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Water plant digging reveals another find

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NEWBURYPORT — After months of searching, archaeologists think they have finally found what they were looking for: a historically important wharf that stood on Newburyport's waterfront more than 200 years ago.

Early yesterday morning, construction workers at the site of the wastewater treatment plant expansion on Water Street uncovered what is believed to be the timber bulkhead of the Lower Bartlet Wharf, a structure that dates to the late 1700s.

Under the supervision of UMass archeologist Tim Barker, construction workers excavated four 12-foot timbers from the site, along with other smaller portions of the structure.

"We had an idea that there might be something here," said Barker, who had determined the location to be historically sensitive in an earlier survey.

The timbers, which were preserved under fill that was excavated to install a water line, feature lap joints that allowed the timbers to be stacked on top of each other and secured with a wooden peg called a trunnel.

"These are large sawn timbers with beveled edges in excellent condition that were sealed under fill a couple hundred years ago," Barker said. "This gives us an idea of how these wharves were built."

The find is significant because Newburyport lacks any detailed maps of the city dating before 1830, said Bill Harris, a member of the city's Citizens for Chapter 91 Committee.

"Without these maps, we are dependent on archeological finds," Harris said. "It adds a dimension to understanding the development of Newburyport."

Harris said that the owner of the wharf, William Bartlet, was a wealthy merchant who owned several wharves in the area and, along with William Coombs, was one of the many Newburyport residents to finance some of the nation's first subscription naval vessels, including the sloop Merrimack.

For now, the timbers will be placed next to granite blocks that were excavated from what is believed to be the Coombs Wharf. The cold weather will continue to preserve the timbers; however, warm spring weather threatens to accelerate the decay of the historic find unless a grant is secured to preserve them, Harris said.

"We have no examples of 18th century wharf timbers in the Maritime Museum," Harris said. "What is left is either buried or destroyed, so these are unusual to find."

The dig site is located within 100 yards of the Merrimack River, in an area where wharves are known to have stood in the 18th and 19th centuries. Much of the area has been backfilled over the years, burying the remnants of the wharves. Harris and Barker plan to continue to monitor the wastewater treatment plant expansion.

"This is a prime example illustrating that we can't assume these wharves have been destroyed because we can't see them," Barker said. "They are still there waiting to be discovered."