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Digging through history

Hunt is on for 'significant' wharf beneath construction site

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NEWBURYPORT — A historic site thought to have national significance is quietly being unearthed, in the shadow of one of the city's largest construction projects.

An archaeologist with the University of Massachusetts kept vigil over the waterfront yesterday as a city-hired contractor continued excavating land intended for an expanded wastewater treatment plant. The city is paying about \$20,000 to find out if the remains of one of the city's most important Colonial-era wharves lies beneath.

It was Tim Barker's first trip out to the Water Street site since city workers made the surprising discovery of several granite slabs thought to be part of a wharf built by merchant William Coombs. And as Barker surveyed the scene — a series of 4- to 8-foot-trenches dug alongside tall piles of discarded soil and debris — Barker began searching for clues that might help him discern the age of the underground structure.

"I'm here to monitor the excavation of these utility trenches, and if there are any historic wharves, then I'll have the opportunity to record them," Barker said yesterday afternoon. "It's a historic resource here for the city of Newburyport that has state and national significance."

Amid the busy construction site, with backhoes digging deep to lay a network of new sewer force mains, water lines and underground duct banks, it was a dirty job for the Amherst scientist, but thrilling nonetheless to imagine how important the buried wharf was to the development of the 13 fledgling American colonies.

Bill Harris, who has compiled an extensive historical study of the waterfront, said the land was owned in pre-Revolutionary times by Coombs, who headed up Newburyport's Committee on Public Safety and Correspondence. The committees, which sprung up in communities throughout Massachusetts, were key players in organizing resistance to the British crown.

His wharf, which extended hundreds of feet from Water Street out into the Merrimack River, was at the foot of Lime Street and was one of many that lined the waterfront in the 18th and 19th centuries in support of a thriving shipbuilding and trade industry. Coombs' Wharf reportedly held the added distinction of providing a home to one of the first of the nation's subscription naval vessels.

Finds

At 1 p.m. yesterday afternoon, Barker had yet to witness the removal of buried treasure, but he did marvel at several oddball artifacts uncovered by workers at the scene — an impeccably preserved "Ayer's Sarsparilla" bottle from the apothecary's Lowell Manufacturing plant, and a milk bottle presumably with the same 19th century origins.

"They're probably from the latter part of the 19th century," Barker said of the two bottles, which he said help him determine how long ago the area he was standing on — once covered by water — was filled in with soil to accommodate the industrial uses that moved in after Coombs' family moved on.

According to historical accounts, the Sarsparilla bottle uncovered could be up to 170 years old, since that was when J.C. Ayer first began manufacturing his proprietary Sarsparilla remedy that he advertised to "make the weak strong," "purify the blood" and "improve the complexion" of its users. Ayer also made a fortune selling cherry Pectoral syrup for lung and throat afflictions, and a number of other remedies to promote overall good health.

Estimating the bottle as manufactured in the late 1800s, Barker said the artifact as well as shards of natural ceramic dishes of Colonial style with signature blue decorative stain found at the scene, indicate the fill being unearthed yesterday was placed there nearly 100 years after the wharf in question.

"The ceramics I've seen coming out of this trench indicate the fill was laid around the 1880s," he said.

While those artifacts were interesting, Barker was more interested in what the city will uncover when it begins digging on the other side of the wharf, an area that might hold much older artifacts.

And of course he's interested to see the wharf itself, which was unearthed, then covered up again when it was determined the pilings meant to support the new Department of Public Works building could not be driven through the earth due to the existing wharf structure. Barker said it's possible that when the city begins work burying a network of pipes that will intersect with the wharf, he'll be looking to see if the wharf covered 150 years ago is an expansion of an even earlier stone- or timber-style wharf similar to others he's discovered in similar excavations in seaside towns.

"To me, I would be very excited if maybe on the inside of Coombs' Wharf was another earlier wharf," Barker said. "There was a family of Coombs that lived here, and the father may have built one that the son expanded."

While Barker said the city is on board with the idea that special treatment must be shown to ensure historic relics aren't destroyed during the construction, project manager Peter Hartford isn't ready to concede that the structure they uncovered predates the Revolutionary War and is the same Coombs Wharf listed on historical maps of Newburyport at the base of Lime Street.

Hartford said the city hired the University of Massachusetts Archaeology Department at the behest of the state Historical Commission but has yet to receive the university's official report stating the 120 feet of granite capstones it removed from the site and the structure still buried beneath the soil are part of that wharf.

"At this point, we don't know much," Hartford said. "We're waiting to hear."

Barker said yesterday he believes all evidence points to it being Coombs Wharf, however, and he points to the granite capstones pierced with steel piles that would have been used to anchor ships of that period.

"They're dressed, granite blocks," Barker said. "They're not just field stones."

If it's determined he's correct, it won't change much other than to provide the people of Newburyport with some documentation and photographs of the wharf's existence, he said.

"I can't stop construction, but I would be given a short amount of time to record any resource and see what we could do about it," he said. "I don't think it's possible to relocate it. Maybe it can be utilized in an interpretive site along the rail trail."