

Archaeological Excavations at Boyd's Corner Odessa, New Castle County, Delaware

The Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) is planning improvements at the intersection of US 13, the Du Pont Highway, and SR 896 (Boyd's Corner Road) in Odessa. Historical research and previous archaeological testing indicate that the remains of Boyd's Store and House may survive underground. The purpose of these excavations is to establish the extent of the remains (both horizontally and vertically) and to evaluate their significance.

Who was Boyd?

John Boyd emigrated from Coleraine, County Londonderry, Ireland to Newcastle, Delaware in 1791. In years to come he would marry Mary S. Read, the daughter of Thomas Read, a Presbyterian minister and himself the son of Irish immigrants. In 1812 Thomas Read sold a large parcel of land to John Boyd, land that Read had purchased piecemeal beginning in 1790. Boyd's Corner includes this land, which remained in the family for three generations until 1877.

When the crossroads became known as Boyd's Corner is unclear. A map published in 1849 (left) shows the anonymous intersection, with John Boyd's house and a store near the northwest corner.

Another map published in 1868 also showed Boyds in possession of the nameless intersection. The intersection was mapped again in 1893, finally identified as Boyd's Corner.

The north-south road would become part of the Du Pont Highway, the transportation corridor envisioned by T. Coleman Du Pont to link northern and southern Delaware. Built between 1911 and 1923; the highway joined the new Federal network of numbered highways as U.S. 13 in 1925.

In 1932, when the Du Pont Highway was dualized, the engineers drew the Boyd compound in detail (right). By that time it contained a two-story frame house ("2 ST. FR. HO.") and six outbuildings: a chicken house, garage, barn, pump shed, windmill and a frame barn, arrayed from south to north on the west side of the highway. The house, according to an informant, was subsequently moved to the opposite side of Route 13 and later removed entirely, but its original foundation is believed to survive.

Results of Earlier Archaeological Investigations

In 2006, archaeological testing along the west side of US 13 yielded historic bottle glass, building materials, oyster shell, ceramics and a kaolin pipe stem among other historic-period artifacts. Near Boyd's Corner Road one excavation revealed a layer of brick, in a pattern suggesting that it may be part of a collapsed wall. The artifacts were found in locations where the historic maps showed Boyd's house and store respectively.

In 2007 15 excavation units varying in size from nine to 25 square feet were excavated. They are being placed so as to locate and evaluate the remains of Boyd's house, the store, and the outbuildings.

What do we expect to learn?

Since the Boyds may have lived here from as early as 1812 until 1877, and their successors occupied it until at least 1932, the site (if intact) may contain a variety of domestic goods from throughout that time span: household goods such as table ware, silverware, cooking utensils, building materials, tools and toys. The store site could contain building materials and possibly remnants of merchandise. The artifacts (and archival research going on concurrently) should tell us more about daily life in the 19th century at a commercial crossroads in central Delaware and perhaps reveal how the site changed over more than a century of evolution.

Following additional sampling of the plowzone in areas close to the house/store, a backhoe will strip the topsoil over an area of about 12,000 square feet in order to expose the foundation and adjacent parts of the site. Before and during this process, historical researchers will be seeking for more information about the Boyds and their activities at this location. The historians will also look at historical documents relating to other stores of the same time period in order to make comparisons and build a fuller picture of life in this part of Delaware more than 150 years ago.

What happens next?

Artifacts will be labeled as to where they were found, then taken to an archaeological laboratory for cleaning, labeling and further identification and study. Ultimately they will be sent to the Delaware State Museum for future display.

When the excavations and analysis of the artifacts are complete, the findings will be recorded in a technical report available to the public, one of a series that continually adds to our knowledge of Delaware's past.

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Learn more about DelDOT's archaeology program at archaeology.deldot.gov.



A few of the artifacts already discovered at the Boyd House site during the previous dig, with a modern coin to show scale.

