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Digging City's History: Finds Show a Black Middle Class Had Once Thrived on Beacon Hill.

By Jenna Russell, Boston Globe Staff

June 30, 2005

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University of Massachusetts faculty researcher David Landon (right) and his team are the latest to sweep for artifacts on the Beacon Hill site. Since the 1970s, archaeologists have collected 70,000 artifacts around the historic African Meeting House. (Globe Staff Photo / John Tlumacki).

In a small dirt yard on Beacon Hill, tucked into the maze of narrow streets behind the State House, Joe Bonni stepped into a three-foot hole and traveled back in time 200 years.

"It's taken three weeks just getting to 1800," he said.

Nearby, Teresa Dujnic marveled at a dusty, dark shard of pottery, a fresh find from another hole.

"Black basalt," she said. "That's pretty cool. I've seen it in the lab, but I've never found it."

From where they dug in recent weeks, behind the historic African Meeting House off Joy Street, the archeology students from the University of Massachusetts at Boston could hear the hum of life on the hill. On streets close by, tourists checked their maps and snapped

digital photographs; state workers chatted on cellphones; legislators finalized details of the state budget.

But immersed in their excavation -- a six-week effort to sweep artifacts from the land behind the meeting house before it is disturbed by an upcoming renovation -- the students felt closer to another era, when hundreds of African-Americans, including many freed slaves, lived on the hill's north slope and the meeting house was the lively center of their thriving neighborhood.

"What people find most stunning is that there was a middle-class, African-American society in Boston in the 19th century," said Bonni, 35, a former journalist who began studying at UMass a year and a half ago. "This was a rare place, where people owned businesses and fought segregation. . . . They were finding their own way, and the question is, how did they do it?"

Archeologists bent on finding answers first excavated the site in the 1970s and again in the mid-1980s and collected 70,000 artifacts, said David Landon, associate director of the Fiske Center for Archaeological Research at UMass. The latest dig, which wraps up this week, is looking even more closely at the compact back lot, using newer water-based screening techniques to salvage the tiniest remnants of history: seeds and bone fragments discarded from long-ago meals; pollen and insect parts that reveal past environmental conditions.

Other findings this month include hundreds of pottery fragments, from blue-painted porcelain to plain red earthenware; animal bones; buttons; a silver clothespin; an intact leather shoe, preserved because of wet conditions in the former privy; and a preserved glass bottle from the 1870s. The artifacts, now piled in plastic bags inside the meeting house, will be analyzed by UMass students and faculty over the next 18 months, Landon said. A preliminary report of their findings will be presented to the public July 26 at the meeting house.

The students hope their work will help flesh out the proud history of the brick structure, which opened in 1806 as the First African Baptist Church and became known as the "black Faneuil Hall." A center of political and religious life, the meeting house was the first home of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1832 by white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. The meeting house and the Abiel Smith School next door, now home to the Museum of Afro-American History, were central in the fight to end school segregation, as well as slavery.

"This was the cradle, the heartbeat, for the emancipation of all blacks," said Tracy Gibbs, a museum spokeswoman.

The \$4.5 million renovation of the African Meeting House, scheduled for completion by the end of 2006, its bicentennial year, will restore the structure to its 1850s appearance. A capital campaign is under way. Museum leaders said an elevator will also be installed for handicapped access, allowing the hall to again be used for lectures and social events, in keeping with its history as a community gathering place.

The elevator shaft will be built at the back of the structure, over one of the spots now being excavated.

In the sunlit back lot, surrounded on all sides by the brick walls of neighboring buildings, UMass students said the labor has been painstaking. Each hole, some as deep as 5 feet, is dug by hand, using a trowel, over days and weeks. Larger artifacts are removed by hand before each pail of earth is sifted through a screen, where smaller pieces are recovered. Paperwork must be done for every batch of items.

Some of the students are being paid for their work through a National Science Foundation program that seeks to boost interest in science by exposing undergraduates to field research.

Tim Hollis, 25, a UMass senior whose previous archeology experience was on rural digs in Belize and Connecticut, said he sometimes dreams he's digging and not getting any deeper.

The ever-present dirt doesn't bother him a bit. But, he said, "it's not a career path for fastidious people."