

TENANTS IN THE WOODLOT, 1770-1920: ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE BIRD-HOUSTON SITE

DelDOT, FHWA, and the Louis Berger Group, Inc.

In this lonely corner of a nearly flat field, covered with puddles after every rain, people lived for 150 years. Why, and what were their lives like? Those are the questions archaeologists will try to answer while excavating the Bird-Houston Site. By the time US Route 301 is built across the spot, they will have learned much about the people who lived here and, through them, about Delaware's forgotten country folks.

Artifacts on the Ground

The Bird-Houston Site was discovered by archaeologists walking over these fields after they had been plowed and rained on. This is the easiest way to find archaeological sites, since the plowing turns artifacts up to the surface and the rain washes them clean. In this corner of the field, next to a swampy wood, hundreds of potsherds, pieces of bottle glass, and other artifacts could be seen lying on the ground. They were grouped in two clusters, 50 yards apart. In the one the archaeologists dubbed Locus A; the artifacts lay dense on the ground and seemed to date mostly to after the Civil War. The other cluster, dubbed Locus B, was much thinner, but it was older, dating to around 1770 to 1830. This property belonged throughout its history to farmers who lived somewhere else, so the people who lived here were tenants and they may well have been African American.



Testing the Site

Last year archaeologists came back to the site for a closer look. They dug what are called "test units," square holes measuring 3 feet across placed at regular intervals. By putting the dirt through a screen, they found hundreds more artifacts. A close look at these showed that the older part of the site, Locus B, dated to around 1770 to 1830, the newer part from about 1830 to 1920. It seems people lived on this spot for at least 150 years, building a new house sometime in the middle. The archaeologists also found what they call "features", things like wells, cellar holes and foundations that were dug deep enough to survive underneath the

plowed soil of the field. On Locus A, the main features were a well and the stone and brick foundations of a small house.





On Locus B, the features included some post holes and this strange pit (left). It is cone-shaped, around 3 feet deep, with sides sloped too steeply to stand on, and it was partly filled in with gray clay quite different from the surrounding soil. The clay must have come from somewhere off the site, maybe from the drainage ditch that was dug through the swamp nearby. Nobody has yet offered a good explanation of this one.

Planning for the Dig

Archaeologists, who study the historic period, from the first European settlements down into the twentieth century, get excited when they

find the homes of less well off people. This is because wealthy people left many records of how they lived, and some of their houses are still standing for us to look at. Even some of their furniture and clothing survives. But it is much harder to learn about poor people's lives. They didn't write much themselves, and few people bothered to write about them unless they were involved in crimes or fought in wars. Their houses have almost all fallen down or been destroyed. So archaeology can tell us things about their lives that are hard to learn any other way.

At the Bird-Houston, people lived for 150 years without leaving any trace in the written records. The site appears on no map and was never noticed by the tax man. The residents probably worked as laborers on nearby farms, and were largely ignored. Since they lived here for so long, though, they left a great archaeological record of themselves. Those potsherds can tell us about lives that are otherwise lost to us. In excavating the Bird-Houston Site, uncovering more features, screening more soil and finding more artifacts, the archaeologists will be trying to answer questions about the past. What kind of house did these people live in? What did their yard look like? What did they eat? Did they raise chickens or pigs? What can their buttons, buckles and so on tell us about the sort of clothes they wore? Did they decorate their house with painted plates or pressed glass dishes? And because the site lasted so long, the site may show how all of these things changed over the whole period from the Revolution to the Model-T. Please visit the Route 301 Archaeology Blog for weekly updates: <http://blogs.deldot.gov/category/us301/archaeology-updates/>



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