Dining at the Chamberlains: An Analysis of the Artifacts from the 2010 Chamberlain Excavation

Chelsea Gross, 2013

The Grua O’Connell Research Award allowed me to add to the evidence I use in my honors project. My honors project examines the social mobility of the household associated with Joshua Chamberlain. I define the Chamberlain household as Joshua, his wife Fanny, their children Grace and Harold, and the many domestic servants that lived and worked in the Chamberlain House, now the Joshua L. Chamberlain Museum. Information about Joshua is everywhere. Historians have written countless books examining Joshua’s roles in the Civil War, as Governor of Maine, and as President of Bowdoin College. Finding information about the other members of the Chamberlain household is the challenge. One reason to explain the lack of information about household members, outside of Joshua, is the concept of historical silencing. Both structural and intentional, historians have told Joshua’s story over and over. I returned to primary sources of evidence, to recast Joshua’s story into a story of the Chamberlain household.

Gender archaeology allows me to overcome the lack of information about the majority of Chamberlain household members. Gender archaeologists employ different types of evidence to study the life of silenced populations in history. To this end, I also use many different types of evidence. First, I use the archaeological evidence uncovered in the 2010 excavation of 4 test pits around the Chamberlain House. Second, I use the architectural evidence of the Chamberlain House to understand the many constructions that took place with the structure. Third, I use government documents such as census records and passports to understand how the members of the Chamberlain household were reported in official public documents. Finally, I use letters among members of the Chamberlain household to understand more of their daily stories.

The Grua O’Connell Research Award directly contributed to the archival evidence I was able to use in my honors project. The award allowed me to travel to Harvard University’s Radcliffe College Special Collections to read the Chamberlain-Adams Collection that keeps many of the letters between members of the Chamberlain household. The trip was productive. The letters in a collection did hold information about Fanny, Grace and Harold, and some of the domestic servants that is not found in the historical record any other collection of letters I had read.

The analysis in my honors project suggests that the Chamberlain household’s rise in fame and income after the Civil War enabled and required the purchase of new items and a new presentation of self. The story of the Chamberlain household does not stop at Joshua. An entire household contributed to the shift from a household of a middle-class status to a household of an upper-class status. Adding to this story allows the more silenced members of the household to have a role in the historical record.

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