Introduction to Project

The High Street Seismic Retrofit Project

The original High Street overcrossing was built as part of the Interstate 880 (I-880) construction project between 1949 and 1950. It bisects a historic residential neighborhood that was first developed in the late 19th century and was, at the time, on the periphery of Oakland. Due to the massive construction impacts of the retrofit project that would completely destroy a historically sensitive area, a large archaeological excavation was undertaken by Sonoma State University’s Anthropological Studies Center, at the request of Caltrans, to recover important information about the former residents of the area.

Brick pad from the back lot of the Stephenson family
Oakland’s Changing Neighborhoods

Given how this section of Oakland currently looks, with its large industrial warehouses and the imposing I-880 freeway dominating the visual and auditory senses, it’s hard to imagine the prior sights, sounds, and smells of an Oakland neighborhood full of garden nurseries and greenhouses teeming with blooming flowers. Yet in between the huge concrete columns that currently support the elevated highway, and under roads and warehouses, archaeological features such as privies and shallow garbage pits have survived the heavy impacts of modern urbanization. These features contain artifacts discarded by their owners that have allowed archaeologists to tell the life stories of three Euroamerican and Japanese/Japanese-American households from the late 19th to the mid 20th century and their multicultural interactions.
Urban Archaeology

The ability to conduct archaeological investigations in urban environments is extremely challenging, because these areas constantly change through demolition, development and reconfiguration of the modern landscape. The High Street excavations were even more problematic because the new I-880 overhead structure was being built as the archaeologists worked. Sensitive archaeological features in urban environments are often buried beneath deep soil deposits or by current buildings or roads. Exposing these sensitive soils and features can require considerable exposure using heavy machinery to get archaeologists to a level where excavation by hand can take place.

In general, the back lots of houses, industries, businesses and so forth have high potential for artifact rich historic soils and sub-surface structures. Prior to organized refuse collection, household waste such as broken ceramics, animal bone, glass containers, and personal items were often discarded in refuse pits, privies, or cisterns, or simply scattered across the ground in these back lots. Even after city collection of household waste was established, refuse pits were still being dug in the back lots by tenants, as demonstrated by the High Street excavations.
Archaeological Features

The discovery of privies and trash pits are important not only for the information they contained about the Pryde, Stephenson, and Orimoto families, but also for highlighting the potential for locating features when documentary and current environmental conditions would suggest otherwise. The discovery of the Stephenson privy (Feature 23), for example, underscores the fact that Sanborn maps (old fire insurance maps which often guide archaeologists to determine areas of potential sensitivity) do not systematically record every small structure. Also, despite the current environmental conditions of a heavily modified urbanized area, only the upper portion of the privy had been sheared away by the freeway ramp construction in the 1950s. The refuse pits discovered during archaeological excavations also remained untouched from road and building construction.

The artifact assemblage from these types of features consists primarily of the byproducts of daily life, or simply put, the occupants’ trash. Analysis of these artifacts provides a rare and important opportunity to further the understanding of daily activities, domestic functions, and the economy of less-documented social groups. The information these refuse pits provide about neighborhood families takes on extra meaning when you consider that most household waste was being collected by the city, taking with it the undocumented insights into everyday life of these families.

Feature 23
While rural properties still commonly used privies into the 1940’s, the use of a privy in an urban area, as late as 1941, is unusual when many households had sanitary systems in place.

Feature 6
Garbage disposal services came at a price and perhaps this refuse pit was dug as a free alternative by the Stephenson family.