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Plimoth Plantation, a recreation of what the Plymouth colony might have looked like (Kevin Fleming/Corbis)

Archaeologists Are Trying To Figure Out Exactly Where

Plymouth Was

A new excavation is looking into the location of the famous colony

By Mary Beth Griggs
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The Mayflower, the pilgrims and Plymouth Rock are deeply engrained in American lore, but where, exactly, was the Plymouth colony located? We actually don't know for sure. But researchers from the University of Massachusetts, Boston are now undertaking an excavation to pinpoint the exact location of the pilgrims' colony.

A Smithsonian Institution Affiliate, Plimoth Plantation draws 360,000 visitors a year to an open-air museum with historical reenactments from the period but is located about three and a half miles from where researchers believe the original colony was founded.

Luckily, there are historical descriptions of the early settlement that archaeologists can use as a starting point. Emmanuel Altham, who visited the town in 1623, three years after the Mayflower landed, wrote:

It is well situated upon a high hill close unto the seaside... In this plantation is about twenty houses, four or five of which are very fair and pleasant, and the rest (as time will serve) shall be made better. And this town is in such manner that it makes a great street between the houses, and at the upper end of the town there is a strong fort, both by nature and art, with six pieces of reasonable good artillery mounted thereon... This town is paled about with pale of eight foot long, or thereabouts, and in the pale are three great gates

The "high hill" is today known as Burial Hill, which is home to a graveyard that overlooks the harbor. It's one of the few locations of the original town that hasn't been disturbed by construction or paved over, and is therefore the perfect place for an archaeological dig. The team is using ground-penetrating radar to survey the ground before digging, to ensure they don't disturb any graves in the process.

The archaeologists are on the lookout for any small artifacts that might have once belonged to the pilgrims, as well as stains in the ground that might indicate where the wooden walls of the town (the "pale" referred to by Altham) might have stood. Any wood would have long since rotted away.

Excavation of the site is expected to continue for years.

About Mary Beth Griggs

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