

A PORTAL TO THE PAST



PHOTOS BY AMANDA BROWN/THE STAR-LEDGER

Archaeologists from Richard Grubb and Associates excavate the site of an old farm house at Cherry Valley and Great roads on the border of Mercer and Somerset counties. A project to widen an intersection turned up 19th-century artifacts at the site, delaying the road work until next year and adding almost \$300,000 on top of the estimated cost.

History unearthed at construction site

BY JOE TYRRELL
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

After maybe 10,000 years in New Jersey, humans have left a lot behind.

These days, routine construction projects become lost-and-found departments, turning up objects whose owners are unlikely to come looking for them.

On the border of Mercer and Somerset counties, a project to widen an intersection and install a traffic light has also opened windows, or pits, into two eras well before lights and before much traffic.

Along Cherry Valley Road as it meets Great Road, archaeologists from Richard Grubb and Associates are sifting through dirt from a series of 5-by-5 plots.

Near the intersection, a team led by Allison Savarese has been turning up fragments of plates, jugs, knives and tools, artifacts of 19th-century farm life.

Early in the 19th century, the intersection was the site of a cottage built by wealthy French immigrants, the Tulanes, for their farm laborers. (Paul Tulane would donate land in New Orleans for a university.)

In 1859, tenant farmer Theodore Drake demolished the cottage and built a larger house, a barn and a stone pad-



A piece of a Redware dish, left, and a pocket knife were dug up at the site, where a cottage built by wealthy French immigrants once stood.

dock. Some of the paddock's boulders are still visible above ground, and the researchers have uncovered the stone footings of a porch.

More than that, they've found those everyday objects

from "people who weren't prominent in society," said Michael Gall, Grubb's liaison to Somerset County, which is overseeing the road project.

"These were people who moved from house to house to house, who didn't leave written records," he said.

But their lifestyles can be reconstructed from those archaeological fragments, pieces of Redware plates and jugs, "the Rubbermaid of its day, very cheap and utilitarian," along with slightly fancier ceramics, Gall said.

About 20 yards to the east, by a "Speed Limit 40 MPH" sign, Tara Bini and assistants are peering into the remains of a fire pit from the Late Woodland period, some 400 to 1,000 years old.

That is, when they're not peering into pools of water, the products of working along a stream during a rainy fall. Even on those days, though, it's possible to get work done, sorting dirt from the test holes through wood-framed screens to see what sticks.

"We've got maybe 80 pounds of dirt back in our office," to screen there, Bini said. "We've been a bit overzealous."

But productive. So far, the excavations have turned up blackened bones, arrow heads and stone flecks carefully

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Archaeologist Tara Bini examines a piece of flint found at the site. Prehistoric finds also included arrowheads.

HISTORY

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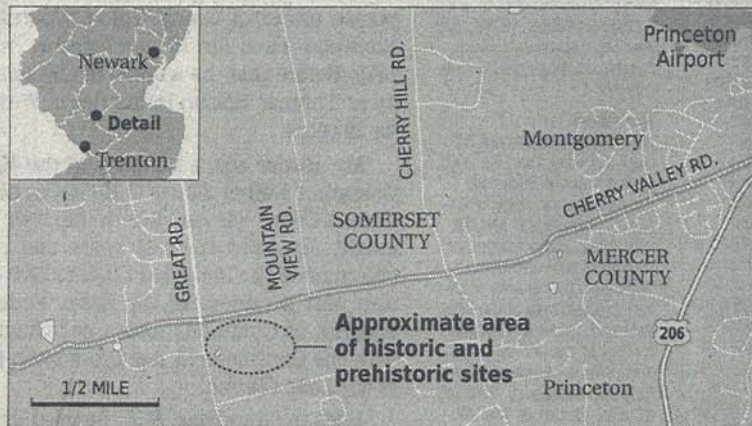
chiseled away. The indications are that this was a temporary encampment, possibly a hunting base, for ancestors of the Lenape, New Jersey's native inhabitants at the time of the European arrival.

By analyzing the material at Grubb's Cranbury laboratory, researcher Rob Lore will be able to draw some conclusions about what species the early hunters were catching and roasting, and thus about their living conditions.

"That's what I did my graduate work on, animal bone analysis," he said.

Because the site appears to have been occupied for a relatively brief time, the task should be easier, because materials from different eras will not be commingled.

But working conditions are less



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than ideal, as much of the area is wetlands along a tributary of Bedens Brook. The excavations also are confined to the narrow strip of the road project, although researchers hope to obtain permission from the neighboring property owner for more test pits.

Down the road by the intersection, space is even more con-

strained as cars pull up a few yards away to stop — or not — at the existing four-way stop. The researchers normally would welcome local schools or community groups to visit a dig site. But there's not enough room to do that safely on Cherry Valley Road.

With development burgeoning in the area, the greatly increased

traffic led the two counties, Princeton Township and Montgomery to agree on road work, said David Lorimer, Somerset's assistant county engineer.

Unlike decades past when road projects obliterated historic sites — part of Route 22 in Bridgewater is built on a Revolutionary War fortification — New Jersey now requires relatively simple test borings and archaeological analysis.

Those turned up artifacts at the intersection, triggering the more extensive studies, Lorimer said. The excavations have delayed the road work until next year and added almost \$300,000 on top of the estimated price, he said.

But the counties are willing to do that to preserve their heritage, he said. Artifacts unearthed at the site "will go down to the State Museum for cataloging" and possible display. "They could be loaned out to other groups," like the Montgomery and Princeton historical societies, he said.