

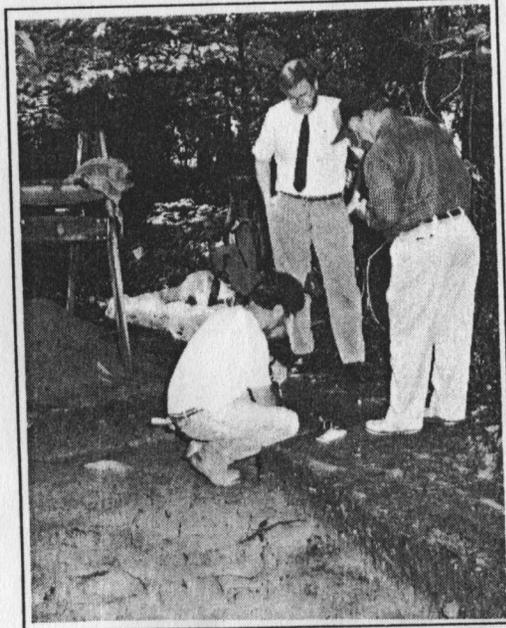
William Rogers: "The 'Poor Potter of Yorktown'"

BY KRISTINA MURDEN

A rare opportunity to study the economics of the 17th-century Southeastern Virginia farmer has been discovered in the form of more than 8,000 artifacts, recently unearthed at Langley. The two-acre site was once part of a 50-acre farmstead that existed for more than 100 years.

The thousands of artifacts, from Chinese porcelain to colonial smoking pipes, have taken archaeologists on a journey back to a small farm that was once surrounded by huge plantations, and was just a boat ride away from a tiny village called Hampton. An archaeological survey has deemed it eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

The site is unique because major subsistence farmsites are rarely found. Most archaeological finds on the Peninsula were owned by wealthy plantation owners. This farmstead belonged to the Francis Ross family of Elizabeth City County. "What we have here is an important 'cultural resource,'" said Dr. Frank Farmer, Langley's archaeologist. The materials



Left to right, Wyatt Vrooman, John Mouring and Jerome Traver discuss an excavation test pit at the "Ross House" site

archaeology is not a casual or unrelated activity. The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires the Center Director to serve as custodian of local historic resources on behalf of the American people.

When construction project plans call for land disturbance, a discovery survey (Phase I) is performed. Depending on the number and kind of artifacts

"The ceramics that helped date the site at 1720-1745 were in excellent condition, and there were enough pieces to identify bowls, plates, etc.

"The almost total lack of Chinese porcelains and delftware (tin glazed earthenware) indicated that the family did not have much money compared to plantation owners. And the fact that there was no pearlware found, which was very common and first made in 1780, meant that there was little activity on the site after 1780 — or pearlware would have been found.

There were also 85 pieces of bottle glass recovered on the site. Most of them were dark green wine bottle glass slivers, and a lip and a base of a pharmaceutical bottle were recovered next to the house.

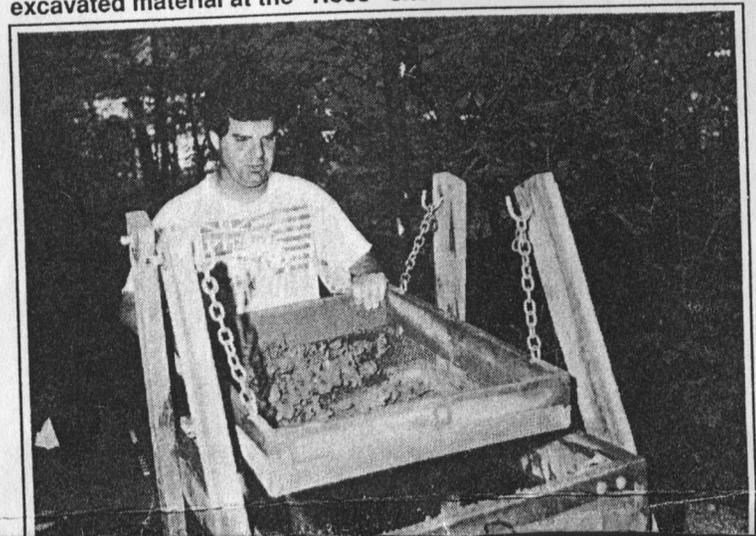
Bone Group

A total of 2,898 items.



All photos by Fred Jones

Jerome Traver, Principal Investigator and Field Supervisor for MAAR Associates, Inc., points to an excavation of half a mold/post hole "feature." The post house foundation rotted, leaving a mold within the larger "hole" of earth and broken brick placed around the post by an 18th century builder. Wyatt Vroom, Archeological Field Aide, searches for artifacts as he screens excavated material at the "Ross" site.



found are directly related to the Colonial Settlement Period (1630-1750) and the Colony to Nation Period (1750-1789) in Elizabeth City County. "One of the most important revelations is that we have linked pieces of a ceramic milkpan (dated between 1720 and 1745) to William Rogers, known as the "poor potter of Yorktown." The Ross family property was identified fairly quickly with the help of an historical document written in the 1970s by J. Patterson, a retired NASA engineer.

The Answer to Questions

The find has the potential to answer questions about why earlier occupation (17th century) on the land had a more permanent type of architecture than later occupation (18th century). Remains of both types were discovered. The find can also provide useful data in understanding the settlement pattern and layout of a subsistence farmstead; where a farmer earned his living from his land. It has already provided some clues about the low economic status of the Ross family from pieces like ceramics.

The site was discovered during Langley's routine preconstruction survey for significant underground resources. When archaeologists got lucky and struck bricks, bones and ceramics, just to name a few, the plans for a building and a parking lot had to be modified. The complex is now being completed at the corner of Ames and Doolittle Streets.

Langley's involvement in

found, an identification and evaluation survey (Phase II) may be undertaken to identify and assess significance of the site. If the site is significant and if the disturbance project can not be modified, then a Curation Excavation Project (Phase III) must be performed to remove or totally document the resource.

A Phase I survey was conducted by MAAR Associates, Inc., during June and July of 1992. Based on the data, the site was identified as a 17th-century domestic site with significant research potential. The surveyors dug numerous shovel test pits in the wooded project area to determine this.

The Virginia Department of Historic Resources then proposed a Phase II investigation to determine the site's extent and eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. Phase II was conducted during May and June of 1993, and progressed to the test excavation pits pictured here. This assessment determined site boundaries and significance of the artifacts and features.

Exactly 8,211 artifacts were recovered in the Phase I/II investigations. They were divided into four groups: Kitchen, Bone, Architectural, and Kaolin Pipe. In the same area, prehistoric materials, including projectile points and a scraping tool, were found.

Kitchen Group

"The most significant find was the ceramics, because they provided the benchmarks for effective dating," said Farmer.

including 57 bones, mostly from domestic farm animals, six teeth, and 2,835 oyster shells, were recovered. The oyster shells are considered artifacts because they were removed from their natural environment to serve a purpose on land. Bone preservation was excellent. Cuts of meat and other subsistence items might be reflected from bones and later testing could provide more clues to indicate a low standard of living.

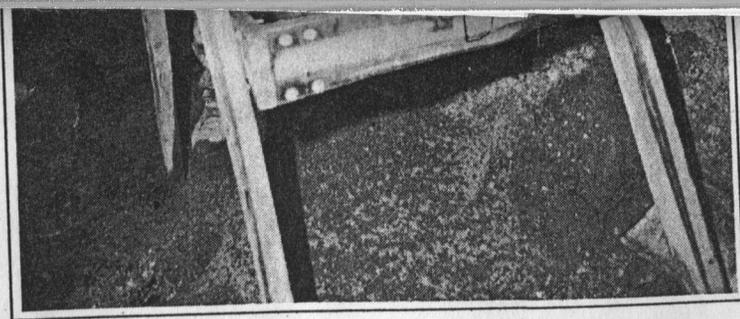
Architectural Group

Most of the architectural materials were brick fragments. Construction materials, including mortar, accounted for 4,862 items. Most of the nails consisted of 154 items in various states of preservation, most showing little indication of being in any kind of fire. Phase II testing also revealed the archaeological remains or features of a brick foundation structure and two post molds and post pits. The posts are associated with a later structure that used brick from the house site as fill.

Kaolin Pipe Group

The relatively small number of kaolin pipe pieces—white clay smoking pipes—indicated that the Ross family probably did not smoke, but their visitors did. There were not enough pipe artifacts to precisely date them.

"Our goal is to manage this resource," said John Mouring, Langley's Facility Preservation Officer, "so we want to preserve it rather than enter Phase III, which is total excavation."



Since the discovery, the pits at the site have been covered back up.

"We have fulfilled our national responsibility by complying with the National Historic Preservation Act in performing Phases I and II. Now, our philosophy is to leave the site alone—there will be smarter people that will come along after us—so we should learn a little from it and leave it alone. Phase III would destroy the future research potential of this important resource," Mouring said. "The artifacts and features that have already been recovered will be curated."



Jerome Traver holds a "diagnostic" artifact from a ceramic milkpan made by the "Poor Potter of Yorktown" between 1720 and 1745.

What Does the Future Hold?

The next step is to contract with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a total Langley site survey which will better support the Historic Resource Management plan. This effort will begin next year and be headed by Mouring and Farmer.

A parallel survey is being contracted to the National Park Service for a two-year survey of Langley's above-ground "modern" structures due to our history-making accomplishments. Mouring and Richard T. Layman, Langley's Historian and Real Estate Management Officer, will lead that effort.