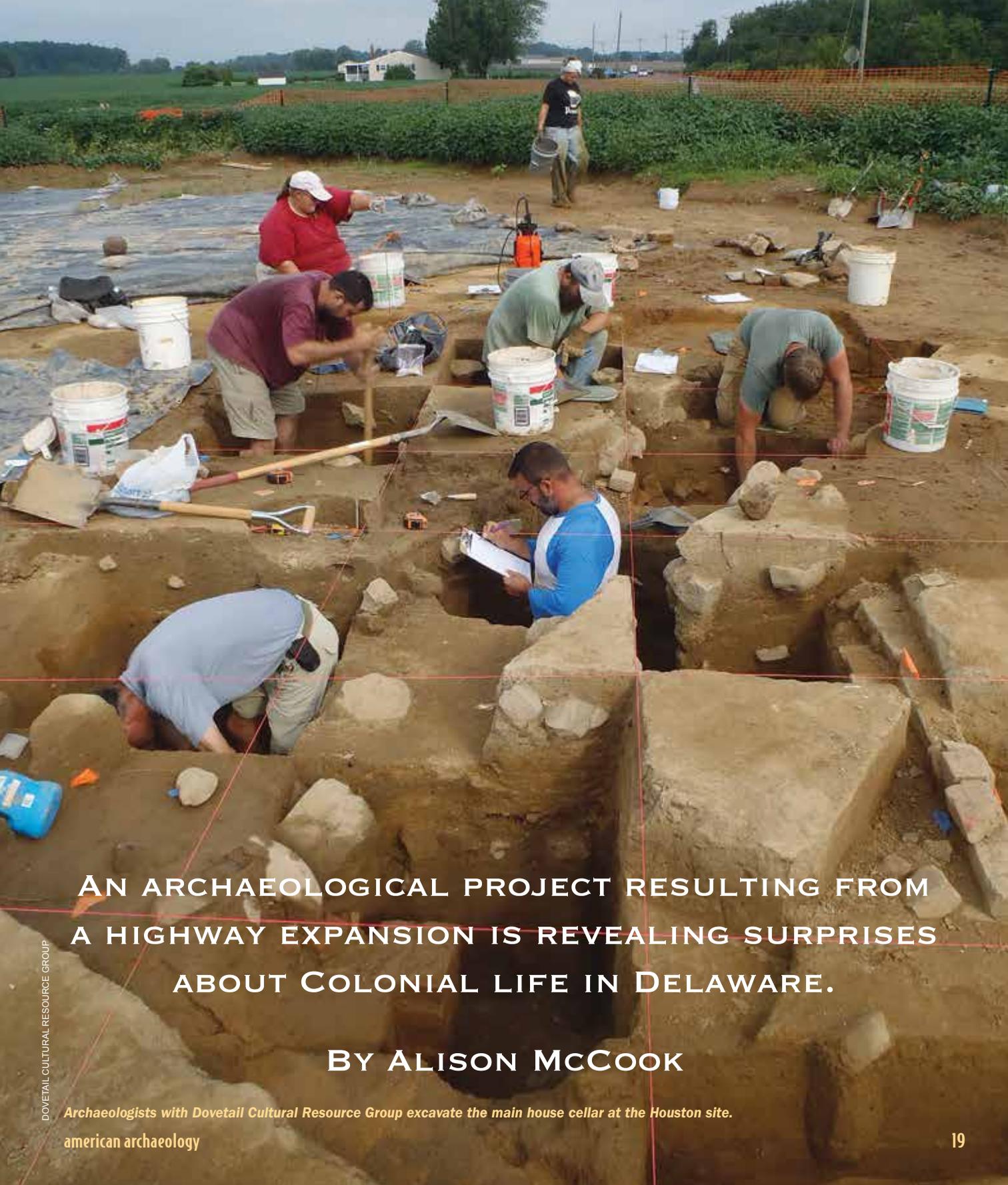


# A Road to the Past



AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT RESULTING FROM  
A HIGHWAY EXPANSION IS REVEALING SURPRISES  
ABOUT COLONIAL LIFE IN DELAWARE.

BY ALISON MCCOOK

*Archaeologists with Dovetail Cultural Resource Group excavate the main house cellar at the Houston site.*

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**O**n a sunny fall day in 2011, as archaeologist William Liebknecht was screening excavated dirt from a soybean field in central Delaware, he found something that changed his picture of colonial life in the region. Liebknecht was part of a team of archaeologists with Hunter Research, a cultural resource management (CRM) firm that was excavating a site that will eventually be destroyed by the expansion of U.S. Route 301, the state's largest highway project in 15 years.

On that day in 2011 he found a type of English ceramic sherd that's rarely seen in Delaware. The white slip over the red body, along with a characteristic scratch decoration known as sgraffito, identified it as a well-known type of pottery made in north Devonshire in England, which stopped being exported to the American colonies in the 18th century. "That was one of those moments where I just said, 'wow,'" Liebknecht says. "It was a surprise for us to see it in this area because it's never been found in Delaware before. It's not what we expected at all."

Based on their research of the archaeological record and previous historical studies, the archaeologists assumed that few European Americans were living in central Delaware

during the late 17th to the early 18th centuries, and that they had little if any access to fancy goods. "What we're finding out from this project is that may not have been the case," says David Clarke, an archaeologist for the Delaware Department of Transportation (DELDOT), which is overseeing the project. "There may have been all these people living here."

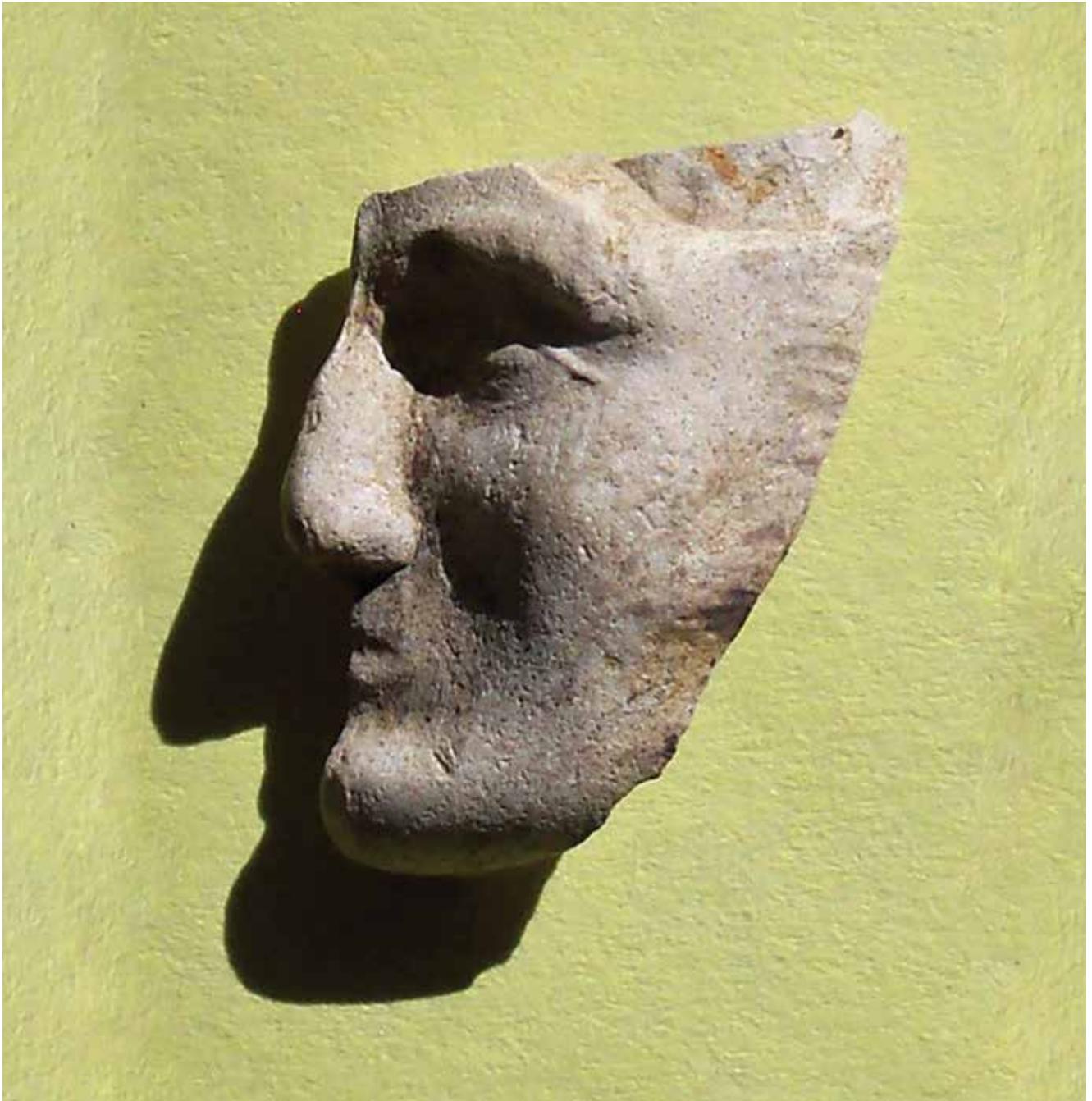
**C**entral Delaware is overrun by trucks. In the suburban community of Middletown, heavy vehicles chug past construction sites for new schools, hospitals, and housing developments. To reroute those large trucks from residential areas, DELDOT is building a new 17-mile, four-lane highway at the cost of roughly \$800 million.

This in turn gave birth to the huge, \$12-million archaeological project managed by Clarke. Many projects of this sort hire one CRM firm to do all the work, but Clarke, having consulted with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), decided instead to hire nine. In addition to speeding up the fieldwork, this decision, according to Clarke, lends the project a wider range of expertise and increases the economic impact of the state and federal money being spent.

In addition to its benefits, working with this many firms,



*This serving platter with a slip design was discovered in the cellar of the Houston house.*



***The Houston site also yielded a 19th-century pipe-bowl fragment with a man's profile. The archaeologists haven't identified who it portrays, but they suspect it was a prominent politician.***

who usually compete against, rather than cooperate with, each other, also has its challenges. He requires the CRM firms to share their data so everyone will have the big picture of the archaeological discoveries, which has led to such unintended consequences as firm A alleging that firm B's work is slipshod, and that A could do it much better. So Clarke spends a lot of time dealing with such matters and making sure that the competitors continue to cooperate.

During the first phase of the archaeological project, which included a cultural resource survey of over 500 acres of land, the researchers identified 68 possible sites.

Due to the limitations of time and money, all 68 sites could not be excavated, so the second phase of the project

focused on evaluating the significance of the sites to determine which were important enough to be excavated prior to the roadwork or, if possible, preserved in place. Federal law mandates that the SHPO take part in the evaluation process, so consequently Clarke, fellow DELDOT archaeologist Kevin Cunningham, and Gwen Davis, the SHPO's archaeologist, spent countless days assessing the quality of the artifacts and considering each site's research potential. Federal law also mandates that the parties concur in their determinations. In the event of a disagreement, a federal agency called the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation would attempt to resolve the dispute.

Though there was an inherent tension between their

respective offices—DELDOT “wants to build a road and the SHPO wants to not build a road,” says Clarke—the three of them recommended that 27 of the 68 sites were significant enough to investigate in detail. “To meet the schedules, we had to make compromises and move on,” he says. “We can’t hold up the construction of a \$800 million highway because we can’t make decisions.” Their recommendations then had to be approved by the Federal Highway Administration, which funded part of the project. The other 41 sites will undergo no further research and will be destroyed during construction. “There have been times when I’ve lost sleep,” confesses Clarke. “By giving a thumbs down on a site, we’ll never know what’s there. That’s a hard decision.”

Of the 27 significant sites, 14 were deemed potentially eligible to be on the National Register of Historic Places. Consequently those sites have to be preserved if possible, or, failing that, completely excavated before they, too, are destroyed. Eight of those sites were entirely or partly preserved by making minor changes to the design of the highway. The remainder are being excavated during the third phase of the project, which began earlier this year. No further excavations will take place at the other 13 sites that are ineligible for the National Register prior to their destruction.

**T**here’s no information out there on how the everyday person lived except for (sites) like this,” says Kerri Barile, president of Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, who is directing one of the digs. That information indicates that rural Delaware’s residents were much more connected to international trade networks than previously believed. Finding that people in these remote areas participated in international trade “changes our entire way of thinking about all the sites in this area.”

Although this part of the state is a short distance from both the Chesapeake and Delaware bays, in the 1700s there was little or no local infrastructure, such as roads. Some of the Native Americans were hostile, and there were also

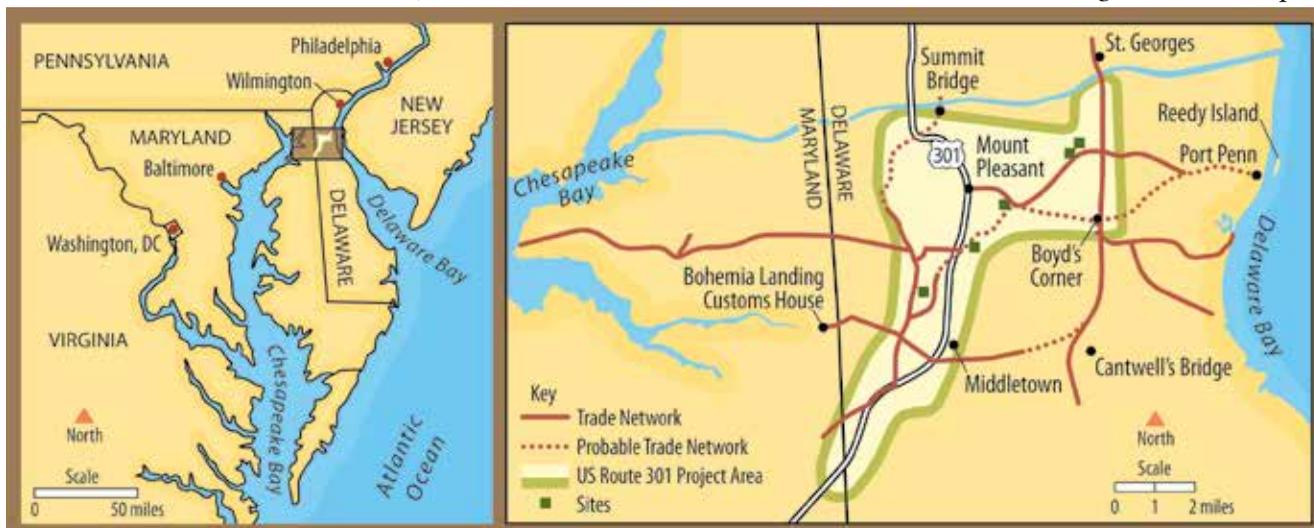


JOELLE BROWNING, HUNTER RESEARCH, INC.

**Archaeologists exposed this section of a road that was part of the trade network through which goods were moved between the Chesapeake and Delaware bays.**

conflicts between European Americans, such as the Dutch and the Swedes, who fought over land. This was “not a hospitable place,” says Clarke, so its residents tended to stay close to home.

In the early 1700s, the British taxed goods that moved between the Colonies, and it appears some of the Delaware trade was untaxed, and therefore illegal. The project has uncovered five sites that the archaeologists think were part



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**Archaeological and historical evidence indicate that there was a trade network that people in Delaware participated in. The right map shows that network as it’s thought to have been in historical times. The known segments of the trade network are represented by solid brown lines, the dotted lines represent likely segments. The highway project has led to the excavation of five sites related to the network.**

of an illegal trade network. To reach one of those sites, Cardon-Holton, Clarke has to slowly maneuver his truck through mud-filled ruts of an unmarked road. A thick, curved tree line stands on the left, beyond which lie wetlands. Eventually, he reaches the area where Liebknecht and a number of other archaeologists from Hunter Research are excavating.

According to historical documents, Cardon-Holton was first settled in 1722 by William Cardon. After his death in 1737, a tenant occupied the land, which contained a well, smokehouse, main house, and other features. The road Clarke took to the site appears on a map that was made around 1740. It covered roughly eight miles and traversed the state between the Chesapeake and Delaware bays. “We didn’t expect to see such amazing archaeological finds along this road,” says Clarke. He anticipated discovering mostly locally made, plain ceramics; instead, the site is yielding goods such as gunflints and ceramics from overseas. “We’re seeing all top-shelf, high-end goods,” such as purple manganese stoneware with a glaze specific to a region in Germany from the turn of the 18th century, says Liebknecht.

Clarke theorizes that the residents of Cardon-Holton participated in illegal trade, which historical documents state took place around this time. “The British Royal Navy

was really watching” the southern portion of the Chesapeake Bay,” says Liebknecht. “It’s where the majority of tobacco” bound for Europe came from.

At the Elkins site, which was part of the illegal trade network, Liebknecht found a batch of redware pottery that he couldn’t quite place. “I’m digging up all this redware, and I’m thinking, ‘this looks familiar.’” He decided to share photos of it with a fellow archaeologist, who saw similarities between the Elkins’ redware and vessels produced from the 1720s to 1746 by the noted Philadelphia potters the Hillegas brothers. Coincidentally, archaeologists with Liebknecht’s company, Hunter Research, had found Hillegas redware during a dig behind Betsy Ross’ house in Philadelphia 20 years ago.

Liebknecht compared the redware from the Elkins and Hillegas sites. “Everything about it was a dead on, spot on match,” he says, which suggests the Elkins site residents obtained the redware from someone who traveled there from Philadelphia in exchange for local goods such as tobacco, wheat, or butter. To confirm this, the archaeologists will perform an X-ray fluorescence analysis to determine the chemical makeup of the redware from the two sites. This will show whether or not they’re a true match.

The other sites on the illegal trade network contain



WILLIAM B. LIEBKNECHT, HUNTER RESEARCH, INC.

*A researcher holds a sherd from a German grey-bodied stoneware tankard dating to the first half of the 18th century.*



LINDSAY LEE, HUNTER RESEARCH, INC

*These red-bodied earthenware vessels—(from top, clockwise) a plate, tankard, another tankard, cream pitcher, and bowl—were recovered from a shallow root cellar at the Elkins site. The items date to the third quarter of the 18th century.*

items that include a brass Chinese coin, and a copper alloy disk that served as a cuff link and carries a portrait of King George II and Queen Caroline. The archaeologists suspect it was a high-quality, commemorative piece from their 1727 coronation.

The archaeologists assume the illegal trade network began in the upper portion of the Chesapeake Bay, where people from Maryland and Virginia could transport tobacco and other goods across the mid section of Delaware to the Delaware Bay. There, a larger vessel could transport the goods undetected up the Delaware Bay to Philadelphia or up

the coast to New York. Archaeological evidence suggests that goods moved across Delaware in the other direction as well.

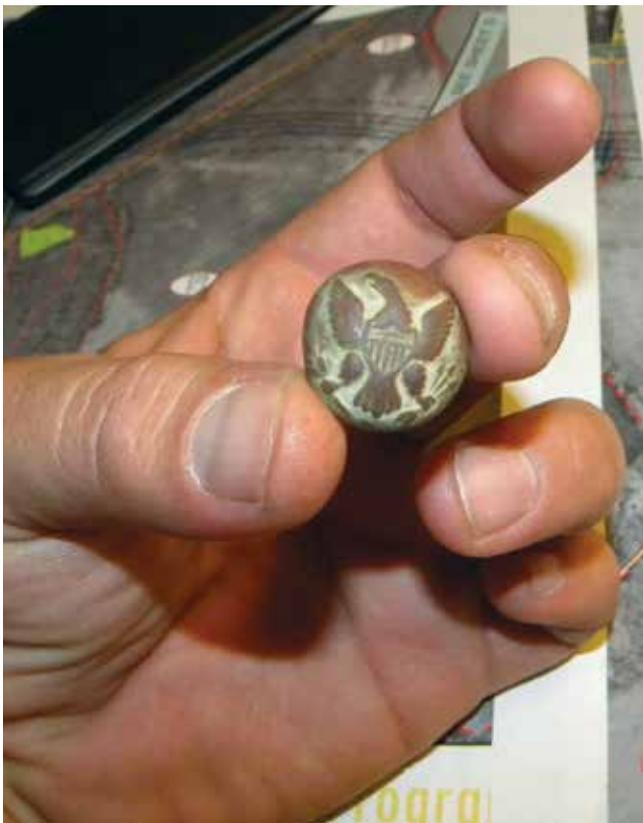
Based on historical accounts of illegal trade in Delaware and New Jersey, as well as the discovery of ox shoes and the center hubs of cart wheels on the road, the archaeologists suspect the people who occupied the Cardon-Holton site maintained the road and provided the oxen to pull carts, for which they received some of the goods.

It's known that the merchants used oxen to drag their boats on giant sleds down the road to the Delaware Bay, where they placed them back in the water.

There was a customs house at one end of the road, but there are numerous historical accounts of tax collectors throughout the Colonies being bullied or bribed. Indeed, Liebknecht and his colleagues have found 18th-century court records of a tax collector saying he was beaten up. “American merchants are doing everything they can to reduce their tax burden,” says Clarke. “A lot of this is setting the groundwork for why we had an American Revolution.”

People in rural Delaware who didn’t live along the illegal trade network also obtained trade goods. At another site along the path of the new highway, the brick-lined basement of an 18th-century log cabin contains jewelry, cuff links, and more buttons—including many that are hand-painted—than any other site Barile has excavated. The first occupants of this land, the Houston family, didn’t bring all of these precious objects with them when they settled the land, she notes, because some date to after they arrived in the 1770s—one pickle bowl, for instance, is made of pearlware, which wasn’t imported until 1775. This evidence suggests that the Houstons, and other 18th-century families in this region, were linked to an extensive trade network. “Both the quantity and quality of the items were surprising for rural areas,” she says.

Once Barile and her team began the excavation, they looked at historical documents such as title, tax, and court records, and found something else unusual: the first occupation by the Houstons was listed under the name of the wife, Mary. She passed the house down to her son, and then in



**This button was recovered during the first phase of the archaeological project.**

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**A hand-painted cuff link was found in the Houston house cellar. This mid-18th century jewelry would have been worn by a male, possibly one of Mary Houston’s three sons.**

1865, county land deeds show a James LeCompt bought the property as a tenant farm, and lived across the street. (Thankfully, he tore down the Houstons’ house and built another property on top of it, sealing the artifacts in the original cellar.) The site was continuously occupied from the 18th to the 20th centuries. “I’d say almost 100,000 artifacts have come out of this site,” says Barile.

She suspects that Mary Houston used the earnings from her farm to buy material goods instead of more land. Since the Houstons were not located on the illegal trade network, they likely purchased their goods legally at a nearby port. The quantity of goods is more than Barile expected from Mary’s land tax and insurance records, which show she was apparently “upper middle class,” she says. “She obviously did travel a lot to get these goods.”

Besides being surprised by the extent of the trade, Clarke is amazed by the number of people estimated to live in rural Delaware during this period. Census data and academic estimates from the early 1700s indicate there were only a few people per square mile, but the archaeologists have found many more sites and artifacts than such a sparse population could produce.

All told, Clarke estimates that the excavators have unearthed “hundreds of thousands” of artifacts, most of which date from the 18th to the early 20th centuries, though some Native American artifacts are 8,000 years old. One site appears to be a 19th-century African-American farmstead. Having yielded their data, most of the sites, including those on the illegal trade network, will be buried under the new highway. When asked if she’ll be sad about that, Barile glances briefly at the Houston site. “Sad? No, I’m happy I got to explore,” she says. “Without the new road, we would never have learned what we’ve learned.”

ALISON MCCOOK is a writer and editor based in Philadelphia.