

Over centuries, trash to treasure

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Artifacts of eight generations unearthed in Dedham

By Brian MacQuarrie, Globe Staff | June 10, 2010

DEDHAM — Nason Sinkula, placing his trowel to the side, looks quizzically at the slender, dirt-covered root he has just unearthed from a pit near busy Dedham Square.

There, cradled in its gnarled elbow, lies a broken piece of white ceramic, decorated with the image of a shepherd that might have adorned the base of a 19th-century teacup.

“Awesome,” Sinkula says.

Such small victories are occurring nearly every day on the grounds of the Fairbanks House, the oldest wood-frame home in North America, where the day-to-day life of one of the country’s original families is being illuminated with every artifact plucked from the soil off East Street.

The work is dirty and tiring. But the efforts of Boston University archeology students and their volunteer crew are paying off with thousands of artifacts tossed aside by eight generations of a family who lived in the house since 1641.

“None of us expected that it would be so productive,” said Mary Beaudry, director of archeology graduate studies at Boston University.

The dig, which is in its third and final week, has yielded a trove of jagged pieces of tableware, bits of clothing, a broken chamber pot, a bone-handle knife, dozens of buttons, and even a thick glass bottle for “Cocaine,” a form of coconut-based hair oil.

“You scrape your trowel, and something pops up,” said Travis Parno, a BU doctoral student who is supervising the digging at the site.

In this hands-on work, Parno explained, one generation’s trash is often another’s treasure.

The Fairbanks House, with its sturdy beams raised by English carpenters in the East Anglian style, has long been celebrated for its age. But what makes this dig so significant, Beaudry and Parno said, is the sheer volume of common household items being discovered.

“It’s telling us about the practices of the typical family in the 19th century,” Parno said. “We’re digging the history of the ordinary people.”

That history had its American origins in Jonathan and Grace Fairbanke, a couple from Yorkshire, England, who settled in Dedham with six children in 1636. Scientific analysis revealed a date of 1641 for the two-story house, which is still owned by a Fairbanks family organization. Rebecca Fairbanks, who left the house in 1904, ended 263 years of continuous habitation by one family.

The Fairbanks organization, which has about 1,200 dues-paying members, is spread across the country. The original Puritan couple were ancestors of Charles Warren Fairbanks, a vice president under Theodore Roosevelt and the namesake of Fairbanks, Alaska.

Today, what once was a 12-acre farm has dwindled to 2.5 acres. The site is on the National Register of Historic Places, offers tours to the public, and boasts a curator, who lives in a separate building.

"This is such an amazing house," said Alicia Paresi, a National Park Service curator who visited the site this week.

Such fascination has long been confined to the home itself, which is filled with hundreds of family mementos that include a Revolutionary War bayonet, a large 1816 map of the United States, a 17th-century wooden trunk, and a museumlike array of farm and household implements.

But Parno and his crew, including BU doctoral student Alex Keim, have found another piece of Fairbanks history that had vanished from memory. Their work has discovered the foundation boulders and cobbled floor of what appears to have been a large barn close to the rear of the original house.

The find surprised the archeologists, because the barn does not appear on maps or documents of the estate or in early photographs from the mid-19th century.

"It's really strange because it's pretty massive, and it's hard to imagine that it's forgotten because it's right under the ground," Beaudry said. "It's certainly not an army of beheaded Roman gladiators or anything, but it's something that will tell how the family was surviving well into the 19th century."

Fortunately for the archeologists, those clues exist because the Fairbanks family discarded many of its unwanted and worn-out possessions there.

"It's fascinating what they've uncovered," said Allen Blood, 66, of Norwood, president of the board of the Fairbanks Family in America. "It means a great deal to us."

The hard work of putting the findings into context remains to be done. For now, the artifacts are being bagged and shipped to the BU archeology lab, where they will wait to be cleaned, labeled, and meticulously analyzed.

Until then, the unglamorous grunt work continues, but with certain benefits. "There's a lot of lifting, bending, and struggling," Keim said. "It's also a great excuse to be outdoors."

MacQuarrie can be reached at macquarrie@globe.com. ■