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Results Of Metal Detector Survey, Testing Operations, And Archival Studies The Wooten-Seale Plantation, Site 41RT362 Robertson County, Texas

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RESULTS OF METAL DETECTOR SURVEY,
TESTING OPERATIONS, AND ARCHIVAL STUDIES
THE WOOTEN-SEALE PLANTATION, SITE 41RT362

ROBERTSON COUNTY, TEXAS

By

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Highway Design Division

November 1988

ABSTRACT

Preliminary historical and archaeological investigation of the Robert Henry Seale farm residences (41RT362) utilizing a metal detector and limited shovel testing indicate that a recent owner of the property removed both residential structures, destroying the site and extensively damaging any buried deposits. It is the estimation of the cultural resources staff of the State Department of Highways and Public Transportation that the physical remains of the occupation of the property have been disrupted to such an extent that they now have no value in answering cultural-historical questions.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY

The proposed project involves reconstruction of a two-lane segment of State Highway 6 in Robertson County and provides for an ultimate four-lane divided roadway facility with frontage roads. The project will generally follow the existing alignment. The west frontage road will be the existing two-lane SH 6 roadway facility. The project is located in a rural setting of woods and pastures. The existing right-of-way width is 100 ft. The proposed project will have right-of-way widths varying from 200 to 850 ft. with a usual width of 500 ft. The project is 4 miles in length extending from Loop 507 in Bryan to 1 mile northwest of Benchley.

An on-site archaeological survey of the project was conducted on January 21, 1987. The survey was conducted on foot and by automobile, with on-foot survey at every point where there was a reasonable probability of finding cultural resources evidence. Four historical markers were located. These include a 1936 centennial marker commemorating the founding of Brazos County, an aluminum marker denoting the Camino Real, a 1918 granite Camino Real marker, and a marker commemorating the community of Staggers Point. During construction, all these markers will be stored and then re-erected at nearby localities as appropriate. Earlier, archaeological site 41RT362 was identified and reported by State Department of Highways and Public Transportation (SDHPT) Bryan District personnel as the ruins of the Wooten-Seale plantation. The location of Site 41RT362 is shown in Figure 1. No evidence was found for any portion of the Camino Real within the proposed right-of-way.

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During the January 1987 survey of the Wooten-Seale Plantation Site (41RT362) fence segments and yard plantings together with several standing outbuildings in various stages of collapse were found within the proposed roadway right-of-way. The concrete foundation for a temporary structure was also noted. It was observed at that time that the outbuildings were fastened with wire nails, a trait postdating the mid 1880s. Based on information at hand in January of 1987, a determination of eligibility for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places was sought from the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) under Criteria D of 36 CFR, Part 800. Based on information available at that time, the office of the SHPO agreed that the site met the criteria for inclusion in the National Register.

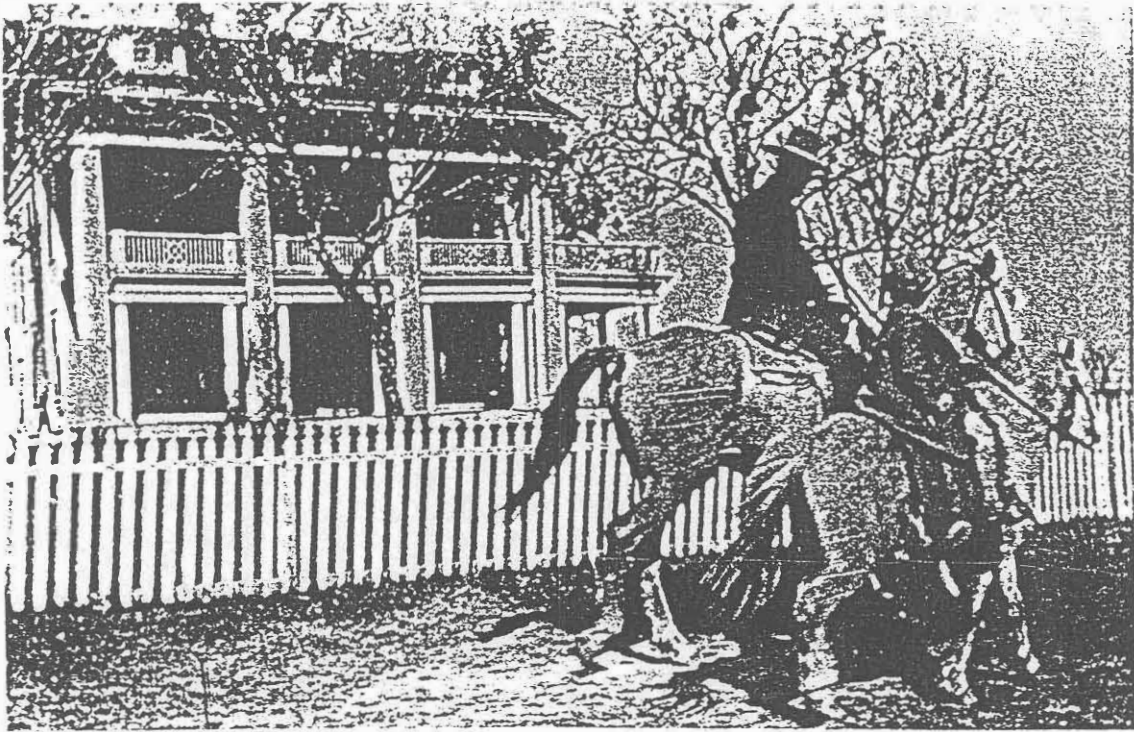
Further archival studies provided additional information concerning the history of the site. It was found that there had been two historic residences on the property and that the original land grant given to Robert Henry was one league and a labor amounting to over 4500 acres. With further land acquisitions the property grew to include 9000 acres.

It was also found that the two historic structures pertained to the occupancy of Annie Lee and Robert H. (Henry) Seale. Robert H. Seale was the son of the original plantation owner, Columbus C. Seale. Columbus C. Seale married in 1850. He purchased land that was originally part of the Wooten headright. Columbus C. Seale's wife received the plantation property in November of 1852 (Robertson County Deed Records, Vol. L:596) and acquired additional land in June of 1868 (Robertson County Deed Records, Vol. 0:641). It can be presumed that Robert H. Seale was probably at least 20 years of age when he married. It was not until

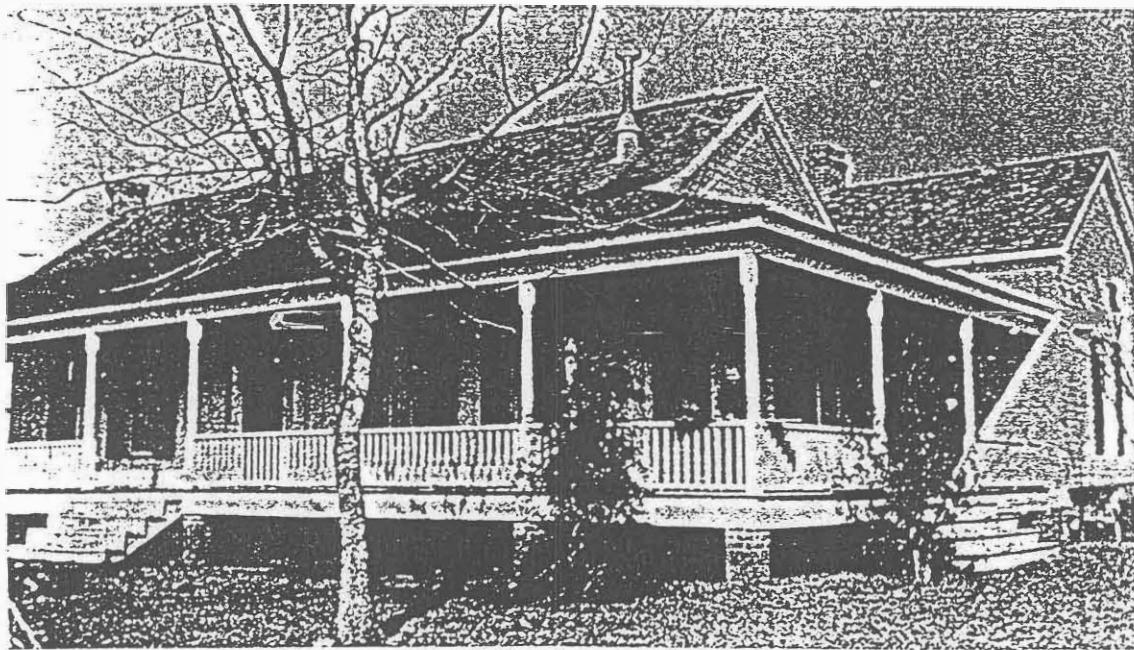
after he married that he inherited the property. Therefore, the earliest Robert H. Seale is likely to have occupied the site was around 1870.

The Highway Design Division of the SDHPT requested that the Bryan District contact descendants of the original property owners to provide historic photographs and historical data. In February of 1988 descendants of the original owners were contacted by the author. The first to be contacted was Edward Burkhart, the husband of one of Robert H. Seale's daughters and keeper of the family history. Burkhart said that the historic house represented by the foundation remains was built in 1909 or 1910 - at a time when Robert H. Seale became a partner with Dr. Giesecke in the First Bank and Trust Co. in Bryan. Burkhart knows of no houses previous to the 1910 two-story structure on the property containing the foundation remains. Information provided by the Bryan District showed that this house was razed in the early 1970s. No early artifacts were found in the original on-site survey. A photograph of the two-story house is shown in Figure 2A.

Burkhart was questioned about the probable location of the residence of Columbus C. Seale, father of Robert Henry Seale. Burkhart indicated that the Columbus C. Seale house was located on his own property well outside and east of the right-of-way, and was situated on a hill adjacent to a modern roadside park. This house burned sometime in the past. Robert H. Seale had his first house on Camel Creek, also outside the right-of-way. The Seale family cemetery is located near the Burkhart house and Columbus C. Seale is buried in the Rye Cemetery near Benchley, Texas. He remarked that the Robert H. Seale part of the land division was on the west side of the Old San Antonio Road.



A



B

FIGURE 2. Two historic residences of Annie Lee and Robert Henry Seale. A, the two-story house built around 1910 and B, the earlier single-story house built in the late 1880's.

The second informant was Robert Henry Seale III, whose grandfather Robert H. Seale built the historic structures in question. Seale III reported that the two-story house represented by foundation remains was built in about 1902 and was razed about 1967. He also stated that there was a second house on the site built by his grandfather and located about 50 yards west of the two-story house. This house was used as the R. H. Seale residence while the main house was being built. This older house was built in the late 1800s. A photograph of this older single-story house is shown in Figure 2B. The reason R. H. Seale III had the houses destroyed was constant theft, vandalism, and the presence of vagrants in the vacant buildings. When the main house was torn down Seale III also removed the older one, including the foundations.

A third descendant, Mrs. Luther Westbrook, was contacted. She stated that there were two historic houses on the property, the first built by Robert Henry Seale in the 1890s after he had lived on the Brazos and at Rye. The second was also built by Robert H. Seale about 1910. Mrs. Westbrook also stated that Columbus C. Seale (father of R. H. Seale) lived on the hill above the present rest stop east of the site. His house later burned, she said. She has photographs of both of the Robert H. Seale houses. Mrs. Westbrook allowed the SDHPT to reproduce these photographs and copies have been provided to the SHPO.

It was noted that the earlier house was a frame building built on piers and that the later structure was a frame building with a masonry foundation and basement. Robert Henry Seale III indicated that he attempted to remove evidence of the structures through bulldozing because of the vandalism that had taken place at the site. This information was provided to the SHPO on March 4, 1988, and the

eligibility of the property for inclusion on the National Register was questioned in light of these new revelations. At that time the SDHPT offered to conduct a metal detector survey of the property while stating that it had been the experience of the SDHPT staff at other sites that bulldozing severely compromises the cultural deposits on shallow historic sites. The metal detector survey was performed on July 25, 1988.

ENVIRONMENTAL BACKGROUND

The site area is situated in the Post Oak Savannah near its margin with the Blackland prairie (Gould 1969). Vegetation on the site includes pasture grasses, irises, crepe myrtle, and hackberries in the yard area. No recent published soil survey was available for Robertson County but since the site is almost adjacent to the Brazos County line, a Brazos County survey was consulted. The soil found in the area of the site is Bonham clay loam on 0-2 % slopes. The soil is described as dark gray-brown friable clay loam, a maximum of 10 in. thick, and overlying a yellow-red permeable clay (Mowery et al. 1958:60). This description was confirmed in the field as typical of the site area.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Since this site is historic and no prehistoric occupation was noted, discussion will be limited to historic archaeological investigations. Work on the Richard Carter homesite (threatened by development at College Station in Brazos County)

focused on a pre-Civil War rural site consisting of the locality of a cabin which was replaced when the owners became prosperous. No structure foundations were found in this plantation site but a "sheet midden" and well were recorded. The Carters were high-status individuals. Since this site is earlier and served a different function than the Site 41RT362, they are not really comparable. Sites that are comparable in age have been excavated mostly in urban areas. These include the following San Antonio sites; the Giesser House, the Arcienega Street houses, the Aldrete House, the Caile House, and the Wulf House. Other sites include houses in Laredo in the Juarez Lincoln Bridge approach, later period occupation of the Carrington-Covert House in Austin, and occupations at Beigel Settlement, Richland Creek, and others. With the exception of the Beigel Settlement, these sites represent turn of the century urban occupations. Few studies, however, have treated wealthy rural residences of the turn of the century.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of this property is described briefly in the 1974 edition of the Texas Family Land Heritage Registry:

Robert Henry, born in Ireland in 1801, married Elizabeth Downing, daughter of Lord Downing of England, in 1820. That same year, they left Ireland for America, and settled for a short time in South Carolina. The spirit of moving still lay upon them, as it did on many people in that time, and they moved on to Alabama, staying long enough to accumulate \$900.00 worth of property which they sold before they moved to Texas. In Texas, Robert Henry was granted one league and one labor in Robertson County. In 1836, heeding the call to battle, Henry took one of his three horses and joined

Sam Houston's Army, where he gave service from March until June 1836. Robert [and] Elizabeth Henry's first child, Elizabeth, was married to Columbus C. Seale, June 26, 1850. In the division of their property, the Seale's son, Robert H., inherited the land. Robert H. Seale married Annie Lee, and they continued to live on the farm, building a large three-story [two-story plus attic] colonial home where they lived and raised their family. At the death of Robert H. Seale, his son, Frank H., inherited the home and land and continued to live there until his death. His son, Robert Henry Seale [Robert Henry Seale III], owns the land today, raising cattle and feed on the property. Each succeeding generation has added land to the original grant and today, total Seale holdings include 9,000 acres. Products of the original farm included cattle, flax, wheat, oats, rye, horses, and mules. (Texas Family Land Heritage Registry 1974:118)

In the division of the property of Columbus C. Seale, Robert H. Seale acquired the land on which the site is located. According to his descendants, his first house site was on Camel Creek, and the house of Columbus C. Seale was in Brazos County near the present roadside park. It would appear that Robert H. Seale built his two houses after the late 1880s, probably between 1890 and 1920.

TESTING OPERATIONS

Prior to examination of the site with a metal detector, the site was mowed to increase ground visibility. The area mowed was 300 ft. wide and 500 ft. long and included the entire site area. The mowed area was entirely within the right-of-way. The test was conducted with a Schonstedt Metal Locator (GAS2B), a sensitive metal detector usually used to find pipelines and buried tract boundary pins. The instrument was found to be very satisfactory for the purposes of locating iron debris. The survey was conducted in a grid pattern with reference to the centerline station positions of the westbound lanes. Metallic encounters were marked with yellow plastic tags and were plotted on a site map.

A site map including results of the metal detector survey is shown in Figure 3. Metal concentrations are found around the standing outbuildings and the foundation ruin of the two-story 1920s house. Another area of concentration was encountered in the southeast corner of the yard where piles of debris had been left by bulldozer activity (labeled dump in the figure). Few metal items were located in areas between structures and in the area thought to have been the location of the earlier house. The purported location of the earlier house was remarkably clear of metal and showed exposed sterile subsoil in most areas examined.

Six shovel tests were made, each in an area where magnetic encounters were noted. Two were situated in the area reported by informants as the site of the earlier house. Four shovel tests were placed in areas around the later two-story house which were felt to be somewhat less disturbed by bulldozer activity. Two of these shovel tests were placed in the yard southwest of the later house, one was placed east of the house, and one was placed northwest of the house. In each of these units recovery was limited to a single wire nail. In each case, these single wire nails were responsible for the magnetic anomaly recorded by the metal detector. In addition, the southernmost test in the area of the earlier house produced a few very small brick fragments and a small amount of ash which perhaps represented the base of a pit. All tests showed shallow soil over basal clay. Soil had been removed from the first house locality so that clay was at the surface of the shovel tests in that area. The deepest soil encountered east of the second house was about 5 cm thick.

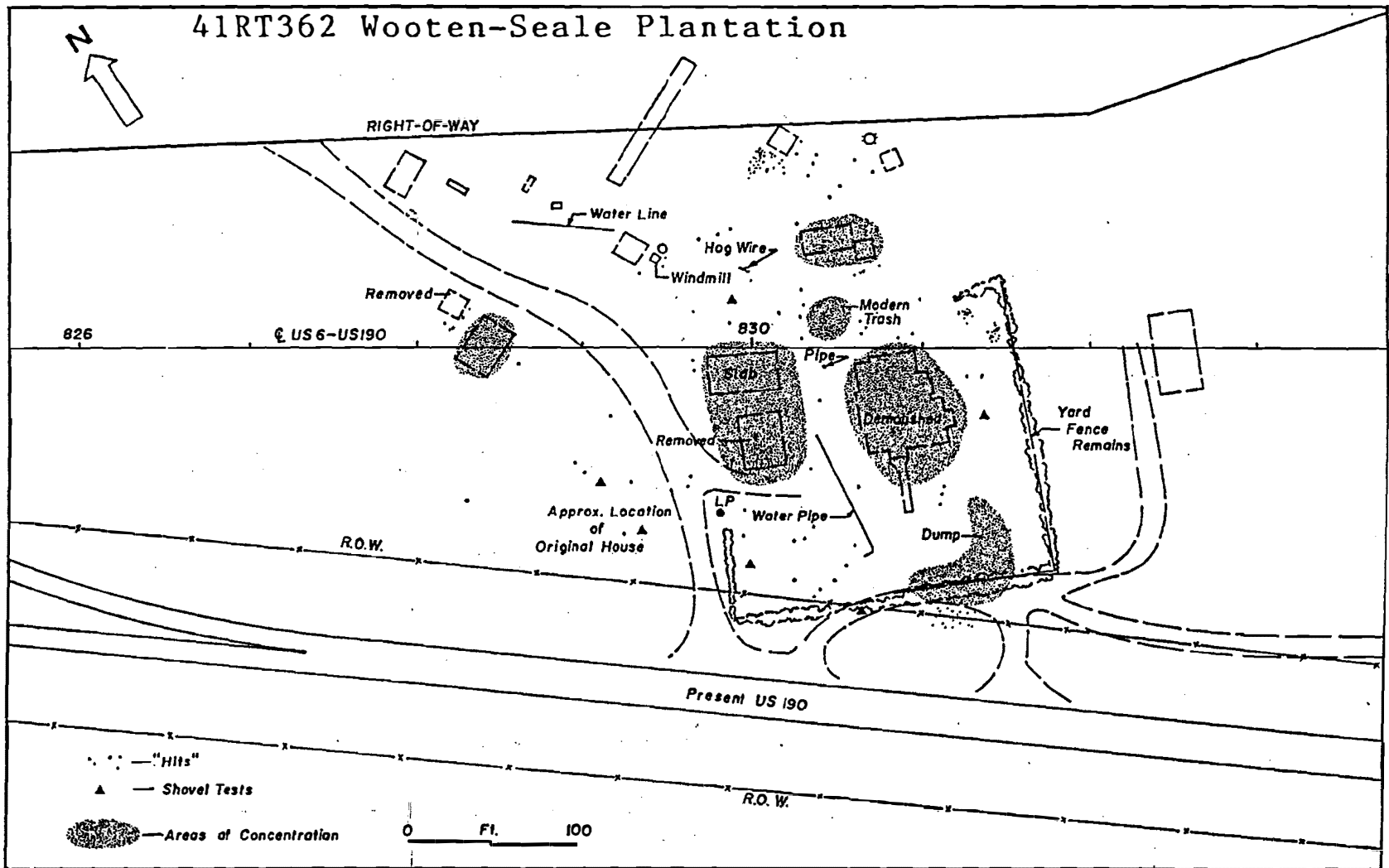


FIGURE 3. Site map of Site 41RT352, the Wooten-Seale Plantation.

At the time of the metal detector testing and shovel testing, several observations were made. The basement of the later structure appeared to have been made of concrete. Concrete from a walk and fragments of steps were observed jumbled into the basement area. Fragmented brick piers and loose bricks also were included in the basement jumble. Three types of marked red bricks were observed: (1) Atlas, (2) Navarro, and (3) Groesbeck Reds.

Two areas of modern trash were observed north and northwest of the second house. One contained a pile of material including steel drums. The other, consisting of a television, a chair, washing-machine frames, and other modern debris, was situated on a concrete slab adjacent to a modern trailer site. The trailer has been removed. No early ceramics or glass was observed. One hard-paste earthenware hollow-cast rabbit figurine was observed.

CONCLUSIONS

An examination of the photograph of the earlier Seale house indicates--&bat it was built on brick piers and was of frame construction. Examination of the photograph of the later house indicates that it too was of frame construction, was two stories high, and had a brick chimney. It is not clear in the photograph what was used in the construction of the foundation. Both structures were quite substantial.

The last occupant of Site 41RT362, Robert H. Seale III, stated that he had the houses razed in about 1967 because of frequent theft and vandalism and because the vacant houses served as refuges for vagrants. His intent was to eradicate,

insofar as possible, evidence that the structures had ever existed. Edward Burkhart stated that earlier occupation of the plantation area by Columbus C. Seale was on Burkhart's property in Brazos County overlooking the present roadside park and east of 41RT362. Mrs. Luther Westbrook likewise stated that the Columbus C. Seale house was in Brazos County and had burned years ago. Robert H. Seale III stated that the first Robert H. Seale house on this site (41RT362) had been located about 50 yards west of the later house whose exact location is known because of foundation remains.

Archaeological investigation including detailed visual inspection on two different occasions, a metal-detector survey and shovel testing guided by the results of the metal-detector survey revealed no pattern of metal distribution that might relate to the earlier structure, no cisterns, wells, or privies, and no evidence of early or middle nineteenth century occupation. The shovel tests and observation suggest that the soil deposit in the area presumed to have been the location of the earlier house has been stripped off to the basal clay. Much of the material from that area appears to have been pushed into the basement of the later two-story house as a convenient way of filling that feature. The remainder of the material appears to have been pushed into the southeast corner of the yard of the later house.

It appears, then, that the archaeological deposits of the site have been substantially destroyed, perhaps as much as or more than 90% in and around the structures. This fact being substantiated by Robert H. Seale III who removed the structures, and by archaeological observation, it would appear that no further archaeological investigation would be productive. However, if the

structures had not been removed in such a radical fashion and if the archaeological deposits remained intact, it is possible that the site would have been eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion D. Unfortunately, the archaeological value of the property has been destroyed.

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