

*Secrets of Soapsuds Row:*  
Preliminary Results of  
Exploratory Archaeological  
Excavation of Laundress Housing  
at Old Fort Meade

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2022 West River History  
Conference



## Bear Butte Creek Historic Preservation Council

- Protect natural & historic resources
- Public education & recreation
- Protect local natural habitat



# Collaborative Effort



14,000  
to years  
ago to  
present

- Native American occupation

Ca.  
1800

- First non-Natives enter the Black Hills for exploration and trade

1857

- Lakota and allied Indian nations council at Bear Butte over defending the Black Hills from white intruders

1868

- Fort Laramie Treaty reserves western Dakota for the Lakota and their allies

1874

- Black Hills Expedition

1876

- Northern Black Hills gold rush

1878

- Fort Meade built and garrisoned

1878

- Army terminates laundress program

1880

- Census shows 148 civilians on post, incl 2 laundresses

1883

- Army stops rations to laundresses

1889

- Maps of Ft. Meade show a constructed laundry facility SE of parade ground. New civilian housing built on post.



1890

- Wounded Knee Massacre

1891-  
93

- All-Lakota units at Fort Meade

1900

- Census shows 103 civilians at Fort Meade, incl. 1 “laundress” and 5 Chinese “laundrymen”

1905

- Maps show 13 houses on Soapsuds Row

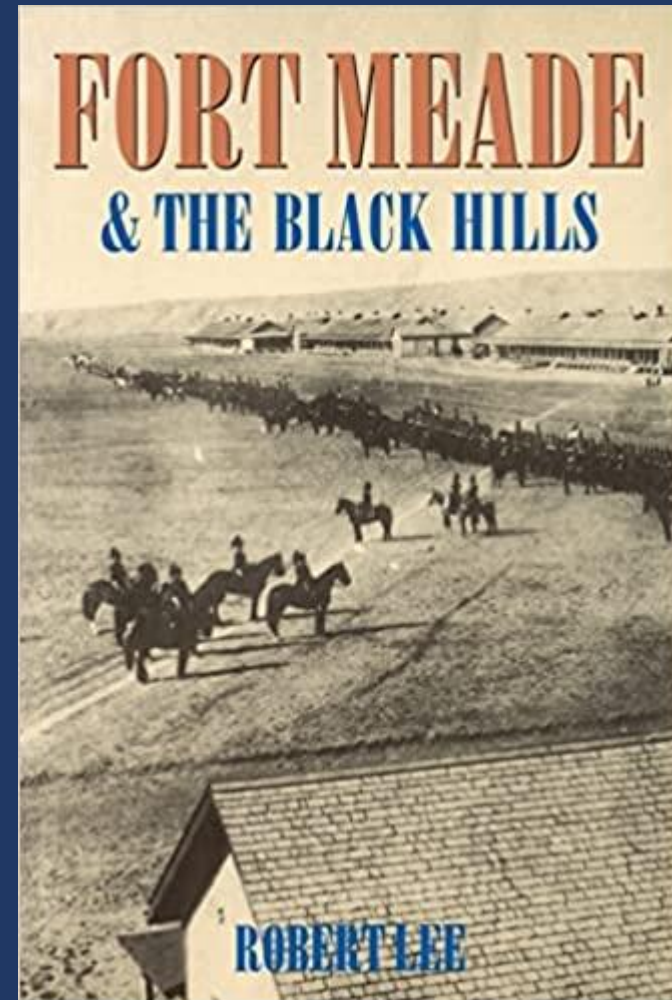
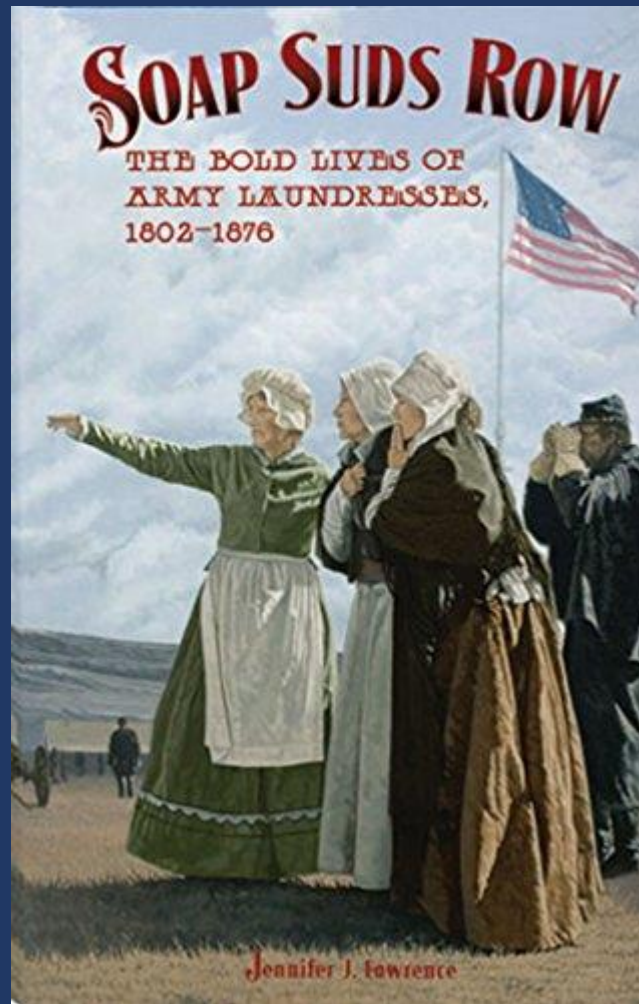
Ca.  
1910

- Maps show continued use of housing on Soapsuds Row

1926-  
1929

- Maps indicate abandonment of most housing on Soapsuds Row; 1929 maps shows no houses remaining





# Lives of Army Laundresses 1870 – 1920

Most were wives of enlisted men

Lived in tents, sheds, or cabins built by their husbands

In the military until 1878

Received military rations until 1883

After 1878 allowed to live and work on base if commanding officer approved

Often earned more than enlisted men

Subject to abandonment by husbands

Often doubled as midwives or nurses



# The Work



Render tallow and lye

Make soaps of various strengths

Make starch of various strengths

Mark laundry with owner's mark or initials

Sort woolens from cotton and linen; colors from whites

Fill wash tubs

Gather wood for fires

Treat any stains; mend tears, and replace missing buttons

Soak in cold, then warm water

Scrub whites in stronger lye soap; boil; add bluing; rinse; wring; hang up to dry

Scrub woolens in milder lye soap; wash in warm water; rinse; hang up to dry

Starch various items with appropriate starch mixture

Iron everything when nearly dry

# Research Objective

Assess the archaeological potential of a portion of the BBHPC lease land

- Are intact ca. 1878 to 1910 deposits present?
- What is the extent of fort-related archaeological remains?
- What is the depth of culture-bearing sediment?
- Are intact pre-contact (pre-fort) deposits present? What is their depth and horizontal extent?
- Has the site been looted or otherwise disturbed? To what extent?





# Research Questions re Soapsuds Row

1. What, if anything, remains of the old Soapsuds Row?
2. Where were the laundress houses and outbuildings?
3. What were the houses made of?
4. Which ages, sexes, and ethnic groups were present at Soapsuds Row?
5. What activities took place at Soapsuds Row? Were the laundresses “ladies in every sense of the word” or catering to soldiers’ vices?
6. What was the economic status of those living along Soapsuds Row?



National Park Service

# Research Plan

1. Assess existing historic and archaeological records
2. Reconstruct landscape history
3. Clean cutbank to view subsurface to look for buried surfaces
4. Map surface features
5. Metal detect a sample of the site area
6. Excavate two surface features: possible privy and possible house





First things first: safe handling  
of unexploded ordnance:  
target range and grenade court



Logan Lamphere





# Heat & Haze



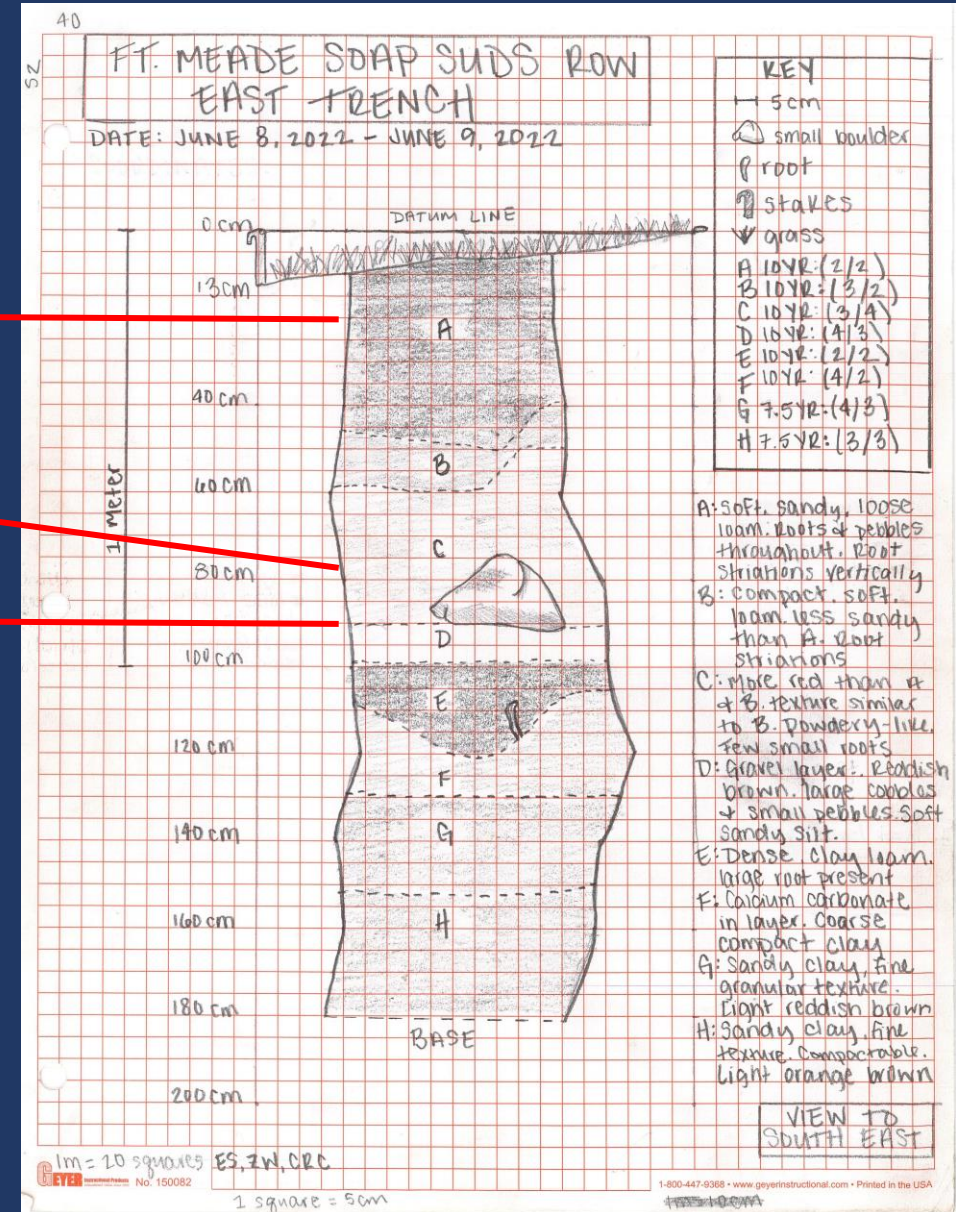


Scratched the surface...

Log structure: house?

Privy

Soap-making feature





Still processing the artifacts...

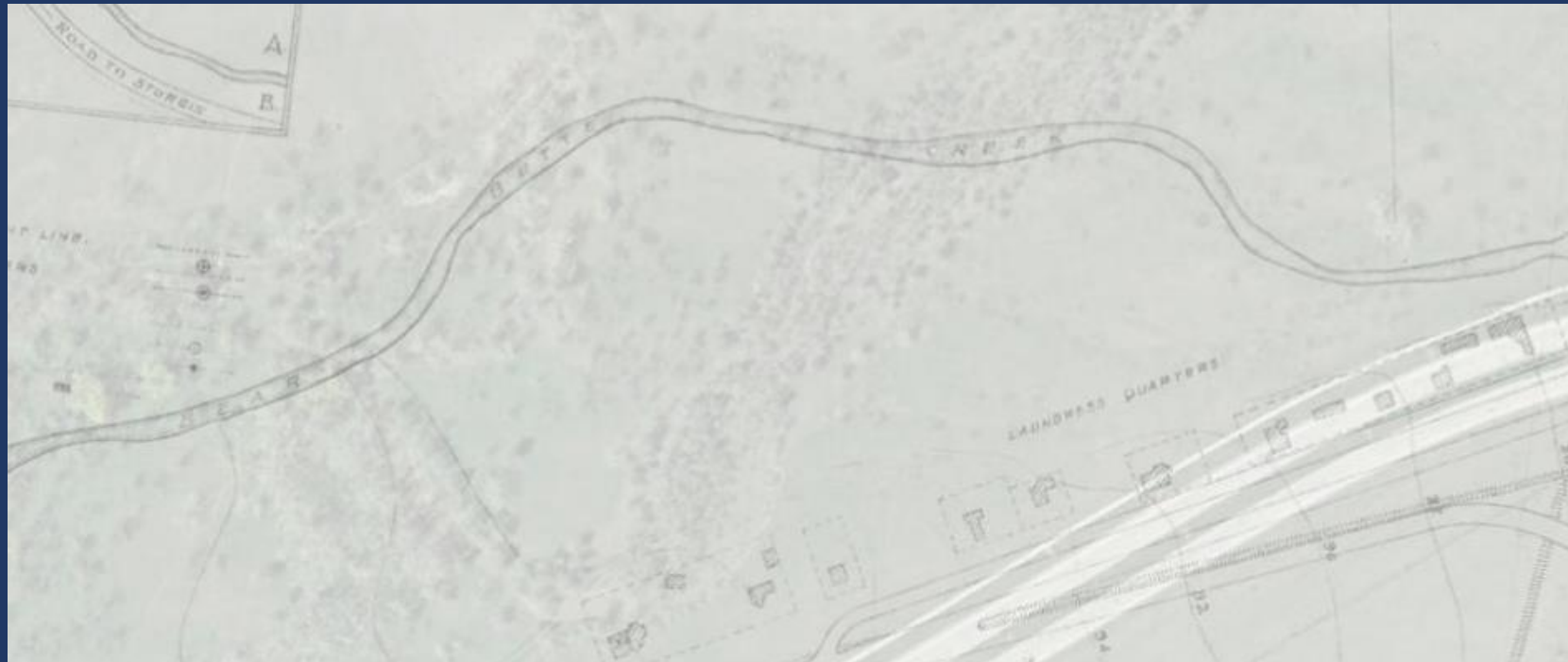






## Results Part 2: Landscape History

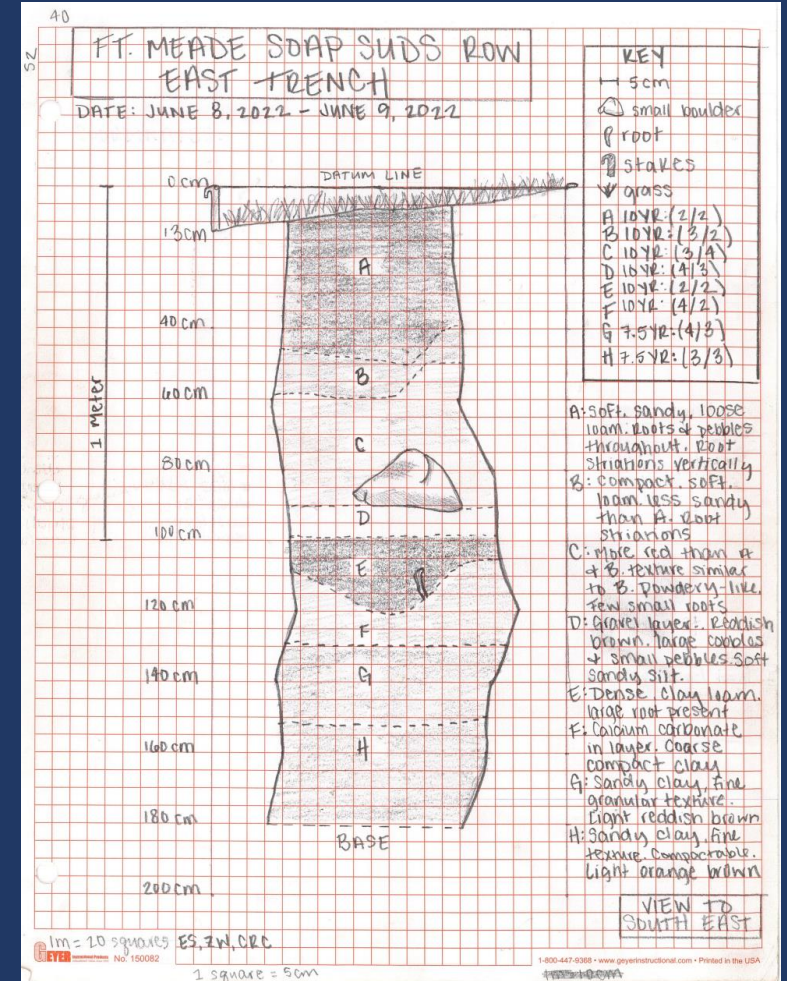
- Complex history of flood events and stream meanders
- Stream course has shifted over the last 120 years
- Heavy use for military activities and road building—removed some deposits





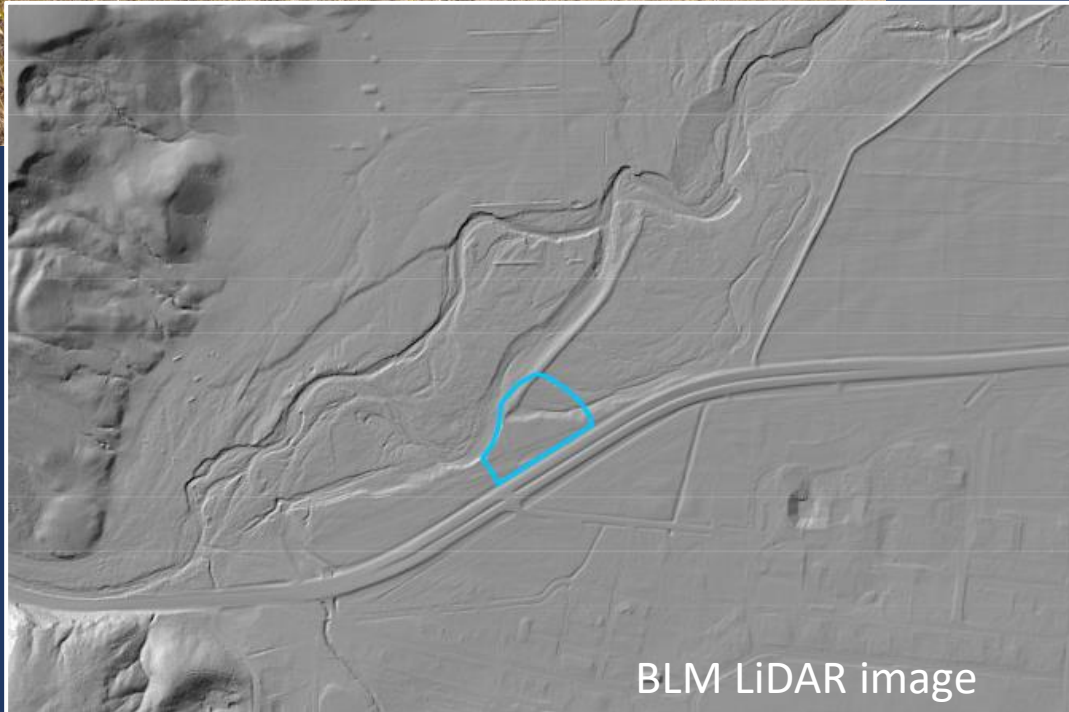
# Results Part 3: Buried Surfaces

Well-developed surface soil  
Very large buried soil about 3 feet down



A: soft sandy, loose loam. roots & pebbles throughout. root striations vertically  
B: compact soft loam less sandy than A. root striations  
C: more red than A & B. texture similar to B. powdery-like. few small roots  
D: gravel layer. reddish brown. large cobbles & small pebbles. soft sandy silt.  
E: dense clay loam. large root present  
F: calcium carbonate in layer. coarse compact clay  
G: sandy clay. fine granular texture. light reddish brown  
H: sandy clay. fine texture. compactable. light orange brown





## Results Part 4: Surface Features

- Surface survey
- LiDAR
- Satellite, drone, and false-color vegetation imaging
- Mapped 15 features
- Fort-era, pre-contact Native American, unknown



## Results Part 5: Metal Detector Survey

- Mapped 560 metal detector hits in mowed transects across the site
- Some patterning to distribution



## Results Part 6: Excavation of privy

- Possible laundress-related items, such as pins, needles, clothes pin spring, wash basin, slate & chalk
- Other items: beer bottles, buttons, dishes, shoes, bricks, nails
- Not much army-related material
- Datable items: 1866-1905
- No evidence of looting; only top portion of pit was excavated



## Results Part 6: Excavation of privy

- Many manufactured items
- Many kinds of cut nails
- Items shipped from St. Louis




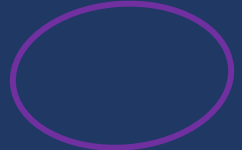


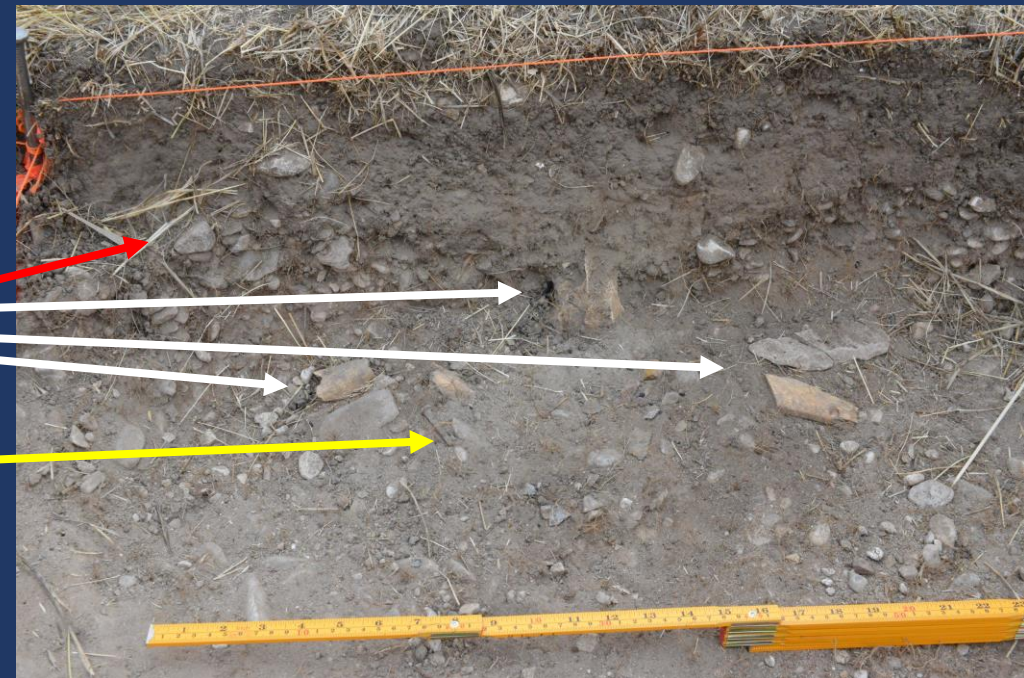




Bonus Result:  
Possible soap-making feature

Intersected by privy pit  
Gravel, ash, burned earth, cut animal  
bone, line of unknown effluent, tin cans  
repurposed as pitcher?

-  Cut Bone
-  Gravel
-  Ash
-  Unknown Substance





# Results Part 7: Excavation of Possible House Depression

Not much domestic debris

Bottle, stoneware, buttons, wood, charcoal

A few Native American chipped-stone artifacts

Probable log house wall with beer bottle and horseshoe adjacent





## Some surprises:

- Metallic thread
- Sinew
- Knapped bottle bottom
- Lack of toys
- Not many military items



## General Questions:

1. Are intact ca. 1878 to 1910 deposits present? **Yes!**
2. What is the extent of fort-related archaeological remains?

**Undetermined, but considerable.**

3. What is the depth of culture-bearing sediment?

**Undetermined, but possibly >2 meters.**







4. Are intact pre-contact (pre-fort) deposits present? What is their depth and horizontal extent? **Undetermined, but some chipped stone artifacts were found near the surface, probably indicating little vertical separation of fort and pre-contact materials.**
5. Has the site been looted or otherwise disturbed? To what extent? **Yes, but large portions are intact and undisturbed.**

# Research Questions re Soapsuds Row

What, if anything, remains of the old Soapsuds Row?

About 1/3 of the original Soapsuds Row appears to be intact.





Where were the laundress houses and outbuildings?

The laundress houses and outbuildings that remain are well away from the other post buildings and near, but not adjacent to, water.





What were the houses made of?

At least one building was made of logs.



Which ages, sexes, and ethnic groups were present at Soapsuds Row?

- No definite evidence of infants or children.
- Likely woman's shoe, decorative hair comb fragment, perfume bottle stopper, and decorative button.
- Man's shoe.
- A piece of sinew and some chipped stone and chipped glass items suggest presence of older-generation Native Americans.





What activities took place at Soapsuds Row? Were the laundresses “ladies in every sense of the word” or catering to soldiers’ vices?

- Rendering tallow and lye for soap
- Consuming meat, wild fruit, beer
- Shoe repair?
- Some, but not many, champagne bottles; several beer bottles; no other liquor bottles; no other markers of “vice.”
- One medicine bottle
- Tobacco tag



## What was the economic status of those living along Soapsuds Row?

- No luxury goods, apart from a perfume bottle stopper.
- Ironstone and porcelain dishes suggest higher economic status, but most ceramics are utilitarian whiteware.
- Nails from packing crates suggest repurposing of crates for furniture.
- Log structure suggests limited resources.
- Apart from the perfume stopper and maybe the nails, all imported goods were from St. Louis.





Many questions remain, but we are starting to let Annie Franklin's story be heard.





27 Volunteers  
706 hours donated





*Special thanks to:*

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South Dakota Archaeological Society

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Dr. Glen Fredlund

Old Fort Meade Museum

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