Abstract

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) contracted with URS Corporation (URS) to conduct research and archaeological investigation of the proposed location for the new kindergarten through 8th grade Jefferson-Houston School. The investigation included: documentary research and an assessment of the archaeological potential of the 10.28-acre property; Phase I archaeological survey within a 1.47-acre portion of the property; Phase II evaluation of site 44AX219; and Phase III Data Recovery investigations of site 44AX219. Work was conducted to assist ACPS in complying with Alexandria’s Archaeological Resource Protection Code (1989). The investigation was conducted as a joint effort between URS and Alexandria Archaeology.

Research and testing resulted in identification of one archaeological site, 44AX219, which included the nineteenth-century brick foundation of a slaughterhouse. Benjamin Baggett, a local butcher, built the slaughterhouse after the Civil War and prior to 1873, when reference to the slaughterhouse appears in the Alexandria Gazette. Benjamin Baggett sold the facility to Charles and William Hellmuth in 1884. The Hellmuth Brothers operated the slaughterhouse until sometime after 1887; the building was gone by 1891.

Mechanical and manual excavations uncovered a brick foundation constructed within an asymmetrical hole with rounded corners and curved, bowed-out walls. At its widest points, the feature was 28.9-x-30.5 feet in size. The interior includes a rectangular cellar measuring 20.3-x-22.6 feet in plan and 8 feet in depth. Fourteen historic features were identified within the interior of the cellar, including four possible post features, three sections of a burned and/or decayed layer of wood, two possible brick partitions, two linear soil stains, a brick-lined well, an area of hard-packed sand, and a stack of loose bricks. Few artifacts directly related to use of the building were recovered. Notable items include three large (5.8 ft-x-1.8-ft) iron panels, which may have been used to contain animals before they were stunned and killed.

The foundations and basement represent a family-operated slaughterhouse in operation from at least 1873 to 1887. The short life span is typical of private slaughterhouses in which sanitation was difficult to maintain and conditions quickly deteriorated. It is likely that the slaughterhouse operated primarily during colder months, although availability of ice may have allowed year-round operation; the basement may have provided an area for cold storage. It is known that Baggett slaughtered pigs, and he may also have processed cows and sheep. The Hellmuth brothers advertised the sale of beef, mutton, veal, pork and lamb. Based on the substantial foundations and size of the building, Benjamin Baggett may have incorporated some aspects of assembly-line production, such as a track system for hanging carcasses; some recovered metal artifacts resemble track similar to that of a modern folding closet door. The well in the northwest corner of the basement may have provided water for a scalding tank to remove hair from pigs and the butchering process in general. Blood and offal may have been collected in barrels for sale to secondary processors. The purpose of the building shape with rounded exterior corners is not known, but it was likely a cost-saving measure to reduce the amount of required brick.

After thorough documentation, the upper portions of the slaughterhouse foundation were destroyed during grading and construction of the new Jefferson-Houston School building. Lower portions of the feature were backfilled and left in place. ACPS plans to incorporate aspects of the history and design of the slaughterhouse into the new school building, including an interpretive outdoor plaza, marking the footprint of the well into the landscape plan, and a permanent historical display inside the school.