

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THREE CRANES TAVERN, CHARLESTOWN, MA

by Jennifer Poulsen



The poster for this year's Massachusetts Archaeology Month celebration features artifacts from the Three Cranes Tavern in Charlestown, MA. Parts of Charlestown were extensively excavated in the 1980s – 1990s when Interstate 93 ramps to the Tobin Bridge were re-routed. Initially, archaeologists were looking for evidence of Governor John Winthrop's first home in Massachusetts, the Great House, but what they found was 17th- and 18th-century artifact and site histories to tell.

When Governor Winthrop led 700 English colonists to Charlestown in 1630, the Great House was constructed and used as

temporary housing. Winthrop and other leaders stayed here during their first summer while their homes were being constructed. The first building created for the Massachusetts Bay Company, the Great House was a sturdy wooden structure. But by the end of the summer of 1630, Winthrop and the colonists moved to the Shawmut Peninsula in search of water, founding the new town of Boston.

The Great House was used as a meeting house until 1635 when it was purchased by Robert Long for use as a tavern. He named it Long's Ordinary and later the Three Cranes Tavern after a pub that was popular in London at the time. The tavern stayed in the Long family for 140 years. In 1663, John and Mary Long added a separate brewery, a wine cellar, and a new house to the property.

When John died in 1683, his wife Mary inherited the tavern. Widows were allowed to renew their late husband's tavern license as long as they never remarried. Despite Puritan beliefs that taverns were not appropriate places for women, Mary prospered at the helm of the Three Cranes Tavern.

On June 16, 1775, the Three Cranes Tavern ended its long run when most of downtown Charlestown was burned to the ground in the Battle of Bunker Hill.



Archaeologists found very limited evidence of the original Great House, finding only posts that may have held up the original wooden structure. What they did find, was the later stone foundations of the Three Cranes Taverns, the additions that John and Mary Long made in the 1660's, the wine cellar with its brick floor, and quite a few privies!

Privies are historical outhouses. The contents of these holes, sometimes politely called "night soil," are probably gross to most people, but to archaeologists they are research gold. The

moist environment of these privies helped artifacts survive better than they would in normal soil. People routinely used privy holes to throw away their garbage, so there are a lot of artifacts in a privy. Finally, if someone accidentally dropped something in a privy, they would be less likely to go looking for it! The privies from Three Cranes Tavern are interesting, too, because they were used across a wide span of the tavern's operation. Some of them are very early, and some much later.

Artifacts recovered from the Three Cranes Tavern include mugs, tankards, wine glasses, cordial glasses, and other drinking vessels, as well as wine and liquor bottles. Archaeologists also



found serving platters and bowls, plates, trenchers, and silverware that would have been used for the many meals served at the tavern over its long history. Some coins, pipes, and gaming pieces belonged to the tavern's owner and family members. The historic burning of Charlestown is even seen through a charcoal layer and artifacts such as gun flints and lead musket balls which may have been used by both the British and the colonists.

To learn more about the Three Cranes Tavern (and see more photos of its artifacts), as well as other excavations in Charlestown, please visit: www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcarchexhibitsonline/threecranes.htm

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