



Archaeological Excavations at the Voorhees Site (28-So-153): A Late 18th-Century Blacksmith Shop in Franklin Twp. Somerset County, NJ

From March to September of 2008, Richard Grubb & Associates of Cranbury, New Jersey archaeologically excavated portions of the Voorhees site that were to be impacted by the Amwell Road improvement project. Somerset County Department of Public Works, Engineering Division funded the project and archaeological excavations.



Overview of archaeological excavations.

The Voorhees site was located on the north side of Amwell Road in front of the late 18th-century Garret Voorhees, Jr. house (now O'Connor's Beef 'N Chowder House) in Franklin Township. The site contained the remains

of a late 18th-century blacksmith and horseshoeing shop, which once stood in Middlebush Village along Amwell Road, a major east/west corridor that stretched from the Delaware River to New Brunswick. Garret Voorhees, Jr., a former teamster during the American Revolution, erected the shop in circa 1783 after rebuilding his house, which was burned by the British army in 1777. Garret, Jr. learned blacksmithing skills from his father, Garret Sr., who was also a blacksmith in Middlebush village.

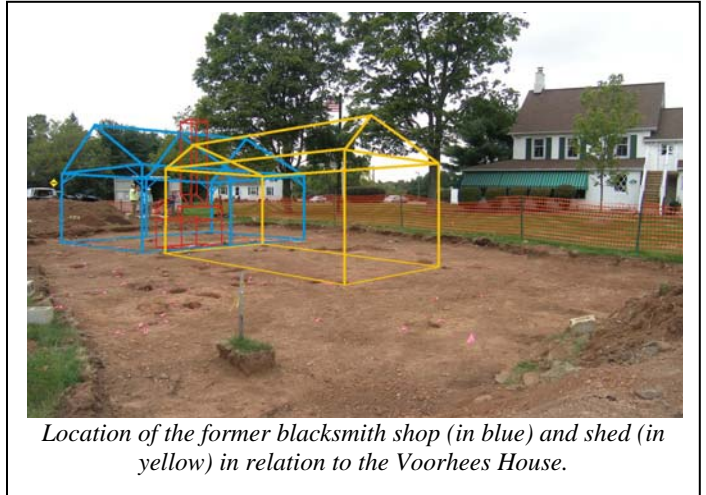
The shop's location at a busy intersection along Amwell Road was optimal for business and travelers. It offered teamsters, who shipped goods on wagons to and from the nearby City of New Brunswick, a place to have their horse teams shod and wagon parts repaired. Community members could also frequent the shop to purchase forged goods and have tools repaired.



A view of post stains from former buildings.

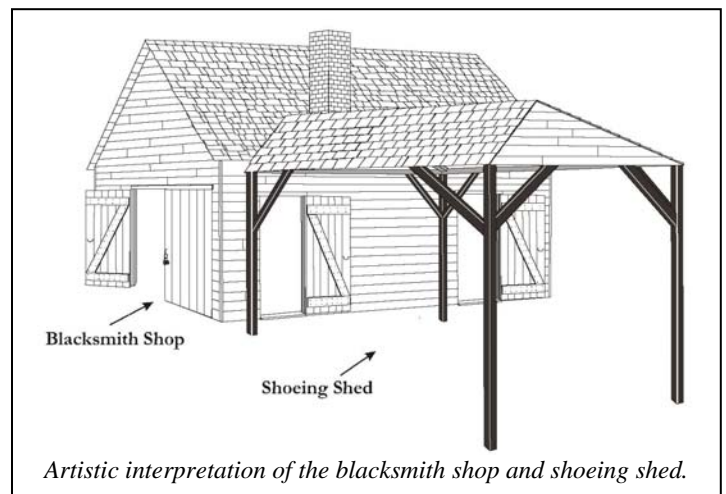
The shop site and surrounding trash scatter measured 43 feet by 95 feet (4,085 square feet). Over 33,000 artifacts were found, most of which were associated with the former blacksmithing operation, and 53 soil stains, representing trash pits and posts from the shop and fence lines, were identified. Though few documents related to the shop could be found, archaeology at

the site provided a wealth of information about both Garret, Jr.'s shop and blacksmithing in New Jersey during the late 18th century.



Location of the former blacksmith shop (in blue) and shed (in yellow) in relation to the Voorhees House.

Large scale excavations at the site revealed an arrangement of stains marking the locations of former posts. The posts represented the remains of two late-18th-century buildings and four subsequent fence lines. The buildings consisted of an 18-foot wide by 20.5-foot long shop and an adjacent 12-foot wide by 21.5-foot long shoeing shed. Both structures were erected using a Medieval building technique known as earthfast architecture, a technique which was previously thought to have gone out of use in New Jersey by the mid 18th century. Buildings erected with this technique lack masonry foundations. Instead, they are supported by upright, load-bearing posts placed into pre-dug holes. Use of earthfast architecture enabled Garret, Jr. to avoid costs associated with gathering stone and hiring a mason to lay the shop's foundation.



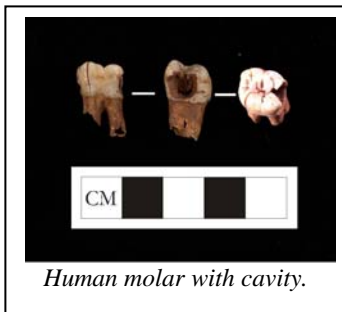
Artistic interpretation of the blacksmith shop and shoeing shed.

Archaeological evidence indicated that the hearth stood along the shop's east wall. It was constructed of handmade bricks, and was fueled by charcoal. The charcoal was likely stored in the adjacent shoeing shed to prevent its accidental ignition. Waste material from the hearth, known as slag, and scrap metal was casually scattered around the shop.



Chisels and punches.

Only a few blacksmithing tools were found. These included chisels, punches, and a forge hammer. These tools and other artifacts found revealed that much of the blacksmith's business centered around horseshoeing, also known as farriering. Conducted by most rural smiths, farriering was a mainstay of shop business. It entailed shoe removal, hoof cleaning and preparation, production of horseshoe nails, the forging of new shoes and repairs to old ones, and the re-application of the shoes. Garret, Jr. also produced door hardware such as lock parts, hinges, and handles; architectural nails, chains and links. The smith also forged wagon parts, like bolts and metal straps, and repaired ploughs and other farm tools. The recovery of a cavity ridden human molar also indicated that during colonial times, blacksmiths, like barbers, often served as the local dentist.



Human molar with cavity.



Horseshoes recovered.

The shop was only in use for a decade or two, and may have closed when Garret, Jr. grew too old to swing the heavy smith's hammer. Like other rural blacksmith shops, Garret, Jr.'s shop was important to town development, trade and commerce, agriculture, and the economy in communities like Middlebush Village across the state during the late 18th century. His shop repaired and sharpened farm tools too valuable to discard, produced everyday items, shod horses, and even pulled painful teeth.



Door hardware.

Due to the age and rarity of similar sites in New Jersey, and its short operation, this blacksmith shop site was eligible for listing on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places. Archaeological excavations at the site provided a unique opportunity to recover significant information about 18th-century blacksmithing and farriering in New Jersey, and the services blacksmith shops offered to local villages and traveling teamsters.



Wagon hardware.

For more information, please contact Michael J. Gall, RPA at mgall@richardgrubb.com or 609-655-0692, ext. 318, or refer to the 2009 archaeological site report entitled, Blacksmithing and Farriering in Eighteenth-Century Somerset County: Excavations at the Voorhees Site (28-So-153), Franklin Township, Somerset County, New Jersey. This report has been accessioned at the Historic Preservation Office in Trenton, New Jersey. Richard Grubb & Associates thanks Somerset County Department of Public Works, Engineering Division for their assistance with and providing funding for the archaeological excavations.

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