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Preparing For The Plymouth 400th Anniversary

7:40 AM WED JUNE 25, 2014

## Archaeologists Searching for Wall the Pilgrims Built

By KATE EARL



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Eric Johnson and Xinli Huang, part of the team excavating at Burial Hill.

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Cynthia Snow

*It's still six years away, but already plans are being made in Plymouth for the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the Mayflower. All this month, a group of students from UMass-Boston are busy digging on the north side of Burial Hill Cemetery, site of the original Pilgrim settlement. It's an archaeological dig, a collaboration between Plimoth Plantation and the university. They're searching for parts of a wall – what they call a palisade – that surrounded the original Plymouth settlement*



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4:22

Burial hill juts up abruptly from the surrounding town, and its startling greenness is a jolt to the eye. A hill like this in a populous town would normally be long gone by now, but this hill has a vital place in American history. Though it's now a cemetery, Burial Hill was the site of the first settlement by those who arrived on the *Mayflower* in 1620.

At the base of the north side of the hill, a hot and dusty crowd of young archeologists from UMass Boston were grouped around pits in the ground. Project leader David Landon watched his students work. He explained that they're looking for remains of the fortifications surrounding the original Plymouth settlement.

"The original fort from the 1620s was right on the top of Burial Hill, and then a palisade wall came down off the sides of Burial Hill and enclosed a small town of maybe 30 or 35 houses and other buildings."

On the southeast side of the area, three students lay on their stomachs around a shallow hole in the ground. They're using age-old tools of the trade – trowels, sieves, and buckets. Eileen Belisle was gently working through the dirt.

She described her work, saying, "We carefully take each level and layer of soil and as we are scraping the soil we can see if there's any soil changes, if there's any texture changes, and all of those things give us clues as to how this soil was placed here."

These tried and true methods work well, but before they even began to dig they needed to use a tool very much rooted in the last century – radar. They call it GPR, or Ground Penetrating Radar. They used it to search for something out of the ordinary, something that in their experience might indicate evidence of human activity lying somewhere below. When they found something, they marked it with colorful flags. The radar also told them where not to dig.

"We had a geophysicist, Brian Damiata, who's been working with us," said Landon, "and he's also an expert in detecting unmarked burials. So we were excited to have his participation in part because we want to make sure that none of our digging accidentally disturbs any unmarked burials."

A lot of progress was made in the past four weeks, yielding artifacts such as glass, nails, and ceramics. The largest hole in the ground also produced the best results. Even so,

Landon explained that they weren't expecting to find 17th century artifacts any time soon.

“Although our ultimate goal is to find parts of the original 17th century settlement, we know that if we're digging in an area that has been continuously occupied and has been urbanized, we're going to have to embrace the whole history of Plymouth. We're going have to learn a lot about 19th century Plymouth and 18th century Plymouth and kind of work through all of that as part of our work.”

At the center of the work area was a pit that could easily fit half a dozen people standing up. Justin Warrenfeltz was taking photographs. He pointed out the foundation of a 19th century building that was peaking out of the corner of the excavation.

“We weren't sure for a long time whether it was just a big pile of rocks, or if we actually had our foundation. We're really excited to actually have something interesting. Now what we're doing is taking it down a little bit further to see if we're out of the cultural layers, and we could potentially, if there's good preservation underneath the floor of this building, we could find the 17th century palisade of the fort.”

That's the hope. That they will find, somewhere under this hill, the remains of the settlement. But they don't know. They plan to return next summer, and the summer after. Whatever they find, Plimoth Plantation will help them share it with the public. The plantation will make replicas of artifacts and incorporate them into their reconstructed 17th century village. They'll use the archaeologists' discoveries to help school children find out what it was like to be a Pilgrim.

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