

Industrial Archaeology with Traditional Methodology: A Case Study of Early European Copper Mining in Upper Michigan

Larry Buhr

University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon SK S7N 5E8

ABSTRACT

The realm of Industrial Archaeology is becoming increasingly accepted as a legitimate subfield of traditional archaeology, particularly when it can be demonstrated that excavation can be added to a methodology originally concerned only with description of extant structures and machinery. An example of this application is work that has been done at the Ohio Trap Rock copper mine and processing site in Upper Michigan from 1993 to 1995. This site represents an early infusion of European/Cornish mining technology, transplanted to a North American mining frontier in the late 1840s without modification, adaptation or, ultimately, success. By 1856, only \$7500 of profit had been gleaned from a total investment of \$150,000 and work was suspended. In subsequent years, usable machinery was removed and site buildings fell over or were burned, leaving behind only mounds of drifting green, waste copper stamp sand in an area slowly being reclaimed by the surrounding boreal forest.

The amount of information left at this site proved considerable however, once testing revealed that the green copper sands were in fact preserving underlying wooden processing features not earlier disturbed by fire or human reuse attempts. Excavation has proven beneficial in exposing such features as Cornish 'buddles' not before noted in a North American context, and in general explaining what can only be hinted at by surviving historical records. Through such work archaeology of the recent industrial past can be tied in with traditional methodologies of research while pursuing new focus areas with different feature and artifact typologies.