

2017-07-21 / Front Page

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Uncovering a 17th century structure

Digging history in Woolwich

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VOLUNTEERS SIFT THROUGH DIRT at the archaeological site in Woolwich, looking for artifacts from structures that once stood there. NATHAN STROUT | THE TIMES RECORD WOOLWICH

Along the Kennebec River in Woolwich, at Thwings Point, Friends of Merrymeeting Bay and a number of volunteers are working to uncover details of two long-gone structures from centuries ago.

“I like it, it’s interesting,” said John Edgecomb, who was volunteering at the dig on Tuesday. “I’ve been interested in this type of stuff, moreso Indian artifacts, but this is interesting also.”

FOMB and MHPC have been working on the site since 2007 and have found a number of 17th century artifacts. In 2011, they uncovered and identified two cellar holes. Digs in 2014 and 2015 helped determine much of the outline of the cellar. This year, the work continues as they attempt to determine the size of the structure that was on top of the cellar.

Lee Cranmer is a retired historical archaeologist with the Maine Historic Preservation Commission who is leading the dig.

“(The site) was first settled around 1650 by a man named Ashley, who probably had a tavern here,” said Cranmer.

Cranmer said the tavern was “definitely burned and destroyed in 1676 in King Phillip’s War,” a conflict between native inhabitants and colonists, named for a Wampanoag chief’s adopted English name.

“Then, in 1720, part of this land was owned by the Pejepscot Proprietors, and one of the proprietors was a man named Temple,” continued Cranmer. “(Temple) owned this land, and he

settled a tenant farmer here. The tenant farmer only lasted about a year and a half here and then he was drowned in the river.”

Temple then leased to another farmer for only about a year,” Cranmer said, “and then the Indians scared him off. So after that, the Thwings moved in around 1750.”

“So what we have down here in this piece of land, we have at least evidence of the two settlements: The 17th century and Thwing,” said Cranmer.

The ongoing dig is meant to uncover more information about the size of the cellars and the buildings that used to be above them. “The size and the shape of the building tells us something,” said Cranmer.

One way they are doing that is looking for post holes. Post holes are expected to be generally uniform in a structure, but they vary between structures at the time. One of the main goals at the dig now is to find more post holes to make it easier to predict where other post holes are.

The land itself is owned by the state of Maine and Michael and Claire Robinson, according to FOMB. FOMB and other conservation organizations worked to protect the land with help from the Land for Maine’s Future program.

FOMB is still looking for volunteers as the dig continues next week. Volunteers are encouraged to sign up in half-day slots, and donations are welcome to help with the costs of the \$7,000 dig.

“This might be the last season,” said Cranmer. “I thought it was in 2015, but after working all winter realized there are more questions to be answered. Hopefully we can answer them.”

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