



# BIG DIGS

**Boston's archaeology program encourages volunteers and visitors to go underground**

BY ALEXANDRA PECCI

## "MAMA, LOOK AT THIS!"

My 7-year-old daughter, Chloe, extended her dirt-covered hand, and showed me a large, triangle-shaped fragment of ceramic, almost the size of her palm, decorated with a pretty, dark-red flower pattern.

"Wow!" I said. We examined it together for a minute, then carefully placed it in a small plastic bag where we'd been putting other treasures dug from the ground: buttons; square-headed metal nails; pieces of glass, ceramic, and pottery; and anything else that looked man-made. Then Chloe went back to work, sifting through a pile of debris on a wide plastic tray, her pants caked in dirt, her eyes and fingers carefully searching for treasure.

## DIGGING UP DIRT

In a place like Boston, it doesn't take much digging to discover a seemingly bottomless trove of historical artifacts. The area has been inhabited for more than 7,000 years, and over the millennia, people have left clues about their lives, from the earliest American Indians, to Puritans, to revolutionary colonists, to Italian immigrants of the North End. Anyone who digs through those layers looking for history will find it. The city's massive Central Artery Archaeology Project uncovered relics such as stone arrowheads and drop weights from prehistoric hunting and fishing camps, and wineglasses and mugs from a 17th-century tavern.

With many properties designated as City Landmarks, Boston's archaeology program is sometimes called upon to excavate and preserve lost history before construction projects get under way. The Old North Church reached out ahead of a major restoration in time for its 300th anniversary in 2023. When I learned that the program eagerly recruits voluntary help, I jumped at the chance to participate.

"We don't require any previous experience, we just hope people are interested," says Joseph Bagley, Boston's city archaeologist. "We don't want archaeology to be something that only archaeologists do in Boston."



COURTESY CITY OF BOSTON ARCHAEOLOGY PROGRAM (5); BOTTOM LEFT: ALEXANDRA PECCI



The author's daughter, Chloe (bottom left), participated in a Boston Archaeology dig at the city's Old North Church, where artifacts included pottery shards and an intact ceramic transfer-printed tea bowl (far left). This pipe (bottom right) is believed to have been used by Irish immigrants living in a neighboring tenement.



## GO DEEP

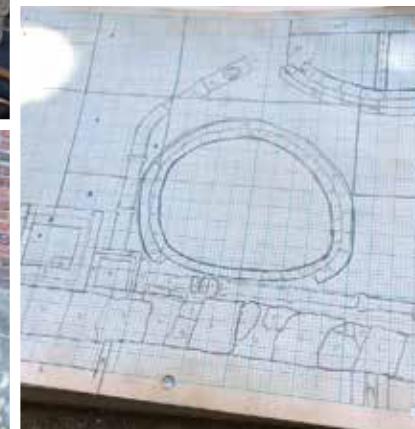
Anyone can watch or assist the public digs. There is no charge to participate and reservations are not required (appointments are needed to visit the lab). Boston Archaeology provides regular updates on dig dates and times and what's being excavated. (617) 635-3850; [boston.gov/archaeology](http://boston.gov/archaeology); [fb.com/bostonarchaeo](https://www.facebook.com/bostonarchaeo/); @BostonArcheo.



Among other things, the Old North Church's Washington Garden yielded doll parts. Other Boston Archaeology projects include work in the Old North Church's crypt (below left) and at the Malcolm X House site in Roxbury, Massachusetts.



(Near left and below) On the Old North Church site, excavations at the privy of the adjacent Unity Court tenement resulted in a particularly rich trove of artifacts.



### THE STUFF OF LEGEND

We found plenty of coal slag—leftovers from burning coal—that resembled blackened, pock-marked pieces of rock. We also found shards of ceramic and glass, metal nails, and pieces of bone. We quickly got the hang of decoding which items were worth bagging and which weren't. Within an hour, we had filled several artifact bags ourselves.

Over the course of the multi-week dig, the team uncovered doll heads and arms, oyster shells, teacups, an ink bottle, beads and buttons, a lice comb, an intact glass oil lamp, rat skeletons, wooden clothespins, and hundreds of other discarded items. Every layer revealed clues about the different immigrant populations—English, Irish, Jewish, and Italian—that called those tenements home over the span of 100 years.

After an hour of picking through coal slag and ceramic shards, Chloe was ready for a slice of pizza in an air-conditioned restaurant, where we marveled at how ordinary the objects we uncovered were. There were no Indiana Jones-style golden idols in booby-trapped temples. Instead, the team got excited about oyster shells, lice combs, and other clues to peoples' real lives.

"It's that realization that nothing is insignificant," Robin said. "It ignites your imagination. You can touch something that people were using. Really using."

But we were all eager to return and do more archaeology work another time. We're not alone. As Bagley said, Boston is "one of those cities where we never have to convince people to care about the past."

*New Hampshire-based Alexandra Pecci wrote about fried clams at Woodman's of Essex a few issues back.*

### GARBAGE DAY

Since my archaeological experience extends about as far as the Indiana Jones movies, I wasn't sure what to expect when we showed up at the Old North Church's dig site, but Bagley quickly put us to work.

We were part of a volunteer team excavating the cloistered Washington Garden, formerly the site of three 1830s tenements that were demolished in the 1930s. Our focus was an old cistern and privy that tenement residents used. Volunteer groups alternated between digging; standing almost-shoulder deep in a long, narrow excavated pit and shaking what was dug up through screens to separate large pieces from dirt; and placing those large pieces onto trays. That's where Chloe, my stepmother, Robin, and I came in. Bagley instructed us to comb through everything, remove whatever looked man-made, and place those items into clear plastic artifact bags that corresponded to the dig's different strata.

Excavating the privy was a little like dumpster diving: We were searching through other people's trash. Chloe and I sat on the grass, examining, piece-by-piece, everything that was too big to be sifted through the screen. Whenever we finished a batch, another arrived right behind it. Occasional tourists wandered in, and Bagley would always stop what he was doing to explain the dig.



The city usually does two or three digs each year, working in the warm-weather months when the ground isn't frozen, at locations where construction is about to occur. Recent digs include the Malcolm X House, and this year, the Old North Church's crypt. During each dig, Bagley shares pictures and descriptions of the artifacts with the archeology program's thousands of Facebook and Twitter followers. He also uses those social media channels to recruit volunteers.



COURTESY CITY OF BOSTON ARCHAEOLOGY PROGRAM (7)

### IF YOU GO



### STAY

Both these hotels are in Boston's North End, within walking distance of the Old North Church.

#### BATTERY WHARF HOTEL

Rates begin at \$314. (617) 994-9000; [batterywharfhotelboston.com](http://batterywharfhotelboston.com).

#### BOSTON MARRIOTT LONG WHARF

Rates begin at \$429. (617) 227-0800; [tinyurl.com/gwrnh5](http://tinyurl.com/gwrnh5).



### DINE

#### BOSTON PUBLIC MARKET

offers seasonal food from 40 New England vendors year-round. (617) 973-4909; [bostonpublicmarket.org](http://bostonpublicmarket.org).

In 2017, **ARTÙ** is celebrating its 25th year of serving fine Italian food. (617) 742-4336; [artuboston.com](http://artuboston.com).

Your AAA travel agent can provide trip-planning information.

Visit a branch, call (800) 814-7471, or go to [AAA.com/explore](http://AAA.com/explore).

TOP RIGHT: COURTESY BATTERY WHARF HOTEL. BOTTOM RIGHT: ALIPES