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Archeologists dig through Lake George Battlefield Park

LAKE GEORGE – Long time local — and revered — archeologist David Starbuck died in 2020 after a lifetime of tracking down the region’s history.

Skidmore Associate Professor and Anthropology Department Chair Dr. Siobhan Hart and her team are continuing Starbuck’s work as they dig into the history of Lak George.



From left, Cerys Forster, Dr. Siobhan Hart, and Lily Whelden, joined by several volunteer archeologists from the area are uncovering some of the history at Lake George Battlefield State Park.

Two areas of Lake George Battlefield State Park are being studied this season.

The first is the location where two barracks once stood connected to the stockade forts that were constructed in 1758 and 1759 near the statue of Sir William Johnson and King Hendrick.

The second is farther south where historians believe the battle lines from the Battle of Lake George were drawn.



Lily Whelden, a rising senior at Skidmore College blocks out a section of what is believed to be the bedrock foundation of a barracks, which potentially housed early American smallpox patients. Pictured in the upper right corner is a pile of smaller stones, which Hart and her team believe were used to fill in gaps in the bedrock to create a level place for the building's floorboards.

Using ground-penetrating radar, the team surveys the area where the barracks once stood and record any anomalies under the surface.

“GPR doesn’t tell us what’s down there specifically, it just tells you where there are differences,” Hart said. “It just tells you that there’s some kind of difference in the conductivity and the magnetism of the material that the wave is penetrating through.”

The anomalies picked up by the GPR tell the archeological team where to start excavating. The surface area gets blocked out and extensively documented in order to provide as much topographical context as possible.

“Professional archeology is all about ‘provenience,’” Hart explained. “The three-dimensional location of an artifact or a feature in space.”

Taking note of the depth, lateral, and topographical location of an artifact gives archeologists an idea of not only where the piece was deposited in relation to a known location, but when. Once a dig site is properly marked and documented, the team carefully begins removing layers of dirt measured in centimeters. That material is then sifted through mesh screens for any potential artifacts.

“The excitement in archeology is discovery,” Hart said. “It is those moments of finding pieces of evidence, finding clues and starting to try to put together the puzzle.”

While finding ceramic pots, tools, or other large pieces is always an exciting discovery, Hart said even the tiniest fragment of an item can be an important artifact.

“We haven’t found enough material to really say anything of substance, but we’re finding some of the same materials here that Starbuck [found],” she said. “That tells me there’s something here.”

What Hart and her team were uncovering during *The Post-Star*’s visit to the site was a section of naturally occurring bedrock which contained within it an arrangement of smaller stones, as well as bits of mortar and brick and animal bones.

“What this says to us is that it’s not a random or natural consequence to have those stones there. They were probably put there in place to level out the floor inside of the barracks,” Hart surmised.

The inclusion of debris which was likely swept away from the barracks floor and found its way through the cracks and crevasses of the floorboards, reinforces the prevailing history that this was the very spot where thousands of early Americans were treated for smallpox in the summer of 1776.

“To me, the living floor of one of these barracks is pretty cool,” Hart said. “It’s not something we can pick up. Archeologists call them ‘features’ because they’re not artifacts that you can take to the lab; they’re a kind of a thing that if we tried to remove... we would lose the thing itself.”

The working historical theory is that following a disastrous winter campaign to try and take control of Quebec, Canada in late 1775, the area which is now the park was used as a make-shift smallpox hospital for thousands of American troops in the summer of 1776. What Hart and her team are looking for is evidence that the two barracks which once sat on the site were used to house those patients.



According to historic records, the barracks were located near the statue of Sir William Johnson and King Hendrick at the Lake George Battlefield State Park.

“Have we found anything yet that is clearly evidence of the presence of large numbers of sick people? Not yet,” she conceded. “But it’s possible that there are things that could suggest the presence of large numbers of people.”

The importance of archeology’s mission is to provide tangible evidence either in support or contrast to the written record of history.

Connecting modern people to the history of an area is one of the aspects of archeology that most entices Hart. Particularly in places like

Lake George which was full of “big men doing big things,” it can be the smallest piece of evidence that bridges a gap of centuries.

“Those are things that, when we find them, I think we have that physical connection,” she said. “You’re seeing something that was in somebody’s pocket, it could be 100 years ago, it could be 1,000 years ago, it could be 10,000 years ago.”

But it’s not just about looking into the past for Hart. Uncovering the items left behind by our ancestors can also help to put into perspective what we are leaving behind for our descendants.

“In some ways our society and the consumerism of our society is maximalist for future archeologists. I don’t think that’s actually a good thing,” she said. “If you think more of the history of place and the history of the land and that we are part of a long chain of human and non-human history here, I think that some reflection on that is warranted.”

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