

THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM: WELL CONSTRUCTION AT HOUSTON-LECOMPT SITE WITHIN ROUTE 301 CORRIDOR, NEW CASTLE COUNTY, DELAWARE

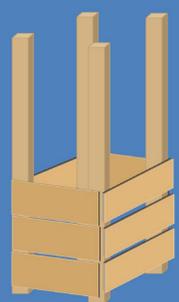
The earliest known occupants of the Houston-LeCompt site (7NC-F-139) were members of the Jacob Houston family in the late 1700s. Upon Jacob's death in 1792, his widow Mary inherited the land. She and her four children—James, Jacob, George, and a daughter, Mary—lived on the parcel for the next 20 years, with her son James running the farm until his passing in 1849. The 130-acre farm became tenant occupied until the late-nineteenth century, when members of the Houston family once again took ownership of the parcel. This area remained the center of farm life until the 1930s.

Archaeological excavations were completed at the site in the summer of 2012 by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group. Part of the larger Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) Route 301 project, the dig focused on the Houston homestead. Over 300 features were uncovered during the three-month field session, including a stone-lined cellar, a wood-lined root cellar, a possible stable, a smokehouse, roasting pits, many fence lines, and three wells. Amazingly, all features were filled and capped upon disuse, resulting in pristine preservation.



Oldest well at the Houston-LeCompt site (top) and a schematic of a box frame (right).

The oldest well, the furthest from the main house, was used by Jacob and Mary Houston in the late-eighteenth century. The corner posts of this box-framed well were formed of white oak while the side and base planks were made from southern yellow pine. Some framing members still retain their original fastening pegs. This well was only used for a few decades, likely rendered impractical due to its excessive distance from the house. It was filled in around 1800.



Learning from their mistake, the Houston's constructed their second well much closer to their dwelling. Also a box-frame system, the white oak corner posts were cleaved and pinned. A 4-inch thick wood base slab functioned as a filter to help keep the sandy soil out of the water. Lime, found all around the well, was used to help purify the deposits.



A cow mandible found in the second well (upper left); Remains of the well box (top and left).



Dovetail retained 14 wood samples from the wells for analysis and preservation. Some of the fragments have been used for speciation and dendrochronology, but most pieces have been kept for curation.

The wood is cleaned by hand weekly and re-submerged in clean water in specially designed tubs awaiting curation and conservation.



By the 1870s, the original Houston log house was referred to as an "old wood dwelling", and a new frame building was erected on the site of the original home. To accompany this update, the second well was infilled and a new well was constructed. This new edifice, just east of the second well, was the ultimate in recycling. An old yellow pine wood barrel was used as the base of the well shaft in lieu of a box frame, and the upper shaft was formed of hand-made brick salvaged from the original Houston house cellar before demolition.



Shaft of the 1870s well. Note the barrel base.



Architectural debris fills the well shaft (top); Detail of brick lining (right)



The sturdy form of the brick-lined well, the third on the site, provided accessible water for 60 years. When the later dwelling was demolished in the 1930s to make way for additional crop land, the occupants turned to the third well as a convenient spot for architectural refuse. Pressed roofing tin, cut stone, and other materials packed the upper stratum, thus preserving the well remains below.

HOUSTON-LECOMPT SITE

7NC-F-139



Circa 1737 George II coin found within the Houston house cellar fill.



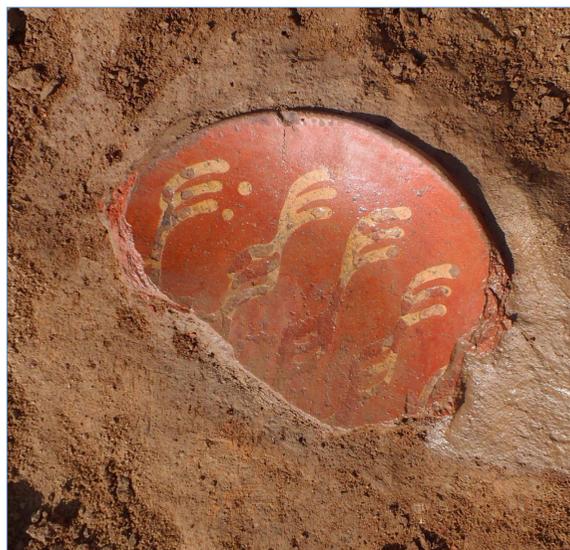
A sample of personal artifacts found at the Houston-LeCompt site. Top Row from left: Brass Thimble, Carved Bone Handle, Pipe Stems, Black Glass Bead, Black Leaf Motif Molded Shelf Shank Button, Blue Glass Bead, Small Copper Ring, Rivet, Brass piece, White Glass Buttons, Brass Shank Back Button with Stamped Floral Motif, Large Brass Coat Button, Aluminum Alloy Button.



Earthenware chamber pot found within the kitchen root cellar.



Nineteenth-century pipe bowl fragment with a male face profile and stylized side burns.



An earthenware trencher with a slip design from the kitchen root cellar.



Eighteenth-century William and Mary type drawer pulls.



Eighteenth-century personal adornments found at the Houston Le-Compt site.



Carved bone utensil handles



Hand-painted sleeve link with a cabachon-shaped inset in glass found within the house cellar.