



Skidmore senior Lily Whelden describes what she found in test units #100 and #102 in Lake George Battlefield Park while Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance President John DiNuzzo looks on.

Archaeologists present initial findings in Lake George Battlefield Park survey

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Animal bones, a shard of glass believed to be from an old wine bottle, nails — some modern, one hand-wrought — pop tops and an Army barracks floor were buried under the sod in Lake George Battlefield Park until uncovered by Dr. Siobhan Hart and her crew over the past two weeks as they conducted an archaeological survey of the historic grounds. Dr. Hart, Skidmore College Anthropology Department chair, and her students, senior Lily Whelden and junior Cerys Forster, presented their initial findings and discussed their procedures at the Lake George Battlefield Park Visitors Center this Sunday. The Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance hosted the presentation.

"Our archaeological research begins with some specific questions," says Professor Hart. Last fall, John DiNuzzo, President of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, contacted Hart and asked if she would be interested in doing research in the park. Ensuing discussions with DiNuzzo and Alliance members and a park tour led them to focus on two questions — "Can we locate the Revolutionary War smallpox hospital's foundation, and can we find evidence of the 1755 Battle of Lake George battle lines?"

"These are two questions archaeology can help answer," says Hart.

There has been a lot of interest and media attention surrounding the smallpox hospital since the 2019 discovery of what is believed to be a cemetery for the hospital's patients. While historic maps identify the hospital's location, Hart notes that 18th-century maps do not have the degree of accuracy found in today's maps, which, using satellites, can identify a spot on the Earth within a few centimeters.

While historic maps show a building identified as a hospital in the park, Hart says that "probably most structures around the fort were being used to house and quarantine smallpox patients. So, probably any and every structure was being used for those purposes." We will need to put "shovel to ground" to learn more, she says.

Concerning the second question, Hart says, "There are historic descriptions of where those battle lines were located, and there are historic maps that show us, in general, where those battle lines were, but, again, putting shovel to ground can help us to know, presence or absence, if there is cultural material related to those activities."

Hart and her team, which includes Skidmore Assistant Professor Katie Baustian, choose the least invasive methods available to investigate the grounds. "We have this mantra of 'survey more and dig less.'" Active excavation is destructive, and modern archaeologists prefer to take a conservative approach to better preserve cultural materials.

For the Battlefield Park survey, they are using ground penetrating radar (GPR) to locate areas of interest and then they dig small test units where radar maps show anomalies. The team brought the GPR device to the presentation, and Hart's students explained how the device is used and what they look for in the maps it creates.



Skidmore College junior Cerys Forster explains how to use ground penetrating radar. Lily Wheldon looks on.

The team identified areas in the North end of the park that showed promise. They opened three test units near a site previously investigated by David Starbuck. They uncovered bedrock that, based on historical maps and previous investigations, they believe to be the floor of an Army barrack. Gaps in the bedrock were filled with stones that had been held in place with mortar. This combination of naturally occurring bedrock and man-made filling created a smooth floor for the structure.

The crevices in the rock can provide a wealth of information, Hart explains, as people sweep the floor, little bits of daily life fall into the cracks and are preserved. In test units #100 and #102, located just several yards behind the Battle of Lake George Monument, the team found animal bones, most likely deer, cow or pig, a sliver of a ceramic object and bits of glass in the crevices. After they complete the fieldwork, they will analyze these materials in their lab.

The GPR maps also pointed them to a location that appeared to contain a lot of metal objects. Excavation of the site uncovered beverage pull tabs and a beer bottle cap, materials related to the 19th and 20th-century recreational use of the park.



Dr. Siobhan Hart points to anomalies in a radar map that indicate possible areas for investigation.

The team will continue their Battlefield Park Survey the week of June 17-21, moving their work to the South end of the park to address the second question concerning the Battle of Lake George battle lines. The Battlefield Park Visitors Center will be open each day during the dig from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Friday. Those wishing to observe Dr. Hart's team at work may stop at the Visitors Center on Fort George Road for directions to the site.

"Archaeology generates more questions than it answers," says Hart, "so, we use the knowledge gained from this season, go back to our research questions and say, 'have we answered any of them or, what are the unanswered questions?' now, thinking about that, what do we propose to do for the next year?"



Dr. Siobhan Hart with her students Lily Wheldon and Cerys Forster present their findings.



Dr. Hart's team brought a sampling of artifacts recovered in their investigation.