

Revelations of a Brothel's Trash

**CAS ARCHAEOLOGY TEAM STUDIES
19TH-CENTURY MEDICINES,
SYRINGES, AND TOOTH POWDER**
BY AMY LASKOWSKI

Progressive reformers wrote of 19th-century brothels as dens of iniquity, vice, depravity, and filth. Mary Beaudry sees them as an important piece of American history, long hidden from 20th- and 21st-century eyes. Beaudry, a College of Arts & Sciences professor and acting chair of archaeology, and her students are unearthing that history, poring over a trove of archaeological treasures from the outhouse of just such a house of prostitution in Boston.

The artifacts were uncovered during Boston's infamous Big Dig construction project, which rerouted the city's Central Artery and other important roadways. Buried were many personal items of the women who made their living outside the margins of polite society: hairbrushes, medicines, and vaginal syringes used for self-medicating and cleaning.

The brothel was on Endicott Street, near Boston's North End, two blocks from what was the city's red light



UNEARTHING HISTORY The artifacts reveal, unsurprisingly, that hygiene in 19th-century brothels was of great importance. But in addition to combs and toothbrushes, the site near what was then Boston's red light district yielded syringes and medicines, including a bottle filled with copaiba oil, a natural remedy used to treat stomach cancers and ulcers.

district in the mid-19th century. Beaudry and her team are studying the more than 3,000 artifacts recovered from the outhouse, as well as city records, to learn what they can about the day-to-day lives of the women who lived at the property between 1852 and 1883. The archaeologists have deduced, unsurprisingly, that personal hygiene was of great importance to these women. In addition to medicines and syringes, they found toothbrushes, hair combs, and tooth

powder, a rare and luxurious commodity given that people seldom brushed their teeth.

“This project is slowly piecing together the texture of everyday life,” Beaudry says. “The dig site is jam-packed with potential, and this collection has such a fascinating backstory.”

In the early stages of the Big Dig, construction crews excavated a site called Mill Pond, which had been filled in 1828 to build houses. There, the workers found a sealed, wood-lined privy (the under portion of an outhouse), which was typically used for the disposal of all kinds of household waste. Recognizing the items’

historical significance, archaeologists working for John Milner Associates, the firm that excavated the Mill Pond site, cleaned and stored them. Beaudry had heard about the surprising finds from former student Ellen Berkland (GRS’89), the archaeologist for the city of Boston.

“She kept talking about what a shame it was that nothing had been done with the materials, because they were sitting in storage,” Beaudry recalls. “So when it came time to find projects for my students to work on in 2008, I asked my friend Martin Dudek, an archaeologist who had worked on the excavation for Milner Associates, if he would be willing to have us come and take some items to study. He was delighted.”

Research into city records revealed that the excavated privy had been attached to a house at 27 and 29 Endicott Street, two buildings that belonged to a Mrs. Lake, whose profession was listed as “prostitution.” Mrs. Lake eventually married a Dr. Padelford, a homeopathic doctor “considered to be crackpotty at the time,” Beaudry says. He prescribed unusual remedies for the women, most likely for treating sexually transmitted diseases and inducing abortions.

“The madam managed to create an atmosphere that mimicked the middle-class home,” she says. “This kind of brothel was referred to as a parlor house, because there

WEB EXTRA

Watch a slideshow about the artifacts found at the Mill Pond site in Boston at bu.edu/bostonia.

were furnishings that sort of looked like a middle-class parlor.” The brothel apparently offered gambling, meals, and “special services,” which would take place in a private room for an extra cost. Because the team found many different dinner and tea sets, they believe the home was able to serve several different clients at once.

One of Beaudry’s students, Amanda Johnson (CAS’10), looked into old Boston census records and learned that most of the women who worked as prostitutes in the city came from rural areas. Among the women working for Mrs. Lake were 21-year-old Eliza Thompson of Rhode Island, 22-year-old Elina McMahon of Vermont, and 20-year-old Mary Colby of Ireland.

To many of the young women, such houses seemed like a place of opportunity, Beaudry says. “But many of them were forced into the low-end brothels, or even worse, streetwalking, because that was the only way they could make any kind of a living.”

“What I think surprises people is the fact that the artifacts point to the workers’ self-care and shows the attention they gave to personal hygiene,” Beaudry says. The site also yielded a bottle filled with copaiba oil, a natural remedy used to treat stomach cancers and ulcers. Richard Laursen, now a CAS chemistry professor emeritus, was able to extract residue from the bottle and run conclusive tests on it. “The analysis revealed the type of medical treatments for venereal disease at the brothel,” says Johnson. “It is the only concrete evidence we have for what the women were using to treat their conditions.”

Diane Gallagher (GRS’11), a PhD student specializing in archaeoparasitology—she studies bugs and dirt, among other things, to identify what diseases may have affected a

» The brothel apparently offered meals, gambling, and “special services,” which would be performed in a private room.

population—identified both roundworm and whipworm, common parasites that infected most homes.

Katrina Eichner (CAS’10) studied 30 syringe fragments, which looked at first like hypodermic syringes. Closer analysis revealed that they were vaginal syringes, used to inject mercury, arsenic, and vinegar into the body to induce abortions or treat diseases.

Beaudry says that despite the complaints of progressive reformers about the depravity of houses of prostitution, the women at 27 and 29 Endicott Street appeared to have a very high concern for personal health and hygiene. “That’s understandable given the inevitable side effects of the sex trade, which are conception and disease,” says Beaudry. “These findings are the reverse of shocking; they show that these women were making a living as best they could.” ■

