

UPLAND TERRACES IN MARK CENTER (44AX162)

Report Summary by Shirley Scalley



"Large Scroll Border Series" Platter dated from 1813 to 1829

INTRODUCTION

In 1991, International Archaeological Consultants began investigation of an approximately 62-acre parcel in Alexandria. The property, part of the Mark Center development at Interstate 395 and Seminary Road, was not scheduled for development. Nonetheless, an archaeological survey of the area was undertaken as part of a continuing effort to identify Alexandria's cultural resources. A methodology to investigate the area was proposed and refined during discussions with Alexandria Archaeology.

The topography of the survey area consists of a series of gravel terraces bisected by drainages. During the first phase of the investigation, shovel tests showed the presence of two archaeological

sites: a prehistoric lithic scatter and a nineteenth century historic site.

A second phase of investigation of both sites was then undertaken. Because the prehistoric site produced few artifacts and no features, no further work was required. Excavations at the historic site, designated Terrace I Site (44AX162), refined the area of occupation, and intensive surface collection and metal detecting defined the area of a small structure, probably a cabin. This structure was then fully excavated.

HISTORY

During the nineteenth century, the survey area was miles from the center of Alexandria and was rural and sparsely populated. Western

Alexandria was primarily agricultural until urbanization began in the 1940s.

The original owner of the property was William Henry Terrett, a prominent citizen who profited from land grants made in the mid-eighteenth century. His descendants continued to maintain and expand their land holdings, and by the mid-1800s, they had acquired 1,172 acres. During the nineteenth century, they engaged in farming activities: they kept sheep, pigs, and cattle and raised crops of Indian corn, wheat, and rye. The Terretts owned as many as 32 slaves to tend to the agricultural and domestic duties. The Terrett family wealth began to dilute with the death of the patriarch George Hunter Terrett in 1843, when his land and slave holdings were divided among his 12 heirs.

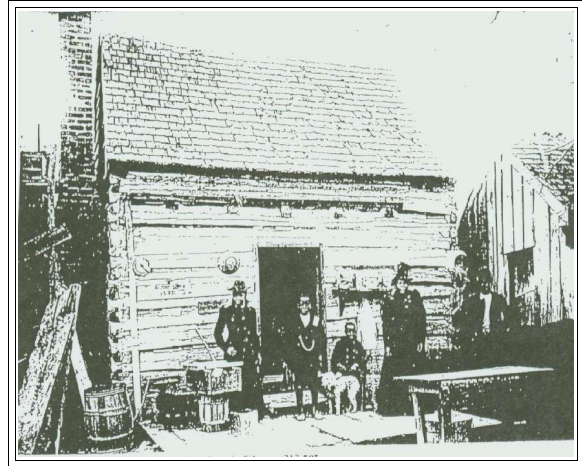
ARCHAEOLOGY

The Terrett family owned the property during its occupation from 1800 to 1870. It is unclear from the historic research and the archaeological evidence whether a tenant or a family of slaves owned by the Terretts occupied the site. The cabin was approximately 3/4 mile from the Terrett dwelling, which suggests that if the occupants were slaves, they lived largely free from direct supervision by their owners.

The excavation revealed only a few features that could be defined. They included a soil discoloration in the approximate outline of the structure, a possible storage pit, the drip line from one side of the structure, and a line of stones that may have been placed under one wall to prevent animals from crawling under the structure. Two other architectural features were noted: a group of cobbles that formed the base of a chimney and a large stone doorstep on the northern wall of a newer portion of the structure.

The excavation yielded a full assemblage of artifacts, including ceramics, bottle and window glass, nails, and personal items. Close examination of these artifacts and their distribution patterns helped to interpret the activities that occurred at the site.

The nails concentrated at the site were of two distinct types: roseheaded, spatula-tipped wrought nails made before 1815 and machine cut nails manufactured later in the nineteenth century. The distribution pattern of these two types of nails indicates that two structures were built at the site perhaps 30 or more years apart.

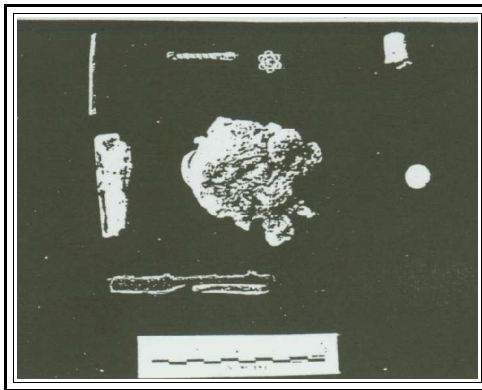


Nineteenth Century Rural Home
(From Valentine Museum-Cook Collection)

A few of the artifacts were part of the structure of the building and give us a better idea of how it was constructed and where some of the features, such as doors and windows, were located. Recovery of a cast-iron flue damper dating to circa 1840 indicates that the brick chimney may have been a later addition. Two matching hinges recovered near the doorstep confirm the location of the door, and three masonry nails found near the base of the chimney suggest that they may have supported utensils or pots used in food preparation. Other small items, including a thumb piece from a door handle and a small hasp from a chest or door, were also recovered. When all of these items are examined in relation to the other artifacts and the soil patterns, a picture of a house or cabin emerges. The structure appears to have been small and simply constructed, and the newer addition appears to have been either built onto or adjacent to the older structure. This structure may have looked similar to small rural structures of the late nineteenth century as shown in photographs taken at that time.

The distribution pattern of the window glass fragments shows that only one window with glass was present in the combined structures. The older portion of the structure probably had a simple opening that may have been shuttered. A lantern hanger and fragments of lantern glass recovered from the site indicate that the house was furnished with a lantern.

From the start of the excavation, it was clear that two events had occurred in the formation of the site. First, there were many indicators that the structure had been destroyed by fire and that the intensity of the fire had melted a large portion of the glass and had altered many of the ceramics. Second, salvage of the bricks from the chimney occurred shortly after the fire. This was indicated by the distribution and position of the brick remnants, the wide distribution of mortar, and the recovery of only two whole bricks at the deepest level of excavation. In addition, a bottle dating to the period of the fire was found sandwiched in the rubble and was probably dropped there during recovery of the bricks.



Top left: Slate pencil, bracelet link, applique, thimble, bone handle, lead, marble, slate pencil with mortar

The ceramics were analyzed by form, function, and decoration and as an indicator of social status. The ceramics recovered include transfer-printed wares, American grey stoneware, shell-edged wares, and a few coarsewares and porcelain. The assemblage was mostly refined earthenwares, with only a small percentage of coarsewares, stonewares, and porcelain. These percentages suggest a difference from sites excavated in the urban setting of Alexandria. Fewer vessels associated with hygiene and fewer pieces of porcelain were found than are generally found in wealthier households.

The ceramics recovered from the site were predominantly wares used in dining or in tea or coffee consumption. Only a few matched sets were among these wares, generally matching

cups and saucers. One of the finds that helped establish dates for the occupation of the site was a single rim sherd from a platter identified as "Large Scroll Border Series" dated from 1813 to 1829. When the percentage of white earthenware sherds that are creamware and pearlware is compared to percentages at other sites, a low to middle class economic status for the household is indicated.

The diet of the occupants and the site of food preparation and consumption were revealed by the recovery of 70 bones and a number of oyster shells. Many of the bones, or faunal remains, were from generally poorer quality cuts from the head, limbs, and feet of pigs. The oysters in the diet must have been transported from at least a few miles away, and the distribution of shells at the site shows that the eating and preparation area for the oysters was in the older portion of the structure.

The recovery of a number of personal items gives us an idea of who occupied the home and how they lived. These items include a link from a bracelet, a decorative applique for a woman's garment, a thimble, a bone handle from a utensil, a porcelaneous marble, two slate pencils, ten small pieces of lead, and one large, 5.9-ounce pool of lead.

The bracelet link is from an inexpensive piece of jewelry made of flat brass and painted with green, blue, white, and black stripes. The thimble, probably brass, was located outside the confines of the structure and had been gnawed at its base by a rodent. A mouse that gnawed at the edge to get the salts that would naturally accumulate in the thimble may have carried it away. The marble was recovered from the area of the newer addition and may be attributed to a child or young adult as the game of marbles was popular during the nineteenth century. Twenty-

two buttons were recovered from the site, most indicating utilitarian clothing. Only a few decorative or higher quality buttons that would suggest better clothing were found.

The two slate pencils recovered were used more as scribes, sharp tools used for marking wood, metal, or ceramics, than as pencils as we think of them today. One of the pencils apparently was dropped during construction of the chimney as one side is covered in mortar. Another item similar in size and wear patterns to the slate pencils is a small worked bone (pig fibula). Most of the pieces of lead recovered are small, and the fire that destroyed the structure melted all of them. The one large, 5.9-ounce pool of lead was either contained in a cloth bag or melted onto a piece of cloth. The fabric impression on the backside of the lead is similar in texture to a flour sack. The original use of the lead is unknown. It may have been a lead seal or a small collection of bullets.



Fabric pattern impressed on lead

A number of other artifacts, including decorated tobacco pipes, medicine bottles, and cooking utensils, have helped us understand the living conditions in the isolated rural location in western Alexandria in the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

The structure on the site was built around 1800 approximately 3/4 mile from the main Terrett house and was originally small, with a second structure added around the middle of the century. The house was furnished with a lantern, and the newer addition had the only glass window in the combined structure.

Whether tenants or slaves occupied the house is unclear. The artifacts suggest that a family, perhaps with a child, lived in the cabin, ate poorer cuts of meat, and at least on occasion, had oysters as part of their diet. The buttons suggest that the clothing was primarily utilitarian, although a few higher quality buttons and a decorative applique adorned some better clothing. These items, as well as the ceramic assemblage, suggest that these people were of a low to middle class economic status. The family may have been involved in tending animals on a wooded terrace owned by the Terrett family.

The history of the City of Alexandria is not complete without incorporating information about the rural residents whose activities and lifestyles differed from those of the urban inhabitants of the port city. This site is an important beginning in understanding the role in the community of these nineteenth century individuals.

This summary is based upon a 1994 report by Robert M. Adams.