

TENANT FARMERS IN COLONIAL DELAWARE, 1730-1760: ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE NOXON TENANT SITE

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

Two hundred and fifty years ago, southern New Castle County was a thriving community.

Working in the path of US 301, archaeologists have been surprised by the number of colonial farm and home sites they have found across this landscape, some of them in places where nobody has lived since. Why was this such a populous area at such an early date? One theory relates this development to a smuggling route that ran from the Bohemia River in Maryland across to the Delaware Bay at either Odessa or Port Penn. Could this route have stimulated the local economy enough to generate all this settlement? The only way to answer this and many other questions about Delaware's colonial past is through the archaeology of sites like the Noxon Tenancy.



Testing a Colonial Pit Feature at the Noxon Tenant Site

Artifacts on the Ground

The Noxon Tenant 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. There were several houses in different parts of this large field during the 1800s, so artifacts from that period were thinly scattered across a wide area. But in this one location there were also older objects. On a barely visible rise, the archaeologists found several pieces of pottery made around 1750, along with other objects that might have been that old.

Testing the Site

Earlier this 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 sifting the soil through a screen, they found hundreds more artifacts. It was hard to sort out exactly what was going on at the site, because of all the artifacts from nearby, later homes. But careful mapping of the finds showed that the colonial artifacts all came from a single small area, about 120 feet across. Documentary research showed that in the mid 1700s, this area



Scratch Blue Stoneware, made between 1744 and 1775, of the Type Found at the Noxon Tenant Site



Excavating a Test Unit at the Noxon Tenant Site

belonged to wealthy speculators who lived elsewhere. Most likely it was part of a property called Noxon's Adventure, although given the inaccuracy of colonial land surveys it is impossible to be certain. The people who lived at our site were therefore tenants, most likely some of the ordinary farmers who cleared most of Delaware's land.

Planning for the Dig

Before they start to dig, archaeologists always make a careful plan. We review everything that is already known about a site from earlier excavations and the documentary record. Then we ask ourselves what it is we want to learn about the site, and what the best way would be to answer these questions. With a plan focused on particular

questions about the past we are likely to learn more than from haphazard digging. Of course, there are always surprises, and sometimes what we find is not at all what we expected. Still, experience shows that it is better to have a plan.



Cufflinks from a Delaware Farm of the Same Period as the Noxon Tenant Site

The plan for the Noxon Tenant Site is to excavate a sample of the plowed soil by hand. Then a backhoe will be used to remove the remaining topsoil, as deep as the plow goes. This will expose "features," pits of various kinds that were dug deep enough to survive repeated plowing. The features we expect to find include a well, large post holes that were part of a house and a barn, and shallow pits where trash was dumped. These features will be carefully mapped, and then dug by hand. Soil from these features will be put through a screen to find artifacts and animal bones, which will be bagged according to where they were found and taken back to the lab for study. A sample of the soil will be floated in water to recover small bits of burned plant material, such as seeds that will tell us what people were eating and charcoal that will tell us what sort of wood they burned for fuel. It is through careful techniques like these that we learn how people lived 250 years ago.

Please visit the Route 301 Archaeology Blog for weekly updates: <http://blogs.deldot.gov/category/us301/archaeology-updates/>



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