

Highway dig in Scotch Plains yields archeological finds

by [Tracee Herbaugh](#)/For The Star-Ledger
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SCOTCH PLAINS -- As traffic whizzes through Scotch Plains along one a busy highway, a few feet away, archaeologists are digging up remnants from past civilizations.

A barren plot of land next to the crossroads of Route 22 and Park Avenue was once the farmland of colonial Dutch settlers and, for thousands of years before that, home to Native Americans.



Alexandra Pais/For The Star-Ledger

Jessica Bookin and Mike Insetta sift through dirt at the archaeological excavations at the Stites Farmstead in Scotch Plains near Route 22 on Thursday.

More is known about these past inhabitants than ever because of an excavation funded by the New Jersey Department of Transportation. Such digs are common before road construction begins, particularly if federal money is involved, but finding a cache of undisturbed historical artifacts is somewhat of a rarity.

Now, at the Stites Farmstead in Scotch Plains, three-foot deep excavation holes mar areas of the land where archaeologists recovered artifacts such as a broken buckle and a gold-plated sugar spoon from the 1700s.

The Department of Transportation hired a Cranbury-based archaeological consulting firm to probe the land for any historical significance. The firm will catalog the artifacts it found before construction crews come in to build a stormwater holding basin. Initial survey work on the project began in 2005, but this phase is in its fourth week and due for completion in late September or early October.

A house deed shows the Stites family settled the land in the mid-1700s and owned it until the 1830s. Tenants lived in the wood-frame, two-story house on the land until about 1860 when the Johnston family bought it.

"The (Stites) family was your run of-the-mill farm family, there were no George Washingtons who lived here," said senior archaeologist Michael Gall. "But the stuff they tossed out the window helps us determine how people lived in the colonial period in Union County."

Some of the relics that were found on the site include parts of tobacco pipes and ceramic dishes.

"Belt buckles and buttons are really common from this period because they didn't have zippers then," Gall said. "And tobacco was really popular back then. Even with young children and women, everyone smoked."

Diggers at the Stites Farmstead also found arrowheads dating back 3,000 to 5,000 years on the property, though much less is known about the Native Americans who lived on the site. On most digs, artifacts dating back this far have been lost or disturbed because of the Europeans who settled the land later, according to Rob Lore, a senior archaeologist with the firm Richard Grubb & Associates that is handling the excavation.

"A lot of these projects are about recovering as much information as possible, because it's that last time to gather before construction," Lore said. "Archaeological evidence shows there were people all over the area."

Now, the land is an empty lot, about an acre, that is overgrown with weeds and trees and is marked by a handful of 25 feet by 25 feet excavation pits. The only visible remains of the colonial settlers is a small water well.

In 2005, when the project initially began, the Stites Farmstead was cataloged as the 36th archaeological site in Union County, a small number compared to other counties in New Jersey that have hundreds.

"There are a lot of excavations going on all the time because there is so much development here," Lore said. From sites like this, archaeologists and anthropologists are able to piece together how past communities lived, whether they are 300 or 3,000 years old.

"We're able to determine consumer behavior, organizational structure and diet by looking at the artifacts and comparing them to other groups of people," Gall said. The artifacts taken from the Stites Farmstead will be cataloged and displayed on rotation at the New Jersey State Museum for patrons as well as researchers.

Last week, some local Boy Scouts toured the site as a requirement for their archeology merit badges.

"I liked learning that the deeper artifacts are older," said Colin Hegarty, 11, of Berkeley Heights. Pamela Hegarty, Colin's mother, agreed.

"The thing that is so fascinating is that we drive speeding by every day," she said. "And to think Native Americans lived here thousands of years ago is really cool."