

# THE ORDINARY AND THE POOR IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DELAWARE

Excavations at the Augustine Creek North and South Sites,  
7NC-G-144 and 7NC-G-145

*March 10 to April 30, 1997*

An Invitation From

The Delaware Department of Transportation  
and

The Cultural Resource Group of Louis Berger & Associates

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Despite our concern for learning about the history of ordinary people, many of the Big Ideas historians have about the eighteenth-century still seem to pertain predominantly to the world of the wealthy. Consider, for example, the "Georgian Mindset" and the "consumer revolution." Historians such as James Deetz and Henry Glassie find it deeply important that European Americans moved out of their old, vernacular houses and into new ones with balanced, Georgian plans, and they relate this change to a complete re-ordering of society. But millions of Americans lived in log cabins and tar-paper shacks until well into this century; what was their mindset? If moving into a Georgian house implies a shift from medieval to modern ways of thinking, did the poor miss out on the Renaissance? Eighteenth-century changes in purchasing behavior have also been singled out, by Cary Carson and Lorena Walsh among others, as indicating a profound change in western society and its values. If we are now defined largely by what we buy, they say, this consumer identity can be traced to the



century before the Revolution. The tea ceremony and its equipage are perhaps the best-known symbols of this new consumerism; by the time of the Boston Tea Party no one could be considered respectable in Britain or America who did not own a tea service and know how to use it properly. Again we can ask, if modern people are primarily consumers, how many people in the eighteenth-century were modern? If we are to understand the eighteenth-century changes that so many experts believe led to the creation of the modern world, we must search for paradigms that apply to the whole society, not just small parts of it.

To help us recover the lives of ordinary people from past centuries we have two main aides, written records and material objects. For ordinary people, material objects generally means things recovered through archaeology. Standing houses from the eighteenth-century have been much analyzed, but archaeology and some records (such as the federal direct tax of 1798) suggest that even the poorest standing houses are nicer than what was normal during the period. The average house is accessible to us only through archaeology. Likewise, the ceramics and furniture surviving in museums, even the pieces that are judged "simple" or "folk," also belonged overwhelmingly to the better-off. Because the belongings of the poor are unlikely to survive above the ground, archaeology can provide a uniquely democratic perspective on the past.

The Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) and the Cultural Resource Group of Louis Berger & Associates (LBA) are gearing up for excavations at two eighteenth-century sites where we

hope to learn about the lives of poor and ordinary people. The Augustine Creek North and Augustine Creek South Sites are located on opposite sides of a small, swampy stream about five miles north of Odessa in southern New Castle County, Delaware. The Augustine Creek South Site was probably occupied between 1727 and 1759 by Samuel and Henrietta Mahoe, the deeply indebted owners of 104 acres of land. To all appearances, the Mahoes were very ordinary Delawareans. Test excavations on the site have identified a post building, a cellar roughly 20 feet square, and at least two pits. The Augustine Creek North Site was occupied by unknown tenants, probably between 1770 and 1800, and also by prehistoric peoples during the Early Woodland period. After 1790 the site was part of an 18-acre tract of land, and since the five freeholders who divided the tract in 1790 did not even mention that house that almost certainly stood on the property at that time it must not have been worth much. The house was discovered during test excavations. It had small cellar measuring 10 by 6 feet, with a bulkhead entrance. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the house was its location, on a sloping site adjacent to the swamps along the stream, a place where no eighteenth-century European American would choose to build. The marginal location of the house reflects the poverty and marginal status of the historic residents. Rather few prehistoric artifacts had been recovered during test unit excavations on the site (52 artifacts in 22 1x1-meter units), so the excavators were surprised when stripping the plowzone on a small portion of the site uncovered at least one and possibly two prehistoric pit features. One of the pits

has been tested, and one quadrant yielded debitage, fire-cracked rock, 22 small fragments of an unidentified ceramic and a substantial amount of charcoal, which returned a date of 2850±60 BP.



Both of these sites will be excavated between March 10 and April 30, 1997. DelDOT and LBA invite all interested persons to visit the site during working hours. We welcome professionals, amateurs, archaeological societies and school groups. For more information about visiting the site or volunteering please contact Kevin Cunningham of DelDOT at 302-739-3826 or Dr. John Bedell of LBA at 202-331-7775.