international financial depression in 1893, as a way of earning a profit from the surplus of cattle that had accumulated on pastoral stations during a period of low cattle prices (Brisbane Courier 23 May 1893:5; Camm 1984:30). The works remained operational until 1903 – albeit with many periods of inactivity due to drought and loss of cattle. With its closure, St Lawrence effectively ceased to operate as a port and the township fell into decline.

The railway finally reached St Lawrence from Rockhampton in June 1921, providing a long-awaited and important transport and communication link to the area. Prior to the advent of regulated systems of waste disposal management, it was common practice to discard rubbish on vacant land or in low-lying areas on the margins of settlement, such as a creek bank (Davies 2006:237; LeeDecker 1994:353; Majewski 2005). A correspondent at St Lawrence, writing for The Brisbane Courier in 1878 (10 August 1878:6) described the land behind the Government Reserve on Macartney Street as ‘a dirty rotten saltpan, where the tide plays over periodically’, and from which emanates a ‘noxious effluvium’. While there is no record of residents dumping rubbish in this area specifically, during a local government meeting at St Lawrence in 1900, a motion was passed to find a site for ‘town rubbish to be deposited, and … to remove all rubbish [including]… broken glass or other rubbish from the streets and unoccupied allotments’ (Morning Bulletin 12 April 1900:3; emphasis added). Considering this shared land use among residents, it is difficult to discern the exact source of the refuse; however, given its proximity, it is likely that the archaeological material originated from one or more of the predominantly commercial establishments on Macartney Street.

Archaeological fieldwork was conducted in June-July 2013, with the aim of recovering archaeological material relating to the nature of life within St Lawrence, and to provide information regarding the networks of interaction that connected the small port town to the wider world from the early 1860s through to 1921. In order to define a study area for archaeological investigations, fieldwork commenced with a systematic survey of the creek bank in the general area of the previously identified archaeological material, to determine the location and extent of artefact concentrations along the bank, and to identify any additional archaeological features. A total survey area of 9000 square metres (120 m x 75 m) was surveyed, encompassing the surface artefact scatters along the creek bank as well as a portion of the adjacent Council land.

Three large artefact scatters were recorded along the creek bank. For each scatter, a basic sketch plan was drawn, photographs taken (prior to and after collection) and the location and boundaries were recorded using both a GPS and total station. The study area, topography and contemporary fencing markers were also recorded using the total station and GPS to create a site plan (Figure 4) amenable to mapping using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which will be superimposed with aerial photographs and historical survey plans of the town.

The scatters consisted of such a high density of artefact fragments that it was impractical to record them in situ; instead, artefacts were collected from the surface of each scatter. Glass was abundant, making total removal impractical,
thus the recovery of a representative sample of the glass assemblage from each scatter was of paramount importance (Birmingham 1987:5). A sampling strategy was implemented whereby only a portion of the total glass fragments was collected from each scatter. A collection grid comprising 2 m x 2 m grid units was established over each scatter to encompass its boundaries, with alphanumeric characters assigned to each grid unit. Sampled grid units were selected at random to accurately reflect what could be expected from each scatter as a whole. Ceramic and metal fragments were not in great abundance and did not require sampling; as such, they were systematically collected across each scatter, irrespective of grid unit. Unique diagnostic artefacts found within a scatter were also collected in this manner. Artefacts from the surface scatters were washed and air-dried in the field prior to sorting, and once dry, bagged by material type, artefact scatter and grid unit.

Four test pits were excavated in various locations within the vacant allotment to determine the extent of subsurface archaeological material, and to aid in understanding site formation processes in the study area (see Figure 4). One 2 m x 1 m pit and three 1 m x 1 m pits were excavated in arbitrary 10 cm excavation units within identified stratigraphic units to a depth of 20 cm, at which point the deposits became sterile. The excavations revealed little depth to the cultural material, with the majority of artefacts recovered from the surface and within the first 5 cm of sediment, possibly indicating a single episode of discard or minimal use of the area over a short period (see Majewski 2005:16) (Figure 5). Excavated sediments were sieved at the site through 3 mm and 6 mm screens. Artefacts were bagged by excavation unit and labelled accordingly. Fragile or very small items, such as clay pipe fragments, were bagged individually to protect them from damage or loss. The archaeological assemblage recovered from the surface scatters and test excavations totalled over 19,000 fragments of glass, ceramic, metal and faunal material. All dateable artefacts were first manufactured before 1890, and the majority were made in Scotland. Detailed functional analysis is currently being undertaken.
CONCLUSION

In recent years, historical archaeologists have become more aware of the rich possibilities of examining the interconnectedness that occurs between sites, and thus between people, communities and countries as a result of processes of globalisation. Indeed, it is now generally accepted that historical archaeological analyses must be multiscale in nature, in that they consider both the situational nuances and global dimensions of a site. Future historical archaeological research at St Lawrence will focus on additional archaeological features identified within the wider settlement landscape in order to explore local, regional and global connections in Queensland from the mid-nineteenth century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my PhD supervisor Jon Prangnell (The University of Queensland), as well as Peter Davies (La Trobe University) for feedback regarding this paper and my doctoral research more generally. I would also like to thank Gordon Grimwade and Karen Murphy for their helpful, critical feedback on this paper. Thanks are also due to the cohort of friends, family, undergraduate and fellow postgraduate archaeology students who generously volunteered their time to assist with fieldwork – your help was invaluable and greatly appreciated. I would also like to acknowledge the funding contribution of The University of Queensland’s School of Social Science Postgraduate Studies Committee.

REFERENCES


BRISBANE COURIER 10 August 1878:6, 23 May 1893:5.


LEEDECKER, C. 1994 ‘Discard Behaviour on Domestic Historic Sites: Evaluation of Contexts for the Interpretation of Figure 5: Ceramic and glass artefacts exposed during excavations.


*MORNING BULLETIN* 12 April 1900:3.


QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT GAZETTE 1863, volume 4.

QUEENSLAND STATE ARCHIVES 1863 Map – Town site of St Lawrence. Item ID: 623797.

*ROCKHAMPTON BULLETIN* 7 June 1864:3.

