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REDISCOVERING AMERICA'S EARLIEST VETERANS

ALEX PORTAL

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IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM

Members of the archaeological team spent 15 months sifting through the massive mound of dirt attempting to pick out every fragment of the remains.



The massive dirt mound that contained fragments of 44 Revolutionary War patriots.

Image provided by the New York State Museum

LAKE GEORGE – The remains of 44 patriots believed to have died during a smallpox epidemic in 1776 will finally be laid to rest during a ceremony at Lake George Battlefield Park, 250 years in the making.

“We have spent the past seven years painstakingly working to piece together the story of the individuals whose unmarked graves were destroyed,” Lisa Anderson, curator of Bioarchaeology and NAGPRA coordinator at the New York State Museum, said in a statement. “It has been a privilege to help uncover the story of these veterans, and we look forward to them finally having the dignified burial they deserve.”

During the summer of 1776, Fort George at the southern end of Lake George was converted into a smallpox hospital to separate the afflicted from the rest of the Continental Army station at Fort Ticonderoga at the lake’s northern tip. Thousands of people died at the site and were buried in makeshift cemeteries, in some cases stacked on top of one another.

“Records are really sparse because it was such an overwhelming event, so we only really know the names of maybe six people who died there,” Anderson said in a follow-up interview with The Post-Star.

In February 2019, one of these mass burial sites was discovered by a construction crew while digging the foundation for a new housing unit along Courtland Street in Lake George. Projects utilizing state and federal funds typically undergo an archaeological study before commencing in order to assess whether anything of significance might be uncovered. Because the Courtland Street project was a private project, no such study was required, so it wasn’t until the crew noticed what looked to be human bones in a massive pile of dirt that the museum was contacted.

One of the first steps when encountering an unmarked burial site is to determine whether it belongs to a Native American or one of European descent. Fortunately, some of the graves had not been disturbed by the excavator, so the museum team was able to quickly deduce that the site was not an indigenous burial. However, much of the site had been churned up by the massive machines, breaking bones and scattering remains.

The archaeological team, with the assistance of the Department of Environmental Conservation, worked diligently in the frigid winter weather to carefully exhume the intact graves. Once the weather broke, they began sifting through the massive pile of dirt, removing any clues about who had been buried on the site and when.



Julie Weatherwax, research and collections technician of bioarchaeology at the New York State Museum, sorts through some of the fragmented remains of the 44 individuals found at the Courtland Street dig.

Image provided by the New York State Museum

“It was basically the size of a house,” Anderson said. “[We] recovered literally thousands of fragments of bone.”

It took over a year and the dedicated work of more than 140 volunteers for the site to be thoroughly examined.

Back at the lab, Julie Weatherwax, research and collections technician of bioarchaeology at the New York State Museum, and her team began cleaning, drying, and sorting each fragment. She said some of the bones had been so damaged by the excavation that it was like a massive three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle just to assemble a single piece.

“Imagine 40 people’s 200 bones broken into pieces and then all mixed together,” she described. “So, it’s taken a while to sort through all that.”

Weatherwax began with the teeth.

“I picked the teeth to do first because I figured we’d get a lot of information just from that,” she said. “You can learn a lot about people just from their teeth.”

That was how she determined how many individuals had been discovered, by identifying 44 (incomplete) sets of teeth. From there, she knew she would ultimately be trying to piece together 44 sets of bones. Unfortunately, many of the parts were still missing.

“You know the song, ‘your hip bone’s connected to the...’ if you’re missing that piece, you can’t put it back together,” she said, adding that much of the individuals’ remains are likely still at the site, hidden under the structure. “It was mostly a little disappointing how little we could reconstruct these people just because of the damage.”



Like a Rosetta stone, this button marked with the insignia of the 1st Pennsylvania Battalion was the key to unlocking much of what is known about the remains found in 2019.

Image provided by the New York State Museum

Because so few remains were found of each individual, little can be known about who they were. Part of that mystery has been solved by the discovery of a series of brass buttons. One in particular shows an insignia from the 1st Pennsylvania Battalion.

“There’s been a lot of graves found up in Lake George over the years, and because of the activity there during the French and Indian War with numerous battles, we just often assume that that’s what these unmarked graves date to,” Anderson said. “But that button told us that this was actually from the American Revolution.”

The 1st Pennsylvania was called up by the Continental Congress in December 1775 to help support the ill-fated campaign to invade Quebec led by Gen. Richard Montgomery and Col. Benedict Arnold. By July 1776, the American forces were pushed back in retreat to their fortification at Ticonderoga, plagued by fatigue and an outbreak of smallpox, which led to the establishment of the hospital at Fort George.

That single button from the uniform of an unknown Pennsylvanian soldier is the most telling item plucked from the site.

“We’re always holding out that technology could change and there’s things we could do in the future, but at least from the physical bones themselves, there’s only certain features that you can use to tell age or sex,” Weatherwax said. “It works best when you have the whole person.”

Fortunately, a team from McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, has been researching the evolution of smallpox. Given Lake George’s history as a smallpox hotspot, samples of the fragments were sent to the university for genetic testing.

“They were able to provide the sex and also have preliminary evidence that there may be a couple cases of smallpox [within the group],” Anderson said.

The geneticist’s research is still ongoing and has yet to be conclusively confirmed, but based on that information, as well as the known history of the area, some educated guesses can be made about who these people were.

Most of the remains are of young men in their teens and early 20s; however, one set of remains seems to be that of a female. Women played an integral role during the Revolutionary War, maintaining the camps, cooking, cleaning, and serving as nurses to the soldiers.

“So, it kind of matches the profiles of what a military population would have been at that time,” Anderson asserted.

Weatherwax said that none of the remains seem to carry any injuries that would correspond with battle, nor did they show any signs of a protracted illness.

“Generally, diseases like smallpox and things, they kill you too quickly for it to make its way to the bone,” she said. “The fact that they didn’t have any of that kind of stuff means that they did die probably of an illness that was short-lived and not from injuries from battle, so it supported the hospital theory.”

The whole endeavor speaks to the historical significance of the area and how crucial it is that, as the march of progress goes on and the land is developed, steps are taken to preserve that history.

“It doesn’t have to hold up your project. This did, it took much longer to sift through that dirt than it would have to remove intact graves properly,” Anderson said.



Julie Weatherwax, right, and a colleague pack the remains into their final resting place in preparation for their reinterment on May 22.

Image provided by the New York State Museum

As a result of the Courtland Street project, in part, New York State passed the Unmarked Burial Site Protection Act in 2023, which requires that all construction activity that could further disturb a site be stopped upon the discovery of a possible burial site.

“The protocol is to report it to the police, so call 911 and then they’ll reach out to us; we can tell right away if this is something,” Anderson said. “We don’t want to be a problem, we want to be a solution.”

One final journey

As for the 44 Revolutionary Americans uncovered in 2019, they will return to Lake George under full military honors during a procession from the state museum in Albany and be reinterred at the newly constructed “Repose of the Fallen” plaza in Lake George Battlefield Park.

The procession will depart from the back of the State Museum at approximately 10 a.m. on May 20, with a motorcade including New York State Police leading nine Korean War and Vietnam-era military trucks operated by members of the NY-Penn Military Vehicle Collectors Club, as well as an escort provided by New York members of the Patriot Guard Riders.

“We pay our deepest honor and respect as 44 patriots embark to their final resting place, standing as a permanent tribute to their bravery and sacrifice,” New York State Police Superintendent Steven G. James said in a statement about the ceremony. “May we honor their memory with our actions and always be mindful of the heroes that walk among us. Their names and stories will never be forgotten; they forever inspire us to carry on with integrity and courage.”

The route north will take it through downtown Albany, Colonie, Halfmoon, Clifton Park, Round Lake, Malta, and Saratoga Springs, where the motorcade will halt for a brief patriotic observance in front of City Hall at 474 Broadway. The procession will continue north through Wilton, Moreau, and South Glens Falls, into the city of Glens Falls, where there will be a brief halt at the intersection of Route 9 and Bacon Street in front of the Chapman Museum for an observance. From Glens Falls, the motorcade will travel through the town of Queensbury to Lake George.

Upon entering the village of Lake George, the motorcade will turn north onto Elizabeth O'Connor Little Boulevard, then head east on Beach Road for a short distance before turning onto Fort George Road and stopping at the memorial site. The estimated time of arrival is noon to 1 p.m.

Upon arrival, most of the caskets will be immediately interred in the memorial. The remaining four caskets will be taken to a nearby church to be safeguarded until the ceremony on May 22. Volunteers will serve as round-the-clock honor sentinels at the church until the morning of the 22nd, when the four caskets will be placed upon a horse-drawn wagon and transported to the memorial site for the formal reinterment ceremony with federal, state, and local officials.

“It’s really good for these individuals to get the recognition that they deserve,” Anderson concluded. “They need to be treated respectfully, so this outcome is the best possible one.”