Traces of Delaware’s Past
THE FAMILY FARM

DELAWARE HAS BEEN FARmed since the arrival of the first Europeans in the 1600s. Its favorable climate, fertile soils, and coastal setting have made it ideal for farming. Over the course of three centuries, changes in the technologies of farming and the development of transportation routes to market farm produce have transformed Delaware’s landscape.

WHO WERE THE FARMERS IN DELAWARE’S PAST?
Most colonial Delawareans were farmers that came from Sweden, Holland, England, and Africa. These early farmers also included American Indians who adapted European ways and settlers who migrated from neighboring colonies. Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, there was a steady stream of immigrants from Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany. Most farmers had large families who worked the farms, some with the help of indentured servants and one or two enslaved Africans. After the Civil War, free blacks and whites were hired as farm hands, often on a seasonal basis.

Today, the family farm has largely been replaced by commercial farming, but the majority of land in Delaware is still farmed despite urban sprawl, the expansion of highways, and tourism.

WHAT IS A FARM?
A farm is a tract of land that is cultivated for the purpose of raising crops and animals. Most food but some farms also grow tobacco and this is the place where farmers, their families, and help live and work. It consists of one or more dwellings – houses plus a number of specialized outbuildings that serve domestic and agricultural purposes. Outbuildings include barns, granaries, wagon or carriage houses, spring houses, ice houses, smoke houses, out houses or privies, sheds, and animal pens. Associated with these buildings are yards, gardens, orchards, arable fields, and pastures.

Dwellings on a farm may house the owners, or tenants who rent the farm, and farm hands. Many Delaware farms were occupied by tenants for at least part of their history.

HOW DO ARCHAEOLOGISTS RECOGNIZE A FARM?

OVER TIME, many farms were abandoned and eventually covered by earth. Building remains in combination with artifactory objects that people used in daily life that were thrown away or lost may form an archaeological site. Archaelogs use artifacts to figure out where a site was occupied, and what people’s lives were like.

When a farm has completely disappeared from the landscape, old maps and written records such as deeds, tax assessments, property surveys, census records, wills and inventories provide clues about where to look. If no documentary information is available, archaeological excavation may still find evidence of a site.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES
When a site is found, archaeologists use many methods to identify and interpret its remains. While a shovel is the archaeologist’s most recognizable tool, they also employ large equipment like backhoes to remove the upper, disturbed layers of a site. In cultivated fields, this is called the plow zone – the earth that has been churned around by the plow. After the above zone has been removed, archaeologists scan the surface with shovels and trowels to expose soil dislocations that may indicate the presence of features – something that was made by people in the past that is too big or too fragile to take back to the laboratory for analysis. Foundation walls, wells, privies and trash pits are examples of features. Prior to digging, archaeologists lay out units across the site and excavate them layer by layer – stratigraph. The soil is screened through wire mesh to ensure that all artifacts are recovered. Archaeologists painstakingly photograph and draw each layer in order to create a thorough record of what they find.

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FARM SITES IN CENTRAL DELAWARE
Many of Delaware’s farm sites have been discovered because of modern development arising from increased population and the need for new houses and roads. As the maps show, the locations of some of these farm sites cluster along the transportation corridors that cross the state. On-farm knowledge of the past, through archaeology, has been greatly expanded thanks to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 which requires state and federal agencies to examine what effects their undertakings will have on the undiscovered remains beneath our feet.
Farms in This Period

Many of the buildings were earthfast—a form of wood construction that could be erected quickly and cheaply after a piece of land had been cleared. Wooden posts were set into holes in the ground, then secured with walls of horizontal beams. Another common building type without a foundation was constructed of logs.

Houses were heated with a fireplace and lit by candlelight, rush or oil lamps. The dangers of fire were very real so it was safer for the house, kitchen, and outbuildings to be separated so that would not be lost if one caught on fire.

Farms generally consisted of a cluster of four to five buildings.

Historical accounts of stray livestock indicate that farmers allowed their livestock to forage freely. Archaeological evidence of posthole patterns on farm sites suggests that fences were built to keep animals out of the living areas.

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The 18th Century Farm

Much of what we know about farms in the 1700s comes from our general knowledge about what rural life was like in the colonial period. Early maps, legal documents recording the transfer of properties or personal belongings, and personal accounts provide a framework in which to fit the archaeological data. Delaware was sparsely settled. Farms, also called plantations, were widely scattered along waterways and the few roads within each Hundred, a geographic division established by the English.

William Strickland's farm overlooked Mill Creek in Duck Creek Hundred and his crops were planted on the "good land".

Strickland Plantation 1726-1764

How We Know what was raised on the Strickland Farm comes from the inventory of William’s estate taken at the time of his death in December 1753. It lists 12 cows, 4 calves, 1 bull, 23 sheep, 15 hogs, 2 mares, 1 horse, and 1 colt. Crops included “wheat & rye in the ground, 12 bushels of oats, a stack of oats, a parcel of flax, and corn in the ear.” Also listed were “a plow and harrow, 2 scythes and a cradle, 2 mattocks, 3 hoes, and a pair of sickles.”

The proximity of Strickland’s plantation to main roads was an important factor in its success. Archival and archaeological evidence of his success is documented in the amount of taxes he paid and by the number of expensive ceramics and silver he owned.

Excavation on William Strickland’s plantation uncovered the remains of two houses, one for his family and another that was both a kitchen and quarters for his enslaved servants, a smokehouse, a granary, and a couple of wells, all enclosed within a fence. A partially-dug cellar found next to the main house indicates he was building an addition to his house at the time of his death. The space around the dwellings was kept relatively clean although a concentration of artifacts in an open area between the house and kitchen was later paved over with ballast. Trash was placed along the fence line some 50 feet from the house.

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THE 19TH CENTURY FARM

BY 1800, DELAWARE FARMERS were still practicing mixed agriculture—planting crops for food and fodder, growing vegetables in their gardens, harvesting fruits from their orchards, and raising livestock for their own use and the market. Farms in central and southern Delaware suffered from a lack of good roads, erosion and falling crop prices. These farmers were forced to clear land of poor quality and property values declined allowing wealthier landowners to buy the land at bargain prices and rent it to tenant farmers.

While these advances improved life, not all farms prospered. Those farms which did not succeed, disappeared and became part of the archaeological record. The changes in lifestyle, mirroring the increasing complexity of life on and off the farm, can be seen in the artifacts left behind.

MOORE-TAYLOR FARM, 1822-1931

The discovery of mud, a natural fertiliser, during construction of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal enhanced the productivity of Delaware agriculture. The opening of the canal in 1829 and the construction of railroads 10 years later encouraged the production of market-oriented crops by providing more efficient transportation of perishable goods. This stimulated growth in the number and value of farms in central and southern Delaware and farms were transformed from subsistence to market farming.

The speed with which farm goods could now be transported opened up the market for perishable fruits and vegetables and Delaware became a center for peach production. This triggered the development of a canning industry and soon commercial canned goods replaced home canning. By 1900, poultry and dairy production were beginning to play a big role in Delaware farming.

The Moore-Taylor Farm was built in 1822 on 27 acres of land in Little Creek Hundred, Kent County, Delaware. This was a small farm that over a hundred years was owned by a succession of farmers who struggled to survive.

One owner, George Moore, bought the farm in 1849 and moved there with his family. According to the 1850 census, George lived there with his wife, Sarah Ann, their three daughters—Rebecca Ann, Susan, Amanda—and a 12 year old African American farm worker named Francis Heath. Twenty-four acres were cultivated but Moore was not listed in the agricultural census, which means his farm produced crops worth less than $100. He owned 1 horse, 1 yoke oxen, 3 cows, 3 calves, and 5 sheep (young pigs). Moore sold the farm in 1876 and continued on as a tenant for another three years.

Archaeological evidence reflects the improvements in home technologies made in this period. When Moore’s farm was sold, the house was described as a “one-story frame dwelling and shed kitchen.” Archaeology revealed it to be 24 x 12 feet with the added kitchen, 20 x 12 feet, supported on brick piers. Charred earth and a metal plate on a brick pad at the center of the house are what remain of a stone foundation. Post molds—stains in the ground left by decayed wooden posts—along the sides of the house represent the remains of a porch. Whiteware and white glass shards found in the post molds date construction of the kitchen to the mid- to late 1800s. In the side yard 25 feet behind the house were three barrel-lined wells and 50 feet from the house was a two-seater privy (outdoor toilet). A second privy was found on the edge of the farmyard. Though the farm survived until 1937, no evidence of indoor plumbing was discovered.

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In the latter half of the century, it was a common sight in Delaware to see the roads leading to train depots lined with farm vehicles loaded with baskets of fruit and vegetables.
HOW DID PEOPLE DISPOSE OF THEIR TRASH?

One of the subjects little discussed in written histories is trash, refuse—the material residue of living. Unlike today, people in the 1700s and 1800s didn’t have the convenience of garbage collection. Although little went to waste on farms or in the kitchen, everything that was disposed of—garbage—was fed to the pigs, and broken objects were repaired and reused whenever possible. The rest was carried away from living areas, where it piled up, or was tossed into a hole—a refuse pit. Wells and privies no longer in use were often used for this purpose.

THE ARTIFACTS AND FEATURES on farm sites represent tangible, if fragmentary, evidence of how farming families lived in the past. By studying the things people left behind—as opposed to what was valued and passed on—archaeologists get a picture of how people organized their households and what they chose, or could afford, to own. Archaeologists can also evaluate what people ate and what they cooked with.

WILLIAM STRICKLAND PLANTATION SITE: WELL STRATIGRAPHY

Remnants of the Farmer’s Past

The well found at the William Strickland Plantation Site may have been lined with wooden cribbing. Past holes nearby indicate it was surrounded by a well sweep, a device used to raise buckets and swing them over to the side of the well. Dishes the family threw out made up the bulk of the assemblage and indicate the well was filled in around 1750. Objects made of wood, leather, and cloth may have been part of this trash but these materials normally do not survive in the ground.

From these artifacts we can tell that the Strickland household used milk pans and butter pots for dairying. Most of the redware plates and bowls were locally made, however at least one was brought all the way from North Devon in England. The Stricklands drank from sturdy stoneware jugs and tankards imported from England and Germany, and sipped tea from fine English stoneware and Chinese porcelain cups.
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ROOTED IN LAND

THE DELAWARE FARM FAMILY was an economic unit of production and each family member, young and old, had a role to play. Apart from the help of a few laborers — those that lived on the farm, enslaved or indentured, or those that were hired by the day or at harvest time, most of the farm work was done by the farm family. While a division of labor, based on sex, age and strength, was understood, everybody — men, women, and children — pitched in during certain operations when timing was critical, such as haying and harvesting. As parents, the farmer and his wife passed on their knowledge of farming and homemaking to their children, but it was up to the children to learn by doing.

DOCUMENTS TELL US ABOUT SOME THINGS FARMERS DID...
Digging historical farm sites, archaeologists unearth pieces of the past that may be unrecognizable, because of their fragmentary condition, and because they may come from objects no longer familiar to us today. This is where historical records, such as merchant accounts and estate inventories that listed a person’s belongings at the time of death, are useful in reconstructing — and providing a fuller picture of — the everyday things used by the farm family.

THE FARMER
It was the farmer’s responsibility to run the farm, work the soil, plant the crops, and raise the livestock. In practice, he had to be something of a “jack of all trades,” an expression meaning he had to be able to be a carpenter, mechanic, doctor, to keep his house, the farm buildings, the farm equipment and the draft animals — horses and oxen — in working order and healthy.

- Clear the land, cut firewood
- Construct houses, outbuildings, fences
- Plow fields, harvest crops, thresh wheat
- Cook the daily meals, bake bread
- Raise sheep, cattle, hogs, chickens

THE FARMER’S WIFE
The role of women in the family was to care for the children and manage the households. In addition, women made contributions to farm income by canning vegetables and fruit and making butter and cheese that were sold or bartered.

- Care for the children
- Cook the daily meals, bake bread
- Raise sheep, cattle, hogs, chickens

CHILDREN ON THE FARM
Children were taught to respect adults, and as soon as they were old enough, they helped their parents on the farm. While they learned important children for their future farming roles, it is unlikely that the evidence of these chores are visible in the archaeological record.

Young boys and girls helped with farm chores by:
- Driving cows to pasture
- Carrying water to the men working in the field
- Hunting eggs in the hay and fence corners
- Feeding the chickens and livestock
- Weeding the garden

PIECING TOGETHER THE PAST

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