Not all archeology is digging holes in the ground and screening for tiny pieces of a puzzle; some digging is done in the most unusual places.

It was thought that a great “find” had been made back in 1991 when I found a painting titled “North Bennington Iron Works” that was “done in 1865 by I. Sackett” (see Figure 1). Because of the North Bennington title, it had been assumed that Sackett depicted a blast furnace at Burden’s mining area off Orebed Road in western Bennington along the Vermont-New York State line and not far from North Bennington village. But when an all day field check was done on May 21, 1992, for evidence of the furnace, nothing was found to indicate any blast furnace ever operated here—no slag, no charcoal, bricks, or masonry. No large foundation walls or remains of a railroad right-of-way uphill behind the furnace site as shown in the Sackett painting. Nothing. So what was this a painting of—what were we looking at here?

As a result of the 1992 field work, which rejected the Orebed Road area as the subject of the painting, and studying the painting closer, similarities between locations of various features in the painting appeared to agree with locations of the same features in the 1869 map of South Shaftsbury depicting the furnace complex. Regardless that the painting showed the railroad and houses uphill and in the background, I assumed that it was an “artists convention” to compress the background, and therefore determined it to be a painting of the Burden Furnace at South Shaftsbury. I was so sure of that, it was published as the Burden Furnace in the original edition of 200 Years of Soot and Sweat.

Fast-forward to the fall of 2005. While organizing a paper on the Burden iron works to be presented to the Bennington Historical Society in January 2006, the Sackett painting came back like a bad dream. As old ground was revisited, the great 1992 “discovery” started to unravel. Specific details in the painting didn’t match the site, such as the placement of the engine house. The steam-emitting chimneys on the engine house in the Sackett painting meant that the engine house was obviously steam-driven, so why does the Beers map indicate a “Bellows House”—a give away for a water-powered device, alongside a canal that ran parallel to Paran Creek. Upon closer inspection, the number of houses in the background didn’t match those that had ever existed along that background road (Eagle Street) at South Shaftsbury. And
then more technical discrepancies appeared, such as when Tyler Resch and I spent a few hours trying to find just who “I. Sackett” was. There wasn’t any shortage of people named Sackett in Vermont in the 1860s, but the only “I. Sackett” was in Colchester, and what little we could learn of him didn’t fit the description of an artist.

Museum improvements in 2004-2005 made it impossible to locate and visually inspect the actual Sackett painting until late December 2005, when museum collections manager Callie Stewart provided a scanned image of the painting, except that it wasn’t a painting at all, but a large-format, 23-inch-wide by 17-inch-high framed black-and-white drawing. And it wasn’t titled “North Bennington Iron Works.” Inscribed on a rock in the extreme lower-left corner of the drawing (invisible in The Shires photo) was “Bennington Furnace, C. W. Sackett, del., Sept 1868” (see figure 2). It had nothing at all to do with a North Bennington Iron Works nor I. Sackett nor 1865 and surely, the drawing looked nothing like the ca 1822-1853 Bennington Iron Works complex.
along the Woodford Road at today’s Furnace Grove. And now it was starting to look like it wasn’t the Burden Furnace at South Shaftsbury either, so what exactly was this drawing of?

How many places are named “Bennington” in the United States? In addition to the obvious one in Vermont, there are places named Bennington in neighboring New York and New Hampshire. Are there others? With nothing more high tech than a Rand McNally Road Atlas, communities named Bennington were found in fifteen states other than Vermont (in Idaho, Bennington is five miles north of Montpelier). What is the possibility that one of them had a blast furnace at one time? Which one? The most obvious to start with was Bennington, Pennsylvania, the state that is home to so many blast furnaces, past and recent.

Googling “Bennington Furnace Pennsylvania” produced the village of Bennington Furnace on an 1873 map of the Alleghany Township in Blair County, in western Pennsylvania, about seven miles west of Altoona (see Figure 3). A comparison of a United States Geological Survey map with the Sackett drawing found a match in the topography, adding further proof that the correct location had been identified. An email to the Blair County Historical Society with a copy of the Sackett drawing attached drew an almost immediate response. They knew of a 1860s blast furnace in nearby Allegany Township but had never seen the Sackett drawing. They included a photograph
of the Bennington Furnace in their response (Figure 4). The photograph was contemporary with the drawing but from a different perspective. Despite the different view it showed enough to identify it as the same site as that drawn by Sackett. The email also reported that Charles Sackett was a school director in Allegany in 1864.7

Research at the Bennington Museum discovered that the Sackett drawing was purchased “with museum funds... probably circa 1946.”8 Speculation is that somebody saw it for sale someplace in the northeast, contacted the Bennington Museum due to the drawing’s title, and the museum purchased it since Bennington had a long history of ironworks.

The mystery of the illusive Sackett “painting” is solved, but the fact still remains that we don’t have any known photographs or on-site drawings of the iron mines along Orebed Road, Burden’s ore washing mill at North Bennington, or the blast furnace complex at South Shaftsbury. Recent deed research in Bennington and Shaftsbury has uncovered much valuable information as to who purchased what, when, and where. And we have the Beers 1869 maps of these Vermont sites, capturing what was probably there in 1869, but neither before nor after.

The Beers map of South Shaftsbury shows the furnace building, bellows house, power canal, charcoal kilns, and various roads and other associated buildings. It also indicates a telegraph office and even a house on the north side of Eagle Street where works agent John Burden lived with his young wife Jenny and four small children (three were born in Shaftsbury; two died there). Important questions still remain. How accurate was Beers with building placement and identification? What blast furnace remains lay quietly hidden only a few inches below the surface adjacent the former dam at the old Furnace Grounds waiting for a different variety of digging?
Endnotes

4 Callie Raspuzzi Stewart email to Victor R. Rolando, December 23, 2005, email attachment.
6 Bennington Furnace, Pennsylvania is now known as Tunnelhill, Pennsylvania. The name derives from the large number of railroad tunnels in the area. A United States Geological Survey quadrangle map is available, USGS Cresson, PA, 1977.