

# Adirondack EXPLORER

## Piecing together the past: The impact of 18th-century human remains found in Lake George

By Gwendolyn Craig

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### How 833 teeth unearthed at construction site sparked new burial protection legislation

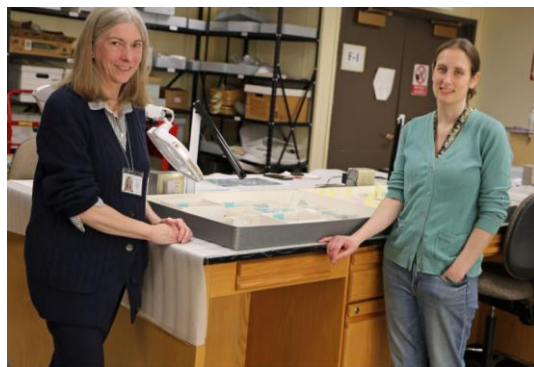
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With a mix of sadness and anger, Lisa Anderson considered trays of bone shards and 833 teeth of 18th-century skeletons. These were the femurs of 44 people and the teeth of 42 human beings, many of them young men of the Continental Army.

And despite the meticulous records on the provenance of the bones sifted from debris in the village of Lake George, the data was irrelevant. It grew clear that contractors had moved the 70 dump-truck piles of soil multiple times before calling the Warren County Sheriff's Office to report the disturbed graves.

"It was a seriously messed up disaster," said Anderson, the New York State Museum's bio-archaeologist.

Anderson and Julie Weatherwax, a research and collections technician at the museum, were the leads on this vexing skeletal puzzle. They were unable to piece together one full skeleton. They were not aware of anyone who had worked on a human remains find of this scale and destruction.



*Lisa Anderson and Julie Weatherwax, of the New York State Museum, stand in their lab where they pieced back together 18th-century remains unearthed on Courtland Street in Lake George. Photo by Gwendolyn*

*Craig*

The Courtland Street remains became “the poster child” for legislation included in the 2023–24 state budget, Anderson said. The “Unmarked Burial Site Protection Act” is the first New York law governing unmarked graves.

The Courtland Street remains also created a unified effort among village, town, state and federal officials to honor the fallen soldiers in one of the most developed areas of the Adirondack Park.

Plans are underway to bury the remains, and others unearthed in the village but not yet laid to rest, at a newly authorized memorial in the Lake George Battlefield State Park. Paired with the state law, new local policies are helping protect any more historic skeletons discovered underneath the bustling village with a war-filled past.

“The plan is to prepare for future discoveries because I can guarantee it will happen,” Anderson said.

### **Protect unmarked graves**

Between the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War, and the site of the largest Continental Army hospital in the Revolution, Lake George was a hub of war and death.

John DiNuzzo, president of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, said in 1776 when soldiers returned from an unsuccessful attack on Canada, healthy troops remained at Crown Point and Ticonderoga, while those who were sick were brought to Lake George.

“Military camps were not good places to be in the 18th century,” said Charles Vandrei, the state Department of Environmental Conservation’s historic preservation officer of four decades (who died in July). “You were safer on the battlefield than you were in camp.”

The Courtland Street remains are believed to be victims of smallpox or other diseases from the Continental Army hospital established in 1776 at Fort George where up to 1,000 people died.



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

On an 87-degree day in June, [Siobhan Hart and her team dug at the Lake George Battlefield State Park](#), searching for more signs of the hospital and artifacts. Hart is an associate professor and chair of Skidmore College's Anthropology Department and has taught about unmarked burial laws for years.

Up until 2023, she said, New York was one of four states that didn't have an unmarked burial law.

Vandrei said he had worked toward such a law his entire decades-long career.

Stories have circulated in Lake George of residents finding skeletons and throwing them away or keeping them.

Kathryn Muncil, CEO of the corporation that runs Fort William Henry Museum, said years ago people lacked guidance on how to handle remains. "When my grandfather started the fort, people would arrive with bones and he'd say 'thank you,'" she said.

Although the town and village had records of some human remains in the area of Courtland Street before, no laws, policies or historical preservation reviews protected them from contractors who dug a foundation in 2019 for a new apartment building. Eleven grave shafts were visible.

Anderson wished they had halted work sooner. The removal process, she thinks, could have gone faster if they had been allowed to remove more intact remains. Instead, it took 15 months of sifting with the help of hundreds of volunteers.

Muncil said the contractors were in "uncharted territory."

"I believe they did the best that they could do under the circumstances, and I thank them for taking that action," she said.



*Lyn Karig Hohmann and Charles Vandrei sift for artifacts and 18th-century human remains, discovered during a construction project on Courtland Street in the Village of Lake George. Photo courtesy of Lisa Anderson*

## **New legislation**

The new state law requires that when human remains are found, digging must stop and 911 must be called. If a coroner or medical examiner determines remains are more than 50 years old, the state archaeologist must notify the Native American Burial Site Review Committee.

In the case of Native American remains, the committee has stewardship and will attempt to find descendants. After 90 days, the property owner, as with other remains, may hire an archaeologist to carry out removal.

The law also establishes penalties for non-compliance. Those failing to report discovered human remains or funerary objects could be subject to a misdemeanor. Those who intentionally remove human remains or funerary objects could be charged with a misdemeanor with greater penalties. Anyone who knowingly destroys a burial site, human remains or funerary objects or possesses those with intent to sell, could be charged with a felony.

The law was already tested in Lake George. In the fall of 2023, National Grid was digging a gas line near the Lobster Pot restaurant on Canada Street and unearthed an 18th-century skull. They halted work and called local officials.

The skeleton was removed and will be reburied with the Courtland Street remains.

### **Local policies**



*Lake George planner Dan Barusch uses a burial map as a reference for development projects. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig*

The state and town have a map they consult where they believe most people were buried in Colonial times. It was drafted using documented military campaign sites.

Dan Barusch, director of planning and zoning for the town and village of Lake George, said they had not been using the burial map as a reference for development projects until the Courtland Street find. Barusch consulted the map and found the street was already highlighted. Barusch does not advertise the map, mindful that artifact scavengers could use it.

Contractors had planned for a second apartment building on Courtland Street, he said, but state and local officials are certain more human remains are buried there. The site is vacant and local government may purchase the site for a memorial park.

Local government leaders now consult the burial map for projects, including planning uses for \$10 million the state granted for downtown revitalization.

Barusch is also working on having the municipalities establish historic preservation boards to provide oversight on found remains or artifacts.

### **Studying remains**

Unearthing human bones comes with a responsibility of studying them for clues on who they belonged to and how they died.

Anderson strives to balance respecting the remains and delving into “our collective history.”

The Associated Press reported a few of 15 skeletons unearthed at Fort William Henry in the 1950s were [reburied in a 2012 ceremony](#). Many local officials interviewed at that time did not know the majority of the fort’s skeletons remained with Brenda Baker, former director of repatriation and curator of human osteology at the New York State Museum.

Baker, an anthropology professor and curator of Nubian collections at Arizona State University, said the fort lacked proper storage for the remains, so she took them to Arizona to store and study. She has kept them since 1998.



*Fort William Henry museum in Lake George. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig*

Associated Press reports show the late archaeologist David Starbuck and others felt the remains should have been reburied sooner. Muncil said she now wants the [fort's remains returned to Lake George](#) and buried with the Courtland Street bones.

Baker emailed the Explorer a glimpse of what she and colleagues have concluded. They were soldiers involved in a 1757 French and Indian War siege, perhaps best known for its depiction in the novel "The Last of the Mohicans."

The new research adds to what she and Waterloo University colleague Maria Liston published in 1996. Baker and Liston reported five of the skeletons were men buried in a mass grave at the fort. Three had been shot in the knee and one man had been decapitated.

In Baker's latest research, she found one of the skeleton's DNA reveals treponemal disease, which includes yaws, bejel and syphilis. Another may have had tuberculosis.

Baker said she has 15 partial to complete individuals in Arizona and hopes to present more findings in the spring. At least one of the skeletons, she noted, was a child. DNA may provide ancestry information.



*A team of volunteer archaeologists sifts through dirt to recover the remains of an 18th-century burial ground uncovered in 2019 during a construction project on Courtland Street in the Village of Lake George. Photo courtesy of the state Department of Environmental Conservation*

### **Studying Courtland Street remains**

Lyn Karig Hohmann, former president of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, said when she learned about the Courtland Street find, she drafted a petition calling for a respectful reburial. With family in the military, she didn't want to see soldiers' bones "ending up in a box on a shelf some place." The town and village adopted her petition in resolutions.

Some research on the remains is necessary, however, to determine if they were soldiers and some limited scientific studies are underway before interment.

At least one of the skeletons was buried in uniform with buttons associated with the First Pennsylvania Battalion. It appears the rest of the remains were buried without other artifacts. Anderson said the hospital's records are spotty, likely because they were overwhelmed with sick people.

Anderson and Weatherwax believe most of the remains were of male teenagers, though two could be under the age of 10 and five were likely over 40. Anderson and Weatherwax said the skeletons saw little sign of injury in battle. It's why Anderson thinks their deaths could have been disease-related, especially with the smallpox hospital in the area.

The state museum sent teeth to McMaster University in Canada for research on smallpox and to find out more about the 44 individuals.

Ana Duggan, an evolutionary geneticist and molecular anthropologist studying the teeth for McMaster University, said she was first contacted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta about the Lake George remains. Duggan had collaborated with the CDC previously on recovering evidence of variola virus, which causes smallpox, in a mid-17th-century Lithuanian child mummy.

The virus would not be active in the Lake George bones, according to the CDC, Anderson and Duggan said. But Duggan can analyze the DNA found in a tooth's root to search for the virus.

Duggan said if the variola virus is found in the Lake George teeth, it would be the first published instance of it studied in North America.

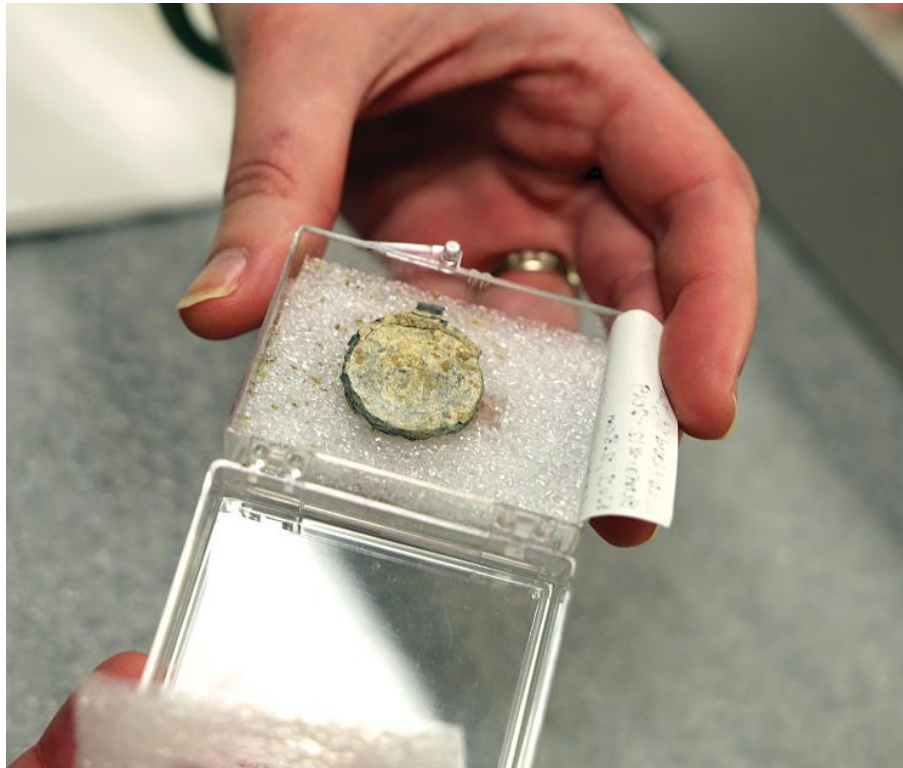
"It had such a profound effect on humanity for those centuries that it was circulating," Duggan said. "I think it's also important to tie it into the history of vaccination ... a medical revolution that has shaped our world for the last couple of centuries and really decreased childhood mortality so intensely."



*Buttons with the First Pennsylvania Battalion signature from the Revolutionary War, unearthed in Lake George. Photo courtesy of the state Department of Environmental Conservation*



*Eighteenth-century buttons unearthed on Courtland Street in Lake George and kept at the New York State Museum in Albany. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig*



*A First Pennsylvania Battalion button used to help identify 18th-century remains unearthed in Lake George. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig*

### **Reinterment plans**



Those on the Courtland Street project hope to inter the remains in time for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, which is also the 250th anniversary of the hospital on Lake George. The project has received state and federal approval.

Barusch is the chair of the Courtland Street Reinterment Committee, a group of public and private individuals who helped spearhead the design of a memorial site and place of interment at the Lake George Battlefield State Park.

“Repose of the Fallen” will feature six columbarium for remains and include a walkway, flagpole, stone benches and interpretive signs. The committee is raising money for the project and seeks a share of downtown revitalization funding.

The U.S. Office of Army Cemeteries said it authorized New York to move forward with the reinterment plan in May. It wants any monument to avoid the conclusion that all the remains recovered at Courtland Street were those of Continental Soldiers because further evidence is needed. The Secretary of the Army is designated the next-of-kin for the Army’s unknown soldiers.

The Army is working on a dozen “major battlefield burial cases” involving soldiers. Most are on the East Coast. Three are potential Revolutionary War burials and the majority are from the Civil War.



*The site in the Lake George Battlefield State Park where 18th-century remains will be reburied. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig*

State and local officials are confident nearly all the 44 individuals in Lake George were Revolutionary War soldiers. However, one or two may have been women and children traveling with the young men of the family.

“We didn’t have buttons with all the graves,” Barusch said. “So, we’re being cautious about how we word things.”

State and local officials held a “hallowing of the ground” in June. DiNuzzo is thrilled that not only the Courtland Street remains will be laid to rest, but also other unearthed skeletons.

Hohmann hopes that if people have any other remains, they will “quietly bring them forward” so they can be interred.

Anderson recalled how National Grid last year asked her where they should be careful working to avoid running into more skeletons.

The map of battle sites and cemeteries has been helpful, but Anderson said: “We don’t know other discoveries if people won’t ’fess up.”

She’ll accept anonymous tips, she added.