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BURIAL HILL DIG: Can archaeologists solve a 300-year-old mystery?

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There was little fanfare announcing this dig, but it's part of a long-term research project being undertaken by the Fiske Center for Archaeological Research (AFMCAR) at UMass Boston, in cooperation with Plimoth Plantation.

The center focuses on Colonial archaeology in New England, and it has a particular expertise in the analysis of environmental samples and geographic information systems (GIS), all of which is particularly helpful when working on Burial Hill, which is important to avoid disrupting known sites of interest.

Researchers are purposefully steering clear, at least for now, of any known burial locations. The fresh excavation work does not include burial sites or other previously studied artifacts.

"We are very conscious that we are working in one of the most revered sites in Plymouth, and New England," said Dr. Christa Beranek, the other project leader. "So we are doing this in the most cautious and respectful way that we can."

In large part, what the Fiske Center researchers are trying to do now, the other project leader, Dr. Christa Beranek, said, is to work that will continue through 2020, though this current phase will end June 28.

The Center is making extensive use of ground positioning radar (GPR) to further identify what may lie underneath the soil found in our area.

Crudely put, if you understand the soil conditions, the radar data can be interpreted more accurately, helping you to know where you are located.

The first phase of the project has simple goals.

"As a start, we're undertaking a survey of the archaeological resources in Plymouth Colony," Landon said. "The reason is that we've recently realized that there could be additional data derived by using modern analytical approaches to these surveys."

Among other goals, the Fiske Center archaeologists and UMass students, led by Landon and Beranek, want to understand what has changed in the area along School Street (numerous stables and other commercial properties) and the area used since the 17th century.

Several of the new excavations overlap areas where buildings once lined the east side of School Street. The purpose of this work, which is long gone, is to explore the possibility that those structures served to protect and preserve earlier artifacts.

That's a subtle hint at the long-range goals of this project.

To be blunt, where's the fort? Or, more specifically, where might researchers find physical evidence of the Pilgrims' original colony?

Though there is a marked site further up the hill that is generally accepted as the location of the first fort, it does not enclose the entire enclosure.

Did the palisade proceed off Burial Hill and east to the water's edge, as represented at Plimoth Plantation?

Or was it oriented north to south, stretching from the high ground behind First Parish Church toward Russell Street?

From the historic record, it's known that the perimeter of the full palisade was approximately a half-mile in length, bounded by the cart path that became known as Leyden Street.

It's also known that similar palisades of the period were diamond-shaped, thick at the middle but tapering toward the four points to allow for a better view and defense of the adjacent palisade.

But where might there be evidence of this or other structures dating back to the first decades of the colony? Find out from the Fiske archaeologists.

Landon told a lunchtime seminar at Plimoth Plantation last week that the project has far more than the palisade been designed to establish a scholarly legacy for the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrim's landing in 2020.

"Over the next 10 years we expect to work, in cooperation with other scholars and stakeholders, on archaeological programming, teacher training and similar activities," the project website states. "These projects would be designed to help mark the 400th anniversary, teach students and teachers the archaeology and history of Plymouth and its place in the 17th century, and provide a meaningful consideration of the period and its impact on both settler and Native communities."

Though the work began with little fanfare and surprised many town officials and interested community groups, the Plimoth Plantation's Little Theatre that the center had all of the necessary permits.

"The MHC (Massachusetts Historic Commission) reviewed our plans and issued a permit," Landon said. "We also got a permit from the Fire Department, and the DPW issued a street-opening permit."

The work is also being done in collaboration with the Native American Institute at UMass Boston.

"We will work to ensure that Native perspectives and concerns are integrated into the project from the outset," the project website states. "This will be done through a partnership between Plimoth Plantation – drawing on the museum's expertise in public education and public programming – to reach the widest possible audience."

Though the project began quietly, Landon said, the center welcomes the public's interest and participation.

"Come on by," he said, issuing an open invitation to the public to stop by the School Street digs, ask questions and learn about the project.

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