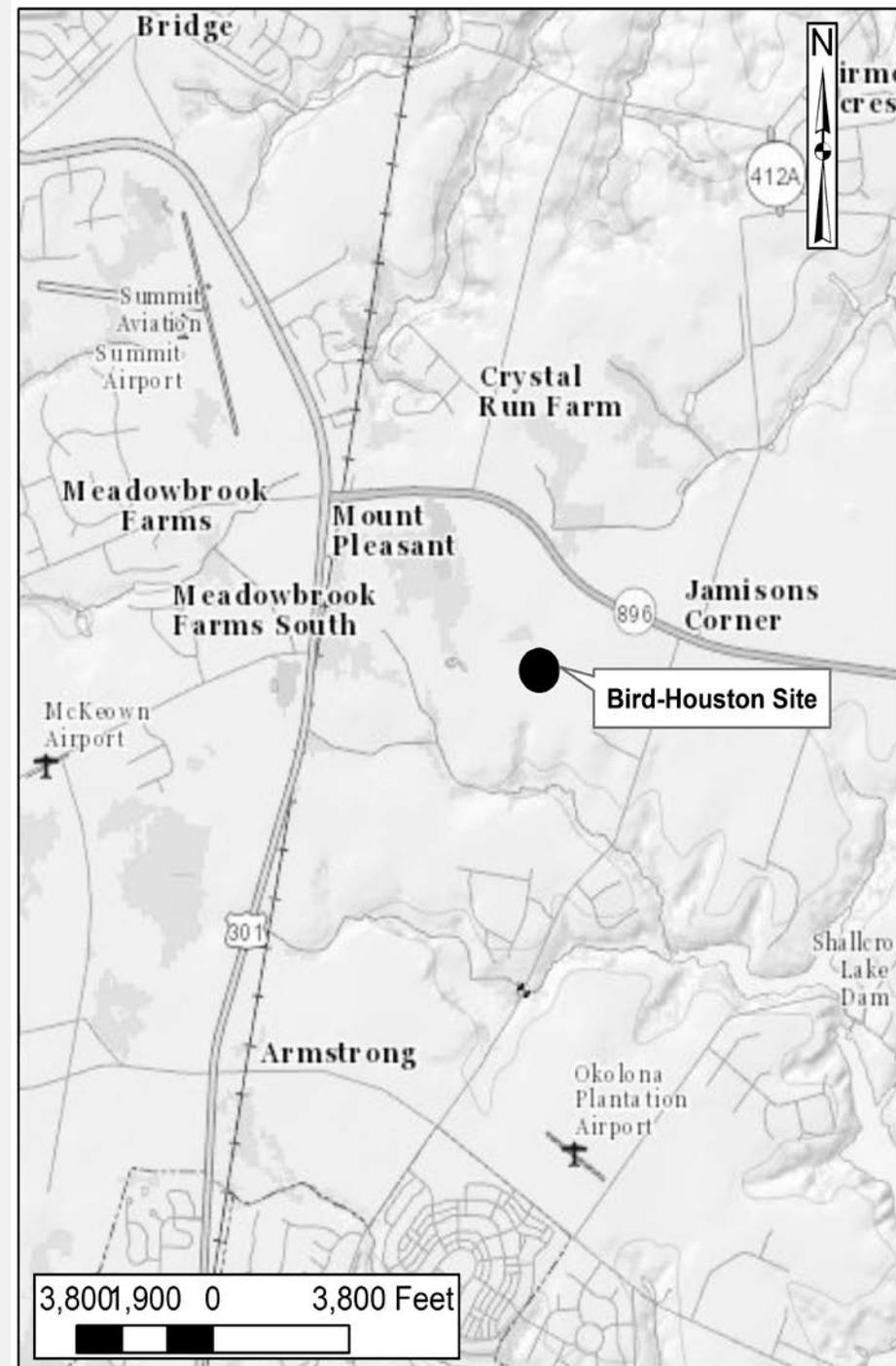


The Bird-Houston Site 1775-1920

145 Years of Rural Delaware



The Bird-Houston Site, 1775-1920: 145 Years of Rural Delaware

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[SLIDE] Between 2010 and 2012 the Louis Berger Group completed a Phase II investigation and Phase III data recovery at the Bird-Houston Site. The site was a small farm occupied continuously between about 1775 and 1920. **[SLIDE]** It is located in the north central portion of the 301 corridor.

[SLIDE] The site has two separate and distinct occupations first identified during a Phase I survey **[SLIDE]** and further investigated during the Phase 2 and 3 studies; Locus B was occupied from about 1775 to 1825, Locus A from about 1825 to 1920. The site's occupants included unknown tenants, white property owners, and, after 1840, African American farm laborers and their families. In this paper, I will discuss the challenges of interpreting the site, including the impact of clearing the site for plowing on the archaeological record, and discuss the site within the context of the local community. I will talk about Locus B first since it is the earlier of the two areas.

Nearly 3100 artifacts and animal bones were recovered from Locus B, about 660 from the plowzone and 2500 from the features. **[SLIDE]** A variety of ceramics, including pearlware **[SLIDE]** and redware were recovered. No architectural items were found here with the exception of a few fragments of brick, a handful of window glass, and a few nails.

At Locus B, the most important discoveries were two wells. The earlier well proved to be nearly sterile.

[SLIDE] The second, later, well contained hundreds of artifacts deposited when the site was abandoned around 1825. [SLIDE] Feature fill produced over 1000 artifacts, including numerous large sherds of earthenware and substantial portions of at least three refined vessels. [SLIDE] At the bottom of the well the wooden lining was preserved nearly intact.

Other cultural features encountered at Locus B were several shallow pits. One pit contained primarily artifacts that dated to the early period of occupation such as handwrought nails and creamware which suggested it was infilled long before the site was abandoned; however, the presence of a large quantity of colorless bottle glass might contradict that.

[SLIDE] A second pit feature also contained artifacts that date to between 1720 and 1820 and had a large cluster of rocks located at its center. A third pit feature was a relatively large, shallow, flat-bottomed pit that produced more than 500 domestic artifacts including machine-headed nails, which date to after 1820. The infilling of this feature, therefore, seems to have taken place around the time the site was abandoned or a few years later.

Locus A contained a dense cluster of 19th century artifacts indicating an estimated date of occupation from 1830 to 1920. About 7000 artifacts were recorded as a result of the excavation at Locus A, 5600 from the plowzone and 1700 from features. Architectural materials account for nearly half of the collection and [SLIDE] whiteware was the most common ceramic type. A large quantity of glass was also recovered from Locus A [SLIDE] include pharmaceutical bottles and [SLIDE] glassware.

[SLIDE] Several features were identified in Locus A. Feature 1 proved to be a backfilled well that contained large amounts of brick and a dense coils of barbed wire. Excavation of the well revealed it was originally constructed with wood cribbing. [SLIDE] During the late 19th or early 20th centuries, the well was further improved with the addition of brick lining within the wooden cribbing.

Two pit-like features, [SLIDE] including Feature 5 were interpreted as possible foundation or pier remains and may provide a location for the house and suggest that the west wall of the structure measured roughly 30 to 35 feet in length. [SLIDE] Another pit feature was determined to be a tree fall that was filled in with brick rubble.

The project findings provide a basis for addressing the question of the site's occupation and interpretation. The Bird-Houston site was chosen for further investigation because Phase I data indicated it had a long occupation distributed in two distinct locations. When a site is continuously occupied, the depositional material becomes mixed together and can therefore present challenges to deriving significant conclusions. Since the residents of the Bird-Houston site moved 300 feet across the field sometime in the nineteenth century, they conveniently separated the material from the two periods for us, allowing us to be much more precise about which objects were used when. To take full advantage of this opportunity, it is essential to date the two occupations correctly.

[SLIDE] The earliest reference to the parcel containing the eighteenth century portion of the site (Locus B) is from a record of sale for an adjacent parcel devised to William Bird, Jr. from the estate of John Vail in 1788. The next reference to the property containing Locus B appeared two years later in a petition to the Orphans Court of New Castle County.

The petition stated that the land containing the site was once considered part of John Vail's estate; however, the parcel was actually in the possession of William Bird, Sr.

A search of the previous land records showed no transaction for this parcel between the two parties, suggesting William Bird mistakenly thought the parcel was part of his estate. Although the petition mentions the parcel contains seven acres of wood lot and one acre of cleared land there is no mention of improvements made on the property.

Around 1800, the property containing the site passed into the ownership of the Houston family. By 1816, the site was part of a 14-acre tract belonging to James Houston, whose family also owned a large, adjoining property. James' property included "an old wooden house," possibly located just south of Locus A.

[SLIDE] In 1829, the estate of Mary Houston, James' mother, was finally divided among her heirs. James received the main farmhouse, which became his residence. The "old wooden house" fell to James' brother Jacob, who probably lived there for several years.

Sometime during the mid- to late 1820s, a house was built at Locus A. The new house was located on a swampy parcel adjacent to Taylor's Branch and Second Drawyer's Creek. The home in Locus A initially served as Jacob Houston's temporary residence while he constructed a

new house. Jacob incorporated the swampy parcel into a larger, adjacent 54-acre tract he inherited from his mother's estate. He built a brick mansion several thousand feet east of Locus A on a small rise on the eastern part of the property, near present-day Cedar Lane Road.

[SLIDE] The 1849 *Map of New Castle County* is the earliest map of the area that depicts the locations of the individual Houston residential buildings. Neither this nor any of the later maps shows a dwelling in the location of the Bird-Houston site.

After construction of the new family home, sometime before 1849, the dwelling in the swamp was used as a tenancy for laborers. From the late 1840s through the 1880s a series of African-American laborers, most with families, occupied the tenant house. By 1900, the entire property, both the tenancy and main farmhouse, were leased to tenants. Then, by 1920, the tenancy at Locus A was dismantled, and the entire estate was converted to a dairy operation.

[SLIDE] The conjectured location of the tenant house at Locus A was based largely on the presence of the two shallow pit features identified in the northwestern portion of the site. The largest concentration of brick and other architectural material from the site was recovered from these subsurface pits, from a tree fall, and the overlying plowzone. None of the brick was articulated within the pits and there was little other evidence to aid in determining the structure's specific orientation and size. As a result, the orientation and size of the tenant house is entirely conjectured. Brick fragments were not abundant enough to suggest a substantial portion the structure was made of that material. Instead, recovered brick likely represents hearth or chimney material, or the remains of structural piers upon which the building rested. The brickwork was originally laid with 19th-century sandy lime mortar, but was repaired with Portland cement in the

early 20th century. Machine-cut and wire nails found in high numbers, and recovered pane glass indicates the presence a frame structure.

Absence of a sill or foundation trench, structural building posts, and linear patterns of brick or stone, along with recovered brick at the site suggests the tenant house at Locus A was constructed on brick piers.

House and Garden tenancies, like the one at this site, were often built on piers for the purpose of portability. Farm owners often moved cottage dwellings about the agricultural landscape. It is unclear if or how often the tenancy at Locus A was moved by the farm's owners, if at all.

However, the later addition of brick lining within the well suggests that the tenant dwelling became a permanent fixture on this part of the farm near the end of its use.

The location of these house and garden dwellings within the agricultural landscape represents an important element in their identification during field survey. House and garden dwellings follow a specific model that differentiates them from the larger agricultural complexes in the region.

They are generally located on the edges of agricultural properties, either tucked against the trees or in clusters of dwellings along the road. Despite the distance of these dwellings from the main farm complex, they still remained within visual range of the main house and their employer.

[SLIDE] An examination of the relationship of the Bird-Houston Site to the larger Houston property reveals that the site is situated in this way. The tenancy lies on the edge of the Houston estate, tucked up against trees. Tax assessments from the period indicate the wood lot to the north of the tenancy was present during the 19th century. And given the vantage point of the brick mansion house on the hill, the tenancy was in visual range of the Houston family.

One of the key technical questions in archaeology is how things ended up where they are found. Artifacts are not usually found where they were left by those who used them, but where they were put by later occupants or landholders, or even neighbors using an abandoned site as a dump.

In the case of Locus B, the clean-up was probably carried out by the Houstons themselves, since they moved only 300 feet away and retained ownership of the property. The process may have been a gradual one. Once the new house at Locus A was livable, the family presumably moved themselves over, but they might have kept using the outbuildings, garden or well at Locus B for months or even years until new ones were ready closer to the new house. It might have been a decade before Locus B was fully abandoned and leveled. This would account for the presence of a few later artifacts, such as machine-cut nails and whiteware, on that part of the site.

[SLIDE] The circular pit in Locus B provides more clear evidence of the site clean-up. However, what was found in the fill may not have anything to do with what was stored there. The main item was a pile of about ten stones. No such rocks were noted anywhere around the site, so these were presumably brought from somewhere else for a purpose. Quite likely they served as part of the foundation for the old wooden house. When the house was torn down, these rocks were tossed into an open hole to keep them from damaging the plow.

The later of the two wells in Locus B must have been filled in after abandonment since the residents would not have blocked their only water source. The lower 2.5 feet of the well was

filled with sand but flotation showed that it did contain numerous seeds from weeds. It seems, therefore, that the well sat open and unused for some time, months or perhaps even a couple of years, before the upper half was filled. It was the upper fill that contained most of the artifacts. So the artifacts were not placed in the well until the bottom had had time to fill with sand, likely months or years after the site was abandoned. Most of the material was the same sort of mixed trash found in the other pits, including sherds of white salt-glazed vessels probably discarded twenty years before.

The well also contained at least 15 sizable rocks of the same general type as those found in Feature 4. These likely came from the same place, that is, the foundation of the house, and they were thrown into the well for the same reason: to spare the plow and the plowman from collisions with big stones.

Some of the features at Locus A also seem to have been intentionally filled after the site was abandoned. The tree fall was mostly filled with broken bricks. The tree may have stood near the Locus A house and was pulled over when the site was cleared. The resulting hole was used to bury bricks from the house foundation or the chimney. The other artifacts in the hole got there by accident, because they were in the soil around it.

[SLIDE] Also in Locus A, Feature 3 was a pit largely filled with what looks like ordinary domestic trash. Based on the artifacts, it was filled around the end of the occupation, or a few years later. It contained significant quantities of charcoal, likely representing ashes from the hearth. The trash in feature 3 fill does not seem to have come directly from the house. If it had, it

ought to contain more nearly complete ceramic vessels, and the artifacts ought to come from a single period. Instead, it contains only tiny portions of vessels and bottles, and artifacts that should have been discarded over a period of many years. This trash seems to be redeposited.

This information is quite important for the interpretation of the site. For example, knowing that the deposits in the features of Locus B were put down well after the move to Locus A explains the handful of later artifacts and keeps the dating of the occupation from being thrown off by these stray objects.

Now I would like to briefly discuss the community in which the landowners and tenant laborers lived during their occupation at the site, in order to understand how the site, and the people that occupied that space, were participants in the larger cultural landscape. **[SLIDE]** Looking at the distribution of archaeological sites during the occupation of the Bird-Houston site shows the changes in distribution and size of their community **[SLIDE]**

[SLIDE] and offers an opportunity for discourse beyond the limits of roughly drawn site boundaries.

Little is known about the Houstons. We know they were a family of farmers who occupied the same site for at least a couple of generations. They participated in the local community and married their neighbors. Much more is known about the African-American tenants who lived at the site in later years.

In the 19th century, the African American tenants of the Houston estate were part of a new and growing community of African Americans which became known as Mount Pleasant.

[SLIDE] Located in western St. Georges Hundred, Mount Pleasant was one of three clusters of African American settlements located along Summit Bridge Road (present-day U.S. Route 301). Although geographically separate from each other, the residents of these areas interacted regularly and eventually came to rely on the same institutions, such as schools and churches.

African American residents of the Houston tenancy had to travel several miles in order to go to market, attend religious services, and by the late 1860s, send their children to school.

For the tenants on the Houston estate, there were few local options for religious services until the late 1860s when a local resident founded his own Methodist church in Daletown, only two miles south of the Houston estate.

Education became increasingly important to the 19th century tenants of the Houston estate.

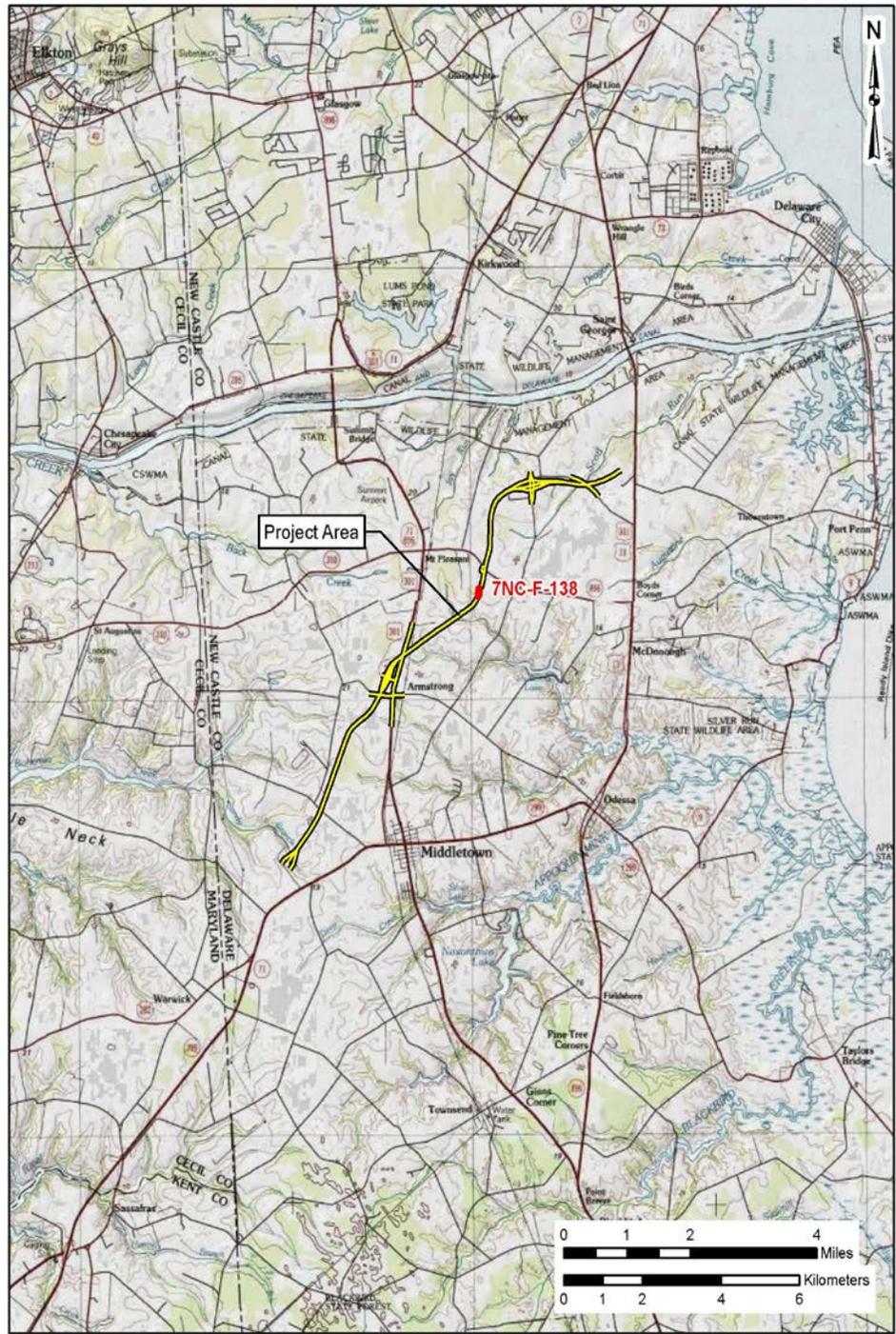
According to records, an African American school was established in Mount Pleasant by 1875.

Prior to that year, the tenants of the Houston estate likely sent their children to attend weekly classes in Daletown.

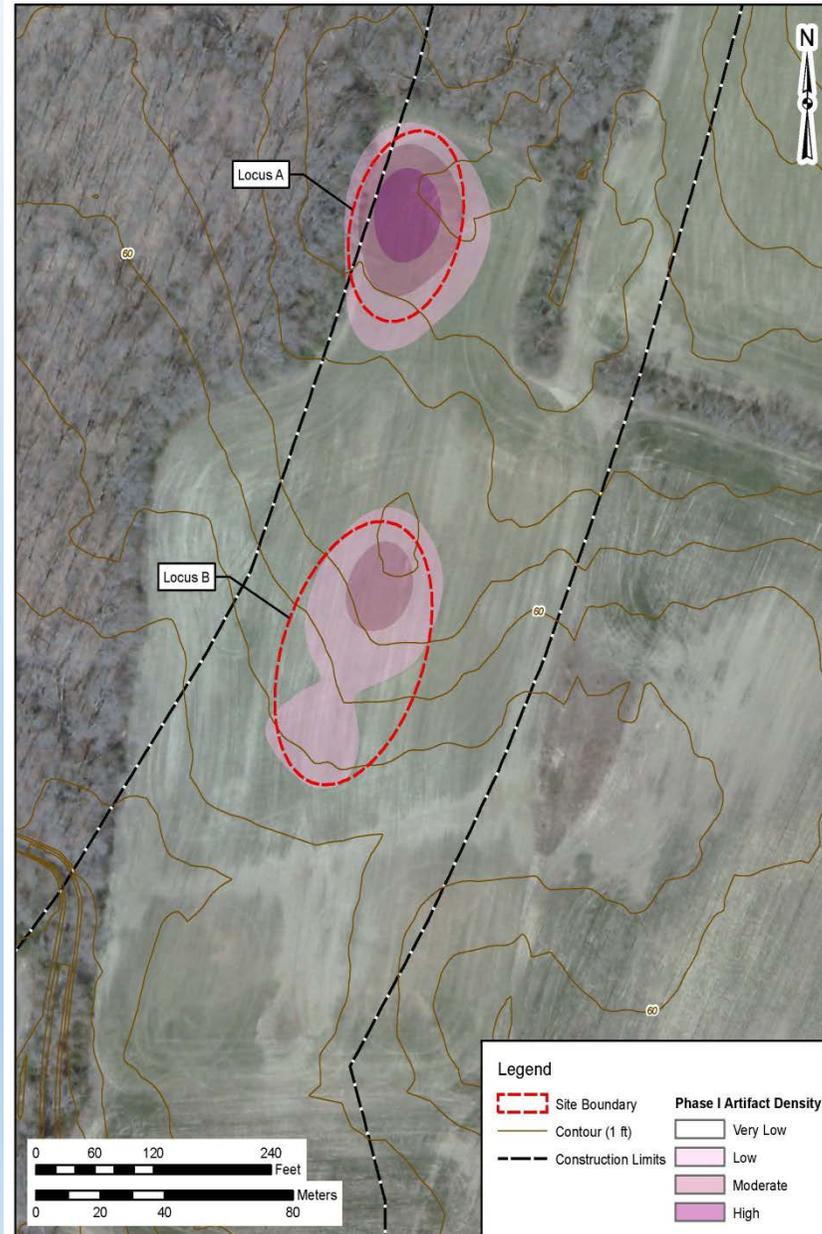
The Bird-Houston site demonstrates the challenges faced by archaeologists working on 19th-century tenant farms but also highlights the potential of these sites to provide valuable new information. Sites like these appear relatively isolated and are not clearly associated with a larger community in a geographic sense. They rarely include distinctive or unusual artifact assemblages that help to explain much about the site's former residents.

[SLIDE] However, by situating this site in a broader economic and social context, we can find links between tenant farmers, landowners, and larger communities. We can see how tenant farmers like those who lived and worked at the Bird-Houston site contributed not only to the running of the large estates where they worked, but also to the economic development of larger African-American communities and institutions.

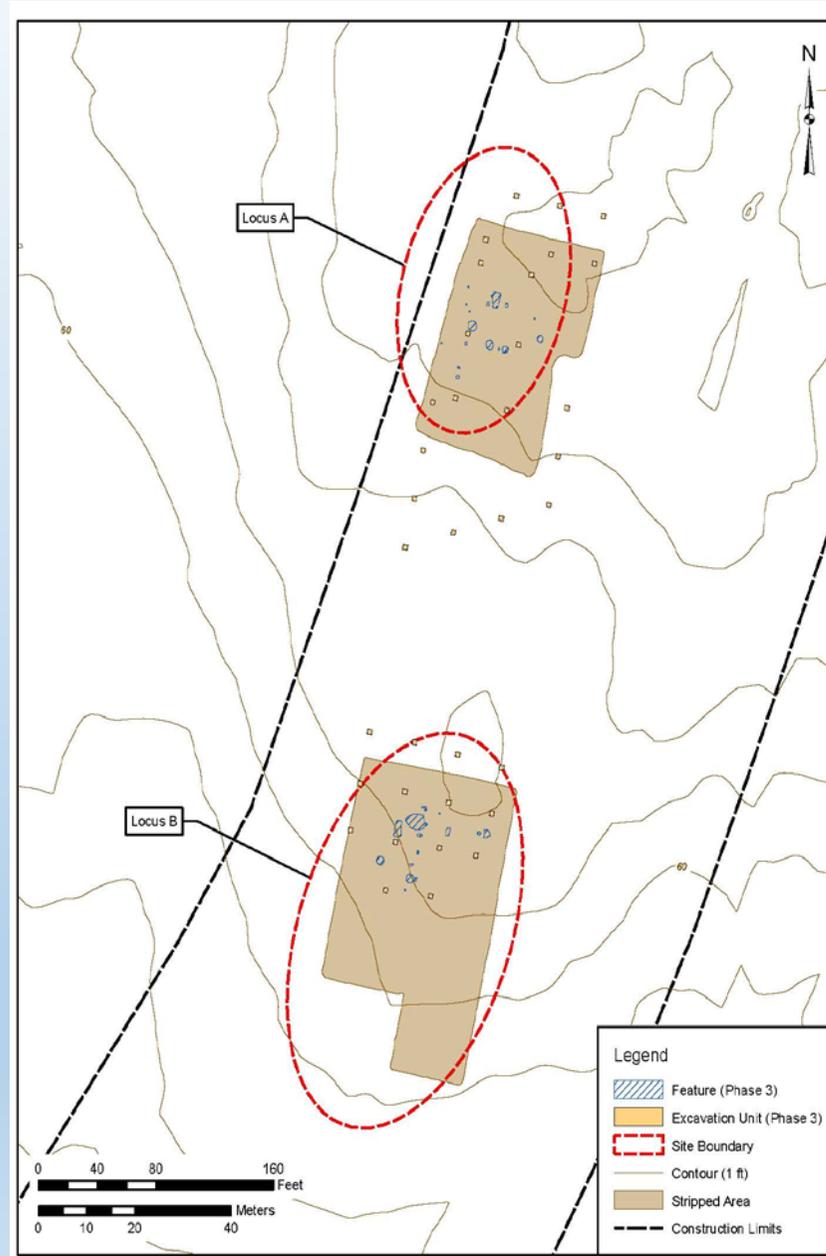
Incorporating information about the larger historical context of St. George's Hundred, as well as the prevailing types of architecture and uses of the landscape, gave us a greatly enhanced means of interpreting the Bird-Houston site by itself and as a part of a community of similar tenant families and landowner farmers.



Identification of Locus A and Locus B following the Phase I survey



Overall plan of the Phase III testing



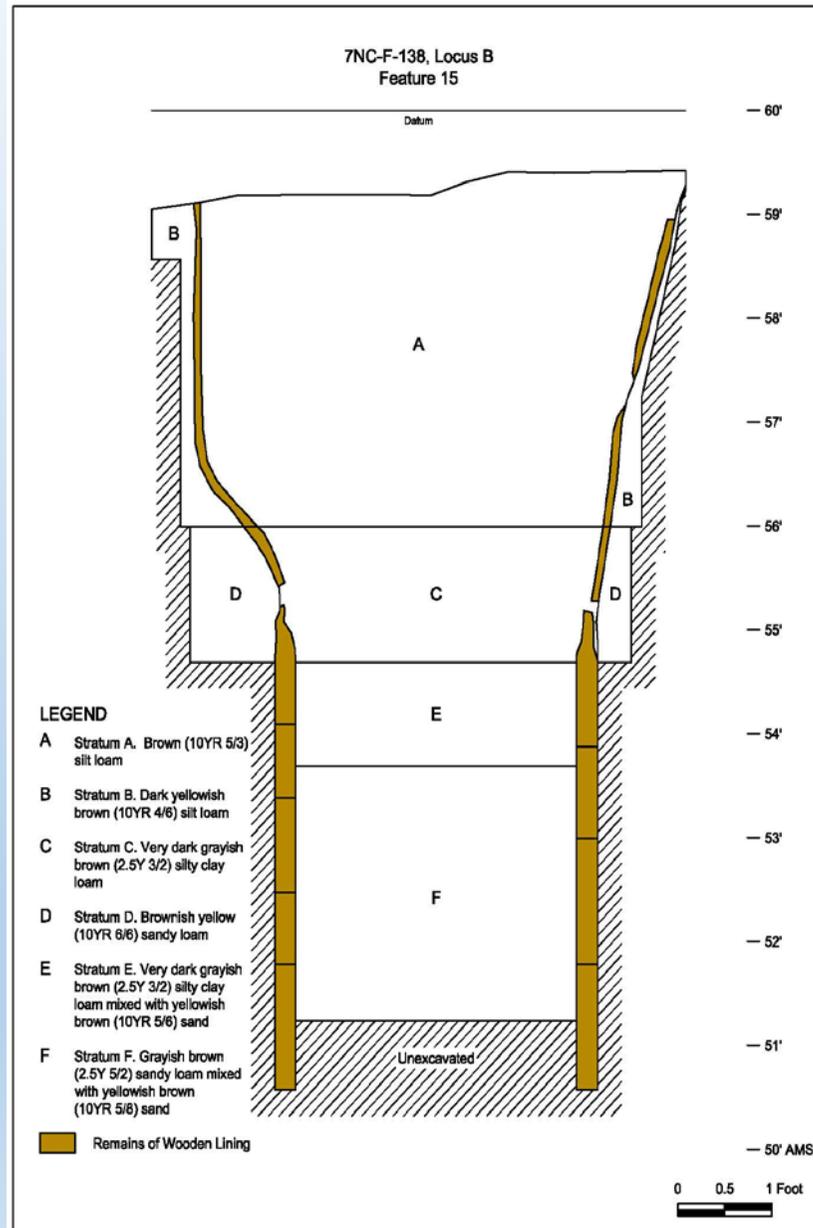
Pearlware assortment from Locus B



Redware earthenware sherds from Locus B well feature



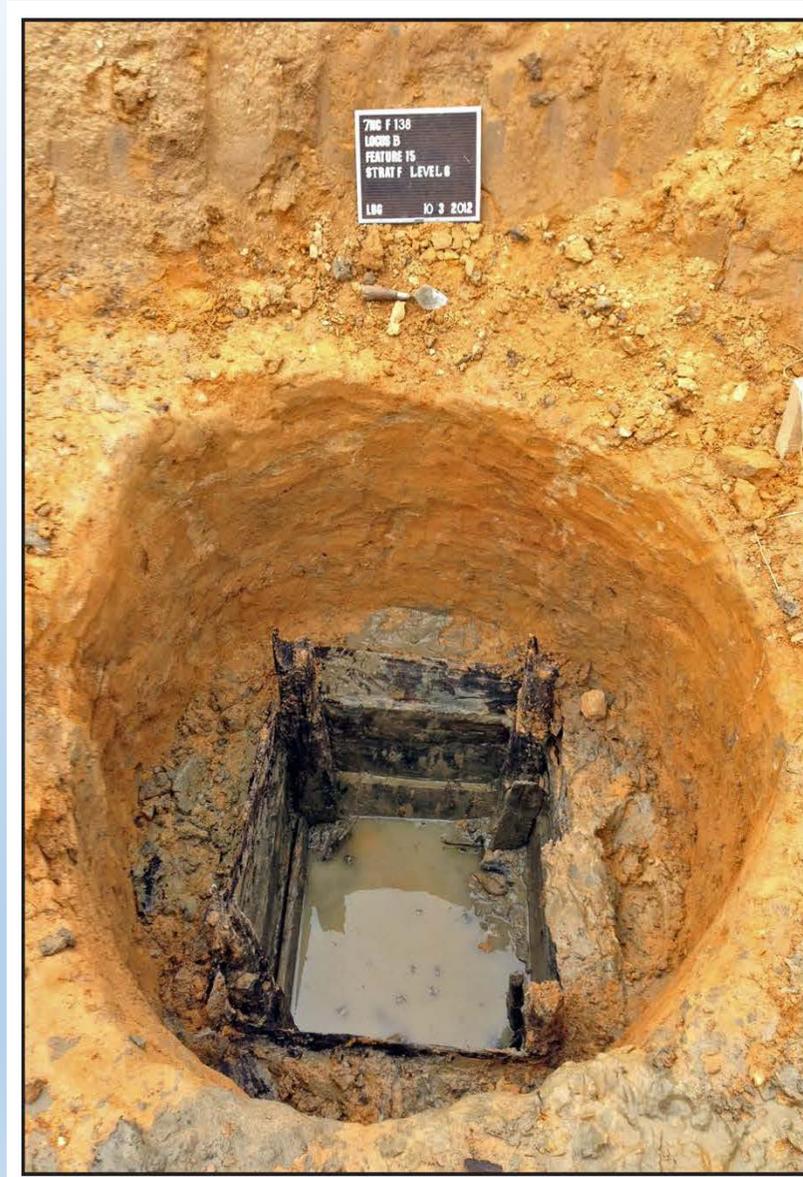
Profile of the later well, Locus B



Sherds of pearlware teapot and mug from well feature in Locus B



Cribbing in the bottom of the well



Rock pile in F. 4, Locus B



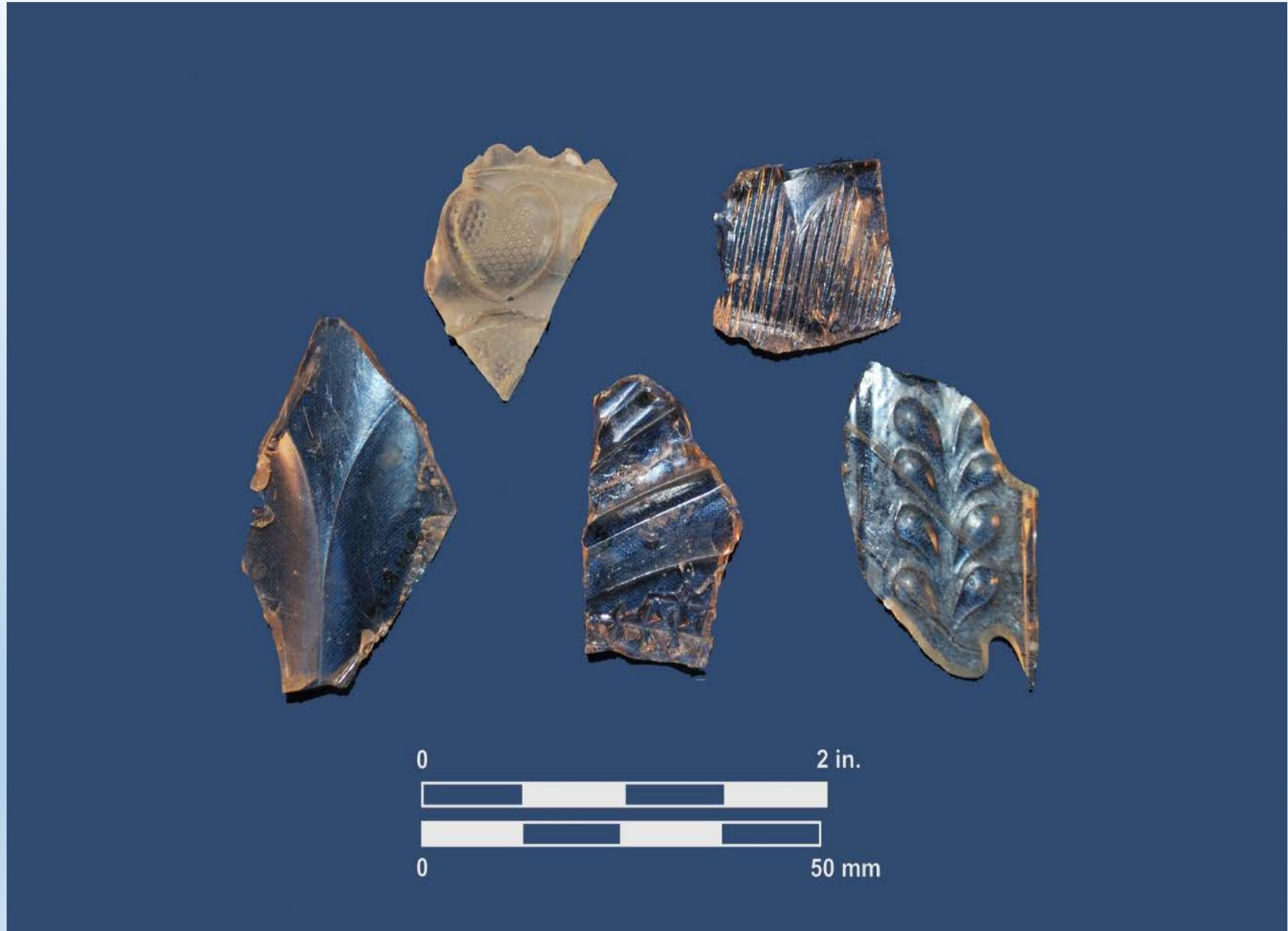
Decorated whiteware from Locus A



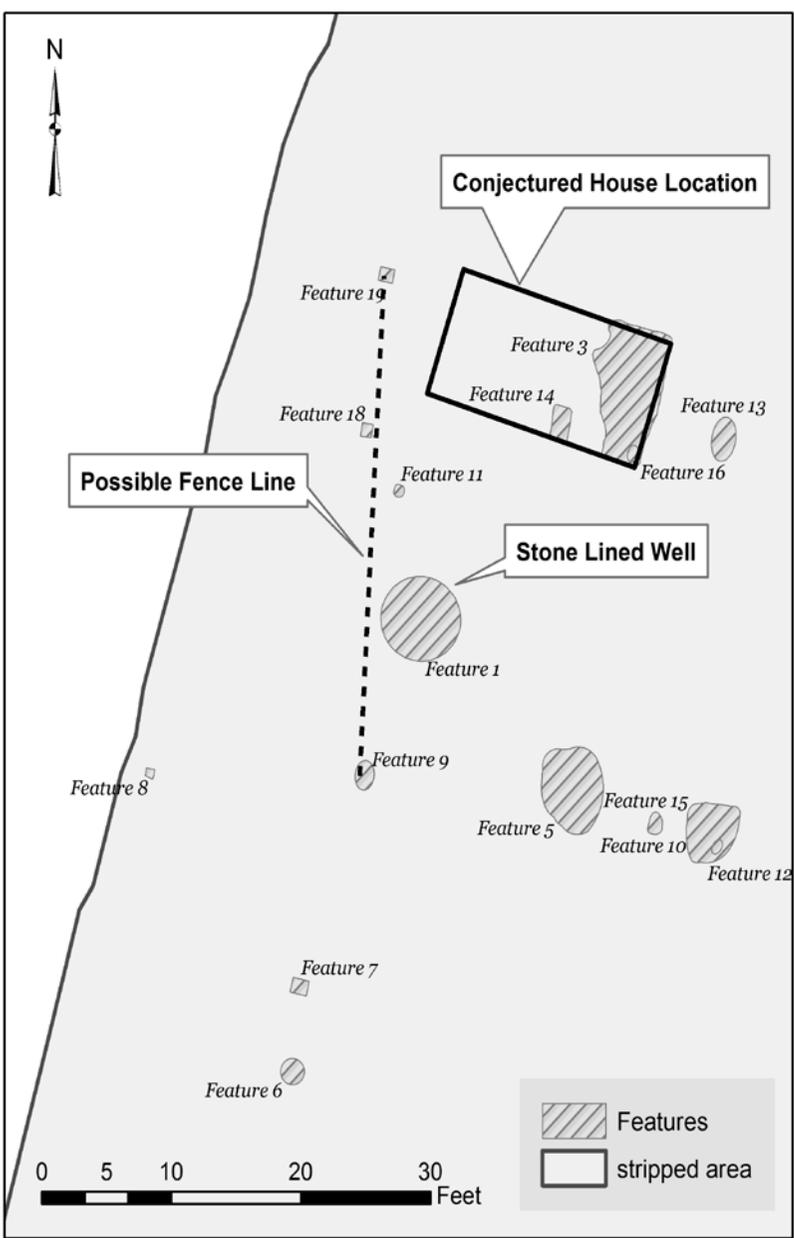
Bottles from Locus A



Glassware from Locus A



Features Identified at Locus A Showing the Conjectured Location of the Tenant House, Fence Line, and Brick-lined Well



Remains of the brick lining in the Locus A well



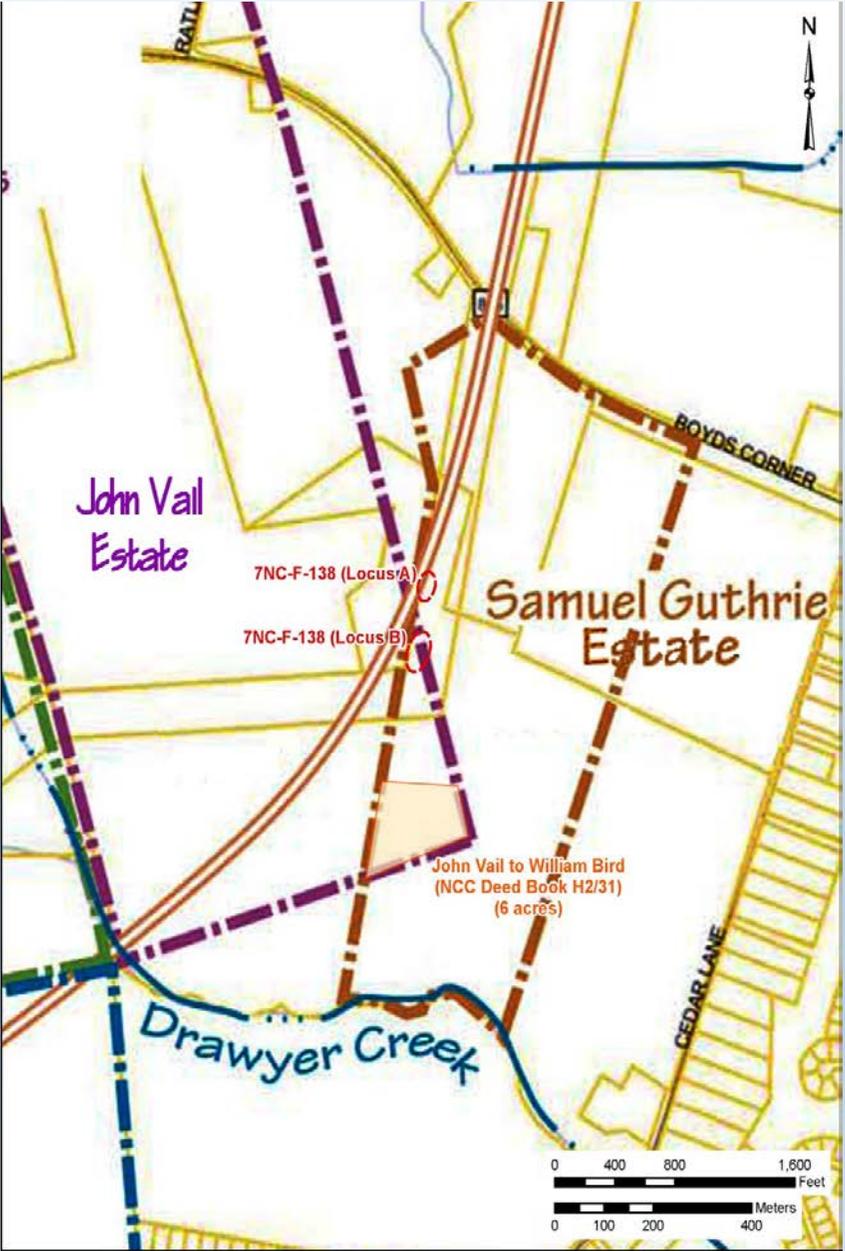
Rubble filled pit, F. 5 in Locus A



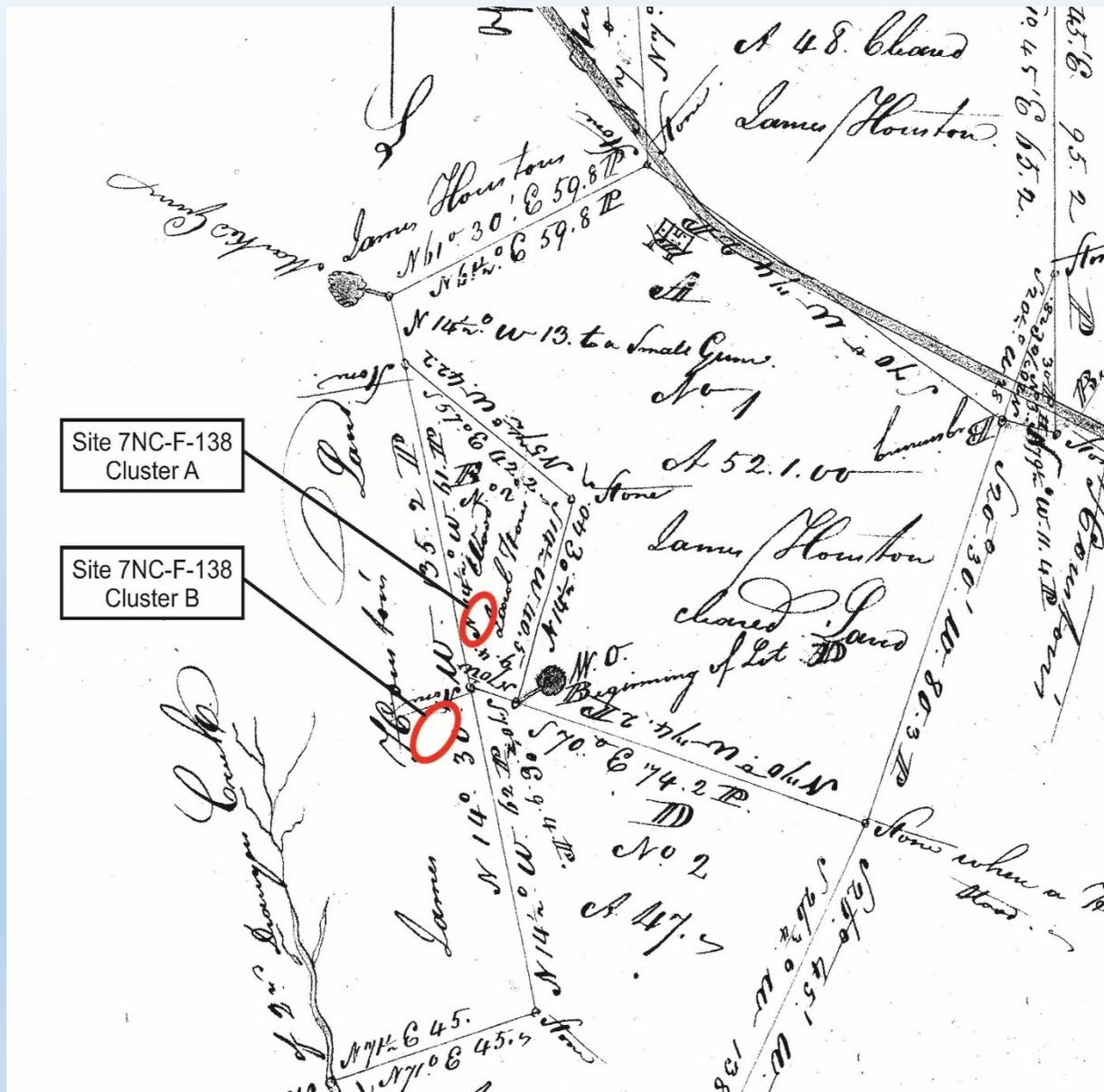
Rubble filled tree fall, F. 10 in Locus A



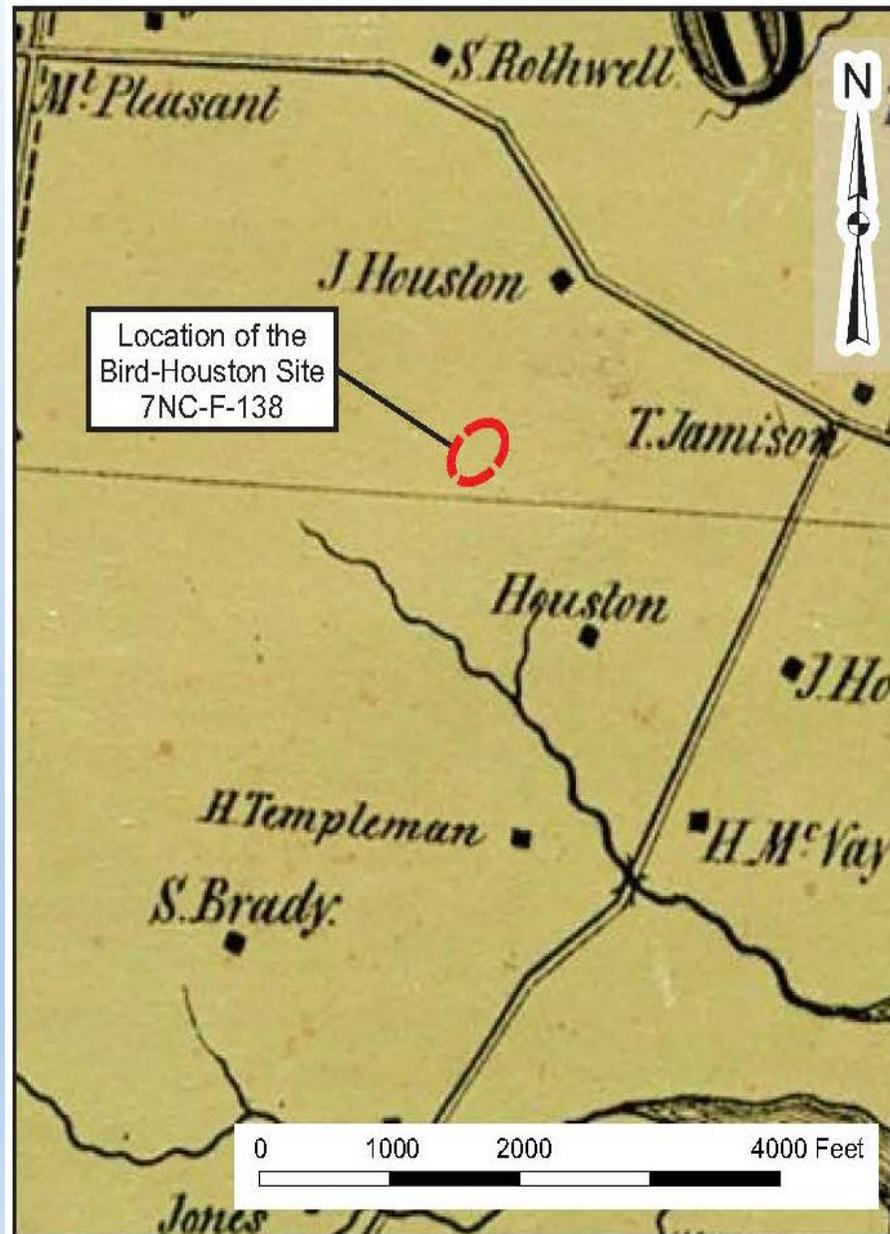
The Bird-Houston site in relation to Colonial property boundaries



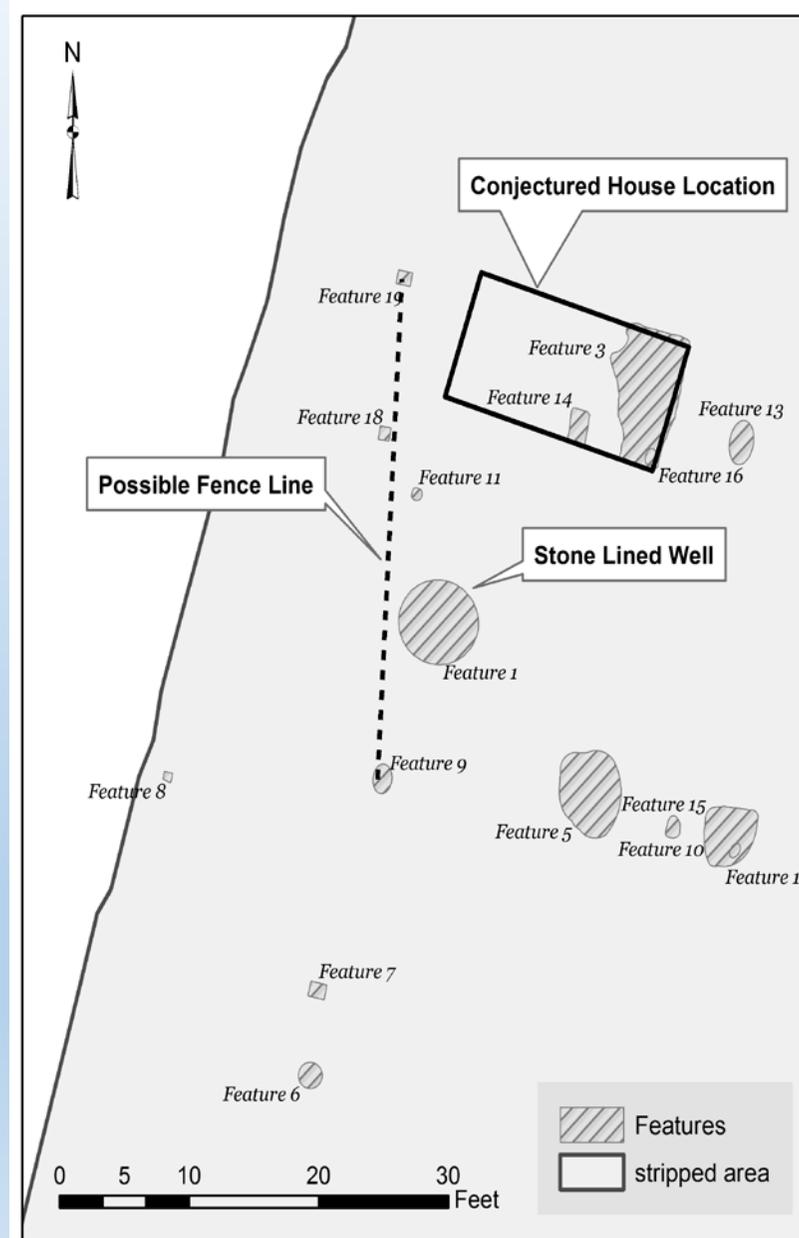
Division of the estate of Mary Houston in 1829

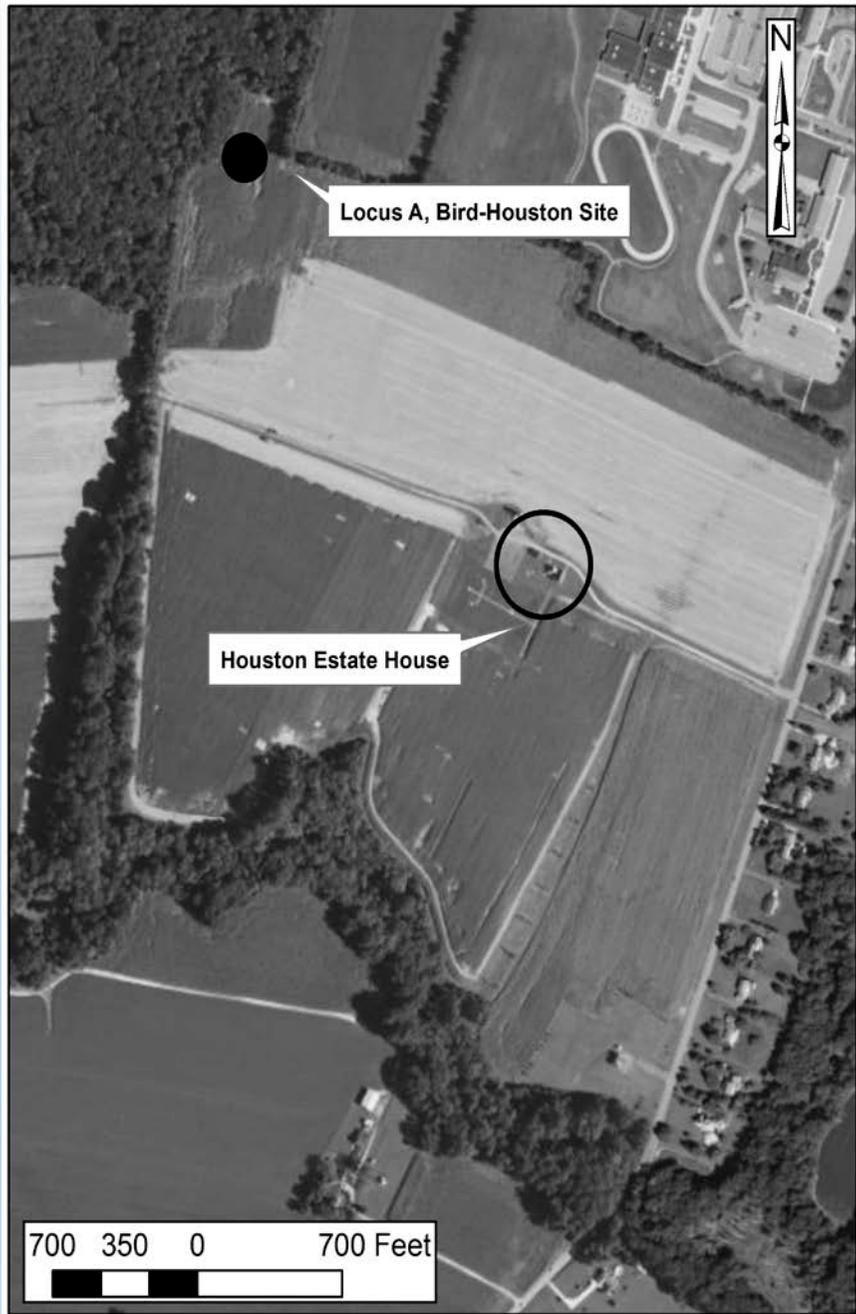


Houston properties in 1849



Features Identified at Locus A Showing the Conjectured Location of the Tenant House, Fence Line, and Brick-lined Well



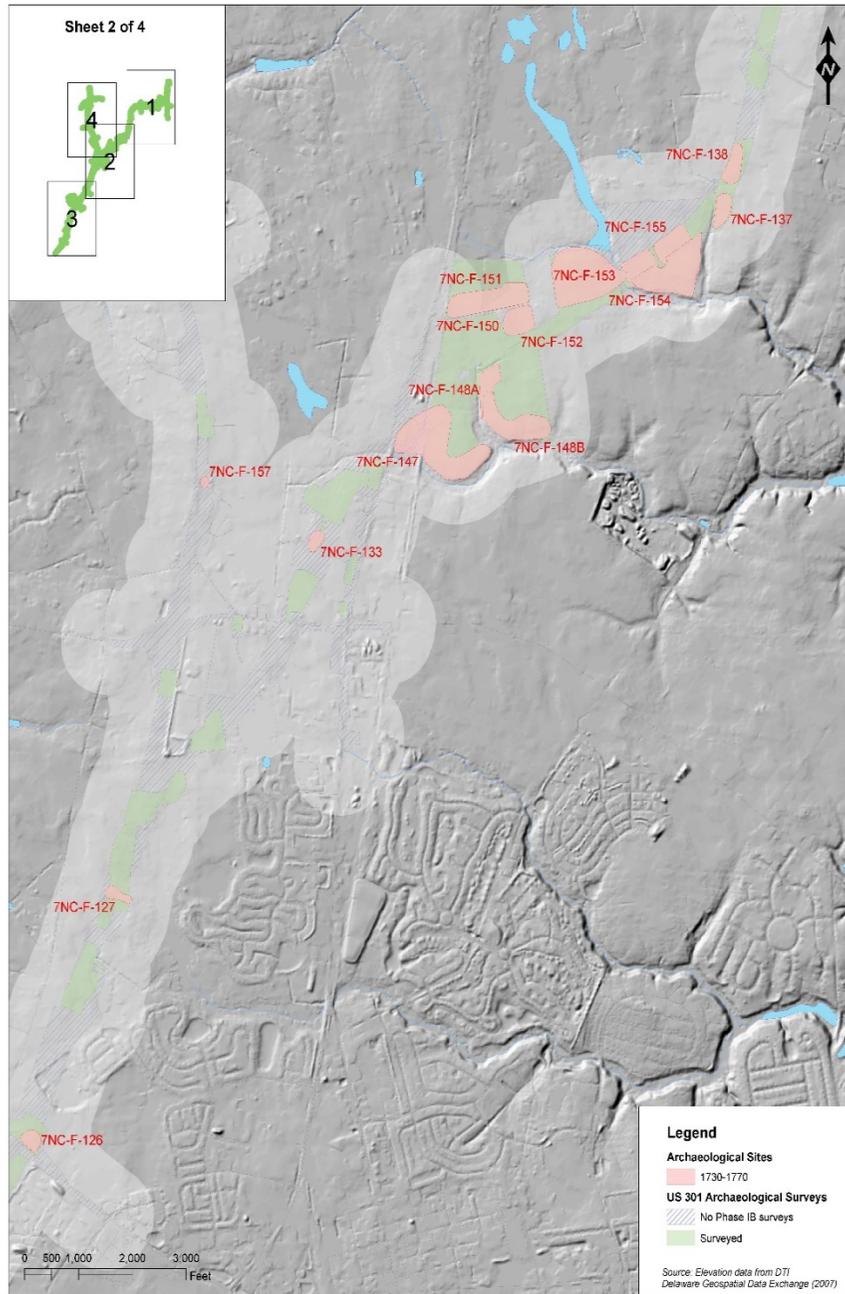
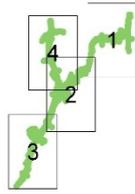


Rock pile in F. 4, Locus B



Locus A, Feature 3 pit





Legend

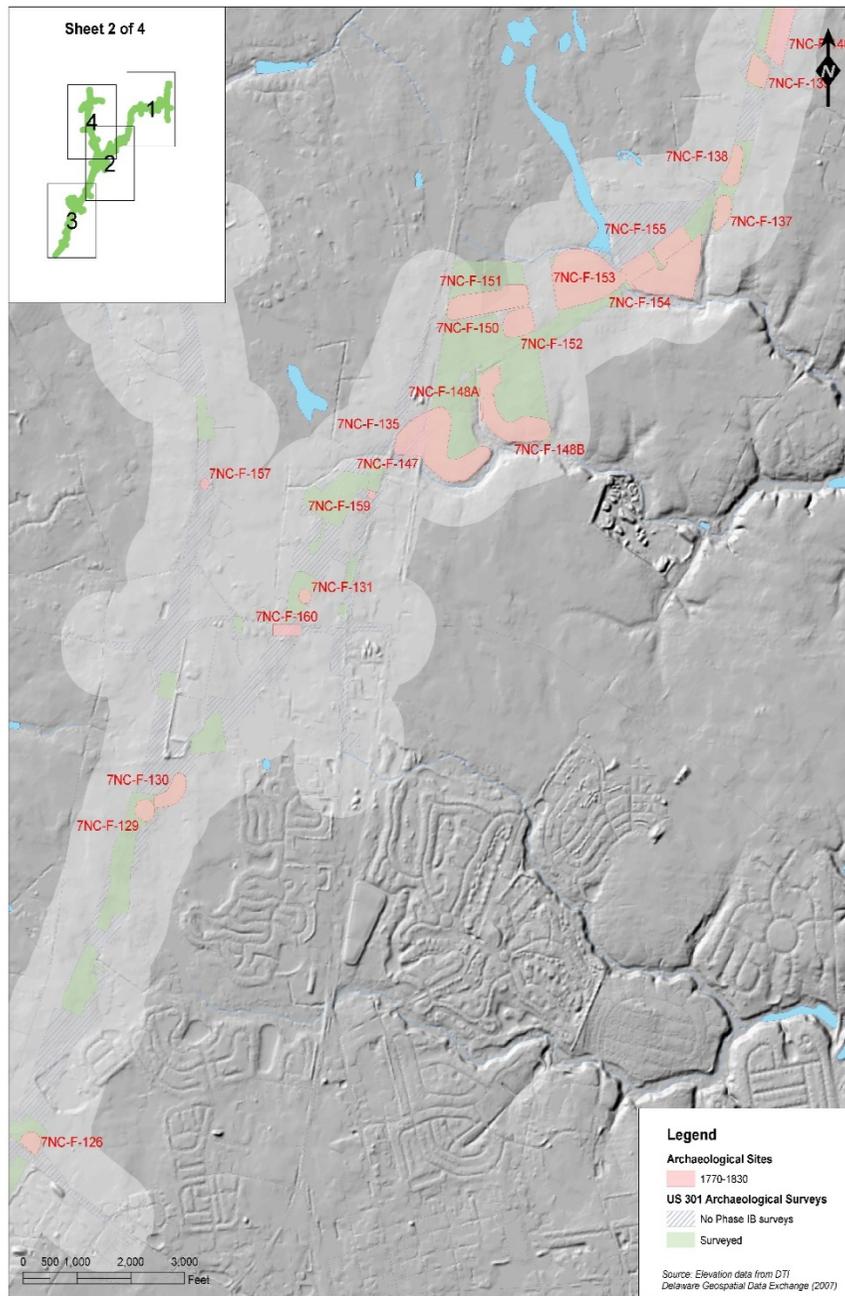
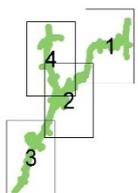
- Archaeological Sites
1730-1770
- US 301 Archaeological Surveys
No Phase IB surveys
- Surveyed

Source: Elevation data from DTI
Delaware Geospatial Data Exchange (2007)



**Sites with Components Dating 1730-1770
General Distribution**

Archaeological Mitigation of
The Bird-Houston Site, 7NC-F-138
U.S. 301 Project

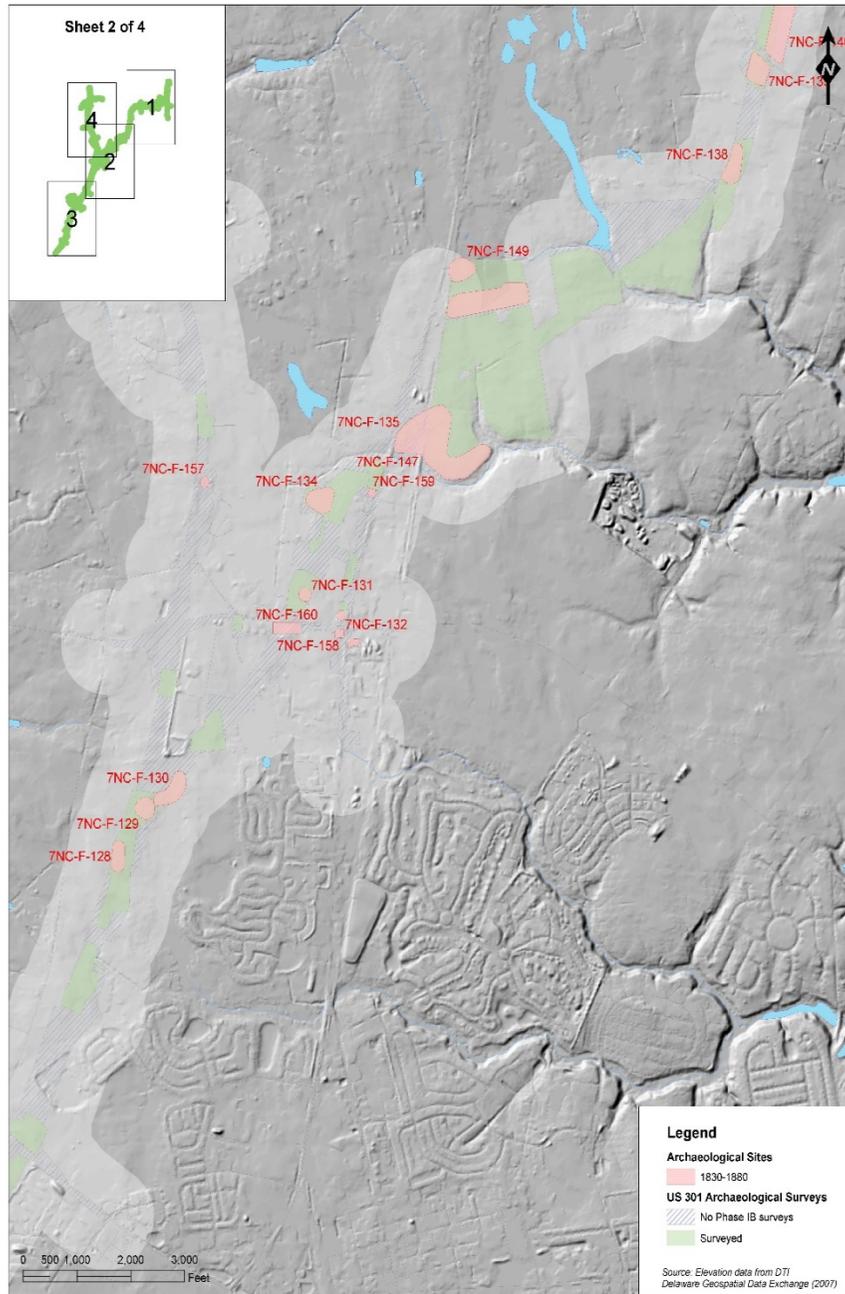
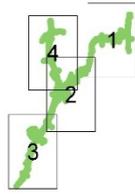


Legend
Archaeological Sites
1770-1830
US 301 Archaeological Surveys
No Phase IB surveys
Surveyed
Source: Elevation data from DTI
Delaware Geospatial Data Exchange (2007)



**Sites with Components Dating 1770-1830
General Distribution**

Archaeological Mitigation of
The Bird-Houston Site, 7NC-F-138
U.S. 301 Project

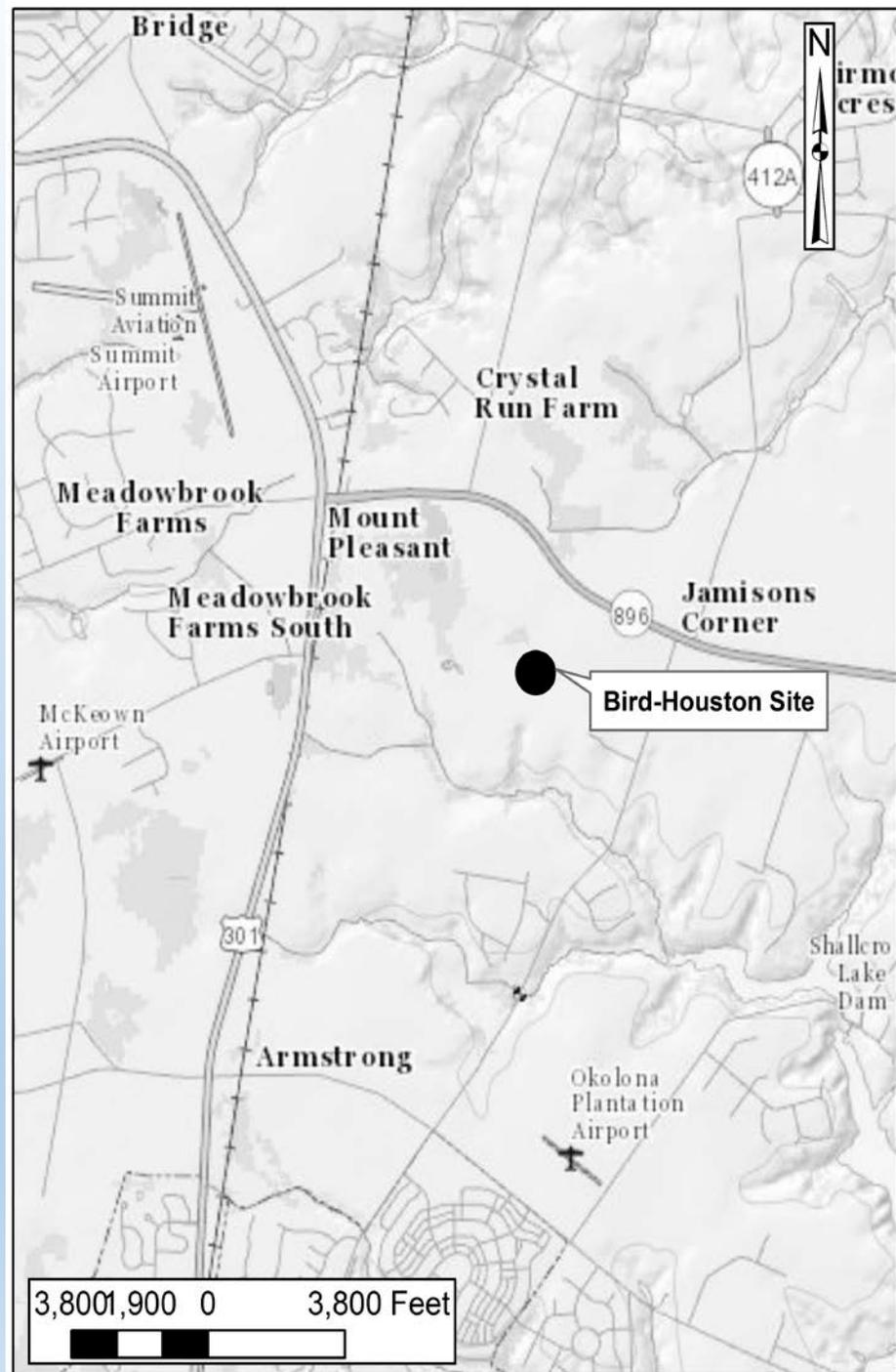


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Archaeological Sites
1830-1880
US 301 Archaeological Surveys
No Phase IB surveys
Surveyed
Source: Elevation data from DTI
Delaware Geospatial Data Exchange (2007)



**Sites with Components Dating 1830-1880
General Distribution**

Archaeological Mitigation of
The Bird-Houston Site, 7NC-F-138
U.S. 301 Project



The Bird-Houston Site
1775-1920



145 Years of Rural Delaware