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## Archaeological Finds at the Lowe House

### Notes from the Initial Discovery

Robin L. Denson

#### First finds, early May 2003

An effort to shore up a sinking porch foundation on the Lowe House outbuilding led to the beginning of the Lowe House Archaeology Project, when, in May 2003, a construction crew at work on the project unearthed a repository of archaeological materials at the site.

Johnnie Wallace, a contractor from Decatur hired by the University of Alabama in Huntsville Foundation to undertake restoration of the outbuilding, was the first to discover the archaeological trove. Wallace and his crew had been removing soil from an area directly under the gallery and out about six feet to where an old outer retaining wall had been constructed, when they noticed glass, bone and ceramic artifacts coming from the soil matrix. Johnnie and his team collected some of the material as they dug, and when Dr. Derald Morgan, the UAH Foundation's Executive Director examined it, I was asked to visit the site to determine its nature and extent and to make recommendations to the Foundation for its disposition.



*Restoration work begins on Lowe House outbuilding to shore up sagging porches*



*Historic ceramics, glass, animal bone and metal discovered by the construction crew warranted further investigation to identify the nature and extent of the archaeological deposits*

### **Assessment and reconstruction, late May 2003**

Initially, the contractor's finds appeared to be coming from throughout the surface of the old walkway that was buried directly under the present one. It appeared that the material was a component of the trench that builders had formed to construct the early wall. To test this assumption, we made plans to conduct a preliminary site assessment. The assessment would include the following: testing of the retaining wall's builder's trench that ran along the length of the gallery, using a minimum of two one-half meter test units; documenting the construction work with respect to the subsurface archaeological deposits, the wall and its current construction features; monitoring the remainder of the wall's removal; and, overseeing the extraction of and the subsequent screening of the bulk materials for artifacts.

The two one-half meter test units proved to be most telling for understanding the nature and extent of the intact archaeological deposits at the Lowe House. The first test unit was placed just south of the original northernmost entry point into the dwelling, now bricked over but still discernible from the exterior façade. The second unit was placed south of the smokehouse door entry. Wallace's workers had removed the top of the buried soil surface down to a naturally occurring clay layer that sloped downward almost eight inches from the north end of the building to the south end. This older, buried clay layer contained no artifacts in the two test units, or in the early builder's trench portion of the test units.\*

The second test unit did, however, offer evidence strongly suggesting that the artifacts were coming from two discrete deposits on either side of the smokehouse entry door and on top of the naturally occurring clay layer. In the case of the first test unit, the archaeological deposits had already been removed by the contractor and the spoil pile laid nearby on the property. Most of the second test unit's archaeological deposits had also been removed, but enough remained to confirm the site's original nature. This type of refuse disposal pattern, where debris was discarded just outside the door and alongside the entry points, is consistent with residential waste disposal patterns evident during the era of the site's purported occupation in the early-to mid-1800s.

Since the bulk of the site's contents had been transferred to the contractor's spoil pile, it was agreed that recovery of the artifacts from the spoil could provide useful and datable insight into the site's occupation. UAH agreed to coordinate with Alabama Constitution Village to develop a public or student archaeology program for the purposes of education and retrieval of the site's valuable archaeological information and artifacts.

### **Bringing in the children, late August 2003**

The artifact recovery project ran for five days, with an average of thirty students visiting the site each day. Students worked in teams of four to six persons led by

an EarlyWorks Childrens Museum volunteer crew chief who chaperoned them through the activities. Each team participated in recovering, cleaning, sorting and cataloging their finds during their half-day visit. Artifacts recovered included pottery, glass, metal and bone. A cursory view of the materials shows that the bone—primarily pig, cow and deer—was consistent with that of butchering and the functioning of a smokehouse at the site, and that the dates of the pottery and glass artifacts consistently point to the mid-1800s (1820-1850). At the close of the week, a good deal of soil still remained to sift, and yet the students had recovered, cleaned and sorted literally hundreds of artifacts in each classification of finds.



*Young archaeologists classify a find.*

### **Following up, September and October 2003**

The UAH Foundation agreed that the remainder of the site's finds would be recovered, weather and time permitting. An additional weekend of work took place in the fall with assistance from members of the local Alabama Archaeological Society chapter. Future weekends are planned for 2004 to complete the recovery portion of the project. The equipment support of the Archaeology Department at Jacksonville State University and its offer to provide students to help catalog and analyze the materials helps make this plan feasible. Further analysis and cataloging of the entire collection will be completed once the remaining artifacts are recovered from the spoil.

The University of Alabama in Huntsville Foundation provided support for the archaeological project in its efforts to maintain and conserve the historic integrity of the property. With the numbers and kinds of historic artifacts being recovered from this early period in the city's history likely to far exceed that which has previ-

ously been collected from other historic sites in the area, the research and educational benefits of this project are still being fully realized. The nature of the finds suggest that the quality of life on Williams Avenue was good at that time for the residents at the Lowe House, with some of the ceramic wares clearly belonging to high-status individuals.

*\*The eight-inch incline was what had caused the continued settling of the porch and the outbuilding roof. Once this was determined, the contractor stepped down the foundations of the new retaining wall eight inches at the northernmost end of the building. Evidence from the old wall indicated that it had been reconstructed at least three times, probably because of this dramatic difference in slope across the site in the clay layer.*

The author extends special thanks to the following organizations that have supported the project: **Wallace Construction**, for assisting with the early investigations; **Jacksonville State University's Archaeological Research Lab**, for the loan of its field equipment and comparative collection; **National Space Science and Technology Center's Education and Public Outreach Office**, for the loan of its field equipment, labs and administrative support; and **Alabama Constitution Village**, for coordinating the public education and community outreach.