

Adirondack EXPLORER

Rediscovering smallpox hospital history at Lake George Battlefield Park

By Gwendolyn Craig

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Archaeologists return to the former Adirondack military site to unearth artifacts. Animal bones and 18th-century glass among their latest findings

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The vista from Lake George's southern end where people picnic, bike ride and swim now, was a place of disease and death nearly 250 years ago.

The Lake George Battlefield Park was "one of the longest continually occupied military sites in American history," said Russell P. Bellico, an historian and trustee of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, in a news release. It was also where some 2,000 patients suffered from smallpox.

Archaeological digs to uncover more clues of this smallpox hospital and battle site haven't occurred since the late archaeologist David Starbuck led the SUNY Adirondack Archaeological Field School in 2016. But test pits were dug once more this June, under the watch of Siobhan Hart, an associate professor and chair of the Skidmore College Anthropology Department.

The park, Bellico said, was the site of a large military encampment during the French and Indian War, the site of the 1755 Battle of Lake George and later in 1776, the site of the "'General Hospital' at Fort George, the largest smallpox hospital in North America at the time."

On Tuesday in 87-degree heat, Hart, her students and a few volunteers dug and sifted at the northern end of the park near where 1750s military barracks were built. They thought they were digging just inside, or adjacent to one, which may have housed smallpox patients.

Ground penetrating radar had shown a cluster of anomalies, perhaps metal, beneath the grassy surface so Hart decided that was where she would start digging. Somewhat like an X-Ray sees inside the human body, ground-penetrating radar allows archaeologists limited sight into the earth. But things are not always what they seem.

The metal ended up being a pile of beer caps and pull tabs, “an indicator of the more recent land use as recreational space,” Hart said. But as they dug deeper, they unearthed animal bones, possibly from butchered cows, sheep or pigs. It seemed to be a trash pit, Hart said. It was an 18th-century one below a 20th- or 21st-century one.

“It’s like an underground Easter egg hunt,” said Jim Reilly, a retired postman from New Baltimore.

Reilly, Larry Handy, a New York State Thruway retiree, and John Lehter, a retired Coast Guard Academy professor, all dug with Starbuck in the past, some at the Lake George Battlefield in 2015 and 2016. Starbuck died from pancreatic cancer in December 2020.

History buffs with a penchant for archaeology, the three retirees were excited to be volunteering at the site again, laying flat on their stomachs and using paint brushes to uncover rocks 52 centimeters below the surface and sifting through the dirt.

They were somewhat disappointed to have not uncovered more. Lehter recalled finding numerous musket balls on his last dig at the site.

“It’s still fun coming out here,” he said.

The three assisted two Skidmore College interns, junior Lily Whelden and sophomore Cerys Forster. The crew was occasionally interrupted by curious passersby.

The most popular question from visitors, Whelden said, is: “What are you hoping to find?”

“That is the hardest question to answer, because we don’t really know what our possibilities are,” she said. “I’m just hoping to find something unique that can tell us more about where we are.” Whelden was excited to have unearthed an 18th-century piece of bottle glass besides the numerous animal bones.

Hart said most of her work has focused on Indigenous sites and repatriating artifacts to descendent communities.

“I’m interested in the everyday things of people,” she said. “I don’t think I’ll ever do work here on the scale that David (Starbuck) did — the multiple weeks, full summers, and that’s partly because the resources here are not threatened directly.

“We can be deliberate and incremental, using archaeology to learn more about the history of this land and the people who lived here. We can use archaeology to help New York DEC manage the park land in a conservation-minded way to protect the cultural resources that are here.”

Hart wrapped up her dig June 21. The DEC said it is consulting with the New York State Museum in Albany and may allow more archaeological research at the battlefield in the future.

“The goal of the current effort is to collect information that will help us manage, interpret and better protect the site going forward,” the DEC said.





Volunteer Larry Handy, Skidmore College student Cerys Forster and Skidmore Associate Professor Siobhan Hart examine an archaeological test pit on Tuesday at the Lake George Battlefield. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



Skidmore College Anthropology Department cordones off an archaeological dig site in the Lake George Battlefield Park. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



Volunteer Jim Reilly, Skidmore College student Lily Whelden and volunteer John Lehet fill in an archaeological test pit on Tuesday at the Lake George Battlefield Park. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



Skidmore College Anthropology Department cordones off an archaeological dig site in the Lake George Battlefield Park. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



Volunteer Larry Handy and Skidmore College student Cerys Forster dig around what appears to be an 18th century fire pit at an archaeological test site on Tuesday at the Lake George Battlefield. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



Volunteer Larry Handy and Skidmore College student Cerys Forster examine an archaeological test pit on Tuesday at the Lake George Battlefield. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



Volunteer Larry Handy and Skidmore College student Cerys Forster examine an archaeological test pit on Tuesday at the Lake George Battlefield. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



A bystander watches volunteer Larry Handy and Skidmore College student Cerys Forster examine an archaeological test pit on Tuesday at the Lake George Battlefield. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



Associate Professor Siobhan Hart chair of the Skidmore College Anthropology Department and volunteer Larry Handy examine a test pit during an archaeological dig on Tuesday at the Lake George Battlefield. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



Volunteer Larry Handy and Skidmore College student Cerys Forster examine an archaeological test pit on Tuesday at the Lake George Battlefield. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig



Skidmore Associate Professor Siobhan Hart leads an archaeological dig on Tuesday at the Lake George Battlefield. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig