

THE HOUSTON-LECOMPT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE (Site 7NC-F-139; N-14517)



A sea of pin flags during the Phase I Survey on the site. Each flag marks a cluster of artifacts.

This archaeological site is named for the Houston and LeCompt families who owned the property from the late-eighteenth to early-twentieth centuries. James Houston owned several farms, but lived on this site until his death in 1849. His land was divided among his heirs, deeding this farm to Richard Mulford. Mulford in turn sold it to James LeCompt in 1865. While owned by LeCompt, the land was used by tenant farmers who also lived in the home built by James Houston decades earlier. After LeCompt's death the land was sold back to the Houston family, but it is unclear if the house was still standing then. Evidence of the old farmstead, and the people who once lived here, is still present today buried under the soil.



Brick cellar walls still partially intact beneath the plowzone.

In our present time, the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) plans to use part of this land in the construction of the new U.S. Route 301 roadway. The new Route 301 will help DelDOT manage interstate trucking traffic, as well as reduce the amount of road congestion encountered by commuters and residents, all of which should lead to safer driving conditions for everyone. Unfortunately, the construction of the new road will destroy the archaeological sites in its path. Federal law (Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act) requires DelDOT to identify and evaluate any archaeological sites it may impact. This work was conducted by Dovetail

Cultural Resource Group and Archaeological & Historical Consultants, Inc. in 2010 and 2011. During the initial survey over 5,000 artifacts were discovered, and the subsequent site evaluation process yielded over 40,000 additional artifacts and the location of the house foundation.

When a site this significant will be affected by construction, the law also requires that the impact be mitigated by recovering as much information as possible beforehand. From July to mid-September of 2012, Dovetail will conduct a "dig" on this site (more properly called a data recovery project or mitigation). During this time, we will search for artifacts for dating, and other physical evidence of past occupation of this site, as well as maps and records in courthouses and archives.



Artifacts from the site include pipe fragments, pieces of an oil lamp, and part of a toothbrush made of bone.



Prehistoric projectile points found at one corner of the house indicate a previous tenant may have had an interest in archaeology.

It is our hope that this will help us to learn more about the people who lived here in the past: how they built their structures and modified them over time, how life on tenant farms and owner-occupied farms differed, and how this farm related to the rest of the region and contributed to its history.

Dovetail will also record as much about the archaeological process itself as possible with journals, photographs, and video to keep the public informed of our findings. Updates will be posted online at the DelDOT Archaeology blog, located at (<http://blogs.deldot.gov/category/us301/archaeology-updates/>). We at Dovetail Cultural Resource Group and DelDOT Cultural Resources also welcome the public to visit the site in person to ask questions about the process and to see our progress so far.

Our work here in the field will consist of excavating ten 2x2 meter squares by hand, to see how and what kind of artifacts collected in the soil over time. The plowzone soil on the remainder of the site will then be removed using a backhoe. Once this is done, we should be able to see the entire house foundation and cellar. The size, shape, and layout of the foundation can often tell architectural historians exactly what style of house once stood on the site. Removing the plowzone will also expose stains in the soil where wooden posts decayed, showing the outline of old fence lines and post-in-ground structures. And, importantly for archaeologists, it will reveal old wells and privies (outhouses), which were often partially filled in with debris, as well as middens (trash pits). Since trash tends to accumulate in layers, archaeologists can tell changes in diet and relative wealth or poverty based on what past peoples threw out.



A partially excavated midden (trash pit). A historic people's trash is an archaeologist's treasure.

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This background was made from a small section of an 1849 map showing the location of James Houston's properties.