

ARCHAEOLOGY IN ALEXANDRIA'S WEST END:

INVESTIGATIONS AT THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE RELOCATION SITE

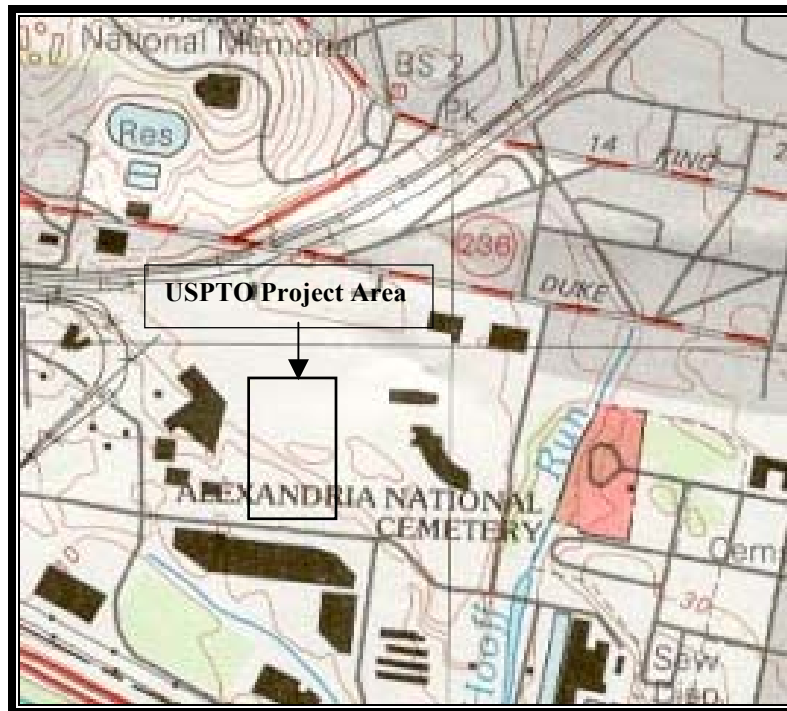


Figure 1: Location of the Project Area in Alexandria

Until January 2001, the casual passerby on Eisenhower Avenue would have seen only a level grassy field at the location proposed for a new office complex, now under construction, that soon will house the United States Patent and Trademark Office. Long-time residents of Alexandria perhaps may remember that, until three decades ago, the Norfolk and Southern Railroad's massive rail yard complex once occupied the northern half of this area. Those with longer memories might even recall that the formerly vacant slopes south of Duke Street and the railroad sidings, now bustling with construction activity, also were used by the City of Alexandria as a waste disposal site

for several decades. All types of debris were deposited in this landfill, sometimes to depths in excess of eighteen feet. The landfill operation filled in several small stream drainages that used to flow into Cameron Run and Great Hunting Creek.

One could scarcely imagine a more unlikely spot for an archaeological project. Yet the archival and archaeological research undertaken for the USPTO project has contributed, both substantively and materially, to our understanding of the history of Alexandria's West End, the city's first historic suburb.

ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

Since the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) Relocation project was a Federal agency undertaking, all aspects of the project had to comply with Federal laws. Two such laws—the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969—have provisions that require Federal agencies to consider the effects of their actions on cultural and historical resources. The USPTO’s decision to locate the complex within the City of Alexandria meant that the City’s strong historic preservation ordinance, which requires archaeological investigations in advance of construction, also came into play. Finally, previous studies conducted elsewhere in Alexandria’s West End had demonstrated that, despite intensive development, this area of the city retained a high potential for archaeological remains. In fact, a preliminary study done in 1990 had identified archaeological features and artifact deposits in the northern half of the USPTO project area itself.

Together, the Federal and local requirements and the demonstrated archaeological potential of the project area dictated the objectives of the 2002 study: (1) to evaluate the impact of the proposed site development on previously identified resources; (2) to identify and evaluate the significance of other historic and archaeological resources within the project area; and (3) to recommend strategies for managing those resources. Achieving these objectives involved conducting background research, analyzing historic maps, monitoring four development blocks as the site was prepared for construction, and documenting and testing the archaeological resources uncovered as a result of construction activities.

SITE HISTORY

Part of the property that the new USPTO complex will occupy originally was

included in a 6,000-acre land grant known as the “Howson-Alexander tract.” By the mid-18th century, this large property had been broken up into several separate parcels. John West, Jr., who already owned over six hundred acres immediately to the west, purchased part of this tract. West’s purchase, described as “250 acres on Great Hunting Creek, including [a] large marsh,” lay south of Duke Street and extended west to a point “a little to westward of arch of the new stone bridge across a run in Duke Street.” The “run” referred to appears to have been Hooff’s Run, known then as “Harrison’s Gut.” In 1764, West purchased another 41 acres on the western bank of this “run” from Thomas Harrison. A 1750 survey of Harrison’s grant (Figure 2) shows West’s house on the western bank of Harrison’s Gut, at a location just east of the USPTO project area.

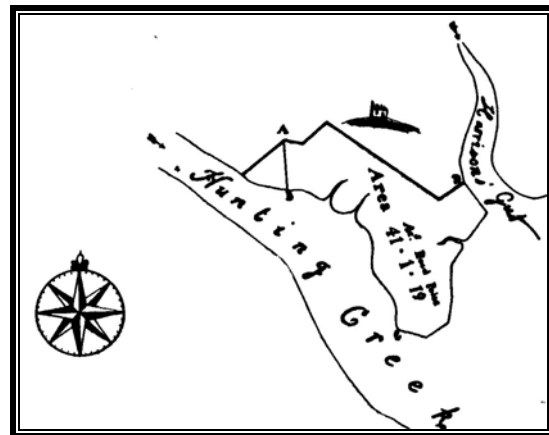


Figure 2: Survey of Thomas Harrison's patent (1750)

After the American Revolution, Alexandria’s population and its economy grew, due mainly to increasing commerce. Goods and travelers from western Virginia entered the City via several turnpikes, including the Little River Turnpike (Duke Street), just north of the project area. The cluster of businesses and homes in this area were known as “West End.” The land south of the Duke Street corridor remained vacant. Landowners Benjamin Rotchford and (after the Civil War) Isaac Peverill used their

properties primarily for agriculture. During the 1850s, the newly formed Orange and Alexandria Railroad purchased a right-of-way through these properties and constructed a rail line to the Potomac River; this right-of-way eventually became the northern boundary of the USPTO property.

The railroad stimulated growth in the area; its presence also meant that the West End assumed strategic value during the Civil War. When the Union Army took control of Alexandria, it expanded this rail terminus greatly. Union forces also established other facilities here, including, in 1863, the Slough Barracks and hospital. At the end of the war, the government demolished and sold as scrap all the structural elements of the hospital, parts of which may have stood within the USPTO project area.

Nearly all the late 19th century development in the West End continued to cluster along Duke Street north of the railroad. The land between the railroad and Cameron Run reverted to agricultural use. Then in 1897, the (now) Southern Railroad acquired a 1,080 ft wide strip of land south of its original right-of-way to provide space for expanding its facilities.

During the next 50 years, Southern's railroad complex grew to include a roundhouse and rail yard that collectively became known as "Cameron Yards." Other railroad-related service businesses also built facilities in or near the yards, including an ice storage warehouse, a car icing platform and station, and a refrigerator car service and maintenance facility. In 1944, the Southern Railroad added a diesel locomotive repair shop, a structure that continued in service until the 1970s.

The foregoing history suggested that archeologists may discover artifacts and features related to 18th and 19th century farming operations, vestiges of a Civil War hospital, and remains of 20th century railroad facilities within the USPTO project area.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

The first task required by the project scope of work was that archeologists monitor and document the removal of all fill (much of it contaminated) within four blocks of the project area. This process would allow a determination of whether mid-late 20th century land use and municipal waste disposal had erased any significant archaeological deposits from the project site. The monitoring process continued during the entire three months that site-clearing activities were in progress. Project archeologists documented that, in the three southernmost blocks of the project area, years of repeated grading, filling, and waste disposal had modified the original landscape so severely that no intact archaeological deposits remained.

Block F, the northernmost block of the project area, was the exception. As the backhoes carefully stripped away several feet of surface fill, Block F began to reveal soil anomalies called features and artifacts that reflected, in reverse, some of the history of Alexandria's West End (Figure 3). The first features to appear in the upper levels related to the most recent use of the area by

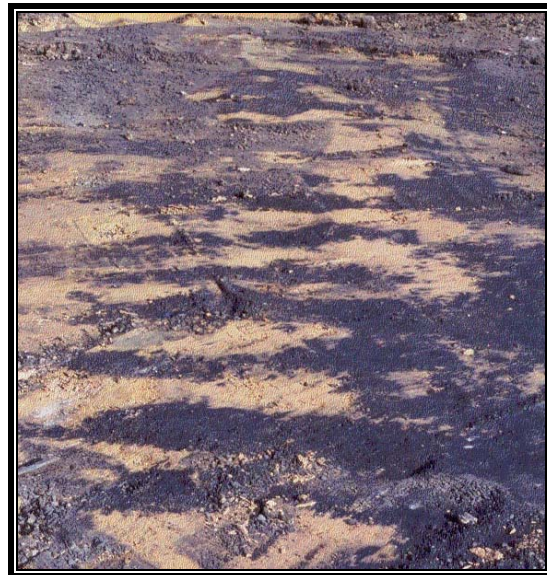


Figure 3: Imprints of railroad ties from Cameron Yards

Southern Railroad, which had expanded its rail yards here in 1897. When the railroad abandoned the yards and removed the tracks, depressions created by the wooden ties filled up with the cinders and ballast that were spread across the upper end of the USPTO project area. Other railroad related features, most of which were truncated, also appeared at this level. These included the remains of at least two 20th century buildings and the bases of several early 200th century privies, some of which contained castaway shoes and tools.

Once the railroad features had been mapped and investigated, more contaminated soils were stripped from Block F. The second phase of this stripping process revealed a total of 85 other vaguely defined features, particularly in the southern half of the block. Some features resembled postholes; others were simply smears of darker soils. The largest of these (Feature 36), which measured about 140 ft east west x 25 ft north south, represented the bottom of a filled in gully.

Buried within this shallow deposit were several very heavy hand-hewn and sawn pieces of timber framing with mortise and tenon joints; parts of what appeared to be the sides of a wooden wagon; and an entire wagon wheel (Figure 4). The timber framing obviously represented the remains of a large, heavy building, possibly a 19th century barn.



Figure 4: Partially excavated wagon wheel

Almost no readily datable artifacts were recovered from the excavations in Feature 36. The single exception was one piece of ceramic—one fragment of the base of a washbasin with a maker's mark (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Bennett Pottery maker's mark

Additional research into the makers' mark revealed that the basin had been made by the Edwin Bennett Pottery, a Baltimore firm that used this particular mark during the latter half of the 19th century. Small as it was, this fragment provided the only date for all of the artifacts recovered from Feature 36.

And what of the Civil War period Slough Hospital? Disappointingly, no traces of it were found. Yet, the City of Alexandria and its citizens can count the archaeological investigations at the USPTO site a success. Both the background research and the archaeological remains documented important aspects of the historic development of Alexandria's West End. After undergoing conservation treatment, the wagon wheel eventually may be displayed at the Lyceum. The remaining artifacts will become part of the city's growing Alexandria Archaeology collection. Most importantly, the project demonstrated once again, that while the City of Alexandria builds its future, it does not forget its past.

Produced by R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates,
Inc. on behalf of Alexandria Archaeology and Roy F.
Weston, Inc.