

Cockeysville dig yields insights into Irish life

A summer archeological dig near St. Joseph in Cockeysville unearthed brown broken bottles and tea cups, coins, a beer token, buttons and children's toys – clues into the daily life of Irish immigrants who manned area limestone quarries and worshipped at St. Joseph beginning in the mid-19th century.

But what wasn't discovered also tells the story of the Irish enclave of a Baltimore County community then known as Texas. There were no rosaries, prayer cards or crucifixes.

"It's rare to find religious items," said Dr. Stephen Brighton, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Maryland, College Park, and director of the dig.

"What we find is usually things that are discarded," he explained. "People held onto things that were very dear to them. It shows the sacredness of such objects. Even when people die, they don't throw them away."

The six-week dig, which yielded 400 bags of artifacts, was conducted at the end of Church Lane, on the site of what had once been a tavern at the center of town. Before selecting the site, Brighton conducted more than two years of research, examining the landscape and interviewing residents about the history of the area.

Brighton worked with a team of students from the University of Maryland, uncovering a rectangular Portland cement box that he believes was used by the tavern for cold storage. Beneath the container was a privy.

St. Joseph Church, a monument of immigrant faith, stands within walking distance of the now-closed dig. The Irish immigrants built the church using limestone they quarried themselves, the anthropologist said.

"Irish Americans may have looked like other Americans and they may have spoken English, but the first thing they had to prove was their respectability," said Brighton, noting that Irish immigrants were regarded as crude and superstitious by many in

the wider American culture.

“The core was their faith - being Catholic,” he said.

Most of the Irish who settled in Texas came from Ballykilcline, a rural area on the Emerald Isle that was hit hard by the potato famine in the 1840s.

“They were evicted from Ballykilcline because they couldn’t afford to pay rent,” said Cassie Kilroy Thompson, a parishioner of St. Louis in Clarksville who grew up at St. Joseph. President of the Ballykilcline Society, Thompson has conducted extensive research in Maryland and Ireland.

“The British government sent them here,” Thompson said.

Strolling through the tidy parish cemetery, Thompson pointed to the many Irish names on tombstones and noted that many parishioners trace their roots to Ballykilcline and Roscommon County in Ireland. The family of Wilmington Bishop W. Francis Malooly, former Baltimore auxiliary bishop, is connected with Texas and has ancestors who came from Knockcroughery, Thompson said.

“I know that there are other descendants of those settlers out there,” she said. “I am looking at as many ways as possible to connect to them.”

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