The Young Men’s Christian Association

The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) originated in 1841 in England, when a dry goods clerk, George Williams, established a reading room where he and his friends could spend evenings in more elevated surroundings free of the moral temptations of the surrounding metropolis. The idea was brought to the U.S. in 1851 by George M. Van Perlip, a divinity student, and George H. Petrie, a New York merchant, who had encountered the YMCA while in London for the Crystal Palace Exhibition. The first YMCAs were established in Boston, Montreal, and New York City, and the first national convention held in Buffalo, New York, in 1854. By the turn of the 20th century, the YMCA was a familiar urban feature, with more than a 1/4 million members in roughly 1500 chapters (Boyer 1978:112–113).

Today the YMCA is a relatively innocuous institution. But its history is complex. The original intent of the YMCA was to provide safe Christian havens for young men alone among the temptations and vices of the city. But reformers also considered it a promising instrument of social control. As part of this mission, it began to take a militant stand against urban vices. For example the New York City YMCA established a “Committee for the Suppression of Vice” and YMCA lobbyists in Albany, New York, successfully campaigned for more stringent liquor laws and laws regulating obscene publications (Boyer 1978:120). The YMCA was also an integral part of maintaining labor peace within corporations. Most company towns had a YMCA. For example, in Pullman, Illinois, the YWMA was considered an important part of establishing loyalty to the Pullman Company.

Although the YMCA was aimed at all young men, its base was almost exclusively American born middle class men from skilled trades. The YMCA badge recovered from Pit 6 in the back lot of the Stephenson property suggests an aspiration to middle-class status, and also suggests that the paucity of alcohol bottles found in the archaeological features associated with the Stephenson family could have been a result of a commitment on the part of the household to the ideals of the YMCA.