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Wharf owner key figure in Revolution

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NEWBURYPORT — Historical accounts of the American Revolutionary War have depicted soldiers and patriots hailing from Newburyport as among the toughest in the fight for the nation's independence. That's why many locals are following with interest the discovery of what may be a pre-Revolutionary wharf at the site of the city's sewer plant on Water Street.

Thought to be erected and owned by William Coombs, and perhaps his father, Phillip, before him, the wharf and everything unearthed around the massive 10-foot structure discovered deep underground sheds new light on a part of the city that helped drive the economy of a fledgling nation. It also provides a glimpse of the two men who owned the property and played a major role in the quest for settling a country of their own.

According to historian Bill Harris, who has been working with state historical experts documenting wharf history since the city happened upon the structure in October, Phillip Coombs, who came from Guernsey and spoke French, settled in Newburyport and built his wharf in 1734.

From records he was able to locate from state officials, Harris learned that the elder Coombs bought a dwelling on the river. Then, in 1756, he traveled to Lake Champlain with a number of other Newburyport carpenters and ship builders to help build ships for the British during the French and Indian Wars.

"They were all captured and transported by ship to France, and Phillip Coombs died as a prisoner of war there in January 1757," Harris said.

Coombs' estate, left to his family, listed a dwelling and a wharf on his land at the base of Lime Street in the location where the city is now digging trenches to build a new Department of Public Services facility. Coombs' son, William, inherited the wharf and home and sought a permit to build or rebuild a wharf in 1765, Harris said. That was the same year Britain's parliament imposed the Stamp Act of 1765 on its subjects living in the Colonies, the first taxation proposition of its kind on Colonists, meant to provide revenue to the monarchy through the taxation of newspapers, pamphlets and other items.

As the owner of a fleet of privateers, Coombs found himself at the center of the tumult between Britain and her Colonies. Harris said he and his merchant friends from Newburyport were active in providing for the opposition.

"He operated privateers in the Revolutionary War and imported gunpowder from the French West Indies," Harris said.

When the British decimated Marblehead, a seaport similar to Newburyport, for its ship-making sites along the shore, Coombs was at the heart of a movement to safeguard the city from similar attacks.

"He organized the Newburyport mariners to sink ships at the Newburyport harbor channel so only they would know exactly where the ships were," Harris said, explaining how the sunken ships served as a deterrent to British ships that didn't know how to navigate the already treacherous Merrimack River passage. "The ships were underwater but not by much so you couldn't see them. You'd have to know where to zigzag. The British came into Marblehead and shelled the place, but they didn't come in here."

As the treasurer of the mariners who eventually rose to become president of the local citizens group charged with protecting the waterfront from enemies, fires, shipwrecks and other threats, Coombs was viewed as a pillar of the community, Harris said.

Coombs also earned a reputation for his good work outside his wharf business, Harris said. He served as organizer of the Port Humane Society, charged with fighting fires at a time when fires were seen as the largest threat to the community.

"Everyone had to have a sand bucket and water bucket," Harris said.

Coombs also played a key role in the Newburyport School Committee, helping to build a school for women at a time when there weren't adequate facilities for them.

In 1808, he organized Soup Homes, similar to the soup kitchens of today, when it was decided that newly free Americans should no longer trade with the British. The Soup Homes helped those who couldn't earn an income to sustain their families during the trade embargo.

"He was an innovator and an entrepreneur," Harris said of the man whose wharf is at the heart of the Water Street excavation.