Introduction

There is no question that many more historic sites celebrate great men than great women (Miller 1992), but that is only part of the problem. Historic sites traditionally have tended to focus on the elite: the rich, the powerful, the famous. Carefully chosen to correct past imbalances, even such recently recognized sites as the Alice Paul house in Moorestown, New Jersey, which honors a leader in the women’s suffrage movement, and the Haley House Museum in Memphis, Tennessee (a tribute to the author of *Roots*), tend to honor exceptional individuals. It is the exceptional who inspire us, who make us proud, who reinculcate the ideals of the American dream. Nevertheless, there has also been some acknowledgment, in recent times, that famous folks don’t do it alone (Miller 1992:5). They have their slaves (the reconstructed slave quarter at Carter’s Grove, a component of Colonial Williamsburg), their Irish servant girls (recognized at the Martin Van Buren House in Kinderhook, New York), and even their lady architects (some attention is paid to Julia Morgan, the architect who designed Hearst’s San Simeon in California). They, too, get credit for contributing to greatness. While all heroes and heroines need not have attained national stature for their accomplishments (the National Register criteria, after all, also allow for sites “that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history”), they do need to be legendary. More often than not, local sites derive their significance from an individual or individuals who are seen as somehow extraordinary (or at the very least, eccentric), be it only on the local level: the house of the earliest settler, the house of the richest resident, the birthplace of someone who ultimately attained national prominence.

The search for significance, or even eccentricity, in specific individuals associated with a historic site may mask the site’s even greater importance as a representation of wider phenomena. In other words, the model of the great man/great woman site transposed to the local level may obscure our ability to discern a site’s more general significance, a significance with which more people can identify, and one that might stimulate our thinking about the past (and its relation to the present) in new ways. Walnford, a historic house site in Monmouth County, New Jersey, will serve as an example.
The Site

Walnford consists of a house, built in 1772 by a Quaker family from Philadelphia, a complex of barns dating to the nineteenth century, and a beautifully preserved grist mill perched on the banks of a sparkling creek. It is owned by the Monmouth County Parks System, which, in the midst of a period of unprecedented residential development, has forged an aggressive program to preserve "greenways" and restore representative historic properties. Walnford, considered the gem among the Park System’s 27 historic sites, was acquired in 1984. That restoration will not actively begin until this year reflects the careful planning that is going into the process.

In 1991, the Park System received a million-dollar grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust to complete a master plan for the site’s development. With funds from the grant, a historic structures report was completed in 1991 (Watson and Henry) and a cultural landscape plan was outlined in 1992 (Andropogon). While a small amount of the budget was dedicated to archaeological investigations (in association with restoration of the grist mill, for instance), it was not sufficient to provide for an intensive survey of the property, including the thorough excavation of resources identified. To do this more general work, the Monmouth County Park System entered into a cooperative agreement with Rutgers University under which three field schools in historical archaeology, to be directed by the author, would be held at Walnford. Discussed here are the results of the first of those field schools, held in the summer of 1992, and their implications for interpretation of the site. Also considered is the role of archaeology as a catalyst for seeing a site’s significance in a new way.

According to Park System personnel, Walnford’s significance lies in its association with the Waln family, originally part of Philadelphia’s eighteenth-century elite merchant class. This is in spite of the fact that the site was first developed by Samuel Rodgers, a merchant from nearby Allentown, who acquired the property in about 1730 and by 1744 had built a two-family brick house, a grist mill with two wheels and two sets of stones, a fulling mill, a cooper’s shop, a barn, a stable, and a storehouse for wheat (McCabe 1987:13). The next owner to make major improvements to the property, Richard Brown, added a saw mill, a blacksmith shop, four tenant houses, and several farm and storage buildings (McCabe 1987:16). It was Brown who transformed Walnford from a mill and accompanying houses into the small commercial and milling village that Richard Waln acquired in 1772.

Waln was a merchant trader dealing in a variety of commodities including flour, lumber, dry goods, sugar, and manufactured goods (McCabe 1987:17). The move to Walnford gave him con-
control of the means of production for many of these goods and also allowed him to take his family out of the city before pending hostilities turned into war. The Walns were Quakers; they sympathized with the British on whom their trade in great part depended, but they were also pacifists. The Georgian manor house that Richard built, which still stands in basically unaltered form (Figure 1), also may have served another need. A country estate was a sign of success among the Philadelphia merchant class and although Richard and Elizabeth Waln lived there full-time, they continued to be involved in Philadelphia society.

Richard Waln was succeeded by his eldest son, Nicholas, who took over from his father in 1799. He expanded the property considerably, acquiring five neighboring farms totaling 1,300 acres. Nicholas was more interested in agricultural production than foreign trade; he emphasized the grist mill to the exclusion of the saw and fulling mills, and expanded livestock holdings. At his death in 1848, his wife, Sarah, and their adult daughter, Sarah Jr. (known fondly as Sally), assumed responsibility for Walnford. The operation that these two women ran included the main house, a grist mill and a saw mill, a store that was attached to the west end of the house, about six tenant houses, a carpenter’s shop, a blacksmith’s shop, and a 170-acre farm (the rest of the land had been subdivided among Nicholas’ other children). The household consisted of up to seven people including, in addition to the two Sarahs, two or three servants and farm laborers, and two or three children who were taken in as wards. The elder Sarah was apparently in charge until shortly before she died in 1872 at the age of 93. By 1880 Sarah Jr.’s household had shrunk somewhat, including only a widowed Irish servant, the widow’s two young nieces, and John Wilson, a 26-year-old black farm laborer. It was to Wilson that Sally left the estate at her death in 1907. The Philadelphia Inquirer ran a front page headline reading “Waln Mansion Deeded by Aged Woman to Negro.” The deed was later nullified when another branch of the family claimed that Sally had been mentally incompetent during its execution and they were eventually successful in buying the property back from Wilson for one dollar (McCabe 1987:67).

In 1907, Richard Waln Meirs and Anne W. Meirs became the new owners of Walnford.

Anne Meirs was a Colonial Revival enthusiast. She de-emphasized the commercial parts of Walnford’s history and restored it as a country estate in the Colonial Revival style. The grist mill, still standing, became a decorative element in a pastoral landscape. The other mills were dismantled, the store was taken off the west end of the house, and a string of small structures was added behind the kitchen to serve as caretakers’ quarters. Anne Meirs was a passionate gardener. She filled the two-acre field west of the house
with vegetable gardens and created a terraced landscape going down to the creek in front of the main house. In the creek she installed a system of large, splint, open-work baskets with lilies flowing out of them (McCabe 1987:72). When Anne Meirs died in 1958 she left Walnford to her son, William, who eventually sold it to Edward and Joanne Mullen in 1973. During William Meirs’ ownership, the two tenant houses (including the two-family brick house thought to be the original on the property) burned to the ground. The Mullen's lived at Walnford until 1979 when they gave it to the New Jersey Conservation Foundation; it was transferred to the Monmouth Conservation Foundation which held it in trust for the Monmouth County Park System.

Archaeological Investigations, 1992

While the Park System’s project manager for Walnford’s master plan, Gail Hunton, had made it clear that the site would be interpreted to the Colonial Revival period (the period most accurately reflected by the standing structures), she was also open to incorporating elements dating to other periods for which there was physical evidence. The whole reason for doing archaeology at Walnford was to prevent the loss of any information on the site’s history that might be “locked” in the ground. The first season of work—the first field school—focused on the landscape behind the main block of the house, a flat open space, and the area immediately west of the main block which was the site of a store wing that abutted the house. A total of 40 5-by-5-foot excavation units (1,000 square feet) and 18 2.5-by-5-foot excavation units (225 square feet) were excavated in these two areas. Only those results from the units relating to the landscape behind the house will be discussed here.

No evidence was found behind the main block for an eighteenth-century ornamental garden. The yard had never been terraced. There was no pattern of pathways dating to this period; there were no flower beds or hedge rows or fence lines. Richard and Elizabeth Waln apparently did not have a garden behind their house unless it was very close to the foundations, an area that was bulldozed in the 1950s. More likely, there was a kitchen garden outside the kitchen door (personal communication, Elizabeth McLean, 1992). According to Frederick Tolles, author of the standard work on Philadelphia’s Quaker merchant class, the “unpretentious villas of the less opulent merchants” (and he includes the Walns in this group) stood “in the midst of natural surroundings modified only by the presence of a few shrubs and a kitchen garden” (Tolles 1963:134).

By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, however, the landscape behind the main block had been transformed. A parterre in the shape of a figure-eight and two triangles was found in the
middle of the yard about 40 feet back from the house (Figure 2). The parterre appeared to be connected to additional planting beds closer to the house which were edged in at least one area with upright roof slates (a practice described in an article in The Gardener's Monthly, published in 1861) and separated from the house by a paved area, also characteristic of the period (Highstone 1982:5). The parterre had other features of a Victorian garden—sand surrounding a centerpiece of some kind, probably a wooden tub (represented archaeologically by a decayed wooden ring), and a number of dibbers, an implement used to dig a planting hole and possibly used subsequently as a garden stake (Figure 3). Wooden tubs were commonly used as focal points in nineteenth-century parterres and it was also common to surround such features with sand (Scott 1870). The dibbers found at Walnford resemble the ones described and illustrated by Bailey in his 1899 publication, Garden Making: "...in the transplanting of young plants, some kind of dibber should be used to make the hole. Dibbers make holes without removing any of the earth" (Bailey 1899:42).

Although only six inches beneath the present yard surface, the parterre was indisputably Victorian in style and probably dates to the 1860s and 1870s. It represents a style, called "bedding out," that arrived from abroad in the middle of the nineteenth century, becoming widespread after the Civil War (Leighton 1987:242). Anne Leighton credits Peter Henderson of Jersey Heights, New Jersey, with the promotion of "bedding out" in the United States (1987:241). It called for ribbon bedding (a succession of solid colors in bands) and islands of carefully choreographed plants in geometric patterns. With its combination of circles and triangles, the central parterre at Walnford is reminiscent of this approach and the artifacts found within its soils confirm a mid-nineteenth-century date of construction.

The shallow depth of the remnant parterre was a complete surprise. In fact, the first thing noticed in this area was a wooden ring, which was initially interpreted as the remains of a central tree in Anne Meirs’ Colonial Revival garden. It was known that there had been a large tree in the middle of the backyard which fell on the house in the 1950s or 1960s. It was the combination of the wood ring with another ring of organic soil, the sand, the dibbers, and the triangles that led to the more correct interpretation. It also required the letting-go of what was expected to appreciate what was actually present.

We had expected a Colonial Revival garden. We had expected it because we knew that Mrs. Meirs, who used Walnford as her summer estate from 1907 through the 1950s, had gardened extensively and was interested in the Colonial Revival movement. We also knew that other Colonial Revival enthusiasts in New Jersey had
Figure 2. Archaeologically uncovered garden parterre consisting of a figure-eight and two triangles.
Figure 3. Dibbers recovered in the context of the garden parterre. *Photograph by Doville Nelson.*
used their yards to recreate what they believed to have been colonial landscapes (Helen Hamilton Shields Stockton at Morven in Princeton, for instance). In contrast to our expectations for Mrs. Meirs, we did not expect to find a garden in the backyard associated with either Sarah Waln Sr. or Sarah Jr. We knew there were flowers—roses, in particular—in the years that Sally headed the household, but her transcribed letters portrayed her as too hard-working, too consumed with the work of managing the farm and the mill and the tenants, to have conceived, let alone maintained, a fashionable parterre just the right distance from the parlor window (for sight and smell) with just the right component parts. We had assumed things about Sally that the reality of the garden remains forced us to reconsider.

**Sally Waln Hendrickson**

As so aptly put by Walnford's curator, Phyllis Mount, "No other personality associated with Walnford has captured the interest of those involved with the site as much as Sarah Waln, Jr., usually referred to as Sally Waln. She was rumored to have been a great character, an individualist and even at the end, a bit off her rocker" (Mount, introduction to "Letters from Sarah Waln Jr. to Elisa Smith" 1991). Seen through twentieth-century sensibilities, the mostly unmarried Sally (her husband, Jacob Hendrickson, 11 years her junior, died after only two years of marriage) appears rather extraordinary for a woman of her era. Her portrait, believed to date to the time of her marriage (when she would have been 40 years old) is interpreted as rather stern (Figure 4) and the death of her husband, reportedly of blood poisoning, as somewhat suspect. Letters, written to her distant cousin over a 40-year period, (transcribed from copies in the library of the Princeton Historical Society) add to a picture of a hard-working woman who, especially in later life, shouldered the responsibilities more often held by men and had less and less time to indulge in the more characteristically feminine pursuits. A close reading of the letters, however, in light of the archaeological evidence from the garden and recent scholarship dealing with Quaker women, particularly widows, in the nineteenth century, suggests that Sally was not all that unusual.

The letters dating to the 1830s and 1840s describe unending social visits, including trips to Philadelphia, and contain repeated pleas with her cousin, Elisa, to visit Walnford. Although Sally mentions the education of her various wards and other relatives and friends' children (an important concern among Quaker women), there is no discussion of the womens' struggle then being waged by Lucretia Mott in Philadelphia and elsewhere. By the early 1850s, the period immediately following Nicholas Waln's death, Sally's letters are a mixture of social trivia—weddings, illnesses, funerals—value judgments on sub
jects as diverse as the plurality of wives among Mormons to the tendency of men to try to tell women what to do, and business concerns, such as the hiring of someone to work on the farm, the search for a miller who doesn’t drink like the old one, the filling of the icehouses, and the slaughtering of the hogs. She also mentions her garden several times—a rose she thinks will bloom in December, a new method of starting fruit trees, and a day of pruning that left “my hand not very pliable.”

The letters written in the 1860s are much the same—lots of social events and even more death—from diphtheria in the early 1860s and later in the decade from typhoid. She talks more of her own domestic activities—baking, sewing, and quilting—but there is also the hard work of killing the hogs and making sausage, of going out into the pines for boards and shingles, and putting the “cheese to press.” In 1869 Sally supervised the replacement of the roof and had the house painted, activities that seem
to have made the harvest late. By the late 1860s she sounds overburdened with work and generally critical of the hired help. It is probably at this time that she began to assume most of the responsibility for running Walnford. She continues complaining in the 1870s, describing herself as “a maid of all works.” Her concerns are practical—the care of her failing mother and another invalid in the house, the progress of various crops, the replacement of water pipes that burst and the grist mill that burned, and the usual servant problems.

By the 1870s Sally had become very sure of herself and suspected selfish motives when her brothers tried to convince her not to rebuild the mill. She defied the remembered advice of her father and grandfather to never build a mill with borrowed money, looking anywhere she could for just that. She seems to have lost faith in men, even in relatives. Her life in the 1870s was composed of too much work and a succession of funerals. There were still parties, but she was disinclined to go and considerably less interested in the social entanglements that had taken up so much of her earlier letters. Once Sally had full responsibility for Walnford, she was all business, or so it seems from these letters.

None of this is unique. Recent research (Bacon 1986) shows that many Quaker women remained unmarried. For daughters born to Quaker families after 1786, 23.5% never married and 40% of all Quaker women were single in Philadelphia during the second half of the nineteenth century. Because many of these women worked as teachers or traveling ministers, they were not viewed as burdens to their relatives. Widows, in particular, demonstrated competence as heads of households. According to one scholar (Waciega 1987:41),

proptied women in Philadelphia and Chester County ... carried on complex business matters with ease and often with considerable success, both before their husbands died and afterward. They acquired financial competence not just from their spouses, but from their experience outside, and previous to, marriage. Furthermore, the husbands of these women generally trusted their economic acumen. Reflecting this trust, inheritance patterns reveal that husbands counted on their wives to act capably on their shared concern for their families’ welfare. Accordingly, many wives were well prepared to make the transition to life alone; they knew how to use their husbands’ legacies to support themselves and their families.

Esther Lewis of Chester County, Pennsylvania, is a good example. Widowed in 1824, she ran a 114-acre farm, discovered and mined iron ore on the property, cared for an aging mother and dependent kin, and eventually divided the farm equally among
her four daughters (Jensen 1986:84). She also used her farm as a refuge for runaway slaves and educated her children herself, one of whom became a well-known naturalist (Jensen 1986:129). Although Esther did not leave letters, she kept a diary of her daily activities during the 1830s and 1840s, the details of which can be compared with Sally Waln Hendrickson’s descriptions. Both women did all kinds of work, from sewing to processing butter to butchering, but both women also noticed the world around them. Esther wrote of “turtle doves cooing,” trees “elegantly dressed in sleet” and a beautiful butterfly “with dark spotted wings edged with pale yellow” (Jensen 1986:140). Like Sally, for whom the aesthetic pleasure of a garden parterre was worth the work, Esther also treasured beauty in her everyday existence.

**Woman’s Work**

It is evident that these competent women were very complex and their gender identity does not seem to fit any of the existing models. These were not merely women shouldering the responsibilities of men in their absence. Their work seems to have spanned spheres that since the Industrial Age have been compartmentalized as either men’s or woman’s work. Woman’s work, in this case, included significant economic responsibility, the management of a variety of commercial enterprises (mills, mines, etc.), in addition to the management of a household. There were the characteristic domestic tasks—baking, sewing, candle-making—but there was also the making of butter and cheese on a larger scale for the market and the raising and slaughtering of animals for commercial purposes. (Jensen [1986] claims that during nineteenth-century industrialization rural women made up in butter what was lost as wheat, pigs, and sheep were more easily and cheaply raised in the west.) These women educated children, cared for the infirm, and indulged in a good deal of socializing. On top of it all, some of them preached, taught school, and practiced medicine (both Sally Waln Hendrickson and her mother were interested in “doctoring,” the elder having achieved a local reputation for her abilities to care for the sick and dying).

The reality of these women’s lives has only recently received scholarly attention. It has taken a feminist perspective (and female scholars) to notice how different they were from the gender model dictated by the “biology is destiny” paradigm (Gero and Conkey 1991:8). Writing specifically about Quaker widows, Waciega (1987:40) notes the “conventional wisdom that while men could make their way in the area of economic enterprise, politics, or the learned professions, women remained in the home. Within its walls they found both a safe haven and a paternalistic forum of confinement.” That Walnford as a site presents physical evidence of a different re-
ality contributes to its significance. In fact, the site’s real significance may lie in Walnford’s connection to Sally Waln Hendrickson, in particular, and to other women like her in Monmouth County.

**Significance on the Local Level**

The Beers 1873 Atlas of Upper Freehold Township, Monmouth County (Figure 5), identified 25 properties with women’s names, among them Mrs. S. Hendrickson (i.e., Sally Waln Hendrickson) of Walnford. While the historical and archaeological work at Walnford has done a great deal to reveal the complexity and competence of Sally Waln, these other women remain unknown. However, in light of the recent scholarship discussed above, as well as the evidence from Walnford, it is likely that Sally and the rest of the propertied women had much in common. Walnford thus gains significance as representing a way of life that was not unique to a fancy family from Philadelphia. It is a site associated with women who did work that was appropriate to their class in their time. Sally was not eccentric; she was one among many.

In a more general way, the physical reality of the site brings to life a part of the past that relates directly to an important concern in the present: gender. As Lowenthal tells us, “A past lacking tangible relics seems too tenuous to be credible” (Lowenthal 1986: 247). That women could have been so different than usually portrayed (but not so different than many contemporary women) requires physical evidence to be convincing. Sally’s letters—her own words describing an unfamiliar (and seemingly unfeminine) mixture of hard physical labor, managerial responsibility, and trivial pleasures—and her archaeologically revealed fashionable garden suggest the complexity of her life. The rebuilt grist mill looms as a symbol of her stubborn determination to replace the mill that had burned against the advice of her male relatives.

It was the unexpected discovery of a Victorian parterre that began the process of investigating who Sally Waln really was. A review of recent scholarship dealing with Quaker widows broadened the picture and made Sally seem less eccentric than representative. On the local level, Walnford is not significant because it is special. It is significant because it is one of many places where women were in charge. In the case of Walnford, they were in charge for three generations. Anne Meirs, the third generation, transformed Walnford from a commercial enterprise into a country estate. She effectively “hid” Walnford’s real past by destroying some structures (the store, for instance) and moving others (several barns and maybe the fulling mill). Like other Colonial Revivalists, she was less interested in the authentic past than in a vision of the past she could project onto the property. In great part, her vision remains today, but
Figure 5. Beers Atlas Map of Upper Freehold Township, 1873. Female property holders are circled.
there is the potential, based on the research discussed, to bring to life the previous generation as well. The garden parterre is a clue to another reality, one which included women—both the known and the mere names on a map—whose work was as complex and varied as that of contemporary women, whose gender identity seems to have combined managerial and physical prowess with aesthetic and social sensibility.

There is, of course, the danger that these insights are colored by the presentist lens through which we invariably view the past (Tilly 1989; Potter 1989). In this instance, however, recent research reflecting present concerns has immediate relevance for interpreting what were otherwise contradictory and confusing remnants of the past. Ideas about the malleability of gender identity, finally taken seriously in the present, illuminate aspects of nineteenth-century gender identity that have previously been obscured by rigid stereotypes based in biological determinism. To ignore these insights and continue to present Sally Waln as the eccentric character who ran Walnford with manlike capability is to perpetuate ideas about women that no longer pertain. To recognize the site’s value in educating the public about gender—in the past and in the present—and about a local history that included propertied women who have heretofore gone unnoticed, is to find true significance on the local level.

Acknowledgments
An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Allentown Historical Society. I am grateful to Jeff McLaughlin, the society’s president, for providing the opportunity to present my thoughts on the local significance of Walnford and to the membership for spending many hours washing artifacts. Thirteen Rutgers students contributed to the analysis of the first season of archaeological work. I wish particularly to recognize the efforts of Greg Archetti and Jim Michael who not only dug the garden parterre, but also did considerable research on nineteenth-century gardening practices. Two complicated and very competent women—Gail Hunton and Phyllis Mount—have influenced my thinking about Walnford in ways it would be difficult to define. I thank them for everything and dedicate this paper to them.

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