

10-11-19 Archeology and Terminology- History Matters

Saturday was such a beautiful day, filled with sunshine and the crisp autumn air! It was a perfect day for so many things. For me, it was a free talk by a UMass archaeologist, Dr. David Landon, at Burial Hill in Plymouth.

I arrived early to enjoy the hills, the granite steps, iron railings, historic grave markers and the gorgeous shadows on a sunny day. I was glad I did on this occasion, as this tour was so keenly and enthusiastically presented, we moved only three times to discuss and learn about the archaeological digs, in and around Plymouth. I was glad I walked before the talk. I walked the walk. He talked the talk.

There was a sweet and comical moment before the talk began. I saw a little boy, with a young woman and an “older woman”. He said to them, something about “Grammy”, as he looked at me. I asked, “Do I remind you of your Grammy?” He said, “Yes”, with a smile. I asked, “Does she wear scarves?” This little boy of three or four answered, “Yes”, with nod of his head and a loving twinkle in his eyes. His grandmother explained that he does this all the time, relating to older people as his grandparents. While I don’t know what is going on there, I enjoyed the moment and the memory of my granddaughter wanting to wear her scarf just as I did. Those young years fly by so quickly!

Then the archeology talk began. Dr. Landon explained how they looked for evidence of the fort, or the palisade. The evidence was found in the circles of dark brown soil, where the wood had rotted, yet left its mark. Dr. Landon joked about his group being so serious about discovering the dark brown circles and having detailed discussions of “Is this this a sandy loam or a loamy sand?” And then, as they attempted to match the color with little paint chips used for this purpose, asking each other, “Do you think this is a 10YR 3/3?” I leaned over and said to my engineering friend whom I happened to see there, “Oh, listen to that; he is speaking our language! He is referring the Munsell book we use at perc tests, isn’t he?” He was.

The Munsell book is a universal language of color, once developed by artists, and now used also by a variety of scientists. Instead of saying dark brown or yellowish- orange and someone on the other side of the world is thinking

something else, we can say 10YR 3/3 for the brown and 10YR 5/6 for the yellow-orange. Not only do we know we are talking about the exact same color, sometimes that color has great significance as to what occurred in the environment. Certain changes in color indicate a wetland. Others indicate organics, such as in the woods under all the leaf litter.

Dr. Landon went on to describe the enthusiasm with which he and his interns and colleagues study the literal minutiae of what can be found in the soils. There might be seeds, indicating their diet. There might be insects or larvae and even pollen indicating the plants of the 1600's! So it is that collaboration soon follows with specialized entomologists and botanists and others. While he did not mention bed bugs, lice or mites, I could not help but wonder....

Artifacts included pottery, beads and coins. Also, there was evidence of a Wampanoag tribe living right next to the pilgrim fort. There, they found evidence of the Native Americans using English brass pots to refashion them into arrowheads and even beads for ornamentation, for these people already had their own clay pots!

It appears these people lived as neighbors and for a while, in harmony. The rest is history and is still being told.

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