



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOMINIC CHAVEZ/GLOBE STAFF

Larry Hess worked on the outer walls during restoration of James Blake House Wednesday in Dorchester. He began work on the building in November.

Window into Puritan life

Renovation of 1648 house offers a look at settlers' everyday lives

By Brian MacQuarrie
GLOBE STAFF

To the uninitiated, the dirty mix of mud, bone, and cow dung is a 350-year-old piece of trash. But to archeologists, the recent discovery at Boston's oldest house is a gleaming, golden nugget.

The brick-hard concoction, used in the mid-17th century for insulation and retrieved during restoration at the James Blake House in Dorchester, is giving archeologists their earliest glimpse of the everyday lives of the city's first European settlers.

The mix, called wattle and daub, will be examined under a microscope beginning next week in the city's archeology lab. What researchers find, they say, could change long-held theories about what the early Puritans ate and farmed and how they built their houses.

"This is a window of opportunity that we have here right now," said city archeologist Ellen Berkland, who is live-in curator at the house in Edward Everett Square. "It will be sealed up soon with new shingles, and we won't be able to get to it for another 100 years."

What they have found at the house, built about 1648, is a hardy oak frame, hand-hewn beams and boards, hand-forged nails, and meticulous construction that has withstood the withering test of time. The restoration crew also has found wooden braces in hidden, unexpected places among long-concealed timbers, human hair in the wattle and daub, and a smattering of buttons, badges, and textiles.

RENOVATION, Page B5



Why it's special

- ▶ The Dorchester house was built around 1648 with a hardy oak frame, hand-hewn beams and boards, and hand-forged nails.
- ▶ The restoration crew has found wooden braces in hidden, unexpected places among long-concealed timbers, human hair in the wattle and daub, and a smattering of buttons, badges, and textiles.

Namesake

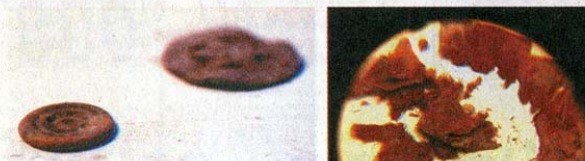
- ▶ James Blake was a farmer, selectman, clergyman, and deputy to the General Court.

You gotta have style

- ▶ The architectural style, brought to Dorchester by Puritans from the west of England, also was used in the early communities in Cape Ann and Salem.

Work to be done

- ▶ Since November, the roof has been replaced with water-resistant cedar shingles, and about 30 percent of the exterior has been examined, repaired, and returned to the condition of the house's last restoration in 1896.



The restoration of James Blake House is giving a glimpse into the city's Colonial history. A concoction called wattle and daub will be examined under a microscope beginning next week at the city's archeology lab. A detail of a small button (left), small toy badge, and fabric.

Renovation offers window into Puritan life

► RENOVATION

Continued from Page B1

"This is very cool," said Jerry Eide, a preservation contractor, as he inspected part of the exposed skeleton of the house. "I'm learning new things every day."

Indeed, Eide said that the quality of wood, with its hard texture and straight grain, is superior to much of today's building materials.

"The saving grace is that they overbuilt," said John Goff, a preservation consultant who studied the Blake House in preparation for the project. "It could easily last 1,000 years if it's maintained properly."

Eide and co-worker Larry Hess began work on the house in November, buoyed by a \$50,000 state grant and matching funds. Since then, the roof has been replaced with water-resistant cedar shingles, and about 30 percent of

the exterior has been examined, repaired, and returned to the condition of the house's last restoration in 1896.

The work is scheduled to continue until May. For a history buff such as Eide, who has worked on several first-generation Colonial structures in Massachusetts, the project doesn't seem like work at all.

"People ask me how they did it," Eide said admiringly. "They did it however they could."

For James Blake, a farmer, selectman, clergyman, and deputy to the General Court, that meant using virgin timber, including a massive central beam cut from a tree that already was two centuries old in 1648. The architectural style, brought to Dorchester by Puritans from the west of England, was also replicated in the early communities in Cape Ann and Salem.

Eide has enclosed the two-story house in a roof-to-ground tarp to protect an exterior being stripped of its shingles. Inside the shingles is a horizontal layer of original oak boards that have been nailed to the frame. The third layer is the wattle and daub, which usually mixed mud, grass, and cow dung. Finally, two or three coats of plaster have been used to whitewash the inside walls.

Berkland said the composition of the wattle and daub has surprised her. A preliminary analysis Feb. 9 at the city's archeology lab showed human and animal hair, as well as burned bone, in addition to the usual ingredients.

"You're getting an environmental reconstruction," Berkland said of the mansion house that in the 17th century overlooked farmland that swept down to now-filled South Bay.

When Berkland analyzes the sample next week, she will be assisted by eighth-grade interns from the Young Achievers Pilot School in Jamaica Plain.

"The most exciting part of this is you're getting original materials from the house," Goff said.

The findings have also included curious nuggets of Boston life. A button and a metal badge have been discovered, as well as an explanation for one pupil's absence from school.

Dated May 19, 1913, a note written in impeccable penmanship asks "Dear Miss Stoddard" to "please excuse Stella for being absent . . . for I wasn't feeling well at all. Yours truly, Mrs. W.F. Shaw."

In such artifacts, Berkland said, lie clues to the untold stories of everyday history.

Brian MacQuarrie can be reached at b_macquarrie@globe.com.