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Project Overview

The Plymouth Colony Archaeological Survey is a collaborative public archaeology project focused on a reanalysis of the Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts. Working with the Town of Plymouth, Plimoth Plantation, descendant communities, and a variety of other stakeholders, we have been excavating in downtown Plymouth, assessing conditions of site formation and historic land use practices while looking for any preserved remains of the 17th-century settlement and fortifications. The project includes a variety of research, education, and public outreach goals intended to add new perspectives to the discourse around the coming 400th anniversary of the colony's founding in 1620. These investigations are designed to address the project's three broad questions: the creation of the English colonial landscape, the environmental context and ecological consequences of colonialism, and the material dimensions of the relations between Native people and the colonists.

To date the project has completed three seasons of geophysical survey (2013–2015) and two seasons of test excavations (2014, 2015) along the eastern edge of Burial Hill (formerly Fort Hill). This area was the western

edge of the original settlement and the location of the Town's fort from 1621–1676 (Fig. 1). After the fort was dismantled the hill began to be used for burials, with the earliest surviving stone dated 1683. Our work has explored an area just to the east of the marked burials, where a line of 18th- and 19th-century buildings once stood, testing inside, underneath, and behind the structures. Based on the current understanding of the layout of the 17th-century settlement, this test area should cross the northern palisade wall. In 2014, we discovered and documented parts of four historic structures from the 18th and 19th centuries, and it became clear that no earlier deposits survived beneath or between the structures. Further, testing behind the buildings turned up no early deposits, suggesting we were too far north, outside of the original settlement.

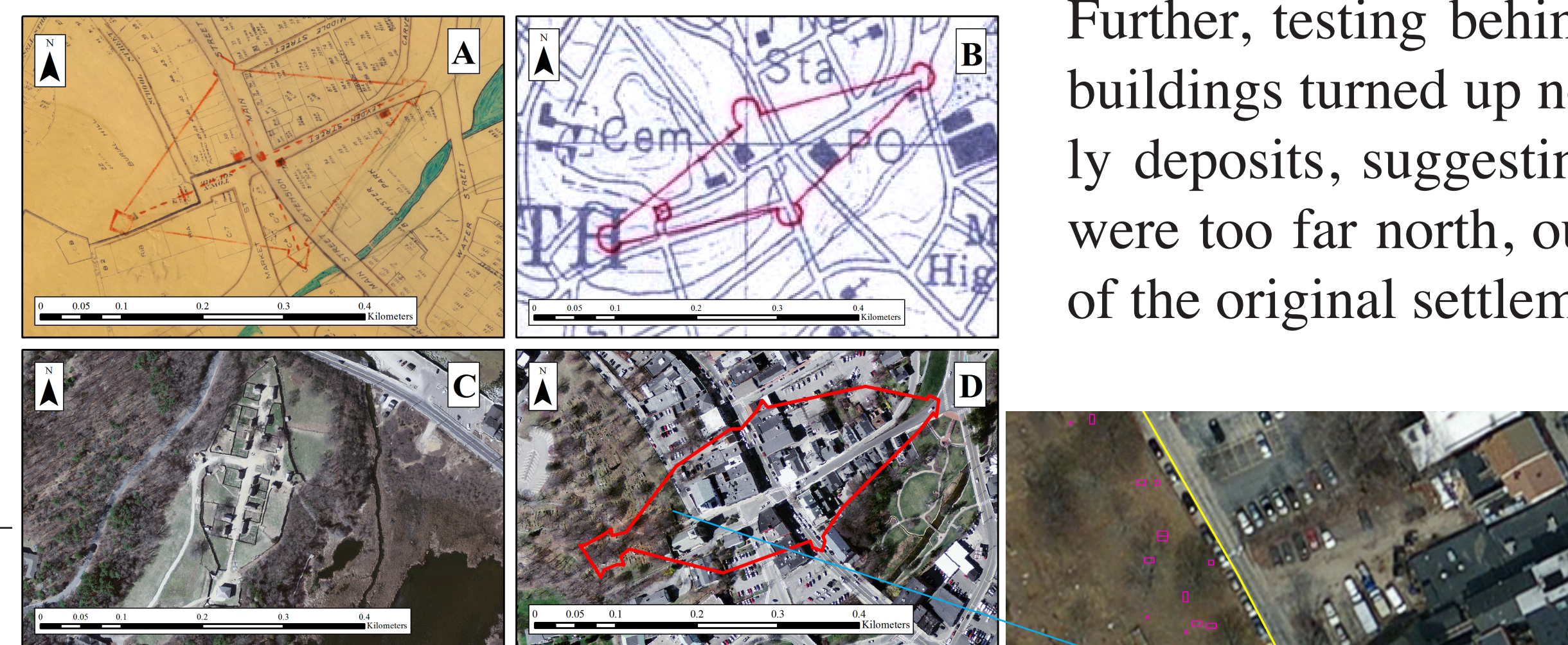


Fig. 1 Conjectural outlines of the Plymouth settlement palisade. A) Plimoth Plantation collections; B) Plymouth Colony Archive Project; C) Aerial view of the reconstructed Plimoth Plantation village; D) Outline of Plimoth Plantation overlaid on the modern air photo. Detail to the right shows excavation unit locations at the edge of Burial Hill.

2015 Excavation Results

In 2015 we moved our excavation further south, towards what should be the inside of the settlement, and concentrated mostly on testing behind the buildings. There we found two areas with intact earlier deposits. In one unit, we uncovered an intact portion of a Native site, including a small pit feature. Artifacts from this unit are primarily lithic chipping debris in a variety of materials (Fig. 2), one projectile point tip, and pieces of Native ceramic, including some that appear to have fine incised designs when examined microscopically (Fig. 3). No early historic artifacts were recovered in association with these materials, suggesting a Late Woodland site that predates the colonists. That Native people lived on Burial Hill is not surprising because we know that the English colonists settled on the Native village site of Patuxet, but the preservation of portions of a site in this densely urbanized environment is significant.



Fig. 2 Flakes from one level of the Native site.



Fig. 3 Microscopic view of one of the Native ceramic fragments.

At the far southern extent of our excavations, we uncovered two colonial features. One was a post hole from a mid-18th century building, but the other was a small segment of a trench that we believe dates to the 17th century based on stratigraphic position and its contents, which included a fragment of Native pottery. In redeposited layers above this feature we found other 17th-century artifacts including several fragments of Border ware, early casement window glass, and a marked pipe. The pipe had an RB mark surrounding a dagger and a heart (Fig. 4), which stands for Richard Berryman, whose pipes were made in Bristol, England, between 1619 and 1652. Pipes with the same mark were found in Ferryland, a 17th-century English colony in Newfoundland (see www.colonyofavalon.ca), and another example may have been found in Plymouth during the 1972 excavations at the Allerton/Cushman Site. The trench feature continues beyond the limits of the 2015 excavation area, and we will return to it next summer. Because the area for work on Burial Hill is so constrained, we also began geophysical survey of other parcels in downtown Plymouth in 2015. We expect to begin archaeological testing of some of these areas in 2016 and to expand our geophysical survey to additional parcels.



Fig. 4

Analysis of Previously Excavated Collections

Collections research to date has focused on the analysis of artifacts that indicate interaction between Native Americans and English settlers. Kellie Bowers examined a series of previously excavated collections from Plymouth Colony sites curated by Plimoth Plantation. Historical accounts and previous research show that material culture was used by both colonists and Native people as: 1) a means of communication between groups that was imbued with symbolic meaning; 2) economic items to be traded for other goods or services; and 3) objects that crossed cultural lines and barriers, acquiring new meanings in the process. Scholarly literature and comparative 17th-century site assemblages helped identify these materials and provided context for interpreting the relationships formed by and around these interactions.

Colonial landscapes like Plymouth are fundamentally shaped by multicultural interactions. Determining who used what in a colonial setting is frequently difficult as Native people and colonists alike used items such as scissors, knives, and straight pins. This situation requires an inclusive understanding of sites and collections as multi-ethnic, situating object types—and sometimes specific objects—in cross-cultural circulation to understand their genealogy. All of the collections studied contained some artifacts that are Native in origin (e.g., stone tools), Native in destination (e.g., glass trade beads), or even Native in co-use through reappropriation (e.g., scissors, firearms). Of particular interest is the presence of reworked copper kettle pieces and sheet copper at all of the study sites (Fig. 5). This material was embedded in multicultural interaction and helps presence Native people in spheres traditionally deemed “colonial.”

Fig. 5 This brass projectile point excavated from an early Plymouth site in the 1940s represents a blend of English material and Native form.



Future Directions

A Collaborative Research Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities funds the next three years of work on the project. In addition to returning to the features partially uncovered at the end of 2015, we plan to expand our geophysical survey and excavation beyond Burial Hill to a series of other test areas in downtown Plymouth (Fig. 6). As part of this project we plan to undertake environmental coring for palynology, while also continuing to reanalyze existing archaeological collections.



Fig. 6 Future test areas.

The excavation in the Town of Plymouth is very much “urban” archaeology, with complex stratigraphy, deep excavations, and very patchy preservation of early features and deposits (Fig. 7). The discovery of substantial intact parts of the 17th-century settlement thus remains a significant challenge.

Fig. 7 Profiling strata.

