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# Archaeological Research Opportunities and Contributions at the Chase House Site

Sheila Charles and Alexandra G. Martin

*Between 2008 and 2014, Strawberry Banke's excavation efforts were focused on the south and east yards of the Chase House (SB26). Although the extant 1762 Chase House was the first restored building opened at Strawberry Banke, no archaeological research had previously been done there. Possible relocation of an historical barn to the site drew attention to the need to investigate the Chase House property in order to gather information about a former kitchen ell, outbuilding, and privy on the site. Analysis of the standing structure, historical documents, and archaeological features, deposits, and recovered artifacts expand the museum's interpretation of the 18th-, 19th-, and early 20th-century Chase House proprietors and occupants.*

*2008 et 2014, les fouilles entreprises par Strawberry Banke se sont concentrées sur les cours sud et est de la Chase House (SB26). Bien que la Chase House de 1762 ait été le premier bâtiment restauré ouvert à Strawberry Banke, aucune recherche archéologique n'y avait été effectuée auparavant. Le déménagement possible d'une grange historique sur le site a attiré l'attention sur la nécessité d'explorer la propriété de Chase House afin de recueillir des informations sur une ancienne cuisine, une dépendance et les latrines sur le site. L'analyse de la structure existante, de documents historiques, ainsi que des structures archéologiques, des dépôts et des artefacts récupérés élargissent l'interprétation que le musée fait des propriétaires et occupants de la Chase House, aux 18e, 19e et au début du 20e siècle.*

## Introduction

The Chase House at Strawberry Banke Museum is architecturally and historically significant to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The house is a 2½-story Georgian dwelling built in 1762 at the corner of Washington and Court streets, in the northwest corner of the present museum grounds. Architecturally, it is one of the more richly ornamented dwellings in Portsmouth, with its gambrel roof, quoined corners, beautiful doorways, and intricately carved interior elements created by master craftsmen (FIG. 1). In 1964, when the Chase House was acquired by Strawberry Banke, restoration of the home was already underway (Garvin 1998). Along with the Goodwin Mansion, it was one of the first houses open to the public when the museum opened on 29 May 1965.

No archaeological research had been done on the Chase House lot before 2008. Possible relocation of an historical barn to the site drew attention to the need to investigate the Chase House property. Between 2008 and 2014, Strawberry Banke's excavation efforts were concentrated on the south and east yards of

the Chase House (SB26). Investigation was focused on gathering information about the former proprietors and their activities, the evolution of the property, and former structures in the east and south yards, including a kitchen ell, outbuilding, and water closet. Evidence of these structures was established, along with a remarkable archaeological assemblage that has led to further research and collaboration with other researchers.

The Chase House Project serves as an example of how a focused project over several seasons of excavation allowed Strawberry Banke to continue its role as an archaeological research center. For example, Diana Gallagher, a 2014 graduate of Boston University's doctoral program in archaeology, used data from the Chase House privy excavation in her dissertation, which analyzed six New England privy sites. Katherine Evans, a 2016 graduate of UMass Boston's master's program in historical archaeology, researched a collection of artifacts from the Chase House in her thesis, an investigation of childhood through the lens of children's objects and archives. Evans focused on the period from 1881 to 1917, during which time the Chase



Figure 1. Chase House. (Photo by Alexandra Martin, 2019.)

House served as the Chase Home for Children, assisting motherless children, children of parents too poor to support them, and children of parents temporarily homeless due to fire or other accidents (Estes and Goodman 1986: 191).

The Chase House excavations and subsequent research will have a long-term impact on public education and interpretation of the site. The excavation of a privy links the past with current issues, such as waste management, recycling, and green technologies, for Strawberry Banke school and visitor programs. Archaeological research offered the opportunity to expand the record, not only of the lives of the Chase family, but of the other residents of the house as well. The archaeological survey also helps staff to better reconstruct and interpret the histories of the diverse occupants, their activities, the extant and former structures, and the ways inhabitants made use of the yard space. Finally, the body of research and cataloged artifact collection will continue to be available to historical and archaeological

researchers who have an interest in the 18th and 19th centuries.

### Archaeological Field Schools

The Chase House Project built on the foundation of the museum's strong public archaeology program, accomplishing the museum's research goals through field-school excavations with professional, student, and volunteer participants. The Chase House excavations, carried out over four summer field seasons, also marked a return to multiyear focused excavations for the museum's archaeology programming. Although short-term public archaeological programs had been carried out around several houses in 2003, 2006, and 2007, the focus of the department's field-school programming in the late 1990s and early 2000s had been largely on collections-study field schools.

Field investigations at the Chase House Site between 2008 and 2011 were conducted by over 100 people, including professional

archaeologists, museum staff and interns, field-school students, and archaeology department volunteers. The participants ranged from 12 years old to retired adults and came from New England, Virginia, and as far away as China. Given the richness of the site, excavations extended into the fall, and laboratory processing continued year round. A network of archaeologists, curators, collections managers, museum staff, preservationists, historians, and ceramic specialists ensured an interdisciplinary approach to the investigations and analyses.

The Chase House research presented an opportunity to educate the public. Throughout the investigations, the team interacted with museum visitors and the newspaper and television press. The Chase House archaeological investigation process and results were shared through a variety of public outreach efforts directed at Strawberry Banke Museum visitors and staff, the New Hampshire Archeological Society and other historical society members, the New Hampshire Department of Transportation staff, field-school students and other students of various secondary- and university-level classes, as well as professional audiences. Public interest in the Chase House site archaeological activities and results was also fueled by newspaper articles, television news programs (e.g., WMUR's *New Hampshire Chronicle*), and the many museum visitors who viewed the fieldwork firsthand during the four years of investigation.

## Chase House

The Chase House is named for Stephen Chase, who began renting the house in 1779 and purchased it 20 years later. The Chase family are the best-documented inhabitants of the Puddle Dock neighborhood due to the extensive documentary record and the efforts of numerous historians who reviewed deeds, inventories, court records, tax records, censuses, letters, receipts, family papers, city and historical society records of Portsmouth, Kittery, and New Castle, records of the

Portsmouth Marine Society, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates* (Shipton 1972: 34–35), Brewster's *Rambles* (Brewster 1869), and other sources. Archival research indicated that the Chase family was of the upper echelon of Portsmouth society. The Chase House was not only a residence, but also a commercial establishment where the Chase family sold goods. Mansions of the wealthy, like that of the Chase family, were often on or near major transportation arteries that facilitated travel to the buildings, wharves, and warehouses that were the sources of their prosperity (Sammons 1995: 4). Prior to the American Revolution, coastal commerce in the Northeast flourished, and Portsmouth was a colonial center for shipbuilding and trading. Merchants, including Stephen Chase, were involved in a thriving West India trade network. Chase “made his fortune at the height of the West India Trade” and “rode the economic boom after the Revolution” (Robinson 2007: 9).

The furnished Chase House represents the appearance of the house and its domestic furnishings in the time immediately following the remodeling of the front sitting room, ca. 1807–1820 (Garvin 1971: 3). Two inventories, as well as receipts and other family documents, itemize the furnishings and personal goods in the interior rooms, and provide evidence of remodeling efforts. The first inventory dates to 1805, following the death of its most renowned owner, Stephen Chase; while the second dates to 1820, following the death of Mary Chase, his widow. The refurnishing was guided by these inventories, Federal-period practices, and period-appropriate paintings and prints (Garvin 1971: 5). Restoration and refurnishing was directed at interpreting “the lives of Portsmouth’s mercantile elite in the period 1815–1820” (Sammons 1995: 1).

## Artifacts

Over 26,000 artifacts were recovered (see Charles and Martin [2015] for a full discussion), constituting an assemblage that reflects details not available in the documentary record, such as information on local industry,

trade networks extending to England, Eastern Europe, and China, consumerism, diet, economic status, and trash disposal and waste-management patterns. Substantial quantities of structural material, such as bricks, plaster, window glass, and nails, provide clues to the fabric of former structures and details associated with the building and repair episodes. Artifacts deposited within the privy footprint included predominantly domestic trash with chamber pots and tea and table wares of creamware and decorated pearlware dating to the early 1800s, although older artifacts, such as Westerwald, Nottingham, and white salt-glazed stoneware dating to the 1700s, were recovered from deeper levels. Kitchen wares included tin-enameled vessels, combed slipwares, lead-glazed redwares, and free-blown and blown-in-mold glass spirits bottles.

### The Chase Privy

Stephen Chase owned two outhouses. The privy associated with the main house may have been in the south end of the former outbuilding. Cartographic research also confirmed the existence of a water closet in the southeast corner of the Chase House lot. It is depicted on Sanborn maps between 1887 and 1956 (Sanborn Map Company 1887, 1887, 1892, 1898, 1904, 1910, 1920, 1939, 1956). The archaeological investigation found that the Chase House privy pit was approximately 54.5 ft. (16.6 m) from the rear door of the main house. The use of the water closet includes the time period associated with the Children's Home as well as the 20th-century private ownership period. As the first known indoor bathroom in the Strawberry Banke district was installed in the Shapiro House in 1912 (Ward 2002: 85), it is likely that use of the privy as an outhouse predated this period of transition to indoor sanitation plumbing.

Beneath the ground, portions of the privy pit (particularly the west and south walls) escaped destruction and were sealed under a layer of coal ash and fill added during land-

scaping in the 1960s (FIG. 2). Adjacent to the privy pit and beneath the fill layer were dense trash deposits. The privy pit measured approximately 2.5 ft. (78 cm) along its west course and at least 10 ft. 10 in. (330 cm) along its south wall. The size indicates an outhouse with multiple seating holes to accommodate several users. Two different brick construction patterns suggest the enlargement of the privy over time, possibly due to the increase of residents (Charles and Martin 2015).

As early as the 17th century, the practice of emptying and cleaning privies was undertaken by a paid workforce, known as "Nightmen" or "Night Scavengers" (Geismar 1993: 59). During the 19th century, laws were passed to control the building, filling, and cleaning of privies (Geismar 1993: 59-60). Disinfecting and deodorizing agents, such as lime, sand, and wood ash, were added to privies and are documented in New York as early as 1802 (Geismar 1993: 59-60). In the Puddle Dock neighborhood, readily available coal ash was used to cap privy layers (Charles and Martin 2015). By the latter decades of the 1800s, privies became obsolete, as cities like Portsmouth established integrated sewer and water systems (Ward 2002: 85).

### Privy Analysis

The analysis of soils and night-soil samples from privies can disclose substantive information on diet, health, and hygiene. Archaeoparasitology, the study of parasites present at archaeological sites, can help archaeologists understand people's habits and living conditions (Reinhard 1992). Archaeoparasitologist Diana Gallagher retrieved soil samples from the Chase House site for parasite and botanical analysis. A total of 15 samples were collected during the field seasons of 2010 and 2011. There was no evidence of parasites or botanical remains in the soil samples (Gallagher 2014). At other archaeological sites on which parasites are identified, botanical remains are typically found through flotation (Gallagher 2014: 281). The lack of



Figure 2. Coal-ash fill layer to the south of the privy foundation. (Photo by Sheila Charles, 2011.)

organic material in this analysis indicates that there may have been no night soil present in the privy (Gallagher 2014: 282). The most “likely reason for missing evidence is that the periodic cleanings and active water table in the area have expunged any evidence of parasite remains from the soil” (Gallagher 2014: 284). Due to historical practices related to waste management, it is unusual that these deposits are missing or found only in small quantities.

The Chase House privy may be an example of a 19th-century privy that was appropriately cleaned according to dictated legal standards (Diana Gallagher 2012, pers. comm.). While in use as an outhouse, the most valuable characteristic of a privy pit is its internal volume, so proprietors did not wish to decrease its volume with indiscriminate household waste. But once abandoned, the pit and surrounding area were a readily available trash receptacle, often filled with household items, chamber-pot fragments, toiletries, and personal items.

At the Chase House site, many household and personal artifacts were recovered from the

privy. The condition of the faunal remains and other material culture recovered from the privy “indicates that this privy had likely been well cleaned throughout its existence and particularly at the end of its useful life when it was filled with dirt and secondary refuse from the yard and trash areas” (Gallagher 2014: 299). The heavy rains and the rising and falling of the Puddle Dock water table may have contributed to flushing away organic material. Another hypothesis concerns the possible adverse effect of the coal ash on parasites and seeds in the privy pit. Coal ash, the remains of waste from burning coal, is toxic and commonly contains silica, mercury, selenium, arsenic, and other dangerous pollutants. The archaeoparasitological examination of the Chase House privy suggests that the residents were mindful of sanitation in their urban environment; see also Trigg et al. (2017).

### Flowerpots

Household furnishings in the 19th century included figurines and vases featured on fire-

place mantles and dining and dessert tabletops (Sammons 1995: 19). During the Chase House archaeological investigation, three decorated flowerpots were recovered: a redware vessel with a green lead glaze, a caneware vessel, and an annular, sponge-decorated pearlware vessel (FIGS. 3, 4). The redware flowerpot is believed to be a product of a local New England pottery manufacturer. It is similar to a redware flowerpot with green glaze uncovered in Charlestown, Massachusetts (Justin Thomas 2013, pers. comm.). The caneware flowerpot and annular, sponge-decorated pearlware flowerpot most likely represent British imports.

This particular area of research has led to an update in the furnishing plan for the Chase House. These vessels represent the type of decorative indoor flowerpots that may have been displayed on one of the Chase House mantels and have been used as examples on which to base new collections objects. With the assistance of ceramics researcher Louise Richardson, two flowerpots were acquired for the museum's collection and are included on display in the furnished family parlor. These include a Wedgwood caneware flowerpot

(Accession No. 2015.58) similar to the caneware vessel and a redware flowerpot (Accession No. 2010.49) similar to the green-glazed redware flowerpot.

### Children's Objects

When Stephen Chase died in 1805, his widow and sons continued to occupy the premises. William Chase (1774–1834) lived in the house with his mother and ran the family business in conjunction with his brothers. William Chase inherited the Chase House after his mother's death in 1819. In 1881, after several decades of occupancy by Sarah Blunt Chase (William Chase's widow), Stephen Chase's grandson, George Bigelow Chase, purchased the family homestead and then sold it for \$1 to the Children's Home in Portsmouth for "orphan and destitute children," in honor of his parents and grandfather (FIG. 5) (Kaputa 2000).

The Children's Home in Portsmouth had been founded in 1877 to care for orphans of the community and provide "a home and hospital for the relief of children under 14 years of age, without distinction of creed or color" (Chase Home for Children 2011). This institution was



Figure 3. Redware flowerpot. (Photo by Alexandra Martin, 2014.)



Figure 4. Caneware flowerpot. (Photo by Alexandra Martin, 2014.)



Figure 5. Chase Home for Children with children and matrons, 1903. (Courtesy of Harvard University Museum.)

renamed the Chase Home for Children, dedicated to assisting motherless children, children of parents too poor to support them, and children of parents temporarily homeless (Estes and Goodman 1986: 191). In 1917, when the needs of the Chase Home for Children outgrew the Chase House, the Chase Home for Children moved to larger quarters at 698 Middle Road in Portsmouth (Chase Home for Children 2011).

Children are often neglected in the historical record, and sometimes by archaeologists, due to their proportionately smaller material impact (Scura Trovato 2016). At the Chase House site, numerous children's objects were recovered, including 57 clay and glass marbles (FIG. 6), 37 elements of porcelain toy tea sets, 61 doll fragments, as well as artifacts related to writing, including 35 slate-pencil and 50 slate-board fragments. Katherine Evans focused her master's thesis research on the ways these arti-

facts could provide a window into the lives of children (Evans 2016).

Manufacturing techniques date the majority of artifacts in the Chase House assemblage that might be associated with children to the late Victorian era, during which time the Chase House served as the Chase Home for Children (Evans 2016: 77).

The material culture and archival resources indicate that Chase Home adapted a Victorian goal of social refinement in their mission to prepare the children for a "better" life than they would have had otherwise. The porcelain toy tea ware, fancy glass marbles, and porcelain-bisque dolls were all signature parts of the ideal Victorian childhood. (Evans 2016: 78)

Other archaeologists have found important potential for the archaeology of schoolhouse sites to reveal information about the experi-

ences of teachers and students (Gibb and Beisaw 2000). The large number of artifacts associated with writing may be related to educational efforts of the Chase Home, which were a stated part of the mission and reflected in its annual reports. Slate pencils and writing boards are material evidence of the educational approach of 19th-century elementary schooling, which relied on practicing letters, words, and numbers (Davies 2005). Whereas some archaeological investigations of school sites produce only a few writing implements—see Rotman (2009), where only three slate pencils were recovered, or Gibb and Beisaw (2000: 124), which cites school sites where only “a few slate pencil and writing slate fragments” were found—Evans suggests that “the high number of slate objects found at the Chase House is a further testament to the many children who passed through the Home, where they lived and learned” (Evans 2016: 88). The numerous slate-pencil and slate-board fragments may also be an indication of Chase Home budget constraints, as they were reusable and thus less expensive than paper and ink (Scura Trovato 2016: 52).

In addition, from the anaerobic environment at the base of the privy pit, fragments of a machine-stitched, twill wool child’s vest and jacket, and five pieces of leather representing soles of children’s shoes were recovered (Charles and Martin 2015). The various artifacts related to children at the Chase House broaden the understanding of the use of the site after the Chase family was in residence and contribute to a richer understanding of children in the historical record.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe the investigations of the Chase House site were a successful continuation of Strawberry Banke’s tradition of public engagement and archaeological research that makes meaningful contributions to the understanding of the neighborhood. We attribute this to several aspects of the project: the preservation of the site within this historical waterfront neighborhood (FIG. 7), the broad base of investigative techniques, and the varied professionals and volunteers involved in the

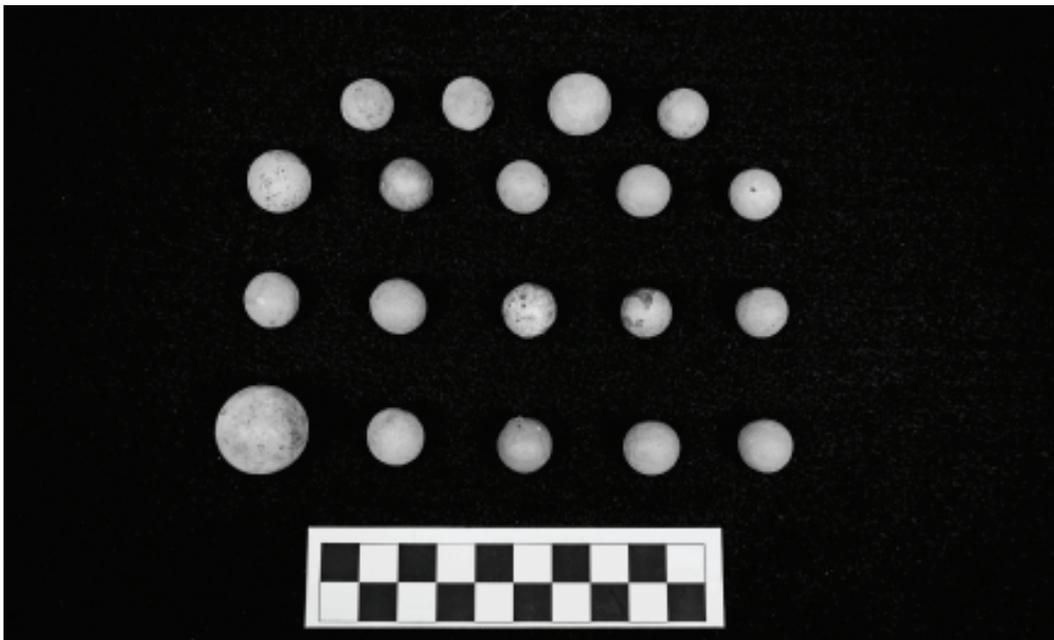


Figure 6. Clay marbles. (Photo by Alexandra Martin, 2015.)

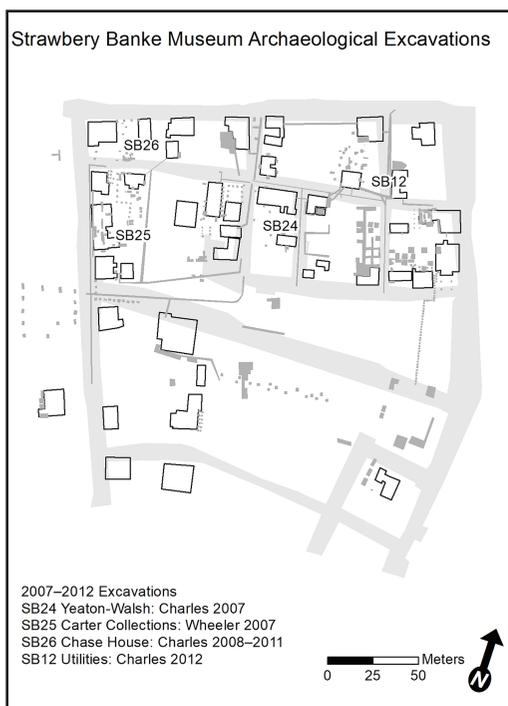


Figure 7. Strawberry Banke Museum excavations, 2007-2012. (Map by Alexandra Martin, 2019.)

project who brought their own interests and expertise to this work.

Archaeological research confirmed the former location of the kitchen ell, barn, and privy, deepening understanding and appreciation of the evolution of Portsmouth and its neighborhoods. The site and associated 19th-century trash deposits constitute a time capsule of economic and social information on personal items, household furnishings, diet, health, and sanitation and waste management that can be correlated with the Chases' specific period of residence. The data have been used to update the Chase House furnishings and guide interpretation of the standing structure, the former outbuildings, yard space, and historic occupants and their activities.

Site information and recovered artifacts have also had an impact on Strawberry Banke's public education efforts. The privy site provides an opportunity to link the history of the Chase House with current issues, such as trash disposal and waste management, for school

and visitor programs. Some artifacts from the site, including from the Chase Home for Children period of its history, are now on display in the building. The inclusion of research from the Chase Home for Children period enriches both the interpreters' discussion of the house beyond the early 19th-century furnished rooms, and the visitors' experiences and understanding of childhood at the turn of the century. Finally, the understanding of the subsurface archaeological deposits of the Chase House site, including foundations and artifacts and their patterned distribution, allows Strawberry Banke to make informed site-management decisions and ensure that these cultural resources will not be inadvertently destroyed. Instead, the buried cultural resources can be avoided and will contribute to Strawberry Banke's ongoing mission of preservation of a New England waterfront neighborhood.

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