

Archaeologists from the University of Vermont Consulting Archaeology Program excavating burials within the footprint of a house addition in Burlington, Vermont.



HOME MAKEOVER

Reveals War of 1812 Burials

by KATE KENNY, JOHN CROCK,
AND BRETT OSTRUM
University of Vermont Consulting Archaeology Program
and JESS ROBINSON
Vermont State Archaeologist

Owners of historic houses know that renovation projects inevitably lead to surprises, both big and small. However, one homeowner in downtown Burlington, Vermont, gutting and expanding a late-nineteenth-century house in the fall of 2020, may be able to claim one of the most unusual surprises of all.



Outlines of coffins can be seen as archaeologists clear soil from the site. A total of seventeen grave shafts were uncovered. Archaeologists worked for two weeks excavating each grave shaft and recording and removing the burials.

As the mechanical excavator removed the first bucket of earth from the footprint of the new addition, human remains and fragments of a decayed coffin were exposed. As soon as the excavator operator saw what he thought was a human bone, he followed protocol and immediately notified the police. Detectives then called the state medical examiner, who determined that the remains, indeed human, were historic and not associated with a crime. He called in State Archaeologist Jess Robinson to take up the investigation. Robinson confirmed the findings and, in consultation with John Crock of the University of Vermont's Consulting Archaeology Program, formulated a plan to recover the individual remains and investigate the rest of the footprint for the addition to the house. Robinson and Crock knew that more than one burial was likely.

The discovery of groups of unmarked graves in Burlington's Old North End has occurred routinely since at least the 1850s, when houses were built, city sewers and waterlines installed, fuel tanks placed, and even once when a creemee (soft-serve ice cream) stand was erected in 1955. In fact, this very address was known to have been mentioned at least three times as a place for burials in mid-twentieth-century newspapers.

The Vermont State Historic Preservation Office acted immediately to arrange state funding to support

the evaluation of the roughly 500-square-foot addition site. To determine if more burials were present, and if so, how many, archaeologists carefully stripped away the topsoil in small increments—with the aid of a mechanical excavator—across the entire area looking for the telltale contrast between disturbed and undisturbed soils. Ultimately, the outlines of seventeen grave shafts were exposed. They had been laid out in three rows extending west from the foundation of the old house. The graves were arranged with heads to the west and feet to the east. Each grave appeared to be a single burial, with approximately one-and-a-half to three feet between them. These were probably the remains of adults or teenagers, as there were no young children or infants among them. Over the next two weeks, teams of archaeologists carefully excavated each grave shaft to record and remove the burials.

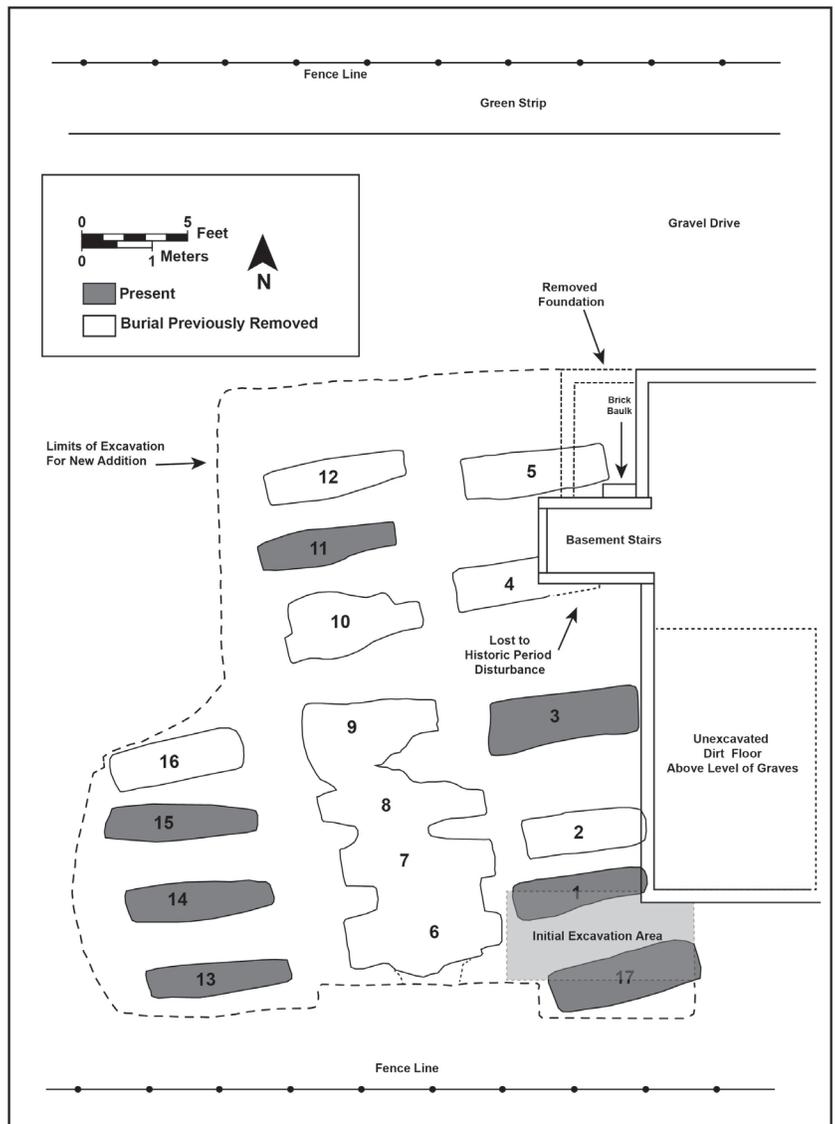
It turns out that archaeologists get surprises, too. Only seven of the seventeen graves contained full skeletons; ten graves had already been exhumed. Soil stratigraphy and other clues, such as the lack of even small skeletal elements, suggest that they were removed carefully, before the house was built, and probably before the wooden coffins had deteriorated significantly. Based on historic reports, these graves may be among those from which medical students at the University of Vermont and Castleton University acquired anatomical specimens in the 1820s and 1830s.

Schematic map shows the location of grave shafts that the archaeologists discovered.

As the modern archaeological excavations progressed, the minimal number of personal finds in the burials left dating them unconfirmed—until the discovery of several military uniform buttons in some of the graves that are consistent with the War of 1812 time period. The initial analysis of the seven sets of recovered remains shows that at least six were male or likely male (with one indeterminate) and that two were probably in their late teens. Three were between the ages of twenty-one and thirty, and two were between thirty and thirty-four, all of military age. Most compelling, however, one individual was an amputee who may have died soon after his leg was removed below the hip.

During the war, from June 1812 to June 1815, Burlington was the site of an extensive American military base. The barracks, storehouses, guardhouse, officers' quarters, hospital, and parade ground were located near what today is Battery Park, but there were also satellite campgrounds, one of which was located west of Elmwood Avenue Cemetery. The number of personnel stationed in Burlington fluctuated from a few hundred to just over 4,000. The hospital served a broader military district and was used continuously until the end of the war. While it was designed for 300 patients, the number occasionally rose to 600 or 700 and even topped 900 in 1814.

The hospital treated many ailments typical of nineteenth-century armies including dysentery and measles, but it also dealt with two severe epidemics, probably influenza or a similar disease. Additionally, the hospital treated injuries sustained in accidents and casualties from battles such as those in Chateaugay, New York (October 25-26, 1813); Lacolle Mills, Quebec (March 30, 1814); and Plattsburgh, New York (September 11, 1814). Although most of the individuals treated at the hospital survived, it is estimated that between 600 and 700 soldiers died in Burlington, along with an unknown number of state militiamen, Native allies, prisoners of war, and camp followers. Most of the burials were apparently made on the sandy plain north of the military buildings and campsites. Soon after the war these burial sites slipped out of sight and memory. A portion of the burial ground



even became part of the fairground, which was used into the early 1870s, until, like the area around it, it was subdivided for housing as Burlington grew.

Thanks to the attentive excavator operator and collaboration with the landowner, Burlington Police, the medical examiner, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the University of Vermont Consulting Archaeology Program, project delays were minimized. The fast action was all the more amazing given the budget crisis brought by COVID-19 and demonstrates an impressive example of Vermont's commitment to historic preservation. This discovery adds to earlier documentary and archaeological research and further demonstrates the potential for the preservation of significant archaeological resources within a developed, urban environment.

Future work will continue to pursue the identification of individuals, even after their remains are reinterred in a city cemetery. 🐾