

Archeological Excavations at Austin State Hospital

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Introduction

The Health and Human Services Commission is proud to preserve history as part of the Austin State Hospital redevelopment project. Archeologists from Baer Engineering and Environmental Consulting, Inc. unearthed more than 12,000 artifacts at the site, offering a glimpse of life at Texas’ first mental hospital.

Looking into the Past

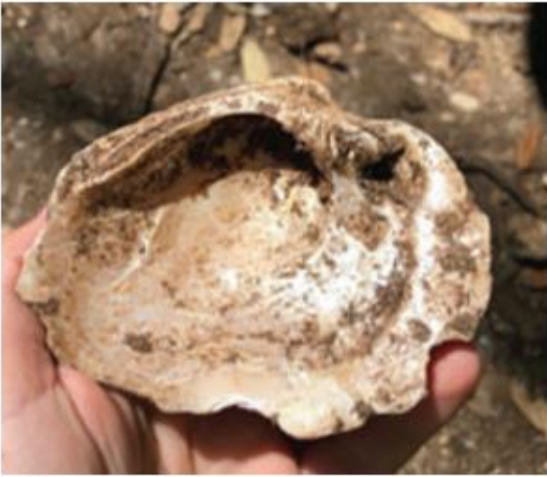
Historically, the Austin State Hospital was a world unto itself. The people who lived and worked there grew their own food, made their own clothes, and maintained the buildings and grounds where they lived. Medical experts at the time considered this work as vocational therapy for patients, allowing them to maintain and learn new skills while staying connected to their lives outside of treatment.



This 1899 photograph shows women sewing and washing clothes in the state hospital's laundry facility.



Above: In the early 1900s, many male patients worked in the maintenance shop and garage at the state hospital.



Above: Mussel shells, like this one, were found in Area C next to the women's dormitory through excavation. They are common along Texas' rivers and major waterways, and their pearly interiors were used to make buttons and jewelry.



Above: This assortment of mother-of-pearl and porcelain buttons and a straight pin were found outside the state hospital's tailor shop.



Above: Coveralls with a grease stain on the knee were unearthed during excavation at the hospital site.



Above: Part of a metal hoe used to plant and harvest crops was found at the hospital site.



Above: Excavations uncovered hand-carved buttons made from shell, suggesting button-making was among the tasks patients performed at the hospital.



Above: Carpenters would use a metal and plastic brace and bit to drill holes. Power tools were not widely available until the early- to mid-20th century.

Archeological Excavations

Archeological investigations from 2019 to 2023 have uncovered artifacts that reflect life at the Austin State Hospital in the early 1900s.

Excavations were conducted in several areas of the campus, leading to the recovery of numerous artifacts and identifying the foundations of facilities once located on the property.

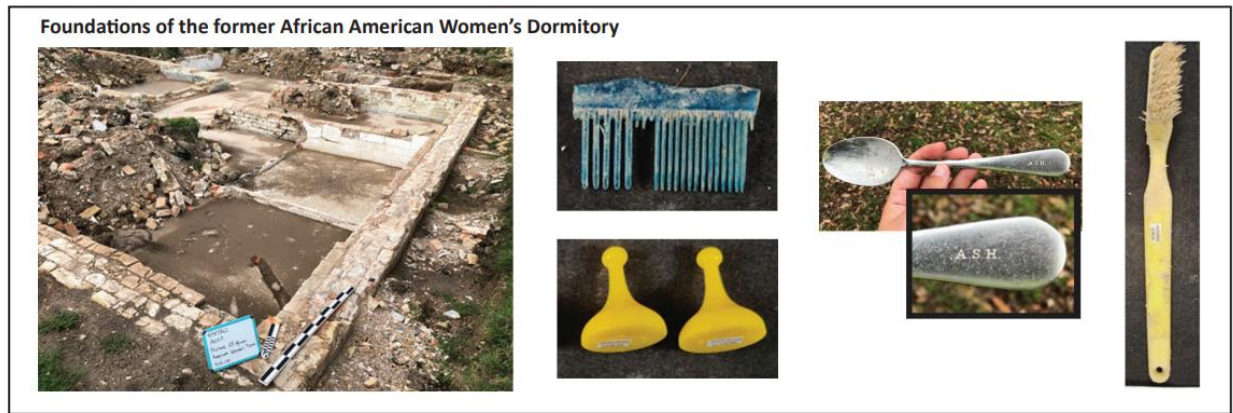
Area A

Archeologists discovered several former building foundations of brick and reinforced concrete construction in Area A (pictured below). These foundations were identified as the remains of the former African American Women's Dormitory, African American Women's Hospital, African American Dining Hall and African American Men's Dormitory.



Archeologists placed 25 1-by-1 meter hand units in Area A to sample high-traffic areas (e.g. pathways, utility driveways and doorways). Some hand units were placed to sample the interiors and exteriors of building foundations, and in areas where higher concentrations of artifacts were recovered during survey and trenching operations.

This effort resulted in archeologists recovering 1,448 artifacts from circa 1901 to present. These include a wide range of artifact types such as domestic wares, metal items, various types of bottle glass, plastic, clothing and personal items.



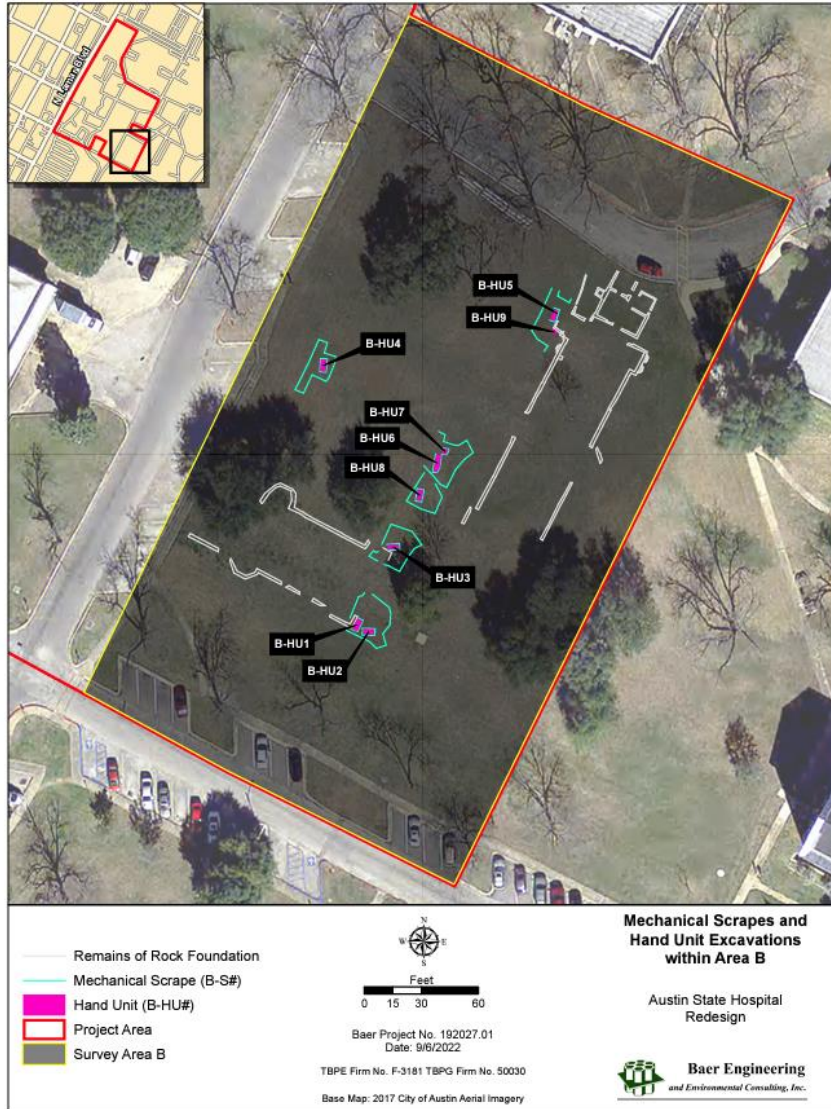
Area B

Archeological excavations in Area B, located in the field next to Building 501, resulted in the discovery of the stone foundation of the White Women's Ward (Buildings 502-505).

A total of 17 1-by-1 meter hand units were excavated in Area B to sample high traffic areas (e.g. pathways, doorways and entrances) as indicated on historical aerial photographs, maps, building plan sets and features identified during mechanical trenching, or the careful removal of earth at an archaeological site.

The archeological investigation of the former White Women's Ward resulted in archeologists discovering the stone and brick foundational remains of the buildings that once stood in this area. The excavation recovered 307 artifacts from the

trenches and hand units. The impression is that all items of a personal nature recovered in Area B were likely lost by individuals as they moved in and around the buildings while going about their lives.



Artifacts Discovered in Area B



1903 Penny



Skeleton key



Glass fragment from a medicine bottle with embossed "Austin Texas"



An undated photograph (facing northeast) of the Austin State Hospital shows the original 1857 Administration building and Men's Dormitory at far right, with the 1883 Women's Dormitory in the foreground.



Brick fragment with "American" maker's mark



Lock face



Frozen Charlotte doll



Aerial photograph of the foundational remains uncovered during archeological excavations.

Area C



Mechanical Trenching



Mechanical Trenching, or the careful removal of earth at an archaeological site, in Area C (see above map) resulted in the discovery of intact foundations of the former male tuberculosis clinic. Trenching near the African American Male Hospital (as indicated in a 1935 historical map) resulted in archeologists discovering scattered bricks, window glass and steel reinforced concrete fragments. No intact foundations were found of this building, suggesting the hospital had a slab foundation rather than a basement. The trenching operation resulted in recovering 73 isolated artifacts including buttons, domestic wares and bottle glass fragments.



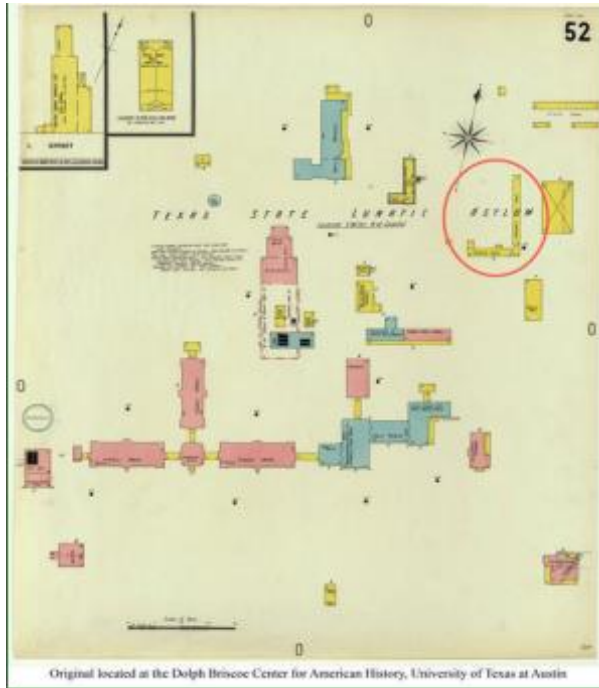
Hand Units



A total of eight 1-by-1 meter hand units were placed in Area C to sample high traffic areas (e.g. pathways, utility driveways and doorways), as indicated on historical aerial photographs, historical maps and building plan sets. Some hand units were placed to sample the interiors and exteriors of building foundations, and in areas where higher concentrations of artifacts were recovered during survey and trenching operations. Excavations in these units extended 10 centimeters into the former ground surface or below exposed features such as foundation walls. The hand unit excavations yielded 109 artifacts including domestic wares, metal items, various types of bottle glass, plastic, a few pieces of fabric and several buttons.

Building 636

Mechanical Trenching



A total of five mechanical trenches were excavated on the western side of Building 636 in the area of the structural foundations encountered during the installation of a modern utility line. These foundations comprised two coursings of yellow brick resting on a wider brick footing, which in turn rested on a grade beam of poured concrete mixed with large gravels. This concrete is similar to other poured concrete seen at other building foundations across the site and appears to correspond to the early construction phase of the Austin State Hospital (late 19th to early 20th century).



Hand Units



Three 1-by-1 meter units were placed around the exterior of the building foundations revealed while trenching near Building 636. The first two units (636-1 and 636-2) were placed to the southeast of Building 636 in an area close to the artifact concentration observed during monitoring of the electrical utility line. The third unit (636-3) was placed west of the building. Excavations in these units extended at least 5 centimeters into the former ground surface (remnant A Horizon). These excavations resulted in the recovery of 179 artifacts representing human activities at the Austin State Hospital from the late 19th Century to the present. Artifact types included domestic wares, metal items, and various types of bottle glass.

Monitoring



Baer Engineering monitored the installation of a series of modern utility lines, a large grease trap and a loading dock around Building 636. In total, the archeological monitoring recovered 679 artifacts. Some of the artifacts, particularly the whiteware and glass, showed evidence of burning, suggesting the concentration may have been related to episodes of trash burning in the area. Initial analysis of the whiteware shows the majority appears to have been from thick mugs, plates and bowls. Several pieces retain partial "K.T. & K. CHINA" maker's marks, which have been observed elsewhere on site.