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Awakening the Bowery's Ghosts

New York 101

By EMILY S. RUEB FEB. 12, 2016

One afternoon in October 2013, as work at a construction site in Chinatown was winding down for the day, an amateur historian known for his renegade research tactics, Adam Woodward, slipped through an open gate wearing a suit and tie. After nosing around in the pit, which was to accommodate the foundation for a 22-story luxury hotel, he sounded the alarm, a Paul Revere of the Bowery.

In an email to a cadre of preservationists, Mr. Woodward wrote: "Sitting under a few feet of flooring, stone and coal is a largely if not entirely undisturbed colonial-to-post-Civil-War archaeological site in immediate danger of being destroyed. Mind you not just any colonial site but arguably the most significant late-colonial revolutionary period site in Manhattan."

The photos he later posted of ax-hewn joists, twisted metal and crumbling bricks electrified the conservation community.

If his suspicions were correct, Mr. Woodward had discovered the remains of the Bull's Head Tavern, where Gen. George Washington assembled with his troops on Evacuation Day in 1783, when British troops left Manhattan.

But were they really?

The ensuing debate forced archaeologists, preservationists and historians into a confrontation with the Chu family, one of the largest landlords in Chinatown. It also

exposed a tug-of-war that plays out with surprising frequency on construction projects.

“Dig a hole anywhere in New York and you’ll find many other lives,” said Kerri Culhane, an architectural historian, “both for the building and for the people who were occupying it.”

In November, workers installing a water main on Washington Square East unwittingly uncovered coffins from a 19th-century burial vault. Earlier in 2015, a trove of bones was discovered underneath a bus depot in East Harlem, verifying the existence of a “Negro burying ground” established on the site in the 17th century.

But in a city that is perpetually rebuilding itself, who controls the remnants buried underfoot? And perhaps more important, who shapes the story that will be told about what has been found?

After Mr. Woodward’s reconnaissance, headlines and emails swirled claiming that the developer of the hotel, 50 Bowery Holdings, managed by the Chu family, was burying history forever. Neighborhood groups and many residents of the Bowery were already on edge, fearing that the gritty, avant-garde character of the area that inspired the cinema of Martin Scorsese and the writings of Luc Sante was slipping into conformity.

Ms. Culhane, who had spent two years researching and writing the application that earned the Bowery a spot on the National Register of Historic Places in February 2013, was part of the chorus.

“It’s not like we were trying to save the Duane Reade,” she said. (The chain pharmacy was one of the last tenants on the site before demolition began.)

As criticism churned, the Chu family, usually averse to publicity, stayed quiet. But suddenly, they themselves became intrigued about what lay beneath their land.

While New York City may seem to be an unlikely place to dig for buried treasure, Lower Manhattan is especially fertile ground. Tides of immigrants, beginning with the Dutch in the 17th century, have imprinted the soil with their DNA (and their garbage). Paradoxically, these layers of history manifest themselves when

the backhoes arrive to build something new. But when these ghosts from the past rise up, they can cast long shadows over developers.

The remains of an 18th-century merchant ship delayed a 30-story office tower in the financial district in the 1980s. A decade later, a colonial-era African burial ground halted plans for a 34-story federal building near City Hall.

Few American cities have the accrued historical sediment of New York, but few are as unsentimental about the past. “We don’t have a lot of qualms about knocking something down and replacing it,” Ms. Culhane said.

Still, she argues strongly there are incentives to preserving New York’s heritage.

For the site at 50 Bowery, the fears were twofold: first, that a layer of historical documentation would be lost forever; and second, that the question of whether or not there were physical remains of the Bull’s Head Tavern would remain unanswered.

“Facts aren’t fixed, as much as we wish they were,” Ms. Culhane said. “And that’s what makes these things very tantalizing. Who is right?”

Today, Tax Lot 23 on Block 202 overlooks a grumbling fog of buses, trucks and cars barreling across the Manhattan Bridge. Rewind to the 1700s, though, and the Bowery was thronged with clopping stagecoaches and a string of inns and taverns catering to travelers and mobile tradesmen.

The Bull’s Head, which operated from the 1750s through the first quarter of the 19th century, was part of a sprawling complex that included a stockyard. Drovers from as far away as Ohio mingled with the local butchers waiting their turn at the public slaughterhouse nearby.

In the generations after General Washington’s visit, the site accommodated a gambling den run by a bare-knuckle boxer; a popular German beer hall; a Yiddish vaudeville theater; a newspaper printer for the Chinese-American Press; a carnival supply shop; dim sum restaurants; and most recently, a Popeyes Chicken & Biscuits and a Duane Reade.

A novelty store, a Chinese hand laundry and a Chinese hairstylist were operating at 50-52 Bowery in 1974, around the time a keen young entrepreneur named Joseph Chu bought the buildings. His name was added to a long property deed that reads like a who's who of New York real estate, including Henry Astor, one of the first to claim the site.

Mr. Chu would later become one of the wealthiest proprietors and high citizens of Chinatown. For years, he talked about building a 400-room hotel on the site. After his death in 2004, Alexander, his son, and Jonathan and Lauren, his grandchildren, took his mantle.

In late 2013, the two-story structures at 50-52 Bowery were demolished to make way for what the Chu family is calling “the largest single development for our community since Confucius Plaza,” a massive 1970s apartment complex across the street.

The reception to the tower at 50 Bowery, designed by the architect Peter Poon, has been prickly, however. Bowery Boogie, one of several local blogs chronicling the project, described the hotel as “a force-feeding of twenty-two stories of glass” that “perfectly encapsulates the collective fears of this neighborhood.”

Until recently, the family has been silent. Now, though, Jonathan Chu, a 32-year-old Harvard graduate and entrepreneur who recently rejoined the family business after a stint in Hong Kong as an investment banker, has taken charge of public relations. He said his father, Alexander, has finally realized the family “can’t ignore the power of social media.”

Discovering the building’s history has been a thrill, he said, despite Mr. Woodward’s questionable trespass on the property in 2013.

“Why wouldn’t we want to celebrate such a cherished piece of the community?” Mr. Chu asked.

The site is not regulated by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which would have required an archaeological assessment as part of the environmental review process.

Amanda Sutphin, one of two full-time archaeologists employed by the city, said she called the Chus to ask if they would consider an assessment even though they were not legally obligated. They agreed.

“So the fact they did it is terrific,” she said. “It was purely through their good will.”

Whether as an act of generosity or an acquiescence to the relentless attention of Mr. Woodward and others, the family commissioned Chrysalis Archaeological Consultants, one of a growing number of archaeological firms for hire.

Alyssa Loorya, who founded the company in 2001, and her staff pored over tax records, historic maps, renderings, paintings and papers at the New-York Historical Society and the Municipal Archives, building a timeline for the site.

Property lines have shifted since colonial times, making it difficult to pinpoint the precise location of the Bull’s Head, Ms. Loorya said.

The neighboring bank building provided a useful geographic cornerstone, since its dimensions are known and it is easily traceable on old maps.

But excavation of the strata of history buried underfoot is critical. These can add more evidence to convey how a site was used; help document the lives of people who were not accounted for in written records; and challenge recorded accounts, which are susceptible to human bias and error.

Archaeology, Ms. Loorya said, is “the physical proof.”

There was snow on the ground when Ms. Loorya and her four-person team began monitoring the construction site in spring 2014. They spent five weeks watching closely each time the scoop of the excavator struck ground and started to pull back.

“A good backhoe operator can be surprisingly delicate,” Ms. Loorya said. “It’s an art.”

The Chrysalis staff, accompanied by Lauren Chu, combed through the dirt with the aid of giant box sifters. They collected more than 700 artifacts from a 19th-century brick cistern, two heaps of bottles and a small deposit of oyster shells.

There were also piles of thick ceramic “hotel ware” dishes; poultry and cow bones with knife markings from butchers or diners and rodent jaws (hinting at a pest problem); beer, wine and Champagne bottles and glass mugs with large handles; and medicine bottles, one for an elixir that promoted long life (or perhaps served as a substitute for whiskey during Prohibition).

Chrysalis produced a 143-page report that reads like a catalog and compendium of 17th- and 18th-century tavern culture.

The investigators were able to divine the recipe for Zoolak, a fermented milk beverage marketed as medicine, from discarded glass bottles. They traced a round, flat bocksbeutel wine bottle to a vineyard in Germany, and painted ceramic tiles to a manufacturer in Zanesville, Ohio.

The most dramatic discoveries emerged from the basement area of the Atlantic Garden, a celebrated German biergarten and concert hall where “Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two)” became a hit in the 1890s.

But there was no positive identification of the Bull’s Head Tavern structure.

There were some old stones that might have been reused from the original tavern, Ms. Loorya said. But the 10-to-15-foot ax-hewn beams Mr. Woodward had photographed were in fact recovered at 52 Bowery, throwing into question the tavern’s location next door at number 50. Also, the beams had been “heavily modified,” meaning they had been moved from their original position and refitted with modern tools.

Though most of the site was gutted in the early 2000s when the drugstore moved in, the real damage had been done in the 1860s, when the Atlantic Garden expanded.

“There was little to no consideration to preserve the 18th-century remains when the builders came barreling through,” Ms. Loorya said.

For Mr. Woodward, the Chrysalis report did not provide closure.

“I don’t think the archaeological work done clarifies the debate in the least,” he said.

Mr. Woodward sent wood samples selected from structural elements to the dendrochronology lab at Columbia University. The oak sample’s rings were cross-dated with the lab’s master tree-ring chronology, developed from living trees and historical samples collected in the New York City and New Jersey area.

Edward Cook, who helped found the lab in 1975, concluded that one of the timbers sampled was cut for construction in the winter or early spring of 1788. “We can say that with 100 percent certainty,” Dr. Cook said. “It would be nice, if they are, in fact, the remaining samples from the Bull’s Head.”

But he distanced himself from drawing any conclusions. “I provide the dates and let the historians argue,” he said.

Mr. Woodward suggests that after the Revolutionary War, the Bull’s Head was extensively modified. He said it was “highly probable” that the joists and wrought-iron rose-head nails that were discovered mixed in with the beams from the Atlantic Garden were part of an original late-18th-century structure that could have been the Bull’s Head.

“Ironically,” Mr. Woodward said, “it’s come full circle, back to a hotel.”

The gleaming glass structure, now complete, towers over the adjacent Beaux-Arts-style bank and the three-story Chinatown Arcade. But the hammering and drilling continue inside as the upscale hotel, operated by the California hospitality brand Joie de Vivre, is prepared for its fall opening.

It will include the requisite high-end amenities, like a name-brand chef, a lounge and a rooftop bar with panoramic views of the skyline.

Some of the disinterred architectural remains may also be incorporated into the building’s structure, said David Ho, the development manager for 50 Bowery Holdings.

The bricks, he said, will be easy to integrate. But still being discussed is where to put the old steel beams stamped “Carnegie,” and a large wheel that once operated the retractable roof over the Atlantic Garden.

Also in storage are the several ax-hewn beams that may or may not have been a part of the Bull’s Head Tavern.

Mr. Chu said that Chrysalis’s work had been “well worth the delay or added cost.”

The Museum of Chinese in America, of which Jonathan Chu is a trustee, is to devise programs for an exhibition space on the second floor. The challenge, he said, will be to tactfully incorporate the Chinese-American story along with that of the Dutch, German, Irish and other immigrant populations who also laid claim to the site.

The Chus have buried a time capsule beneath the hotel, an echo of the leaden box entombed near the site on June 19, 1826, which has never been recovered. Lauren Chu, who prepared a collection of personal effects, also included a MetroCard, takeout menus from nearby restaurants, coins and paper currency, and a bottle of orange bitters Ms. Loorya prepared based on historical recipes.

“The Chinese history is the most recent chapter,” Mr. Chu said. “There is a new layer to be written.”

Have a question about how the city works? Email: newyork101@nytimes.com.

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