

Ground radar probes New York's past

Archaeologists seek clues to village under Central Park

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NEW YORK (AP) — Archaeologists are digging with electronic fingers into Central Park to learn more about Seneca Village, a vanished 19th-century settlement of poor folks — blacks, Irish immigrants and others — that existed before landscapers arrived in the 1850s.

A team of scientists from Barnard College and City College of New York launched the two-day effort Wednesday, using ground-penetrating radar to probe selected areas of the site that once covered roughly two blocks and was home to as many as 260 people.

The radar, or GPR, transmits ultra high-frequency radio impulses into the ground that are reflected back by buried objects or differences in rock density to form a digital image on a screen, without any physical disturbance of the site.

Pulling the wheeled device along like a little red wagon, a GPR technician can probe as far as 15 feet (4.5 meters) below the surface.

The five-acre site that was the heart of the village was previously probed last fall, when 100 core-sample borings recovered pieces of ceramics, glass, pipe stems and other items reflective of daily life of the time.

The borings also narrowed the area to be examined further, and on Wednesday it was marked off in a grid with white tape for the GPR equipment to survey.

"We are trying to get a sense of how people lived in what was really a middle class African-American settlement of the mid-19th century," said Nan Rothschild, a Barnard archaeologist and co-director of the project.

She said any decisions to physically excavate the site would be based on what the radar discovered. The project is sponsored by the schools.

"Seneca Village has always been a part of the history of the park, and we are always interested in more information, but that is far down the road," said Linda Blumberg, vice president for communications at the Central Park Conservancy, which manages the park.

The "noninvasive" GPR technology has been used in recent years in many archaeological explorations around the globe, including lost cemeteries, battlefields of various wars and Port Royal, Jamaica, destroyed by a 1692 earthquake.

The U.S. military uses it in MIA crash site searches in Indochina. Ground-penetrating radar also has been used to locate buried land mines.

Often described as one of several "squatters camps" of huts and shacks that were displaced by the building of Central Park, Seneca Village actually was a more permanent and well-ordered community, experts now say.

It had three churches, a school and some inhabitants who owned their property, they say.

Although founded by free blacks, it later became a multi-ethnic settlement that included Irish and German immigrants and possibly some native Americans, according to various historical sources.

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University of Denver professor Larry Conyers monitors Wednesday's GPR survey in Central Park.

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