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Archaeology at Ferryland 2023

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Figure 1: 2023 excavation inside the colony's (ca. 1620s) defensive ditch, Area F, looking south.

The archaeology at Ferryland in 2023 was in many ways a continuation of previous investigations but also a time to redirect efforts toward recording the ongoing damage along parts of the exposed 17th-century waterfront caused by climate change. As such, the field season was highly informative concerning life in Ferryland during the early 1600s and late 1800s to early 1900s yet disheartening when considering the extent of erosion over the last three decades. Let us start with the good before we get to the bad/ugly.

Continued excavation of the colony of Avalon's defensive ditch, built in the 1620s and slowly filled in between the 1600s and 1700s, was the first area of investigation in 2023 (Figure 1). Work here had halted for several years while the team investigated other parts of the site (see Gaulton 2023, 2022; Gaulton and Bethune 2020; Gaulton and Teasdale 2019; Gaulton and Lacy 2018) but it was always our intention to return. Archaeology was re-established 10m to the south of the wooden bridge that once spanned the defensive ditch. The plan was to further expose intact deposits from the 17th and 18th centu-

ries; however, things did not turn out quite as expected. These early colonial layers were truncated by a late 19th- to early 20th-century subterranean wooden feature dug in the same location. Consisting of large quantities of decomposing wood fragments, including boards with corroded cut nails and rounded posts, the feature was highly organic and pungent in the summer heat. Upon the discovery of large quantities of glass bottle fragments and intact medicine bottles, the first thing that came to mind was that this might be the remains of a privy. Working with this preliminary theory, we continued

excavations to delineate the size of the feature, determine how it was built, its period of use, and what it could tell us about those who utilized it. Plans were also put in place to carefully wet screen the associated deposits to search for seeds and other preserved organic materials.

As work progressed throughout the summer, a tremendous number of objects were recovered mostly dating from the early decades of the 20th century including more intact medicine bottles, along with fragments of wine bottles, beer bottles, soda bottles, and bottles for preservatives, cod liver oil and sewing machine oil (Figure 2). Fragments of stone-ware storage vessels, ceramic tableware and tea service vessels (mostly whiteware), tobacco pipe bowl fragments, an almost intact pressed glass goblet (Figure 3), and several non-ferrous metal button and buckle fragments rounded out the collection of durable finds. A slate writing tablet shown in Figure 3 is also worthy of note. As the burial environment was conducive to organic preservation, parts of a leather boot, a wooden knife handle and animal bones (from domesticates such as sheep) were recovered; howev-



Figure 2: (top) Intact 19th-century medicine bottle; (bottom) assortment of 20th-century glass bottle fragments.



Figure 3: (left) Pressed glass goblet; (right) slate writing tablet.





Figure 4: Outline of in-situ root cellar (Feature 222) measuring 2.1m by 2.7m (7 by 9ft), Area F, looking north.

er, no seeds were found during wet screening in the field or after flotation and sorting in the conservation lab.

During the final week of the field season, the full extent of the subterranean feature and its function was revealed. Measuring 2.1m by 2.7m (7 by 9ft), this feature was dug to the level of subsoil and its sides framed with upright wooden posts (Figure 4). The size, dearth of evidence for seeds and presence of many iron barrel hoop fragments at the bottom of the feature all suggest that it was a root cellar instead of a privy. When no longer functioning in this capacity, the abandoned cellar served as a convenient trash pit for nearby residents during the early decades of the 20th century.

As for who these residents were, the root cellar is situated approximately 12m from a former dwelling built by Jack Williams in the late 19th century (Annie Jordan, personal communication 2023). For those familiar with the history of archaeology at Ferryland, it was Jack's son Arch Williams who first convinced Jim Tuck to conduct excavations around the Pool in search of George Calvert's colony of Avalon. It is postulated that this subterranean wood-lined root cellar is contemporaneous with the construction of the William's house and served as one of its original outbuildings. For comparative purposes, a nearby cement-lined root cellar dug at the western end of the site by the Costello family in the early 20th century also measures exactly 2.1m by 2.7m. Now that the root cellar is fully exposed and recorded, excavations inside the colony's defensive ditch will continue in subsequent field seasons.

Although more limited in scope, two other areas of the archaeological site were investigated further in 2023. The first was a 19th-century stone footing from a structure located at the easternmost edge of the inner harbour and the second was the builder's trench directly behind Calvert's "Mansion House" (see Gaulton and Hawkins 2017, 2016, 2015). The former area served as the location for the 2023 Archaeologist for a Day program, while the latter is directly associated with ongoing research into the colony's principal dwelling built in the 1620s (Gaulton, submitted). Portions of the 19th-century stone footing (Feature 202) were first uncovered in 2015 and continued northeast toward the current beach. The goal for 2023 was to follow the footing, record associated



Figure 5: 19th-century stone footing (Feature 202), Area D, looking southwest.

deposits before the annual tidal events and storm surges wash these remains into the sea. As seen in Figure 5, an additional 1.5m (5ft) of stone footing was revealed by the end of the field season, as was a significant quantity of 19th- and early 20th-century artifacts, several of which are typically associated with children. For example, fragments from two different plates (Figure 6) — created for child members of the Victorian 'Band of Hope' temperance movement whose purpose was to educate children on the immoral behaviour of alcohol consumption — were among the finds (Shiman 1973). These and other 19th-century children's artifacts previously excavated from Ferryland formed the impetus for a conference paper presented by MA student Carli Perri at the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology (Perri 2023). Given the ongoing coastal erosion at Ferry-



Figure 6: Band of Hope plate fragments associated with Feature 202, Area D. Photo credit: Carli Perri 2023.

land, this part of the site requires further archaeological mitigation.

Excavation of the builder's trench directly behind the Mansion House has been ongoing since 2012 but has not been completed due to the tremendous amount (upwards of 2m) of clay and rock used to fill in and level off the builder's trench back in the 1620s. Simply put, it is a backbreaking task just to reach a thin occupation layer. This year, three 1m units were excavated with the continuing goal to gather information on the daily activities of the tradesmen who built the Mansion House (Figure 7). Surprisingly, there contin-

ues to be a wealth of objects associated with this brief period of construction. Notable artifacts include fragments of ceramic storage vessels from England, Portugal, France and Germany, clay tobacco pipes including a small bowl with a rose mark on the heel, as well as several copper aglets (Figure 8). Preserved animal, fish and bird bones continue to form a significant portion of the artifact assemblage, including pieces of mammal bone with visible cut marks associated with butchering. A variety of lead waste associated with the manufacture of windows was also found in the builder's trench. As stated in previous newsletter reports (Gaulton and Hawkins 2017), I am convinced that a glazier was in Ferryland during the construction of the Mansion House, making windows for this and many other buildings, as opposed to shipping in prefabricated windows. In 2024, we hope to return to the builder's trench and perhaps complete work on what is arguably the most important building in Ferryland's early colonial history.

The final area of interest in 2023 was the 17th-century waterfront. This part of the site was uncovered in the early 1990s and today forms an integral part of the visitor experience. Given the repeated instances of storm surges and annual flooding in recent years, we decided to record the current state of these exposed archaeological features compared to their original post-excavation condition. Located closest to the inner harbour, the tidal flushing privy and water-

Figure 7: 2023 excavation of the builder's trench associated with the "Mansion House", Area F, looking northwest.





Figure 8: (left) Rosemark on heel of early 17th-century pipe bowl;
(right) copper aglet.

Figure 9: Previously excavated privy feature (ca. 1620s)
as recorded in summer 2023, Area C, looking north.





Figure 10: Previously excavated floor of storehouse (ca. 1620s) as recorded in summer 2023, Area C, looking west.

front storehouse, both constructed in the 1620s, are bearing the brunt of climate change. Figure 9 shows how high tides are displacing small rock and cobblestone from west of the privy to rapidly fill in the feature; this same tidal action is also destabilizing its clay-bonded walls resulting in the constriction of the privy. The storehouse floor presents a similar pattern of damage: the clay/sand bedding underneath the flagstone floor at the west end is eroding away and being pushed further east to carve out deep channels in the earthen floor at the east end of the building (Figure 10).

Some may wonder if this damage was simply caused by exposure to the elements for decades, and not the direct result of storm surges and high tides; however, a comparison with Ferryland's 17th-century cobblestone street is quite instructive in this regard. Built in the 1620s, this pavement was laid at a height roughly 2.4m above the level of the waterfront. The cobblestone street and associated sand bedding are the same in 2023 as it was in the late 1990s when first uncovered. Such a comparison between the contem-

poraneous features of the cobblestone street and that of the waterfront buildings — distinguished simply by their relative height and location within the 1620s village — is both startling and sobering.

In advance of future mitigation planning, the archaeology team decided to excavate a 1mx2m exploratory trench at the southwest end of the waterfront area, directly below a late 17th-century cobblestone feature (Gaulton, Tuck and Miller 2011) which has seen significant erosion of its underlying sand bedding and a resulting shift of the cobblestones during seasonal high tides. This operation was aimed at identifying the presence of earlier colonial deposits and recording the nature of said deposits before their archaeological integrity is lost (Figure 11). After the cobblestones and what remained of the sand bedding was removed, an early to mid 17th-century occupation was revealed. Measuring upwards of 20cm thick, this deposit contained iron nails, brick fragments and roof slates suggestive of a nearby building. Many of the recovered artifacts were domestic in nature including fragments of tin-glazed earthenware, North

Italian slipware, Saintonge polychrome, several seed beads, and a partial gold-gilded bead (Figure 12). If there is an earlier 17th-century structure underlying the late 17th-century cobblestone pavement, further

targeted excavation may be warranted, particularly since this entire area is under increasing threat.

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Figure 11: 1x2m excavation below late 17th-century cobblestone pavement (Feature 73), Area C, looking south.



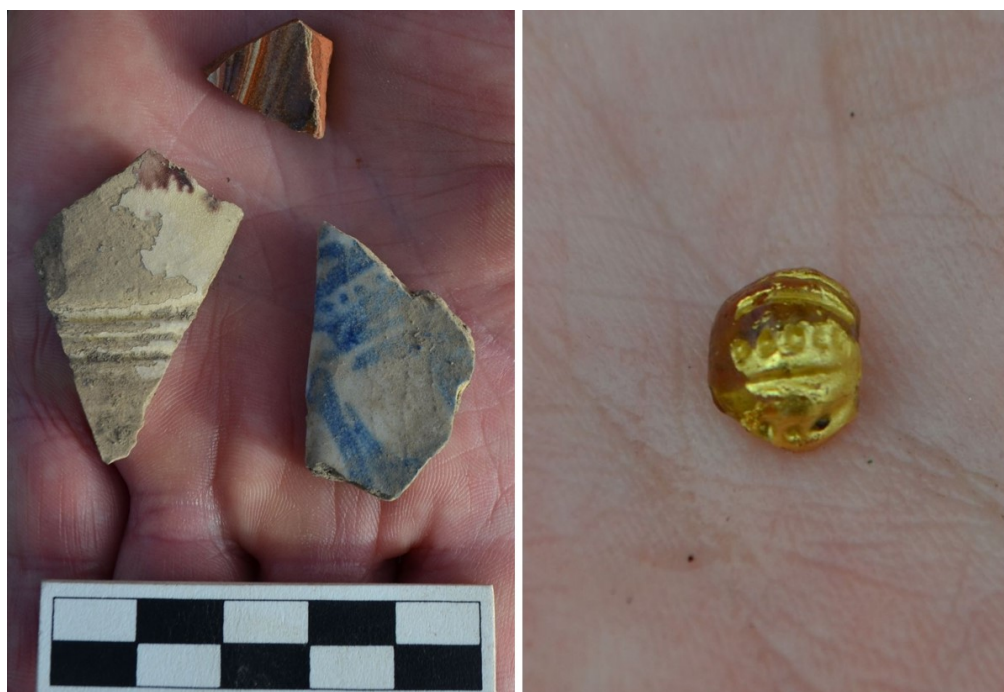


Figure 12: (left) 17th-century ceramic fragments; (right) partial gold-gilded glass bead.

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