

# Taylor-Bray Farm Archaeological Project

## October/November Richard & Ruth Taylor Home Site

Daniel M. Zoto

This fall, the Taylor Bray Farm Association, along with the help of 40 community volunteers and 20 Dennis-Yarmouth High School students, made some amazing discoveries at the farm! Led by archaeologist Craig Chartier, the four-week archaeological dig investigated the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century home site of Taylor Bray Farm's original English settlers, Richard and Ruth Taylor.

With its initial construction dating to the 1640s, this is possibly the earliest Euro-American home site to be professionally excavated on Cape Cod. It is also one of very few encompassing earthfast construction. The term earthfast refers to when corner and other roof-supporting posts of the house are driven directly into the ground with no foundation or sill. The house is literally "fastened" to the earth.

The highlights of the excavation were several large soil stain features that were interpreted as remnants of the earthfast posts of the house. The stains were quite large, and roughly ovoid in shape, some spanning four to five feet in diameter. Each had a darker component near its center falling exactly nine feet apart from one another. The larger stains are the result of where large holes were dug to insert the house's supporting posts and the dark central stains are the remains of where those posts rotted in the ground. These stains formed a rectangular pattern, presumably the circumference of where the house once stood and reflected a 27 by 18 foot original structure with an 18 by 18 foot addition on the north side likely added in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Features like these are arguably the most important artifacts, tending to yield the most information about archaeological sites. They can give indications to land use, contain datable organic remains, or can be a map to structural patterns like the ones at Taylor Bray. Yet unlike what would be considered a "traditional" artifact (pottery sherds, glass, metal objects), they cannot be brought back to a laboratory for analysis. Features must be meticulously investigated and recorded in the field, which allows them to be recreated in a lab setting.

The volunteers showed great enthusiasm during the often slow and painstaking process of excavating the features and recording them with precise drawings and photography. All the soil stain features were excavated in 5 centimeter (2 inch) levels, in a sense slowly peeling them back to reveal their secrets. The features were also bisected, meaning they were cut in half. This allows for the stain to be viewed in "plan" from above, as well as in "profile" at the center, exposing the depth and other characteristics. At the end of the excavation the remaining half-features were covered with plastic and backfilled, leaving them for future study. The reason for this is future technologies may be able to give insights we can only imagine today.

In addition to the features, there were plenty of artifacts of the "traditional" sense of the word recovered during the dig. The most numerous were nail and brick fragments and to a lesser extent but also quite prevalent, were shards of window glass. The window glass was often in a preservation state that Craig refers to as "sick glass", meaning the thin glass had been in the soil for so long it had started to decompose. Although it's not always the most thrilling to discover

these types of structural artifacts, they further support the features being associated with the Taylor house site.

Some of the more exciting artifacts recovered during the dig were ceramics, gunflints, and a musket ball. The ceramics were largely utilitarian “redware,” a usually unglazed or partially-glazed earthenware used for things like storage containers, milk pans, and chamber pots. There were a few ceramic fragments of what would be considered finer “China,” although certainly English in manufacture. These included some fragments of late 17<sup>th</sup> century black and yellow glazed Staffordshire slipware, once part of drinking vessels or plates. Also discovered were a number of gunflints all of which were flaked from English flint. The somewhat crude nature of the gunflint manufacture indicate they were likely made locally from raw materials imported for the purpose, or those gathered from ballast stone of ships discarded along the shore.

The contrast between the smaller amounts of domestic type (ceramics, gunflints) artifacts and those considered structural (nails, brick) differs from previous excavations elsewhere around the knoll. In previous years, archaeologists found larger numbers of domestic artifacts to the north and east of this year’s excavation, including many dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The lower numbers of these types of artifacts recovered during this year’s dig further indicate the presence of the house in this location. It is expected to find more artifacts in what was the yard of a home than where the actual building stood. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries it was common practice to throw trash right out of the doorway or window into the yard.

Future archaeological investigations will likely return to these yard areas as this very important part of the history of Taylor Bray Farm is pieced together. The Taylor Bray Farm Archaeology Project has been an important contribution to this archaeology and history of not only the farm and Yarmouthport, but Cape Cod, and in a greater sense New England. Only time will tell what the future of the project can teach us about the past!