

UNCOVERING SALEM HISTORY AT THE SKERRY HOUSE

WHY DID ARCHAEOLOGISTS DIG AT THE SKERRY HOUSE?

In 1989, prior to construction of the Beverly-Salem bypass in Salem, Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Archaeological Services conducted an archaeological survey on the property of the 18th century Ephraim Skerry House. The survey was completed for the Massachusetts Highway Department under permit from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Because the property would be destroyed during highway construction, it was important for researchers to gather as much information as possible. Archaeologists excavated the yard surrounding the Ephraim Skerry House to learn more about the history of the house and the lives of its former occupants.

Archaeology is the study of past material culture. To determine how long people lived at a place, archaeologists identify and date the objects, or **artifacts**, they discover. The pieces of broken dishes, tobacco pipes, projectile points, and bottles shown on this poster are all examples of artifacts. Archaeologists also study the many changes in the landscape that occur as people construct houses and build homesteads. People dig holes in the ground as they set stones for house walls, place fence posts, and bury household trash as it accumulates. Finds such as foundations, post holes, and trash pits, called **features** by archaeologists, offer insight into how people lived and worked in the past.

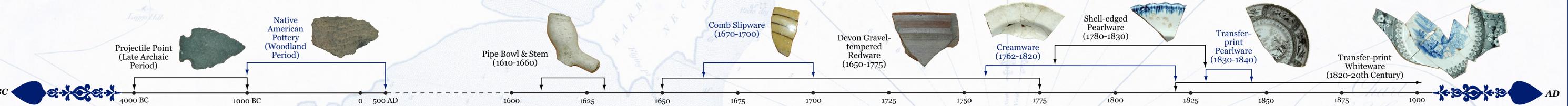


While at the Skerry House, archaeologists recovered a collection, or **assemblage**, of artifacts that included personal items (buttons, beads, and tobacco pipes), architectural debris (nails, window glass, and door hardware), and broken household ceramics (dishes, cups, and other vessels for cooking and eating). Ceramic types have unique attributes such as size, shape, clay type, and decoration. These characteristics are used to determine when ceramic styles were manufactured as well as how some types were used. During excavation at the Skerry House, archaeologists collected ceramics from a range of time periods. Notably, some of these ceramics came from two interesting features at the site. More than 150 years ago, two trash pits were dug in the back yard at the Skerry House. Over time, the occupants of the house filled these holes with a mix of dirt and household refuse. The trash included plates, cups, and dishes broken during everyday use. The trash that filled the pits provided clues as to who lived at the house as well as their status in the community!



Archaeologists also discovered that like many early European American sites, the land around the Skerry House was first occupied long ago by Native Americans. These ancient people made their living hunting in the Salem area, and fishing along the North River that borders the property. While investigating the Skerry House, archaeologists recovered a stone projectile point and pottery fragments, proving that Native Americans lived at this location some 4,000 years ago.

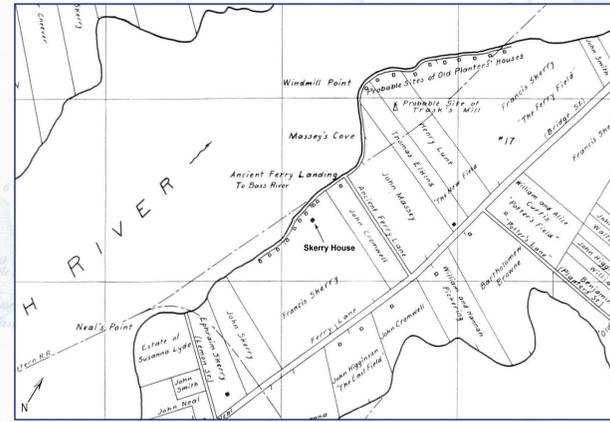
The timeline below shows how long the Skerry House property was occupied!



THE SKERRY HOUSE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

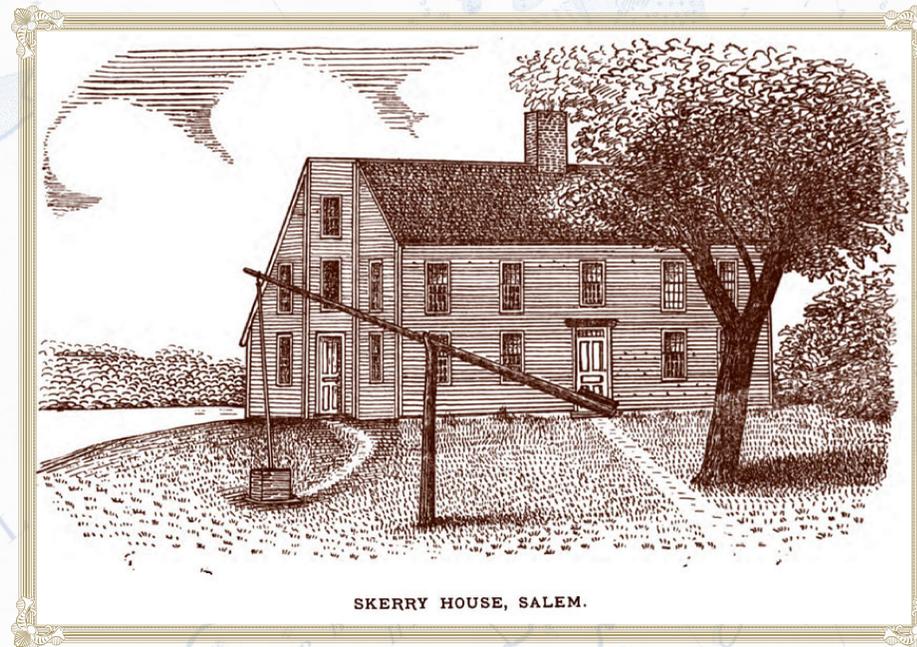
THE OLD PLANTER'S SETTLEMENT

Europeans first settled in Salem in 1626, but the exact location remains a mystery. Some historians believe that the original settlement was located on the south bank of the North River and consisted of a cluster of cottages sitting adjacent to agricultural land. These houses were likely timber frame construction, one room deep, each built around a prominent central chimney. Archaeologists hoped to find remnants of these cottages during their excavation and did recover artifacts predating construction of the Skerry House (between 1710 and 1730). Items from the 1600s included a kaolin pipe, combed slipware, and Devon gravel-tempered redware (see the timeline, below). These early artifacts suggest that the Old Planter's Settlement may be located nearby. However, no tangible evidence of the cottages, such as building footprints, post holes, or fireplace remnants was unearthed. Working together, historians and archaeologists may one day identify the location of the Old Planter's Settlement in Salem.



1700 Map of Salem in 1700, Phillips, James Duncan, from the Research of Sidney Peley, Assembled by William W.K. Freeman, Salem, Massachusetts.

THE EPHRAIM SKERRY HOUSE



The Skerry house was built by Ephraim Skerry (1685-1741) between 1710 and 1730. Skerry worked as a mariner and fisherman before settling on the North River as a "husbandsman" or farmer. He shared this family farmstead with his wife Margaret and their seven children. The property remained a working farm with agricultural fields and livestock pastures for two hundred years. During this time, the front yard was likely used as a work area rather than for recreation or aesthetic value as we use our yards today. Over time, the building underwent multiple structural changes. The drawing to the left is an interpretation of how the house looked in the late 1800s. As the population of Salem grew, in the early 1800s, the land around the Skerry House

was divided into small house lots and sold. Many homes were built on these lots, transforming the area around the property from farmland to an urban neighborhood. At the same time, the Skerry House was renovated into a duplex and rented to different families. During excavation, archaeologists discovered two trash pits with ceramics dating to the mid 1800s. These trash pits reflected a change in the way people discarded household garbage, from scattering it across the yard in the 1700s, to burying it in backyard pits in the 1800s. By the 1900s, garbage was no longer discarded in the yard, rather it was removed from the site completely. This change in behavior witnessed at the Skerry House follows a pattern recognized throughout New England. As more people moved to New England, large farms transformed into small towns with centrally located houses, shops and factories. With so many people living so close together, it was no longer acceptable (or healthy) to discard household garbage on the ground.

A TALE OF TWO HOUSEHOLDS

Ceramics found in two trash pits (A and B) provided evidence for two very different but contemporaneous households living at the Skerry House during the mid 1800s. Each pit held kitchen refuse, such as animal bones, fish bones, and shell, as well as broken table glass, window glass, kaolin pipe fragments, nails, buttons, and many pieces of broken ceramics. However, the ceramic assemblage from Trash Pit A was different than that collected from Trash Pit B. The quality of the ceramics reflect the different lifestyles and social status of the two families renting apartments in the Skerry House.



Anonymous Household (Trash Pit A)

The majority of ceramics collected were plain, inexpensive, and locally produced, like our "everyday" dishes. The family who owned these dishes likely worked in Salem and cooked their meals at home. Since there were no plastic bags or containers in the 1800s, some of these ceramic vessels would have been used to store food. The picture to the left shows coarse, red bodied fragments, plain white tableware, and dull colored stoneware.



James Archer Household (Trash Pit B)

The ceramics from this household were fancy, expensive, and came from all over the world. The picture to the left shows multi-colored, hand painted dishes, a ginger beer bottle from the Caribbean, porcelain from China, and printed dishes from England. This trash pit likely held garbage from the James Archer household. Archer was a mariner, merchant, and gentleman who rented one of the apartments at the Skerry House. James Archer travelled widely and could afford to set his table with the most fashionable dishes of the day.