

## John and Joseph Howland Site Excavations

The John and Joseph Howland sites are located on Rocky Nook, Kingston, Massachusetts. The sites lie on opposite sides of Howlands Lane and are on property owned by the Pilgrim John Howland Society (PJHS) (Figure 1). The PJHS owns over twenty acres which contains the core of the farmstead purchased by John Howland from John Jenny in 1638. Upon John's passing, the property went to his second eldest son, Joseph, who in turn gave it to his son James. James sold the property off in pieces, with the last parcel being sold out of the Howland hands in 1725 (until the PJHS reacquired the land in 1920) (Table 1).



Figure 1. Google Earth image of Rocky Nook with location of John and Joseph Howland Sites.

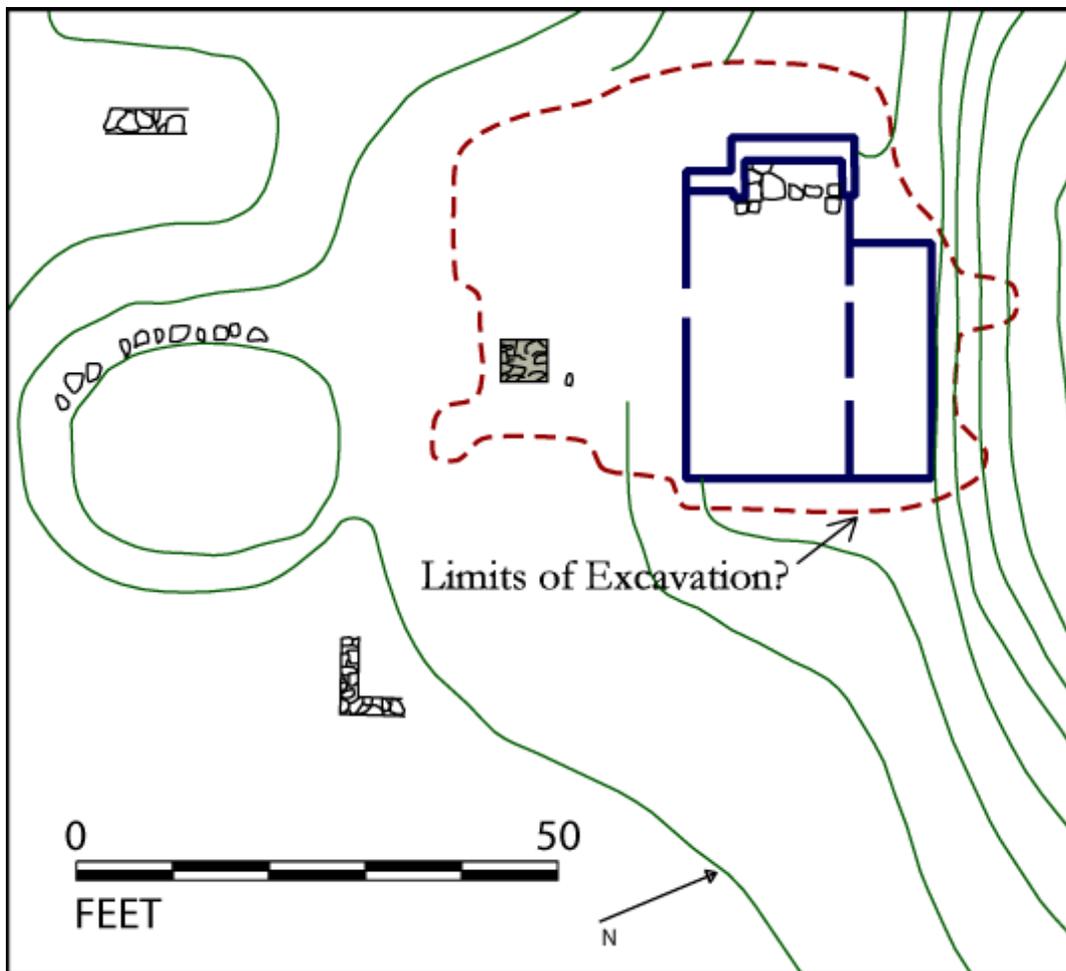
## John Howland Site Excavation History

In 1937, Sydney Strickland, an architect from Boston, was hired to locate the original Howland dwelling purchased by John and listed in the 1638 deed. Strickland and his team quickly found the remains of a dwelling measuring 34 by 17 feet with a large, nine-foot wide chimney on the west end and a 8 foot by 22 foot addition to the north with a cellar underneath. Southeast of the dwelling, Strickland identified a square stone pad roughly 5 feet on a side and what appears to have been the corner of a stone

foundation. Finally, thirty-five feet to the south of the dwelling, Strickland found a large, and what appeared to be elliptical, stone filled depression roughly twenty feet in diameter (Figure 2).

Date	Transaction
1627	John Jenny received land at Rocky Nook in the land division
1638/9	John Howland purchases house, barn, outbuildings and land from John Jenny
1672/3	John Howland wills property to Joseph effective after the death of his wife Elizabeth
1686/7	Elizabeth Howland dies and Joseph takes possession of homestead
1703/4	Joseph Howland wills homestead to his son James Howland
1735	James sells property to Benjamin Lothrop and his wife Experience Howland, daughter of Thomas Howland
1748	Experience, wife of Benjamin, dies leaving her estate to her husband
1787	Benjamin Lothrop dies with his heirs dividing the land at Rocky Nook

**Table 1. Howland land transactions on Rocky Nook.**



**Figure 2. Digitized copy of features discovered during 1937 excavation of the Howland Site.**

Time constraints limited Strickland's excavations to the dwelling house and a peripheral examination of the other features. Based on these limits, Strickland interpreted the dwelling as the house purchased by John Howland. The square stone pad and the corner of the foundation were identified as the remnants of a barn also conveyed to John Howland by the 1638 deed. Finally, the circular stone filled depression, was the remnants of a small "dew pond" used for watering cattle and other farm animals.

At least eight photographs were taken during the 1937 excavation, with three surviving in a scrapbook belonging to the PJHS (Figures 3-5). At least one photo was taken of the cellar addition on the north side of the dwelling house showing that the cellar was partially excavated. It is not known if the other photos would provide additional insights into the Strickland excavation.

At least some of the artifacts were collected by Strickland (soil and sediments were not screened). At least part of the assemblage was put on display. After that, the history of the artifacts is not known, until James Deetz was taken to a Plymouth residence and shown the collection (pers. comm.). With the permission of the owner, Deetz curated the assemblage at Plimoth Plantation. The collection at Plimoth Plantation contains numerous 17<sup>th</sup> century artifacts as well as dozens of mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century ceramics. It is apparent that the assemblage is not complete (many iron artifacts were attached to cardboard cards, but only the cards remain), and it is possible that it has been contaminated with artifacts from other sites. Some of the larger and more unique objects are currently curated and displayed at the Jabez Howland house in Plymouth, Massachusetts (owned and operated by PJHS).



**Figure 3.** View to southwest of dwelling house hearth uncovered by Strickland in 1937. A portion of entryway is shown in the middle of the left side.



**Figure 4. View to north of dwelling house uncovered by Strickland in 1937. Entryway in foreground and hearth on left.**



**Figure 5. View to northwest of dwelling house uncovered by Strickland in 1937. Entryway in foreground and hearth in background.**

Excavations at the John Howland site re-started in 1998. In June of 1998 and 1999, University of Virginia (UVA) archaeological field schools excavated at the dwelling house found by Strickland. The idea behind the re-excavation was twofold. First, it was desired to see if it could be determined whether the dwelling was the building sold to John Howland in 1638. The identification of historic artifacts during Strickland's excavation was in its infancy. The 1937 site report, for example, is filled with entries on the discovery of yellow pottery found in and around the dwelling foundation. Unfortunately, there are numerous pottery types that this could refer to. Many types date to John Howland's lifetime, but there are just as many that were not developed until after James Howland sold the property out of the Howland family in 1725. So the first question was simply a matter of dating the structure: were there any archaeological deposits associated with the dwelling that could confirm the structure's early date?

Second, if the dwelling did date to John Howland's lifetime, then it is one of only a small handful of buildings dating to the first expansion of Plymouth's colonists out of the original fortified town. With such an important site, the dwelling would be of vital importance to scholars interested in this early period of the Colony's history. The dwelling would need to be uncovered to map it carefully; adding much more detail than the schematic drawing executed by Strickland in 1937 (see Figure 1).

Pre-excavation reconnaissance work indicated that Strickland did not fully backfill his excavations (Figure 6). This is not surprising considering that the 1937 excavation was conducted with the intention to reconstruct the homestead shortly thereafter. Excavations showed that within the structure, only four to six inches of soil lay on top of undisturbed subsoil. This is most likely the remnants of unexcavated sediment as well as sixty years of soil formation processes creating a new topsoil/A-horizon.

A datum point (quarter inch metal re-bar was sunk to ground level) was set twenty-seven feet to the northeast of the northeast corner of the large granite monument commemorating John Howland and his family. A second re-bar was sunk to ground level 20 feet to the east (magnetic, not true east). A digital theodolite and pull tapes were employed to lay out the excavation units. Excavations were conducted in five foot by five foot quadrats, digging in natural layers. All sediments were screened through quarter inch mesh. Only a small handful of artifacts were recovered within the confines of the 17'x34' dwelling house – none of which were temporally diagnostic. Excavations continued to expose the remnants of the stone foundation as well as the chimney and hearth, the stone entryway, and part of the cellar addition to the north. The excavations in and around the structure (except for the cellar addition) generally consisted of two to three layers (organic O-horizon, A-horizon and a transition to undisturbed subsoil).

The cellar addition, being the lowest point on the site accumulated eroded sediment from the small hill to the north as well as an inordinate amount of mid- to late-twentieth century trash consisting mostly of brown and green bottle glass. Upon partial removal of the twentieth century layers, it was determined that Strickland only partially excavated the cellar. The cellar was most likely not completely filled in after the dwelling was abandoned and Strickland's activities centered on the cellar with the least amount of fill. This resulted in a crater-like excavation, with only a small portion of the cellar floor being exposed in 1937 (roughly 1-2 feet in diameter).



**Figure 6. View to the west of dwelling house at the beginning of excavations in 1998. Note the remnant backdirt piles from the 1937 excavation in the background as well as the depression that was determined to be the partially excavated dwelling house cellar.**

The 1999 UVA field school excavation focused on the dwelling house cellar addition (Figure 9). The excavation uncovered a larger quantity of artifacts and some interesting architectural details. Unfortunately, the artifacts were not useful in dating the dwelling house. Most were common utilitarian wares such as milk pans and storage jars and are types of ceramics produced over hundreds of years (Figure 10). The top of the filled in cellar did contain a few pieces of an English ceramic type called Staffordshire Mottled Ware that was produced between 1680 and 1780 (Figure 11). The lack of any ceramics dating to the late-18<sup>th</sup> Century suggests that the dwelling was abandoned and the cellar filled in sometime between 1680 and 1725. This suggests strongly that the dwelling was occupied by John Howland and his family. Unfortunately, we could not find any evidence supporting the claim that the dwelling was the one purchased by John in 1638, but significantly, we did not find any evidence to disprove it either.

The cellar fill appeared to be a single deposit, indicating that it was deposited rapidly. It consisted of a dark brown silty loam with a high percentage of rock cobbles. The shared dwelling/cellar foundation on the south side was two layers of relatively flat river cobbles about a foot to a foot and half wide (Figure 12). The cellar walls on the west and east sides could not be identified due to displacement by living trees. The north wall of the cellar appeared to be similar to the south wall. However, with the wall partially collapsing into the cellar, it was difficult to ascertain the exact construction method due to the desire to leave all foundation stones in place (Figure 13).



**Figure 7. Dwelling house excavation near the end of the 1998 excavation. The cellar addition is in the foreground, chimney in the upper right corner and entryway in the upper left corner.**



**Figure 8. View to west of dwelling house and partially excavated cellar addition on the left. End of 1998 excavations.**



**Figure 9.** View to west of cellar addition exposed in 1999 after removal of topsoil and twentieth century deposits (including backfill from a 1998 5'x5' test square in center). The main dwelling house is to the left and the backfilled chimney 'mound' in the upper left corner.



**Figure 11.** Earthenware milk pan with a lead glaze interior found within the dwelling house cellar fill.



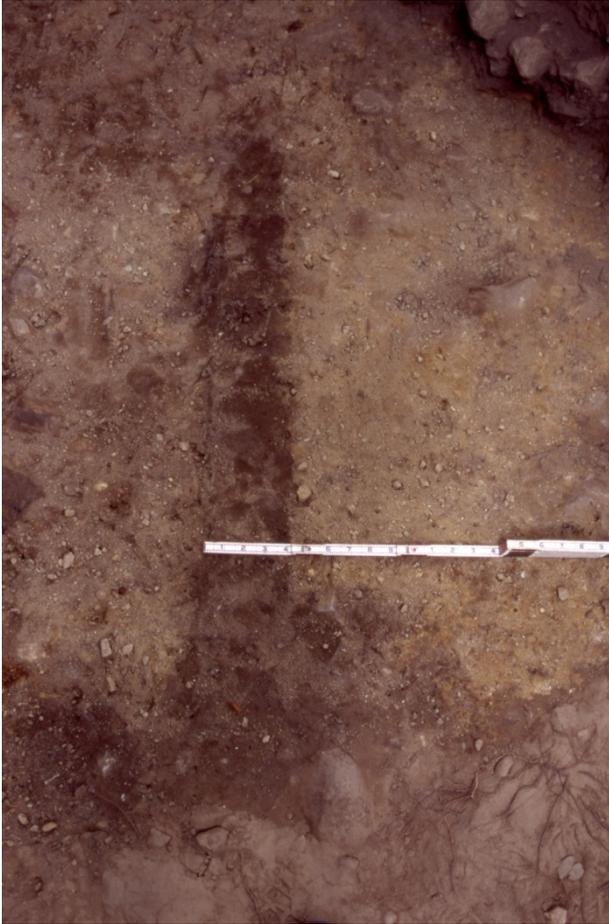
**Figure 10.** Exterior and interior view of base of Staffordshire Mottled Ware tankard found in the top of the dwelling house cellar fill.



**Figure 12. View to south of partially excavated cellar addition. The collapsed cellar wall in center was due to locals using the area for riding mountain bikes.**



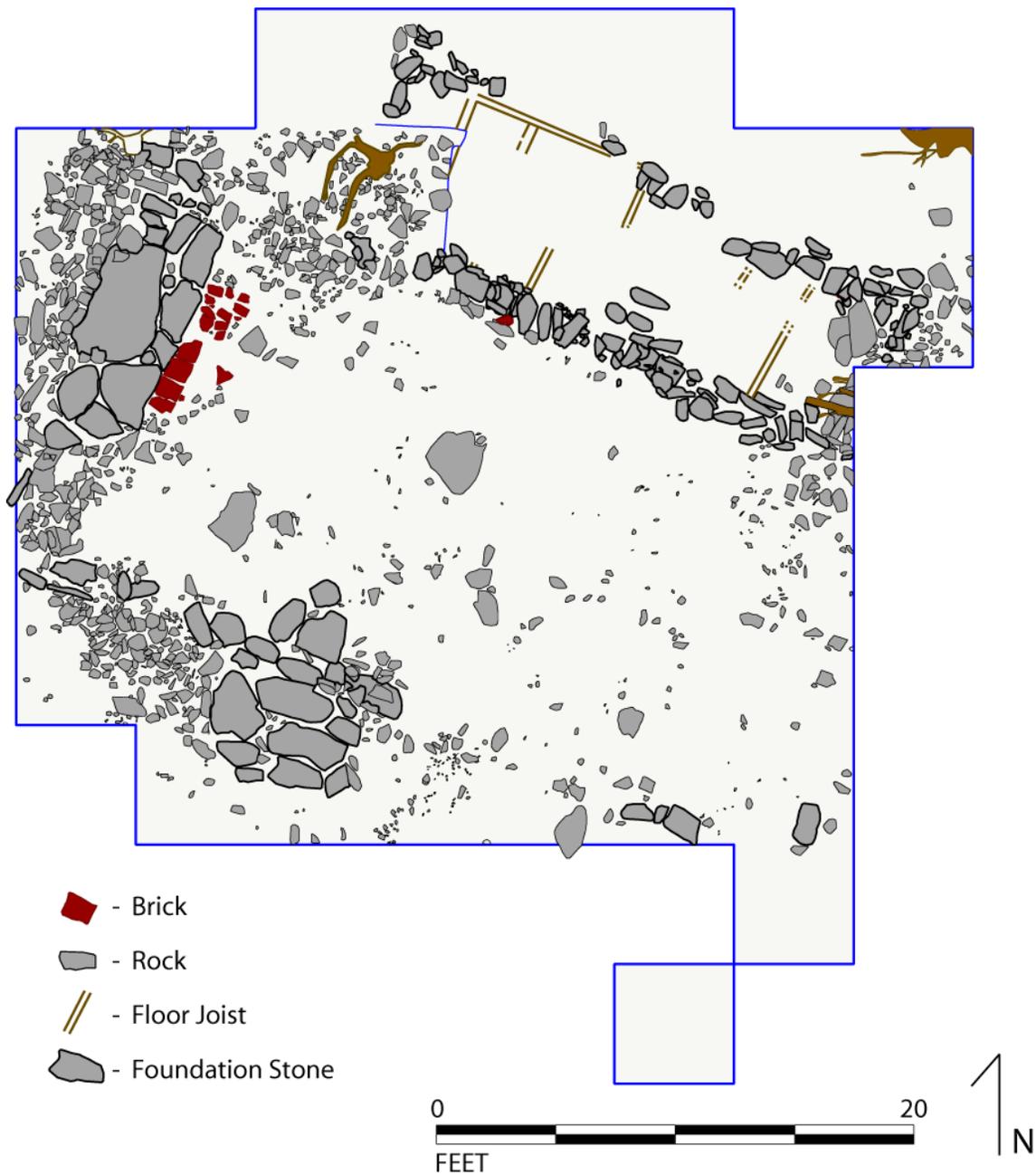
**Figure 13. Overhead view of cellar addition excavation at end of 1999 season.**



**Figure 14. Soil stain from decomposed floor joist that lay directly on the ground of the cellar.**

Parallel soil stains (roughly 0.4 feet wide) were discovered at the base of the cellar fill (Figures 14 and 15). These were interpreted as the decomposed remnants of floor joists lying directly on the ground, indicating that the cellar addition had a wooden floor. No direct evidence was found suggesting that there were wooden walls; however, the care in creating a floor would suggest that the walls were finished to some degree.

Starting in 2000 and continuing through 2004, excavations were able to continue at the John Howland site with the help of PJHS members. Each year, from five to ten Society members conducted excavations under the supervision of three to five trained archaeologists. Excavations were conducted over the six days prior to the annual August PJHS meeting. With the completion of the excavation and mapping of the dwelling house in 1999 (Figure 15), our focus turned to the area identified by Strickland as the “dew pond.”



**Figure 15. Plan of dwelling house based on 1998 and 1999 excavations.**

The first step was to figure out exactly what the “dew pond” feature was. In 2000, by placing 5’x5’ foot test squares in the center and along the southern and western edges of the feature, we found out that we were excavating a cellar to another structure. During the 2001 season, in deposits just above the dirt cellar floor we recovered a “Wood Penny” with a 1723 date (Figure 16). Excavations at the “dew pond” cellar were completed during the 2002 season.

The cellar was approximately sixteen feet square and may have had a chimney on the western wall. Intact foundations stones were found at the cellar floor level on the south side as well as on the ground surface on the west side. The east side of the foundation showed that it had been robbed and only a displaced stones remained. The

north wall also appeared to have been robbed out, but excavations were not conducted in this location. Significantly, the alignment of the cellar did not match that of the dwelling house. The “dew pond” cellar was only a couple degrees off of magnetic north, while the dwelling house foundation

was almost thirty degrees off of a north-south alignment. This indicates that the two buildings were not constructed at the same time and may suggest that the “dew pond” structure was built after the dwelling house was abandoned.



**Figure 16. 1723 “Wood” penny found in the “dew pond” cellar fill.**



**Figure 17. View to southwest of “dew pond” cellar at end of 2002 season. Partially intact foundation stones line the west side (upper right corner). The east side was robbed out leaving no intact stones.**

Besides the “Wood” penny, very little tightly datable material was uncovered, making it difficult to assign a date to the structure. If we take the supposition that the dwelling house and “dew pond” structures were not standing at the same time due to their being out of alignment, then a construction date of c.1700 can be assigned. The building stood for a minimum of twenty-five years as attested by the “Wood” penny. Therefore, a first half eighteenth century date has been assigned to the structure.

The focus 2003 and 2004 field seasons were two-fold. First, we turned our attention to the area identified as the barn by Strickland. We concentrated our attention on the square rock pad that Strickland interpreted as lying in front of the barn door (centered on the west wall of the barn). Three five-foot by five-foot square test units were placed at the location of the rock pad. While many rocks were exposed and left in place during the excavation, they did not seem to form any type of pattern. A few datable English ceramics were recovered, but they were of a type that was produced for almost two centuries – between 1600 and 1770.

The second focus was a limited exploration of how the inhabitants of the site organized and used the space surrounding the dwelling house and the “dew pond” structures. A total of twenty-six five-foot by five-foot test squares were excavated between the two structures and northwest, west and east of the dwelling house. Between the two structures, in two adjacent squares, we found a linear soil stain and two postholes. This could be the remains of a fence or perhaps a small outbuilding that will only be confirmed by opening up a larger area. All other test squares continued the trend of finding small quantities of historic artifacts with a large range of manufacturing dates (brick, wrought nails, and both glazed and unglazed utilitarian redwares).

In total, between 1998 and 2004, thirteen weeks were spent excavating at the John Howland site. During that time 107 five by five foot excavation squares were opened up. Of that, almost half (48 of 107) were excavated to re-expose the dwelling house and cellar addition that Strickland identified as the house John Howland purchased in 1638. Twelve of the forty-eight test squares excavated below where Strickland stopped – all in and around the cellar addition.

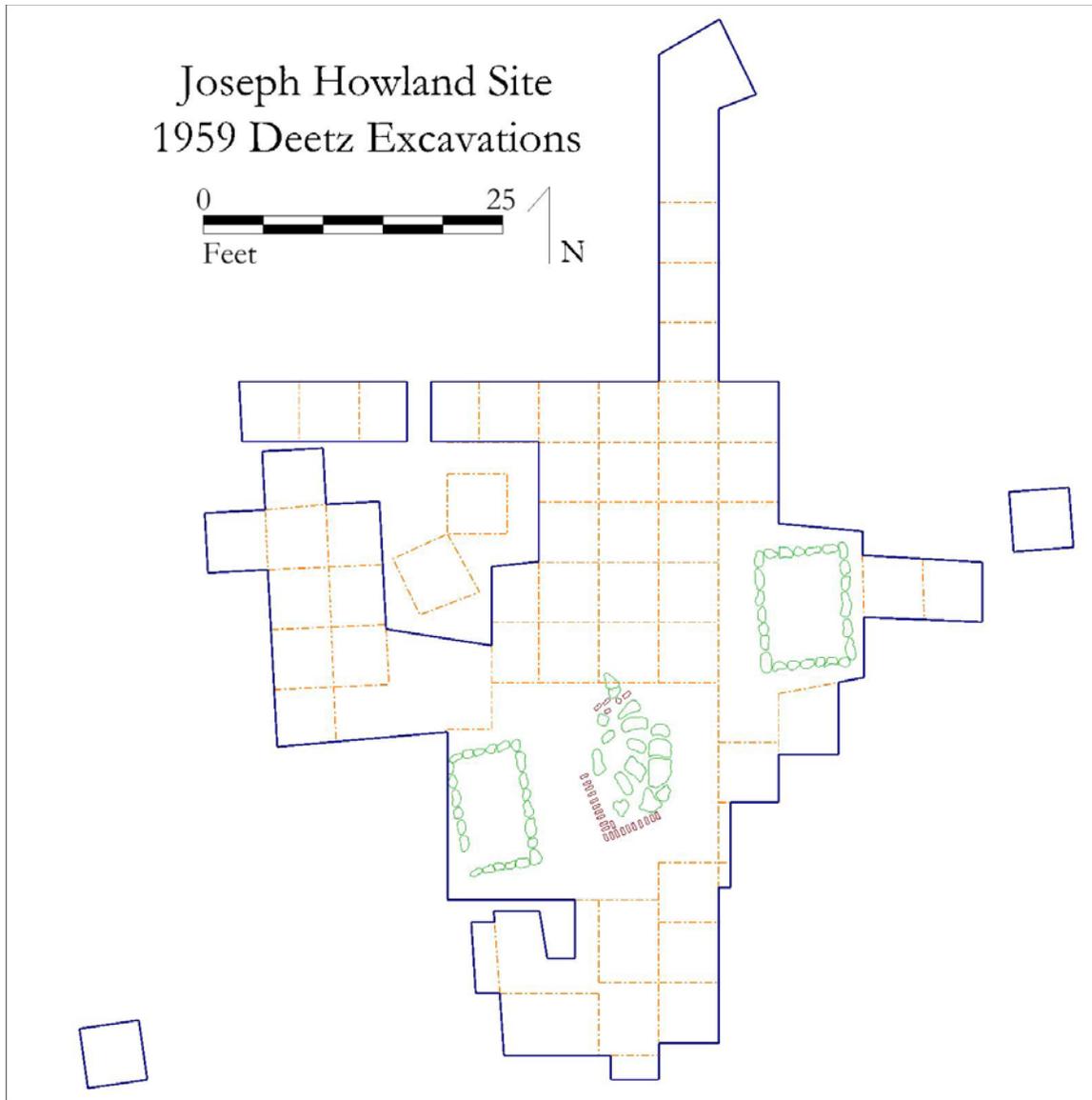
An additional 25 test squares were excavated at the “dew pond” structure. It is not known how much Strickland dug in this area, however, it is assumed that every test square was excavated below where Strickland stopped.

The remaining 34 test squares were dug around the dwelling house. A little more than half of these appeared to have been on undisturbed soil with the rest being within the limits of Strickland’s excavation.

### **Joseph Howland Site Excavation History**

James Deetz excavated at the Joseph Howland Site in 1959 and again in 1968. During the 1959 campaign, Deetz uncovered two rock-lined cellars and a hearth and chimney associated with the smaller of the two cellars (Figure 18). Generally, Deetz excavated in square 5 foot by 5 foot excavation units. However, other unit sizes and shapes were also employed. All material was screened through quarter inch mesh. The artifact assemblage, field notes, maps and photographs are currently housed at Plimoth Plantation.

Deetz returned to the Joseph Howland Site in 1968 with a field school from Brown University. A rough site map was produced, but the exact area excavated is not known. The current best guess is that it was immediately to the south of the 1959 campaign. All sediment was screened through quarter inch mesh. All surviving field notes, maps and photographs, as well as the artifact assemblage is housed at Plimoth Plantation.



**Figure 18. Digitized site map from Deetz 1959 Joseph Howland Site excavation.**

In 2005, excavations at the Joseph Howland Site began with the seemingly simple task of identifying where Deetz excavated in 1959. It was hoped to identify, locate and map the two cellars and the hearth feature, providing an accurate site map for both the John and Joseph Howland sites. Deetz and Scott Deetz provided a schematic map of the John and Joseph Howland sites in their 2001 publication *Times of Their Lives: Life, Love and Death in Plymouth Colony*. This map was used as a starting point for the excavations.

The John Howland site grid established in 1998 was expanded to the Joseph Howland site using a Nikon TotalStation. Using the Deetz schematic map, it was estimated that the stone cellars and hearth were approximately 100 feet west of the north-south running Howlands Lane. The following description describes the excavation strategy employed in 2005 and replicated each year afterwards through 2012.



**Figure 19. Hearth feature uncovered by Deetz in 1959.**



**Figure 20. Smaller of two cellars uncovered by Deetz in 1959.**



**Figure 21. Site preparation prior to 2008 excavation at Joseph Howland Site.**

In the early 2000s, the entire site was covered in thick, impenetrable vines between 6 and 12 feet high (much like it was in 1959). Each year, an area roughly 40 feet by 40 was cleared of vines and fallen cedar trees (Figure 21). A block of 5 foot by 5 foot excavation squares was laid out and excavated. The topsoil was removed from the entire excavation block. The remaining A-horizon was next excavated. A portion of the excavation block was chosen to excavate further. The third layer usually terminated on an artifact rich interface sitting on top of a rocky subsoil (see Figure 22 for the typical block excavation strategy).

While it was assumed that artifacts would be found during the excavation, the hope was to identify either a clearly backfilled area by virtue of seeing the edge of excavation, or more likely, an area mostly devoid of artifacts larger than a quarter inch in size (indicative of screened backfill). If neither an edge of previous excavation was found nor areas with only small artifacts, it was assumed we were in an area that had not been excavated by Deetz. However, to be sure, one or two test squares were taken down to subsoil to remove the possibility of Deetz having a variable artifact collection strategy.

Once an area was deemed to contain intact deposits, black plastic laid down and the block was backfilled.



**Figure 22. Block excavation strategy employed at the Joseph Howland Site between 2005 and 2012. Topsoil removal provided a view of intact deposits or redeposit backfill. Intact deposits were generally not excavated and the excavation block was backfilled. (View to north during 2009 excavation.)**

Only one excavation block uncovered an area that was known to have been excavated by Deetz (Figure 23). In 2007 a 10'x10' excavation block revealed a grid-like pattern of deposits. In 2008, this area was expanded to a 15'x15' foot block and the pattern continued. The topsoil layers produced higher than expected artifact counts and many could be seen in the darker bands of sediment. The lighter colored sediment contained few to no artifacts on the surface (mostly brick fragments and occasional small redware sherds). The hypothesis was that Deetz employed a Wheeler Box excavation strategy and the darker soil were unexcavated balks. The lighter, artifact poor sediment in one quarter of a 5'x5' excavation square was excavated to subsoil (Figure 24). At the bottom of the fill, sitting on top of the subsoil was a broken Coke bottle produced only in 1968. It was concluded that the Coke bottle fragments, square nature of the feature, and the grid pattern of lighter fill represented an area excavated by Deetz in 1968.

Unfortunately, the relationship between the 1959 and 1968 excavation is not known. Based on further excavation and an examination of the 1959 and 1968 site maps suggests that the later excavation is to the south or southwest of the earlier excavation. A visitor to the site who, as a child, helped with the excavation in 1968, suggests that that excavation was right next to the road. This suggests that the 1968 excavation was to the south or southeast of the 1959 excavation.



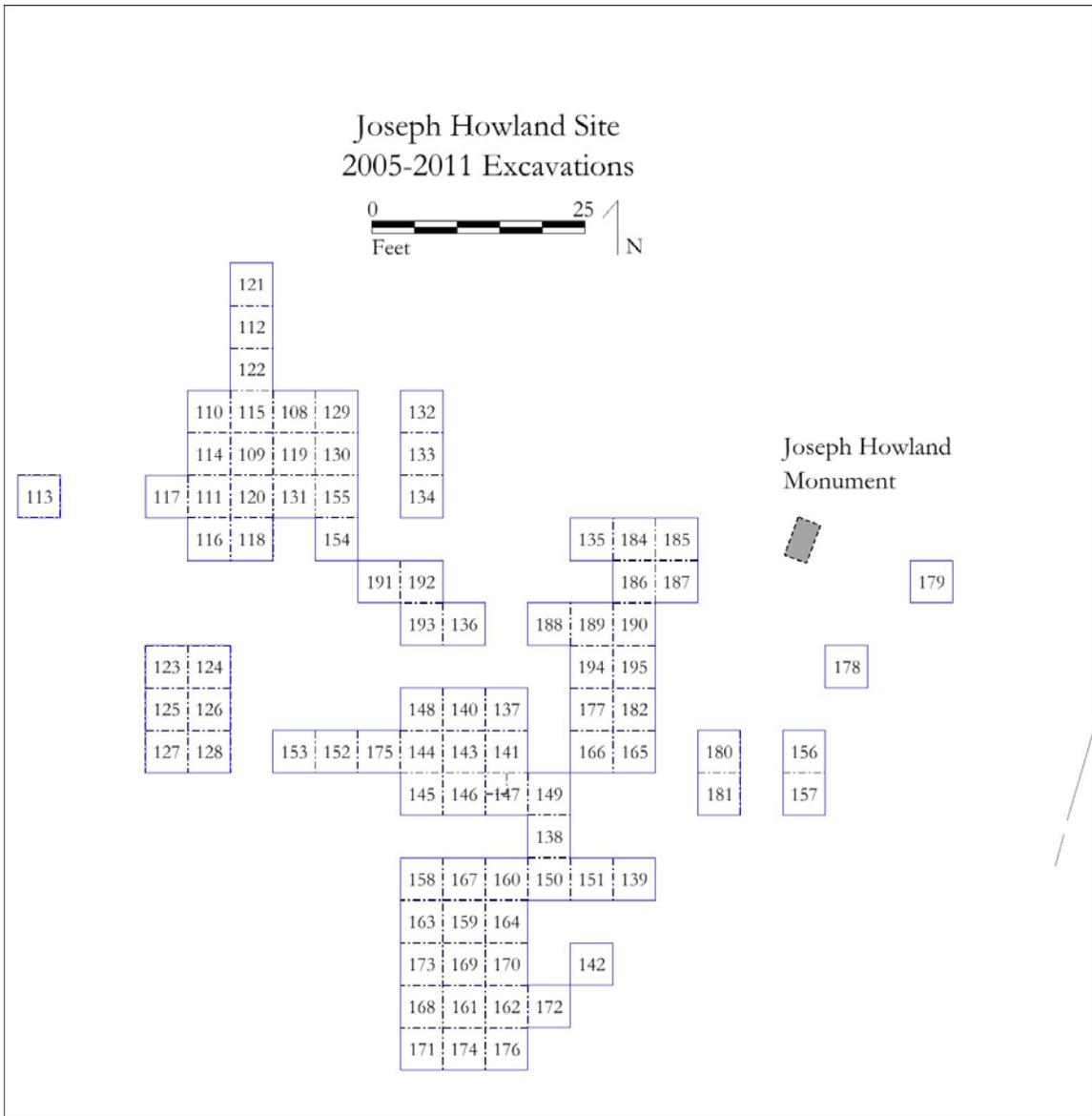
**Figure 23. Areas of dark fill indicate intact strata unexcavated by Deetz. Lighter areas formed a grid pattern that were found to be backfilled excavation units from 1968.**

At the end of the 2012 field season, a total of eight weeks were spent excavating on the Joseph Howland site. Eighty-eight 5'x5' test squares were excavated (Figure 25). The vast majority of the excavation squares appeared to be on intact eighteenth century deposits as a large quantity of artifacts were recovered from each area. The expected plan of finding a donut shaped distribution where the "hole" in the artifacts would be the previously excavated backfill did not pan out (Figure 26).

At this point, it has been concluded that the current excavation strategy has and will not reveal the location of the two cellars and hearth that were uncovered by Deetz in 1959. As such, excavations have been suspended pending a refinement in the research design that will provide for the protection of the remaining intact 18<sup>th</sup> century deposits. If non-intrusive methods (ground penetrating radar, resistivity, etc) are employed in the future, targeted excavation may take place to ground truth the results.



**Figure 24. Northwest quadrant (2.5'x2.5') of excavation unit 147 showing a corner of a Deetz unit (backfill removed). On top of subsoil was a broken Coke bottle produced only in 1969.**



**Figure 25. Joseph Howland Site Plan. 1968 Deetz backfill identified in center of excavation (15 foot square block with unit 148 in northwest corner and 147 in southeast corner); otherwise intact 18th C. deposits identified everywhere else. Howlands Lane partially mapped and showing on right edge of plan.**

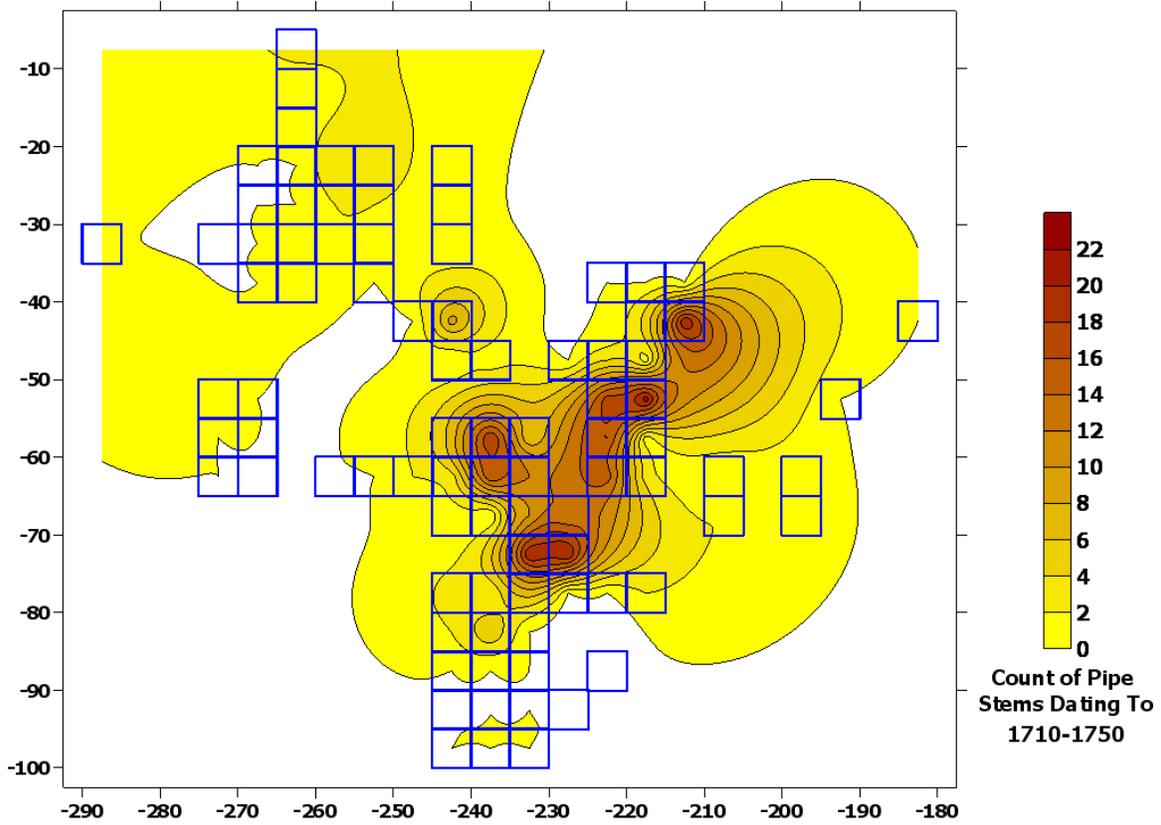


Figure 26. Ball clay pipe stem distribution for with bores of 5/64".