

# Maritime Activity in 17th & 18th Century New Castle Delaware

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## Abstract

*During the fall semester of 2023, the Millersville University anthropology department hosted an archeological field school in which students from various disciplines signed up to learn how to complete an archeological dig. Dr. Trussell, a professor of archaeology, led the field school with the help of student supervisors. Throughout the semester, Professor Trussell guided the students through the stages of conducting an excavation; including how to properly excavate a pit, how to sift for artifacts, how to clean and catalog the artifacts, and how to write a research report on the findings.*

*This field school was located in New Castle, Delaware. Our sites were in close proximity to the Delaware River, which was the site of a booming maritime industry in the 17th & 18th centuries. Taverns became hotspots for those involved in maritime industries and were therefore central to our research objective. All of the excavation sites were either verified taverns or the site of potential taverns. By excavating these tavern sites, we were able to uncover the tavern ware and material culture of this time period, finding conclusive evidence of maritime activity and international trade in late 17th and early 18th century New Castle, Delaware.*

For the 2023 Archeological Field School of Millersville University, Dr. Trussell was able to obtain three tavern sites in New Castle, Delaware, from the colonial period. Two of the sites are located along the Delaware River and had ties to the tavern owner, Hypolotus LeFever; these sites were named 112 The Strand and 33 The Strand. The third site was on 400 Delaware Street and was the tavern and home of John Cann. The close proximity of these 17th & 18th century taverns made them hotspots for the socialization of those involved in maritime activities.

During this time period, Delaware developed a maritime economy that had become reliant on seafarers, such as marine mercantilism, trade, and even piracy.

Delaware had connections with the infamous Red Sea pirates, and we were hoping to find evidence of such at our tavern sites. Yet, our primary hypothesis for our excavation was to obtain evidence of 17th-century and early 18th-century maritime activity. There are many forms of maritime activity, but for our purposes, we looked for evidence of international trade.

Within the field of archaeology, stratigraphy is an important concept; it is the detecting and studying of discrete soil layers that are uncovered. Soil layers that are undisturbed can be detected based on color changes as seen in Figure 1. This is such a crucial concept because archaeologists can study the artifacts and material culture to determine the date range of each soil layer.

Stratigraphy allows archaeologists to paint a clearer picture of where they are timewise since they are digging in reverse chronological order; this means that the most recent and more modern artifacts are located in the top/highest soil layer while older artifacts are located lower down. This is why it is highly important for archaeologists to dig stratigraphically; by maintaining control and organization over the recovery of artifacts, they are able to yield more data from the site in return. The site, 33 The Strand had to dig 8ft deep to reach 17th and 18th century material culture. A key artifact that aided us in confirming the time period was yellow Dutch brick, which was made in large quantities by the Dutch Republic in the colonial period. These bricks were one of the main building materials they used for their settlements that were constructed in the mid 17th century throughout the Americas. The discovery of Dutch bricks narrowed down the time period of the soil layer to the time period we were researching.

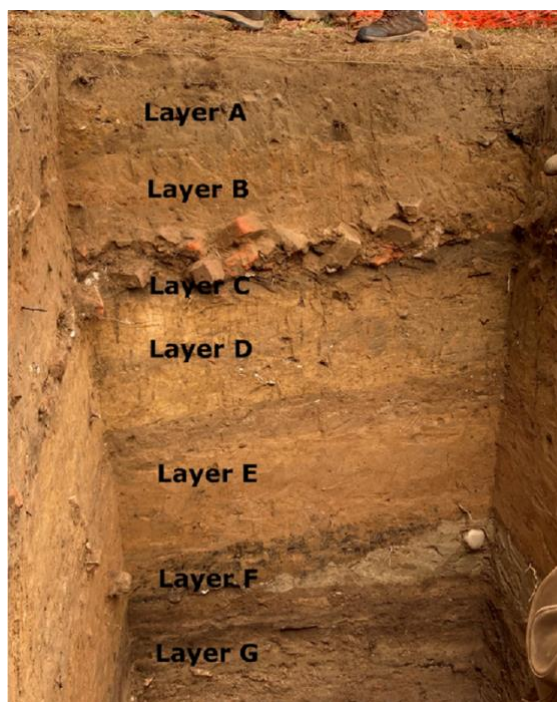


Figure 1. Excavation Unit 110 on 33 the Strand, New Castle Delaware.

When it comes to archaeological excavations, artifact analysis provides the most useful data for interpretations of the excavation results. By identifying and analyzing the artifacts, archaeologists paint a clearer picture of the past and develop a better understanding of how each artifact relates to the culture being studied. During the excavations in New Castle, the most prominent artifacts found were mass-produced refined earthenware—creamware, whiteware, redware, pearlware—as well as glass shards, metal fragments, and building materials such as bricks, mortar, and nails. Some artifacts also contributed to our understanding of typical tavern-ware and tavern activities; these artifacts include pipes, gun shell casings, and an abundance of oyster shells, which were a common food source at the time. As for evidence of international trade, artifacts produced outside of North America and transported overseas include English brown stoneware, Fulham stoneware, Westerwald stoneware, Nottingham stoneware, Chinese export porcelain, delft, and faience.

Each site also had some important and unique findings. At 33 The Strand, we found an intact comb that was made out of bones as well as several intact cow teeth. Additionally, 33 The Strand and 112 The Strand both found Bartmann jugs, which were witch bottles. At 400 Delaware, we found a silver French coin dated to 1644 and a brass merchant's weight that would have been used inside the tavern. 400 Delaware was also unique since we found a large brick floor and stone wall in one of the pits. Further excavations of additional pits located in the same area revealed that this building was fairly extensive, but its purpose and use cannot be determined.

Overall, the sites that we excavated all provide evidence for the maritime activities that occurred in New Castle between the 17th and 18th centuries, since

many of the artifacts found from this time period were created in Europe and Asia and had to be transported to the region through overseas shipping vessels. Additionally, two of the sites in particular, 400 Delaware and 33 the Strand, had a plethora of artifacts that were specifically indicative of traditional tavern activities. Many of the ceramics found were easily accessible, easily purchased, and plainly decorated, all of which would have made the production and buying costs lower. This is why these ceramics were popular for tavern owners who were looking for dishware that was simple, did not break easily, and was cheap to purchase. Analysis of the artifacts created a better understanding of New Castle's social and economic culture, especially in relation to maritime and tavern activity. The artifacts we recovered also confirm that there would have been international trade occurring in New Castle during this time, but they do not definitively prove that this trade was with Red Sea pirates.

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