

DIGGING THE BLOCK: 44AX1 500 King Street

Excavations on the block began in 1977. Preliminary historical research indicated that the NW quadrant of the block may be the most productive. As such, the quadrant became the target area for archaeological investigations. The remaining quadrants were also explored, though not as intensively.

Although a few structural walls and basement floorings were discovered on the site, most of the old building foundations had been destroyed by the 1967 demolition. Most of the finds consisted of the remains of deep wells and/or privies (a total of 26 were found). When wells went out of use or were discontinued due to water contamination, they were often turned into outhouses and disposals. These are treasure troves for archaeologists, not only because of the plethora of objects that usually end up in them, but also because of the airless, water-logged environment that enables excellent artifact preservation, including floral, faunal, and other organic remains.

Digging up these privies however was quite a feat! The following is an extract from Marian Van Landingham's "[Privy to the Past: Digging the 500 Block of King Street](#)". In it she describes the trials and tribulations of a troop of enthusiastic, persistent, and courageous excavators!

"We were small in a vast, open pit.....scraping bottom in the 165-year history of commercial and residential structures that had filled the block before it was emptied.

In hard hats we clustered around a circular, brick-lined hole that had once been a well and then a privy. Around us, bulldozers growled and shoveled and hauled sand and dark, organic muck into encrusted, heavy dump-trucks.

The noise was overwhelming. We could hardly hear each other shout. In the vastness of the damp cold, the pot-bellied Salamander stove gave warmth only to those who stood for a while a few inches from its surface.

Down in the well/privy, diggers were now below the water table, and the muck oozed despite the steady work of the electric pump. It would grab your rubber boots and almost pull them off.

Seventeen-year-old Lisa Falk was one of the diggers down in the well who sent up bucketfuls of



Fig. 1: The construction site, 1977 (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 2: Excavator about to be lowered into the privy (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 3: Inside of a brick lined privy (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

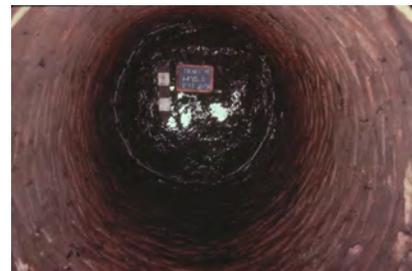


Fig. 4: Inside of a brick lined privy (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

pungently endowed muck to the surface to be washed and screened.

Lisa was one of the few on our teams who did not mind the fragrance of the 18th and 19th century disposal. The Groveton High School student who spent her Saturdays in the digs would be inspired to her future career.

Disorientation was the worst problem for a digger down in the round shaft. There was no sense of direction, and there was the danger of organic decay gases and the fear of cave-ins. Diggers often complained of a feeling of vertigo, dizziness, and headaches after working only a few minutes.

The danger of the loosely laid brick walls collapsing was particularly real....though it happened only once, after the diggers had come to the surface. We were careful not to undermine the base of a shaft because this would cause the bricks to start to shift and "ladder".

Part of the problem was that we were not used to the confining environment, unlike the professionals who originally dug the wells. A man who still digs holes for wells by hand in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, told the Washington Post in August, 1983, that the holes he digs are safe as long as he keeps them perfectly round, so the sides support each other. If the circle is not perfect, the danger is serious.

Clifton E. (Sonny) Parker is one of the last of his breed and uses a short shovel and short pick to dig four-foot diameter wells. He can throw the dirt up at least 20 feet and uses a bucket only when he goes deeper. "You have to have a strong back to work all day bent over," he told the Post.

When we sent our diggers down into the shaft, they were wearing waterproof protective clothing, boots, and a harness. With the harness the digger could be lowered into the shaft by a winch....and at the first sign of danger, pulled to the surface. We always had someone watching from the

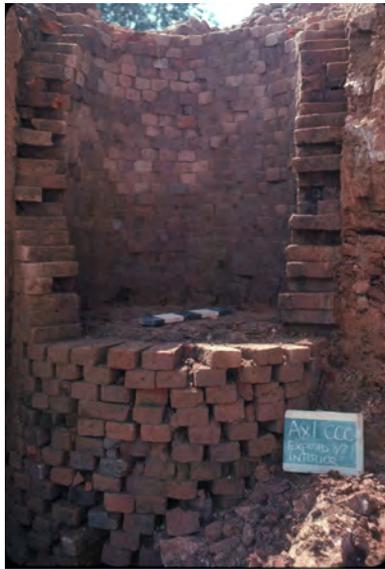


Fig. 5: Vertical profile of a brick lined well/privy (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 6: Inside of a brick lined privy (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 7: Volunteer being lowered into a well/privy (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 8: Volunteer coming out of a well/privy (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 9: Volunteers screening through the muck (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 11: Volunteers screening through the muck (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 12: Archaeologists at work while the bulldozers level the site around them (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

top and no digger stayed down more than 30 minutes at a time.

The winch also pulled buckets of muck-covered artifacts to the surface. Gene Luckman was one of the volunteers that winter who spent days washing and screening. She had just retired as a budget analyst with the U.S. Department of Commerce and had read a feature article in a local newspaper about our digs in the 500 Block. Living only a few blocks away, she thought the prospect looked exciting as it would give her an opportunity to learn more about the community where she lived.

As she screened, she found scraps of glass, pottery, seeds, bones and leather that had been thrown into the well/privy. Working to break the hard, cold lumps of earth to find these treasures, she developed arthritis of the thumbs which still reminds her of the adventure. (!)

Materials found in the muck were incredibly well-preserved, as Kathy Beidleman pointed out. Everything was preserved in the airless, damp environment where there had been very little temperature variation. Even organic material barely changed in chemical composition.

Kathy, who was directing the digs, saw to it that we worked quickly to gather these treasures. The contractors and bulldozer drivers were impatient to finish the pit where the underground parking for the city's new Courthouse would soon fill the block with a new environment for Alexandria's history to continue.

Despite their hurry, however, the construction workers were cooperative and negotiated with us daily. And when we emptied the shaft of a well/privy until we were down over our heads, we would come up and stand back as a bulldozer sliced away four or five feet for us, As the machine moved off, we went back into the now shallow hole and started digging again.

Another reason we worked as quickly as



Fig. 10: Water screening for artifacts (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)



Fig. 13: Bulldozer slicing away part of the well/privy (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

possible was the fear that the site would be raided in the evening by pot or bottle hunters. Even though we were working on city property and police cruised the block on occasion, we sometimes returned in the morning to find fragments and dirt tossed outside of a well/privy, an indication that some bottle hunter had been at work.

Caring only for whole or mostly whole artifacts that can be kept as souvenirs or sold to the antique market, these searchers destroy the context of finds and disregard fragments with little intrinsic market value. (A patched together pot is valued only by an archaeologist, not an antique dealer.)

These diggers engage in no careful photography of a feature as it is excavated, do not meticulously measure the location of major finds, do not screen the soil to find all bits and pieces that provide richness of context. They are not interested in old leather, cloth, seeds, bones, etc.....just glass, pottery, and some metal objects like coins. Unfortunately, they have benefitted from the interest we help generate in archaeology and there is a ready market for the objects they carry off.

But for most Alexandrians, interest in the past is less possessive and more supportive. As we worked, curious spectators watched from the sidewalks 25 feet above, protected by temporary wood railing. The sidewalks themselves were shored up by steel "I" beams and railroad ties to keep the sides of the pit from caving in. Some of the spectators had known the block all their lives and part of their collective memory was being emptied from its site. Jelly-cakes and coffee in the high-ceilinged back room of Schuman's Bakery will never taste the same in its new building many blocks from City Hall.

Ben and Ruben Hayman like their fine new store in the urban-renewed Tavern Square served by underground parking, but remember their father's store where they played and learned their



Fig. 14: Haymans store, 526-530 King Street in 1967 (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

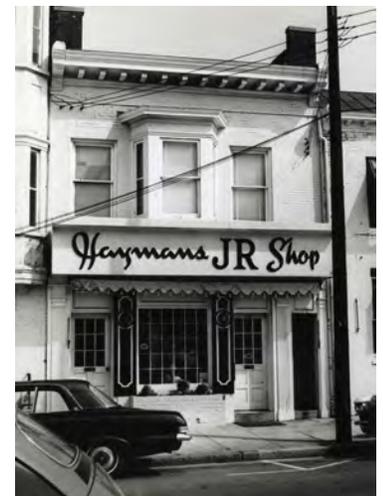


Fig. 15: Haymans JR Shop on 102 S. St. Asaph Street in 1967 (ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTION)

business. When Joseph Hayman went on vacation, they painted the store for him and ran the shop so well that when he returned, Joseph rewarded his sons by sending them on a vacation to Atlantic City.

Long-time resident and structural engineer, Ed Holland, along with his little terrier Ozzie came nearly 20 times a day to oversee the digging. Holland was hired by the city in 1969 to demolish the old buildings on the King, Pitt, and St. Asaph sides of the block. A few years earlier, he took down structures in the center of the block for a Park and Shop Lot. Now he was the structural engineer for the Courthouse complex.

He gave us access to history and was curious to see what was under the block. What was the source of the mound in the center? Why was there no foundation for a chimney where no house had stood? (?)

Holland observed the overlying clay on the site and the 20-foot deep layer of quicksand below the clay (fine-grained sand with edges so smooth there was no surface meshing of grains to give stability in the presence of water). He knew the pilings for the Courthouse had to go below the sand to a dense layer of gravel and clay, earlier alluvial river deposits.

The engineer approved the way we took pictures, checked elevations and compass directions, and recorded what we found at every level.

From the pit, we took the dirt-encrusted artifacts across St. Asaph Street to the vacant old Columbia Firehouse, where there was some shelter from the elements. Four years later, the firehouse would be transformed with elaborate reproduction Victorian woodwork and stained glass and given the name of a 19th century beer brewery in Alexandria – Partners'. It's bar and restaurant would become an elegant meeting place for lawyers and businessmen from the new Courthouse offices and businesses."