

# NewburyportNews.com, Newburyport, MA

October 15, 2010

## Discovery of pre-Revolutionary War wharf may delay project

### Important wharf found under plant construction site

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NEWBURYPORT — After pieces of a historic pre-Revolutionary War wharf were uncovered during the construction of the city's sewage treatment plant, the state's Historical Commission is asking city officials to perform an archeological study and halt construction in that area until it is done.

Bill Harris, a member of the city's Citizens for Chapter 91 Committee, said workers uncovered pieces of the wharf structure that belonged to William Coombs, who headed the Newburyport Committee on Public Safety and Correspondence before and during the Revolutionary War. One of the two walls was discovered, Harris said.

"We haven't found the second wall," he added.

Harris said the Coombs and Bartlett wharves, both of which were located at the site of the wastewater treatment plant expansion, supported investment in the first of the nation's subscription naval vessels. They were located at the end of Lime Street. Newburyport's waterfront was once lined with many wharves to support its thriving shipbuilding and shipping trade; most have rotted away, and others — such as this site — have been covered with fill.

After a fire in 1870, the Kimball Planing Mill was rebuilt, with at least one of the buildings built in brick, Harris wrote in an e-mail this week. Kimball took over Coombs Wharf, and later the Perkins Lumber Co. took over from Kimball.

"This site contains pre-Revolutionary maritime infrastructure and 19th century infrastructure of the age of steam," Harris said. "It is of both local and national significance, because the merchants operating here used their wealth to advance the build-out of a subscription Navy for the United States. Granite-topped wharves, placed at Coombs Wharf before the Revolutionary War, were not common either in Newburyport or in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This is the only presently known granite-topped wharf found in the City of Newburyport."

Upon learning of the discovery, which Harris said was "concealed" by the city for 12 to 18 weeks, he reached out to the state Historical Commission, which directed him to Mitchell T. Mulholland, a research professor and director of UMass Amherst's Archaeological Services.

Mayor Donna Holaday said this week that she was awaiting the state's report to the Historical Commission, but she disputed claims that the finding of the wharf was hidden.

"This was a site where granite curbing was stored," Holaday said. "I don't think anyone thought twice about it. I don't think they had a clue as to what they had found."

Harris said the Moss-Bennett Archaeological Preservation Act of 1974 permits federal departments and agencies to expend up to 1 percent of federal project costs to salvage, preserve and interpret archaeological structures and artifacts of the nation's past.

"The Wastewater Treatment Plant modernization obtains at least 80 percent of its funds through the (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act), channeled because of federal legislation through the Environmental Protection Agency and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection," Harris wrote. "This creates both a federal opportunity and a duty to preserve and interpret locally and nationally significant elements of our nation's past. The immediate adjacency of the Newburyport rail trail provided interpretative opportunities at the 115 Water Street site, and potentially at other waterfront sites in Newburyport."

Harris said he will meet with Mayor Donna Holaday and Pieter Hartford, the project manager for the plant project. He would like to see elements of the wharf placed on the rail trail, he added, due to the Rail Trail's close proximity and ability to allow for permanent historical preservation.

"I'm going to help them try to get federal funding," Harris said yesterday. "The goal is to have them pay rather than Newburyport ratepayers."

The mayor called the discovery "exciting."

"I think the rail trail is a very feasible option for it," she added.

According to historical reports, Capt. William Coombs, and the owner of the nearby Lower Bartlett Wharf, William Bartlett, were two of eight initial Newburyport subscribers to finance the first "subscription" vessel of the U.S. Navy, the sloop Merrimack. It was captained by Moses Brown of Newburyport.