

Interim Report, Robertsville Forge, Part III

2007 Subsurface Testing

The remains of the forge are presently buried under tons of rock brought to the site for the reconstruction of the Old Creamery Road Bridge after the 1955 flood. Since this would be very difficult and expensive to excavate, the focus of the 2007 archaeological testing was just west of the forge on the property described previously. At the end of September Dr. Mark Banks with assistance from Paul Hart, President of the Barkhamsted Historical Society, established a grid with a baseline parallel to Robertsville Road at the northern edge of the property. Subsurface testing was conducted along this baseline and perpendicular lines running southward across the field. The grid was measured off in one meter squares. Pins driven into the ground at the points along the baseline will permit the grid to be re-established for any future archaeological work.

Fifty-centimeter shovel-dug test pits were dug at 5 and 10-meter intervals across the grid with some adjustments made to avoid rock outcrops and trees. Each test pit represented one quadrant of a one-meter square, which will allow them to be incorporated into any expanded block excavation that might be required. Test pits were dug in arbitrary 10cm levels following the natural soil stratigraphy. The matrix of all test pits was screened through one-quarter inch hardware cloth to recover any cultural material or ecofacts that were present. Soil stratigraphy was recorded for each test unit. The soil profiles of many of these test units were also photographed. Test pits were terminated upon reaching glacial sediments, bedrock, the water table or after a minimum of twenty centimeters (just under 8 inches) of sterile subsoil. All recovered materials were packaged for analysis. Subsurface testing continued until snow covered the field in late November. By that time 131 of the 150 test pits projected had been completed. Additional test pits will be dug this spring.

Structures within and adjacent to the 2007 Study Area

The evidence of a number of the buildings that appear on the 1771 map was located. These structures included the coal house, the forge, the store, the blacksmith shop and the iron house. The approximate location of one or more of the dwelling houses was identified by a concentration of domestic and building materials. A well discovered immediately north of this concentration may be associated with this house(s). Stonework from the dam and piers for the gates to the raceway is still visible east and west of the Still River respectively. Many of these features lie just outside the area investigated in 2007.

The forge was located immediately west of the Still River and just south of the bridge on Old Creamery Road. Some stonework from the forge foundation is still intact along the edge of Still River. Portions of the forge or the channel leading from the race may actually lie beneath the road. The stone remains of the structures (store, blacksmith shop and iron house) within the triangle of land east of the Putnam's house were examined. Preliminary measurements taken of these buildings correlate well with the 1771 map. Rough dimensions of the store and forge were taken that closely match the scale of the map. More exact measurements are planned.

The Coal House

The approximate location of the coal house had been established about four years earlier by Walter Landgraf and Robert Grigg. Using a soil auger, they dug approximately 12 cores across the northeastern corner of the open field. A number of the cores revealed charcoal

concentrations below the upper soil horizons. These cores were assumed to be within the coal house. From these test holes the dimensions of the building were estimated to be 29 feet by 55 feet. The larger 2007 test pits provided a better view of the stratigraphy across this part of the site. These test units revealed that the charcoal deposits were as deep as 2 feet in places and that the layers of charcoal were separated by layers of sand and gravel in other locations. The sand and gravel was probably used to cover over charcoal that had become wet. Dry charcoal was then placed over this new floor. Since time didn't permit the excavation of trenches, test pits were placed at intervals in the four cardinal directions across this area to determine the extent of the charcoal deposits and thus the walls of the building. Based on these units, the building appears to have been somewhat larger than first believed, at least 60 feet (east to west) by 40 feet (north and south). The structure may actually have extended further east on the property owned by Northeast Utilities that was not tested. Testing also indicated that rather than being parallel to Robertsville Road, the coal house was oriented on somewhat of an angle running from northwest to southeast. This would suggest a discrepancy with the 1771 map, which shows the coal house in line with the forge. The forge's layout was dictated by the surrounding geology.

Dwelling Houses

A concentration of domestic and building materials uncovered near the northern end of the project area suggest the location of one or more dwelling houses depicted on the 1771 map. Historic ceramics recovered from this area included: English Trail Slip c. 1675-1710 (production dates); white salt-glazed stoneware c. 1720-1770; Whieldonware c. 1740-1770; hand-painted creamware c. 1760s-1820; and redware c. 1780s-1840. Other varieties of stoneware and bottle glass shards that were present have yet to be analyzed. Items of apparel included a cufflink and a shoe buckle. The latter artifact usually dates between 1700 and 1815 in America. This buckle appears to be made of brass or copper and may have been plated with tin to resemble silver. The artifact assemblage also included kaolin pipe bowl and stem fragments. Although no evidence of intact house foundations was located during subsurface testing, building materials included wrought nails, brick and window glass further support the presence of one or more houses in this part of the field. The handmade wrought nails and very thin window glass fit well with the time span during which the forge was in operation. Brick fragments found throughout the area are undoubtedly the remains of chimneys from these buildings. A crane fragment indicates that cooking vessels were suspended within ovens or fireplaces. During subsurface testing evidence of filling was indicated by voids amongst stone fragments. It has yet to be determined if this fill is covering the remains of cellar holes. It is hoped that future excavation can resolve this question. It is believed that the stone that served as piers/foundations for these structures were removed during the two centuries of farming that followed the demise of the forge. These materials probably were used in the construction of later buildings on the property. Some may have found their way into stonewalls as the field was cleared for agricultural purposes.

To be continued next week.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg