

Not Your Average Campus Life: 18th Century Brewery Found at Va. College

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In this photo taken on Thursday, Aug. 28, 2014, Colonial Williamsburg archaeologist Libby Cook works in a saw pit at a dig next to the Wren Building on the campus of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va. Archaeologists, who believe they may have found the remnants of a centuries old brewhouse, wrapped up the intensive excavation work on the site on Friday, and will now turn to laboratories to analyze everything they've found. (AP Photo/Steve Helber)

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (AP) — College students have always had a taste for beer, and archaeologists have uncovered new evidence at the College of William and Mary to prove it.

The remains of what is likely an 18th century on-campus brewery were discovered just outside of the nation's oldest college building when campus officials were looking to widen a sidewalk.

School officials say the discovery near the Wren Building will allow them to tell a broader story about campus life in the Colonial era that involved the interaction of slaves, Native Americans, faculty and students.

"This is exactly what we want," said Susan Kern, executive director of the college's historic campus. "It's a marvelous find."

Records have long indicated that the college had slaves who sold the school hops that the slaves had grown on a nearby plantation. It wasn't always clear, however, exactly where that brewing was taking place after the initial campus building burned down in 1705. Based upon cannon debris found at the site, officials believe the brewery they've found only existed until the Revolutionary War.

If known about by previous archaeologists, the brewery was never included in

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historical records or artist renderings. Instead, attention was generally focused on the main historic buildings like the Wren, which was built sometime between 1695 and 1700 and housed students and faculty, a kitchen and also served as a classroom space.

After it was gutted by fire, the Wren Building was rebuilt in 1716 and debris from its construction was placed in a large pit near the building site. Sometime after that — likely in the 1720s, although the exact date isn't known — archaeologists believe the school built a small brewery right next to that trash pit. It would've provided beer for the few dozen students and faculty who were there during the Colonial era.

The brewery site itself isn't large, with the brick outlines measuring 18 feet by 20 feet. A small addition measuring 18 feet by eight feet was added at some other point in time. The building's remains were found only about a foot underneath the surface in a heavily trafficked area of campus near Colonial Williamsburg where students and tourists have been snapping photos of the dig site.

Archaeologists wrapped up the intensive excavation work on the site Friday, and will now turn to laboratories to analyze everything they've found.

One of the things they'll be looking for is pollen residue, which would help prove that hops were in the area.

"Hops are flowers, essentially, and they should have pollen," said Andy Edwards, lead archaeologist on the dig. "If they're around, we should get their signature and that'll help with the case."

Other evidence strongly points to the building being a brewery, he said. In the middle of building's outline is a fire pit, which he believes was used to boil water in a kettle used for the beer. The pit didn't have bricks for a chimney base as would be expected in a home or kitchens and the dimensions of the building's outline suggest it's too large to be a smokehouse.

Edwards' team also found a faucet, which is what would be used for a beer tap. Edwards said that for a brewery, the building was cramped. He said nobody would've been drinking beer at the brewery itself and that the beer wouldn't have been very strong.

"Beer was beer. It was small beer, which is likely what they're brewing. Small beer just means it were second or third brew and less alcoholic, like an ale today," he said.

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