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Battlefield Park archeological survey resumes with new questions

June 15, 2025 by Gillian Burdett

“We’re glad to be here again, and we’re glad to be able to continue the research here, which was research that was begun in the 2000s by Doctor David Starbuck and many field school students and volunteers,” says Professor Siobhan Hart, Associate Professor at Skidmore College. Hart was speaking Saturday at a presentation in Battlefield Park hosted by the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance. Hart conducted a study last summer focusing on the 1776 smallpox hospital located on the site and the 1755 Battle of Lake George battle lines.

Hart returned to Battlefield Park on June 2 with two Skidmore seniors, Lia Donahue and Lauren Attwell, to explore a new series of research questions focused on an open area of the park west of Fort George Road, an area Starbuck and his team called Site 10.

Attwell (left), Donahue (center), and Hart describe the work they performed last week at a test unit during the Battlefield Park archeological survey.

“One of the things they found when they were excavating was what archeologists call a feature, which is essentially in an area where we can tell that some kind of past activity happened, either because there’s a group of artifacts all together, or because there’s just a difference in the color of the soil or the texture of the soil,” says Hart.

Starbuck’s team found themselves in the middle of a feature, which they labeled Feature 1, alongside the present-day Fort George Road, which closely tracks the 1755 military road. They found butchered animal bones, porcelain and other ceramics and personal objects such as buttons. The artifacts retrieved were a mix of French and Indian War and Revolutionary War-era materials. A compass excavated from Feature 1 is on display in the Battlefield Park Visitor Center. “David’s interpretation was that the feature was a trash pit that was perhaps part of a gully along the side of the military road,” says Hart.

In addition to 18th-century materials, past surveys found pre-contact materials, which may have been in the ground for 1,000 years, and early colonial period Indigenous materials on the west side of Fort George Road and in test units closer to the lake.

“So we know that this was a very important location for people to live for millennia, and certainly the lake and the proximity to the lake, the flora and fauna that the lake encouraged, was a big part of that,” says Hart.

Due to the intensive labor involved in site excavation, Starbuck's team was unable to locate the edges of the feature, and the first research question this summer's session will investigate is "What's the extent of Feature 1?"

The second research question — "Are there other features related to military encampments?" — flows from the history of Battlefield Park as an active site during the French and Indian and Revolutionary Wars. The third research question will look for evidence of pre-colonial Indigenous activity.

Hart and her team are using ground penetrating radar (GPR) to identify anomalies underground that indicate there may be cultural material worth investigating by opening a test pit. Hart's students demonstrated how the GPR works and how data collected is used to create maps that show the location of underground anomalies. When an area of interest is identified, they take a test core of soil from the spot to further examine what is below the surface. This non-invasive method allows them to be more selective in where they dig.

Hart, Donahue and Atwell, along with volunteers, will be working in the park on weekdays through June 27, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., weather permitting. The public is welcome to observe. Visit the Lake George Battlefield Park Visitor Center, which will be open during the survey work, for more information.

Skidmore student Lia Donahue explains how archaeologists identify underground anomalies using ground penetrating radar at a presentation held in Battlefield Park on Saturday, June 14, 2025.

Skidmore student Lauren Attwell describes how GPR data is used to create maps.