Manchester — Archaeological Investigations, Workers' Housing Midden Site

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An archaeological investigation of the newly discovered Workers' Housing Midden Site (27-HB-435) within the New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) Manchester I-293 Exit 4 Bridge Refurbishment Project (#14966) was conducted by the NHDOT and the Northeast Archaeology Research Center. In 2012, archaeologists exposed sealed artifact deposits that date from the 1890s to 1920s, hidden under layers of road fill, which reveal a story of the local community. The artifacts represent trash from working class families that lived in housing in the neighborhood near the historic Crafts and Green Shoe Factory. Results indicate the site is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Investigations combined archaeological and archival research methods to develop in-depth historic contexts and associated research themes related to large-scale factory shoemaking, municipal expansion, public health, and waste disposal practices. The archaeologists used historic documents including town histories, maps, censuses, company and town records as well as detailed artifact analysis and comparative studies to reconstruct the story of the working class neighborhood. Archaeologists also studied issues related to land acquisition, neighborhood formation, ethnicity, household composition, and other aspects of everyday life related to urban working class communities in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Historic documents demonstrate that construction of the Crafts and Green Shoe Factory in 1890 stimulated the growth of the neighborhood, blending municipal planning and private development. Single and multi-family residences were built to house workers and families, who moved there to find work and better opportunities. Immigrants came from Germany, England, Canada, Scotland, Austria, Holland, Sweden, and Ireland; others came from New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Maine, Massachusetts, and Nebraska. Many children were first-generation Americans, and they often went to work as teenagers in nearby factories. Of the 107 workers listed in the censuses, 40% worked in shoemaking. Others were cotton and textile workers, carpenters, farmers, day laborers, servants or domestics, cigar makers, blacksmiths, tailors, tinsmiths, grocers, and peddlers. Artifacts reveal an upwardly mobile working class who purchased household items like teawares and tablewares that reflect both broad and local trade networks. Discarded medicine, alcohol, infant, and dairy bottles indicate changing social customs and views on health.

The study also demonstrates how creation of municipal laws impacted trash disposal patterns. The presence of the Workers' Housing Midden Site reflects the common historic practice of filling in low, undeveloped areas at city margins with neighborhood trash and construction debris. Trash was also picked up by private contractors in a "scavenger" system; later, by more regulated city garbage collectors.

A primary goal of the Workers' Housing Midden Site study was the development of an in-depth historic context that could be used for other similar archaeological sites. This context will inform future archaeological studies related to workers' housing neighborhoods that developed during this time in response to the growth of various industries. The study provided a wealth of information on the history of this late-19th and early-20th century West Manchester working class neighborhood during a dynamic time period.