

Digging Into The Past Archaeologists Look For Secrets Of Old Passaconaway Settlement

By Rob Burbank

IN 1831, THOMAS RUSSELL OR one of his sons may have dropped a nail as he was hammering clapboards onto the side of the house they were building. Years later, Ruth Priscilla Colbath may have dropped a chamber pot in the dooryard, and failed to pick up all of the broken pieces.

husband, Thomas Colbath. Perhaps tired of trying to make a living in the rocky soil of New Hampshire, or perhaps tormented by some demons of his own, Thomas Colbath left the house in 1891, telling his bride he'd be back "in a little while."

Thirty-nine years later, Ruth died at the age of 80, never having seen her husband

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Those scenarios amount to mere speculation several generations later, but those items were found earlier this month under the soil at the site of the last remaining farmhouse in the once-bustling Passaconaway Valley.

How they got there remains a mystery, but U.S. Forest Service employees turned spades of dirt and sifted soil through wire screens in an attempt to retrieve artifacts that may serve to document the pioneering life at the Russell-Colbath House off the Kancamagus Highway.

The archaeological dig was undertaken by the Forest Service in an attempt to find out what cultural tidbits lay hidden beneath the ground at this dwelling that itself became the scene for a classic tale of unrequited love a century ago.

The house, built by Thomas Russell and his five sons in 1831, later became the home of Russell's daughter, Ruth, and her

again. While others had written him off as dead, Ruth Colbath forever held off hope, and kept a lantern burning in the window each night, to guide her husband home.

Thomas Colbath did return, but not until three years after his wife had died. Shortly thereafter, he disappeared again.

The tale of the hermit lady of Passaconaway, the lady who put the lamp in the window, is, truly, a story all its own. But it's an interesting tale upon which to hang a modern-day account of an archaeological excavation. Could the brass button unearthed by Forest Service technician Lyle Wiggin have popped off of a jacket once worn by the wandering Colbath? And the clay pipe stem he found under 18 inches of dirt: Could it have been held by one of the house's boarders who had, perhaps, stepped outside to enjoy a smoke after supper? just as we'll



Technician Dave Hrdlicka (foreground) and archaeologist Karl Roenke of the White Mountain National Forest work on an archaeological excavation at the site of the 160-year-old Russell-Colbath House off the Kancamagus Highway. The recent excavation, performed to ensure that a planned drainage project at the site wouldn't damage cultural resources, yielded a few artifacts from the days when the Passaconaway Valley was a bustling farming and logging community. (Rob Burbank/Mountain Ear Photo)

probably never know why Mr. Colbath took his extended leave, we may never know just how these artifacts got there or to whom they belonged. Yet, once this stuff is uncovered, it provides one more piece in the historical mosaic that makes up New Hampshire's past. It helps researchers to interpret the events of another time.

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The purpose of the dig, Roenke said, is to mitigate any cultural damage that may be done to the site when the Forest Service installs a new drainage system under the land next year.

Roenke and his crew dug in the likely vicinity of the planned catch basins in a sort of scouting mission that was designed to see what could be found out about the site's history and also to determine if the planned project would seriously damage any cultural resources hidden beneath the soil. The house was placed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1986, and the excavation work is required by federal law.

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The body of Ruth Priscilla Colbath is buried (beneath the stone on the far right) in the family cemetery adjacent to the Russell-Colbath House. Famous as the "hermit lady of Passaconaway," Colbath kept a lamp burning in a front window of the house for 39 years in the hope that her husband, who stepped out for a stroll in 1891 and didn't return, would come back to her. Her estranged spouse did eventually come back to the homestead—three years after his wife had died. Some contend Ruth Colbath's spirit still roams the property. (Rob Burbank/Mountain Ear Photo)



White Mountain National Forest Technician Lyle Wiggin displays the clay pipe stem and brass button he unearthed during the recent excavation at the Russell-Colbath House. The condition of the soil indicates the land had been disturbed in the past, making historical artifacts difficult to find.

Artifacts

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"We wanted to document the redone foundation in 1948 and see if we had a builder's trench that was disturbed," said Roenke, pointing to a hole dug against the southwest side of the building's foundation, "and we also wanted to dig in the area that will probably be disturbed by

ceramic plate with a design similar to that of a plate on display inside the house, and the handle of a ceramic chamber pot. "Outside of things like that, about the only thing we're getting is a lot of little ceramic flakes and cut nails and wire nails," said Wiggin. The latter, due to their relative recency of invention, were being used as an indicator that the site has been disturbed in the past, Roenke noted.

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the drainage. And then, seat-of-the-pants is the next thing. We're going to dig a pit over there," he said, gesturing to a spot 20 feet from the building, "because it looks like a good place."

Roenke and his crew of three to four men, each from a different district on the national forest, had begun digging on Tuesday, Oct. 8. Now it was Thursday, and the cry of "Eureka!" had yet to pierce the air, but Roenke still appeared pleased with the findings. "I think we moved quite a bit of dirt for three days, and got good results," he said. "One of the things that's frustrating is, half the time we're digging, it's negative information. But you have to look at it from the point of view that that's good: Go ahead with the project and we're not going to be disturbing anything."

IN EACH OF NINE THREE-FOOT-square pits, Roenke, Wiggin, Dave Hrdlicka, Terry LaPointe and Don West dug, and found shards of pottery, rusted bits of metal, and plenty of earthworms. (Recent, live, wriggling ones; not ancient, dead, historical ones.)

The depth and types of soil didn't appear consistent and Roenke speculates that some artifacts may have been removed or damaged by previous earth work at the site, but the new dig still provided a bit of a view into the past.

Protruding from the edge of Wiggin's meticulously scraped pit was the rim and bail of a rusty bucket a foot below the surface, a chunk of a blue-and-white

Groups of tourists, attracted to the Kancamagus Highway by the colorful autumn foliage, intermittently milled about the site as the diggers dug. As one knot hovered over Wiggin, he pointed to a vein of black ash running through his pit. "Probably, they brought some rubbish out here and burned it," he told the onlookers. Wiggin's pit appeared to hold the most varied treasures—from the thunder mug handle to the clay pipe stem and brass button. The button, somewhat discolored by the green of oxidation, was embossed with letters, but Wiggin couldn't quite make out their message. "I'm not sure what it says. You can read just enough to be tantalizing," he said.

Each piece of material unearthed was placed into a plastic baggie, upon which would be written the date and location at which the item was found.

While settlers in the day of the Russells and Colbaths often discarded their rubbish in household dumps kept on the property, Roenke said it was not his intention to unearth the residence's trash pit. As for how these bits and pieces of early American life had found their way beneath the west windows of the house, Roenke noted, "Stuff could have just gotten thrown in as fill to raise the land up.

"I think, with the ceramics and stuff, we can work up a pretty nice display you can use inside," said Roenke to Judy Pike, one of the Russell-Colbath House's caretakers. "That's the best use for this stuff. Otherwise, we have to store it. We can't throw it away," he said.

THE HOUSE, PURCHASED BY THE U.S. Forest Service in 1961, is now used as an information center. The decor is as it would have been in Ruth Colbath's time, although the furnishings are not necessarily from the house originally. A spinning wheel dominates the parlor, a room which also holds a pump organ, and some modest chairs. A portrait of Thomas Russell, the home's builder, hangs on the wall.

An enormous fireplace, complete with a beehive oven, takes up one wall of the kitchen. Behind glass in a shelf display are such items as pottery, a steel trap once owned by legendary woodsman Jigger Johnson, and some articles of Ruth Colbath's clothing.

Broad floorboards, some of them two feet wide, speak to the age of the structure.

A bedroom and pantry complete the first-floor layout, and three bedrooms take up the second floor. According to Judy Pike, those rooms weren't completed until the 1930s, but Ruth Colbath had taken in boarders, who slept in the unfinished attic.

The cottage also served as a post office, and Ruth served as Passaconaway's postmistress, from 1890 until 1906.

In 1935, new owners renovated the house for use as a summer home. Outbuildings were razed at that time.

The building was long known as the George House, named for Austin George, who settled in the Passaconaway Valley in 1805. Poring over old documents in the 1980s, Ann Croto, one of the cottage's caretakers, discovered that the house that George built was actually located east of the building acquired by the Forest Service. The George House wasn't built by George at all, but by Thomas Russell. Upon this discovery, the Forest Service changed the name of the house.

SO, JUST WHY DID THOMAS COLBATH up and leave, anyway? "There are two or three different stories, and one of

them was that she had been fooling around with someone else," said Pike. According to Pike, one gentleman whose great-great aunt had spoken to Colbath upon his return claims "there used to be a huge garden out in the back here, and it was all hardpan, and he said he had gotten tired of trying to get things to grow in the rocks."

Colbath apparently hitched a ride to Portland, Maine, hopped on a ship, and spent those 42 lost years in such locales as Panama and Cuba, Pike said. "He never said why he left, really, except for the garden, so that kind of blows the theory that she was fooling around with

somebody," said Pike.

After her husband left, Ruth spent her days at the house, caring for her aging mother, taking in boarders and sorting the mail. Her mother died in 1905, and Ruth remained at the homestead, setting the lamp in the window each night for the rest of her life. She died in 1930, leaving an estate worth \$527.13 after the bills were paid. She never gave up hope that her husband would return, and in that belief she was correct. But she didn't live long enough to see it happen. Her bones are buried in the family graveyard adjacent to the house.

Some have speculated that Ruth Col-

bath's spirit was tormented in death, having left this earth without that longed-for reunion with the husband for whom she still cared. Pike said recent visitors to the Russell-Colbath House who had occasion to overnight there in the 1930s told her tales of windows and doors mysteriously and inexplicably thrown open in the middle of the night as the cold wind blew outside.

Like the chips of pottery and rusty nails that are hidden beneath the soil in the dooryard, Ruth Colbath's spirit may still inhabit the old homestead, but that's one thing an archaeological excavation won't be able to confirm.