History beneath Us:  
Public Archaeology at the  
Lew Wallace Study & Museum in Crawfordsville  

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Since 2010 the University of Indianapolis (UIndy) has been working alongside staff from the General Lew Wallace Study and Museum in Crawfordsville in an effort to learn more about one of Indiana’s most famous citizens. Beginning with a single public archaeology event in September of that year, the Study has now hosted three community archaeology weekends and one week long UIndy archaeological field school. Additionally, funds from the university’s In-Query Collaborative have been used to survey portions of the Study grounds with two remote sensing techniques – Magnetic Gradiometry and Ground-Penetrating Radar.

The Museum passes on the legacy of General Lew Wallace, a lawyer, Civil War general, governor of New Mexico Territory, writer, and inventor. The property is governed by the Lew Wallace Study Preservation Society, a non-profit group that oversees policies and operations. The mission of the Museum is to celebrate and renew the belief in the power of the individual spirit to affect American history and culture. This belief is shared with over 8,000 visitors a year.

Two buildings are extant on the property: the Study built by General Lew Wallace in 1898 and the Carriage House Interpretive Center built in 1875. In addition to the historic structures, the grounds date to General Lew Wallace's ownership of the property and contain features related to his use.

The UIndy/Study collaboration began in the winter of 2009 when staff at the Study inquired about the possibility of conducting some archaeology on the grounds. Conceived from the start as a project in public archaeology, each year community members (including many small children) work alongside UIndy faculty and students digging, screening, and cleaning artifacts. Last May we hosted several class field trips from the local elementary school.
General Lew Wallace is an important figure in Crawfordsville’s history; from an early age schoolchildren in Crawfordsville learn about his accomplishments and visit the Study to experience something of who he was as an individual. Augmenting this experience through the discovery and excavation of artifacts associated with the General is a primary goal of the public archaeology experience. Furthermore, it is hoped that the work at the Study will better inform the community of the value and utility of archaeology as a scientific endeavor. In sum, the goals of our project are to bring the past into the present for the people of Crawfordsville and to secure the future of archaeology by building public support.

Advertising is key to the success of any public archaeology event. Prior to the first excavation in September 2010, a notice was sent to the two Crawfordsville newspapers, as well as a press release to the Indianapolis Star. Right away, public interest was piqued. While most visitors to our public archaeology events are locals, we have had several volunteers from around the state, including White, Marion, and Hamilton counties. In addition to print media, we have had success advertising on Facebook and on the Study’s blog.

A main component of the program is to expose ULIndy undergraduate and graduate students to field and lab work on a local site. Many of the students who participate are freshmen with no field experience. This project provides valuable hands-on training that complements what the students are learning in the classroom. Lew Wallace is an extraordinary learning experience, giving them the opportunity to do actual fieldwork very early on in their academic careers, and
providing context for the information learned in their archaeology courses. Students have commented how fantastic and unique it is to get to dig next to their professors and to get their guidance as freshmen. As one student commented, “The information I gained from the first weekend at Lew Wallace at least doubled what I knew about archaeology.”

Another component of the public archaeology mission at the Study is for the archaeological research to aid museum staff in interpreting the site. As a result, the research design is heavily influenced by the staff’s needs and mission. Thus far, their interest has centered on locating Wallace’s horse, reportedly buried on the property, and determining the exact location and shape of a reflecting pool known from historic photographs to have existed behind the Study.

Since fragments of the reflecting pool were visible on the ground surface and work over the last two years has focused on excavating portions of the pool that were not depicted in the photographs. Although analysis is still underway, our excavations have greatly enhanced our understanding of how the pool was constructed, filled, and modified over the past 100 years.

This information about the subsurface architecture and site formation processes illustrates the utility of archaeology to small museum properties charged with the goal of interpreting historic sites to the public. Any structure, whether a private home or public edifice, is part of a cultural landscape. Interpretation of the structure, and the women and men who made it significant, requires an understanding of context. What other structures were nearby? Where were outbuildings, gardens, and landscape features located and what did they look like? How did the property change through time and how does it differ from the period being interpreted? Our work at the Lew Wallace Study is beginning to provide the answers to many of these questions, and the story is much more complicated than any of us