

TITLE: The Phoenix Project: Archaeological Evidence from Decatur's Courthouse Well (9Da90)

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Introduction: In the late 1970s, Georgia State University academics and students were involved in archaeological excavations associated with the construction of the MARTA rail line. The archaeological materials were recently returned to GSU, and GSU students have continued the work started by their predecessors to use the excavated material to reconstruct Atlanta's history. This analysis is a component of this larger ongoing research project – named the Phoenix Project.

Purpose: This interpretation of site 9DA90, a filled in and covered well outside of the historic Decatur Court House, will determine the dates of use and fill date of the well while additionally investigating what diagnostic artifacts can tell us about the activities conducted in and around the Courthouse and how these data mesh with existing historical data.

Method: Utilizing the original excavators' vertical stratigraphic excavation layers of 1' increments, we digitized the archival records into Excel and constructed a typology to organize the diverse artifact assemblage from the well. Next, relative proportions of artifact typologies and conditions were plotted within the fill depths of the well. Dating methods for diagnostic artifacts included catalogue research for forms, maker's marks, and pattern types fitting in with existent regional chronologies.

Results: A distinctive shift in the quantity and type of artifacts found between the layers of 10'-25' and 30'-40' was identified. The lower level contained more intact artifacts with little evidence of fire damage. Many of the materials in the 10'-25' layers represented architectural materials and included a significant portion of ceramics and glass artifacts that displayed evidence of burning.

Conclusion: We have determined the well dates to between 1840 and 1916 from the historical records and diagnostic artifacts. Personal possessions, horseshoes, ceramics, bottles, architectural materials, and coins were among the many items discarded either intentionally or accidentally in the well during the time of its use. Material from two fires can be correlated with historical dates for the Courthouse's full (1842) and partial (1916) destruction by fire. As none of the artifacts date after 1916 and the well appears to have been filled in at one time with architectural material, we believe that the remodeling conducted in 1916 led to the filling of the well.

Recommendations: Though not much more can be learned from this particular site at this time, the project as a whole offers remarkable value. Not only does this study provide continuing enrichments to understanding the history of Atlanta, general urban construction, and the immense benefits of Cultural Resource Management, the project as a whole offers students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels a uniquely educational, hands-on, and memorable experience.