

WINTER 2011

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Oyster Shells, Rusty Nails and Rosary Beads

Irish 'Dig' Reveals Clues to Lives of 19th Century Canal Builders





Six UMass Lowell students and two Queen's University archaeologists dig for artifacts in front of St. Patrick's Church in Lowell.



Colm Donnelly of Queen's University in Belfast led the dig.

One of the first things they uncovered was a small section of a rosary.

"Divine intervention, you suppose?" was what Colm Donnelly would ask later. He could have been kidding. It was difficult to tell.

They hadn't been digging long when they made that find. They were down only a few inches. Hundreds of other artifacts followed. By the end of the dig, more than 1,300 had been collected.

The bowl of a clay pipe. Some pipe stems. Small shards of pottery – some white and some blue – but all of it inexpensive by the standard of the day in 19th century Ireland.

The list went on and on. Pieces of glass. Buttons. Shards of slate. About 200 rust-encrusted nails. Pieces of animal bone, likely the remnants from long gone stew pots. And, of all things, oyster shells. The people who once lived there obviously ate oysters.

The project that unearthed all of these objects, an archaeological dig, took place in August on the sun-baked lawn in front of St. Patrick's Church in the Acre section of Lowell. It was the area in which Irish workers lived when they came to the city in the early 19th century to dig the canals that provided water power for the booming mills of that era.

The purpose of the modern-day dig was to unearth clues about the lives of those Irish laborers. The project was the result of a collaboration between UMass Lowell's Center for Irish Partnerships and Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Center is one of six in which the University is working with universities around the world to provide student exchange opportunities, joint degree programs and cooperative research projects (see sidebar, on page 25).

The dig was led by Colm Donnelly, senior research fellow at Queen's University, with the assistance of two others from Queen's – Ronan McHugh, the principal surveyor, and Harry Welsh, an archaeologist and historian.

The actual digging was carried out by six UMass Lowell students: Dimitrios Booras, an undergraduate

English major from Lowell; Eunice Delice, a RESD graduate student from Methuen; Kim Scarfo, a history major from Chelmsford; Alaina Puleo, a biology graduate student from Tyngsboro; and Amanda Veiga, a RESD graduate student from Lowell.

'SHANTY TOWN' CREATED AFTER 30 IRISH LABORERS WALKED TO LOWELL FROM CHARLESTOWN

The site for the dig was chosen because it was about the only place left in the city's Acre section that hadn't been built over since the mid 1800s.

It was in April of 1822 that the first Irish laborers arrived. Thirty of them had walked to Lowell from Charlestown, led by another Irish immigrant, Hugh Cumiskey, a native of Ireland's County Tyrone.

According to historical records, as more immigrants arrived, spirited disputes broke out between the early arrivals and the newcomers, and Cumiskey reasoned that they might all get along better if they had a church in which they could find common ground.

So he pleaded his case with Boston Bishop Benedict Fenwick, who persuaded Kirk Boott, the agent for Merrimack Manufacturing Co., to donate corporate land for a church and school. So it was that an acre of land was provided to the immigrant workers and that area of the city became known, as it still is today, as The Acre.

The first church, a wooden structure that was consecrated by Bishop Fenwick in 1831, later burned and was replaced, in 1854, by the neo-Gothic stone church that stands today on that same Suffolk Street site.

It was on Acre property that many of the original Irish laborers lived in small dwellings called "shanties." (The word shanty comes from two Irish words – sean tig – which is pronounced "shan-tee" and means an old house.)

DIG ATTRACTED DAILY MEDIA ATTENTION

The dig, which was carried out for five days, took on a festive air.

Throughout the week, visitors appeared, fascinated and curious about what was being uncovered in the two trenches. Their questions were answered readily by the three affable archaeologists – Donnelly, McHugh and Welsh.

And the media arrived almost daily – television, radio and print – local, national and international. The Boston Globe provided extensive coverage, both prior to and during the dig, including a front-page story.

"I didn't think we'd generate this much interest," said Donnelly.

The size of the artifact harvest was surprising, given the fact that the two trenches were only six feet square (or two meters, archaeologists would say) and neither one appeared to be more than a foot and a half deep at the end of the project.

Near the end of the week, Donnelly was asked to assess the project.

"When we opened the trenches we didn't know if we'd find anything," he said. "Of course, any excavation is like that to a certain extent. But it became clear after

the first day that we were going to be able to tell a story of what was going on here in the period between 1820 and 1850.

"I would say the project has been very successful."

The only thing he found mildly surprising was the number of nails they uncovered.

"I probably shouldn't have been surprised," he said, "because, after all, the first church was built of wood and so were the shanties."

Donnelly expressed great admiration for the work of the six students who, despite having come from diverse academic disciplines and who ranged from a freshman to graduate students, gelled easily into two three-member teams. Armed with trowels, hand shovels and brushes, the dust-covered students painstakingly cleared level after level of earth – collecting, bagging and recording artifact after artifact.

"The students have been great," Donnelly said. "They had no previous experience with archaeology, but they've been really hard working and they've demonstrated that they're aware of what an archaeological excavation is all about. We're really impressed with them."

One of the students, Booras, the English major, said, "For me, this is a lot of fun. Doing this work, you're able to view history from a different perspective. You're learning things but it's not from a textbook. You can actually see history as you go down through different layers of dirt. It's exciting."

Veiga, a graduate student who teaches history in a middle school in Peabody, said, "Throughout the entire experience, the field of archaeology has been eye-opening and from a personal experience it's been incredible. As a history teacher, it has been a dream come true to work on something that has so much meaning to people."



A piece of a clay pipe from the 1800s

FOUR MORE DIGS PLANNED FOR LOWELL AND IRELAND

Frank Talty '77, a co-director of Center for Irish Partnerships, described himself as "de facto project manager" of the dig for UMass Lowell. He was well qualified for that assignment despite his admitted lack of archaeological experience. In addition to being a Lowell native, he also is a citizen of the Republic of Ireland, a status made possible by the fact that his paternal grandfather, Hugh Francis Talty, came from County Clare. He also teaches a course in Irish politics – in addition to being director of Academic Programs in the College of Fine Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

(The other co-directors of the Center are Profs. Ann Marie Hurley of mathematical sciences and Stephen McCarthy of plastics engineering.)

Discussing the project during the week of the dig, Talty said, "We felt this was a prime site where we might find evidence of the early Irish lifestyle. And, within a few inches of the topsoil on the first day we were discovering things."

Continued

THEY HADN'T BEEN DIGGING LONG WHEN THEY MADE A FIND. THEY WERE DOWN ONLY A FEW INCHES. HUNDREDS OF OTHER ARTIFACTS FOLLOWED. BY THE END OF THE DIG, MORE THAN 1,300 HAD BEEN COLLECTED.

IRISH CENTER PROMOTES ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL PROGRAMS

The UMass Lowell Center for Irish Partnerships is one of six such centers through which the University develops international alliances and expands global learning experiences for students and research opportunities for faculty.

The Center fosters collaborations and partnerships with educational institutions in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland across an interdisciplinary spectrum that includes the social sciences, the natural sciences and engineering, the humanities and health and education fields.

Examples of these collaborations include programs offered by Queen's University in Belfast and St. Mary's University, an affiliate of Queen's. This year and last, UMass Lowell students have spent three weeks at the International Summer School at Queen's University studying Irish history, politics, literature, music and culture.

UMass Lowell students also are attending a full semester of study this academic year at both these partnering universities.

In 2009, UMass Lowell, in partnership with Queen's and Dublin City University, hosted the first U.S./Ireland

Emerging Technologies Conference at the UMass Lowell Inn and Conference Center. Plans are already underway for Emerging Technologies II to be held in both Dublin and Belfast in 2011.

Also in the planning stage is the first-ever NCAA college hockey game to be held in Belfast when the UMass Lowell River Hawks face an as-yet unnamed opponent there in October of 2011.

The Center for Irish Partnerships has three directors: Prof. Frank Talty, director of Academic Programs in the College of Fine Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; and Profs. Ann Marie Hurley of the Mathematical Sciences Department and Stephen McCarthy of the Plastics Engineering Department. Victoria Denoon Drakoulakos, assistant to the Chancellor, is an associate director of the Center. A native of Northern Ireland, she earned a law degree at Queen's University.

More information about the Center is available at uml.edu/International/Irish. ■



Though the St. Patrick's parish was formed in 1827, the church wasn't officially consecrated until 1831.

"WHEN WE OPENED THE TRENCHES WE DIDN'T KNOW IF WE'D FIND ANYTHING, BUT IT BECAME CLEAR AFTER THE FIRST DAY THAT WE WERE GOING TO BE ABLE TO TELL A STORY OF WHAT WAS GOING ON HERE IN THE PERIOD BETWEEN 1820 AND 1850."

—COLM DONNELLY,
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY

"The samples correspond to similar samples found in Northern Ireland in the same time period. We're fairly certain that we've discovered evidence of people living in the (church) lawn area, which was probably the earliest encampment for the canal diggers. A lot of things they're finding are precisely what we anticipated.

"We've been able to confirm that this is a site but not necessarily the only one. We hope the interest generated in this dig will spur another round of research."

The idea, he said, is that over the next two years, this dig will be followed up by four more – one week-long dig each year in both Lowell and in County Tyrone, the latter being at the home site of Cumiskey, the immigrant who led the Irish laborers from Charlestown to Lowell nearly 190 years ago.

At week's end, the students filled the trenches back in. But first they spread plastic sheeting at the bottom to preserve the sites and placed plastic pegs at each corner to mark the dimensions of the excavations.

"If we get funding, we hope to come back next year and open the trenches again and continue to dig," said Donnelly. "And we may extend the project. Open up other areas."

The partnership between UMass Lowell and Queen's was formalized in 2009 when Chancellor Marty Meehan led a delegation to Ireland to meet with representatives of the Belfast university.

Speaking more recently about the project in *The Acre*, Meehan said, "Our priority with these Centers is to provide graduates with a global perspective, one that will contribute to their career success by deepening their understanding of multiple cultures, which, in today's shrinking world, is no longer optional but required.

"This archaeological dig is one of many concrete ways that students are already benefiting from our agreements with notable international universities." ■



Students Alaina Pales and Jonathan Brown

UMASS LOWELL ALUMNI HAVE COME FROM MORE THAN 80 FOREIGN COUNTRIES

When he arrived here two years ago, Provost Ahmed Abdelal said one of his priorities would be to "internationalize" UMass Lowell. His efforts in this initiative have included the creation of six centers that provide students and faculty with opportunities to study and conduct research with academic partners in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East.

But, from the standpoint of enrollment on the Lowell campus, the University has been "international" for a long time. This academic year alone, there are nearly 400 international students enrolled from 46 countries.

Moreover, the alumni rolls include more than 1,200 graduates from more than 80 foreign countries. India, with 419, is, by far, the country with the largest number of UMass Lowell degree holders. Next come Taiwan with 197 and Canada with 101.

UMass Lowell has prepared these graduates to return to their own countries armed with the knowledge and skills to enjoy successful careers and to be effective community leaders.

One example of a graduate who has returned home to raise the quality of life of her fellow citizens is **Sallinee Tavaranan**, who in 2004 earned a master's degree in solar engineering. Tavaranan moved back to her native Thailand where she is director of the Border Green Energy Team, an organization that works with villagers in ethnic minority areas on both sides of the Thai/Burma border – improving solar home systems, teaching renewable energy practices and helping with solar electricity construction for medical clinics.

Yanir Shaked is an example of a graduate who has achieved success in both the corporate and academic worlds. Shaked, who earned his doctorate in plastics engineering in 2007, is director of research and development at Polyram Co., Israel's leading manufacturer of engineering thermoplastic compounds for the automotive, electrical and construction industries; and he also is a senior faculty member in plastics engineering at the Shenkar College of Engineering and Design.

Three others among the 1,200 graduates from foreign countries who have achieved success in their chosen fields are from Taiwan, Korea and India.

Edward Chang, who earned a master's degree in plastics engineering in 1992, is vice president of Simpio Technology, a Taiwanese company that produces a variety of battery pack products for customers such as Dell, Hewlett-Packard and Apple.

Jae Hyun Kim, who earned his master's degree in chemistry in 1999, is managing director of Dongjin Semichem Co. in Korea. Dongjin makes electronic materials and foaming agents for semiconductors and flat liquid crystal displays.

Nayan S. Parekh '94 is director of Nikamal Ltd. in India, a company that manufactures plastic moulding products. Parekh earned a master's degree in plastics engineering. ■