

SUMMARY OF THE BLUE BALL TAVERN EXCAVATIONS IN NEW CASTLE COUNTY, DELAWARE

by

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Abstract

The Blue Ball Tavern site has allowed for the study of several aspects of the developing economic landscape in New Castle County during the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. The site originally functioned as a tavern, with documentation beginning in 1787 and continuing to 1849, thereafter functioning as a tenant farm until 1909, when the Blue Ball Dairy occupied the site. Each occupation is historically and archaeologically discernable. The "Tavern Era" can be archaeologically subdivided into an earlier unit of 1787 to 1828/9 and a later unit up to 1850. The "Tenant Farm" phase spans the years from 1850 to 1909, and can also historically and archaeologically be subdivided into an earlier unit of 1862 to 1890 and a later unit up to 1909. The "DuPont Dairy/Farm" phase begins after 1909 when A. I. DuPont purchased the property and lasts until 1938, when DuPont died and the property was transferred to various Florida based companies and leased to independent dairymen.

The Blue Ball site was located (Figure 1) north of Wilmington at the intersection of Concord Pike and Rockland Road on a parcel of the Chestnut Hill Plantation. A tavern is documented at the site from 1787 to 1850, after which it was converted and operated as a tenant farmhouse by the E.I. DuPont de Nemours Powder Company. In 1909 Alfred I. DuPont purchased the property and continued to run it as a tenant farm. After 1914, A. I. DuPont's Blue Ball Dairy operation occupied the site. DuPont died in 1935, and the property subsequently transferred to various Florida based companies and leased to independent dairymen.

Hans Peterson obtained this land (Table 1) through a 1678 New Castle County Court warrant (F2:245), and a 1681 Indian Deed signed by the "natural owners & Indian proprietors". In 1685 and 1700 Peterson sold the tract to Cornelius Empson (A1:113; Q1:598), who deeded the west half, where the Blue Ball Tavern would later stand, to his son Ebenezer in 1708 (C3:395). In 1722 Hans Peterson's son, Israel, bought Chestnut Hill back (G1:225). He died inestate leaving ten children as heirs, eight of whom sold their shares to Joseph Mortonson (F2:245, 297, 298), married to Regina, one of the heirs.

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Joseph Mortonson's 1771 will (O:558) left three acres, a loft, and dwelling to Regina; property in Cherry Island Marsh to his son Joseph; and, the Chestnut Hill tract to his son Joshua. When Regina Mortonson deeded her portion of the property to Joshua she is mentioned as the widow of Joseph Mortonson, Innkeeper (F2:246). Through a series of purchases (F2:294, 510), John Dickenson came to own the Chestnut Hill tract by 1786. Regina Mortonson is listed intermittently in the tavern license petitions from 1787 through 1798 as one of a group wishing to keep taverns in their respective dwellings. In 1799 Lancelot Law Smith took over the "long accustomed public house ...kept for some years by [the late] Mrs. Regina Mortonson". Smith was licensed until 1807, in which year Thomas McKee assumed the "Tavern...lately occupied as house of Public entertainment by Lancelot Law Smith". McKee continued as proprietor until

YEAR	GRANTOR	GRANTEE	CONVEYANCE	TENANT	YEARS	OCC.
1678	Court of NC Co.	Hans Peterson	warrant			
1681	"Indian proprietors"	" "	Indian Deed			
1685, 1700	Hans Peterson	Cornelius Empson	deeds			
1710	Cornelius Empson	Ebenezer Empson	deed			
1722	Ebenezer Empson	Israel Peterson	deed			
1749	Israel Peterson	10 children	inestate			
1749-1755	8 Peterson siblings	Joseph Mortonson	deed			
1771	Joseph Mortonson	Joshua Mortonson	will			
1772	Regina Mortonson	" "	deed			
1777	Joshua Mortonson	Andrew McKee, Jr.	deed			
1785	Joshua Mortonson	John Dickenson	deed			
				Regina Mortonson & Joshua McLean	1787 1794-98	Tavern
				Lancelot Smith	1799	
				Thomas McKee	1807	
1804	John Dickenson	Maria Dickenson	will	George Miller	1810	
				Robert Galbreath	1819	
				Isaac Anderson	1828	
				Joshua Hutton	1859	?
1860	Maria Dickenson	Mary Morris Logan	trust	?		Farm
1862	Mary Morris Logan	Jonas Miller	deed	?		
1862	Jonas Miller	E.I. DuPont de Nemours	deed	?		
1908	E.I. DuPont de Nemours	A.I. DuPont	deeds	?		
				Mr. Bishop	1920	Dairy
				Mr. Thurber	1921	
				Andrew Fullarton	1921	
1935	A.I. DuPont estate	various	deeds	Maxey Bland	1926-35	

Table 1. Chain of Ownership and Tenancy.

1810 when George Miller took over. Public elections were held at the inn during Miller's tenure, and it was during his keep that the tavern became known for its fine food. Miller kept the tavern until 1816, when John Dickinson's daughter, Maria, inherited his property. In 1819 Robert Galbreath petitioned to keep the "Blue Ball Tavern...which license had previously expired". He kept the tavern until 1827, after which it was taken over by Isaac Anderson, an announcement stating "Isaac Anderson has taken the Tavern by name of Blue Ball...formerly kept by Robert Galbreath, now deceased". Anderson farmed and kept the tavern until his death in 1850.

One hundred features, including the tavern/house foundation, were identified and excavated. The tavern/house foundation was constructed of uncut mortared stone. Interior basement partition walls formed a three room L-shaped structure (Figure 2), with access to the basement provided at various times by four stair courses, two of which were sealed off by

mortared stone partitions. The northern room had an interior staircase, the remains of a basement hearth or hearth support, and cement flooring, which when removed revealed an anthrosol, yielding artifacts indicating it was in place in the late eighteenth century, and the cement poured after 1864. A well adjacent to Concord Pike outside this room was cross-sectioned by backhoe, the buckets examined for artifacts, but none found. The other two rooms had brick flooring laid over a bright orange Aeolian sand of the Pliocene Bryn Mawr Formation (Figure 3) that was three and a half feet deep, and which was underlain by gray gleyed clay. These rooms were joined by an interior passageway, and separated from the other by two stone walls, one of which was once exterior. A builder's trench along a stair course leading into these rooms dates its construction at post-1890, and glass from between the brick floor and sand dates the flooring at post-1910.

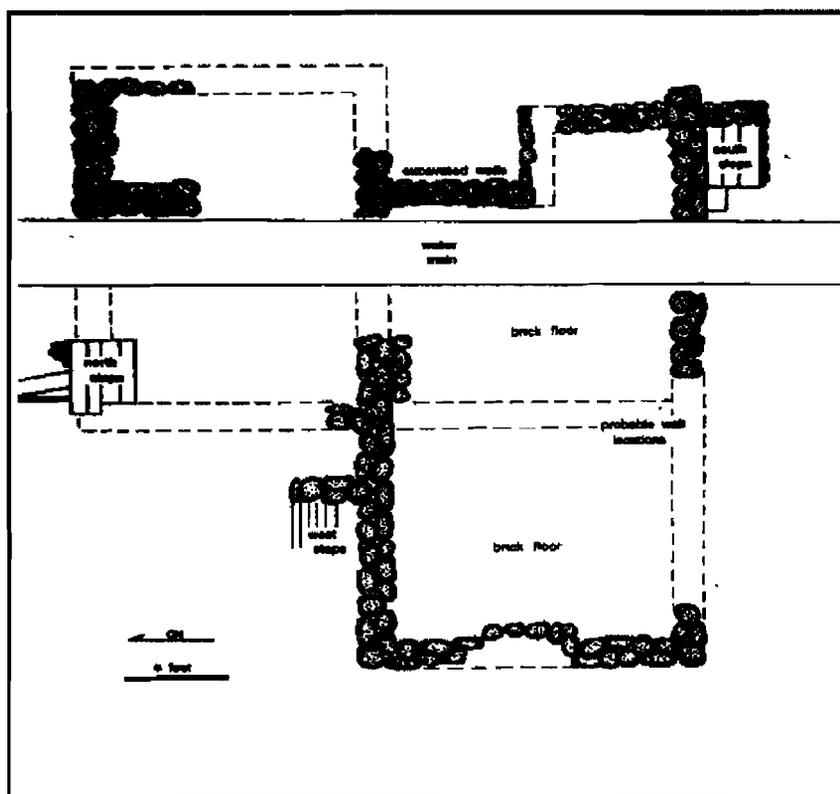


Figure 2. Tavern/House Foundation.

Contexts associated with the early portion of the tavern operation include the north foundation room, an adjacent buried yard surface, and three pit features. One was an eight-foot deep, four-foot diameter circular pit (Feature 43), with a flat bottom comprised of thin bands of clay and wood planking. The other two (Features 91 and 95) were three-foot deep, four-foot square pits with flat bottoms. Ceramic fragments from these contexts include refined and unrefined jugs, bottles, tankards, crocks, bowls, plates, creamers, platters, saucers, cups, and chamber pots. Glass remains consisted of pre-1830 manufactured case gin, ale, brandy, wine, and medicine bottle fragments, bottle stoppers, snuff and ink jars, plates, tumblers handled wine glasses, goblets, and lamp chimneys. Clay pipe fragments, faunal remains, a jewelry box piece, slate pencils, and a brass suspenders clasp were also recovered.

The artifact assemblages from these features are comparable, distinguished from one another mainly by the presence of unique personal items, and larger artifacts from the pit features. The average Mean Ceramic Date for these contexts is 1803, with average Mean Beginning and Ending Dates providing a bracket between 1776 and 1829. The buried yard as an accretional surface, was exposed over an approximate 58-year period that could include all tavern keepers up through Robert Galbreath. The Terminus Post Quem for the pit features indicate they are largely associated with the George Miller and/or Robert Galbreath occupations. The only context associated with the later tavern operation is an eight-foot long deposit south of the foundation characterized by a high proportion of mortar, plaster, brick, and pre-1860 manufactured glass from spirits, mineral water, and medicine bottle fragments. The Mean Ceramic Date is 1839, however, wire nails recovered from beneath the feature soil indicate post-1890 deposition. Isaac Anderson kept the tavern until 1850 and his widow, Ann, may have continued the operation, though by 1859 Maria Logan's will indicates Joshua Hutton residing on the tract. These items may represent Anderson's term at the tavern as well as the Hutton occupation, yet would have been discarded after the DuPont Powder Company came into ownership.

A comparison of a so-called “tavern assemblage” for the early and later tavern phases (Figure 4) indicates more glass and refined ceramic tableware and tobacco pipes and snuff containers in the earlier component and more coarse ceramic wares and bottle glass for the later component. Clearer patterning emerges from a comparison conducted from the probates for Blue Ball Tavern keepers Regina Mortonson, Robert Galbreath, and Isaac Anderson, Samuel Landers of the Green Tree Inn in Brandywine Village, and Peter and Joseph Springer of the Riseing Son Tavern in Mill Creek Hundred. Categories of items consist of (Figure 5) (1) beds and bedding, (2) furnishings such as desks, tables, chairs, clocks, tablecloths, (3) glass and ceramic, (4) pewter and silver, (5) “waring apparel”, (6) livestock, and (7) tools.

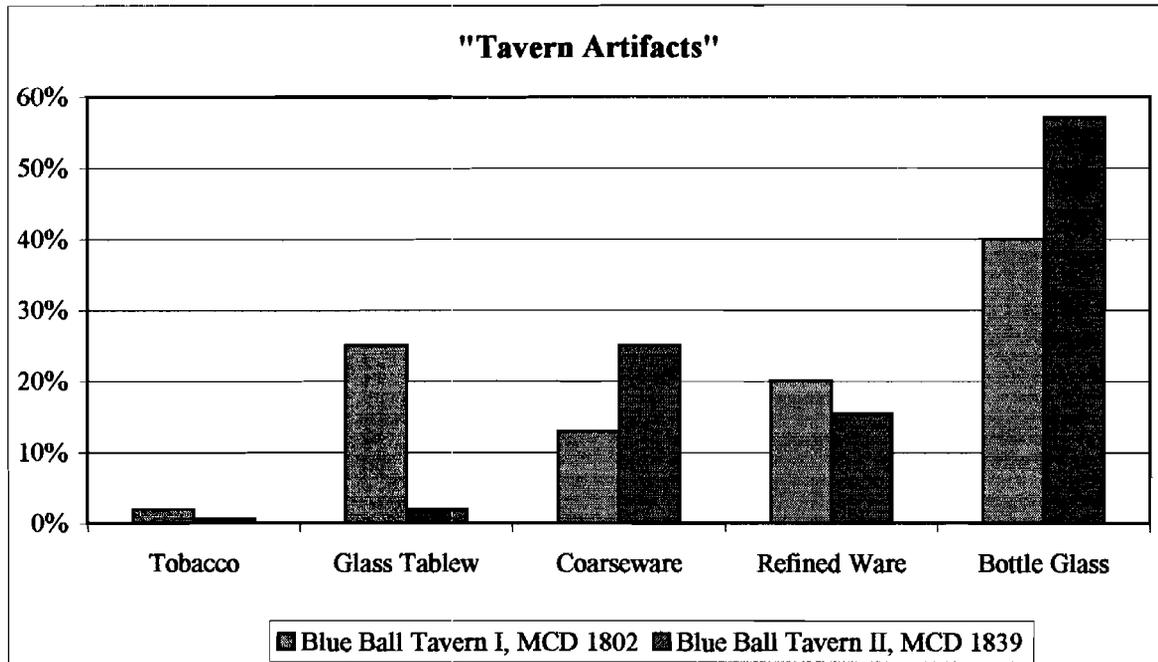


Figure 4. Distribution of “Tavern Artifacts” from Earlier to Later Tavern Occupation.

Regina Mortonson’s probate shows a proportionally high presence of bedding, furnishings, pewter, silver, and personal possessions, and low presence of livestock and tools, suggesting a tavern that provided dining and overnight accommodations for travelers. Over half of Samuel Lander’s probate consisted of livestock and tools. A relatively low proportion of bedding, and greater investment in “waring apparel”, furniture, and food preparation and service items may indicate it provided dining and entertainment in a semi-urban setting, rather than for overnight stays. Peter Springer’s probate shows a comparatively high proportion of bedding to other types of furnishings, more glass and ceramics than pewter and silver, and a high proportion of livestock and tools. The establishment probably provided basic overnight accommodations and was a working farm. This contrasts with his son’s Joseph’s probate, consisting mainly of agricultural equipment or tools, and including seemingly insufficient furnishings and kitchen implements to provide overnight accommodations and food service, suggesting that it largely serviced the local community, rather than as lodging for travelers.

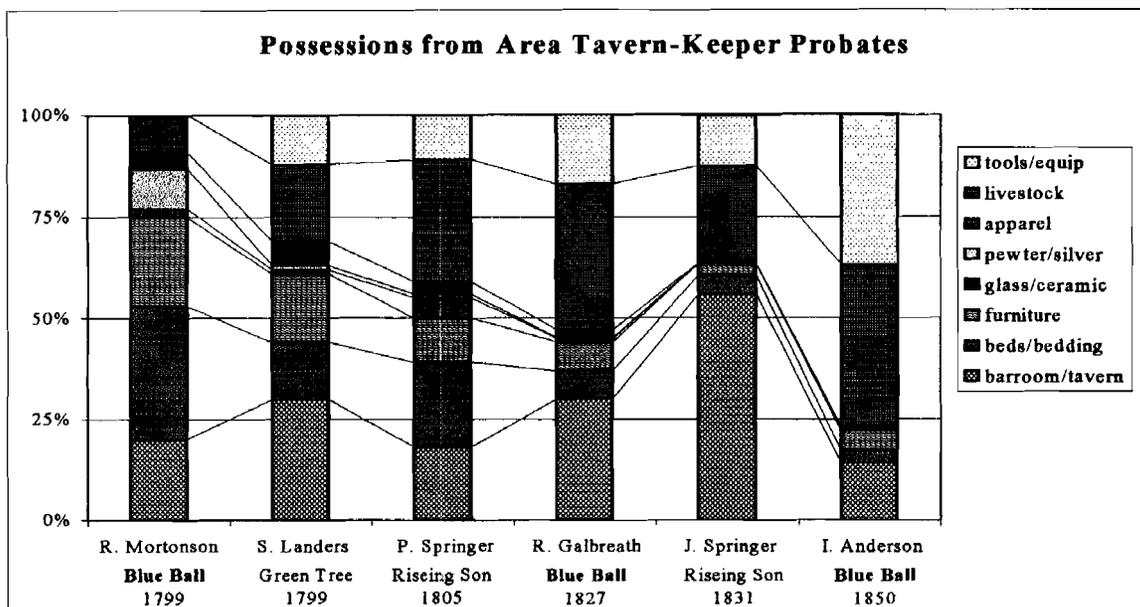


Figure 5. Distribution of Possessions from Area Tavern-Keeper Probates.

Most of Robert Galbreath's probate consisted of livestock, equipment, or blacksmithing tools "in the barn", while other items were noted "in the bar". During Galbreath's term, the Blue Ball Tavern appears to have functioned as a traveler's inn, providing food service, lodging, and blacksmithing. The majority of Isaac Anderson's inventory consisted of agricultural items, including tools used for grain cultivation, and dairy production, facilities for raising chickens and pigs, a slaughterhouse, a blacksmith shop, and a barn. The dining and bar rooms were listed separately, so while dining and accommodations were available, the property was also a working farm. This probate demonstrates the mid nineteenth century trend toward agricultural intensification and diversification throughout the state.

The second phase of the site's use can be described as farm tenancy, characterized by a non-landowning, but land holding class of farmers and managers, who often owned livestock and shared profits with the landowner. This was the dominant mode of agricultural production in the area until a shift in the 1930's to wage labor (DeCunzo and Garcia 1992). Maria Logan left the "Blue Ball Farm" in trust for her daughter who later sold it to the E.I. DuPont de Nemours Powder Company (Q7:247, 250). The 1880 Brandywine Hundred Agricultural Census lists Nemours and Company with income from hay, corn, wheat, and cut wood. Two hundred dollars was paid for labor and board for 33 weeks, or the equivalent of one person at six dollars per week. Artifact distributions indicate an intensification and expansion of land use outward from the main structure. Associated contexts include the remains of a 54-foot long mortared stone yard wall two feet south of the foundation, and the foundation remains of a thirteen by fourteen foot mortared stone structure 50 feet south of the foundation (Figure 6), and a large midden.

The Midden was a foot and a half deep basin covering a 65 square foot area northwest of the foundation. A wide range of ceramics from jugs, crocks, cups, pitchers, bowls, plates, platters, saucers and chamber pots were recovered, providing a Mean Ceramic Date of 1847, and Mean Beginning and Ending dates of 1809 and 1884. Glass vessel remains manufactured between approximately 1840 and 1890 consisted of spirits, ale, cider, mineral water, medicine, and perfume bottles, demijohns, decanters, flasks, snuff jars, tumblers, and goblets. Other

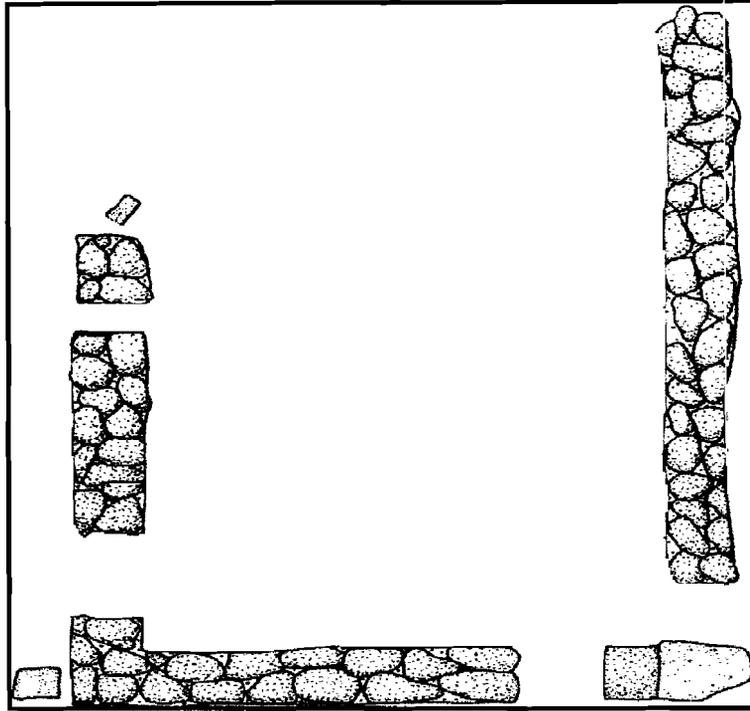


Figure 6. Features 69.

artifacts include ceramic marbles, a key, a thimble, slate pencils, a porcelain doll head, a porcelain figurine, mirror fragments, metal cutlery, a brass escutcheon, eyelets, leather, an agate doorknob, jewelry fragments, lamp chimney fragments, and several buttons, including mid nineteenth century U. S. Infantry General Services Eagle buttons. Several kaolin and earthenware pipe fragments were recovered, two manufactured between 1861 and 1900.

A high proportion of architectural remains, included a variety of window glass types and nails, and low proportion of faunal material, suggests that the midden was not formed solely from daily domestic activity but represents, in part, debris from structural renovation or demolition and the discard of accumulated belongings. One such episode is noted pre-dating 1888. A comparative analysis of general artifact categories (Figure 7) for the two tavern and tenant farm phases show the two tavern phase most resembling one another, and a marked skew between glass and ceramic artifacts for the Tenant Farm phase.

The third phase of the site's use is the dairy operation. New Castle County was the largest dairy producer in the state from the 1850's until 1945 (Michael 1985), with peak years from 1914 to 1928 (Hoffecker 1982). In 1914, A.I. DuPont had the dairy barn and milk house built, among the first to incorporate concrete and glass blocks into construction (HABS 1993). Many structural elements that could at one time be seen throughout the dairy complex, such as use of stucco, concrete and galvanized iron sinks, iron window and doorframes, and the elimination of projections and moldings were recommended in Alfred Hopkins' 1913 publication "*Modern Farm Buildings*" (Brizzolara 1989).

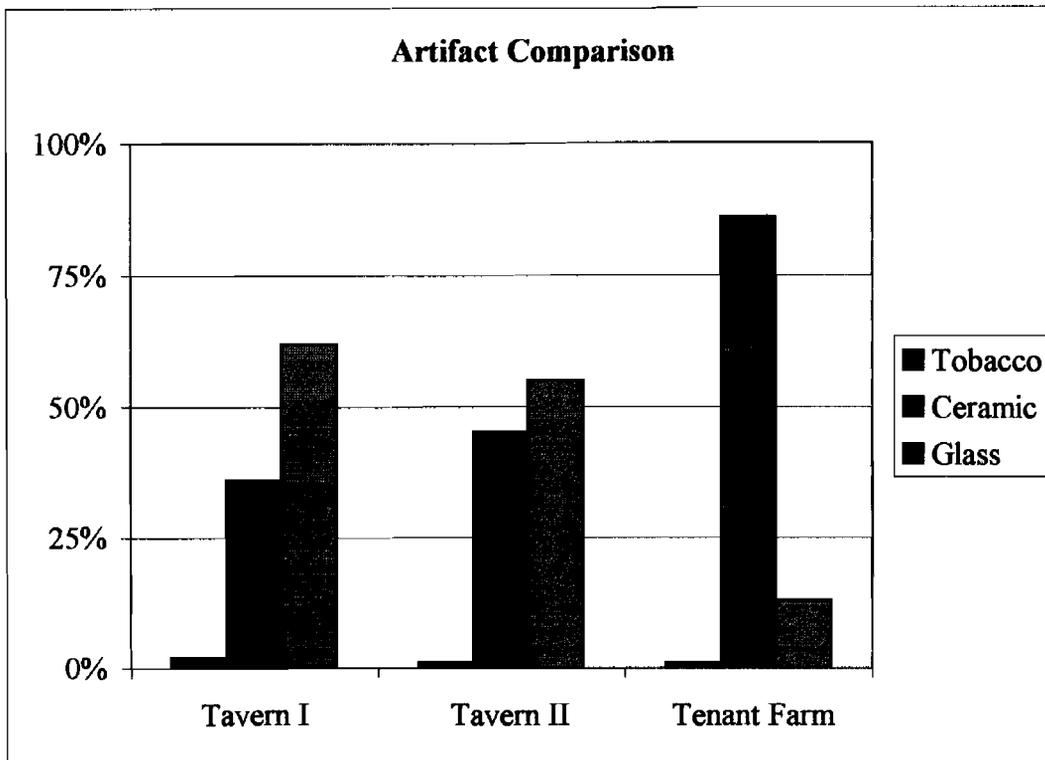


Figure 7. General Artifact Categories from the Tavern and Tenant Farm.

A.E. Whittington managed the dairy during its first years of operation up until 1920, after which management was transferred to E. M. Davis (HABS 1993). Davis, an ex-railroad brakeman, was active in gaining support for DuPont from local labor unions, and eventually gained ownership of DuPont's newspaper, the *Newark Ledger* (James 1941), becoming one of DuPont's chief political advisors (Wall 1990). A group of letters between the two indicates that, in addition to owning cows for the dairy operation, the Farm kept a number of horses, sheep, turkey, and chickens. Grain planting, harvesting and processing equipment, pig pens, a poultry house, a horse stable, and a cow stable are all mentioned. They also discuss a request to use the porch of the "Blue Ball boarding house" for registering voters and clerks for the New Castle County Republican Committee. Mr. Bishop supervised the farm under Davis and lived in the farmhouse. In 1921, Bishop was relieved of his responsibility for the dairy and poultry operations, which were turned over to Mr. Thurber. From that point on the poultry and dairy operation were to be "carried on as a separate business from Blue Ball Farm". Later that year Andrew Fullerton replaced Mr. Bishop as superintendent. A series of correspondences between DuPont and Fullerton indicate that the milk was not to be sold, but made into butter, and Fullerton was granted permission to plant crops.

Maxey Bland was superintendent from 1926 until 1935. A 1927 letter to DuPont includes a financial report and inventory for the farm, indicating that Bland and DuPont shared the profit equally, and Bland paid \$5.00 rent. Similar figures and profit are shown in a 1928 report, however reports from 1931 and 1934 showed a substantial decline in profit. Inventories were made for contents of the dairy, cow stable, horse stable, feed room, granary, barn, poultry house, tractor shed, oil house, hay barracks, corn crib, sheep house, pig pen, house, and "outside". The inventory for the house consisted of four single cots, six single beds, three bureaus and mirrors,

five bedroom chairs, four bedroom tables, six dining room chairs and a dining table, a kitchen table with three chairs, a stove, two rockers, an icebox, and a lard press. The number of single beds and cots substantiates the building's function as a workers quarters or "boarding house".

Several features are associated with this phase of the site, including a post-1864 constructed stone wall that was probably the remnants of a building shown on the 1917 Price and Price map (Figure 8); and, the post-1910 mortared stone remains of another small structure. A ten foot square post-1910 dry laid stone floor (Figure 9) included two large square post molds, probably for support beams, along one edge, and a large cut stone slab entryway along another edge. Adjacent to the entry was the metal hoop remains of an above ground wooden barrel. Similar features found at the Thomas Williams Site in New Castle County have been interpreted as rainwater collection devices.

The 24 by 18 foot remains (Figures 10) of a plastered stone, brick and concrete structure indicated on the 1917 Price and Price map of the Nemours estate was presumably built as part of the Dairy. An interior cement floor was removed, revealing an underlying brick floor. One post-1899 manufactured dairy bottle fragment was recovered from between the two floors. A large cut stone threshold beneath the cement floor spanned the width of a staircase entry that was flanked by stone troughs. Several dairy bottle fragments manufactured between 1910 and 1915 and canning jar fragments manufactured between 1910 and 1930 were found within the troughs. A metal pipe that also ran alongside a post-1880 above ground unmortared stone conduit to the west entered this feature into one of these troughs. A series of four plastered brick troughs connected by a metal pipe formed the inner wall of the feature. The depths of the troughs varied

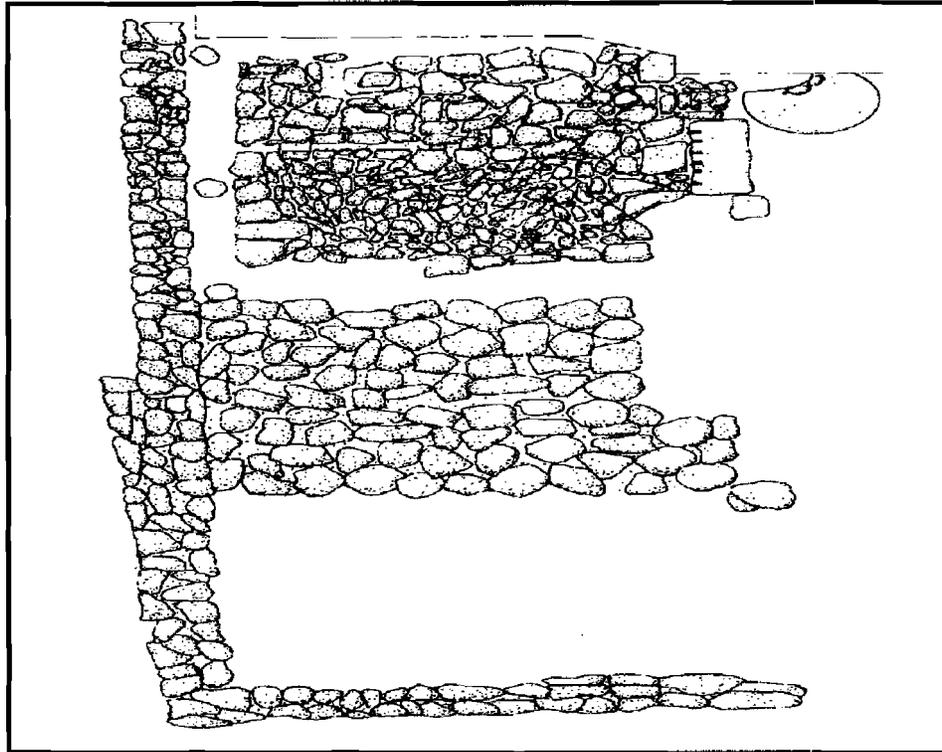


Figure 9. Features 33, 45, and 69.

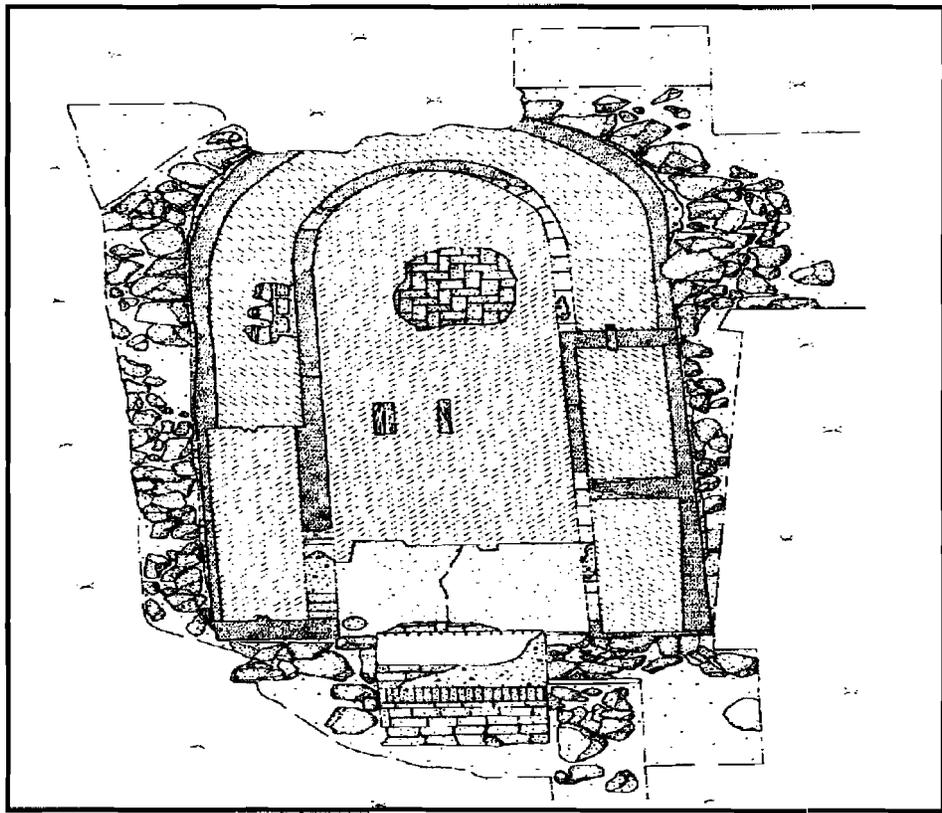


Figure 10. Feature 12, Plan View.

from half a foot to two feet, and the grade around their tops was pitched, presumably to circulate water through the pipe. The pipe terminated at a floor grate that was connected to a glazed ceramic pipe beneath the floor that ran back into the west field. A backhoe trench cut across the feature revealed five layers of coarse sand fill extending two feet beneath the brick flooring (Figure 11), from which post-1908 bottle glass fragments were recovered.

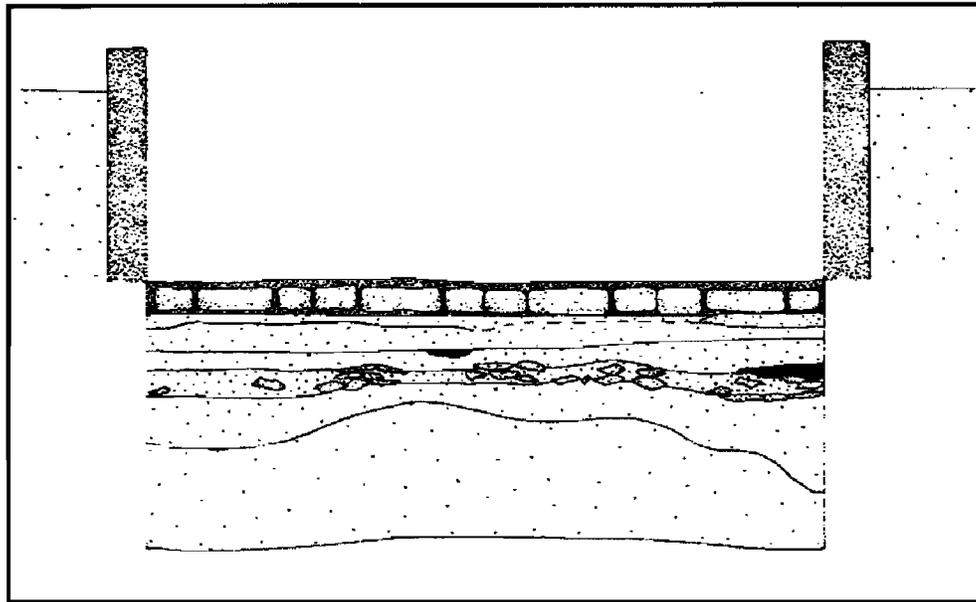


Figure 11. Feature 12, Sub-floor Excavation Profile

The larger size, variety, and increased number of outbuildings is trait of twentieth century dairy farms that has been exhibited as an additive strategy at the Buchanan-Savin farm (7NC-J-175) in Blackbird Hundred (Scholl et al 1994), where eight new outbuildings were constructed in the 1920s, as well as at the Blue Ball Dairy.

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