READING THE DIRT: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION OF THE WILMINGTON BOULEVARD PROJECT AREA

By removing the dirt and building rubble that covered the Wilmington Boulevard area at the beginning of the dig, archaeologists uncovered evidence of where early Wilmingtonians built their houses and businesses, how they changed the natural landscape to suit their many needs, where they placed the stables, sheds, wells, cisterns and privies in their properties, and what they threw away in their backyards. They also uncovered something about the people themselves, what they ate, what they bought from local markets, what they had in their china cabinets, and what they put on their dinner tables.

We know from historic documents that Wilmington's early government was constantly trying to get people to build their houses and businesses at a set distance from the edges of the city streets, but were often unsuccessful. In the 1740s, when new buildings under construction encroached on the street, they were to be pulled down at the charge of the offender, provided that the "Regulators of the Streets" had given warning before the building was one story high.

The building foundations uncovered during the excavation of the seven block area did not date to this early period of Wilmington, but were from the nineteenth century. It was apparent that at this time, the earlier problem of having buildings at set distance from the streets had been taken care of. Most of the foundations showed the houses or businesses to be just a few feet from the street, with the buildings extending back into the owner's property (Plate 4). Behind the main buildings would be open yards, sometimes with smaller "outbuildings" such as sheds, and usually at the very back of an owner's property would be a "necessary" or privy. As with the standardizing of the distance of houses from the streets, the early town government also had problems keeping people from putting garden fences, stables, and "necessaries" in the wrong places, sometimes too near a street. This problem occurred in 1787 when these structures were found to be too close to

PLATE 4

WILMINGTON BLVD.

PHOTOGRAPH OF 101 SHIPLEY ST. CIRCA 1860S

Shipley Street, just above Second Street. The owners of these outbuildings were ordered to remove them. A year later, it still was not done, so the Overseer of Streets was ordered to remove the "intrusions" and bill the owners. Most of the privies and other outbuildings uncovered in the seven blocks were located where they should be, away from the streets and at the rear of the property.

The historical and archaeological evidence on the location of buildings, outbuildings, and rear yard features such as privies, suggest that by the nineteenth century, Wilmington had an established city grid pattern, with buildings neatly aligned along the streets. Wilmington was now a small city similar to our modern idea of what a city should be like, with modern concerns for sanitation, clean streets, and buildings set evenly along a street.

Not only was there a concern for the appearance and health of the city, but landowners were continuously changing the natural landscape to fit their needs, as we still do today in our urban areas. In the block bounded by Shipley and Orange Streets, excavations revealed that the early property owners were bringing in dirt to make the block and individual house lots more level with the streets. Also, high portions of the block were leveled by removing large amounts of soil. This filling and leveling occurred many times, with later activities burying older backyard areas and the privies and trash dumps located in these yards. In fact, the original ground surface of this block was very marshy until around 1800, when the land owner began to fill in the marsh area to make the land more useable. The excavation of this block exposed many layers of this continuous filling and raising of the land. Also, the archaeologists were able to date each period of land filling by the trash that was thrown in or buried by the dirt fill.

Not only were the archaeologists able to learn how landowners changed the city's landscape to fit their needs, and were able to date these land changes by the levels of buried trash, but the archaeologists also identified where in a yard trash

was thrown away and what was thrown away. In fact, they learned that this changed as the city grew.

Before the 1810s, the rear yard areas were used for trash dumping. Garbage was thrown onto the very rear of the yards and within privies, both abandoned ones and those still in use. In closely studying the types of artifacts that were thrown onto the ground surface and in privies, archaeologists discovered that different types of trash were thrown in different places. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, trash on the buried surfaces of backyards consisted of small pieces of broken pottery and very little glass. On the other hand, the privies dating to this time had much more window and bottle glass than was found in the yards. Apparently, people were using the rear yards, so they made sure that dangerous items such as broken glass were not present. These dangerous items were thrown into the privies or put into holes deliberately dug into the soil for holding trash, and thus were put out of harm's way. What is interesting is that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the rear yard areas had almost the same amount of glass as did the privies dating to this time. Why the change? When the archaeologists studied the artifacts recovered from the blocks in the laboratory, they could see that the overall nature of the artifacts in the soils dating before the 1810s was very different from that of the artifacts found in the later soil deposits. The earlier materials were made up of mostly household items, such as sets of dishes, tea wares, wine and spirit bottles, brushes, shoes, and the like. However, the artifacts from the later soils were made up of not only these types of household items, but also of large quantities of buttons, needles, batches of unsmoked pipes, literally thousands of pieces of broken oil lamp glass, and parts of machinery such as gaskets. These items, which were specifically found in privies on the blocks bounded by King and Market and Washington and West Streets, clearly suggested that in these blocks trash thrown in the privies was not only from households, but

also included materials from different types of businesses, such as tailor or clothing shops or stores selling dry goods.

This was confirmed by the historic documents. Before 1810, these two blocks contained mostly homes, with some stores, shops, and craftsmen mixed in. However, after 1810 the area became more commercial, with business filling entire street fronts, but with homes still mixed in or present above the businesses in upper stories.

It seems then, that the use of backyards changed. Earlier, when homes were more common in some blocks, people often used the yards, and thus kept them free of harmful objects. However, when properties became more commerical, the yard areas were apparently used less, and the owners did not care if dangerous items were thrown there. Think of the rear areas of some modern day businesses. They are often filled with all sorts of junk, including broken glass, metal objects, and discarded products. And if the property is industrial, there are even more things in the rear yards.

One other interesting observation came up during the study of artifacts from the seven blocks. Very few objects dating after the 1860s were found, either in privies or backyard areas. Again, something happened in the way people were throwing away trash. For some reason, trash was not thrown into the rear of properties. One possibility is that garbage was taken away from the area and deposited in large trash dumps in other parts of the city. Unfortunately, we do not have any historic documents that would tell us about trash disposal in the later half of the nineteenth century.

One very important thing we can learn from the artifacts from these seven blocks is what the people who lived on the blocks were like. For example, what did they do for a living? What did they eat? What did they buy at local markets?

Also, we can look at the differences and similarities in how people acted, either at a single moment in Wilmington's past, or at different periods of the city's history.

As an example of what archaeology combined with history can tell us about Wilmington's citizens, we will first look at where different people lived, then focus on three different households and a business dating to different times. First, a well-to-do household on Market Street at the turn of the eighteenth century will be discussed. Then we will look at the household and business of a middle-nineteenth century mineral water bottler. The last household we will discuss is that of a family that appeared to have fallen on hard economic times.