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Lillian Salamone

Laurence King

Kathleen Keith

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# An Archaeological Analysis of a Possible Slave Quarter on the Little Falls Plantation in Southern Stafford County

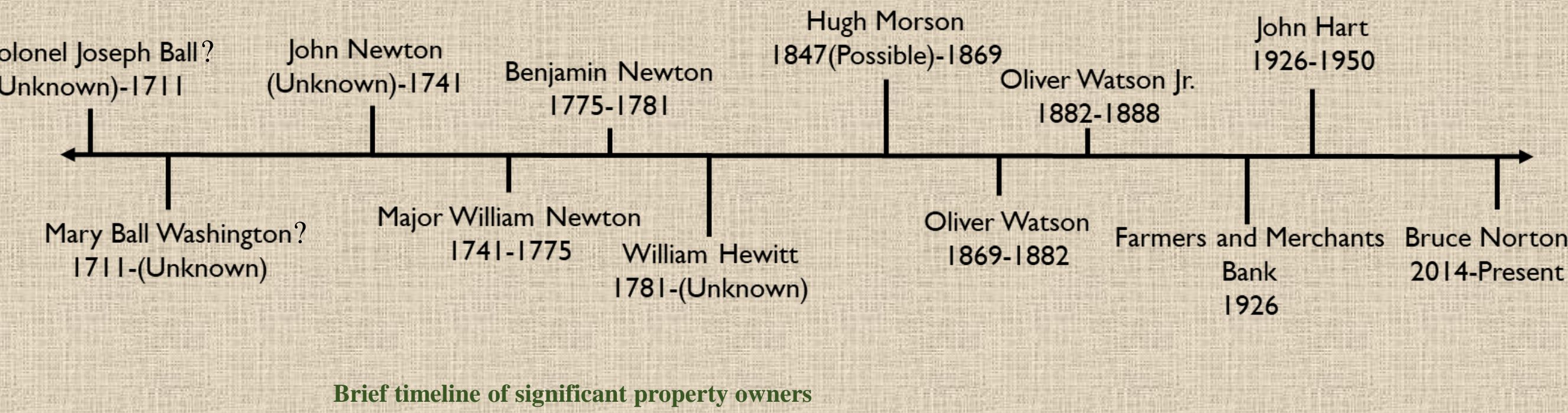
Lillian “Kyett” Salamone, Kathleen Keith, and Laurence King  
Department of Historic Preservation, University of Mary Washington

## Introduction

Little Falls is an 18th and 19th-century plantation located in southern Stafford County, Virginia. Today, much of the original 1,100-acre property has been subdivided, except for 125 acres surrounding the curtilage located on the Rappahannock River, just outside of the city of Fredericksburg. In 2016, the owner of a 11.5-acre residential plot in what was once outlying agricultural fields on the Little Falls Plantation, contacted Dr. Lauren McMillan of the Department of Historic Preservation at the University of Mary Washington after she found archaeological material in her backyard. An 1867 map indicated there were at least two buildings on the site, likely an Antebellum slave quarter and possibly an overseer or foreman’s dwelling (Fig 1). The archaeological site on the residential property dates to the mid-nineteenth century and is likely a slave quarter which continued to be occupied by tenant farmers after the Civil War.

## Background History

Many local historians have recounted that the Little Falls property was originally owned by the Washington family, having been left to Mary Ball by her father Colonel Joseph Ball in his will. The facts of this are still unclear. The earliest clear reference to the Little Falls property is from John Newton’s will, which is dated December 21, 1696. By the late 18th century, the Newton family had amassed nearly 2,000 acres, including the 1,100 acre tract at Little Falls. In Major William Newton’s original will, dated June 16, 1784, he divided his estate amongst his heirs (King 1942:222-227), and the portion of the land upon which UMW students conducted archaeological testing was given to his son Benjamin Newton, while other portions went to his other heirs. Unfortunately, there is a gap in the records between 1784 and the Civil War. An 1867 Union Army map indicates that there was an individual named “Mason” living on the Little Falls property (Figure 2). However, this is most likely a misspelling of the name “Morson” as there is no other record of anyone named Mason at this site. Additionally, there is a post-war court deposition concerning a nearby plantation, Sherwood Forest, that indicates that Morson was a neighbor (McMillan 2019). Based on archaeological dating, the site and possible quarters found likely date from the Morson occupation, both before and after the Civil War. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Morson sold Little Falls and the property went through many hands and was subdivided several times, until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the current parcels were divided out to create the rural subdivision that exists today.



## Methodology

The first phase of the project was a Phase I field survey, conducted by students in UMW’s introduction to archaeology class (Figure 3). Eighty five pits were purposively placed in a grid at ten-foot intervals (Figure 4) and excavated approximately 18 inches in diameter and excavated down until subsoil was identified at approximately 1 foot. The soil was screened through 1/4-inch mesh. All artifacts recovered were placed in plastic bags labeled with provenience information and then taken to the archaeology lab at the University of Mary Washington to be cleaned and cataloged. Laboratory Aide Delaney Resweber created several GIS maps in ArcPro, which the authors then used to conduct spatial distribution analyses. Archival deed research was conducted at the Stafford County Courthouse to determine ownership from the current owner to the earliest owner recorded on file.

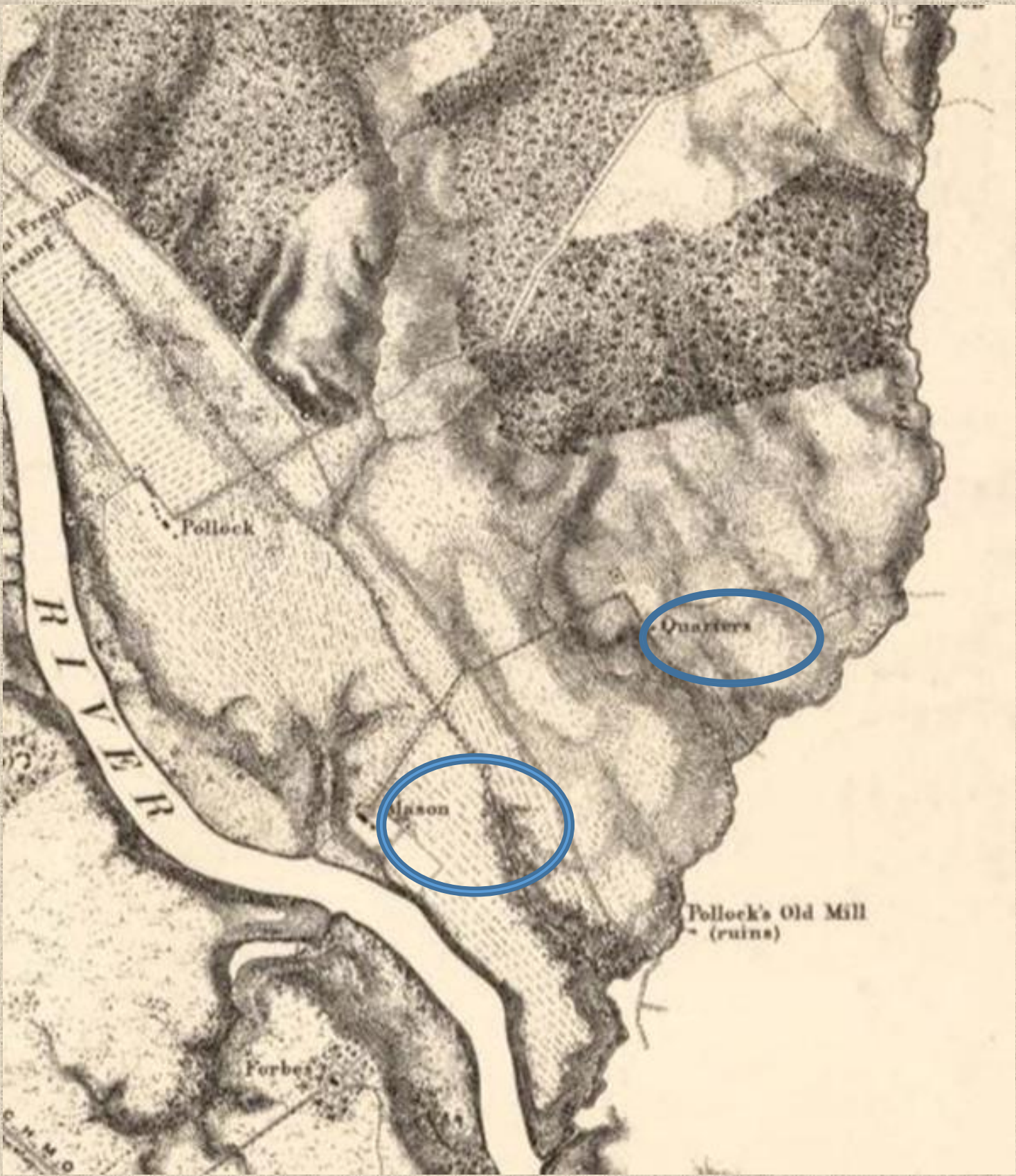


Figure 1: Map of Little Falls, 1867 showing location of the quarters, along with name “Mason” located at the plantation’s Big House

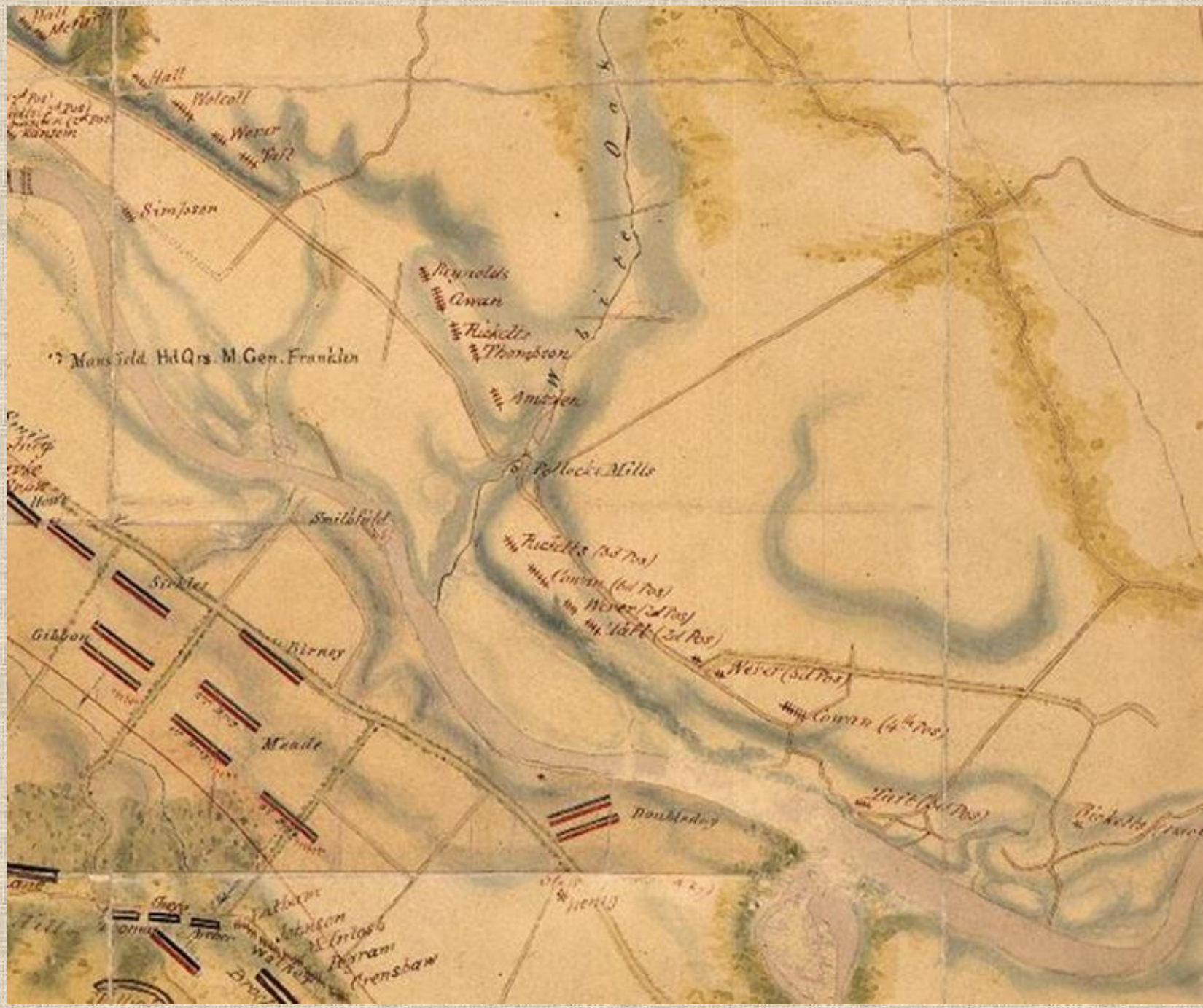


FIGURE 2. White Oak Run Passages, Rappahannock Map detail, War Department, Office of Chief Engineers, 1862.



Figure 3: UMW Historic Preservation 207: Introduction to American Archaeology students excavating on site

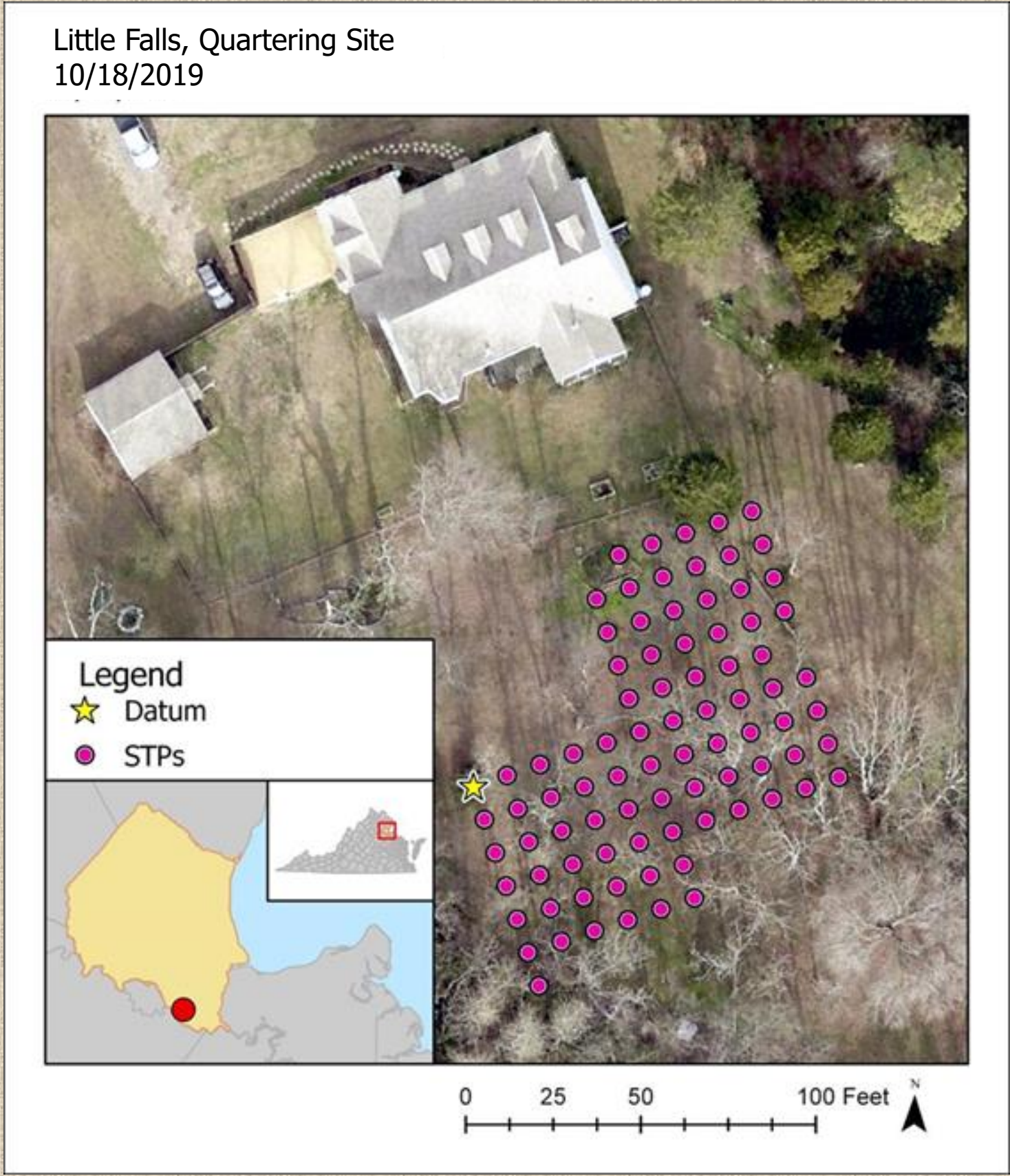
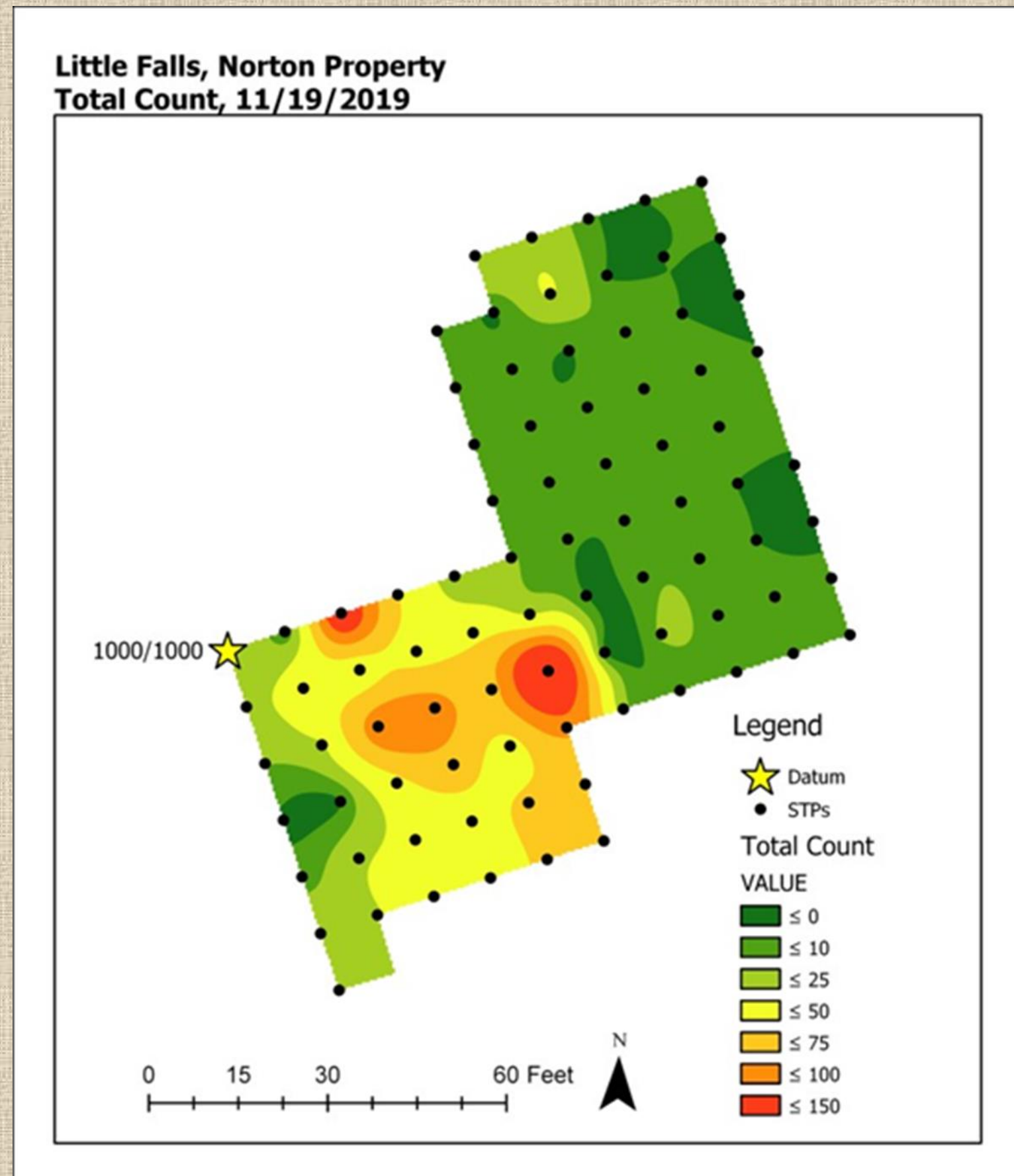
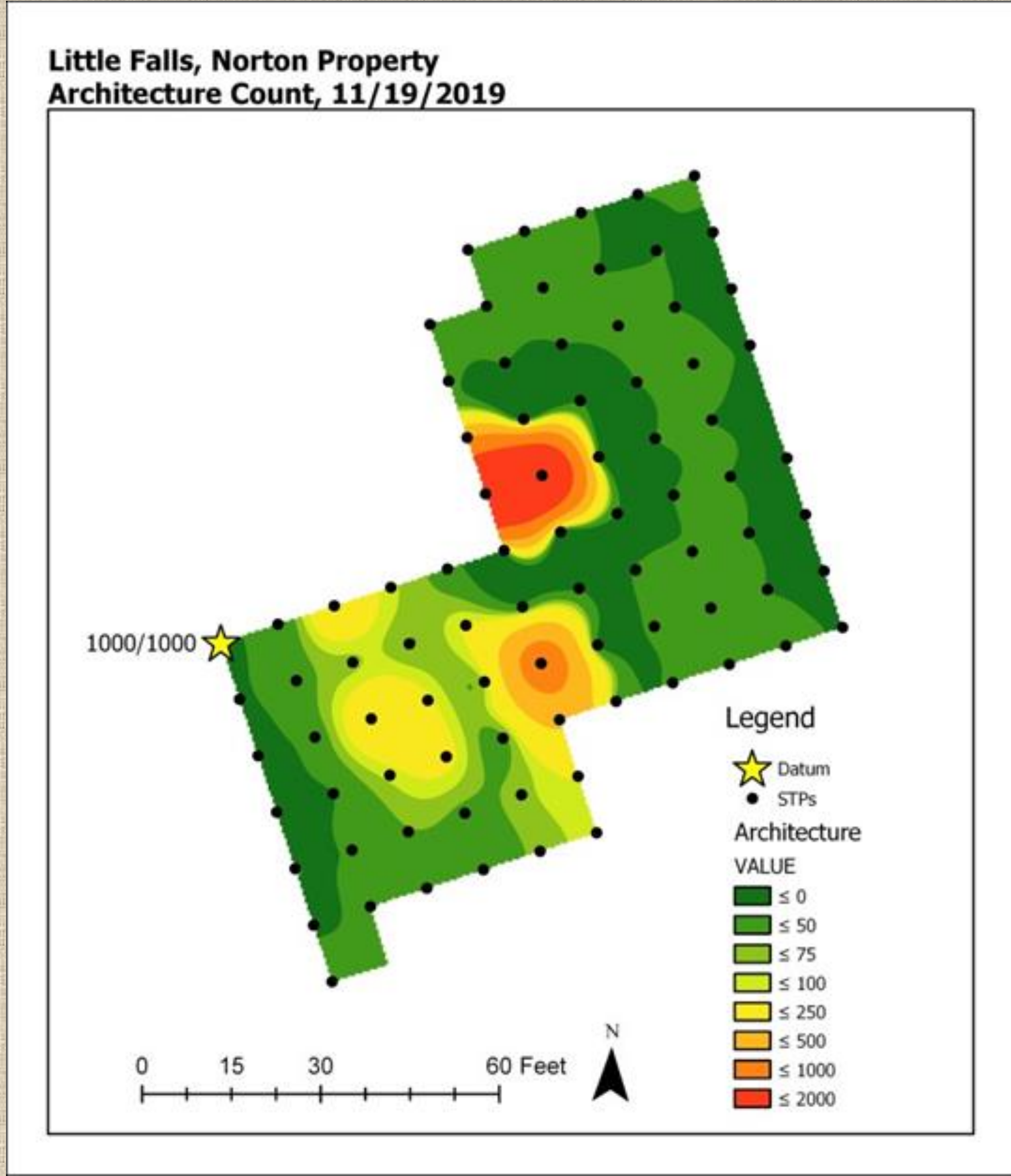


Figure 4: Shovel test pits excavated imposed over a satellite image of the site, created by Delaney Resweber



Figures 5 and 6: Artifact Distribution Maps by Delaney Resweber



Figure 7: Lawrence King holding the newly-excavated coat button, taken 2018 by Dr. McMillan.



Figure 8: Image of Union Army coat button, taken 2019 by Kathleen Keith



Figure 9: Picture of front of shield shaped padlock, taken by Kathleen Keith 2019



Figure 10: Close up X-ray of padlock, showing interior mechanisms. Image courtesy of Dovetail Cultural Resource Group

## Diagnostic Artifacts

One of the most interesting artifacts excavated was a Union Army eagle coat button (Figures 7 and 8). The brass button has a design of an eagle with one claw holding an olive branch and the other claw grasping arrows, referencing the Great Seal of the United States. The button seems to be an infantry button, with the design in use from March 27, 1821 to 1854, but continuing through 1902 for officers. (Albert, 1977:35-40). An 1863 map of troop positions along the Rappahannock indicates that men under the command of Reynolds, Cowan, Ricketts, and Thomason were encamped on the Little Falls property.

The site’s most unique artifact was a shield-shaped iron padlock (Figures 9 and 10). The padlock was heavily rusted, so it was X-rayed by the Maryland Archaeological Conservancy Laboratory. This was made possible by from the Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, who included it in a batch of their artifacts to be X-rayed. The lock is made of iron and is missing a brass keyhole cover. Padlocks of this type date “no earlier than 1840” (Noël Hume, 1969:251).

## Results

Of the 1,591 total artifacts recovered, 75% of the artifacts are architectural, with most of those artifacts consisting of brick by both weight and number (Figure 5). Ceramics make up 8% of the artifacts, 8% are glass, 4% are organic, 3% are metal, 2% are lithics, and the rest are personal effects such as buttons or items that have no clear category (n=4).

Using the 131 ceramics recovered, the unadjusted mean ceramic date calculated is 1898. Once all of the ceramics with over a 100-year manufacturing period are removed (leaving only whiteware with a more specific date from decoration and Victorian Majolica), the adjusted mean ceramic date is 1868. Both of the mean ceramic dates indicate the continued occupation of the site after the Civil War. There are three wire nails and eight cut nails, each still consistent with the proposed mid-nineteenth century time period.

The ceramic analysis further supports that this was a domestic site. Of the 131 ceramic sherds recovered, 79% were tableware, while 17% were utilitarian. The remaining 4% had no identifiable function. Of the ceramic assemblage, 81% were refined earthenware; 14% were stoneware; 4% were coarse earthenware; and 1% was porcelain. The majority of ceramics found on this site were ironstone (n=50), whiteware (n=49), and American Blue and Gray Stoneware (n=14). There were a handful of more rare types such as Victorian Majolica (n=2), yellowware (n=3), Jackfield revival type (n=2), hard paste porcelain (n=1), and some local stoneware and coarse earthenware which are undated (n=10). These more expensive ceramics, such as the majolica and porcelain, probably date to after the Civil War-era occupation.

The largest total concentration of artifacts was found in the southwestern portion of the testing area (Figure 6). These artifacts consisted of ceramics of a variety of types such as tableware and utilitarian wares. This concentration, located along a low area leading to a nearby creek is possibly a sheet midden, where people disposed of their trash. This makes sense, given the swampy conditions of this area of the site, which would make it less desirable for another use.

The largest concentration of architectural artifacts was found to the northeast of the ceramic concentrations (Figure 5). The artifact assemblage in these areas consisted of brick pieces, mortar, daub, nails, and window glass. The high concentration of architectural artifacts in this spot may indicate the physical location of the building, especially when paired with the 1867 map.

## Conclusion

The assemblage data and historical documentation indicate that the area tested was most likely used by enslaved persons (and later tenant farmers), with limited evidence of a brief presence of Union soldiers. Architectural material, combined with the 1867 map, suggests that the area of excavation is near one the of quarters. Additionally, a clarification of property ownership during the 1860’s was established through hours of archival research: that a “Mason” owning the Little Falls property during the period of significance was a clerical error. Hugh Morson was the property owner according to deeds from the Stafford County Courthouse and census data gathered, which showed a large amount of money invested in land holdings in the county. Through additional research, it might be possible to confirm the presence of one or more quarters on the site. Additional research goals for the site should include the chain of title, which is missing owners.

## References

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