

Bones uprooted last Halloween Eve give flesh to bygone era

October 29 2013



Yale anthropologist Gary Aronsen and Nicholas Bellatoni, Connecticut state archaeologist, examine the bones discovered in 2012 on the New Haven Green.

On Halloween Eve 2012, ferocious Storm Sandy uprooted an historic oak tree on the New Haven Green and exposed skeletal reminders of New Haven's past. A passer-by found bone fragments lodged in roots of the oak tree, which was planted in 1909 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. The discovery of the bones on Halloween eve drew international media attention and triggered a quest to answer the question: To whom did the bones belong?

A year later, the bones have yielded some clues about their history to Yale University anthropologists and their colleagues. Forensic experts including Yale anthropologist Gary Aronsen have assembled and analyzed the bones and, in so doing, recreated a portrait of life in the Elm City more than two centuries ago.

Aronsen and other experts will present their findings Halloween night, Oct. 31, at the New Haven Museum, 114 Whitney Ave. A panel of experts will discuss the history of the Green during the program from 5:30 to 7:45 p.m. The public is invited.

Preliminary findings show the [bone fragments](#) came from multiple individuals who died in the late 1700s, about the time city fathers stopped using the Green as a [burial ground](#). As many as 10,000 people may have been buried under the Green in the 150 years it was used as a burial ground, historians have estimated.

One adult male between the age of 20 and 30 and at least three children under the age of 10 were identified from fragments. The cause of death of individuals could not be determined, but the adult male may have suffered from genetic abnormality that contributed to health problems during his life.

New Haven suffered through outbreaks of yellow fever, scarlet fever, and dysentery during the years the individuals died. Examination of teeth revealed that all had experienced periods of nutritional or metabolic stress at an early age.

"The uprooting of the Lincoln Oak reveals in a dramatic way the important role of the New Haven Green in the life of the city," said Judith Schiff, chief research archivist at Yale and a member of the Oct. 31 panel. "Without the storm, years and years would have gone by and we would have forgotten this part of New Haven's history."

Provided by Yale University

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