

# Archeology dig in Harvard Yard offers glimpse into student life over the centuries



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Students working on the Harvard Yard archeological livestreamed the project too students in six states and Puerto Rico, a sort of virtual field trip.

By [Cristela Guerra](#)

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CAMBRIDGE — Just a few feet under Harvard Yard are fragments of history that tell the story of the first college in Colonial America which isn't found on maps or drawings.

Every Thursday, Harvard students spend hours digging and sifting through soil, often finding old pieces of glass and clay roof tiles they believe belonged to a college building from 1638. The artifacts provide insights into student life centuries ago.

“It's really a once-in-a-lifetime thing to be able to say I worked at America's oldest college, dug up stuff, and then built a museum collection at the end of the semester,” said Rachel Freed, 20, a sophomore and social studies major.

Every other year since 2005, about 20 students take part in a course called “The Archeology of Harvard Yard.” It's a collaboration between the Department of Anthropology, Harvard's Peabody Museum, and Harvard's Native American Program. The excavation takes place September to November. In the spring, students learn the interpretive aspects of archeology.

Any artifacts students discover become part of a collection at the Peabody Museum called “Digging Veritas.”

“Students have the opportunity here to go from excavation into the lab to catalog and accession of the material into the museum collection and then the curatorial interpretation and public interpretation,” said Diana Loren, the course's co-instructor and the Peabody Museum's curator of North American archeology. “So they get to see all the full aspect of what archeology is about.”

For the first time this spring, the artifacts will become part of a new augmented reality app that anyone meandering through the yard can download to learn about and visualize what students have excavated at the site.

Course participants will take 360-degree photos of the area, and the photos will be digitally stitched together for the app.

On Thursday, museum education specialists livestreamed the students' dig for the first time to 200 middle school students in six states and Puerto Rico as a virtual field trip — another way they are using technology to share students' findings. Most afternoons, as they're

working near the center of the yard, the students can interact with visitors, answering questions about the work they're doing.

"We'd like to be able to tell stories about the objects that are found," said Brandon Bentley, senior instructional technologist at Harvard, who's helping to create the app. "This is a highly trafficked area for tourists, so it's a nice thing to be able to share those stories with people who are coming through who may not know the history of the original site here."

Freed and junior Kyle Sanok recently began work on a new level of soil in the dig site. The deeper they dig, the earlier in history they're positioned. They grabbed buckets, shovels, scoops, and a plastic bag to contain what they found and set to work.

"I was talking with the professors about possibly writing my thesis on taking the artifacts that we find and running a computer algorithm to try and match the pieces or the plates and the ceramic tiles that we found to reconstruct" them, said Sanok, 21, who studies applied math.

Different classes have excavated various areas of the yard, including what they believe was the foundation of the Harvard Indian College, a structure that was right next to the first college building and contained the first printing press in North America.

The press was used to print the Bible in the language of local indigenous tribes. Founders dedicated the Indian College to "the education of the English & Indian Youth of this Country in knowledge: and godliness" in the founding Harvard Charter of 1650.

"It's really a special feeling pulling something out of the dirt and being the first one to see it in a couple hundred years, even if it's just a piece of ceramic," said Sophomore Paul Tamburro, 19. "We discovered in our unit a piece of a medicine bottle from the 1800s, and you could see on it the beginning of the words 'Lowell, Massachusetts.'"

Recently, the students found several pipe stems, a surprise since smoking was prohibited at the college during the 1600s, though it was considered a health benefit in those days.

"A lot of what we find is fragmentary so we don't tend to pull out whole artifacts," said senior Manny Medrano, 22, who is studying applied math with a minor in archeology. "It'd be

wonderful if we do, but I think the core message is it doesn't take a lot to be able to form a narrative."

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