

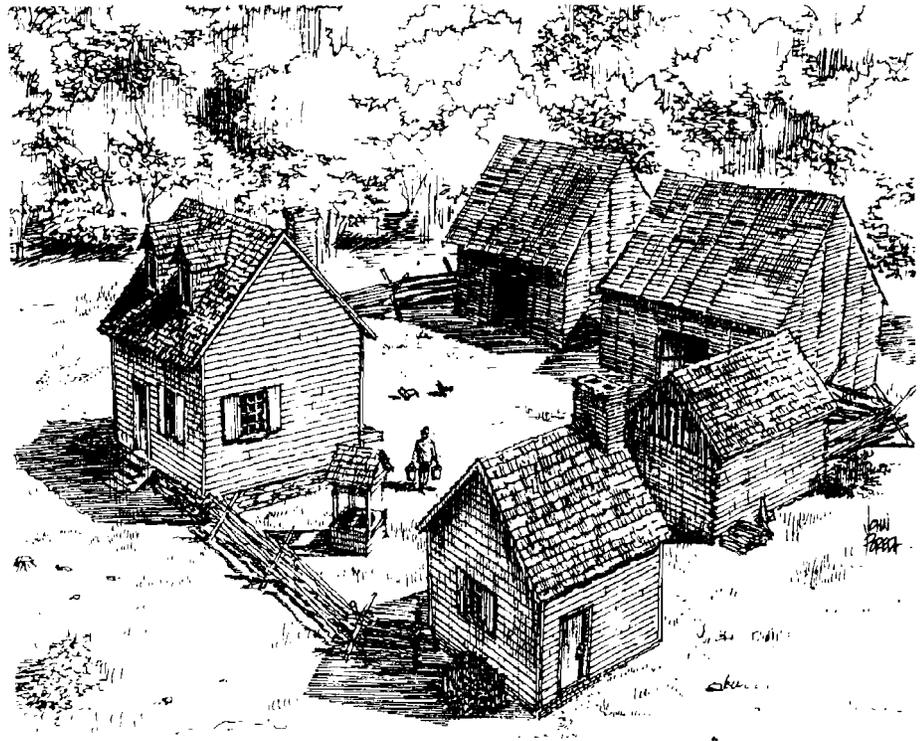
A PLANTATION ON THE APPOQUINIMINK

Excavations at the McKean/Cochran Farm

The Delaware Department of Transportation and Louis Berger & Associates

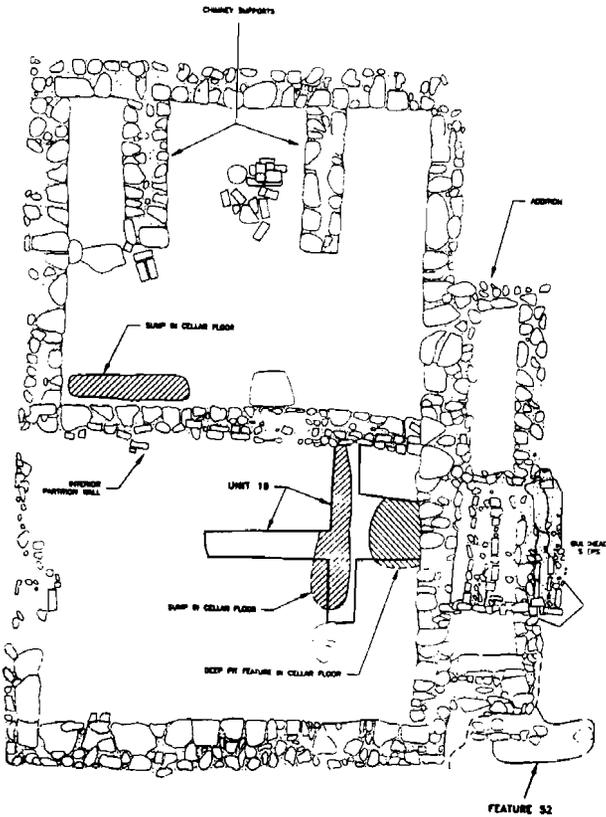
The McKean/Cochran Farm site was part of a 400-acre farm on the north bank of the Appoquinimink River just west of Odessa, Delaware. The site was discovered during an archaeological survey of the route of SR 1, the new highway that will carry traffic from northern Delaware and I-95 to the Atlantic beaches. During the excavation of the site, which was carried out in the summer of 1996, the foundations of several buildings were uncovered and more than 30,000 artifacts were found. The finds can tell us a great deal about life in Delaware at the time of the American Revolution.

The first house was built on the site about 1770. Like most American houses in the colonial period, it was small, about 15 by 18 feet, with a single room on the ground floor. The house was wooden, with stone foundations, and it had a full basement. It was heated by a single fireplace on the ground floor. The upstairs, probably a simple attic, was unheated. The single ground-floor room served the family who lived there for eating, visiting, working, and, in the winter, sleeping. At that time the site belonged to two children, Thomas and Letitia McKean, who had inherited it from their grandmother, so the people living in the house were probably tenants. The tenants' farm also included two barns, a separate kitchen, a well, and a smokehouse.



The McKean/Cochran Farm about 1800

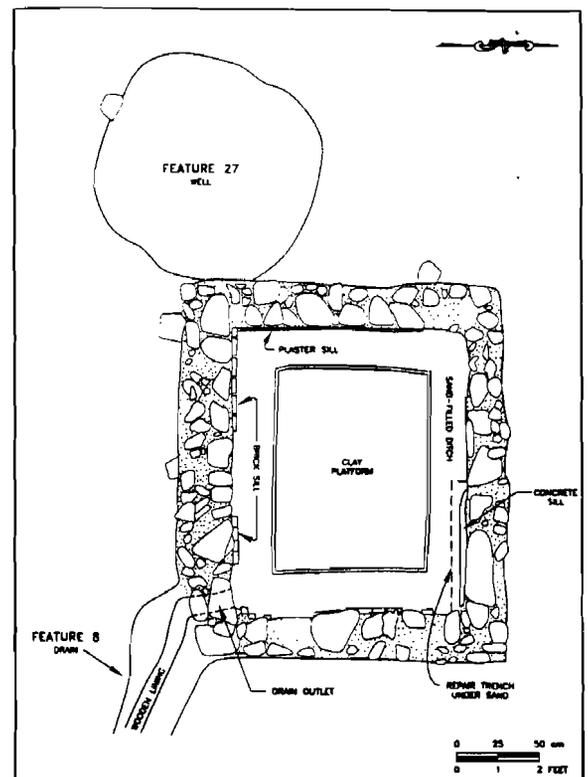
By 1810 Letitia McKean Clark, then a widow, was living at the farm. Letitia was from a very wealthy and prominent family. Letitia's relations were mostly Scotch-Irish, but through one of her grandmothers she was descended from the Dutch and Swedish immigrants who settled on the Appoquinimink in the 1650s. The inventory of her father's estate mentions silver spoons and a mahogany writing desk, and bills submitted to the estate show that Letitia took lessons from an arithmetic tutor and a dancing master. Letitia's uncle, Thomas McKean, was one of Delaware's signers of the Declaration of Independence and later became governor of Pennsylvania. In keeping with her status, Letitia built a new, bigger house on the site. Still, the house was not large by modern standards. It measured 16 by 26 feet, with a basement and a full second story. Thousands of pieces of window glass were found in the cellar, showing that the house had many windows. The house probably had two rooms on the ground floor. The house only had one chimney, so only one of the rooms was heated. Even the wealthy people of the 1700s lacked many things we take for granted, such as heated bedrooms and window screens to keep out mosquitos.



Plan of the Foundation of the Later House

Letitia died in 1814, and the farm was sold at auction. The buyer was Robert Cochran, a member of a numerous and important Delaware family. Robert and his sons lived in Letitia's house until about 1830, when they built a new, even larger and grander house elsewhere on the property. The move to the new house shows two things. First, standards of living continued to rise, so the house that had seemed new and grand to Letitia McKean in 1800 was no longer adequate for a family of similar wealth thirty years later. Second, the site of the house was moved from near the river, which had been the main means of transportation in colonial times, closer to the road. When the house was abandoned the cellar hole was filled in with trash, and more than 15,000 artifacts were found there. These included many kinds of ceramics, such as Chinese porcelain tea bowls, coarse earthenware milk pans and jars, Creamware and Pearlware plates, a stoneware ink bottle, and "petalled" bowls made in Philadelphia. Bones found in the cellar show that the residents ate raccoons, turtles, and several kinds of fish, as well as beef and pork. Gun parts and a jacket button from a Continental Army uniform suggest that one of the residents had fought in the Revolution. The most mysterious object found in the cellar was a single canon ball; perhaps it was another souvenir of the Revolution.

The most interesting building found on the site was a dairy, which was probably built around 1300. The dairy, a building for making butter and cheese, was an important part of traditional culture in much of northern Europe. Butter and cheese were important parts of the European diet, and the technology for making them was well-developed. In Scotland and much of Germany the preferred form for the dairy building was the spring house, a stone structure built directly over a spring or stream, so that the milk could be cooled in the flowing water. Spring houses were very common in Pennsylvania and northern Delaware, where springs and small streams are plentiful. So when the occupants of the McKean/Cochran farm decided to build a dairy, they built it in the way they knew, as a spring house. However, they were not in Scotland or Pennsylvania, but in the flat lands of the Delaware coastal plain, and there was no spring on the site. The water to cool the milk must have come from the adjacent well. This building represents, therefore, a traditional technology used in an environment for which it was completely unsuited. Rather than adapt to the world in which they found themselves, the residents tried to live in the way they knew.



Plan of the Dairy Foundations