

On the Border: Farming near the Maryland Border in 18th-19th Century
St. Georges Hundred, Delaware

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Abstract

The Rumsey/Polk Tenant/Prehistoric Site (7NC-F-112, CRS # 14492) is one of the most important sites in Delaware owned by the prominent Rumsey Family in the 18th century. Cecil County based Patriots, traders, and tobacco growers, the Rumseys also owned extensive holdings in St. George's Hundred. Phase II investigations of the site located numerous features including large post-in-ground structures, possible well, brick fireplace or hearth, dated from end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Occupied by tenant farmers, the site has intriguing hints of participation in a wider world, including the presence of an 1848 "president" pipe and English imported ceramics. Outside of the features, artifacts from the early 18th century suggest an undocumented early occupation that may be revealed during mitigation.

[Intro Slide 1] Between 2009 and 2011, Richard Grubb & Associates, as part of the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) team, completed Phase I and II archaeological surveys of the 129-acre Levels Road Mitigation site in St. Georges Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware. The surveys **[Click 2]** identified the mid-18th through mid-19th-century Rumsey/Polk Tenant/Prehistoric site, in an area measuring approximately seven acres. **[Location Slide 2]** The site is located on the north side of a peninsular terrace near the head of Sandy Branch, a tributary of the Great Bohemia Creek in the Chesapeake Bay drainage. Due to a re-design, the project will avoid impacts to the northern half of the site (Locus 2). Phase II archaeological survey efforts were confined to the remaining 3.3-acre southern portion of the site (Locus 1). Archaeological and historic data suggests the site was occupied by tenants of unknown identity from 1742 to 1855 with a possible hiatus between the late 1770s and late 1790s. A Woodland I and Woodland II prehistoric occupation was also identified, but is not the focus of this presentation.

As you can see, the site is close to Delaware's border with Maryland. Delaware was part of the Colony of Pennsylvania until 1701 and not fully independent of Pennsylvania until 1776. Delaware's border with Maryland was disputed until 1775. This border was not just between two states but also between two cultural regions, between the Chesapeake and the Delaware, the holdings of the Duke

of York and Lord Baltimore, north and south, wheat and tobacco, and other economic and religious differences. Straddling these boundaries were a number of important families, such as the Rumsey family, with vast landholdings, who influenced the area's cultural identity, while their tenants, workers, and servants - free and enslaved, provided another dynamic layer of activities. Borders and boundaries are recognized as contested and liminal spaces that provide a way for two cultures to negotiate their differences. However, during the colonial period, the area containing the project site was culturally and administratively oriented toward Cecil County, Maryland and the Eastern Shore.

[Slide 3 historic development] In the 17th and early 18th centuries, the site property was owned by a variety of absentee and local landowners, including a small portion by Augustine Herrmann (yellow stripe), James Heath, Richard Hill, and others. **[Click 1, 2]** By 1742 the property was consolidated by William Rumsey Sr., whose vast landholding stretched from Cecil County, Maryland to New Castle County, Delaware. William Rumsey was wealthy and influential, a mill owner, and customs collector for the Cecil County District, who lived in Bohemia Landing in Cecil County, 1.5 miles northwest of the site. Extensive historic research provided no specific information regarding improvements, development, or occupation within the project site during the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century. Between 1731 and 1742 was a rebuilding and expansion period on the Rumsey plantation, including numerous structures and a mill operation, located downstream from the project site. Rumsey acquired the land including our project site in 1742; artifacts from the site suggests it was developed during about the same time. A man of substantial means, William Rumsey may have erected several dwellings on portions of his holdings to house tenant farmers who worked his land, skilled laborers who toiled in his mill, or merchants or craftsmen who operated along a cart road near the site. Rent from the tenancies supported his family following his death in 1742. William Rumsey's son, William Jr. came in full possession of his father's holdings by 1763. William

Rumsey Jr. and his son Nathan were important Patriots during the Revolutionary War: William a Major in the local Bohemia Battalion and Nathan an agent of the Continental Congress in Paris. After the Maryland and Delaware state boundary dispute was settled in 1775, William Jr.'s property was split in two. The homestead, gristmill, and core farm buildings ended up on the Maryland side of the border. The rest of the plantation, including the project site, was in Delaware. His will separated the home plantation into two separate estates, suggesting William Jr. may have conceived of the property as two distinct farms. A second farming operation run by tenants or perhaps family member, may have been in operation on the portion of the plantation containing the project site. Tenancies on the property were further indicated by 17 separate individuals documented in William Jr.'s inventory who owed rents to the estate. Clearly, Rumsey was profiting from renting lots and farmlands to others, and a community of tenants rented houses, yet no records confirm the presence of a dwelling in or near the project site during the 18th century. In fact, a tax record from 1797 indicates that the tract was vacant of buildings that year, information which combined with the archaeological assemblage suggests a hiatus in occupation. An 1804 tax record lists a “dwelling house, barn, stables, cribs etc, ” suggesting a redevelopment of the project site by the early nineteenth century, buildings remained standing through 1849 and probably to 1855, based on archaeological and cartographic evidence.

[1849 Map Slide 4] William Polk, a wealthy landowner from Odessa, Delaware, purchased the project site in 1836. At some point following Polk's death in 1853 the buildings in the project site were razed. Their demolition likely coincided with the construction of a new farmhouse close to the road (point) by Polk's daughter and heiress Eliza and her husband, John P. Cochran in 1855. We don't know the identity of the former site occupants between 1804 and the mid-19th century, though the tax record suggests they farmed the property and raised livestock.

[Site, Slide 5] Nearly 160 years after its abandonment, the archaeological remains of the former

tenancy were rediscovered in an agricultural field. Phase I and II fieldwork efforts included a pedestrian survey, metal detecting, 33 shovel test pits and 124 one meter-square units [**Phase II EUs Slide 6**], followed by 79 square meters of mechanical plowzone removal in the site's core. As a result, loci of historic and prehistoric artifacts and 26 features were identified. Over 13,000 mid-18th through mid-19th-century domestic, faunal, agricultural, and architectural historic artifacts were recovered from the two phases of survey in this site. In this slide you see the locations of units and some of the notable Phase II artifacts. [**Artifacts Slide 7**] Here are some of the intriguing Phase I artifacts - including a 1739 English George II halfpenny, flintlock pistol, and mid-18th-century ceramics and glass stemware. The pocket or boot pistol would have been carried by an officer or gentleman, and may, along with the stemware, reflect the status of one of the 18th-century tenants who occupied the site, William Rumsey Jr., or even a visitor.

[**Phase II Trenches Slide 8**] Coupled with the 120 units, four strip trenches were excavated in the southern portion of the site to further expose cultural features. Several additional features and unexcavated soil stains were identified. Historic features included two large subfloor pits or cold cellars, a collapsed brick chimney or hearth, a large circular cistern or well feature, an oval brick fill, five small pit features, an amorphous stain, and 14 post molds and postholes.

Two building episodes were inferred from the cultural features and artifact distribution data. As you can see in this slide [**click 2**], a first building phase was represented by features shown in yellow. This phase dated from the 1740s to the 1770s during the colonial border dispute period and includes Feature 5, a sub-floor pit or cold cellar, and nine post features. The first phase coincides with the purchase of the land by William Rumsey Sr. and its subsequent ownership by William Rumsey Jr, and appears to end around the time of William Jr.'s unexpected death in 1777. Although the owners lived elsewhere, the identities of the Rumsey family tenants are unknown, but some were engaged in agriculture. It is also possible it was occupied by relatives of the Rumseys who were engaged in

more lucrative, non-agrarian trades. The second building phase **[click 3]** shown in purple dated from approximately 1804 to 1853 and included a second large subfloor pit, possible well, hearth, and posts. More about that in a second.

[Feature 5, Slide 9] The largest feature from the first occupation is Feature 5, a large storage pit or cold cellar. It was irregularly shaped, measuring almost 9 square feet in plan, and extended over 3.5 feet below ground surface. Much of the feature was exposed during excavation but no evidence of a masonry foundation was found, suggesting the feature may have been located beneath an earthfast building. In fact, several post stains were found near the feature, which may represent the remains of the former building. It is possible the border dispute may have influenced the use of earthfast building technology at the site since they were not sure of the outcome and needed more temporary structures. This is considered a factor in the adoption of earthfast building methods in New Jersey during the 18th century (by Michael Gall, Richard Veit, and Robert Craig- forthcoming in *Historic Archaeology*).

[F5 Artifacts Slide 10] Artifacts from the feature, shown here, consist of substantial portions of a cylindrical canister-style red and green floral enameled creamware teapot similar to those produced from 1751 to 1779 at Cockpit Hill in Derby, England. The large teapot fragments were found throughout the feature matrix. This suggests the feature was filled in one episode with material that was likely recently broken just prior to infilling, rather than redeposition from a sheet midden. Large fragments of a thick-walled North Devon gravel-tempered jug or jar of a type rarely found in Delaware, but popular in the Chesapeake region between 1675 and 1760, were also found in the feature. Similarly, the large fragments suggest deposition immediately following their fracture. Other artifacts included hand-wrought nails, large iron kettle fragments (shown in the unit profile), red earthenware pan fragments, and a fragment of scratch blue white salt glazed stoneware. The absence of pearlware suggests this feature was filled before the 1770s. Faunal material included cow,

sheep, and pig bones. The quantity of teaware, kettle fragments, and faunal material suggests the pit or cellar was located beneath a domestic dwelling or out kitchen. The residents set their table with finely decorated wares, consumed tea from stylish ceramics, and ate domesticated animals.

As shown in purple on the site map, the second building phase dated from approximately 1804 to 1855.

[Feature 46, Slide 11] Features associated with this period included a subfloor pit or cellar, a cistern or well, this collapsed brick chimney or hearth, a possible subfloor pit, and six posts. The second phase coincides with documented improvements to the Rumsey's Delaware holdings based on the 1797 and 1804 tax records and extends to the acquisition of the site by William Polk, ending after his death in 1853.

[Feature 6, Slide 12] Of the features from the second occupation phase, Feature 6 was among the largest. The feature, filled during the 1840s or early 1850s, was partially exposed during Phase II excavations, and measures at least 10 feet long by 12 feet wide. It extends 2.9 feet below the ground surface. Like Feature 5, the earlier subfloor pit or cold cellar, this feature was considered to have a similar function. There was no evidence of intact masonry foundations or builder's trenches, suggesting the domestic building that stood above it may have also been on an earthfast or perhaps a shallow stone footing foundation.

[F6 Artifacts Slide 13] Almost 3,000 artifacts were recovered from Feature 6 (vs. 177 from Feature 5). Over 500 fragments of red earthenware dairy pans, pots, and bowls along with the a varied faunal assemblage (including cow foot bones, turtle, chicken, pig, and sheep remains) were recovered, suggesting on-site animal husbandry, dairying, and butchery had occurred. Other artifacts include tin-glaze, a large variety of decorated whiteware, white granite ware, porcelain, pearlware of varied decorations, and creamware; cut and wrought nails, horse, and sewing items.

One notable artifact from the second occupation phase is a glazed red earthenware "president" pipe. This pipe depicts Lewis Cass, a U.S. Senator, U.S. Secretary of State, and the 1848 Democratic Party Presidential candidate. This pipe was probably made in Germany and sold in 1848 during Cass' campaign. Cass had briefly lived in Delaware early in his career. Most notably, Cass was a leading proponent of the idea of "Popular Sovereignty," a moderate, compromise stance on slavery. This artifact provides an inkling of the political and social philosophy of one of the site's occupants (or visitors) during the mid-19th century and highlights the philosophical tension over slavery in St. George's Hundred that gripped the nation. No artifacts in the feature post-dated the mid-19th century.

Phase I and II excavations revealed evidence of two former, but possibly non-contemporary earthfast domestic structures. It is believed that the remaining posts and pits may form outlines of other structures or fence lines. Artifact distribution data also indicated the former use of multiple activity areas, including several areas around the southern domestic core of the site and an undefined activity area in the northwest corner of the site. While the identity of the former site occupants is unclear, the diversity of material culture from food remains and tableware to personal items and firearms helped breath life into the unrecorded tenant occupants.

A suspected roughly 20-year hiatus in historic occupation between the late 1770s and late 1790s at the site provides an opportunity to learn about intrasite changes during the Colonial and early to mid-19th-century occupations. Intrasite comparisons between these two tenant occupation phases could provide significant data on changes in domestic economy, manufacturing and trade, settlement systems, and, possibly, social group identity, behavior, and interaction as defined by DeCunzo and Catts (1990:1-49) in St. George's Hundred, the Chesapeake drainage basin of New Castle County, and northern Delaware (DeCunzo 2004). It may also afford the opportunity to examine an area in Delaware that was culturally and administratively oriented toward Cecil County, Maryland and the

Eastern Shore during the colonial period. Examining this site provides an excellent opportunity to utilize it as a microhistory to explore larger trends about the contested administrative, economic, and cultural border.

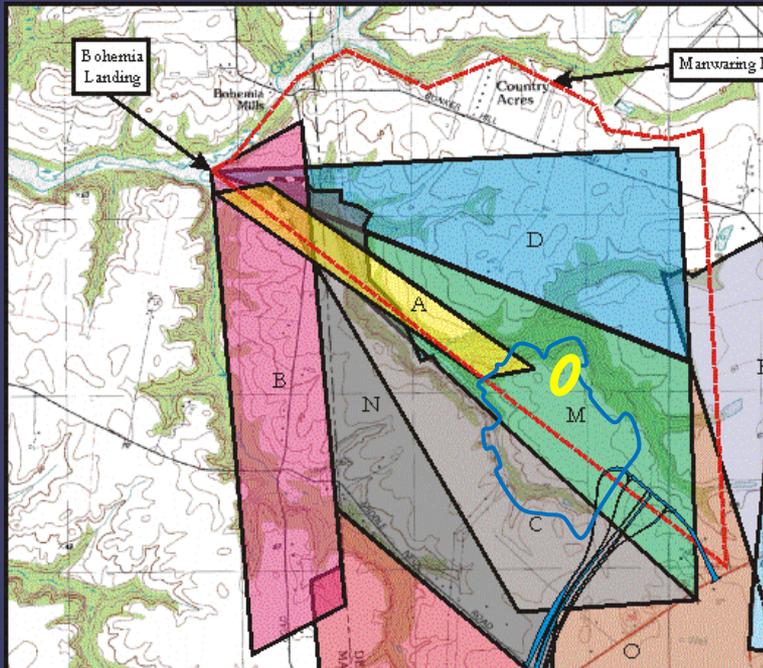
[Ack, Slide 14] The site was recommended eligible for the National Register of Historic Places given its potential to learn more about the politics of boundaries and borders, critical periods of Delaware and Maryland history and the connection with the major Rumsey family during the eighteenth century.

In closing, I'd like to acknowledge our intrepid crew who tirelessly worked through varied weather conditions and did an incredible job. I'd also like to acknowledge the help and support of David Clarke and Kevin Cunningham of DelDOT and thank David for asking us to participate in this session.

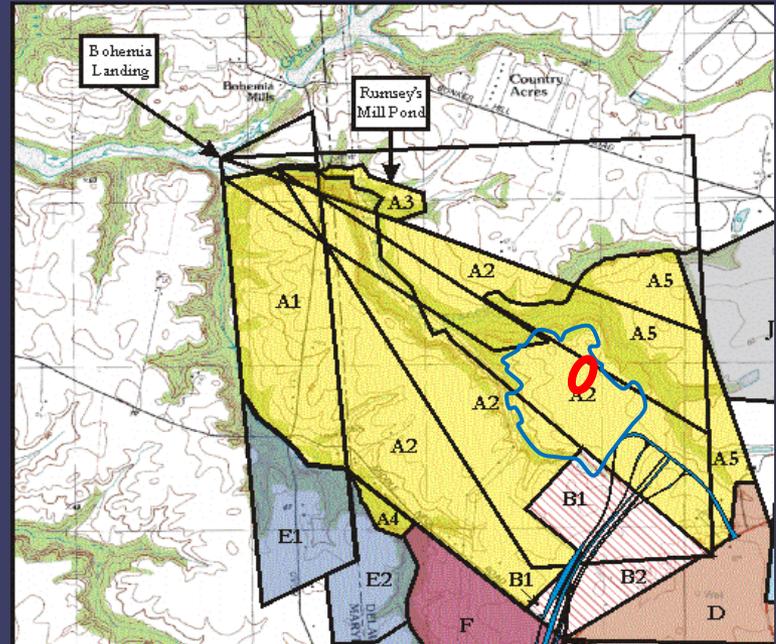
On the Border:

Farming near the Maryland Border in 18th-19th
Century St. Georges Hundred, Delaware

Original 17th- and 18th-century patents and surveys in the site's vicinity



Led to Consolidation by William Rumsey Sr. by 1742



Phase I identification of the Rumsey/Polk Tenant/Prehistoric site (7NC-F-122)





Phase II Excavation Units
120 1x1 meter units resulted in

- 11,814 historic artifacts
- 15 historic features



Hoe

Sample of Historic Artifacts from Units



Combed slipware, Staffordshire



Tortoise-shell teaware



Tin-glaze



North Devon



Flintlock fragment



Gunflint

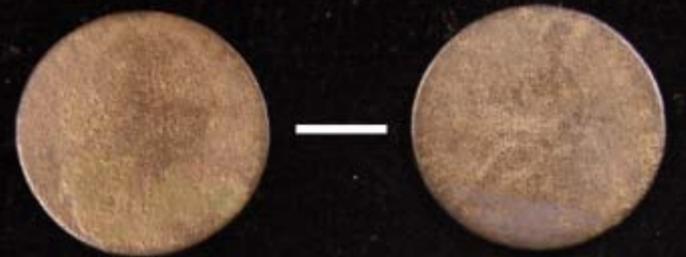


Phase I Artifacts

Thimble



Shoe buckles



18th C. George I or III



1739 George II English half penny



18th c. flintlock "boot" pistol barrel



replica



Scratch blue

teaware

Wine Glass stem

Red earthenwares





Strip Trenches:

4 mechanically excavated trenches resulted in

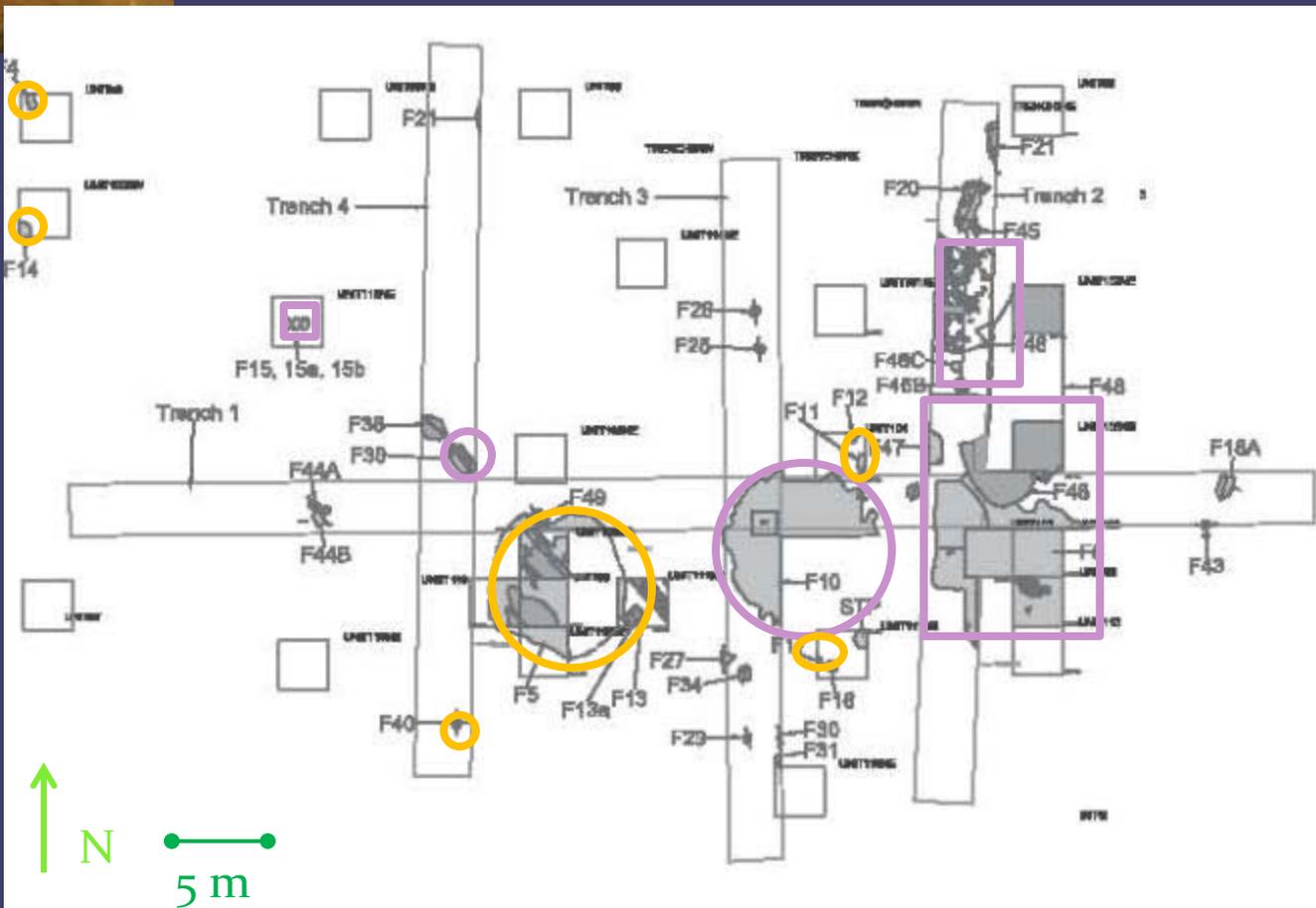
- 5 additional features
- 21 soil stains/possible features
- 295 additional historic artifacts

Two occupations:

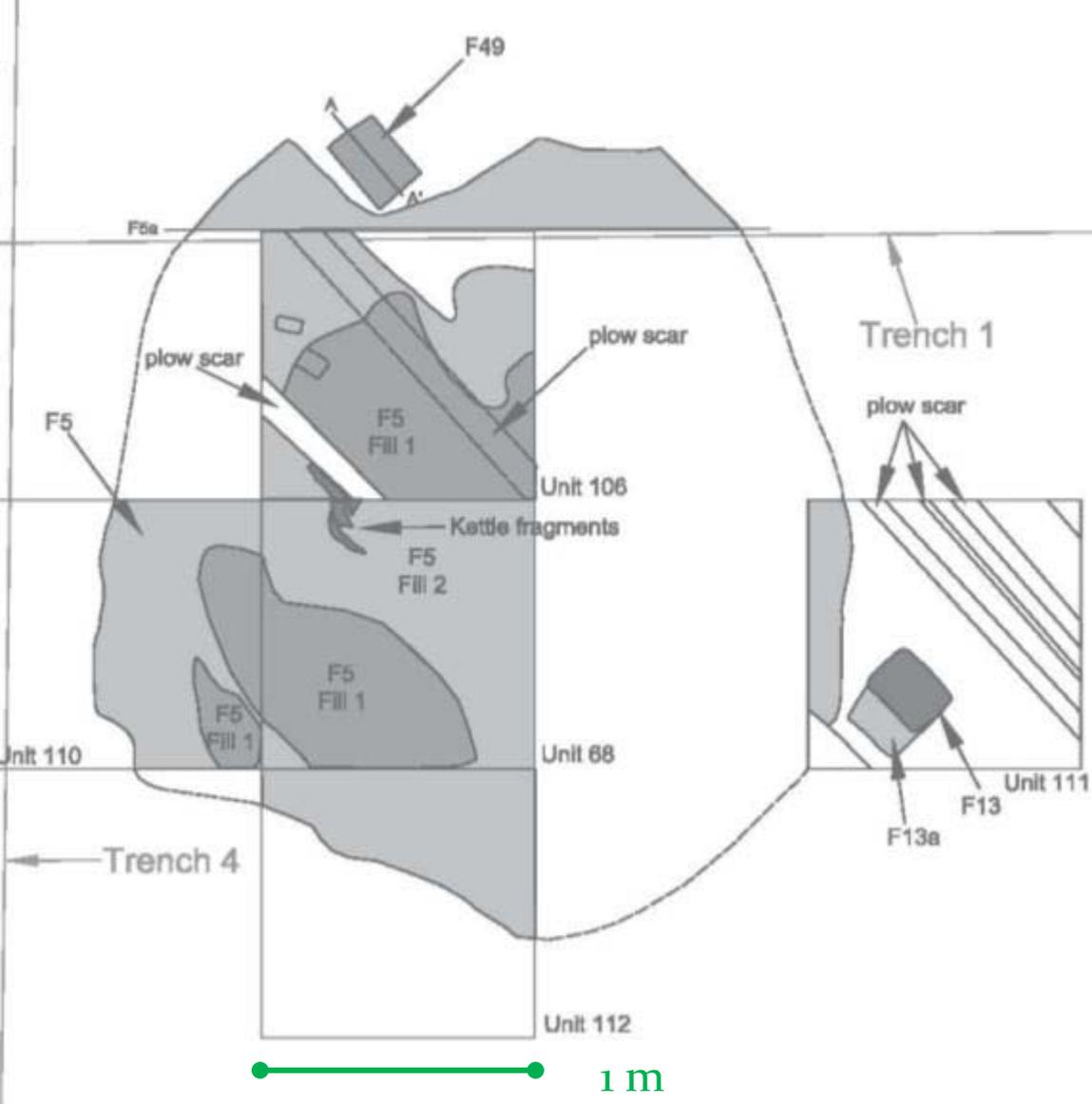
• 1740s to 1770s



• 1797/1804
to 1849/1855



Feature 5: Early Occupation 1740S-1770S



Iron Kettle fragments



Feature 5 artifacts

White Salt-glaze
Stoneware



Hand-painted canister -style teapot fragments

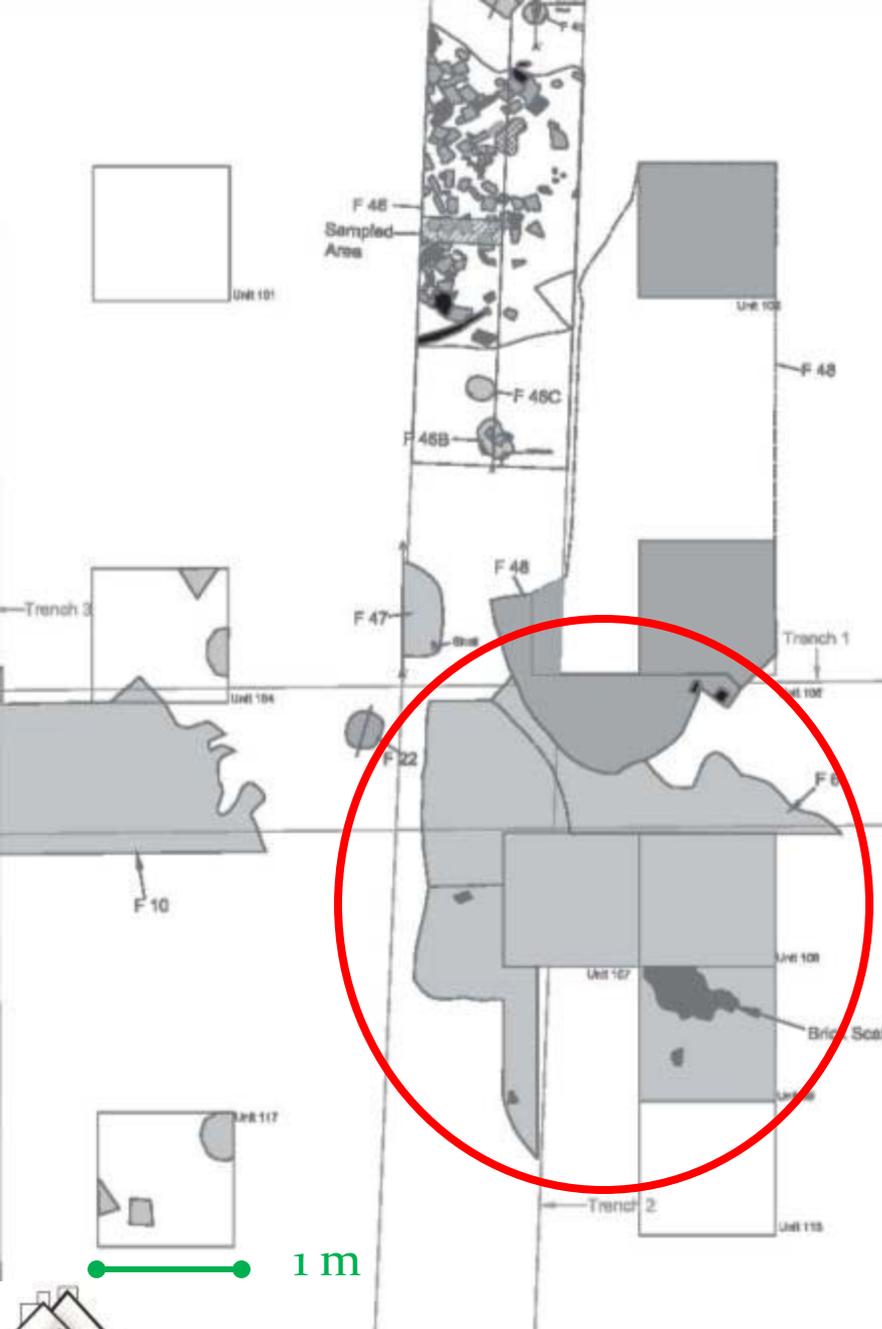
North Devon Gravel Ware jug or jar



**Feature 46: Collapsed brick fireplace/
Hearth associated with the
2nd occupation**



Feature 6:
2nd occupation 1797/1804
to 1849/1855 cellar pit



Feature 6 artifacts



1848 Lewis Cass President pipe



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