

# PHASE 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF NOVA CONSTANTIA

Prepared for

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Prepared by

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Archaeology Contracts Office of the University of Cape Town was commissioned by Margie Walsh & Associates Architects to conduct a Phase 1 archaeological investigation at the property known as Nova Constantia, Nova Constantia Road, Constantia. The client required that a specified area at the rear of the south east wing (Figure 1) of the main house be excavated to establish the presence of any sub-surface features or other archaeological deposits before alterations are planned. Archival research was not requested. The findings of the investigation are presented in following pages.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

Nova Constantia was originally part of the farm "Berg Vliet" until it was deducted in 1793. The house was thought to have been built at this time, but according to Fransen and Cook, the joinery displays a number of early Georgian features, possibly indicating a period of early alteration. The front gable is neoclassical and bears affinities to the work of Thibault (Plate 1). The present layout of the house is a narrow "U" but the back wings are of unequal length - the short south east wing having a half-hipped end (Plate 2).<sup>1</sup>

In 1972 the property was restored by Munnik, Visser, Black and Fish Architects to its present condition. During the course of the restorations a Victorian verandah with a curvilinear canopy was removed from the front thus exposing the full extent of the gable and original stoep. A Victorian structure appended to the rear of the south east wing was also demolished revealing the rear aspect of the half-hipped southern wing. The property was declared a National Monument in 1973 after completion of the restoration.

## **3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION**

Before commencement of the excavations, we proposed that three possible archaeological scenarios could exist in the area to the rear of the south east wing:

1. The fact that the two wings of house are asymmetrical has led to speculation as to whether the south east wing was shortened at an unknown time in the past. If so, this would have involved dismantling of possibly a gabled end and agterkamer. If such structures did exist, it is likely that their footings and foundations would lie undisturbed beneath the existing surface.

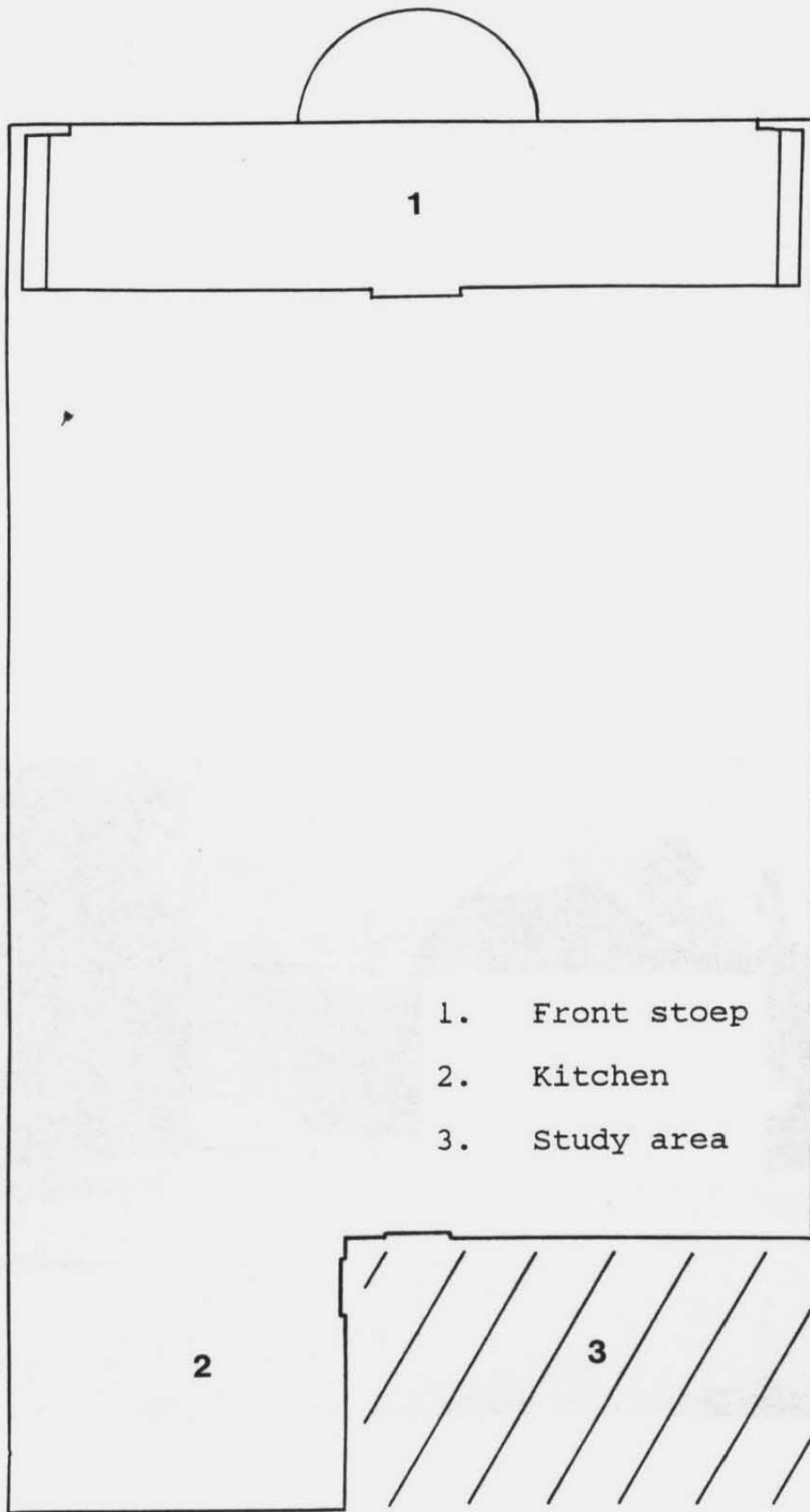
2. The rear-most room of the of the north west wing is the kitchen. If the area to the rear of the south east wing had been open ground since the earliest days of Nova Constantia, there is a likelihood that household debris would have been discarded at this point which is an easy "toss" distance from the kitchen door. Middens that accumulate in this fashion are a valuable source of information about details of peoples past lives.

3. The final option is that the area to the rear of the south east wing is not sensitive in that it may not have been used as a discard area or contain early foundations.

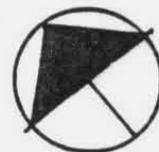
Archaeological excavations were conducted in such as way as to "test" the proposed scenarios, and provide an explanation of the finds.

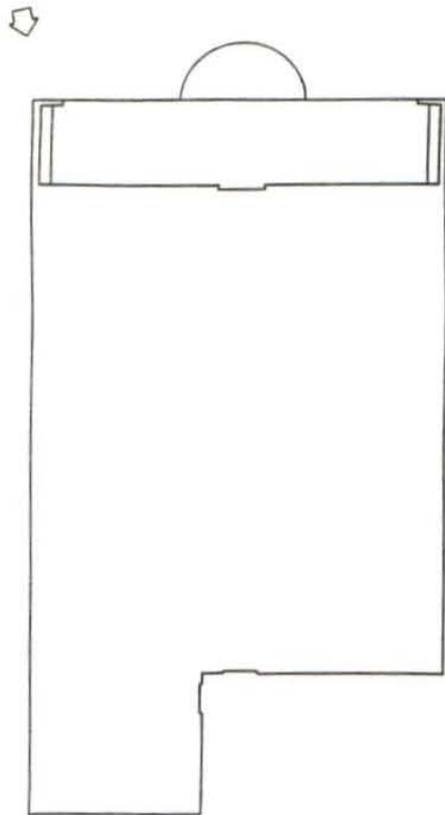
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<sup>1</sup> Fransen, H. and Cook, M. 1980. The Old Buildings of the Cape. Cape Town: AA Balkema.

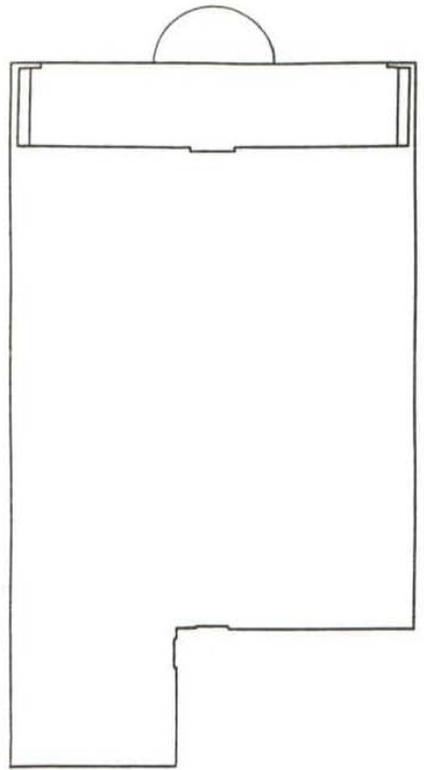


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### **3.1 Excavations**

Three trenches (A, B and C) were excavated behind the south east wing. The first of these (A) was initially positioned to check for an extension to the south east wall of the main house (Figure 2).

#### **3.1.1 Trench A**

After brick paving was lifted, the initial excavation of 1.5m<sup>2</sup> was sunk using stratigraphic techniques. Upon removal of the paving the foundation of the Victorian extension (demolished in 1972) was located. This foundation, which did not penetrate far below the existing surface, consisted of a single layer of bricks resting on a cement foundation. The first 40cm of deposit, although containing fragments of ceramics dating to the latter half of the 19th century, consisted of imported fill which had been laid over a recently used surface. This is indicated by the fact that pipe trenches for two underlying waterpipes did not break the stratigraphy of upper levels.

At 75 cm below surface a flat stone feature at first thought to be a cobbled floor was exposed. Broadening of the excavation showed that this was a foundation consisting of large Table Mountain Sandstone boulders, with smaller stones of the same material used as spacers and gap fillers. No mortar of any sort was evident. Excavation A was then extended to intercept with the rear wall of the south wing. At this point it was established that the stone foundation locked with that of the foundations of the standing structure (Plate 3). An examination of the stratigraphy showed that the alignment of the excavation trench of the rear wall continued over the old foundation showing that modifications had been made to the rear wall of the south east wing after the laying of the original foundations.

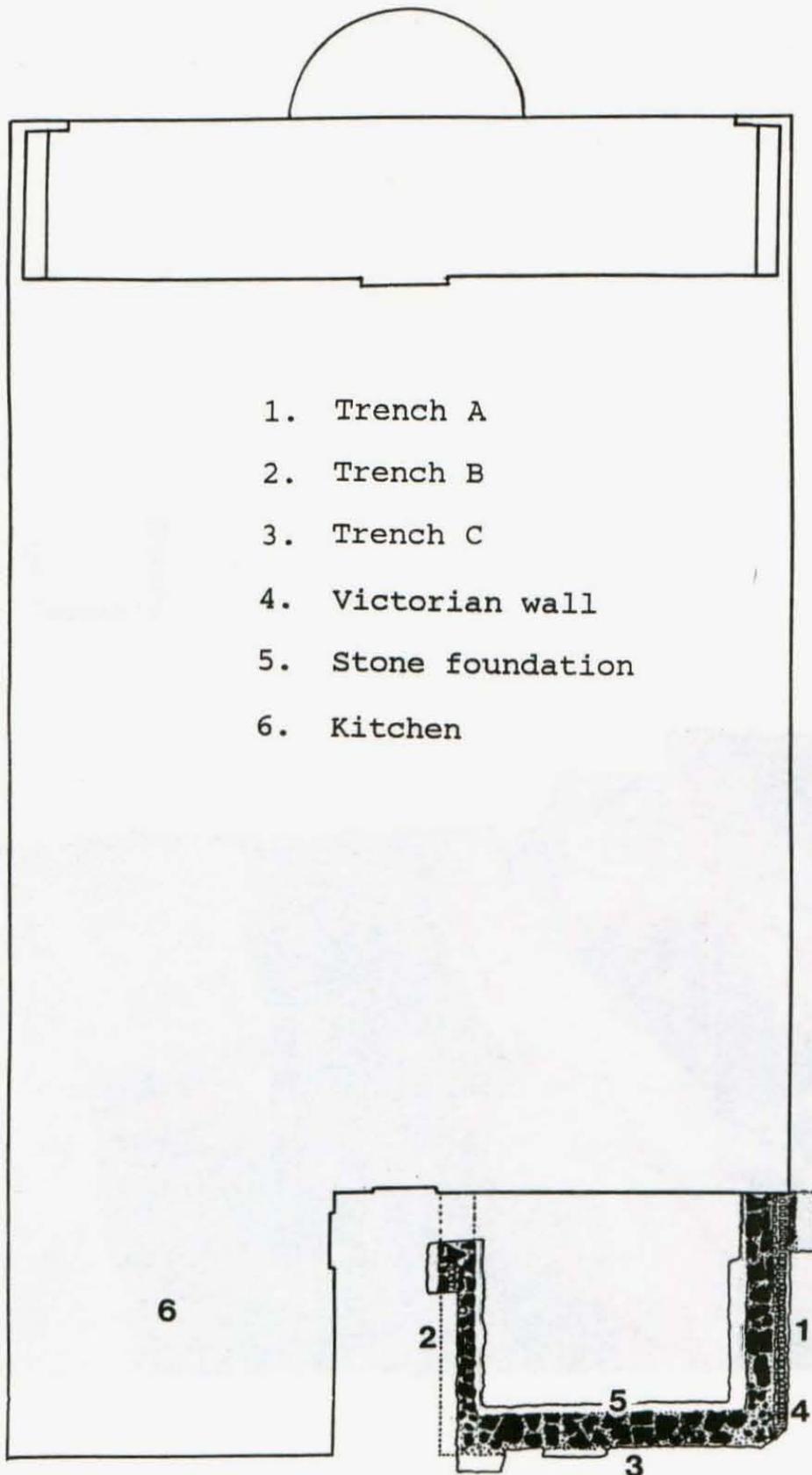
Having established that an earlier foundation existed, trench A was extended westwards to locate the south west corner of the foundation. This was found to lie on the same alignment as the rear wall of the north west wing. What is clearly evident is that at some time in the past large stones had been excavated out of the original foundation. These were probably re-used as building material (for modifications to the rear wall?) as this would have been more economical than collecting more stone from the closest mountain slopes.

#### **3.1.2 Trench B**

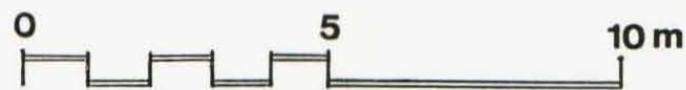
This was excavated to establish whether a parallel foundation existed to form the other side of the south east wing. The remnants of this and the rear corner were found to underlie a fill containing ceramics characteristic of the latter half of the 19th century. Location of the rear corner at this point showed no evidence of further walling to the west. In addition, no interior walls could be found abutting any of the exposed foundations. As in trench A, the foundations had been demolished to an extent, with large stones being removed.

#### **3.1.3 Trench C**

A deep trench was sunk to link the corners of the foundations exposed in both trenches A and B. The foundation, which lay some 120cm below the surface, (Plate 4) was made up of an alignment of large boulders with fragments of ferricrete and small stones used as gap fillers. The base of the foundation is set into a hard compacted 'B horizon' which lies 165 cm

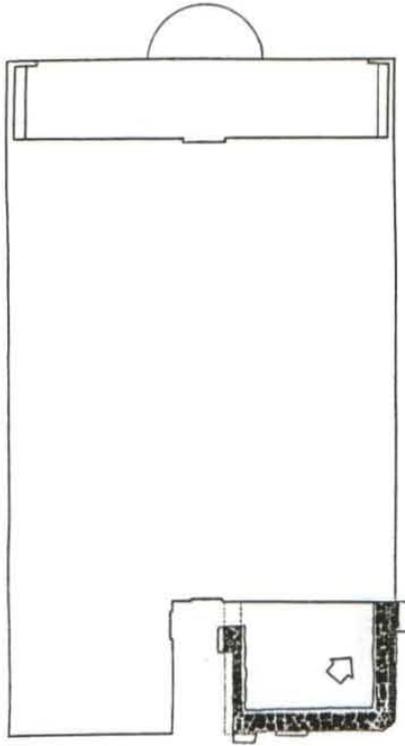


- 1. Trench A
- 2. Trench B
- 3. Trench C
- 4. Victorian wall
- 5. Stone foundation
- 6. Kitchen

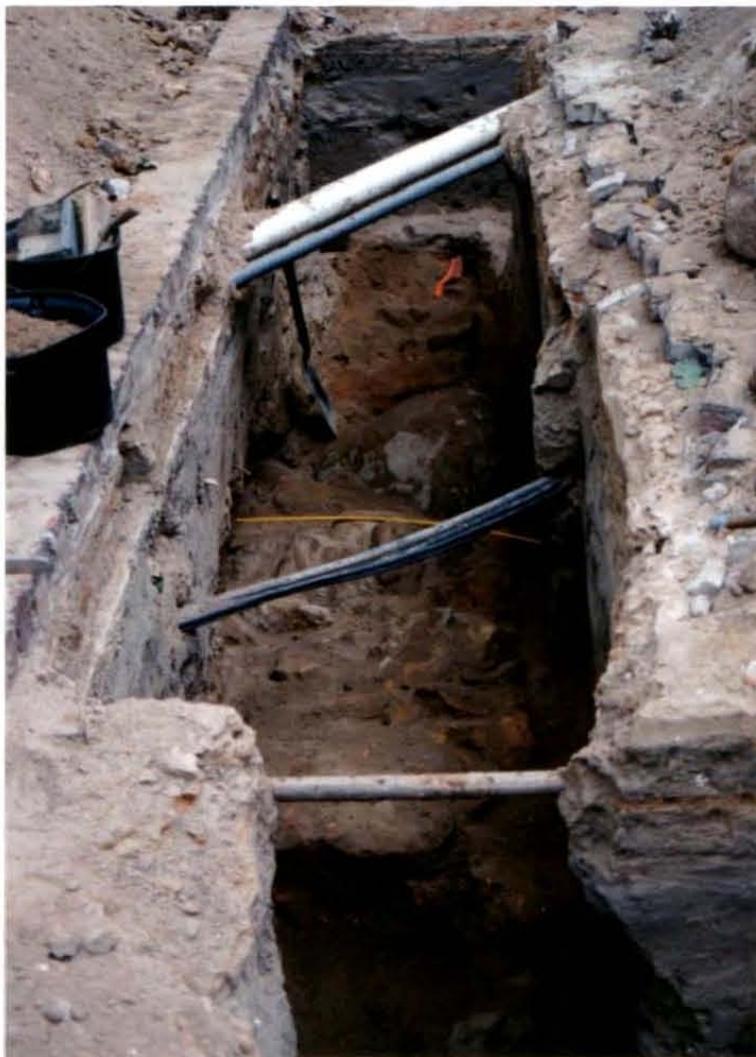
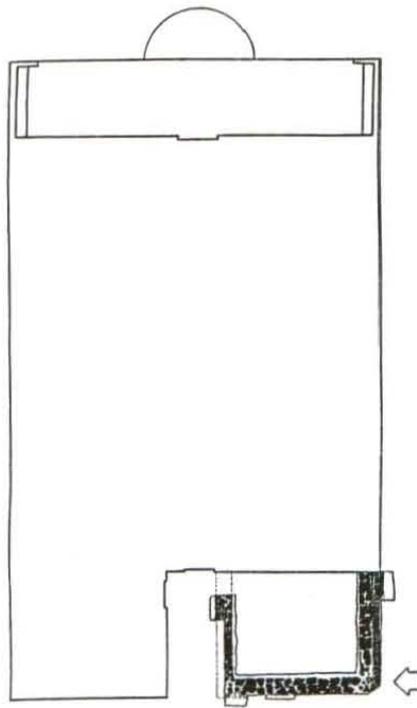


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below the present surface. Again, there is evidence to show that considerable effort had been taken to remove boulders from the foundation at some stage in the past.

### **3.2 Artefactual material**

The bulk of the material retrieved from the excavations was found to be in a secondary context. This was primarily caused by the massive disturbance which took place when large quantities of stone were removed from the foundations. The resulting cavities were filled with soils of unknown origin that contained quantities of bone, ceramics and a small amount of glass. Although these finds are not in a primary context and have not been analysed in detail, the artefacts can provide a clue as to when the attempt to remove the foundations was made.

#### **3.2.1 Ceramics**

Oriental porcelains which are characteristic of household assemblages from Dutch period sites excavated in Cape Town were not present in significant quantities suggesting a 19th century date for the fill. It was at this time and after that massproduced Staffordshire ceramics which had flooded markets in Europe, gained popularity at the Cape. The collection from the trench fill at Nova Constantia consists mostly of refined earthenwares including small quantities of Staffordshire creamware, annular ware, but mainly pearlware (polychrome, hand painted and transfer printed blue and white, often with Chinese scenes). The presence of spongeware, flow blue as well as green and pink transfer printed whitewares in the trench fill immediately above the foundations signifies a likely date of somewhere in the second and third quarters of the 19th century for the event of the removal of foundation stones from the rear of the south wing. It is reasonable to presume that this event may have been accompanied by demolition of this portion of the house and construction of the hipped-end.

#### **3.2.2 Bone**

The bone will not be analysed due to the disturbed context in which it was found. Inspection of the finds has shown that the assemblage was dominated by domestic animals such as sheep and cow. Small quantities of tortoise, ostrich eggshell, fish bone, a steenbok mandible as well as shellfish (black mussel) were noted.

## **4. FINDINGS**

Salient findings of this Phase 1 investigation are as follows:

1. Substantial stone foundations have been found to exist behind the hipped-end of the south east wing at Nova Constantia main house. The base of the stone work lies at 165cm below surface in places while the width of the wall is between 80cm and 105cm. This is consistent with dimensions of other Dutch period foundations known in the Cape.
2. The layout of the foundations indicates that Nova Constantia was originally designed as a symmetrical "U" shaped homestead.
3. Examination of ceramics has been undertaken with reference to Klose, J and Malan, A. 1993. *Ceramics of the South Western Cape 1650 - 1850. A guide to the analysis and interpretation of ceramic assemblages excavated from archaeological sites.* Handbook No1. University of Cape Town: Historical Archaeology Research Group.

4. The rear foundation includes massive boulders at its base. This was evidently a load-bearing wall and may have supported a gable.

5. Some time after the turn of the last century, the end of the south east wing was demolished and the major foundation stones removed. Some of these may have been included in the existing rear wall which was built or strengthened at this time.

6. No in situ dump material was found in the area under investigation. This is to be expected considering that the area was occupied by the south east wing in earlier times and a later on, a Victorian addition (demolished in 1972). If dumps do exist on the property, they are likely to be under the surface of the tarmac or garden in the vicinity of the main house.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

In terms of the specific area which was which the subject of this investigation, no further excavations are required. The following recommendations however, have been generated by the findings of this study for consideration by interested and affected parties.

1. If alterations to the rear of the south wing are envisaged, these should acknowledge the dimensions of, and architecture implied by the excavated foundations.

2. If alterations are approved, the excavated stone foundation should not be removed but used as a basis for any new extensions.

3. If alterations are approved, it must be taken into consideration that changes to the hipped-end may destroy this feature of the house. Although not original, it is an early renovation and it is part of the history of the property. Possible ways of mitigating this potential loss would be to:

(a) conduct the alterations in such a way as to minimise destruction of early fabric.

(b) ensure that a suitably qualified person is at hand to photograph and describe architectural features and fabric which may be affected. The results must be presented as a report, a copy of which should be lodged with the National Monuments Council.

4. The general surrounds of Nova Constantia are archaeologically sensitive. It is likely that early dumps do exist on the site and that these could be disturbed by deep trenching or landscaping. If major disturbance is to take place, a Phase 1 assessment should be commissioned, or at minimum, a monitoring brief be negotiated with an archaeologist.

## **6. INVESTIGATION TEAM**

Consultant  
Principal Investigator  
Field work

Martin Hall  
Tim Hart  
Tim Hart  
Envor Jephtha  
Gavin Anderson  
Beth Wahl