

Archaeologists dig up backyard of living museum at Hull House

July 25 2013, by Pat Donovan



The dig has found a number of fragments of early pottery and ceramics, among other items.

Among several archaeological excavations undertaken this summer by the Archaeological Survey in the Department of Anthropology is the ongoing search for and excavation of outbuildings at Lancaster's Hull Family Home and Farmstead, one of Western New York's most significant historic sites that is anchored by the oldest substantial stone dwelling in Erie County.

As part of the effort by the Hull House Foundation to restore the farmstead to its original composition, archaeologists led by Ryan Austin, research analyst with the Archaeological Survey, are working to locate the remains of the property's outbuildings, which are expected to include a threshing barn, well, animal pens, privy and possibly an outside oven and smoke house. A room that may have served as a root cellar recently was unearthed.

The public is welcome to visit Hull House during the Hull Family Home and Farmstead History Camp July 22-26. A wide range of events focused on 19th-century frontier life will take place from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily at the historic site at 5967 Genesee St., Lancaster. Archaeologists will be on hand July 25 to answer questions and demonstrate their science.

The archaeologists are assisted by a professional landscape architect and a historical research consultant who are studying other homes and farms of the period to determine the type, size and approximate location of the buildings.

UB became involved in this undertaking in 2005 when the Archaeological Survey undertook a Phase I survey of the entire property. The three-phase plan was designed to locate artifacts and establish where outbuildings were originally sited.

"We've found fragments of brick, nails, early pottery and ceramics, early glass, and recently a bone-handled fork and a portion of a teapot handle," says Douglas Perrelli, director of the Archaeological Survey.

Other things most people wouldn't glance at are evidence of [prehistoric life](#) on the site. "Some of these items are displayed at Hull House; others are housed in the survey's lab at UB.

"The first step in the actual excavation," he explains, "was to dig test pits every 50 feet to form a grid. Then we determined which areas were worthy of further examination. Next, the team dug slit trenches 1.6 feet wide and 150 feet long, which radiate from the house and permit expansion upon earlier work. The team is working in the slit trenches now and may use ground-penetrating radar to identify possible building foundations and other areas deserving of further attention."

Gary Costello, president of the Hull House Foundation, says the farmstead itself originally comprised 340 acres and grew wheat and barley, and whatever vegetables, fruits and farm animals—likely an ox, chickens, pigs, a horse, maybe a cow—were required to make it self-sufficient.

"One significant feature was uncovered recently a few feet behind the house; it is a 7-foot-by-11-foot room, 40 inches below grade, that we suspect may have been a root cellar," Costello says. "There is also a family cemetery on the site. Over the decades it was severely vandalized, but eventually that will be restored as well."

"The original 340 acres were sold off piece by piece over the years and in 1992, the house had less than an acre of land attached to it," he says. "The Hull House Foundation was established in 2006 to handle the restoration and educational use of the site and, of course, to restore as much of the original property as possible. Since then, we have purchased 26 acres of the original property and plan to acquire more."

The Hull House restoration is being funded by many Western New York foundations and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, as well as by private donations.

"With additional land and restoration of the farm buildings, the Hull Farmstead will represent life on the early Niagara Frontier in a manner

that is accurate and can offer visitors the opportunity to get a feel for the experience of the Hull family," Costello says.

"Even during restoration, the home serves as an educational and interpretive center for early 19th-century pioneer life on what was then the country's western frontier," he says, adding that he and others involved in this work have taken a great deal of satisfaction from the historical research, development of restoration plans and fundraising required by this effort.

Costello notes the restoration of the house is almost complete. The woodwork has been refurbished and interior plaster work is underway.

Hull House has further historical importance. In 1813, the British burned Buffalo to the ground. It is considered likely that the Hulls would have assisted victims who escaped the village via Genesee Street, which extended from Buffalo to Clarence and beyond.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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