

# How the History Of New York City, In Little Pieces, Is Being Unearthed

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

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## The Region

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**A**S New York City reaches higher into the sky to build its houses and offices, it is reaching deeper into the earth to reacquire itself with patterns of life in earlier centuries.

From some of their discoveries, urban archeologists are concluding that trade networks, for example, were greater than once supposed and that a remarkable variety of imported and domestic goods were available in and around New York.

"We see sources of supply and manufacture that weren't supposed to exist," said Dr. Joel W. Grossman, an archeologist in Manhattan. Said Dr. Joan H. Geismar, also of Manhattan: "Archives tell you what was supposed to happen. Archeology tells you what happened."

In 1987, Dr. Geismar found what she called "an encyclopedia of mid-to late 19th-century goods for the middle and working class" in two privies for two long-lost Greenwich Street dwellings, between Christopher and 10th Streets. "What surprised me was the variety," she said. The 3,000 artifacts included an amber olive bottle from France and an 1849 pickle jar that was traced to the still popular Messrs. Crosse & Blackwell of London.

A dig in Richmondtown in the middle of Staten Island unearthed the same Oriental porcelain one would find in Manhattan in colonial times. That led Dr. Sherene Baugher, the city's chief archeologist, to conclude that when it came to obtaining goods, "it didn't matter whether you were in an urban area or the hinterlands."

### Under the Rubble

As at any site around the world, archeological discoveries in New York range from diminutive shards to spectacular treasures.

Two weeks ago in City Hall Park, Dr. Grossman and his team unearthed what may be the foundations of the Almshouse, built in 1735 in one of New York's earlier efforts to deal with homelessness, poverty and vagrancy. Even if the structure turns out to be a different building, fresh insights into colonial life are promised by the undisturbed and well-defined strata that surround it.

Seven years ago, Dr. Geismar un-

covered an 82-foot ship that was built sometime before 1720 and sunk as landfill in the 1740's. The downtown site, bounded by Front, Fletcher and Water Streets and Burling Slip, was excavated for an office tower being built by Howard Ronson.

A nine-year-old provision of the city's environmental quality review procedure prompted discovery of the ship. When a developer seeks to construct a building whose use, bulk or parking requirements differ from zoning rules, the Landmarks Preservation Commission begins an archeological review.

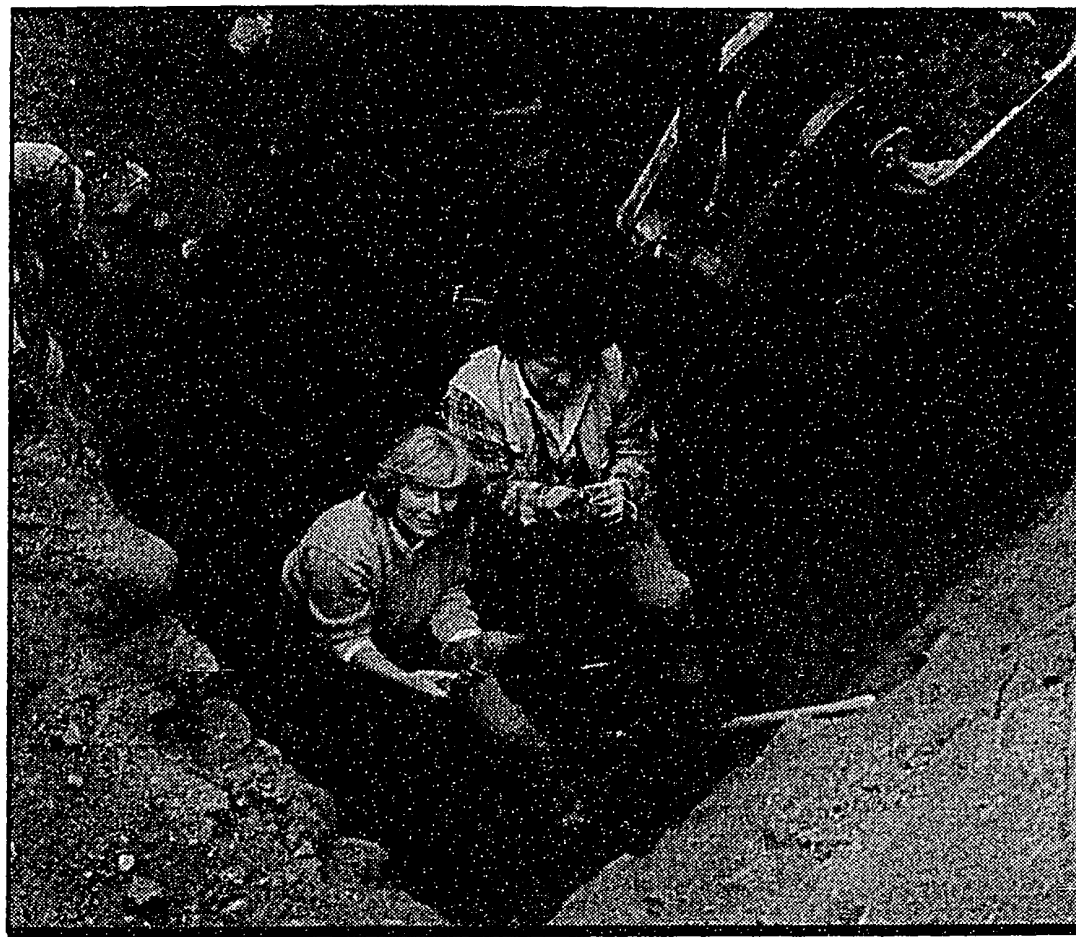
An average of 200 applicants a year reach the commission, Dr. Baugher estimated. Many are eliminated at the outset because previous construction has most likely wiped out the traces of history. Only about 50 a year are flagged as requiring documentary study; about 30 go to field testing, and only one or two go to full-scale excavation.

### 'Wonderful Sites'

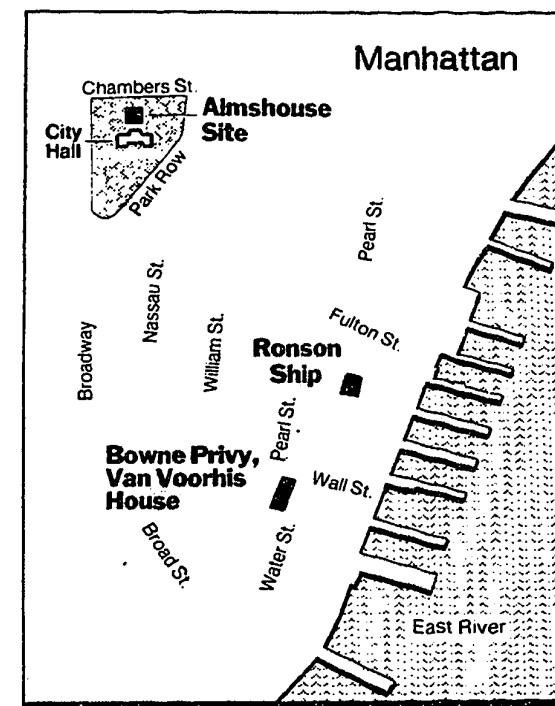
"We've just been fortunate," Dr. Baugher said, that the environmental rules have covered "a number of wonderful sites."

Sometimes, the landmarks commission must depend on voluntary cooperation. For example, Milstein Properties is proposing a building in the South Street Seaport Historic District, on a block bounded by Pearl, Beekman and Water Streets and Peck Slip — a site shown on a 1730 map as Dallys Ship Yard. "Archeologically and historically, it's extremely important," said Dr. Diana diZerega Wall, curator of archeology at the South Street Seaport Museum. If constructed without special permits, the building would not have to go through archeological review. But if the plans win approval from the landmarks panel, the Milstein family is prepared to undertake what might become an "extensive" archeological excavation, according to their lawyer, Raymond H. Levin of Brown & Wood.

Other instances of cooperation involve city agencies, which do not have to submit their projects to archeological review. The General Services Department, for example, undertook the Almshouse excavation before laying a new water pipe. And the Cultural Affairs Department is helping identify sites with archeolog-



The New York Times/Vic DeLucia



### Life Below

Some archeological sites in lower Manhattan (above); Dr. Joan H. Geismar (left) with assistant Shelly Spritzer, in a privy recently excavated at Greenwich and West 10th Streets.

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ical potential at city-owned cultural institutions.

For an archeologist, excavation is only the beginning. The Ronson ship is still under study by Dr. Warren Riess, who has narrowed the craft's possible identity down to one of five ships and believes she was built for the tobacco trade. What excites Dr. Riess is that "we'd never seen a typical merchant ship from this period from the American colonies."

Absent a local patron, the remnants of the ship wound up at the

Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Va., in 1985. Since then, the South Street Seaport Museum has become more aggressive. "We have assembled one of the largest collections of urban archeological materials anywhere," said Peter Neill, president of the museum. "The evidence generated by archeological material as to the life and times of people in lower Manhattan is very much part of our story."

A museum exhibition, "Beneath the City Streets," running through

Sept. 10, includes hundreds of items from a block bounded by Wall, Pearl and Water Streets, an early landfill site. From the cobble floor of the 18th-century home and shop of Daniel Van Voorhis, silversmith, goldsmith and jeweler, came charming delft tiles with biblical or pastoral scenes, and sets of ceramic crucibles in which metal was melted.

Next door was the privy of the Richard M. Bowne household, built in the early 19th century and used, like most privies, as a convenient

trash pit. A portrait of domestic life emerged in items like toothbrushes, pipes, buttons and dice, and a Balsam of Life medicine vial — "BY THE KINGS ROYAL PATENT." There were also a delicate porringer, plate and egg cup made by a member of the Wedgwood family; a pretty blue-and-white pitcher in a willow-like pattern, and a piece that needed no archeological interpretation to speak poignantly across the centuries: a child's pearlware mug inscribed "My dear Cousin."