

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever walked into a vacant lot in the city and picked up an object which looked interesting to you? It might have been a piece of broken china, an old bottle neck, or a nail that looked different from nails we use today. If you wonder about the people who used such objects, then you are beginning to think like an archaeologist. Archaeology is the study of people, past and present, by looking at the things they threw away or dropped, and the remains of their houses and places of work. When people think of archaeology, most have a picture in their minds of a large "dig" in Egypt or the excavation of a biblical city in Israel. However, archaeologists have very recently discovered the wealth of materials that can be dug up in our own American cities. Below our city streets and buildings are the remains of the houses, businesses, trash dumps, wells, and privies of historic America. Excavations in New York City have uncovered the remains of the first Dutch settlers on the island of Manhattan. Also in New York, a ship has been recently discovered, buried under buildings and streets near the East River.

Like New York, modern Wilmington sits upon the remains of its past. Often these remains, which archaeologists call artifacts, can be linked to the citizens who founded Wilmington and helped it grow into an important colonial and later industrial city in the United States.

By digging up the houses and artifacts of early Wilmingtonians, we can learn what the city was like, who lived here, what they did day to day, and how their lives were affected by the events of our American history.

The artifacts of America's past can be thought of as part of our historical heritage, similar to sites such as Valley Forge, Mount Vernon, or Benjamin Franklin's house, which archaeologists recently excavated in Philadelphia. Our government, since the days of Teddy Roosevelt, has set aside these sites as time capsules for future generations to view and enjoy. Today, we have realized that

the historic artifacts and sites of everyday people who lived in this country are just as important as more well known artifacts, such as George Washington's wooden teeth. Thus we have laws which protect the important historical remains of the average American. These remains are protected by either setting aside a house, building, and/or buried artifacts linked to these places as a monument or park. If these buildings and artifacts cannot be set aside, and they will be lost due to construction of a road or new office building, they are studied by archaeologists and historians. The historian will study all documents and historic records that are available for the particular site. The archaeologist will dig up, or excavate, the site, removing objects from the ground, but first carefully recording where they came from by taking notes and photographs, and drawing maps. In this way, parts of the site are preserved for future study and the enjoyment of people interested in our American heritage.

Because of the construction of a new road, Wilmington Boulevard, in downtown Wilmington (Figures 1 and 2, Plate 1), archaeologists and historians had an opportunity to study, excavate, and learn about a very old section of the city. This section lay within an area that was important enough to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is a list of significant historic and prehistoric properties in the United States that have gained special recognition. Properties on the Register receive special protection under Federal and State laws and regulations. The Federal Highway Administration and the Delaware Department of Transportation have a policy, following these laws and regulations, that whenever they affect a property which is listed or eligible for listing on the National Register, they will conduct an archaeological and historic investigation of the property to see if any important historic or prehistoric sites would be lost. To save the information contained in these sites, the Delaware Department of Transportation had groups of archaeologists, historians,

environmental planners, floral and faunal experts, photographers, and draftsmen study the area before the road was built, to see what information these sites contained about Wilmington's history and how it grew from an important market city to a large industrial one.

The results of this study are presented in a technical report entitled "Archaeological Investigation of Wilmington Boulevard: Monroe Street to King Street" by Soil Systems, Inc., a private environmental consulting firm.

An additional policy of the Federal Highway Administration and the Delaware Department of Transportation is to provide information to the public on the archaeological work done on such a project. That is why this report on the Wilmington Boulevard project has been written.

The blocks where Wilmington Boulevard would run were so rich in historic objects and building remains that it was impossible to say how many sites were actually there. Digging up and studying every object and building ruin would have taken years. For that reason, the archaeologists and historians selected a few of the sites on the blocks which would best tell them about what happened in this area of the city, and who lived there. These blocks ran from King Street on the east to Justison Street on the west. The area was bordered on the north and south by Second Street and Front Street.

The excavation of this area required a crew of eight to nine persons working over an eight month period. The method used in excavating these blocks was to open up squares five to ten feet on a side, laid out in a checkerboard pattern (Plate 2). In this way, the archaeologists could get a good view of what was below the ground without spending a great deal of time exposing a very large area. If something interesting was there that seemed to extend beyond the squares that were dug, more dirt would be removed to fully expose the interesting item, whether it was a well or the foundations of a house. All dirt from the squares,

including soils from privies (which were usually a single wooden barrel, or at times multiple barrels stacked one on the other, placed within the ground) and trash dumps in buried backyard areas, was sifted through quarter-inch mesh metal screening. In this way, even small objects could be recovered. At some points, the buried building remains and trash dumps that the archaeologists were interested in examining were covered by large amounts of recently deposited broken bricks, demolition rubble and dirt. To remove this by hand would have been very time-consuming, so the archaeologists asked for the assistance of a backhoe operator. Use of heavy machinery is one way to speed up the progress of an excavation (Plate 3).

A large number of objects, or artifacts, were recovered from the areas of the blocks that were dug up. Many of these artifacts were completely whole. Items found included fragments of stoneware and other types of storage containers, serving plates and bowls, porcelain tea wares, clay pipes, which were often still filled with tobacco, bits of broken glass tumblers, bottles, window glass, and an assortment of household and business goods, such as inkwells and oil lamp fragments. Less spectacular, but no less interesting, were the large quantities of bone and seeds that were preserved in the dirt. These, no doubt, were the food remains of the people that once lived on these blocks.

The excavation of the blocks in the Wilmington Boulevard area produced a rich array of artifacts. The historic documents on the area were equally rich. From these early records, the historians were able to learn who lived on the blocks, where their houses were, what the neighborhoods in the area were like, and how they changed in character over time. Also, they were able to discover the types of businesses that existed on the blocks, and located old newspapers in which these businesses had their advertisements, selling items ranging from mineral water to chairs and coffins.

PLATE 3
WILMINGTON BLVD.
BACKHOE TESTING



There have been many urban excavations similar to the Wilmington Boulevard archaeological project in the United States. Many sections of New York City have been studied by archaeologists. Archaeologists have also worked in Philadelphia; Boston; Patterson, New Jersey; Alexandria, Virginia; Washington, D.C.; Phoenix, Arizona; and Los Angeles. However, most of these works were not of the scale of the Wilmington Boulevard project. The majority of these excavations dealt with a single block or only a section of a block. The dig in Wilmington involved many blocks, in fact a total of 12 blocks, of which seven are discussed here. The Wilmington Boulevard excavations are special in that the blocks are all next to each other, thus providing an excellent "slice" of different neighborhoods and business areas of the historic city.

We have briefly touched on the types of things we can learn about the city and how it grew from the excavation of the seven blocks. In the following section, we will look more closely at what items have been discovered from this dig. What can we learn from Wilmington's dirt?