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Piece of 18th century Bartlet Wharf heads to Maryland for conservation

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NEWBURYPORT — A vital link to the city's maritime history was loaded into the back of a Subaru crossover wagon yesterday morning bound for Maryland, where it will be restored over the next 18 months before it comes back home.

The roughly 150-pound piece of timber, found during construction of the city's new sewage treatment plant extension on Water Street at the end of Lime Street, was once part of the Bartlet Wharf pier and dates to the 1760s, local historian Bill Harris said.

In October, workers found the remains of what is believed to be parts of the Bartlet Wharf as well as Coombs Wharf. Those wharves, and others nearby, served as the backbone of the city's thriving shipping and shipbuilding industry during the 18th century. Many of the wharves from that time period have rotted away while others, like the Coombs and Bartlet, were covered with fill as the contours of the waterfront evolved over the years.

The pier fragment, roughly the size of an adult person, is heading to the Maryland Archeological and Conservation Laboratory in St. Leonard, Md., where it will be under the care of restorer Caitlin Schaffer.

Schaffer said it was exciting to be driving home with a piece of Newburyport's maritime history in the back of her Subaru.

"It's pretty cool," she said.

For weeks, the pier piece was stored in the back of a red pickup truck owned by Tom Kolterjahn, vice president of the Newburyport Historical Commission. Covered in plastic wrap and secured with duct tape, the pier piece was later covered with several feet of snow to further protect it from open air.

Kolterjahn said should the piece come in contact with open air, it would turn to a pile of mush within a few months due to its age and its time spent underground.

"Once it gets exposed to air, it starts to immediately deteriorate," Kolterjahn said.

At the Maryland Archeological and Conservation Laboratory, part of the state-run Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum, the pier fragment will spend many months immersed in fresh water. By doing so, saltwater inside the piece will dissipate. Later, polyethylene glycol will be added to the water to further preserve it before it is sliced open so scientists can more accurately date it, Harris said.

By studying the tree used to make the pier fragment, specifically, by counting the number of rings it has, scientists will be able to end speculation on when the pier was built. Harris said the best guess so far has the pier built around 1764.

Once the piece is restored and dated, it will return to Newburyport, where it will be displayed inside the city's Custom House Maritime Museum. Harris expects its return by summer 2012.

The entire project, including transportation, will cost a little less than \$4,000, and it is hoped the city will be able to use money from the Community Preservation Act fund to pay for it, Harris said.

The CPA allows communities to collect additional taxes from residents if the funds are used to preserve open space and historic sites or create affordable housing and recreational facilities.

Harris said he will soon go before the city's Community Preservation Committee, hoping to secure enough funds to foot the entire bill. But because the committee has already allocated all its funds for fiscal 2010, the earliest that the money could be secured for the project is in October.

Yesterday, along with the pier segment, Harris handed over a check for \$1,770, covering half the restoration fee plus transportation and a document signed by Mayor Donna Holaday authorizing the project.

The funds came from Pieter Hartford, the project manager for the treatment plant construction, who agreed to front the money until the city could pay him back, Harris said.

"The city is sort of being creative to pay for this," Harris said.

The Maryland Archeological and Conservation Laboratory is a well-known center for historic preservation and has much experience caring for maritime artifacts, Schaffer said.

The lab is currently restoring a maritime palisade from Charleston, N.C., and an 18th century ship found last summer at the site of the World Trade Center after the buildings were destroyed in the terrorist attacks of 2001.

Harris said it took several attempts to find a suitable agency to handle the restoration of Newburyport's pier fragment. Officials first contacted the state's director of maritime archeology, who recommended a Vermont-based restoration company. But when it became apparent that hiring the Vermont company was economically unfeasible, local officials contacted the archeological officials at UMass Boston. Officials there quickly put them in contact with the University of Maryland and then the Maryland Archeological and Conservation Laboratory, Harris said.

"We are very pleased to find a center of expertise that is relatively economical," Harris said.