



AN
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 PUBLICATION



Surroundings

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Archaeological Excavation Yields Evidence of Camden's Early Beginnings

Below the paved street surfaces and open lots, the archaeological record of Camden's development offers a unique cross-section of the city's ethnic background, engineering feats, neighborhood growth, and consumer patterns. In the case of the Cooper's Ferry Development Association (CFDA), the archaeological undertaking in Johnson Park proved to be a cultural and historical surprise. The CFDA, in conjunction with Rutgers University, has proposed to restore Johnson Park, home of the National Register-listed Cooper Library, to its original early-1920s setting. The proposed improvements include: the restoration of an ornate fountain and wading pool complex fronting Cooper Street, planting of trees in the surrounding park, new sidewalks, the installation of thematically appropriate lighting along the sidewalks, and the installation of a new handicap ramp on the north side of the building to allow full wheelchair access to the building's interior.

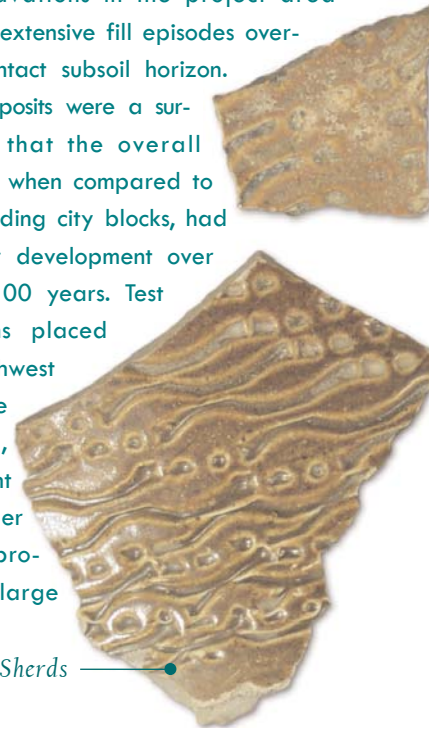


North Wall Profile

A.D. Marble & Company was contracted by the CFDA to conduct a Phase I-II Archaeological Investigation in the areas of the proposed improvements. Historical background research of the Johnson Park property revealed that this parcel was part of a late-seventeenth-century estate owned by William Cooper, a Quaker blacksmith. Subsequent development of the estate through Cooper's heirs led to several improvements in the Johnson Park parcel. In 1798, Richard M. Cooper and his wife moved into a three-story rough-cast house situated north of Cooper Street and east of what would become Front Street. It is currently unclear whether Richard had built this house in 1798 or whether it had been built some years before his marriage. In 1816, Richard had a two-and-one-half-story, five-bay wide, two-room deep Georgian dwelling constructed in Parcel No. 5, roughly the current Johnson Park lot. Between 1860 and 1877, a two-story brick stable was constructed behind (north of) the mansion. In 1895, the city of Camden

acquired the Cooper mansion property, and demolished the rough-cast dwelling along Front Street and the stable behind the Cooper mansion in Spring 1896. In 1898, the first public library was organized in the Cooper mansion. The original Cooper mansion continued to serve as a library until the construction of the current Cooper Library, which was completed in 1918.

In January and February 2005, staff archaeologists conducted a Phase I-II Archaeological Investigation of Johnson Park. Excavations in the project area uncovered extensive fill episodes overlying an intact subsoil horizon. The fill deposits were a surprise, given that the overall property, when compared to the surrounding city blocks, had seen minor development over the past 100 years. Test excavations placed in the southwest area of the property, near Front and Cooper Streets, produced a large





Celluloid Hair Combs

assortment of ceramics, glass fragments, kaolin pipe stem and bowl fragments, a gun flint, a small lead shot, and architectural debris, in a fill horizon approximately 1.5 feet below the ground surface. The ceramic collection, which dates roughly from 1730 to 1775, includes Chinese export porcelain, creamware, English or German stoneware, and Jackfield ware, all of which are usually found in upper-class households. A test unit placed in this area exposed a mortared rough-cut stone foundation as well. It is believed that these artifacts and foundation remains are part of the domestic occupation of the rough-cast dwelling Richard Cooper and his wife moved into in 1798.

On the north side of the Cooper Library, the archaeologists exposed a second mortared stone foundation. Unlike the rough-cut stone foundation exposed in the

southwest corner of the block, the second foundation consisted of worn 6.0- to 8.0-inch diameter rounded cobbles found approximately 2.5 feet below the surface. An assortment of early nineteenth to twentieth-century artifacts were recovered from fill deposits in the north side excavations, including glass fragments, ceramics, a kaolin pipe bowl fragment, and other domestic debris, but in smaller quantities than recorded in the southwest corner of the property. A small quartz triangle projectile point recovered from the fill suggests that Native Americans occupied the property before the Cooper family took residence. Of particular note, a dense 1.0 to 2.0 foot thick layer of broken brick pavers and mortared brick fragments was exposed above the stone foundation, and was thought to represent debris from the demolition of the stable. This brick layer increased in thickness extending toward the south.

Testing across the remainder of the property produced a scattering of historic artifacts from fill deposits. No foundation remains or any significant cultural features were noted in the test excavations conducted in the northeastern, eastern, and southeastern portions of the project area.

Archaeological testing of the property is still ongoing. Analysis of the fill horizons

and artifact assemblage will provide further insight into the age of the various fill deposits across the lot and the context of the architectural remains found in the ground. Given the historical significance of the property and the Cooper family, and the potential for the artifact collection to reveal more about eighteenth and nineteenth-century lives in early Camden, this site has great potential to contribute to our understanding of Camden's early beginnings.

For additional information, **Scott Emory** can be reached at **(484) 533-2500**, or via email at **semory@admarble.com**.

	<p>Scott Emory <i>Principal Investigator, Archaeologist</i></p>
	<p>M.A. Maritime History/Nautical Archaeology, 2000 B.A. Anthropology, 1991</p>
<p>Mr. Emory has over 16 years of experience in terrestrial and submerged cultural resources management. He has directed and participated in a variety of prehistoric and historic archaeological projects.</p>	

375 East Elm Street / Suite 200
Conshohocken, PA 19428
WWW.ADMARBLE.COM