A Clean Slate: The Archaeology of the Donner Party's Writing Slate Fragments

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Abstract
Archaeological investigations into the whereabouts of the Alder Creek Donner family campsite yielded a number of artifacts. One type of artifact collected was writing slate fragments, the topic of this thesis. Why were writing slate fragments found at the Alder Creek camp? An investigation into writing slate in the historical record had to be conducted to address this question. The lack of pertinent research associated with writing slate posed a major obstacle, as it has been disregarded as a diagnostic artifact in historical archaeological literature. This paper addresses this problem by a history of writing slate and its uses, as well as including a discussion of precursors to writing slate, to provide a context for materials recovered from the Alder Creek site. It was first thought that writing slate was only used in the context of education, as might have provided a means of keeping the children busy during the Donner Party's snowbound experience. However, this research indicates that a number of other activities can be associated with writing slate; including messages and notes, record keeping and accounting, gaming and gambling. The writing slate recovered from the Donner family camp is analyzed here using the results of the historical overview of this material and a cognitive archaeological approach.

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The writing slate consisted of a piece of slate, typically either 4x6 inches or 7x10 inches, encased in a wooden frame.[2] A precise date range for writing slates of this type has not been established. Usually, a piece of cloth or slate sponge was used to clean it and this was sometimes attached with a string to the bottom of the writing slate. The writing slate was used by children in America in one-room schoolhouses to practice writing and arithmetic during classes or at home and in multi-room schools until the twentieth century. The writing slate was sometimes used by industry workers as well. Slate used for writing slates also had to be of good quality because of the thinness required. Report prepared for the Donner Family Camp Archaeology Project. Copies available from the University of Montana, Department of Anthropology, Missoula, Montana. Swords, Molly, and Dixon, Kelly J. 2006 School as Usual: Examinations of Writing Slate Fragments Excavated from the Donner Party’s Alder Creek Camp. Poster presented at the 39th Annual Meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology, Sacramento. Symes, Steven A., Berryman, Hugh E., and Smith, O.C. 1998 Saw Marks in Bone: Introduction and Examination of Residual Kerf Contour.