



Archaeology at Boston's African Meeting House

Don't miss UMass Boston's open lab and lecture on the Archaeology of the African Meeting House on October 25th, see pages 11-12 for details.

The African Meeting House on Beacon Hill is undergoing a major restoration as part of its bicentennial celebration (1806-2006). The Meeting House was the subject of many excavations between 1975 and 1999, but the current restoration will disturb some previously unexcavated areas — for example, a spot at the back of the structure where a new elevator shaft will be built. A team of archaeologists from the Fiske Center for Archaeological Research at the University of Massachusetts Boston has been excavating and studying important archaeological remains from these areas.

The Meeting House was the heart of Boston's free African American community through the 19th-century, serving as a church, community center, school, and residence. It is also one of Boston's best-known and most important archaeological sites. By studying artifacts in their context, archaeologists learn many details of people's past lives.



The crew consisted mostly of graduate and undergraduate students from UMass Boston. Ten students in the UMass Boston Research Experiences for Undergraduates Program also worked at the site for a week, and participated in the laboratory work. The REU program is supported by the National Science Foundation.



During summer 2005, digging slowly and carefully and at times using a water-based screening technique the UMass Boston team recorded the exact locations of findings and their relation to the surrounding soils. Archaeological excavations in the Meeting House backlot uncovered a variety of 19th-century features and artifacts, including remains of drains, builders' trenches, and a privy.

A buried privy containing household trash, including kitchen refuse such as broken dishes, seeds, and animal bones, tell us about the dining habits of African Americans in the 19th century. Archaeologists found bricks, plaster, window glass, and other architectural materials that are useful in helping us learn how the African Meeting House looked in the past and when and how it was modified. Remnants of people's clothing, and the

remains of such household items as medicine bottles, have their own story to tell. Artifacts can also speak of the social importance of the African Meeting House in the community as a place for religious ceremonies as well as political and social gatherings.

To learn more about the Museum and UMass Boston visit these web sites.

Fiske Center at UMass Boston, www.fiskecenter.umb.edu

The Museum of Afro American History, www.afroammuseum.org



a) & b) All of the soil excavated at the site was passed through fine screens, either 1/4" or 1/8" mesh, to recover small artifacts. The field crew wet screened waterlogged deposits from the bottom of the privy using 1/8" mesh screen to recover even the smallest artifacts from the soil. Seeds, bones, and insect parts from the bottom of the privy will tell us much about people's diet and the environmental conditions in the backlot.

c) Making a measured plan map of one of the stone and brick drains.

d) Cleaning artifacts in the archaeology laboratory at UMass Boston. Each artifact will be washed, labeled, and cataloged in a computer database.

e) Sorting seeds under the microscope. The bottom of the privy contained lots of seeds. The field crew also collected bags of soil for flotation in the lab to systematically collect seeds, charcoal, fish scales, and similar small remains of plants and animals.