

# Farmstead Transition at the Houston–LeCompt Site



## **Farmstead Transition at the Houston-LeCompt Site**

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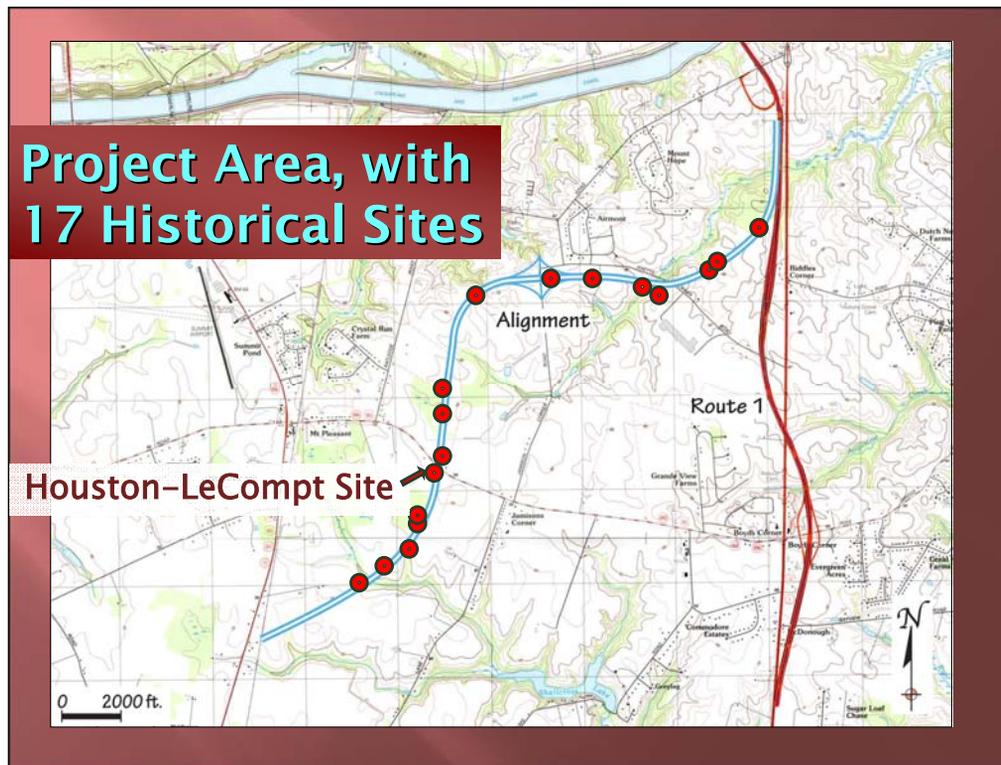
*Paper presented in "17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Historic Archaeology Sites from the Route 301 Project in Delaware,"*

*session organized by the Delaware Department of Transportation*

*at the Society for Historical Archaeology annual meeting, Baltimore, January 2012*

*and at the Middle Atlantic Archaeological Conference, Virginia Beach, March 2012.*

This site was discovered as part of a large project funded by the Delaware Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration. The US Route 301 project consists of a proposed new highway, which would extend from US Route 1 just south of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal southwest across Saint Georges Hundred in New Castle County, Delaware, to the Maryland border.



In 2009, Archaeological and Historical Consultants, Inc. (A&HC) was assigned to survey the northwestern portion of the proposed project. Surveys of supplemental areas resulting from design changes were conducted by Hunter Research, Inc. and Dovetail Cultural Resources Group. Together, this work resulted in the identification of 17 historical sites in an area of 5.4 miles. Only one of these sites was associated with a standing historic structure, a barn.



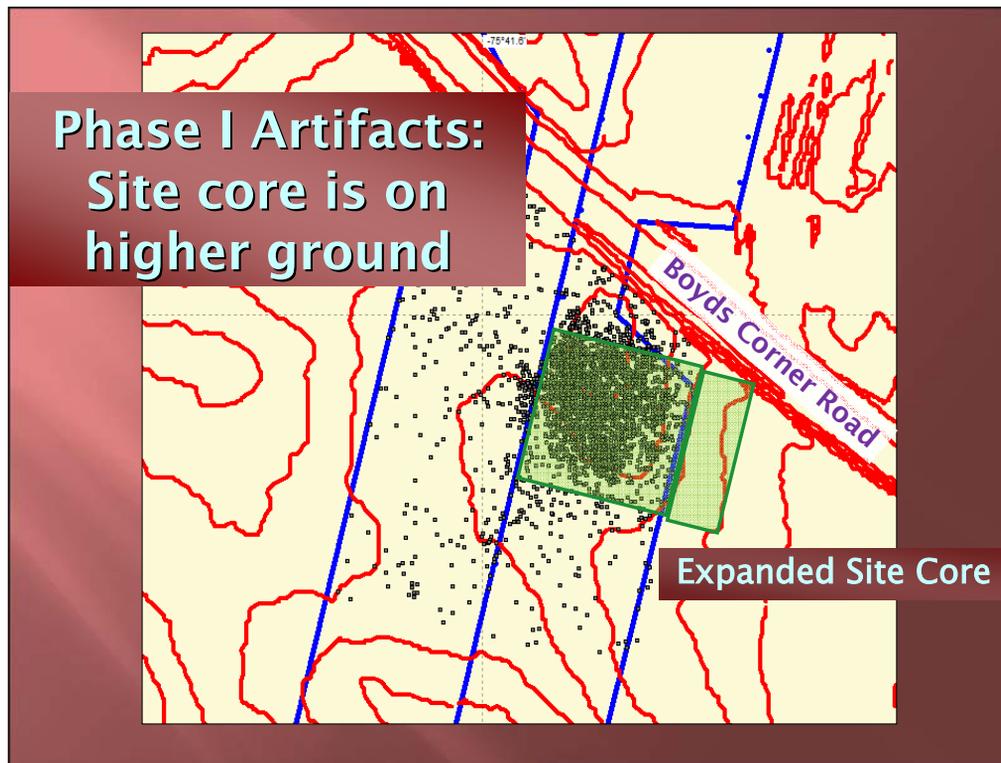
Most of the survey was across agricultural lands. The boundaries of many of the fields and wood lots have not changed from those depicted on historic maps. This made it easier to trace the history of property ownership.

The Houston-LeCompt Site was situated in a field on the south side of Boyds Corner Road, an early road leading east towards Reedy Island on the Delaware River. There were no extant historic structures. However, historical atlas maps had shown a farmstead at this location, making it a high probability area for a historical site.

## Pedestrian Survey of dense artifact scatter



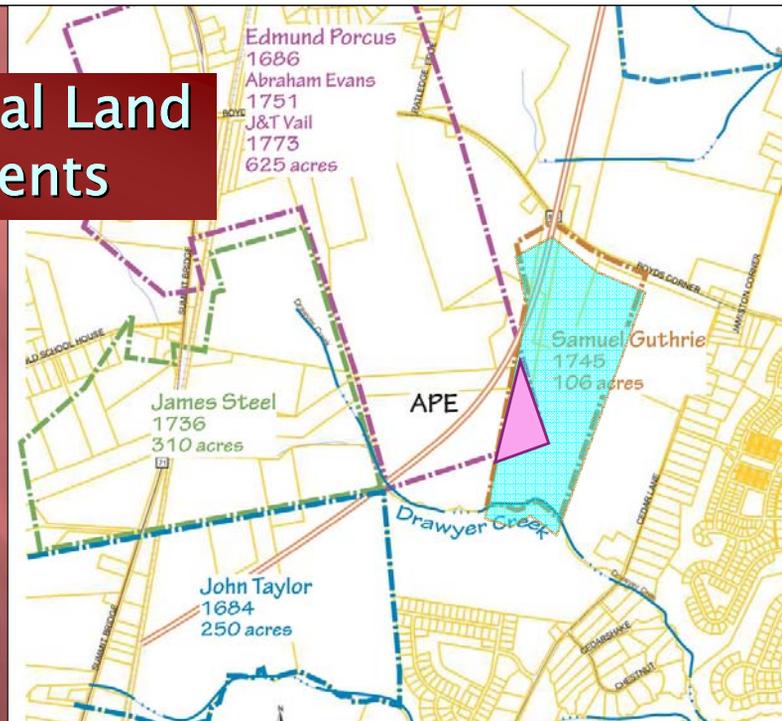
The portion of the project surveyed by A&HC extended mostly across agricultural fields. This provided ideal conditions for the identification of sites through pedestrian surface survey. The survey methodology required that field be plowed, disked, and washed by rain. Then pin flags were used to mark the locations of artifacts found in surface survey, which were recorded with GPS readings. Some sites showed only light scatters of surface artifacts. But at the Houston-LeCompt site, over 5000 artifacts were collected in the Phase I survey by this method.



Plotting the distribution of artifacts from the GPS readings showed that the site extended across the entire highway alignment (shown in blue) on the south side of the road. Within the site, there was a concentration of artifacts in the northeast part of the alignment, forming a core site area (shown in green). Survey of an additional project area to the east by Dovetail Resources Group confirmed that this core area extended beyond the original survey.

In the relatively flat terrain of central Delaware, the use of 1-foot contour intervals (shown in red) was helpful in highlighting subtle differences in terrain. In this case, it demonstrate that the site core was located on a slight rise. The larger view showed that this rise was the highest ground between the headwaters of two streams, Scotts Run, which flows to the northeast, and a tributary of Drawers Creek flowing to the south. Historic settlers in Delaware were aware of and used such slight variations in the landscape to advantage, in this case providing a dry place for a house cellar in an otherwise generally wet area.

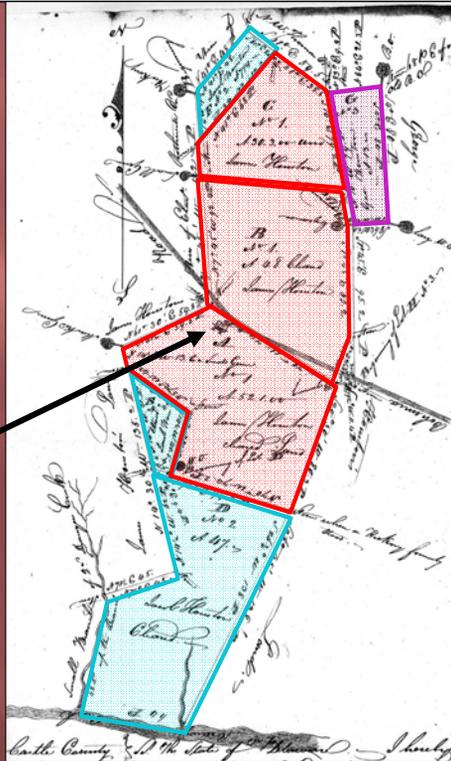
## Original Land Patents



The property was traced back to an original land patent obtained by Samuel Guthrie in 1745 (shown in blue). Nearby properties were traced back to patents dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reflecting the gradual rate of settlement and in-filling in this region. Guthrie's patent covered 106 acres, extending north from the stream to the historic road. However, his boundaries conflicted on the west side with those of another property, known as the "Percus Tract." It had originally been patented by Porcus, and was subsequently re-patented by Evans, and then by the Vail brothers without resolving the boundary conflict (shown in pink).

Samuel Guthrie was not known to have settled on the property. The land was acquired by Jacob Houston in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, probably through his wife's family. Jacob and Mary Houston settled in the area about the time of the Revolutionary War. Tax lists showed Houston as a head of household in Saint Georges Hundred as early as 1779, and continuing until his death in 1793. Thereafter, his widow Mary was assessed for the real estate, including additional properties to the east and north of the road. Their three sons were only assessed for livestock and personal property, not real estate. This showed that they had not yet acquired their own farms. They were probably still living together in the family homestead with their mother and sister, and farming the family lands. Eventually two of the sons established their own farmsteads on adjacent lands.

## Division of Mary Houston's estate in 1828



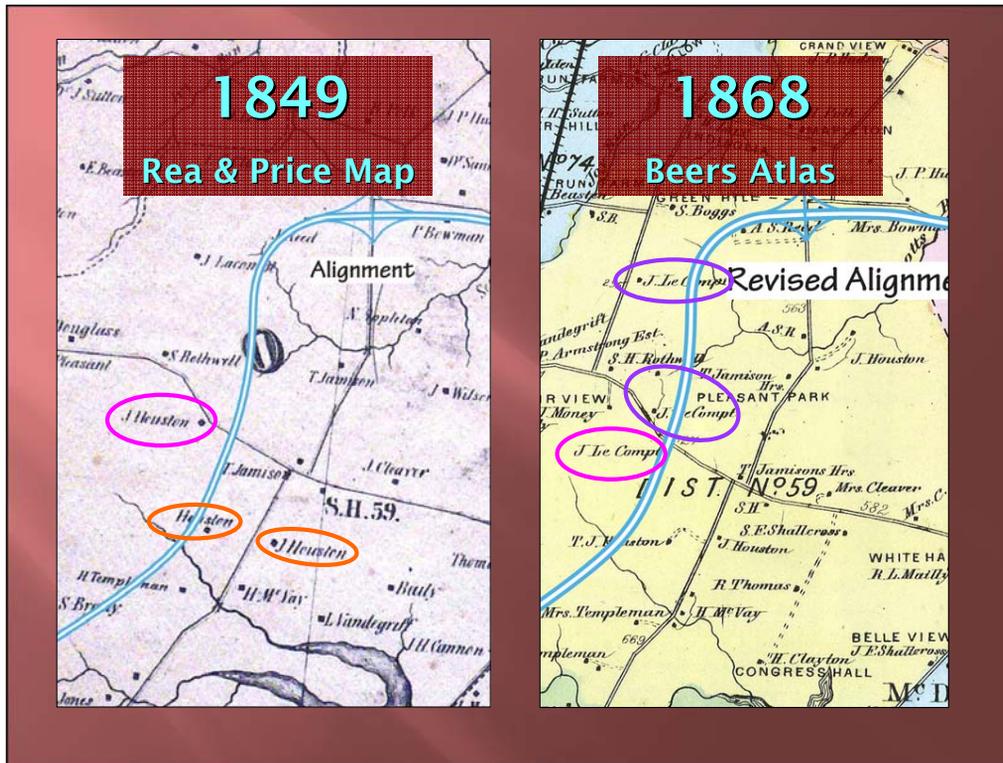
George

James

Jacob

After Mary Houston's death in 1816, the property was supposed to be divided equally among her four children. Between her death in 1816 and the settlement of her estate by the Orphan's Court in 1828, her daughter had died, so her share was re-apportioned among her brothers, and George had sold his share to his brother James. James thus acquired the largest portion of the lands (130 acres; shown in pink). This included the original farmstead, in which he was living at the time. This house was the only structure shown on the Orphan's Court map. His brother George, who had a farmstead to the northeast, only acquired a wood lot (shown in purple). His brother Jacob, who had established a farmstead on lands to the southeast, acquired a field bordering his property and two wood lots (shown in blue).

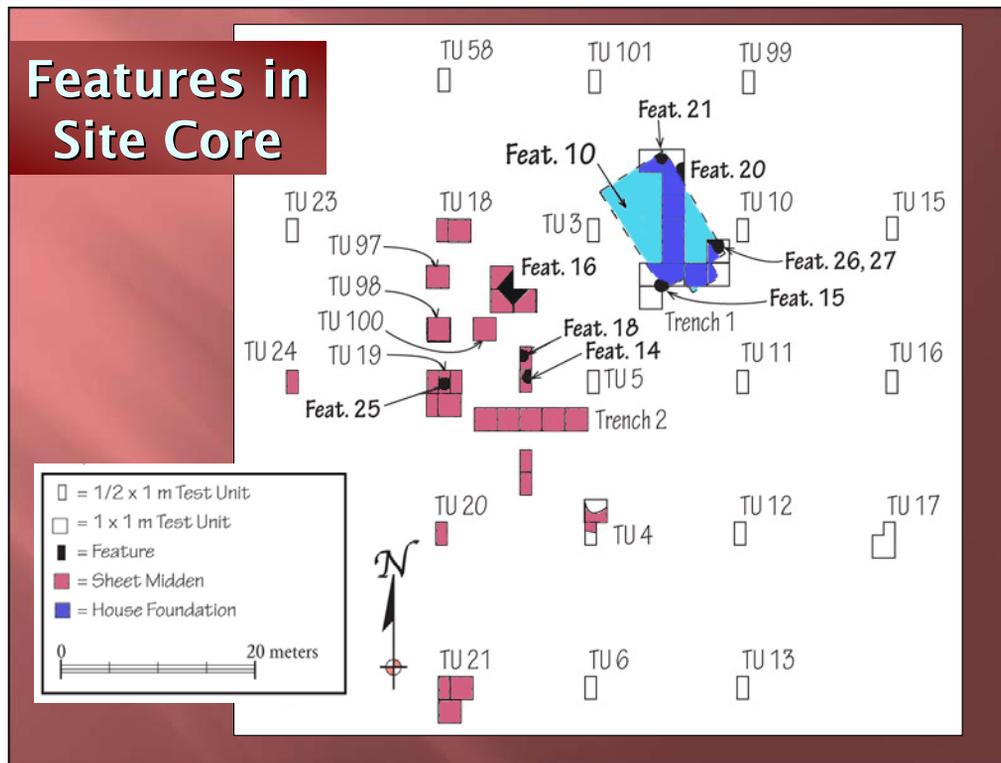
James worked to restore the western portion of the property, which had been lost through conflict with the neighboring property boundaries. He bought several small parcels bordering the west side of the property that he and his brothers inherited.



In the second generation, the Houston brothers thus owned adjacent farms. But by the third generation, much of this land had passed out of the family. George Houston, living to the northeast, died in 1847. His will left part of his property to his wife, which passed to the Jamison family heirs, and part to his natural son John Houston by another woman. Jacob Houston, living to the southeast, died in 1838. He left his entire property to Sarah Ann Taylor and her five children, who were listed as Taylors in his will, but all bore the name Houston later in life. Three of her sons moved to the Midwest, leaving one son and daughter at home, neither of whom married or had children. James Houston never married and continued to live at the original farmstead until his death in 1849. Census records showed that after the death of his mother, he lived alone with one younger woman (likely one of his cousins) and one or two slaves. He left no will and his property was divided among his cousins (his closest legal relatives), who sold their portions.

Most of it was acquired by James LeCompt, a neighbor to the northwest. This was an example of a pattern seen throughout the region in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The earlier trend to divide lands among sons resulted in smaller farms over time. This pattern was reversed as individuals bought several small farms to form large land holdings. Farm managers or tenant farmers were then hired to farm the individual properties. James LeCompt, for example, added to his original holdings by buying the former James Houston lands. Three residences were shown on the 1868 map, suggesting that the original farmstead had been divided into two or three tenancies.

## Features in Site Core



Phase II excavations at the Houston-LeCompt site revealed a number of subsurface features. The Houston family had established the farmstead and occupied it for two generations, a period of about 70 years. The most important feature relating to this period was the house foundation (shown in blue). Cellar fill had been identified in a Phase I shovel test placed on the slight rise. A trench excavated across the location identified the north and south corners of the foundation. With an extension to find the east corner, we were able to determine that the foundation measured 9 x 15 feet, with a small extension on the southeast that may have served as an exterior access to the cellar.

In the 1797 tax lists, Mary Houston's property was described as containing two houses, a barn, stables, and a corn crib, as well as livestock and 2 ounces of plate (silver). The next year for which detailed tax records were available was 1816, the year of Mary Houston's death. Her property was described as "improved with one wooden dwelling." This was probably the house whose cellar was uncovered in the excavations.



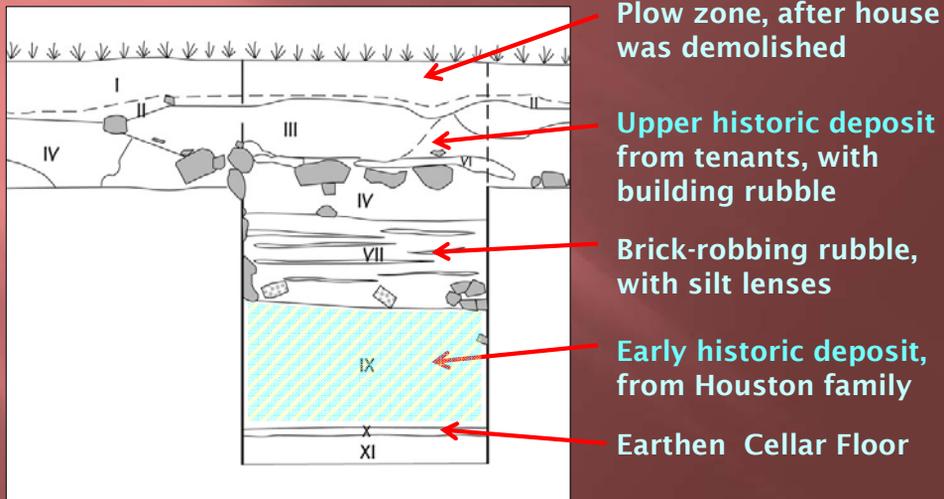
Across most of the house foundation, excavation was only extended to the base of the plow zone to define the limits of the cellar. Excavations extended deeper to define the east corner of the house, encountering an intact portion of the brick foundation wall. The wall did not extend to the base of the plow zone. Apparently the upper portions of the brick walls were later robbed out for re-use elsewhere. This was a common practice in an area where building stone was scarce and bricks had to be manufactured for buildings.



One test unit in the center of the foundation was also selected for excavation extending to the cellar floor. The cellar had an earthen floor, which was found at a depth of 145 cm (almost 5 feet) below the surface.

The house was demolished around 1932, and the area converted to cultivation. Since then, it had been plowed continuously, creating a plow zone that was 15-20 cm (6-8 inches) thick on the rise where the foundation stood. Few rocks were visible on the surface to provide evidence of the house location. Below the plow zone, however, there was scattered stone rubble from the demolition of the house. This debris formed an upper historic deposit, which was 42 cm (16 inches) thick. Tax records listed the house as wooden, but the fireplace and chimney were likely built of stone. Both the plow zone and the upper historic deposit yielded artifacts dating to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the Houston family ownership, the property was apparently occupied by tenants, but they could not be identified from records.

## Profile of Cellar Fill



Below the upper historic fill was a zone of brick fragments, which was 50 cm (20 inches) thick. This marked the period of brick robbing, and contained few artifacts. There were numerous lenses of silt, from soils washed into the partially filled cellar by rain. This suggested that the building stood empty for a period, while bricks were robbed and debris filled the cellar cavity.

Below the brick rubble was an early historic deposit, which was 35-50 cm (14-20 inches) thick. It contained artifacts from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, indicating that it had accumulated during the two generations of the Houston family occupation. The deposits from the Houston family were effectively sealed off by the layer of brick rubble, separating them from the deposits associated with later tenants of the property.

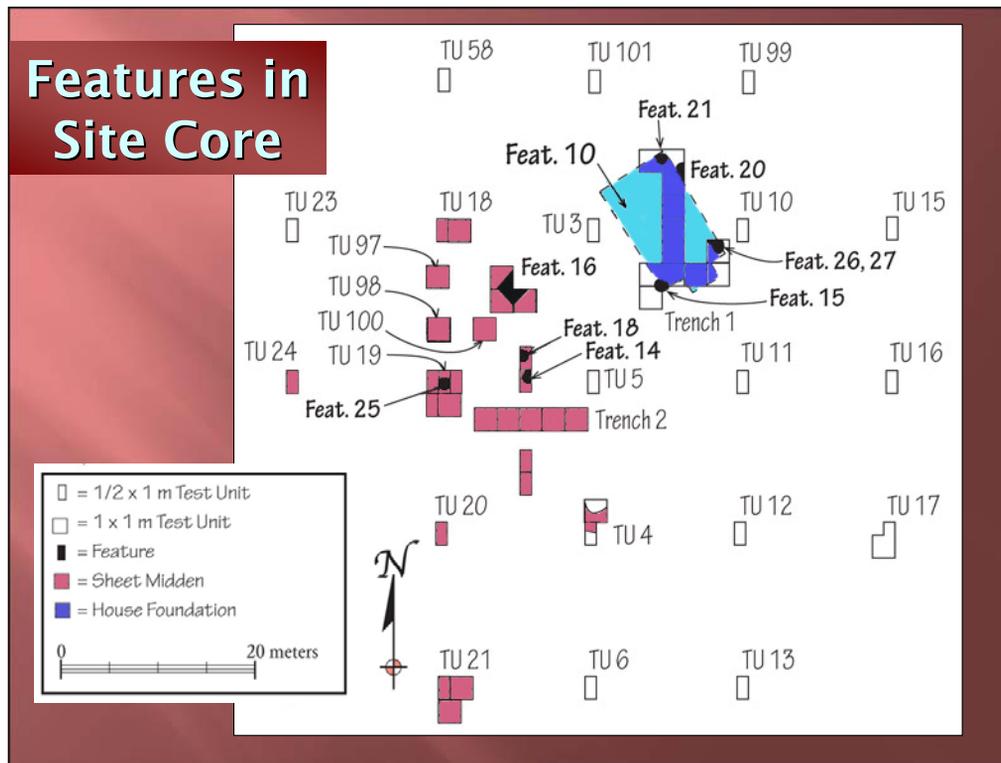
What remains unclear at this point in the exploration of the site is the history of the house itself. Does the presence of the brick rubble mean that the cellar walls were being robbed while the house was standing empty, between its use by the Houston family and by later tenants? Or was the Houston family house demolished and replaced with a later tenant house? If so, the later house appears to have been built on exactly the same location, over a partially filled cellar. Further excavation may help to resolve this question.



The artifacts from the Early Historic deposit in the cellar, reflecting the Houston family occupation of the site, were characterized by redwares and creamware. There were also a few sherds of tin-enameled earthenware, especially a type with gray speckled decoration, and one sherd of white salt-glazed stoneware.

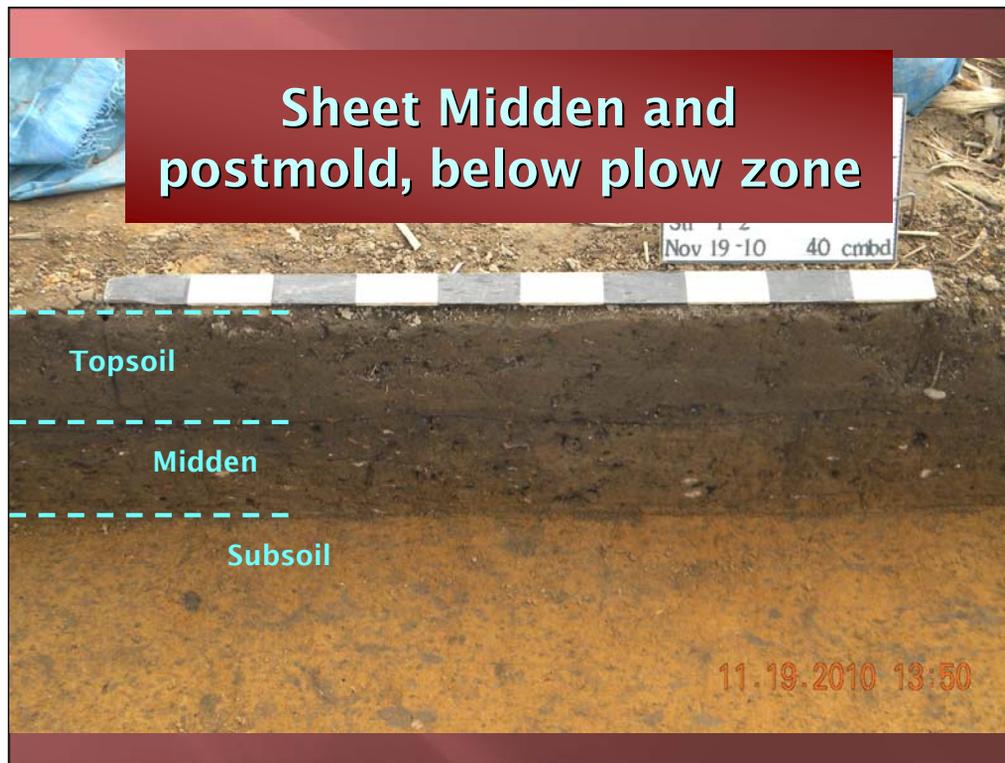
James Houston continued to live in the house until his death in 1849. Since he never married, he apparently also never replaced the family dishes with more contemporary wares from the early or mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The Houston assemblage was quite distinct from the later tenant occupations. The later occupants introduced refined white earthenwares with a variety of transfer printed and other decorative styles, as well as an abundance of container glass.

## Features in Site Core



As mentioned previously, the house was built on a slight rise. On the crown of this slight elevation, erosion and plowing had thinned the topsoil to the extent that plowing reached to the subsoil. All artifacts were mixed in the plow zone and no subsurface features were found except foundation corners.

Around the lower slopes of this slight rise, in contrast, the soil had been thickened by slope wash and the accumulation of historic trash. As a result, there was a layer of historic yard deposits or sheet midden (shown in pink) that was preserved below the depth of modern plowing. A number of features had also been preserved within or below this historic yard deposit.



The thickness of the sheet midden varied across the yard, being up to 20 cm (8 inches) thick below the plow zone. It had accumulated gradually, incorporating yard deposits from the different periods of occupation at the site. Where it was thick enough to be excavated in two or three levels (each measuring 10 cm thick), differences in the artifacts could be analyzed. Both upper and lower midden levels were characterized by redware ceramics, as well as architectural materials, shell, and other faunal remains. But the upper level had distinctly higher frequencies of the later 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century ceramic types, as well as container glass. These preliminary results suggest that the sheet midden may be able to provide information about different activity areas within the yard, and how the use of the yard changed from the family farmstead to the tenant occupation.

## Decayed Brick Floor Of Outbuilding



Other features found in the excavation of the yard included traces of at least one outbuilding. A bright orange deposit was all that remained of a decayed brick floor. It had probably been the floor of a kitchen. It measured approximately 120 x 130 cm (4 x 4.5 feet) and had a post mold at one corner.

A number of isolated post molds were found across the yard area. But not enough area has been cleared to identify whether they marked the locations of outbuildings or fence lines.

## Buried Pail with Ash & Cinder



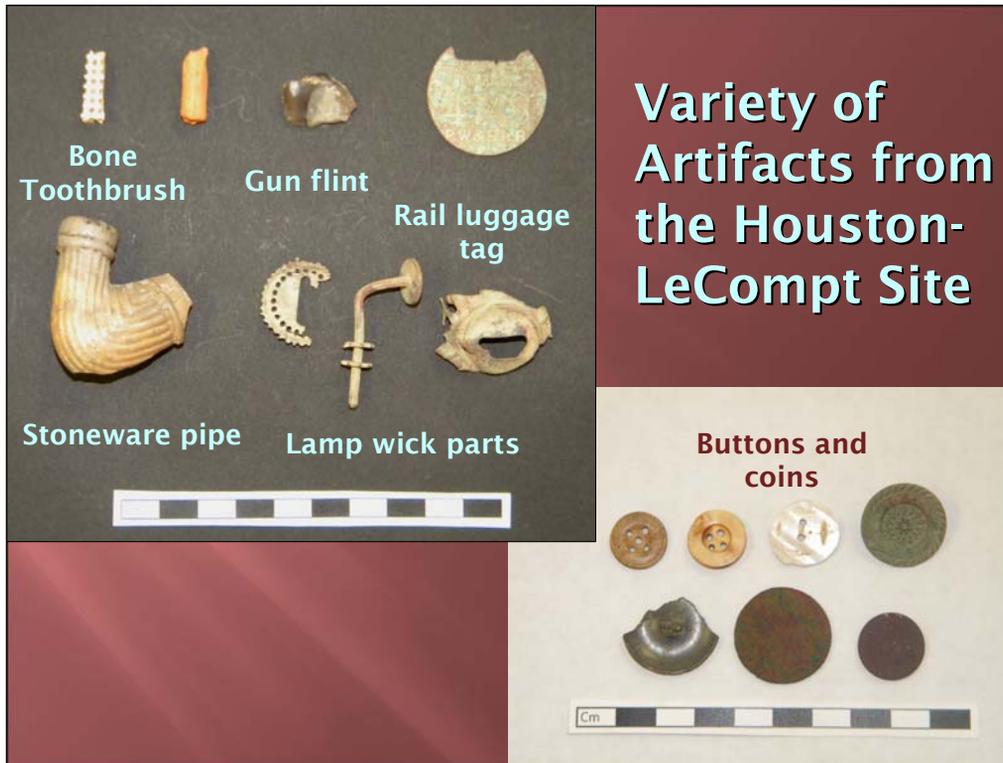
Various pits and other features were found scattered across the yard. One of the most unusual features was a trash-filled bucket or pail that had been buried in a pit. Although it was mostly filled with ash, cinder, and nails, it also contained a lot of container glass fragments and a few artifacts such as a plastic comb and ceramics with gilding and decal decorations. Together, the contents indicated that this pail represented a discrete deposit from the later tenant occupation of the site, probably from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Small Trash Pit



This small trash pit was similar in size to the one with a pail. It contained several redware ceramics, as well as most of a blue shell-edged plate (seen upside down), in a matrix of soil with charcoal. Like the pail, it was a discrete deposit, but from an earlier occupation at the site. It could date to an early tenant, or to James Houston's occupation of the site.

There was also one deep shaft feature, a well or privy. It was not investigated further in the Phase II survey. The variety of features found in the yard give indications of activity areas, which could be further defined through the excavation of larger blocks.



Excavations at the Houston-LeCompt Site have been limited, but have produced a large collection of artifacts from the plow zone, as well as from features. The site was occupied by the Houston family from the 1770s to 1849 and by tenants until about 1932. The range of ceramic wares in different deposits at the site has already been described. The temporal span of the site can be illustrated by two artifacts, a gun flint representing the technology of the earliest occupants in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and a railroad luggage claim tag, representing the technology of mass transit used by some of the latest occupants of the site. In addition to large assemblages of ceramics and glass, the site yielded a range of small finds from both periods of occupation.

## Projectile Points from an early collector?



The most unusual artifacts from the site were perhaps these five prehistoric projectile points. There were only 16 other prehistoric lithics found in the entire excavation. These five points were not found together, but they were all found in the cellar fill and the plow zone near one corner of the house. They may have been stashed in the house, or under a floor, and were scattered when the house was demolished. Perhaps it was a cache, but we can't be certain. Archaeologists tend to cite ceremony or ritual when they don't know the function of something. Instead, one of the site inhabitants may have been an arrowhead collector or had an interest in archaeology.