

NewburyportNews.com, Newburyport, MA

December 8, 2010

Digging deeper

Port's history revealed 10 feet underground

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NEWBURYPORT — Digging deep underground along Water Street yesterday, city workers unearthed an inventory of aged remnants that reveal a tiny glimpse into the life of the Colonial inhabitants of Newburyport.

They include a piece of an 18th century tobacco pipe engraved with the initials of its manufacturer, shards of Colonial pottery finished with a glaze and decorative trim popular in the late 1700s to early 1800s, bricks that constituted an early Colonial home drain and several bones thought to be from cattle that once grazed along the riverbanks.

After 250 years underground, the artifacts were plucked from the earth via backhoes from as deep as 10 feet while workers were laying a series of pipes that will connect to the new Department of Public Services control center on the waterfront.

While none by themselves could be associated for certain with William Coombs, who owned a home and wharf at the same location during the Revolutionary War and played an important role in America's fight against the British monarchy, the historic relics helped archeologist Tim Burton date the "fill" that was left on the site hundreds of years ago so that he can better ascertain what kinds of historic structures still lie beneath the site of the city's future DPS facility.

Some of yesterday's findings don't necessarily date the historic structures beneath as much as they provide historic snapshots of what the waterfront looked like when British settlers first set down on American soil, he said.

"They came down onto a gray, sandy clay with marine shells," Barker said of what he believes is the old 18th-century shoreline, marked by a mass of marine shells and a change in the soil from rich, dark loam and rocks to the fine gray ocean sand that once stretched from the river all the way to Water Street.

"We can get a good idea of how far up the shoreline went," Barker said, peering into the latest trench dug at the DPS site and pointing out how the layers of soil tell a story.

Barker had hoped, given the location of this latest trench closer to Water Street, that yesterday's dig might have uncovered parts of the Coombs' home foundation or the remains of a privy, the term used to describe 18th century outhouses. Privies are a gold mine for archaeologists because they contain all sorts

of trash — bottles, dishes, smoking pipes and other trash — that can be used to determine a time period when the privy was in use and the wealth of the privy's owner.

Neither the home nor the privy was found. But the day wasn't without some exciting revelations.

"This is where the historic maps show Coombs' house may have stood," said Barker, after discovering the remains of what he believes was a brick drain that serviced a home along Water Street, similar to others he's found in Colonial communities. They were once used to keep storm water out of the family's living quarters. The bricks were soft, low-fired bricks from the 18th century, he said.

"As they were excavating, north of Water Street on the floor of the trench was a 2-foot-wide linear conversion of loose brick," Barker said. "The bricks weren't laid in course. They were laying parallel to Water Street about 30 feet from the street."

He found nothing to suggest a privy, however, but was on the lookout for a change in the soil that would indicate a former outhouse once stood in that location.

"That's one of the things we would expect to see," Barker said.

Privies, he said, would have been numerous along the waterfront back in the 1700s, given that a family used them for a time, and then for their health and safety would close it up and dig a new one, often filling the old privy with garbage that becomes something of a time capsule for archaeologists when dug up years later.

"Sometimes they were used to hide things you don't want people to see," he said, like a stash of empty rum bottles, for instance.

What Barker did find, however, dates the area where DPS workers are digging and leaves room for the possibility that more will be discovered in the days to come when the city continues its underground trench work in this historically significant part of the city.

Barker is bringing back to the University of Massachusetts a piece of a green shelled-edge pearl ware from the first quarter of the 19th century that he found lodged in the soil, an 18th century piece of creamware with a signature green puddling around the rim that was of a popular style in Revolutionary War-era homes and taverns and a piece of brown salt-glazed stoneware from the 1700s, as well. Also included in his inventory are several cow bones found along with those items, a smoking pipe impressed with the letters T and D, and a pipe stem dated by a bore width that was the signature of 18th century pipes.

"They're like 18th century cigarette butts," said Barker. "But they're a great diagnostic tool. The larger the bore, the older the pipe stem."

According to UMass archaeological expert Mitch Mulholland, the most exciting thing found at the Water Street site so far has been the remnants of what's believed to be the original 1766 Coombs Wharf, identified by the timber cribbing pulled from the earth on Nov. 30 while workers were building a catch basin for the facility.

"If it were intact, if it were not disturbed or partially destroyed, it could be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places," Mulholland said. "But the integrity of the site or lack thereof reduces that substantially."

Despite the structure's ineligibility for historic recognition, the fact that it is largely still intact 10 feet underground adjacent to the foundation of the new DPS facility is important for the city. Peter Hartford, manager for the city project, said Barker will be coming back out today to oversee digging in another location along Water Street and likely will be back again in another week when trenches are dug to lay lines for the department's electric services. Hartford said work has been delayed by about two months with the discovery of the underground wharf, not because of its historic quality, but because the city was forced back to the drawing board after discovering it stood in the direct location of the proposed building foundation.

"We're probably a couple months behind," Hartford said. "When you look at the building, we had hoped to have the building with walls up and closed in for the winter (by now), and we're not there."