

FIELD NOTE 4

Archaeology at the ca. 1750 Dr. Reuben Mason House in Chepachet Village, Gloucester

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A 1 ½-mile stretch of Putnam Pike (U.S. Route 44) in the Chepachet Village Historic District is undergoing extensive reconstruction and repairs. Before roadwork work began, Archaeological and Historical Services, Inc. (AHS) conducted intensive archaeological testing and historical background research to determine if the construction would impact any important cultural resources along Putnam Pike, which was historically known as “The Great Country Road.” In the 18th century Chepachet developed into an important economic and transportation hub of northwestern Rhode Island. Although the local economy was based on agriculture, by the early 19th century there were a variety of water-powered mills, a tannery, a hat factory, and a number of stores. There were also two taverns, two churches, a bank and a Masonic Hall.

To care for its growing population, the town of Gloucester needed a physician, and in 1774 Dr. Reuben Mason moved to Chepachet and purchased a two-and-a-half story center-chimney house which had been built about 25 years prior. During the Revolutionary War Dr. Mason served as an army surgeon in the Rhode Island militia, and then returned to Chepachet where he resumed his medical practice until his death in 1799. During the short-lived Dorr’s Rebellion in 1841-1842, the Reuben Mason House served as a field hospital, as it was strategically located near the Dorrite fortifications built atop nearby Acote Hill (now a cemetery). Fortunately, the armed conflict, which was fueled by a demand for greater equality in voting rights, dissipated before the field hospital was needed. Today, the Reuben Mason House is owned by the Gloucester Heritage Society, which is restoring the house. When restoration is completed the house will be used for a variety of public education programs, including a Dorr’s Rebellion museum.

AHS’s archaeological testing at the Reuben Mason House was limited to a long and narrow stretch in the front yard that will be impacted by road repair and sidewalk construction (Figure 1). Although small in scale, the excavations revealed important new information on the house and the lifeways of its occupants. A total of 2,256 artifacts was recovered during the Phase I and II testing, including a diversity of early imported ceramics from England, France, Germany and China. Also discovered were a fragment of a decorated brass knee buckle, brass and pewter buttons and a 1722 British Hibernia halfpenny or “copper.” Other items include a red clay marble, and fragments of white clay or “kaolin” tobacco pipes, slate writing boards, and a European flint strike-a-light, a fire-making tool that was struck against a piece of steel to create sparks (Figure 2). One Native American tool was also found, a small quartz biface or edged tool, used for cutting and scraping.

The excavations uncovered two buried post holes from an early to mid-19th-century fence line that once stretched across the yard (Figure 3). The remains of an old stone-lined well were also found; it had been filled and demolished by road construction sometime in the 20th-century. Below the ground surface archaeologists found a number of distinct soil layers. One layer was made up of soil that had been shoveled into the yard when the cellar hole was dug out ca. 1750. It mostly contained construction debris such as broken window glass, bits of red brick and hand-

wrought nails. A complete hoe was also found in this level. The hoe was likely lost when a worker was spreading the loose soil around the yard during the house construction. Below that was a layer of dark black topsoil: the ground surface when the house was built. This layer contained an abundance of wood charcoal. Old Yankee builders typically prepared a house lot for construction by first burning off all the dead trees and brush.

Today the Town of Gloucester maintains much of its cultural and historic character in its historic buildings, stone features, and landscapes.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Archaeologists from AHS, Inc. working at the ca. 1750 Reuben Mason House in Chepachet Village. To the left is Putnam Pike (U.S. Route. 44), historically known as “The Great Country Road.” In 1794 the stretch between Chepachet Bridge and the Connecticut State Line became the first corporate turnpike in New England. The toll charged for a wagon, cart or ox-sled was 12 ½ cents.



Figure 2: Top row from left to right: red clay marble and a kaolin tobacco pipe stem fragment, bottom row: a small Native American quartz biface fragment (a small cutting and scraping tool), a slate writing board fragment, and European flint strike-a-light fragment (used to spark fire).



Figure 3: Photograph of a bisected early to mid-19th century fencepost feature found in front of the Reuben Mason House. The soils include **A**) the post mold (the wood long rotted away, leaving a light brown stain in the soil), **B**) the post hole (the hole that was dug out to set the post), **C**) a deeply buried, black and charcoal rich topsoil. This was the ground surface when the house was constructed in ca. 1750. **D**) Soil was shoveled out of the cellar hole and spread around the yard by the house builders.