

Revere House Radio
Episode 33
Archaeology at the Paul Revere House

Welcome back! May was a hectic month for us at the Paul Revere House and we haven't released an episode in a few weeks. We're happy to be back though, and continue bringing you new content. And as a plug, if there are ever topics you are really curious about, feel free to reach out! We're always brainstorming new episode topics, and we'd love to cover the topics you're interested in. Reach us on Twitter, Facebook, or email preverehouse@gmail.com. OK, let's start the show!

In honor of the past month of May, which is Preservation Month in the United States, I thought I would do an episode about one way we preserve the past on our site - through archeology. Archeology is not meant to simply gather and collect, though that is a part of it, but really it's goal is to be able to learn about the past through material culture and landscapes. Gathering hundreds of pot sherds is not very helpful if no one analyzes and interprets them! And so, what archeology has transpired at the Paul Revere House, and what can the findings tell us about the land our house is built on, and who has lived here? Welcome to Revere House Radio, I'm your host, Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly. Let's dig in.

I'd like to start this episode by discussing the first inhabitants of what is historically known as the Shawmut Peninsula, but what you today most likely call Boston. The Massachusett and Pawtucket peoples utilized and lived on or around the Shawmut peninsula and its surrounding islands for centuries. In the early 17th century, when Europeans started arriving in earnest to the area and making efforts to establish long term settlements here, conflict and disease decimated the populations of these native people and forced them from their homelands. You can learn more about what the descendants of these indigenous people are doing today through their websites. I'll link to some in the show notes. I'll also link to an interactive mapping project called Native-Land.ca through which you can research the land you live on and see which tribal nations call that area home.

The land that I will be discussing today is our current property in Boston. Most of the material culture referenced in the literature available to me was deposited by humans starting sometime in the 1600s, and much of it seems to be connected to European settlers and their descendants. The Revere House has had several digs on our site since its beginnings in 1908. I'll touch on a few of them, but the bulk of my research centered around a dig that took place from 2011-2013. When the Paul Revere House was in the midst of renovating what is now our visitor center, we

hired the Public Archeology Lab based out of Rhode Island to do a somewhat extensive dig in and around the 1835 building and see what we could find, learn, and preserve from their work. A total of 9,852 objects were found during that dig.

One feature that stuck out in their archeological report and that gives a good example of the importance of archeology in urban settings was the prevalence of drains. Yes, you heard me correctly, drains and sewers. Drainage systems on our site vary in time of construction, quality of construction, and method of construction. All of these allow us to, in a relatively small geographical area, see how the city of Boston approached sewage and drainage issues over the centuries. This, in turn, can shed light on larger issues such as changing attitudes toward public health, the growing understanding of the relationship between sewage and disease, and even the economic status of an area, depending upon the quality of the drainage systems. For example, private sewage management was typical in Paul Revere's time and into the early nineteenth century. Meaning, property owners were responsible for building privies and maintaining them at their own expense, though there was some intervention by the board of health if need be. On October 12th, 1799, the Boston Board of Health, for which Revere served as president, published in the newspaper that it was time to clean out one's privies. The article said, "...that as the season has now arrived when the emptying of the contents of privies will be the least offensive to the inhabitants, it be earnestly recommended to and required of the inhabitants, immediately to empty all privies whose contents are within 18 inches of the surface." Much of these efforts were enacted in an attempt to stave off yellow fever epidemics, which, being carried by mosquitoes, ramped up in the summer months. Earlier that year on April 2nd, 1799, the board of health published a declaration of all their cleaning efforts in advance of the hot summer days. This included "137 vaults of privies, running on the surface of the earth, have been emptied and cleaned. 27 offensive drains cleansed and cleared.....13 ponds and cellars of stagnant water, cleansed and the ponds filled up with clean earth." Revere's involvement on the board of health is a fascinating aspect of his biography and we'll definitely do a future episode on it. Until then, I recommend reading our blog post from Nina Rodwin published on April 9th, 2020, which I'll link to in the show notes.

In 1835, Boston started allowing private sewage pipes to be connected into the public lines, which meant homeowners could theoretically flush their sewage from their privies into the larger municipal system, thereby ending the practice of cleaning out one's privy when it was full. In fact, on our site, we see brick catch and drainage systems that suggest our visitor center at Lathrop Place was added into this system. Later in that century, 1877 to be exact, Boston started

construction on the Boston Main Drainage System, a new sewer system that funneled sewage out to Moon Island in the Boston Harbor, which was then washed away during outgoing tides. While good for public health in general, we can see from features on our site that some property owners were slow to adopt a newer, better system. We have evidence of two barrel privies that were filled in quite late, and were located alarmingly close to a water cistern which continued to threaten local drinking water.

I understand this is a lot of talk about sewage and drainage, but I think it's a good example of how archeology can illuminate many other areas of public and private life, allowing us to better understand topics like public health, urban planning, and municipal politics. From objects located within these structures, too, we can draw conclusions about the people who lived on our site. Starting with expensive, imported ceramics in the 1600s we know the people who lived in the Revere House - the Howard family and then the Knox family, were quite wealthy. We know that both Robert Howard, his son in law, and later Andrew Knox were all involved in international seafaring or merchant endeavours. This embedded them in the wealthiest strata of the economy and gave them access to goods from all over the world. We also know that Robert Howard's lifestyle and wealth was supported by his involvement in the slave economy. Unfortunately there is little to no material evidence in the archaeological record from our site for those who were enslaved here. The information we have about Samuel, one man we know lived in the Howard household, is from limited written records.

Later in the 18th century, we can see the types of objects changing and this indicates that the socio-economic status of the residents was changing as well. The Reveres owned this property from 1770-1800 and the ceramics from that time period tend toward the more plain and simple, rather than the opulent ceramics from the 1600s. Going into the early nineteenth century and into the time after our Visitor Center was built in 1835, the objects change still. We start to see things that we may recognize more readily, such as a glass pomade jar, perfume bottles, pipes, pieces of slate tablets and pencils, and bone button making equipment. Together, these objects tell a story. A story that started hundreds of years ago and continues today as people live, work, build and produce material culture on this land. Digs like the one in 2011 are invaluable for understanding the past that is all around us, literally just below our feet. Fortunately, the discoveries didn't stop there.

There have been more recent digs on other areas of our property. For example, in 2017, Joe Bagely and his intrepid team of volunteers spent part of that summer digging in the courtyard of our other building, the Moses Pierce-Hichborn House.

A comprehensive catalogue and report is still in process, but you can see some of what they found on the Boston Archeology Lab website, which I'll link to in the show notes. Joe's office is always active around Boston and we are just one of many many sites he has investigated. I encourage you to follow them on social media if you're interested in this topic as they are always posting new content. And that is just the city of Boston! Just think what could be under your own home or in your own yard.

Archeology continues to educate and inform us, and can have very real, present day impacts on the fate of old buildings or properties. Many municipalities use archeological findings to determine the historic and preservation value of buildings that may not look like much on the outside, but have outstanding and important histories. I hope you will be inspired to learn a little bit more about the history and archeological record of your own area, and I hope you've enjoyed learning a little bit about what is buried beneath our property.

As we move into the summer, stay tuned for updates regarding operating hours, days, and protocols, as those are changing rapidly. The most up-to-date information can be found on our Twitter and Facebook pages, as well as our website. This has been Revere House Radio, and as always, thanks for listening.