



Jillian Reese, curator of exhibits at the Michigan History Center, prepares items for the new privy excavation exhibit for the coming summer season at Fayette Historic State Park in Delta County. (Michigan Department of Natural Resources photo)

Investigating a privy at Fayette Historic State Park

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In 1991, a team of archaeologists from Michigan Technological University in Houghton conducted a dig on the site of the privy that was once connected to Shelton House, Fayette's only hotel.

During the decades the hotel operated, guests often left items behind. Staff then tossed many of the unwanted items into the privy, which was an easy way to get rid of them.

The privy, a two-story, outhouse-type structure, hasn't stood since the early 20th century. Part of the goal for this dig was to relocate the privy and excavate the ruins of it in hopes of finding those personal items that could provide key insight into life in historic Fayette.



The hotel privy can be seen on the right side of this image, connected to the hotel by catwalk. (Michigan History Center photo)

Archaeologists used historical documents and photographs to find its approximate location. However, when they found it, they only excavated half of the privy. The other half – the untouched cross-section – helped them see different layers within the deposits.

The first 6.5 feet was filled with 20th century park trash; however, below that, they found undisturbed soil from the 19th century.

During the dig, the archaeologists collected a total of 8,884 artifacts.

All artifacts were brought back to an archaeology lab for analysis, where they were cleaned, mended and cataloged. Some artifacts were eventually identified to come from a certain manufacturer or company.

Afterward, the artifacts were separated into the following categories:

- Ceramics.
- Glass.
- Personal items.
- Table and kitchenware.
- Architectural materials.
- Utilitarian objects.

Ceramics found included a variety of water pitchers, plates, gravy dishes, cups and serving dishes. Most of these ceramics were plain, undecorated whitewares that probably served a utilitarian function within the hotel's guest rooms and dining room.

More than 2,000 glass fragments were found during the dig. The fragments included pieces of liquor bottles, drinking glasses, prescription bottles, perfume bottles, canning jars, condiment jars and vials.

The crew collected plenty of window glass fragments, nails and screws, as well as pieces of wood, including one that had formed part of the privy seat.

Small scraps of fabric, two pieces of ribbon or sash and a few pieces of leather survived the test of time. Other clothing items found included buttons, buckles and even multiple shoes, some almost fully intact.

Among the personal items discovered were toothbrushes, watches, harmonicas and combs, which gave the dig crew a glimpse into the everyday life and basic items used by people staying at Shelton House.

A new Fayette exhibit in what was once Shelton House displays just a sample of the nearly 9,000 artifacts uncovered by the crew in 1991. The exhibit not only tells the story of the 1991 excavation and helps make sense of the work that archaeologists do but also helps link the artifacts back to life in Fayette.

With the exhibit now complete, visitors can step into the dining area of the hotel and further explore the townsite's story. The exhibit expands our understanding of life in Fayette with the inclusion of a variety of artifacts, historic images and stories of those who lived there.

The story of these found artifacts begs the question: What will future generations think when they uncover 21st century items?

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