

## 1700 DUKE STREET PUBLIC SUMMARY

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When archaeologists first saw the property at 1700 Duke Street, it was nothing but an asphalt parking lot and the remains of a small strip mall that was being torn down and loaded into trucks as they watched. But experience shows that asphalt pavement sometimes preserves underneath it important traces of the past, so before work began on the new buildings that will soon go up on the property, a historical and archaeological exploration of the lot was carried out.

Historical research showed that this lot was part of the West End development launched by John West, Jr. in the 1790s. The project area was part of West's Lot 12, which he leased to John Limerick in 1797. Limerick's lease said that by September, 1798, he was to

Raise a House of brick, Stone, or Frame, at least sixteen feet square, with a brick Chimney two windows with twelve lights in each & compleat the same by plastering & white washing it in a workmanlike manner, together with everything else to render it a comfortable & convenient dwelling house...

Limerick purchased the property from West in October 1798 for \$400. Just days later Limerick and his wife Susannah subdivided the lot. The larger lot became 1724 Duke Street, the smaller one 1718. A house stood on the 1724 Duke Street lot by 1804, but there is no good record of a house on the smaller lot until 1902. In the 1800s the West End was an industrial area, with feed lots, slaughterhouses, tanneries, and other businesses, and most of the people who lived there were working class.



Since there had been a house at 1724 Duke Street since the early 1800s, the archaeologists hoped to find a record of life in the West End when they dug under the parking lot. Cellars, wells, privies, and cisterns often survive on paved lots, and sometimes they are filled in with trash that can tell us much about people's lives. The pavement and the modern fill dirt were removed from the site using heavy machinery. There was no old topsoil underneath, so it must have been graded away before the parking lot was built. The archaeologists did find some brick walls, and they carefully cleaned the bricks off by hand to see what they might be.

The bricks turned out to belong to four features: a cellar built in the early 1900s, a single brick wall that was probably part of the early 1800s house foundation, a nineteenth-century brick drain (shown in photograph, left), and a brick-lined well. The well was similar to those built in nineteenth-century Alexandria, but nobody could say

exactly when it was built. Digging into the upper part by hand showed that it contained mostly coal ash, mixed with bottles and other artifacts from the 1930s. Trash from the 1930s is not of much interests to archaeologists, but what is in the top of a well is not always the same as what is at the bottom. From a glance at the geological borings that had been done on the site, the archaeologists thought the well might be as much as 25 feet deep, much too deep to dig safely by hand without expensive shoring. They therefore used a large backhoe to dig into the well, dumping the fill on the surface so they could trowel through it for artifacts.



The well (shown in photograph, left) proved to be 24 feet deep. The 1930s coal ash fill extended down to near the bottom, where there was 2 feet of clean gravel over a concrete floor. The backhoe pulled up pieces of a wooden water pipe. The well must have been converted to a pump at some point, and when that was done the bottom was cleaned out and the concrete and gravel installed, so that nothing from the early days of the well was left inside it to find. The lower part of the well was waterlogged, which made for good preservation conditions, and the backhoe pulled up a leather wallet and a woman's shoe in good shape.

Besides the leather goods, the most interesting objects in the well were the large number of bottles. In the period from the Civil War to the 1930s, many bottles were embossed with the name of the product they contained, its place of manufacture, and other information that is now usually printed on paper or enameled labels. These bottles therefore provide a glimpse into the habits of households that by 1900 were becoming increasingly like those we know today. All manner of prepared food products were purchased in bottles and jars, such as catsup, mayonnaise, and pickles, as well as cleaning solutions, soft drinks ("Nu Icy"), medicines, and beer. Electricity was transforming American life in the 1920s, and the well produced evidence of this in the form of light bulb glass and part of a telephone.

The archaeologists the remains of a nineteenth-century brick wall and a drain. However, most of the nineteenth-century evidence of occupation was gone. Therefore, the archaeologists ended their investigation of the lot, and the property was cleared for construction.