



Volunteers work at the Jason Lee archaeological site on Broadway Street NE in Salem. SCOTT PIKE / WILLAMETTE UNIVERSITY

Archaeologists learn more about Jason Lee site

Volunteers logged hundreds of hours, excavated artifacts from basement area of original structure



Forward This
Capi Lynn
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Imagine walking along the sidewalk of Broadway Street NE and seeing an outline of brick marking the location of the Jason Lee House, or maybe an etched glass panel that provides a three-dimensional view of what the historic Methodist mission home would have looked like when it was built there in 1841.

Both are among ideas for future interpretative plans at the site, where a volunteer-led archaeological dig uncovered 2,300-some artifacts, and still counting.

Such novel displays could be months, even years, from being realized, but they were inspired by a recent two-week project on the outskirts of downtown Salem.

Twenty-five volunteers logged 621 hours excavating a swath of parking lot next to a corner property that will be developed this summer as a mixed-use building. They did it COVID-19 style, wearing masks and maintaining at least 6 feet social distancing, with no more than 15 people allowed on the site at a time.

Not even a pandemic could deter work on what is considered one of the most significant archaeological sites in the history of Salem and arguably the state.

The house was completed in 1841, and Lee was a prominent figure in early meetings that led to the formation of Oregon's territorial government two years later. He is recognized as the founder of Salem and a founding member of Willamette University.

Both the city and the university were involved in the project, along with Willamette Heritage Center, the State Historic Preservation Office, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Oregon Archaeological Society.

"I'm just so amazed and impressed with how the community came together and made this happen during a difficult time," said Kimberli Fitzgerald, the city's historic preservation officer and archaeologist. "It just shows how passionate people are and how much they care about Salem's history."

What made this public archaeological project so unique — more so than recent digs at the new police facility property and Pioneer Cemetery — is that for the first time the city worked with private property owners.

Fitzgerald said it demonstrated how support can be provided to property owners if needed and how owning historic property doesn't preclude redevelopment.

Owners have local roots

Luke Glaze and Charles Weathers are both graduates of McNary High School, in their 30s and actively developing commercial property in and around the community where they grew up.

Weathers remembers learning about the Jason Lee House during field trips to Willamette Heritage as a youngster —

it's the oldest wood-frame structure still standing in the Pacific Northwest — but he had no idea where it originated.

Glaze bought the property at 960 Broadway about two years ago. He's aware of the large wooden historic marker near Mill Creek just to the south. But he had no idea the Jason Lee House was built where the parking lot for his building is today.

He vaguely knew the story of the house being saved from demolition in the 1960s and eventually moved to the Willamette Heritage property.

"I figured any excavation would have been done when they moved the house," Glaze said during a visit at the site a few weeks before the pandemic.

He and Weathers are partners on a planned mixed-use building just north of the parking lot and archaeological site. They were thankful for support from the city, which paid for excavation and will repair the parking lot, and excited about the dig.

"When they find something," Weathers said, "Jason Lee's trash is the city's treasure and the headline."

As the property owners, they own the artifacts.

Searching for the privy

Using historic Sanborn fire insurance maps and state-of-the-art ground-penetrating radar, volunteers strategically pinpointed where to excavate.

Lee was among the first white settlers in Oregon, arriving in the fall of 1834. He established a Methodist mission about 12 miles north of Salem, eventually relocating the mission to less swampy land.

Statesman Journal archives describe Lee's second mission home as having been built in the middle of an oak grove near Mill Creek, just north of where missionaries set up a water-powered combination mill and grist mill.

The timbers used to build the house came from the nearby sawmill, and a 1922 newspaper article suggests Lee sawed lumber and helped build the house. He's been described as a strapping fellow, around 6 feet, 4 inches tall, strong from working as a youth in northeastern logging camps.

The two-story structure was built 18 feet by 50 feet with a step-pitched roof and an extension over the porch that extends the length of the house on both levels. It was divided into four apartments for the families of the early missionaries, including Josiah Parrish and Lewis Judson.

Multiple additions were made over the years, and the building later served as the state's first treasury, the county's first courthouse, Salem's first post office and a general store.

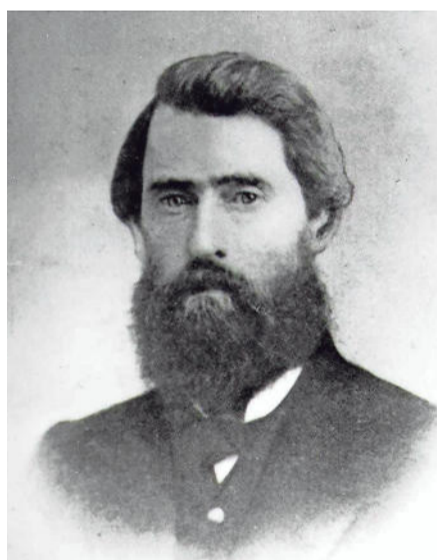
Archaeologists volunteering on the project hoped to locate the privy, or outhouse. In those days, the privy was a convenient place to toss trash. They had no such luck, although they did find the next best thing, the basement of the original structure.

"One of the things we learned was that in 1963, at the time they demolished a majority of the house and prepared the 1841 section for transport, they scraped the site and pushed debris into that basement area," Fitzgerald said.

The primary area of excavation was a



The West facade of the Jason Lee house in 1937. BEN MAXWELL COLLECTION



Rev. Jason Lee STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

rectangle running east to west and crossing the basement area, where most of the artifacts were discovered.

Bottles, beads, bones, oh my!

Fitzgerald continues to tally the 2,300 or so artifacts on a spreadsheet. They're separated into categories, including artifacts associated with the building and artifacts associated with the people who lived there.

Wood, brick, metal, plate glass and nails were found at the site. The brick, including what is believed to have been the wall of the basement, was an exciting find because it confirmed early missionaries were making brick in the early 1830s.

Household items such as ceramic and bottle fragments also were found. Some of the ceramic fragments have stamps or other markings that will help date the items. The base of a bottle has been dated to pre-Civil War, after the missionaries no longer used the building.

"I like to imagine the bottle is leftover from when the basement was used as storage for a store," Fitzgerald said.

A couple of Native American beads the size of a pea or smaller, including one made of stone or clay, were found early in the dig.

Volunteers also found hundreds of small bone fragments — animal, not hu-

man.

Before the project launched there was some question whether anyone had been buried on site early in the history of the house, but they found no evidence.

Bones found included deer and elk, providing insight into the type of food the early missionaries might have eaten.

Public curiosity outweighs pandemic

The dig drew interest from drive-by archaeology enthusiasts and curiosity seekers. Even at the height of the pandemic, 10 to 20 people a day would stop by the site.

Fitzgerald improvised to maintain a public aspect of the project, putting together a notebook of historic photographs and a bag of artifacts, all of which she shared from a safe distance while wearing a mask, usually outside a car window.

What surprised Fitzgerald was that most people had no idea the house at Willamette Heritage once stood there.

The hope after this project is that generations to come will remember not just where the house stood but the history beneath it.

Some of the best examples of intact brick have been preserved, and CB|Two Architects is working on ideas for reusing them in future interpretative plans at the site.

Willamette Heritage, where the Jason Lee house is open to the public with admission to the museum, is likely to play an education and preservation role. It just recently re-opened and is operating with new hours, limited visitors and social distancing.

"We hope to create some kind of exhibit, so people can see the materials and what came out of the ground and they're not just stuffed in a closet," curator Kylie Pine said. "We're excited about what more stories we can tell about the house."

Capi Lynn is the Statesman Journal's news columnist. Her column taps into the heart of this community, including its history. She has spent her entire career at this newspaper, 31 years and counting.