

Shields's Folly: A Bathhouse in Old Town

Alexandria Archaeology recently completed excavation of a deep shaft or pit feature located in the basement of a historic building on North Royal Street, not far from City Hall (the owners have asked that the street address remain unpublished so as to protect their privacy). The assemblage of artifacts recovered from the shaft feature dates its filling to the early nineteenth century, ca. 1810 to 1820. The creation and filling of the pit feature seems to correspond with specific events that were occurring on the property at that time and provides a perspective on Alexandria during a period of economic turmoil brought about by the War of 1812.

Some Background History

Beginning in the 1760s the property operated as a tavern. The establishment was one of several ordinaries that formed a tavern district of sorts in the city, catering to locals and travelers alike. Taverns at the time functioned as full-service hotels, places where people could get a meal and drink and socialize, but also rent a bed for a night, stable their horse, and receive other services. The building remained standing for over a century. Toward the end of its life it appeared in the background of a photograph taken during the Civil War and in 1863 it was described by a longtime resident as a “long, old, and very ugly wooden house, [with] one story and [a] garret” (Plate 1).



Plate 1. *Officers of First District volunteers, City Hotel, Alexandria, Va, ca. 1861-1865* (Library of Congress). The red square highlights the tavern.

The story of the archaeological shaft feature begins some fifty years earlier in 1811 when a tavern keeper named Frederick Shuck leased the property. Shuck also established a public bathhouse on the property to operate in conjunction with his ordinary. Shuck may have been a

bit before his time. Bathhouses came into vogue in American cities in the latter nineteenth century as a result of new understandings about hygiene and public health. Public bathing facilities were quite uncommon in the United States prior to the Civil War. This was not Shuck's first foray into running a bathhouse. Several years earlier he operated the Rural Felicity Tavern (location of which may have been near the bridge over the Great Hunting Creek) where customers could pay a fee for a bath. Two years after opening his baths on North Royal Street, Shuck put them up for sale in 1813, offering a facility "in complete order for the approaching season. The House will be sold with or without the utensils for Bathing" (*Alexandria Gazette* March 26, 1813, p. 2). Quite quickly Shuck found a willing buyer in Thomas Shields, a friend and associate looking to change his career path.

Thomas Shields must have been an enterprising man. At the very least he seems to have been cut from the same cloth as Frederick Shuck; both men tried their hands at a variety of business ventures. Born in 1785, Shields was a barber/hairdresser by trade, having apprenticed under the tutelage of Peter Vallet beginning at the age of 15 in 1801. In 1807, a year after completing his apprenticeship, Shields had a shop of his own on Royal Street near Prince Street where he offered "hair cutting, dressing and hair manufactory" for both gentlemen and ladies. In 1813 Shields obtained a tavern keeper's license and subsequently advertised in the local newspaper that he had "taken the bath house formerly kept by Mr. F. Shuck...which are now open and will be kept in the most complete order."

In this new enterprise, Shields offered bathing for men and women ("two separate baths are kept exclusively for Ladies...") with separate entrances for each. In his newspaper ads Shields stressed the healthful effects of warm baths which could cure "the most violent pains of the Rheumatism, weakness in the limbs, etc., etc." Apparently the public bathing facilities were a seasonal affair, offered to customers between May/June and October of each year. Each year between 1813 and 1818 Shields announced the opening of the baths in the early summer via newspaper advertisements. In 1814 Shields petitioned the Common Council for permission to use a public water pump on Cameron Street for his bathhouse "until he can sink a well." Evidently he was receiving complaints for using public water for his private business.

Given the economic climate of the time, and the instability caused by the War of 1812 in Alexandria, Shields appears to have struggled to keep his bathhouse/tavern afloat. At the height of the war in the summer of 1814 the British burned parts of Washington, D.C., and briefly occupied Alexandria. The fallout from the war wrought economic havoc on the area. The British Army stripped vast amounts of supplies from many of Alexandria's merchants who were never compensated for their losses. Much of the trade and commerce for the region was interrupted if not brought to a halt. The money supply was short. One would think that bathing would have been one of the lower priorities of most of the city's residents at this time.

The War of 1812 formally ended in late December 1814. In November 1815, nearly a year after the armies had dispersed, Shields signed a ten year lease for the tavern/bathhouse property perhaps believing that circumstances were returning to normal. However, recovery was slow and economic factors continued to remain turbulent after the war. In fact, instead of gradually returning to stability, economic forces grew worse, culminating in the Panic of 1819, an international monetary crisis precipitated by a shortage of credit.

Throughout the growing banking crisis Thomas Shields continued to operate his tavern/bathhouse, offering baths between May and October each year, as well as food, drink, and accommodations at the tavern. However, the on-going economic crisis continued to grind forward, reaching its nadir in January 1819 when the price of cotton on world markets dropped by 25 percent which precipitated a panic and ensuing recession in world financial markets. Perhaps not coincidentally, in April 1819 Shields opened “a new shaving office” on Prince Street, apparently having abandoned his tavern and bathhouse enterprise. Two months later in June 1819 Shields sold his interest in the tavern/bathhouse to Margaret Garner, a woman who may have been serving as the ladies’ bathhouse attendant for Shields. A year later in June 1820 Thomas Shields declared bankruptcy. He fell back to barbering throughout the 1820s, sometimes in shops in Alexandria, at other times in Washington, D.C., but he continued to concoct creative business ventures, at one point opening a soda fountain next door to his barber shop where he was “happy to deal out this delightful beverage to all who will please to honor him with a call.”

Margaret Garner assumed Thomas Shields’s lease with six years remaining. In newspapers her business was referenced as “Garner’s Tavern” or “the Theatre Tavern.” Garner frequently advertised her bathhouse in the local newspaper, announcing a reduction in price for subscribers from \$10 to \$8. She also highlighted the availability of her turtle soup and pickled oysters in the tavern. For the bathing season in 1821 Garner announced that she had “made considerable improvements in the bath-house.” Single bath tickets were priced at 50 cents, and three for \$1.00, reminding her female patrons that “a proper female attendant being constantly in waiting on the ladies.” In 1825 Garner’s lease expired and the property owner, Sarah Porter, promptly sold the lot to Thomas Irwin for a mere \$50. The property stayed in the Irwin family until 1849 when Thomas McCormick acquired it. Michael Harlow later acquired the property in 1868, and by 1870 he tore down the tavern and erected a new building in which he operated a grocery store for many years.

The Archaeological Findings

The owner of the North Royal Street property is in the process of renovating the building. A significant step in this process involved lowering the basement floor. As this work took place, a pit feature was exposed. The owner contacted Alexandria Archaeology, and soon thereafter we were given permission to excavate the feature.

At the beginning of the excavation the pit feature was approximately 5.0 ft. in diameter on the surface, generally circular in shape. On the west side of the feature was a curious “notch” that had a heavy stone block embedded in it at the time the construction engineers encountered the hole (Plate 1). As excavation progressed archaeologists identified nine discrete layers in the feature, many of them consisting of sandy lenses that extended to a depth of 9.0 ft. from the basement floor (Plate 2). From top to bottom the feature remained consistently cylindrical in shape, although within the sandy layers the sidewalls bulged outward in places, a likely indication of erosion eating away at the friable edges of the feature over time.



Plate 2. *Views of the pit feature after its initial discovery.*

Archaeologists observed no definitive evidence of how the hole might have been lined—no bricks, stones, or barrel stains in place. Equally curious, there was no evidence of a brick or stone base at the bottom of the hole, what one would typically find for a well. Rather, the sidewalls gently sloped inward. Nor were there any signs of an organic layer with the kinds of materials that might accumulate over time in the bottom of an open well or a privy. Another mysterious aspect: there were no signs whatsoever of water at the bottom of the pit feature. As a test, archaeologists punched a hole down through the bottom of the pit feature and did not reach water for another 6.0 ft. It is possible that the water table has changed over the course of two centuries and lowered significantly, but even if the water table was much higher two hundred years ago, there is not a shred of evidence that water had been reached at the bottom of this hole. All the signs suggest that this was a dry hole.

Although the structure of the feature—how it was built and for what purpose—remains elusive, the layers of soil that filled the hole contained a wealth of artifacts; approximately 5,000 total artifacts were recovered. Full analysis of the artifact assemblage from the feature will begin soon. However, at this early juncture in the artifact research we have identified some general understandings from the data set, enough to allow for some preliminary observations and interpretations.



Plate 3. *View from above to the bottom of the pit feature.*

- The artifacts in the upper layers are similar to those in the lowest layers, suggesting that the feature was filled relatively quickly in a short span of time.
- As a whole, the artifact assemblage dates to the period ca. 1790 to ca. 1820.
- Local wares are present in the assemblage, including stonewares likely produced at the John B. Swann Pottery (1813-1825) as well as earthenwares produced by the Henry Piercy Pottery (1793-1809).
- In general the assemblage has the characteristics of a tavern: numerous food preparation, food service, food consumption, and drinking vessels, multiple teapots, glass wine bottles and square case bottles, a wine decanter; a large assemblage of faunal remains with fish, bird, pig, sheep or goat, and oyster shells in evidence (Plate 4).
- The artifact assemblage includes a sizeable number of small finds—clothing fasteners (including more than a dozen coat buttons probably from the same garment) (see Plate 4), personal items, and portable types of artifacts that one would carry on their person such as a ladies parasol (see Plate 4).
- For a likely tavern assemblage, the number of clay tobacco pipe fragments is underrepresented.
- Archaeologists recovered a noteworthy number of brick bats, some of them burned on one side, and building stone, suggesting that a fireplace or hearth was repaired in the building with the rubble dumped into the pit feature (Plate 5).
- Because many of the ceramic and glass artifacts were whole or nearly so when discarded into the pit this bespeaks to a major overhaul taking place for the business, perhaps when the tavern/bathhouse changed hands (see Plate 5).

- There is abundant evidence of a pest issue at the site as demonstrated by the many rat and mice bones in the assemblage, as well as four or five cat skeletons, perhaps kept at the site to combat the rodent problem.
- With the bathhouse in operation on the lot, we would expect to find objects devoted to hygiene—what Frederick Shuck called “utensils for bathing”—such as combs, brushes, and other items used for grooming. Yet thus far none of these types of artifacts have been observed in the assemblage.



Plate 4. *A selection of artifacts recovered from the pit feature.*

From an archaeological perspective, perhaps the most significant factor regarding the pit feature is its apparent narrow window of use. The hole does not appear to have been open for very long. The time that lapsed between digging the pit and filling it in may have been as short as a few weeks or months, or at most a few years. Because of this seeming short time span, the materials recovered from it relate to the same moment in time (an archaeological moment in time being defined as a few years), a snapshot of life at the tavern/bathhouse in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

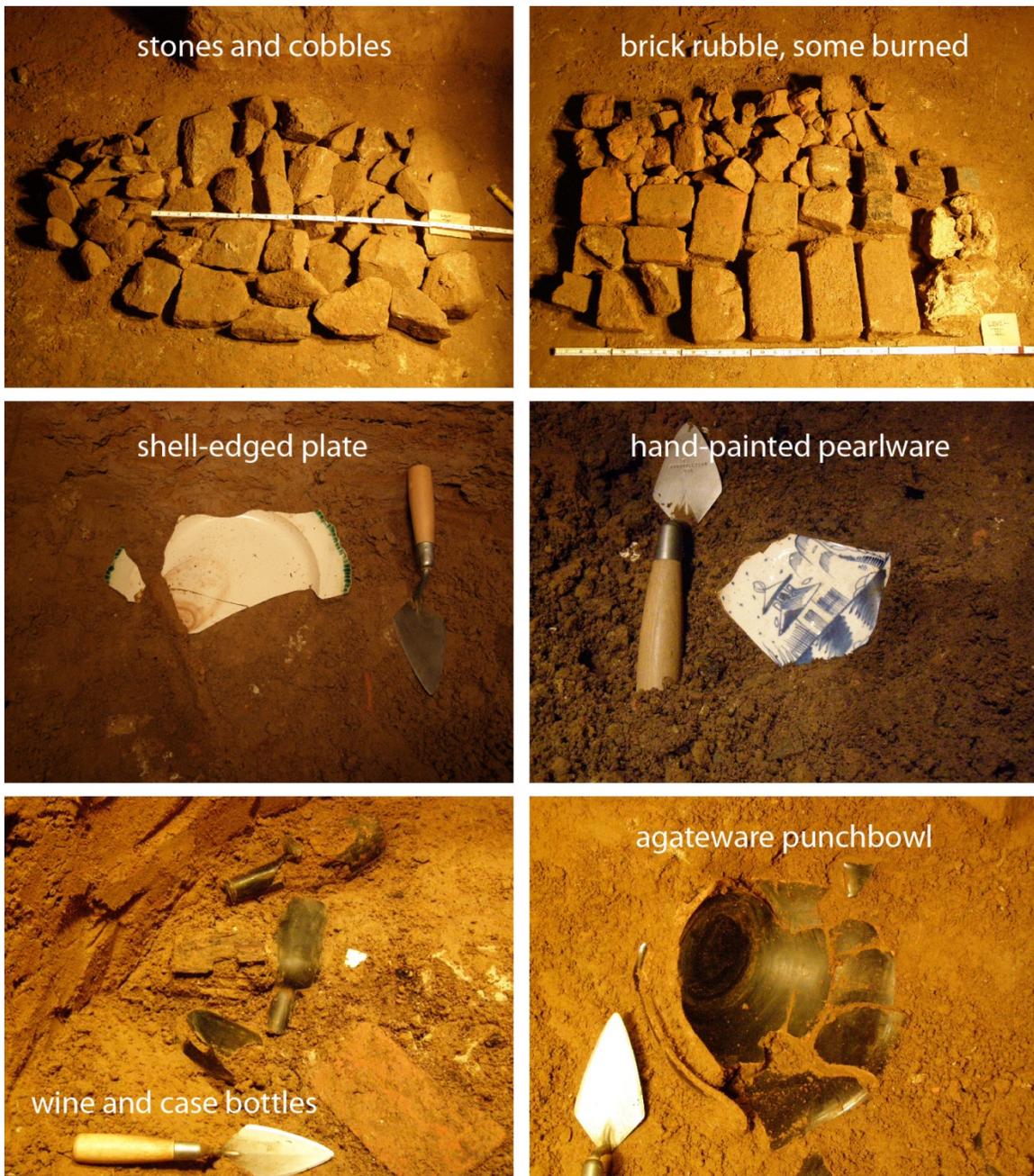


Plate 5. *Examples of nearly complete artifacts recovered from the pit feature, as well as brick and stone rubble.*

The Archaeological Interpretation

By combining the documentary record for the property with the archaeological evidence extracted from the deep pit feature, we can suggest a likely scenario of what happened and take some educated guesses at the purpose of the pit feature. Based on the dates of the artifacts, the pit feature appears to have been filled sometime between 1810 and 1825, and within that time

frame, probably before 1820. First let us give some thought to the intended purpose of the deep hole inside a tavern, how it got there and how it got filled sometime between 1810 and 1820.

The pit feature is unusual. It does not have the traits of a functioning water well, a dry well, a privy, a cistern, or a sump, all of which are reasons to dig a deep hole in the ground. The pit could not have been meant to be a privy because we know that at the time the hole was dug—the early nineteenth century—the tavern stood at this location. No sane person would dig a privy inside a standing tavern, and we have every reason to believe that Frederick Shuck, Thomas Shields, and Margaret Garner all retained their senses while occupying the site. Nor does a sump make sense in this case. Drainage must have been a frequent concern for the tavern operators on the lot, but digging a giant hole in the middle of your building defies rational thought. We think that the hole was either intended to provide water (a well), store water (a cistern), or store goods in a cool, dry setting.

If it were a well or a cistern, we would expect to see evidence of a lining, either brick, or stone, or wooden barrels with their bottoms punched out shoring up the sides. In most cases the interior walls of a cistern were parged (coated with a plaster-like material) to make them watertight because their purpose was to collect and store water. None of the brick rubble or stones recovered from the pit feature showed signs of parging. In fact, the sidewalls of the hole betray no signs of a lining of any sort. This factor alone makes the interpretation of the pit feature as a cistern very unlikely.

We are left with thinking about the pit feature as either a dry well for storage or as a water well, an apparatus that provided access to water. It is possible that whatever materials were used to line the well were “robbed” or extracted for reuse elsewhere before the well was backfilled. If the well was barrel lined, the effort necessary to remove the barrels would have been immense, and frankly not worth the reward of retrieving the barrels. If the well was lined with brick or stone, these materials might have been worth the trouble to recover. However, the process of dismantling a brick or stone lined well often leaves behind telltale signs, gouges in the dirt sidewalls, broken pieces accumulated at the bottom, and neither of these were in evidence.

Could the hole have functioned as an unlined well, either dry or wet? Maybe for a short period of time. However, the functionality of an unlined dry or wet well is limited, even if it were dug into hard-packed clay. An open hole in the ground will erode; its sides will expand, it will undercut itself. Foot traffic will cause the edges to crumble and fail. The possibility that someone would dig a deep, unstable hole under the floorboards of their business defies sensibility.

All of our interpretive guesses have assumed that the hole successfully performed its purpose. But what if work on the hole was aborted? What if for some reason the well was left unfinished, a valiant attempt to dig it, but complications arose, circumstances changed, and work on it just stopped. Perhaps there was every intention to finish the hole, but it needed to be filled before it threatened the stability of the building. Consider this scenario: Thomas Shields begins operating his tavern/bathhouse in May 1813. The next year the economy begins to tank, commerce comes to a standstill because of the war, both armies wreak havoc on the countryside. The business is not doing well. To make matters worse, the Common Council is questioning

Shields's use of public water to fill his bathtubs. To keep the Council at bay, Shields asks for permission in 1814 to continue to use public water, but promises to "sink a well" as soon as he can. He makes plans to dig a well inside his business so that he can more easily fill his tubs instead of hauling water from down the street. This is a major enterprise involving reconfiguring the interior of the building. When Shields enacted his plan to dig the well is unknown, but he was willing to sign a ten year lease on the property in 1815, presumably because he was optimistic that the interior well would work. It did not. His workers were able to dig down deep, but not deep enough to reach water. The hole may have remained open for a time, the gaping evidence of a pipe dream. Eventually Shields had to admit defeat. The hole could not be completed. By 1819 Shields was in the process of extricating himself from the business, finding a willing buyer of his failed enterprise in Margaret Garner. Garner may have been the one who filled the hole in the floor. Perhaps she alluded to this in her bathhouse advertisement in 1821 when she informed the citizens of Alexandria that she had "made considerable improvements in the bath-house." The materials in the aborted well appear to have been deposited during a period of refurbishment initiated by Margaret Garner, a process of dumping old, worn, outdated tavern ware in the hole during a thorough cleaning, fixing a failing chimney, and generally sprucing up of the place. In the end, the shaft feature was never anything more than an open hole, a story of good intentions gone sour, the sad material evidence of Thomas Shields's folly.