

Dig reveals slices of village life

Archaeologists sift tiny pieces of 19th century cheese factory

BY STEPHEN WILLIAMS
Gazette Reporter

The former farm field where Charlton officials want to build a new town hall is yielding clues about this bucolic hamlet when it was a thriving community.

An archaeological crew is digging sample pits at the Charlton Road site this week, gathering information about the Charlton Union Cheese and Butter Factory that operated there, 1866-1868.

The information may be in tiny pieces buried in heavy soil, but it offers clues to how life was lived here just after the Civil War.

"We're getting brick fragments, pieces of glass, nails, metal fragments," said Susan Gade, chief investigator and president of Landmark Archaeology of Altamont.

The fragments will be analyzed in a laboratory, and a report sent to the state Historic Preservation Office. The state will then decide whether a full artifact recovery dig is needed before the new town hall can be built on the land next to Gideon Hawley Park.

"None of us knows much about what went on at the Charlton Cheese and Butter Factory," said Town Historian Laura Linder.

The entire Charlton hamlet has been on the National Historic Register since 1976, so town officials are sensitive to historic preservation issues.

"Being in a historic district and being a municipality, we should find out what's there," said Councilman Alan Grattidge, co-chairman of the town building committee.

"It's kind of interesting when you open a three-by-three-foot window down into the earth and see what's there," said Grattidge, who has watched some of the work.

The archaeological investigation taking place this spring has been an unexpected twist in the long-held plans for a new town hall, costing the town about \$20,000 to date.

The town didn't know about the cheese factory when it bought the 2.7-acre site in 2000 and began making plans for the new municipi-



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Landmark Archaeology Inc., of Altamont, is conducting a survey to gather more information about an 1866 cheese factory on Charlton Road in Charlton. Archaeologists Josh Dubuque, left, and Sarah Schreyer are seen working in the field.

pal building. The first clue came last winter, when Linder reviewed deed records left by the late town historian Frank Lafforthun.

The 2½-story factory only lasted two years, and then the building was moved to another nearby location. Linder said it burned in the 1950s.

"This was a very busy area then," Linder said. "There were general stores at either end of the hamlet. There were hotels, businesses. It was a commercial center. Then the automobile came along."

In the mid-19th century, there was no refrigeration, and butter and cheese were two ways of preserving milk produced on the many small farms that dotted the countryside, so cheese factories were quite common. "Cheese factories were meant to serve the

farmers, so they were strategically located," Gade said.

Landmark conducted an initial shovel-pit survey in April based on Linder's deed information, and it found enough artifacts to justify this week's work. "I think it's wonderful . . . I really didn't think they'd find anything," Linder said.

To date, Landmark has dug about 100 shovel pits, narrowing where to look for artifacts. By the end of today, the seven-member crew will have dug a half-dozen "unit digs," which are 1-meter-square pits going down about 2 feet. The loam soil is then sifted for pieces of brick, nail, and other possible evidence.

"We're taking a closer look at what we found in the first phase. It's very systematic sampling," said Scott Padeni, Landmark's field director.

Landmark expects to send a report to the state Historic Preservation Office within about six weeks, and the state agency will then decide whether a more extensive dig to recover and preserve artifacts is needed.

If a full archaeological dig is ordered, Grattidge believes it can be wrapped up late this year, clearing the way for the new town hall that will replace the outmoded 1894 town hall located just down the road.

"We would hope to get the building started next year," Grattidge said.

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Site survey

Landmark Archaeology Inc. Field Director Scott Paden and employee Stephanie Sprout work Thursday at the site of where an old cheese factory once stood on Charlton Road next to the Gideon Hawley Park. The land is part of the site of the proposed new Charlton town hall. Story on page B5.