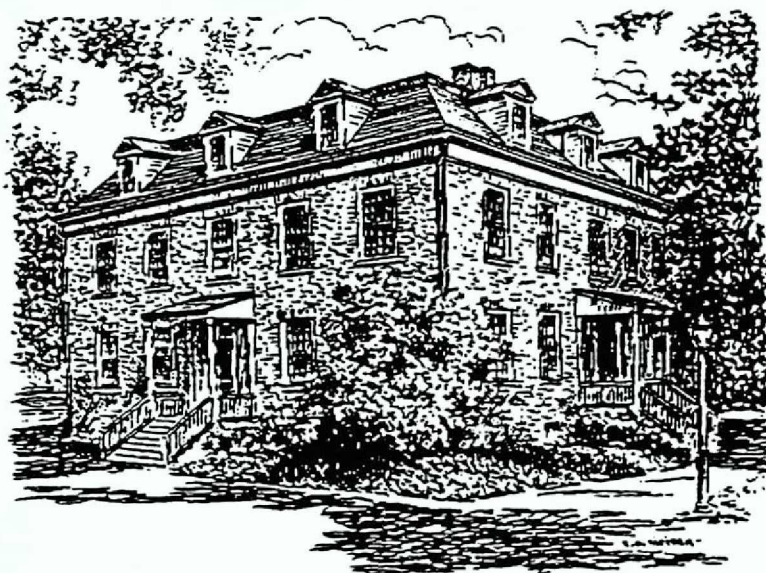


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VAN CORTLANDT HOUSE EXCAVATIONS



1990 AND 1991

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1990 Season

Introduction

The Brooklyn College Summer Archaeological Field School conducted excavations at Van Cortlandt House from June 13 through June 28, 1990. Fieldwork was directed by Drs. H. Arthur Bankoff and Frederick A. Winter, SOPA certified archaeologists on the staff of Brooklyn College. The excavation crew consisted of 25 undergraduate students from Brooklyn College and other U.S. institutions.

The College appreciates the permission to dig given by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and the National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York. We are especially grateful for the logistical support and other assistance offered by Mary Ellen Hern and Paul Berizzi of the Department of Parks and Recreation, and Julie Mirsberger and Elizabeth Leckie of the Van Cortlandt House staff.

Operations (See Map)

Excavations were conducted in five areas: the lawn to the east of the House, the lawn to the south of the House, the immediate perimeter of the House, the Herb Garden, and the edge of the baseball field to the northeast of the House grounds.

East Lawn: Five trenches were excavated in the Est Lawn area: S2E1.5,

S2E6.5, S3E2.5, N0E4, and N0E9. The trenches were positioned to investigate an area that had been partially disturbed by the construction of a sewer line in 1985. At that time, local newspapers reported the disturbance of archaeological deposits and building foundations. our trenches revealed no foundations or architectural features in the area, although pottery and other artifacts from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries were recovered. The Daily News reported that one of the trenches (S2E1.5) had come down upon a prehistoric dog burial. In fact, the dog bones found in the trench represent only a partial skeleton, and were found in association with nineteenth-century pottery, thus precluding the possibility of the burial being a Native American feature.

South Lawn: One trench was excavated in the South Lawn area: S28W15. This trench was designed to locate foundations exposed during sewer construction in 1910. It is assumed that these foundations belong to the van der Donck or Tippetts house that preceded the standing eighteenth-century House. The southeast corner of an unmortared fieldstone foundation was found at the bottom of the trench, approximately 2.25 meters below the ground surface. Due to the prior disturbance of the area, no intact seventeenth- or eighteenth-century strata were found.

Building Perimeter: Three trenches were excavated around the perimeter of the eighteenth-century House: N9.1E12.5, S5.5W11.35, and

S7.55W26.25. The objective here was to investigate the building foundations prior to the proposed excavation of a new drainage system around the building. All trenches encountered late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century ceramic drain pipes and other modern intrusions. It is noteworthy that the character of the foundation as revealed in the trenches differs markedly of the north and south sides of the structure. This may suggest that the north wing of the House was a somewhat later addition. No foundation trenches were found in our excavations, indicating that the basement walls of the House were constructed flush to the edge of the basement pit.

Herb Garden: Two trenches were excavated in the Herb Garden between the old House and the modern north wing: HG1 and HG2. They were positioned between the brick pathways of the Herb Garden, and were designed to investigate the area of a previously-demolished lean-to or shed which was built against the north side of the original House. In addition to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century household refuse, a stone foundation wall was uncovered in HG1.

Northeast (Baseball Field): Two trenches were excavated to the northeast of the House: N27E13, and N42E28. These trenches were positioned to investigate an area that in nineteenth-century illustrations was shown to have been the site of a large barn. The first trench, located within the

House fence, proved to have been disturbed by a modern electrical pipe. The second trench was located on the south edge of the Van Cortlandt Park baseball field, where recent excavations for an electrical conduit line had exposed elements of a fieldstone wall or foundation. Excavation revealed a subterranean stone structure approximately 1.75 meters square, which was cleared to a depth of slightly more than three meters. Excavations did not reach the bottom of the deposit, and the feature was partially refilled for preservation and later excavation. Comparison to similar features at related and contemporaneous historic structures, such as the Washington Irving Mansion near Tarrytown, indicate that this was originally a root cellar. The feature had been filled with a mixture of rock rubble and earth, at the bottom of which was deposited a collection of largely intact bottles, plates, and other artifacts. These materials date to the middle and later part of the nineteenth century, with possibly some earlier pieces.

Conclusions

Excavations have revealed that the Van Cortlandt House is a rich source of archaeological information dating from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Cleaning, restoration and analysis of the artifacts will be begun during the 1990-1991 academic year. Future excavations are strongly recommended in order to complete the investigation of the root cellar in the baseball field, further expose the

older foundations to the south of the existing House, and to investigate the area to the west of the House.

20 October 1990

1991 Season

Introduction

In June 1991 Brooklyn College continued its program of field excavation at the historic Van Cortlandt House in Van Cortlandt Park, the Bronx, New York. The project was jointly sponsored by Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, The Brooklyn College Foundation, The Historic House Trust of New York City, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (which owns the site), and The National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York (which operates a house museum in the existing eighteenth century House). The 1991 project was directed by Drs. H. Arthur Bankoff and Frederick A. Winter, SOPA certified archaeologists on the faculty of Brooklyn College, and Bogdan Bruckner, from the University of Novi Sad in Yugoslavia. The excavation crew consisted of 35 undergraduate students from Brooklyn College and other U.S. institutions.

As in 1990, the excavations were conducted with the kind permission of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and the National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York. The directors acknowledge with thanks the

logistical support and other assistance offered by Mary Ellen Hern and Nancy Zeigler of The Historic House Trust and the Department of Parks, Linda Dockeray and Cordell Schachter of the Van Cortlandt Park Administrator's Office, and Julie Mirsberger and Elizabeth Leckie of the Van Cortlandt House staff.

Operations

The 1991 fieldwork was conducted in four major areas: the lawn to the south of the standing House, where an earlier structure had been uncovered in 1910 and during the 1990 excavation season, the west lawn, where historic maps showed the presence of an early roadway, the House's herb garden and, northeast of the House, in the current parade ground and baseball field where the House's former barn complex was located. Additional field tests were excavated east and west of the House. A total of 16 trenches were excavated, all but two to sterile subsoil. Trenches ranged in size from 5 x 5 meters down to 1.5 x 1.25 meters, although the majority were 2 x 2 meters. Excavations were conducted using standard hand tools; all excavated soils were sifted through 1/4 inch mesh screens. Cultural materials recovered in the excavations are currently undergoing conservation and analysis in the laboratories of the Archaeological Research Center of Brooklyn College. Eventually, the finds will be returned to the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Van Cortlandt House for permanent curation and display.

South Lawn: One 5 x 5 meter trench was excavated in the south lawn area: S23W33.5. This trench included the area of the 1990 trench S28W15, and it was positioned to further reveal the house foundation that had been first uncovered in 1910 during sewer construction and that was exposed again in 1990. The foundation consisted of three courses of fieldstones, approximately 0.45 meters high. The foundation, which was assumed to belong to a predecessor of the standing 1748 Van Cortlandt House, was encountered approximately 2.25 meters below the modern ground surface. As was the case in 1990, the dry wall foundation was buried in a sandy fill that contained only limited quantities of cultural material. No deposits contemporaneous with the construction of the foundation were found, and it is now clear that the 1910 excavation thoroughly removed the associated deposits from this feature. As electrical resistivity survey of the area, conducted in May 1991 with the assistance of Dr. Alan Gilbert of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Fordham University, was not successful in isolating the fieldstone foundation wall from its sand fill matrix.

West Lawn: Three 2 x 2 meter trenches were excavated to the west of the House along the line of a previous roadway that ran east to west directly to the south (or front) of the 1748 building: N1W52, N3W57, N5W50. This road is marked on pre-WW II maps of the mansion and its surroundings, at which time it connected the House with Broadway,

approximately 800 feet to the west. The road was removed during the O'Dwyer mayoral administration when the currently existing road system, which links the mansion to Broadway by a road/path that runs to the House's north, was established. Excavations were designed to investigate the road's construction and possible predecessors. Traces of a beaten earth and macadamized road surface were uncovered directly beneath the top soil in trenches N1W52 and N3W57. The artifacts found in association with these road surfaces did not permit their precise dating. Deposits in trench N5W50 were disturbed by a modern utility trench which cut an east to west swath through the excavation unit down to a depth of 0.90 meters below the ground surface, considerably below the level at which sterile subsoil was encountered in the other trenches.

Two additional 2 x 2 meter trenches were located north of the other west lawn trenches: N18W50 and N18W52. These trenches, positioned to be well clear of the road surface, were designed to give an undisturbed picture of the natural soil profile on the west side of the House. As it turned out, however, these excavations revealed a Native American period shell pit, reminiscent of ones described in late nineteenth century excavations within Van Cortlandt Park. The 1991 pit was first encountered approximately 0.30 meters below the modern ground surface. From that level, it extended an additional 0.50 meters to its base. At its top, the circular pit was 0.65 meters in diameter. The pit was bell-shaped, and

broadened at its base to a maximum diameter of 1.16 meters. The pit fill consisted mainly of oyster shells accompanied by a few clam shells and a very limited quantity of ash. No pottery was present but some flint flakes and quartz projectile point fragments and flakes were recovered. The feature probably dates to the Late Woodland period of Native American occupation (ca. 1000 to 1600 A.D./C.E.).

Further to the west, approximately half way between the House and Broadway, a 4 x 4 meter trench was excavated in an area where field stones were exposed on the park's lawn surface: N22W108. The trench was designed to investigate the possibility of this being the remains of an outbuilding (a gate or carriage house?) of the early House. Excavations revealed that the stones were, in fact, a natural feature, with no cultural deposits below the shallow, ca. 0.05 to 0.10 meter deep, topsoil. This soil profile is in sharp contrast to that of the south lawn, where extensive filling was observed.

Herb Garden: Two trenches were excavated in the early twentieth century Herb Garden that is located directly to the north of the House: HG3 and HG4. These trenches were positioned within the open planting areas between the ornamental brick pathways of the modern garden. HG3, on the west side of the garden, was 3.3 x 1.5 meters while HG4, on the east side next to the house, was 1.5 x 1.25 meters. Neither trench was

excavated to sterile. Strata in HG4 were disturbed by twentieth century drainage/sewer pipes, presumably installed around the time when the House's adjacent custodian's wing was built in 1916. In HG3, below upper strata that included early twentieth century construction debris, cultural deposits continued to a depth in excess of 2.0 meters. Material recovered from the lower strata in this trench included domestic refuse and construction debris of eighteenth century type. This deposit thus suggests that an earlier structure in the area of the modern Herb Garden was demolished and its cellar filled during the eighteenth century. This may have been an ancillary structure to the standing House, such as a kitchen wing (traces of a late nineteenth century lean-to or kitchen shed were uncovered in the 1990 excavations), although its close proximity to the House suggests that the structure was more likely a predecessor to the 1748 House, in which case it represents a hitherto unknown episode in the architectural history of the site.

Two additional 2 x 2 meter trenches were positioned immediately to the west of the Herb Garden, between the Herb Garden and the contemporary north-south driveway that runs to the west of the House: N7W22.5 and N17W22. Both trenches revealed traces of road curbing along their western edges, paralleling the edge of the modern driveway, but their deposits were shallow, thus suggesting that the structure whose cellar was encountered in HG3 and HG4 did not extend this far west.

Northeast: The 1991 excavations in this area were designed to continue the investigation of the House's barn, a facility depicted in an 1844 painting of the House and its surroundings. Work began by completing the clearing of cultural materials from the stone-lined, 1.75 meter square and 2.75 meter deep feature first uncovered in 1990: trench N42E28. As was the case in 1990 when most of the fill was removed from this feature, the lowest levels of the stone-lined box contained large quantities of nineteenth century artifactual and ecofactual material. It was assumed that this feature was unique to the site, and a 1 x 4 meter trench was opened approximately 4 meters to its east in an attempt to identify traces of the barn complex that the nineteenth century painting indicated was associated with the subterranean feature: trench N41E45. A line of stones appeared in this new trench directly beneath the ground surface. With the opening of two additional 1 x 4 meter trenches immediately to its south (trenches N40E45 and N39E45), the line of stones resolved itself into another stone-lined feature, identical in size and depth and 4.5 meters to the east of the one encountered in 1990 in trench N42E28. The new stone box produced even more cultural material than the one found in 1990. Artifacts include ceramic dinner wares of various types, chamber pots, crocks and unguent containers, medicine and drinking substance bottles, glass syringes, the decayed remains of a number of pairs of high-heeled shoes, kaolin smoking pipes, cutlery, tooth brushes and an upper plate from a set of

vulcanite/porcelain false teeth, among other finds. The artifacts, which except for a few earlier pieces date exclusively from the nineteenth century, appear to have been introduced into the two stone boxes in a single, late nineteenth century dumping or filling episode which is likely to have been associated with the transition of the mansion in 1889 from private to public ownership. Mid-western parallels suggest that these subterranean boxes, which in last year's report were characterized as possible root cellars, may have originally functioned as underground silage pits.

In trenches N41E45, N40E45 and N39E45, directly to the west of the 1991 stone box, and thus between it and its identical western neighbor, a rough fieldstone "flooring," only one course deep, was uncovered directly beneath the modern ground surface.

Another 4 x 1 meter trench was excavated 10 meters to the east of the N41E45/N40E45/N39E45 cluster in an attempt to uncover additional traces of the barn: N40E60. The trench was located in an area where growth patterns in the grass of the modern baseball field suggested the presence of subsurface anomalies. Despite the promising ground surface traces, no cultural deposits or features were found in this trench.

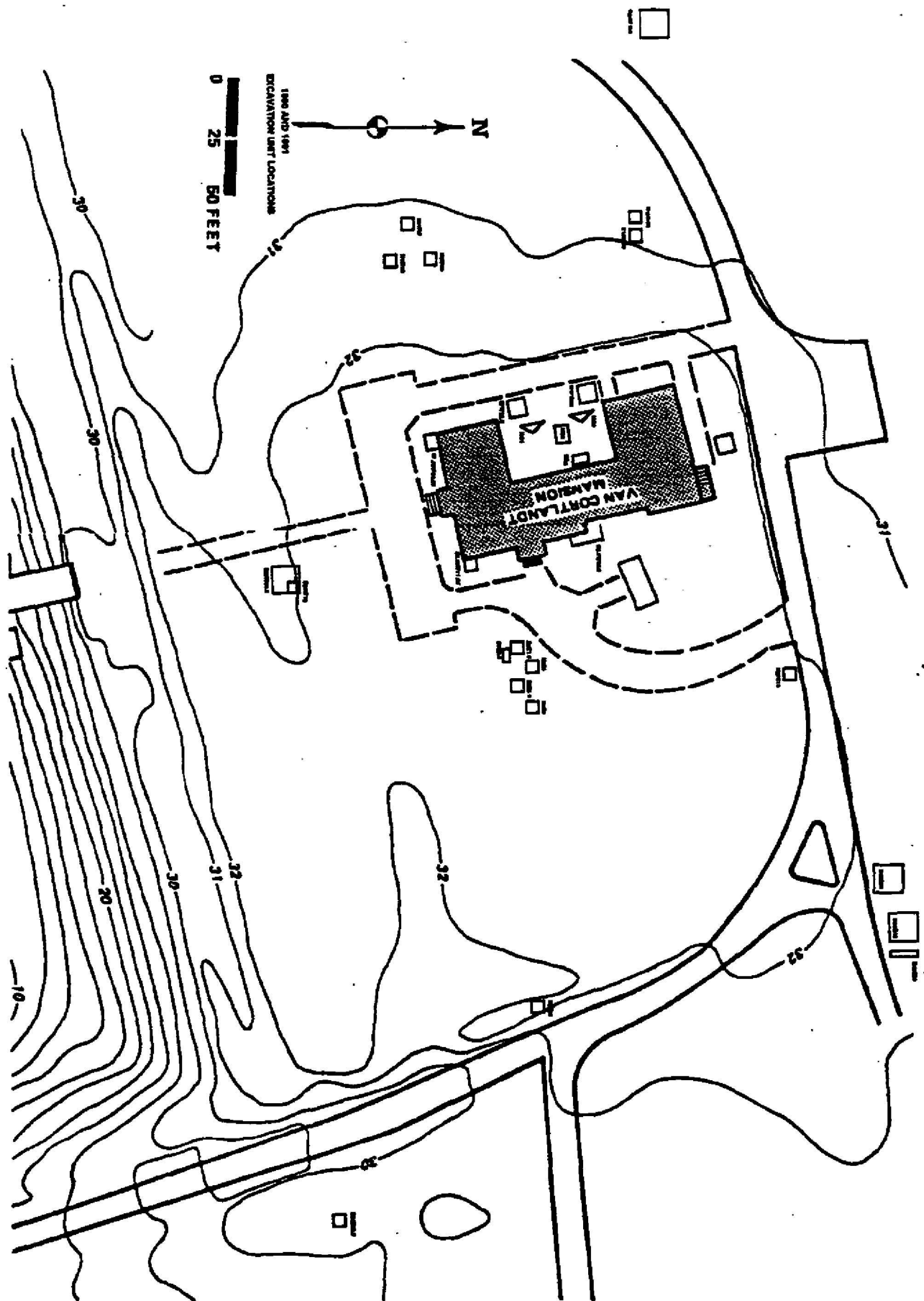
East Lawn: Two 2 x 2 meter trenches were excavated to the east of the

House, considerably beyond the group of five trenches excavated close in to the east side of the mansion in 1990. N0E35 was positioned just within the east perimeter fence of the House's grounds. It revealed traces of a pathway that would have linked the House to its pond and mill further to the east. Trench S54E60.5 was located approximately 25 meters east of the House's perimeter fence. Like trench N22W108, this trench was positioned to investigate some fieldstones visible at the level of the modern ground surface. And, as was the case with N22W108, no cultural deposits or non-natural features were found. A 1.3 meter diameter sink hole located approximately 6 meters east-southeast of trench S54E60.5 was also investigated. It was found to be associated with the early twentieth century line of the Broadway sewer connection.

Conclusion

Like the 1990 excavations, the 1991 field season demonstrated that the Van Cortlandt House and its surroundings are a rich source of archaeological information dating from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Further excavations are planned for 1992 to clarify the identity of the possible predecessor structure under the modern Herb Garden, to continue the investigation of the barn complex and to seek traces of other ancillary or out-buildings associated with the Van Cortlandt farm/plantation.

25 April 1992



1988 AND 1991
EXCAVATION UNIT LOCATIONS

