



NEWSLETTER

BRUNSWICK COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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EXCAVATION OF THE JAMES ESPY HOUSE RUIN IN BRUNSWICK TOWN

On January 13, 1731, Maurice Moore, the founder of Brunswick Town, sold Lot 31 to James Espy for one pound. The Sauthier Map of 1769 reveals a house on this lot with an off-set at the northwest corner. The property lines shown on this map indicate that the house next door on Lot 30 was probably owned by the same person; and this is supported by the fact that we know that James Espy bought the house next door on May first, 1731. It appears, therefore, that the house on Lot 31 was a residence and that on Lot 30 a commercial building when Sauthier made his map in 1769, judging from the symbols he used to identify these two structures.

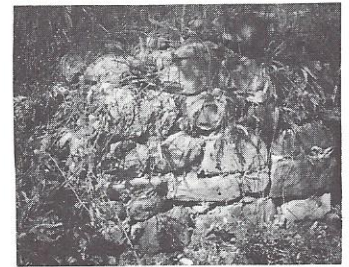
When excavation was begun in March it was discovered that the off-set was not on the northwest corner, but was actually on the southeast corner, revealing one of the few mistakes that can be attributed to the generally very accurate Sauthier. Before excavation was begun the remains of the stone foundation wall for the house could be seen standing several feet high, covered by vines and ferns, revealing that after the house burned in 1775 there was no attempt by the owner to level and improve this lot for re-sale.

As excavation was carried out brick footings supported by stone foundation columns were found along the front of the house, a typical feature with Brunswick Town houses. These footings were for the support of the porches along this side of the house. In excavating around these footings in order to determine the construction details, a standard approach of historical archaeologists, it was found that when the house was built (probably shortly after 1731), that the front of the house had a sharply dropping ground surface. In order to provide a good footing for the house porch, and to allow for leveling of the yard on this side of the house, the builders constructed a tall column of stones on which they then began the brick footing for the porch columns. They then intentionally filled the area around the stones with soil from the surrounding area, an area which had been used to dispose of trash and broken dishes, probably from the house next door on Lot 30. Since the Espy House was probably built shortly after Espy purchased Lot 31 in 1731, it would appear that the layering of fill soil seen around the footings in front of the house was placed there soon after the house was completed as part of the landscaping of this area for the new house. Therefore the artifacts from these deep layers would likely date prior to 1731 at least, and very likely date from 1726 to 1732. The fill soil layers can be seen against the stone footing in the accompanying photograph, overlaid by the darker layer of soil that was built up in the front yard in successive years during the use of the house until 1775. The china and other objects from these deeper levels of this stratified deposit do indeed date early in the eighteenth century, with creamware and other later types being found in the upper layers of the deposit. This stratified deposit is typical of those found by historical archaeologists on historic sites, and provide a most valuable means of establishing contextual relationships between artifact types.

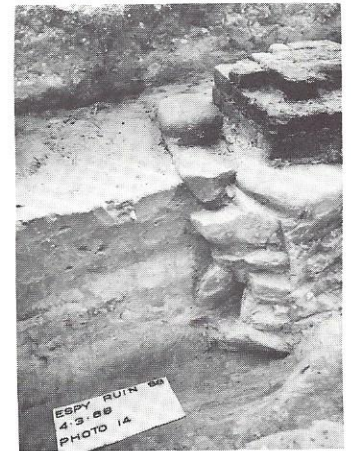
At the level on which the burning walls fell when the house was destroyed by fire a large number of wine bottle fragments were found, indicating that this room may have been used as a wine storage cellar. Beneath the layer of sand on which the falling walls fell a charcoal floor was found. This fact would point to a double burning for this house. Perhaps the cellar floor caught fire and burned and did not burn any of the remainder of the house. A layer of sand was used to cover the burned floor, and then at a later time the house itself was destroyed by fire. This seems to be the case, and more details on this will be revealed when the north room floor is completely excavated. The south room was found to have had a brick floor on which the burning house fell. As most of the houses in Brunswick Town were, this house was empty when it burned, the owners having left town for fear that the town would be burned.

After the house was in ruins someone came to salvage bricks from the ruin. They brought with them two glass tumblers possibly to get water from the spring, still located only a few yards away from this house. As they worked in salvaging the bricks, the two glasses were stacked together and placed upside down near one of the footings of brick, and were buried by the rubble accumulating around the footing. These glasses were found, still stacked together, where they had been left by these workmen some 180 years ago.

Stanley South, Archaeologist
N.C. Dept. of Archives and History



The corner of the James Espy ruin covered with jungle growth as seen before excavation began.



The profile at one of the porch footings showing the deep stratified layering typical of filled areas often found on historic sites.



View of the James Espy ruin during excavation, with an inset showing a glass tumbler left by workmen salvaging bricks from the ruin.

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