

106 SUCCESS STORY

New Highway Uncovers Untold Histories U.S. Route 301 Corridor, Middletown, Delaware



“This is a very exciting project and one we have been talking about, literally, since my first day as governor, and years before that. It’s going to bring so many benefits to the area—less congestion, better safety, more economic development—that’s what I call a win-win-win.”

— FORMER GOV. JACK MARKELL
2016

“The demands of the project schedule required an intensive cooperative relationship among all the parties. Daunting at first, what emerged was a focus on not just the challenge, but also the opportunity that this large-scale project presented.”

—GWEN DAVIS
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

Photos: Above, exhibit of Houston-LeCompt Site on display at DeIDOT’s rest area in Smyrna (courtesy Dovetail Cultural Resource Group[DCRG]); Right, stone foundation of dairy and well at Armstrong-Rogers Site (DCRG), artifacts recovered from Noxon Tenancy Site, 18th century wooden cribbed well at Noxon Tenancy Site (both courtesy Louis Berger)



THE STORY

In 1638, the Swedes laid out the first permanent European settlement on Delaware soil at Fort Christina, the site of modern-day Wilmington. This site was intended to be the capital of a Swedish colony. After almost two decades of contention, the Dutch controlled the area and allowed the Swedes to practice their language and culture. By the start of the 18th century, the area consisted of Swedish, Dutch, and English settlers. Although many changes have occurred over the past 300 years, the area remained agricultural in nature, retaining the remnants of its rich cultural heritage, until the 1980s when suburban development intensified and expanded.

THE PROJECT

The Delaware Department of Transportation (DeIDOT) began planning studies for an ambitious highway project in the 1990s to remove a bottleneck along U.S. Route 301, a significant part of the regional highway network. This project would improve safety, manage truck traffic, and reduce congestion. Improved traffic flow would support economic development, enhance the region’s ability to compete for economic development, improve local access to rail lines and bus services, and improve livability in the region. Several alternatives for U.S. Route 301 were identified, and cultural resource studies were initiated including a predictive model for archaeological sites.

THE 106 PROCESS

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) was responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects on those properties of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the historic property when adverse effects may occur.

By 2007, the project alignment was defined, and 10 different Cultural Resource Management (CRM) firms were engaged to efficiently complete testing of the 17-mile corridor in the four-year project time frame. These firms contributed in various capacities such as geographic information system-based predictive modeling, detailed

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Photos: From left, an archaeologist explains a pit feature at Elkins Site to DeIDOT archaeologists, SHPO, project engineers (photo courtesy Hunter Research); a Cub Scout troop spent the day at Houston-LeCompt Site learning about archaeology (DCRG)

historical research, field work, specialized studies, and public outreach efforts.

Sixty-six historic and prehistoric archaeological sites were identified. Close coordination among DeIDOT, Delaware State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and FHWA was necessary to make decisions and keep the project moving forward in a timely manner. Public outreach and engagement were seen as a crucial element of the project early on and were woven throughout the Section 106 process. Participants had a kickoff meeting where they decided on expectations concerning data sharing and contact information. The timeline was expedited by using weekly site visits between SHPO staff and DeIDOT archaeologists, with CRM consultants providing management summaries instead of full reports when mitigation was planned. Decisions concerning eligibility and mitigation were made quickly using the understanding, relationships, and trust that the site visits engendered.

Eight archaeological sites were avoided during the design process, but 14 sites eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places could not be avoided. DeIDOT, SHPO, and FHWA worked closely to develop mitigation strategies to resolve adverse effects to those eligible sites. Excavation to recover important data was chosen as the resolution of adverse effects for eight of the sites; the adverse effects to the other six sites were resolved through the development of historic context documents, syntheses and best practice studies, and public outreach. The mitigation program provided a net benefit to the region, state, and public.

THE SUCCESS

Through the Section 106 process, consulting parties balanced the mission of providing safe transportation while serving as responsible stewards of archaeological resources. The information gathered provided a new perspective on the Colonial period in Delaware. The up-front investment in predictive modeling and intensive background research, and the involvement of multiple CRM firms, allowed the archaeological fieldwork to be completed within a tight time frame. Because sites were identified early in the planning process, several sites on DeIDOT-owned land were avoided and preserved in perpetuity through protective easements. Public dig days were offered to experience archaeology. Public engagement occurred throughout the Section 106 process and through project construction, providing a greater awareness of Delaware's past and shared cultural and historic resources.

Brochures and posters were developed for the eight excavated sites to provide information to the public who stopped by the sites. Long-term public outreach included three exhibits across the county highlighting each of the three sites and thematic websites. These websites with additional information are available at https://www.deldot.gov/archaeology/historic_pres/us301/index.shtml.

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Federal Highway Administration
Delaware State Historic Preservation Officer
Maryland Historic Trust
Delaware Department of Transportation

For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov



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