



History Underground at Longfellow National Historic Site

The site you are visiting today has been one of continuous human habitation for over 250 years. Beginning in 1759, John Vassall, Esq. built this large Georgian mansion, and within five years his 97-acre estate included a carriage barn, other outbuildings, and possibly even slave quarters. During the Revolutionary War the estate became an encampment for the Continental Army and General George Washington's headquarters 1775-1776. The Craigie family, who owned the property between 1791 and 1841, built additions onto the house and added outbuildings and landscape features. The Vassall and Craigie outbuildings no longer exist but foundations could still exist underground. The Longfellow family continued to make changes to the site including the existing carriage barn, built in 1844. Today, these layers of human history are hidden from view beneath the ground.

The Longfellow family and their changes to the house and grounds are well documented through primary sources. Comparatively little is known about the Vassall, Washington, and Craigie time periods. Archaeology can provide us with vital insights into what happened at the site before Henry Wadsworth Longfellow took-up residence. The existence of Chinese export porcelain

shards, for example, would indicate a family of considerable wealth.

Before National Park Service stewardship of the site, archaeological discoveries were by chance. In the 1920s, for instance, a gardener uncovered a cannonball and French bayonet left over from the Revolutionary War encampment. The first organized archaeological investigation of the site began in May 1997. The goal of the project is to identify and ultimately preserve any archaeological resources lying within the boundaries of Longfellow National Historic Site.

Recent discoveries by National Park Service archaeologists include hand-wrought nails, charcoal, animal bones, a single copper button, and shards of brick, earthenware, porcelain, bottle glass, window glass, and wood. At the rear of the carriage barn they discovered a buried masonry structure, likely the remains of an historic manure pit. Gathering the artifacts is only the first step. At their laboratory the archaeologists will clean and analyze the artifacts to identify and date them. The new information will allow for enhanced interpretation of daily life over the past 250 years.

What is Archaeology in the National Park Service?

The science of archaeology is the study of past human culture. Archaeologists usually specialize in either prehistoric or historical periods. The archaeologist's investigation entails a combination of field work and laboratory analysis. Both demand sound scholarship and precise data collection to interpret the past. Today, new technologies such as ground-penetrating radar can eliminate the need for excavation which destroys the site and is expensive. However, in many instances excavation is necessary. Artifacts uncovered through excavation are only one type of evidence. Soil types, layering of soils, submerged features such as trenches and post holes, and the location of artifacts in relation to each other are all vital clues. Field notes and laboratory analysis culminate in a published report of the archaeologist's findings and a preserved collection of artifacts for future study and exhibition.

Archaeology is one of the many ways that the National Park Service promotes its mission, decreed in the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act: "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of future generations."

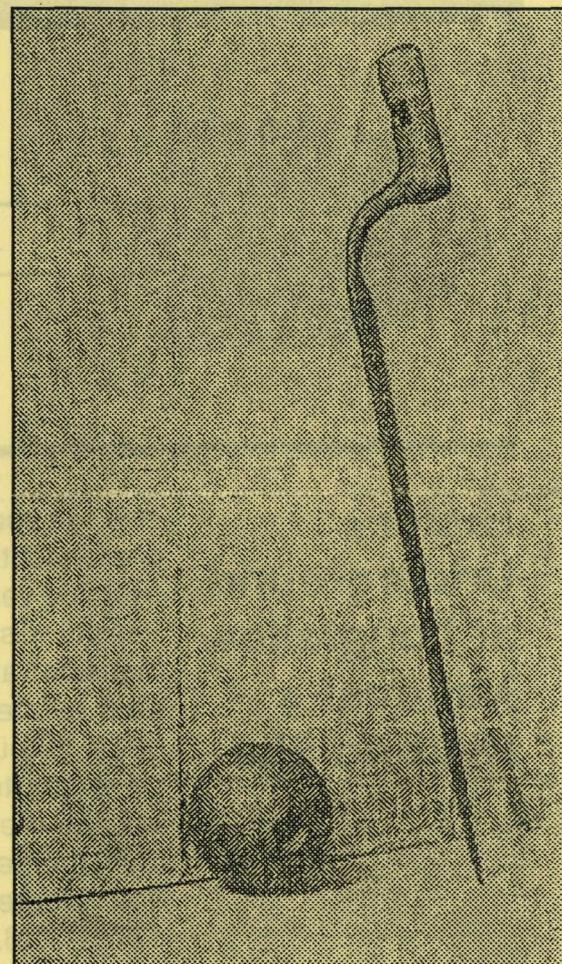


Illustration from "Revolutionary Bayonet in Longfellow Garden," *Boston Post*, March 18, 1930.

Take a Look For Yourself

The field work portion of the project will continue until the fall. If you see the archaeologists at work, feel free to observe and ask questions. To ensure your safety please stay outside the roped-off areas.



For More Information

If you are interested in learning more about archaeology, pick up a free copy of *Archaeology & You* in the Visitor Center.