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'Heartbreaking' problems

Historic wharf site coated in oil

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NEWBURYPORT — With a mix of excitement and disappointment, an archeologist with the University of Massachusetts watched city workers unearth yesterday what may have been the 18th-century timber frame of Coombs Wharf.

While an exciting find, considering the structure was likely placed there by the hands of colonists prior to the Revolutionary War, the find was tarnished by the sad reality that it could not be properly documented due to a thick layer of toxic, oily sludge unearthed along with the aged wood.

The timber pieces were uncovered while the Department of Public Services was digging deep underground to build a catch basin for the city's new sewer plant on Water Street and appeared to University of Massachusetts archaeologist Tim Barker to be arranged horizontally at right angles to each other in the same pattern used by early colonists to construct wharfs.

"It looks like cribbing," Barker said as he peered into the 8-foot hole. "Eighteenth- and 19th-century wharves were often constructed by building a long box — a crib — and then filling it with stones and sinking it."

When the first timber was pulled up by the excavator, Barker could just make out the presence of another large piece below it and managed to get the workers to stop work long enough so that he could place a few phone calls to the university and to others with an interest in preserving whatever history is revealed at the site, and perhaps find a way to at least document what they were uncovering.

According to local historian Bill Harris, who has compiled an extensive historical study of the waterfront, the land being excavated was owned by William Coombs, who headed Newburyport's Committee on Public Safety and Correspondence. The committees, which sprung up in towns throughout Massachusetts, organized support for American efforts in the Revolutionary War.

Coombs Wharf, located at the base of Lime Street, was one of many that lined Newburyport's waterfront. But because of Coombs' public role during such an important time in our nation's history, the discovery of his wharf — intact save for a layer of oil covering it — could reveal something about life on the waterfront during a pivotal time in our nation's history. The only problem workers encountered yesterday

is figuring out how to extract history from the contaminated soil left behind by an oil refinery once sited on the riverbank.

"My suggestion is to try to limit the impact to the historic structure," Barker urged workers, following his conversations with colleagues. "It's very highly suggestive to me of timber cribbing."

But while workers vowed to be careful, the task of working around the timber structure proved impossible, and with 3 additional feet of digging left to go to reach the desired depth, they pulled up piece after piece of the historic timbers—all covered in oil and some splintered by the force of the digger.

"I'm afraid that there is some sort of timber construction down there that we can't get a good look at because of the hazardous water," Barker said. "It's breaking my heart that these timbers can't be adequately documented."

Dilemma

For Peter Hartford, who is managing the sewer project on behalf of the city, the find posed a dilemma.

"We can't pump the water out because it's contaminated water," Hartford said. "We're trying to do as little damage as we can. It's a balancing act."

Hartford said the balance must be struck between observing the rules and requirements of working within a contaminated site, and those that govern the process of preserving historic structures. On top of that, the city is trying to get certain aspects of a \$26 million sewer project completed before winter comes.

"We're trying to get in all the utility work," he said. "Winter is coming. That doesn't change the fact that this is a contaminated site. So, we've got a couple of competing interests here."

As the digger brought up piece after piece of old timber, some were crushed and revealed splinters of fresh-looking wood—impeccably preserved in the earth for perhaps 250 years or more. Barker took pictures of the process and wrote down his observations in a notebook he's brought to the site every day since the digging around the wharf began.

While Harris had been on site with a video camera earlier in the day, the timbers came up with little fanfare, as Harris had long since departed. Earlier in the day, Barker found shards of pottery and glass apothecary jars that date back to about 1860.

He planned to sift through the latest excavated material that accompanied the timbers later yesterday to see if he could find any artifacts that might help him date the timber beams. But Barker said early in the process that the most exciting thing he could find on the site would be the presence of an older timber wharf within the stone-built structure, perhaps built by Coombs' ancestors and representative of an even earlier period. He was clearly concerned that what was dug up yesterday might have been pieces of such a structure.

"They've been preserved this long, and then to excavate them without being able to properly document how they were placed there is a shame," he said. "A careful excavation would have relayed how they were placed there. Unfortunately, the construction phase monitoring is not the ideal time to do archaeology."