

No. 2 if by sea: Outhouse tied to Paul Revere is excavated

September 29 2017, by William J. Kole



In this Sept. 28, 2017, photo, City of Boston Archaeological Program volunteers Tim Riordan, left, and Bob Sartini excavate a site that experts believe may have contained an outhouse used by Paul Revere. Fragments of pottery and a tobacco pipe already have been recovered from the dig outside the Pierce-Hichborn House in Boston's historic North End. Experts say the house, built next to Revere's house in 1711, was owned by one of Revere's cousins, and the renowned American patriot himself likely visited on numerous occasions. (AP Photo/William J. Kole)

No. 1 if by land, No. 2 if by sea? Archaeologists are excavating what they believe was the site of an outhouse next door to Paul Revere's home—and the "privy," as the colonists politely called their potties, could be flush with artifacts.

Historians say people typically dumped trash and household goods in their outhouses. On Thursday, the second full day of the dig, volunteers with the City of Boston Archaeological Program already were pulling fragments of pottery, bottles and a tobacco pipe from the bricked yard of the Pierce-Hichborn House in the heart of Boston's North End.

So far, there's been no sign of mummified human excrement. That would be the telltale evidence of an outhouse at the home once owned by a cousin of Revere, Boston city archaeologist Joe Bagley told The Associated Press.

"Paul Revere might well have come over here for dinner and used the bathroom," Bagley said. "He had 12 kids in his own little house next door. It's easy to imagine they didn't stay cramped up in there all the time."

The house—one of the earliest remaining brick structures in Boston—was built around 1711 next to the Paul Revere House, one of the city's most prominent historic sites and a huge tourist draw. Archeologists timed their dig to coincide with drainage improvements being made to the property.



In this Nov. 24, 2004 file photo, tourists visit the Paul Revere House in the North End neighborhood of Boston. In 2017, archaeologists said they think they found where an outhouse was located next door to Revere's house in the yard of the Pierce-Hichborn House. Experts say the house, built next to Revere's house in 1711, was owned by one of Revere's cousins, and the renowned American patriot himself likely visited on numerous occasions. (AP Photo/Chitose Suzuki, File)

Colonial-era outhouses tend to yield surprises, said Nina Zannieri, executive director of the Paul Revere Memorial Association that owns and operates the homes.

"They've excavated other privies and they were full of stuff," she said. "It's always a treasure trove. For us, it's an opportunity to get at a source of information that's literally buried underground."

Any fossilized unmentionables will be analyzed for seeds or the remains of parasites—clues that could tell scholars more about the colonists' diet.

And bones left over from a 1700s supper could speak to the occupants' financial health, Bagley said. "We'll learn what they were eating, how much money they had, whether they bought good or cheap cuts of meat," he said.



In this Sept. 28, 2017 photo, Boston city archaeologist Joe Bagley displays fragments of pottery and a tobacco pipe recovered from a site that experts believe may have contained an outhouse used by Paul Revere. Experts say the Pierce-Hichborn House in Boston's historic North End, built next to Revere's house in 1711, was owned by one of Revere's cousins, and the renowned American patriot himself likely visited on numerous occasions. (AP Photo/William J. Kole)

Moses Pierce, a glass worker, was the original owner of the house. It was later bought by Nathaniel Hichborn, a boatbuilder and a cousin of Paul Revere, famed for his midnight ride on April 18, 1775, warning that the British were coming.

Revere's backup plan—preparations to light either one or two lanterns as signals from the steeple of Boston's Old North Church—is immortalized in a line in "Paul Revere's Ride," a Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem: "One if by land, and two if by sea ..."

Did one of America's most celebrated patriots use the outhouse? The experts concede they may never know for certain.

"If it happened," Zannieri said, "we hope he left a marker for us."

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