

## NON-WRITTEN DOCUMENTATION

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### I

The subject matter of contemporary social science – be it history, economics, geography, psychology, sociology or anthropology – is human behaviour. What distinguishes each social science is a particular aspect of human behaviour: history looks at human behaviour in the past, economics focuses on the production and exchange of goods and services, and geography, for example-, looks at the spatial arrangement of material resources and of human processes. But the social sciences also differ in the instruments which they use to apprehend their subject matter. Thus, written documents from the past are often considered the preserve of the historian, while anthropologists draw their data from field observations, archaeologists search for artefacts, and folklorists record songs and folk tales. Most historians, it is true, will concede that field observations, artefacts, and folk tales may at times provide insights not obtainable from written documents, but they seldom explore non-written types of evidence in any systematic way. Lacking the technical skills required to interpret this evidence, and already burdened with masses of written documents for which they have had to develop their own particular expertise, historians usually content themselves with research in written documents. Only an occasional acquaintance with other disciplines and the indefinite nature of the historical object prevent them from feeling totally at ease with this partitioning of sources.

The historian's predilection for written documents stems from tradition and arbitrarily constrains the range of potential sources. Historical evidence is wherever it may be found and thus an explicitly systematic survey of sources must deal with non-written as well as with written documentation. Non-written sources have been used with profit by other disciplines, which have gradually evolved techniques to deal with them and which have gathered from them evidence not obtainable in any other fashion. For the southwestern region of Ontario, such material is plentiful and very diverse. Besides the non-written two-dimensional sources – maps, plans, charts, atlases, pictures, drawings, photographs, films – which historians sometimes use, there exists a wealth of three-dimensional sources which have provided archaeologists and other students of material culture with a fascinating, if cumbersome, record

of past life in the area. These range from classical. Indian artefacts (arrowheads, pottery shards, stone tools, and ritual objects such as face masks), through the physical records of the pioneer period (agricultural implements, buildings, dress, and housewares), to more recent testimony on life and work in an industrial milieu (plants and machines), and even to the remnants of the domestic surroundings of the "common" and the "uncommon" population. The alteration of the landscape itself tells a valuable story.

How can this voluminous and heterogeneous material be approached by scholars who are untrained in its use? How can it even be assessed within the compass of a single paper? Few pieces of historical literature offer direction in an explicit fashion. Of course, historians often "set the scene" for their story by describing landscapes and physical milieux, but these descriptions merely provide the "reconstituted" stage upon which the action, which has been pieced together *from* written sources, takes place. Sometimes this "reconstituted stage" has a direct bearing on the action. The French scholars of the Annales school have long heeded Lucien Febvre's 1933 call for a history "...qui s'édifie, sans exclusion, avec tout ce que l'ingéniosité des hommes peut inventer et combiner pour suppléer au silence des textes, aux ravages de l'oubli ...";<sup>1</sup> they have woven complex accounts of the interplay of landscape, biological man, Homo oeconomicus, and cultural man. Besides the classic regional monographs of Pierre Goubert<sup>2</sup> and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie,<sup>3</sup> one may cite Robert Mandrou's Introduction To Modern France, which recreates the psychological universe of sixteenth-century Frenchmen by describing the pervasive influence of nature upon their lives, from the daily cycle of light and darkness to the psychic conditioning that their living quarters – small, cold, dark, and smoky – exerted upon them.<sup>4</sup> Philippe Ariès, in his Centuries of Childhood, devotes chapters to dress and toys as evidence of the way in which adults looked upon childhood and draws many of his sources from iconography.<sup>5</sup> Others have focused upon technological change – often more easily grasped in its three-dimensional embodiments than in written accounts – as a primary factor in the rise of industrial

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<sup>1</sup> Lucien Febvre, Combats pour l'histoire (Paris: Armand Colin, 1953), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Goubert, Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 1730, contribution à l'histoire de la France au XVIIe siècle (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, The Peasants of Languedoc (Urbana; University of Illinois Press, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Mandrou, Introduction to Modern France 1500-1640: An Essay in Historical Psychology (London: Edward Arnold, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Ariès, Centuries of Childhood (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972).

society in the western world.<sup>6</sup> In a narrower context, archaeological work on colonial North America has contributed to a better understanding of lifestyles and social order, either explicitly as in the case of Plymouth colony and New England in general,<sup>7</sup> or implicitly, as with the Louisbourg reconstitution.

Yet the problem remains of providing some method of approach to sources which traditional historical method has left to the care of other disciplines. Even recent historiographical discussions, when they call for systematic analysis of unwritten sources, do not propose conceptual strategies in dealing with them.<sup>8</sup> One therefore has to turn to other disciplines and seek in their methodology those elements which may suggest a conceptual framework appropriate to the task at hand. I have selected for examination those social sciences that have acquired some expertise in the use of non-written records: geography, folklore, and archaeology.

Geography has been included in this category because it makes use of graphic information such as maps and charts not only as a method of presentation, but also as sources. Depending on the quality of the sources, maps, for example, may be used to document the evolution of settlement in a far more comprehensive manner than available written documentation. Maps are also used by geographers to reveal much about surveying methods, about what contemporaries judged to be important information, in other words, about the methods and the content of perceptions of the environment at various times.

But for geographers maps are only one source of documentation; furthermore, the information they contain can, often be verified through other sources. Historical geography, then, did not have to develop a specific methodological expertise grounded in the particular form of its sources. For that reason it has offered little, to this author at least, in the way of methodological contribution in the use of non-written documentation.

Folklore and archaeology, on the other hand, are directly concerned with the study of non-written documentation. They have some methods in common in dealing, with their sources: they emphasize the spatial distribution of their material, their structural and functional affinities; both study the horizontal (spatial) and the vertical (historical) interrelationships of their data and infer their conclusions from their

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<sup>6</sup> David S. Landes, The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> John Derros, Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); E.S. Dethlefsen and J. Deetz, "Death's Heads, Cherubs and Willow Trees: Experimental Archaeology in Colonial Cemeteries," American Antiquity 31 (1966): 502-10.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Frangois Furet, "Quantitative History," Daedalus 100 (1971): 156.

sources through analogy with processes perceivable today, such as diffusion and adaptation. The purpose both of folklore and of archaeology is to reconstruct the "culture" of an era, whether the term "culture" is applied narrowly to the set of ideas and attitudes prevalent in a given community or whether it is understood more comprehensively as the interaction of man and his environment.

The major difference, of course, between folklore and archaeology, is that the former still deals to a large degree with language even though the words have not been preserved in written form. Archaeologists, on the other hand, deal with material objects the significance of which is less immediately perceptible. The methodology and the taxonomies of archaeologists should therefore provide some guidance to historians.

Archaeology has traditionally been concerned with cultural context and with diffusion, two concepts taken from anthropology.<sup>9</sup> Its ultimate aim has been to arrive at rules concerning the evolution of cultural entities and thereby to establish cultural "laws." It has worked with a set of postulates about the horizontal (contextual) and vertical (stratigraphic) interrelationships of artefacts and about the relationships between the form of artefacts and their functions; these postulates are usually inferred from observations of contemporary cultures, "primitive" or otherwise, and thus analogy is the method used to "know" the "unknown," a particular culture, through its artefacts. Archaeologists rely on the quantity of artefacts and on the analysis of their attributes to draw inferences about cultural organization and evolution. Thus the high frequency of shared attributes of artefacts on a given site is an indication of their belonging to a common cultural context, while such frequency *across* sites is taken to indicate diffusion. Lewis R. Binford has criticized traditional anthropology's view of culture and *has* suggested instead a "systemic" view,<sup>10</sup> where culture is not defined in terms of common "mental templates,"<sup>11</sup> or as the "ideational basis for varying ways of human life," but as "an extrasomatic adaptive system that is employed in the integration of a society with its environment and with other sociocultural systems."

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<sup>9</sup> On archaeology see Walter W. Taylor, A Study of Archaeology (Carbondale, Ill.,: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967); James Deetz, Invitation to Archaeology (Garden City, N.J.: The Natural History Press, 1967); Lewis R. Binford, An Archaeological Perspective (New York: Seminar Press, 1972); and Alain Schnapp, "L'archéologie," in Faire de l'histoire, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), vol. 2, Nouvelles approches, pp. 1-24.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis R. Binford, "Archaeological Systematics and the Study of the Culture Process," in Binford, An Archaeological Perspective (New York: Seminar Press, 1972), pp. 195-207.

<sup>11</sup> See the use of this expression in James Deetz, Invitation to Archaeology, pp. 45-49.

Both views of archaeology, however, rely on classification as a prime analytical tool, for frequencies and diffusion cannot be established unless some criteria are set for determining the common characteristics of artefacts. For this reason alone the archaeologists' methodology should interest scholars wanting to use non-written evidence.

Yet archaeologists are still at pains to arrive at common classificatory schemes for material artefacts. Most archaeological taxonomies are based on the physical features of material objects, and since there may be infinite variations of such features, categorization is a persistent problem. One notable exception is the functional taxonomy suggested by Lewis R. Binford in 1962.<sup>12</sup> Binford proposed a three-tiered categorization of artefacts into technomic, sociotechnic, and ideotechnic functional classes. By technomic artefacts he meant those artefacts whose primary function was to help man cope directly with the environment. By sociotechnic he meant "the material elements having their primary functional context in the social subsystems of the total cultural system. This subsystem functions as the extrasonatic means *of* articulating, individuals one with another into cohesive groups capable of efficiently maintaining themselves and *of* manipulating the technology." And finally, ideotechnic artefacts "have their primary functional context in the ideological component of the social system. These are the items which signify and symbolize the ideological rationalizations for the social system and further provide the symbolic milieu in which individuals are enculturated ...."<sup>13</sup> Binford's classification scheme had logical appeal, but Binford himself found it difficult to apply to artefacts, because few artefacts could be classified unequivocally into one or the other of these categories, and because there was no deductive way of determining which morphological characteristics were typical of which categories.<sup>14</sup>

James Deetz has recently borrowed from linguistics and proposed a structural system of classification for archaeological artefacts.<sup>15</sup> His purpose was to define basic and universal concepts for archaeology in the same way that linguists have isolated basic and universal elements of language. Such an approach is structuralist in nature, because it rests upon the postulate that human action has fashioned

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis R. Binford, "Archaeology as Anthropology," American Antiquity 28 (1962): 217-25; reprinted in Binford, An Archaeological Perspective, pp. 20-32.

<sup>13</sup> Binford, Archaeological Perspective, pp. 23-24.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

<sup>15</sup> Deetz, Invitation to Archaeology, pp. 89-90.

artefacts from a finite range of possible attributes that have been combined according to specific logical systems. A given culture then is the physical manifestation of a given logical system; the logical system, or combinatory structure," in an inelegant translation of Lévi-Strauss's formulation,<sup>16</sup> can therefore be logically deduced from the intrinsic and relational structures of the artefacts it produced.

A summary of Deetz's schema will illustrate the potential power of such a type of analysis. Deetz put forward the concepts of facteme and formeme as parallels to the linguistic concepts of phoneme and morpheme. He defined the facteme as "the minimal class of attributes which affects the functional significance of the artefact." The formeme, in turn, was "the minimal class of objects which has functional significance."<sup>17</sup> The example which Deetz gave was that of the arrowhead. Arrowheads may be said to have three attributes: side notching, base notching, and the form of the sides. Notching may be

conceived of as an elemental attribute of arrowheads, and these elemental attributes would vary according to the function of the artefact. In the case of the arrowhead, notching of the base indicates the way in which the arrowhead was attached to the shaft, and arrowheads which would be similar except for the presence or the absence of notching at the base could be said to be functionally different. Similarly, arrowheads may be viewed as a basic formeme, which combines with other formemes to constitute an artefact, in this case an arrow, composed of arrowhead, shaft, feathers, cement, and a painted design on the shaft.

The structuralist approach to archaeology, however, remains in its infancy and it is hard to use in the interpretation of non-written documentation. What is the proper methodology for the study of the combinatory structure of artefacts? What are the rules of inference that have to be followed in making statements about a society from the evidence contained in the combinatory structures of its artefacts?

Few have offered answers to these questions. The French archaeologist Mario Borillo has examined the semantic transfers performed in the classification of archaeological remains and in the coding of contextual and stratigraphic relations for machine processing. Borillo dwelt upon the

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<sup>16</sup> For a good critical introduction to Lévi-Strauss, see Edmund Leach, Lévi-Strauss (London: Fontana/Collins, 1970); for a discussion of the structuralist concept of the "combinatory" in Lévi-Strauss and Louis Althusser, see Miriam Glucksmann, Structuralist Analysis in Contemporary Social Thought: A Comparison of the Theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Althusser (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> Deetz, Invitation to Archaeology, pp. 89-90.

relationship that had to be specified between the symbolic meanings of language – both human and machine languages – and the symbolic values that are expected to be found in artefacts.<sup>18</sup> In other words, language and archaeological remains both are symbols which contain information, and in order to "translate" the symbols of archaeological remains into semantic symbols, archaeologists must devise appropriate "codebooks." Artefacts, like words, are seen as "information supports" and their variegated shapes matter less than the information they hold.<sup>19</sup>

The "decoding" process which archaeologists engage in when they study artefacts is the same logical operation that historians effect when they study written documentation: the difference is simply that historians decode semantic symbols instead of physical ones. In this light, written evidence and non-written evidence may be viewed as a subset of all the potential symbolic evidence available to reconstruct the human past. The heterogeneous character of the information supports that are maps, plans, pictures, drawings, buildings, machines, clothes, etc., should not obscure what they have in common, namely that they all contain information for the scholar to decipher.

The problem of classification mentioned at the beginning of this paper is then transferred to a different level. It is no longer necessary to dwell at length on the characteristics of different types of information supports, just as it matters little for computer analysis, for example, whether machine-readable data are stored on punch cards or computer tape; what matters is to understand the proper meaning of the information stored on these media. Similarly, it should be more fruitful to classify non-written documentation according to its semantic contents than according to its form. It is hoped that the typology offered below will yield some of these fruits.

## II

### Types of Sources: A Semiological Framework<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mario Borillo, "Formal Procedures and the Use of Computers in Archaeology," Norwegian Archaeological Review 4 (1971): 2-27.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of information supports see Jacques Arsac, La science informatique (Paris: Dunod, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> Since this section was originally conceived, I have become aware of a classification scheme which employs some of the same divisions as are used here, but without explicit reference to semiological functions. See W.H. Holmes, Handbook of Aboriginal American Antiquities. Part I: Introductory, The Lithic Industries (Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 60. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919).

The typology which this paper would like to suggest for non-written documentation borrows in part from Susanne K. Langer's discussion of signs and symbols.<sup>21</sup> It rests upon the differences in the "decoding process" from representation to reality which mark the various types of sources to be accounted for. The logical division concerns the presence or the absence of a symbolic message. The first category consists of what may be called, somewhat inaccurately, non-coded depictions. The second category contains coded representations, which I will call here "symbols" in a restricted usage of the term by opposition to "depictions." The second category is in turn divided into "intentional symbols" and "non-intentional symbols." These categories are logical categories; they refer to conceptually distinct levels of meaning. Historical sources may often be classified into more than one logical category. When that is done, however, it becomes obvious that a given source is being interpreted at different levels of meaning and it becomes easier to avoid confusing these different levels when "reading" it.

### 1. Non-coded Depictions

To the extent that representations purport to portray a given reality in all its visible details, their message is transparent and does not require a conscious recourse to a "codebook." In pictures, for example, forms and colours – or shades – bear the same relationship to each other as they appear to have when the viewer looks directly at the reality depicted in the picture.<sup>22</sup> Ambiguities of meaning stem from a lack of fidelity of the medium but not from the structure of the information itself. Ambiguities of this latter kind would only occur when such representations were also viewed as symbolic. Seldom are non-coded depictions devoid of any further meaning, but the point is that what they are supposed to represent when they are read at that level can be grasped immediately without any more than sensory processing.

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<sup>21</sup> Susanne K. Langer, "The Logic of Signs and Symbols," Chapter 3 of her Philosophy in a New Key, 2nd ed. (New York: Mentor Books, 1951), pp. 54-75. For Langer, "a sign indicates the existence--past, present, or future--of a thing, event, or condition" and thus usually calls for a response, while "symbols are not proxy for their objects, but are vehicles for the conception of objects [*italics hers*]" (pp. 58, 61). According to these definitions, historical sources would be symbols if one accepted sources as the product of past social systems; they would be signs if they merely indicated the existence of the past.

<sup>22</sup> There is of course a decoding process involved here as well, but it is general to the cognitive process and not specific to this form of representation; to discuss it would needlessly complicate matters.



## 2. Symbols

In this category fall those representations which require a "key" to be understood. This key may be provided or readily accessible, or it may not be provided but must be deciphered by the researcher. Hence the distinction between "intentional" and "non-intentional" symbols, since some material sources have been created for a purpose other than symbolic representation.

### Intentional Symbols

Intentional symbols are representations of reality which do not attempt to portray all aspects of reality but only a certain number of characteristics which are deemed adequate to represent that reality. They are intended largely for abstract cognition rather than concrete perception as is the case for non-coded depictions. Most often, the characteristics that are deemed adequate to represent reality are what their creators conceived to be the structural relationships underneath a given reality or the essential components of a process. Such symbolic representations either come complete with the codes necessary to their interpretation (see Figures [1](#) and [2](#)) or use codes readily penetrable by those for whom the symbolic representations are intended. Maps are a good example of this type of symbol. They use scales, colour schemes, varying thickness of line, geometric figures, and other cartographic conventions to render a given reality. The same may be said of diagrams, plans, charts, and pictographs.

The major interpretative difficulties which may confront researchers beyond the normal task of assessing the accuracy of such sources lie with those intentional symbols whose codes were not given but were assumed to be possessed by those for whom they were intended. The association of symbols with meanings takes place within a cultural framework which changes over time, so that meanings readily apparent to contemporaries may not be so apparent to later users. In this case, documents which were generated as intentional symbols have to be deciphered by researchers in the same way that unintentional symbols have to be read.

Intentional symbols may be treated as unintentional symbols as well when the researcher is interested not so much in the information which intentional symbols carry, but in the logic of symbolic representation which was used in creating such documents. Again, that logic is inscribed within a

cultural framework and may be used *as* an entry point to understand the values implicit in that symbolic logic. Present-day road maps, for example, seldom show the physical features of terrain, because these features rarely are obstacles to motorized transportation. Earlier maps were more likely to indicate streams and small rivers, ridges and marshlands because the traveller would have to cope with them. A comparison of road maps at different times would thus illustrate the evolution of the efficiency in means of transportation and thus the changing consciousness of the physical environment.

### Non-intentional Symbols

Non-intentional symbols differ from the two previous forms of representation in that they are symbols not by virtue of the intention of their originators but by virtue of the researcher's imaginative and analytical powers. Under this heading would fall that part of material culture which owes its primary existence to functions other than symbolic. That would include every material object involved in the work process, in providing shelter, transportation, and recreation. Since the symbolic component of unintentional symbols is by definition not apparent, some methodology should be suggested that will enable us to make some sense of that material. What social conventions, for instance, dictated the engraving of decorative patterns on the 1886 "Brantford Light Steel Binder" pictured in?

One should turn to semiology for guidance, since this is a semiological problem. Unfortunately, semiology – the study of signs and sign languages – is a new science whose rules have not been elaborated to the extent of the rules of structuralist archaeology. Semiology was, in the minds of those who coined it, the broader science of signs and symbolic representations under which fell linguistics, the study of the signs and significant structures of language.<sup>23</sup> Like linguistics, which has had more rapid development, semiology is a rather abstract science and it may well, at first glance, repel historians accustomed to what they consider "hard" documentary or statistical "proof." That surely is because they see no difficulty in interpreting the symbols contained in written documentation and often remain unconscious of the "decoding" aspect of historical analysis. The sense of security produced by written documentation comes from its univocality, or at least from its being perceived as univocal, whereas

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<sup>23</sup> For a treatment of the relationship between semiology and linguistics, see Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).

non-written documentation is more obviously equivocal. Non-written documentation should be analyzed in the same manner as equivocal written documentation: "internal evidence" – what the archaeologists call "form" – and "external evidence" – what they call "context" – must both be studied systematically and must yield congruent information.

That, however, is a rather crude answer to the fairly refined set of questions implicit in the categorization of artefacts which has been suggested above. Researchers interested in non-written evidence will await the further development of semiology with keen interest.



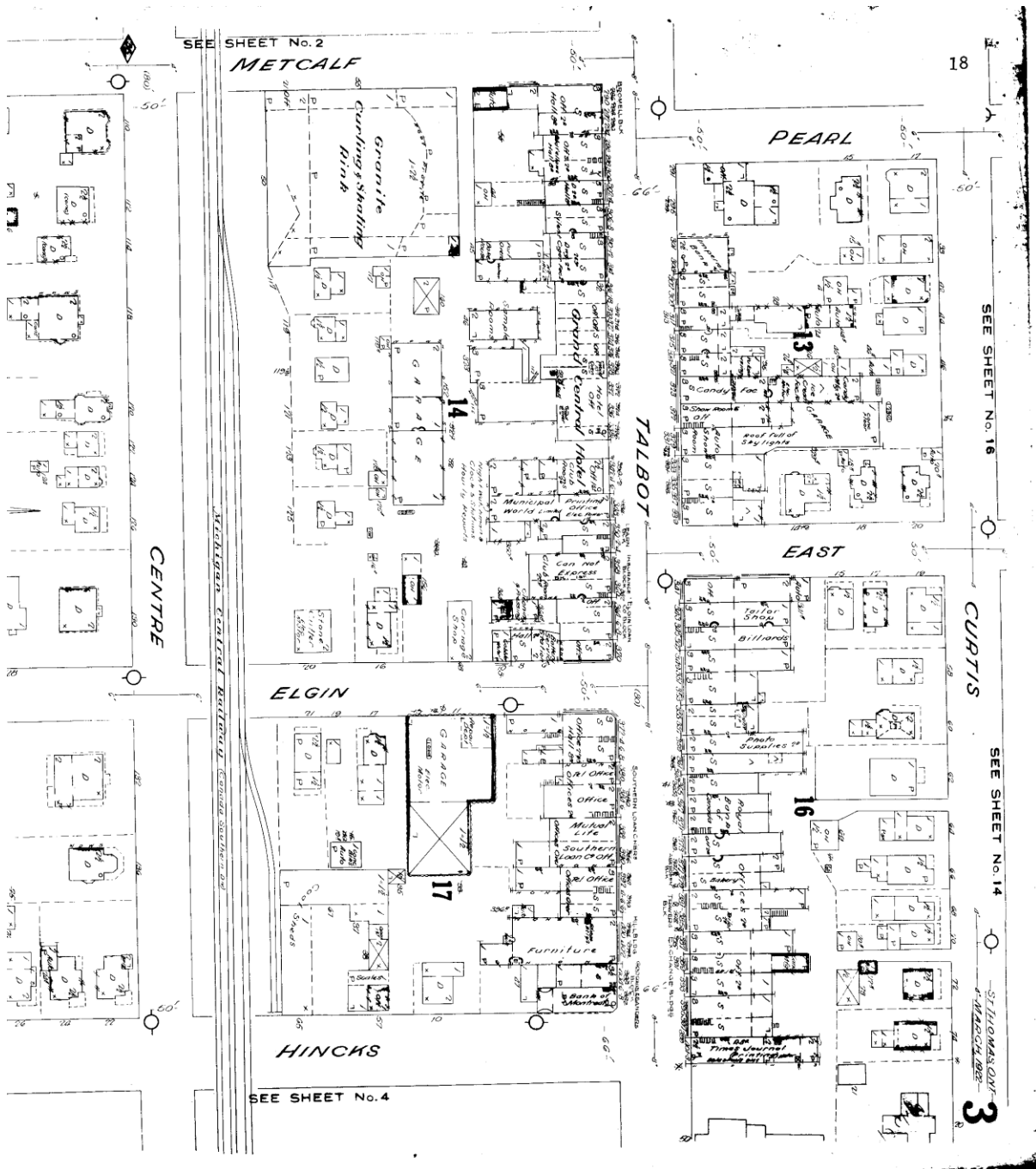
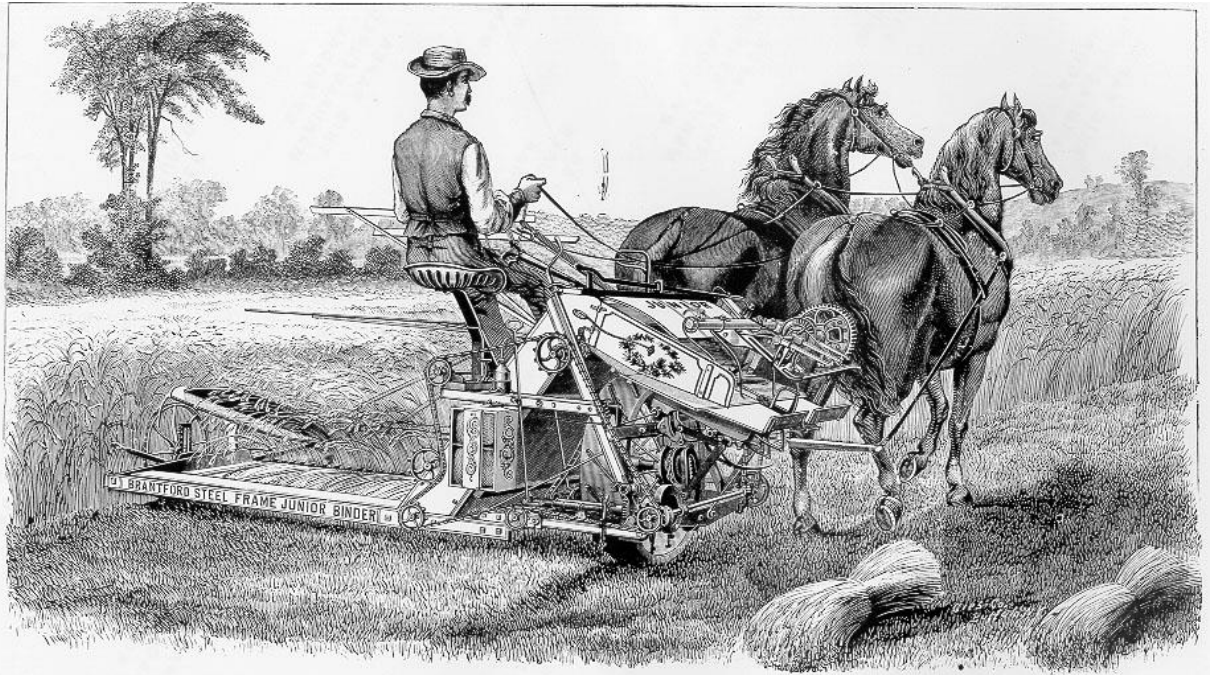


Figure 2. Section of fire insurance plan for St. Thomas, Ontario, showing part of main street. Underwriters Survey Bureau Limited, Toronto, March, 1922. (Regional Room Collection, University of Western Ontario.)



❁ THE BRANTFORD LIGHT STEEL BINDER AT WORK ❁

Figure 3. 1886 Illustrated and Annual Catalogue of Harvesting Machinery Manufactured by A. Harris, Son, & Company Limited (Brantford, Canada), pp. 16-17. (Joseph Seymour Fallows Collection, Regional Room Collection, University of Western Ontario.)

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[The rest of the paper was an inventory of non-written documents pertaining to the history of southwestern Ontario. It is not reproduced here]