

# Cultural Resources



Discovering New Jersey's Transportation Past

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# Digest

Governor Jon S. Corzine

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Commissioner Stephen Dilts

## > location:

vernon township  
sussex county

## > resource types:

archaeological tavern site  
historic house

## > action:

data recovery  
architectural recording



Vernon Township  
Sussex County

The *Cultural Resources Digest*, published by the New Jersey Department of Transportation, summarizes information from professional studies in archaeology, history and historic architecture conducted during the development of transportation projects. Visit us at <http://www.state.nj.us/transportation/works/environment/>

## The Stewart House and the Tompkins Tavern Site: Archaeology in Sussex County



*This undated photograph shows the Stewart House in much quieter times, probably late in the 19th century, when a boy could stand in the road with his bicycle, his dog nearby. N.J. Route 94 is at right, Sand Hill Road is at left. The view is northeast.*

A handsome 19th-century home stands at a busy intersection in the rural hills of Vernon, Sussex County, New Jersey. Traffic speeds past on Route 94 between Hamburg and Vernon (and the New York state line), some of it turning onto, or entering from, Sand Hill Road.

Historians knew from old records that Peter Tompkins had kept a tavern on the corner for at least two years at the end of the 18th century. Because of the obvious age of the house, it was thought to have been the old tavern.

But the house has a secret buried in its side yard. Early in the century before last, when Route 94 was still the Vernon Turnpike, the house was built next door to an even earlier house, one that had probably been built late in the 18th century. It stood between the

surviving house and Sand Hill Road. This had been Peter Tompkins' tavern, and before that it had been owned by a tailor. It was demolished around the middle of the 19th century.

Deeds and tavern licenses told the documentary part of the story, but when the intersection had to be widened, archaeological testing unearthed the physical evidence and brought the rest of the story to light. Archaeologists found much of the tavern's foundation, and discovered that when it was torn down and the cellar filled, a stone garden wall had been built on top of the old foundation.

Ultimately a more expansive archaeological excavation was carried out to more fully understand the site. The house, although untouched by the road project, was recorded in measured drawings and photographs.



*The Stewart House in 2006. The view is northwest [Source: Hunter Research, Inc. 2006].*

The house known today as the Stewart House, at the northeast corner of Sand Hill Road and N.J. Route 94 in Vernon, Sussex County, has long intrigued historians. Clearly it is of great age, but exactly when it was built has always been something of a mystery. Historic documents, maps, deeds and family genealogies provided some clues, but there was no substantial evidence linking construction of the house to a particular date or person. Since the corner was owned by Peter Tompkins from 1799 to 1807, and Tompkins was issued tavern licenses in 1799 and 1800, it was assumed that this house had once been Tompkins' tavern.

When the intersection was slated for improvement to meet the needs of modern automobile traffic, routine archaeological testing in the small side yard between the house and Sand Hill Road yielded prehistoric and historic artifacts, but there was more to the story: the remains of a stone foundation and a cellar filled with rubble were also found. The historic artifacts, both in the cellar and in the area between it and the Stewart House, were domestic in character and dated from about the 1790s to the 1830s. Accordingly, in the summer of 2006, expanded archaeological excavation was undertaken to better understand the site and to retrieve any information that would be lost to the road project. Further historical research was conducted in parallel with the excavation to amplify what was known about the property, and the Stewart House was also recorded photographically and by measured drawings to capture it in its setting as it existed before the intersection project.

### Property History

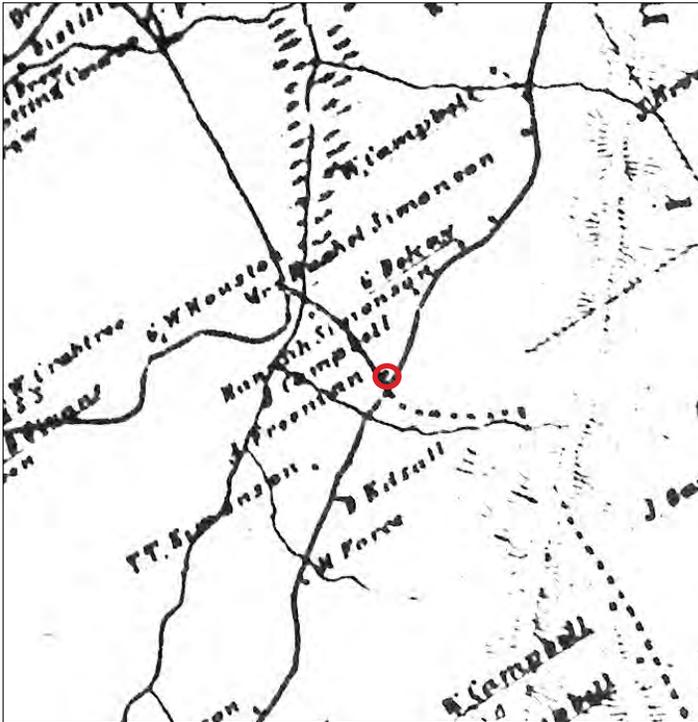
The first known reference to the location of the Stewart House in the historical record was in 1773. In that year Sand Hill Road was surveyed, and while other buildings near the intersection with "ye Old Road" (today's Route 94) were named, nothing was noted on this site.

The land on which the house presently stands was the subject of a sale in 1796 when James Ensign, a tailor, conveyed two parcels together totaling 44.69 acres to Uzal Tompkins (1747-1831), a carpenter from Morristown. The deed included language conveying all houses, barns, stables and other structures on the property, but without specifying them in any greater detail.

"...by the Main Road leading from Hamburg to New Windsor."

In December of 1799 Uzal Tompkins sold the property to his son Peter (1772-1836) for £3 less than he had paid. The fact that there was so little change in the price implies that Uzal had not made significant improvements during his almost four-year tenure.

There was certainly a building on the site in August of 1799 when Peter Tompkins petitioned Sussex County for a tavern license. He renewed his petition the following August, and unlike the previous year, this petition included the statement that he lived "...by the Main Road leading from Hamburg to New Windsor." Tompkins obtained no other tavern licenses except these two.



The Hopkins map of Sussex County in 1860. The Stewart House, marked as “A. Freeman,” is circled in red.

Peter Tompkins and his wife Sarah sold the property and an additional 10 acres to Nathan Tompkins, Peter’s uncle, in 1807. The value of the property had increased by more than 140% in less than seven years. The reason for the rapid increase in value can only be guessed at, but it may indicate that the building housed a going concern.

Nathan Tompkins (1757-1823), a Revolutionary War veteran born in Morristown, owned and lived on the property for the rest of his life. During his tenure he enlarged the property by purchasing 24.16 acres from Francis Walling in 1810. Upon his death it passed to his son Isaac, born in 1791.

After Isaac Tompkins inherited the property from his father in 1823 he retained ownership until selling it to Jesse Trusdell in 1844. Trusdell owned it for six years, during which time his son Warren was born. Jesse Trusdell sold it in 1850 to Amos Freeman, and it is this name that appears on the county map of 1860.

Amos Freeman mortgaged more than half the price of the property, and in 1873 it was sold at a sheriff’s sale due to Freeman’s default. William Campbell was the high bidder and the property would not be sold again for more than 100 years.

William Campbell was one of Vernon’s major land-owners in the late 19th century, as well as the holder of numerous public offices, including those of Freeholder and Justice of the Peace. Campbell owned several farms that he leased to tenants, and it is believed that the Tompkins Farm was used in this fashion. For the next quarter century, until Campbell’s death in 1896, the farm is believed to have been occupied by tenants, of whom nothing is known.

At William Campbell’s death in 1896 the property passed to his daughter Anna Trusdell, wife of Warren N. Trusdell and therefore the daughter-in-law of Jesse Trusdell. Anna Campbell Trusdell conveyed the property to her daughter Anna T. Stewart to be held in trust for the Trusdells’ grandson, Warren T. Stewart, in 1909 (hence the present name of the house). Stewart came of age in 1919 and at that point took possession of the house and other properties.

Warren T. Stewart lived on the property until his death on the last day of 1978, and his heirs sold it to the Vernon Valley Recreation Association in 1981. It had been in his family since his great-grandfather William Campbell purchased it in 1873. Today it is used as offices.

### **Historical Archaeology**

Historical archaeology is the study of past human activity in the era of written records. While artifacts can tell the story of past cultures, historical documents (and folklore) combined with archaeological research together yield a richer, more nuanced perspective on the past.

Archaeological data and documents complement each other. For instance, a census return may supply the one-dimensional fact that a mill worker and his family lived in a row house in Paterson in the middle of the 19th century; analysis of the items they discarded in their backyard could reveal what kind of tableware they used, what kinds and cuts of meats they ate, what patent medicines they used, and what kinds of toys their children played with.

Likewise, historical archaeology can help fill gaps in historical records. While the exploits of political and military leaders are generally well-documented, the lives of the people who raised their food, prepared their meals, and shod their horses are seldom the subjects of glowing biographies. Information recovered archaeologically from farmsteads, workers’ housing, and blacksmith shops, for instance, can help to answer questions about the class, gender and ethnicity of other persons alive at the same time as the “famous man.”

## Archaeological Excavations

By the beginning of the 21st century, traffic through the Sand Hill Road intersection and on Route 94 generally had increased to the point where the intersection had to be enlarged to meet modern standards. Both roads were to be widened, on both sides, which meant that the new pavement would be closer to both the front and side of the Stewart House. A study was undertaken in 2005 by the A.D. Marble Company to determine if any significant cultural resources would be affected by the project, either archaeological or architectural.

The study located two archaeological sites and evaluated four potential historic architectural resources that might be affected. A Native American site was found on the west side of Sand Hill Road, and the proposed project was modified to avoid it. The second archaeological site was the site between the Stewart House and Sand Hill Road, where a foundation wall believed to date from the 1790s was found, as were domestic artifacts dating from the 1790s to the 1830s. Of the four architectural resources, only the Stewart House was determined to be significant; it was found to be "...a good local example of a large residence that embodies the characteristics of several vernacular styles spanning over time from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries."

Even though one archaeological site had been saved by redesigning the project, at least part of the second site could not be avoided. Because the highway project would obliterate the archaeological remains that had

initially been detected in the side yard and would alter the setting of the Stewart House, a series of mitigating activities was designed, consisting of three parts: archaeological data recovery to learn as much as possible from the fragmentary remains found in the side yard; additional historical research into the history of the Stewart House; and recording of the house in its pre-project context by means of large-format photographs and measured drawings. The mitigation took place in the summer of 2006.

The research design for the archaeological data recovery had several goals, starting with the mundane: Was this foundation and cellar really the remains of the Tompkins Tavern? What were its dimensions? How would the artifacts at this site compare with those recovered from known tavern sites of comparable age in the region? Would the artifacts reflect this site's location on a 19th-century turnpike, providing comparatively easy access to major trading cities such as New York? How would they compare with other house sites in the region of about the same age that have previously been archaeologically excavated?

Data recovery was carried out over a five-week period in July and August of 2006. Twenty five *excavation units*, each measuring five feet by five feet at the surface, were hand-dug by archaeologists armed with shovels and trowels; 12 of the units were in a single north-south row, forming a continuous trench five feet wide and 60 feet long. The main purpose of this trench was to examine in greater detail the cellar and the foundation walls discovered the previous year, and to pro-

### *Archaeological Data Recovery*

Depending on the size and significance of an archaeological site, and the extent of foreseeable disturbance, a carefully planned program of data recovery may be the preferred treatment for offsetting the effects of a project such as a highway intersection improvement. Since data recovery by definition destroys the site (and with it, the context of the artifacts), it is usually reserved for instances where destruction of the site is unavoidable.

The process begins with preparation of a research design, posing questions the excavation should aim to answer. These may pertain to, as examples, the lifeways of the site's inhabitants, the nature of certain industrial or agricultural processes which took place there, or changes in the use of the site through time. Next, based on archival research and survey data (and, if necessary, the presence of hazardous materials), decisions are made as to how much of the site must be excavated in order to answer these questions; only rarely is an entire site excavated. The proposed locations or area of larger excavations are laid out, and the excavation proceeds.

As in other archaeological studies, soils, buried remains and key artifacts are exposed, photographed and mapped horizontally and vertically. Artifacts and samples of soils and other materials are taken to the laboratory for cataloguing, processing and (ultimately) long-term storage in a suitable repository. The archaeological team prepares a report of the study which, since it will be the only record of the site, is much more detailed than would result from a less complex archaeological survey. Typically the reports are generously illustrated and include chapters on background research, the testing phase, the research design, and the findings (including a full artifact catalog). Findings can also be reported in less-traditional media, such as a video production, school curriculum, posters or exhibits.

vide a north-south cross section through the building. Additional excavation units were placed around the site to establish the east-west dimensions of the building, if possible, and to relate the structure stratigraphically to the surrounding soils.

The site was tightly constrained and contained several obstacles, all of which detracted from what would have been the “ideal” site layout. First, the site abutted (and had in fact been truncated by) Sand Hill Road on the west; not only was the integrity of the site affected but traffic turning right from Route 94 onto Sand Hill Road posed a constant hazard to the archaeologists (and it was for this reason that the public had to be excluded from the site). Bright orange traffic drums provided by NJDOT were placed along the edge of the site every morning and stored every evening, and everyone wore orange safety vests, just as at a highway construction project. Second, the Stewart House was apparently atop part of the eastern portion of the site. If this weren’t enough, two large trees and a telephone pole (and its supporting guy wire) were located within the site and had to be avoided.

The major structural features within the foundation (and the foundation itself) were assigned to either the construction phase of the building or the demolition. Remnants of the construction phase included parts of the south, north and west walls and the beaten earth floor of the cellar. The southwestern corner of the foundation was located, but the northwestern corner was not—it is apparently now beneath Sand Hill Road. However, from the surviving walls it was learned that the building had been about 25 feet by at least 17 feet.

The demolition phase was reflected by the contents of the cellar which was found to contain a three-foot-deep layer of loose medium to large cobbles and cut stones similar to those in the foundation walls.

A low, loosely-built stone wall was found on top of the south foundation wall, built of stones unlike those used in the foundation and aligned not with the foundation wall but with the south wall of the Stewart House. This was determined to have been a landscaping feature, built after the tavern was demolished in order to define the side yard of the house. Like the foundation and the fill in the cellar, this was covered by a later grading episode that contained brick fragments and other construction debris.

## Artifacts

A total of 3,920 historic artifacts (and 438 prehistoric artifacts) were found at the site. Nearly half of the historic artifacts were ceramics, 28% were building materials and another 14% were glass vessel fragments. Unfortunately the vast majority of the historic-period artifacts were recovered from the grading deposit atop the cellar fill and the foundation walls, and therefore of little assistance in unraveling the dates of the building’s construction and demolition. However, taken as a whole, the historic artifacts display a date range of 1775 to 1895, with a concentration in the period *circa* 1800 to 1850. Ceramics found at the cellar floor indicate a period of use between *circa* 1775 and 1840. The cellar fill yielded ceramics from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but fragments of whiteware suggest the cellar was filled (and therefore the building demolished) in the 1840-1860 period.

Among the artifacts that may correlate with what was known about the building from historical research were 15 buttons, a thimble, a straight pin, part of a scissor blade, four different styles of clear glass tumblers, forks, a large cast pewter serving spoon (datable to the second half of the 18th century) and a fragment of a cast iron kettle. The nature of the historic artifacts was overwhelmingly domestic, although not entirely inconsistent with the building’s episodic use as a tavern.



Assorted late 18th- and 19th-century artifacts recovered from the excavations in 2006: a belt buckle, buttons, a coin, two slate pencil fragments, a scissor blade, a thimble, a brass pin, a pocket watch plate and a harmonica part [Source: Hunter Research, Inc. 2006].



Assorted food-related items recovered from the excavations in 2006: a pewter serving spoon, three forks, a utensil handle, a kettle fragment, a pig tusk and a sheep rib fragment [Source: Hunter Research, Inc. 2006].

### Architectural History of the Stewart House

The style of the house suggests that it may have been constructed during Nathan Tompkins' ownership (1807-1823). Its proportions point to three major construction periods. The original house would have been a three-bay wide, two-bay deep side hall house consisting of the easternmost three bays and the two bays closest to Route 94. To this was added the western fourth bay, closest to Sand Hill Road. Finally, the major extension to the rear was added last. Taken as an isolated unit, the stylistic attributes of the three-bay block would fit neatly into the 1807-1823 period due to its plan, massing and the spacing and proportions of its windows. In this regard it may be relevant that what is now Route 94 became part of the Vernon Turnpike in 1811, bringing increased prosperity to landowners along its route due to improved access to markets. According to local historian Ronald Dupont, Jr. writing in *About Vernon* (see *For More Information* on back page), a result of this was that "[t]he small frontier houses [along Vernon's turnpikes] ... were replaced by fine, large farmhouses with many rooms and ornate detail." The original block of the house may, therefore have been built between 1811 and 1823.

Since the property was in all likelihood operated as a rental from 1873 to 1896, it is hypothesized that the fourth (western) bay was added prior to 1873. On the basis of available information it is impossible to assign a narrower date range (or a particular date) for this construction episode with any confidence. However, one scenario that is not contradicted by any known facts would have Amos Freeman demolishing the old tavern on the corner, filling the cellar hole and extending the house by one bay at some point during his ownership (1850 to 1873), although it is equally plausible that these actions were carried out during Jesse Trusdell's ownership (1844 to 1850).

Although the Trusdells were natives of Vernon, they lived in Newark and used the Tompkins Farm as a second home. They also quite clearly were responsible for the large rear addition to the house, terminating in an almost "bungaloid" rear elevation, evocative of early 20th-century design. When Warren N. Trusdell died in 1917, his obituary in the *Sussex Register* identified him as "... owner of the beautiful country estate, 'Willow Tree Farm,' in Vernon..." and noted that he had "... remodeled and beautified it about ten years ago to enjoy as a resting place in his old age, it having been the family homestead and his birthplace". This chronology, if correct, places the erection of the addition in the first decade of the 20th century, about two years before the Trusdells conveyed the house to their grandson's trust. Another source notes that during the Trusdells' ownership, "... a number of elegant, rustic outbuildings were constructed on the property—pergolas, summer houses, and log cabins."

### Recording the House

Besides the archaeological excavation, there were two other parts of the project: Photographing the house and preparing a set of *measured drawings*. Large-format black and white photographs were taken of all sides of the house to accurately record it in its setting as it looked before the intersection was enlarged. These were processed to meet the archival standards of the Historic American Buildings Survey and were also stored digitally. Copies of the photographs were provided to the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office and to local historical organizations.

While photographs capture the appearance of the building and its relationship to its environment, they do not always clearly depict architectural details, they can distort the relative sizes of objects depending on their distance from the camera and are subject to obstruction by trees and other objects. Measured drawings overcome these problems. While the archaeological excavations were in progress, a two-man team measured every element of each elevation of the building – including features such as the height of the chimneys above the roof – and recorded the results on sketches of the four elevations and selected details. Back in the office, the information on the sketches was inked onto Mylar sheets, and the result is a set of drawings similar to architects’ drawings. Mylar copies of the complete set were provided to the same repositories that received the photographs.

### ***What is Architectural Recording?***

Architectural recording combines historical research, large-format photography and measured drawings to collect and preserve important information about a historic structure. A “structure” might be a building, a work of engineering such as a bridge or a canal lock, or even a movable object like a ship or a locomotive. The resulting report, photographs and/or drawings are preserved in archives, libraries or museums, where they can be valuable research tools for those interested in our past.

The amount of detail in the recording usually depends on how important the structure is historically and the amount of information available. For instance, if the original construction plans have survived, they might be photographically reproduced instead of creating new plans.

Often, structures are recorded if they are going to be demolished or severely altered. The reports and photographs therefore are the only permanent archive of information about the structure, so the recording has to be compiled as thoroughly and accurately as possible.



*The east elevation of the Stewart House, as recorded by architectural historians in 2006 [Hunter Research, Inc. 2006].*

**Project:** Intersection Improvements at N.J. Route 94 and Sand Hill Road  
**Location:** Vernon Township, Sussex County  
**Date:** 2005; 2006  
**Consultant:** A.D. Marble & Company, 375 East Elm Street, Suite 200, Conshohocken, PA 19428.  
 Hunter Research, Inc., 120 West State Street, Trenton, NJ 08608.

**For More Information...**

A.D. Marble & Company

2005 Cultural Resources Survey: Route 94 and Sand Hill Road Intersection Improvement Project. On file, NJ Department of Transportation, Bureau of Environmental Services, Trenton, New Jersey.

Dupont, Ronald, Jr.

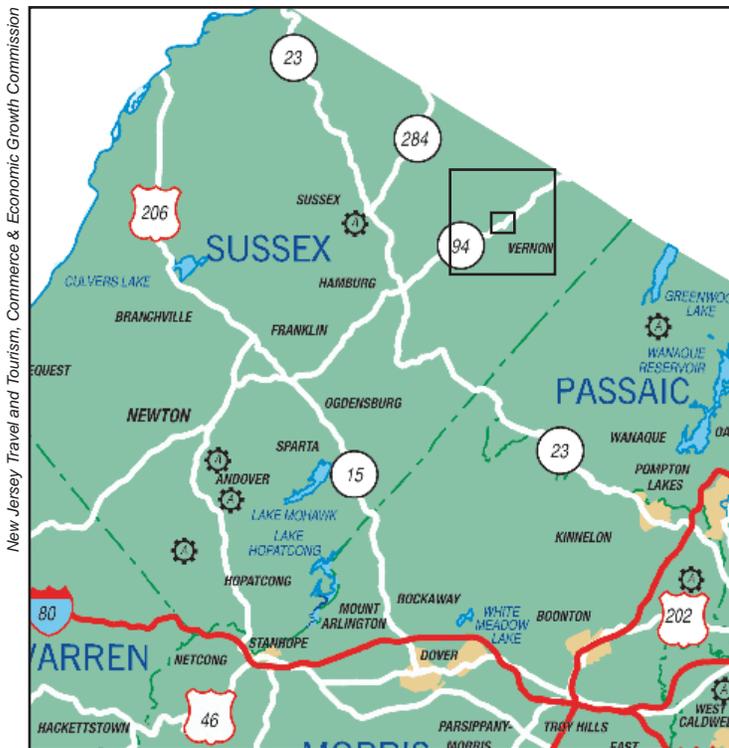
n.d. A New Chapter for the Stewart House. *The Vernon Stories of Jacobus Van Brug*. <http://www.vernonstories.com>, [accessed July 8, 2009].

n.d. An Historical Overview. *About Vernon*. <http://www.vernonchamber.com/ourtown.htm>, [accessed July 8, 2009].

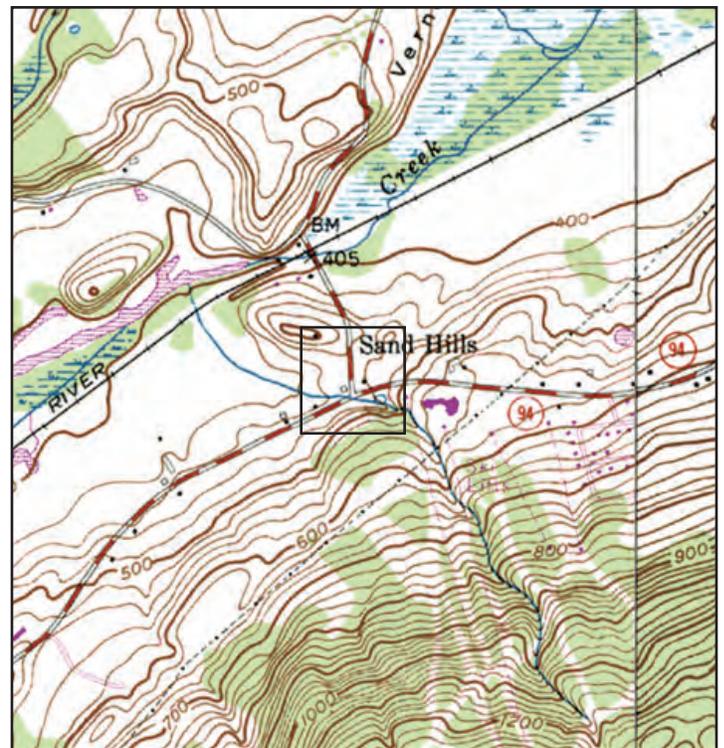
Hunter Research, Inc.

2008 Archaeological and Architectural Mitigation at the Tompkins Dwelling/Tavern Site and the Stewart House, Vernon Township, Sussex County, New Jersey. On file, NJ Department of Transportation, Bureau of Environmental Services, Trenton, New Jersey.

*Additional information on transportation projects and historic preservation is available from the Division of Environmental Resources, New Jersey Department of Transportation (<http://www.state.nj.us/transportation/works/environment/overview.htm>), the Federal Highway Administration (<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/archaeology/index.htm>), the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office (<http://www.state.nj.us/dep/hpo/2protection/njrreview.htm>), and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (<http://www.achp.gov/work106.html>).*



*Project vicinity map*



*Area of detail*