

Christ Church Drainage Project – Update on Excavations December 8, 2021

Excavations at Christ Church thus far have identified several layers and features, with artifacts dating from the Woodland period (500 BCE – 1600 CE), the earlier 1670s church, and the extant 1735 church. A total of sixteen test units, most measuring 2' by 5', have been partially or fully excavated thus far in three separate trenches: a 20' trench at the southwest churchyard low point, a 52' trench along the south sidewalk, and 10' stretch of the trench which will eventually extend along the entirety of the west sidewalk. The following summary details our preliminary interpretations, but these are subject to change if further excavations or the detailed catalog of artifacts (scheduled for the winter) reveal new information.

Southwest Churchyard Low Point Trench

The 20' trench in the southwest churchyard is located between 30' and 32' south of the western sidewalk leading from the lowest point in the churchyard to the wall. This trench was generally excavated in two layers: a dark, loamy topsoil with an older layer underneath. Subsoil was reached in this area at approximately 0.8' below ground surface. Very few artifacts were uncovered in these excavations, with a notable exception of multiple sherds of an English stoneware drinking vessel that mend together. This mug or tankard dates to the 18th century, and its presence in the churchyard raises some interesting questions about what activities took place in religious spaces. Additionally, a large feature was identified at the base of the older topsoil layer, which consisted of a light-colored clay cap on top of a dark loamy soil. This feature is possibly a burial, with the darker soil representing the original grave fill and the clay cap representing leveling efforts (grave shafts often leave a low spot on the surface, either from natural settling of soils or the eventual collapse of the coffin). However, the shape is somewhat odd for a burial, given that it is only 5' long (east-west) while also being over 4' wide (north-south), so this could also be some other kind of feature such as early landscaping efforts.



18th-century stoneware mug found in the southwestern churchyard trench.



Southwestern churchyard trench showing possible burial feature.

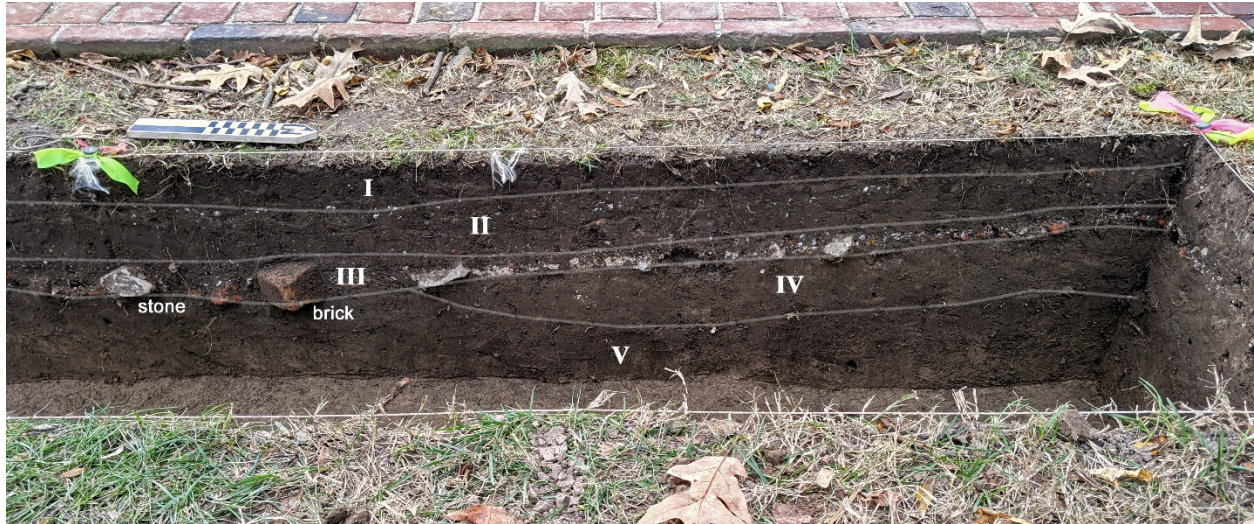
We also found many layers/features related to the churchyard wall. A thin lens of brick fragments close to the wall is likely evidence of the 1960s wall reconstruction. We also found evidence of the excavations conducted in 1959, which identified the 18th-century wall foundations on which the current wall was built. Interestingly, we did not find any evidence of the earlier 18th-century wall beneath the extant one. It is possible that the earlier wall did not exist in this location, or that it was deconstructed prior to the installation of the new wall (several whole or partial 18th-century bricks – matching a whole brick recovered from the 1730s church builder's trench – were found near the base of the 1960s excavation trench).

South Sidewalk Trench

The trench running along the eastern edge of the south sidewalk also revealed some very interesting layers from various points in the church's history. The profile from the test unit closest to the church displays this most clearly (see labelled photo below). The most recent layers (I) likely date from the 1980s onward. A 1980 penny and a 1984 nickel, while not the most exciting finds, date the first layer nicely. The following layer (II) consisted of a burned oyster shell layer (possibly evidence of an earlier path?), followed by a thin clay lens, followed by a brown loamy layer. These lenses are all 20th-century episodes, since they contained slate fragments from the roof installed in 1897. Near the base of this layer, a few larger slate fragments and a higher quantity of 19th-century machine-cut nails were found. This is possibly representative of the removal of the second wood shingled roof (installed 1838) and the installation of the new slate roof in 1897.

Beneath this was a layer of rubble with handmade brick, mortar, and stone (III). The stone found in this layer appears to be an exact match to the imported English stone present in the floor of the church. This, combined with the lack of later artifacts such as slate, means this layer is likely related to the construction of the extant 1735 church. In the northern portion of the unit, closest to the church, there was a lighter-colored clay lens (IV) directly beneath this rubble. This is likely a lens of deeper clay subsoils which were redeposited when the builder's trench for the church was dug. Together, these two layers tell the story of the church's construction: first the excavation of a deep trench into which the church's foundation was built, followed by the construction of the brick, mortar, and stone elements of the church.

Last but not least, we excavated the old topsoil which predates the 1735 church (V). This layer produced hand wrought 18th-century nails (either related to the earlier 1670s church or the early years of the 1735 church) as well as Woodland-period Native American artifacts such as a broken projectile point, shell-tempered pottery, and lithic flakes from stone tool production. The total depth of these units was typically around 1.5' below ground surface.



Profile of the test unit closest to the church (10' south of the south elevation). Individual layers have been lightly outlined for emphasis/clarity.

- I – recent topsoil
- II – post-1897 fill lenses
- III – ca. 1735 construction fill lenses with brick, mortar, and stone fragments
- IV – possible backfill from excavation of builder's trench
- V – old (pre-1735) topsoil



Comparison of an excavated stone fragment to the stone present in the floor of the church – note the same fossiliferous inclusions in both stones.

Excavations on the southern portion of the trench are still ongoing. As the trench extends away from the church, the thin construction lenses begin to taper. This makes dating layers somewhat more difficult, but in general there is still a modern topsoil layer, followed by various 20th-century fill lenses, followed by old (19th-century and earlier) topsoil. A narrow utility trench containing a single electric wire, possibly related to the first installation of electricity in the church, helps confirm the relative date of some of the 20th-century fill lenses.

Two other possible features have been identified in this southern portion of the trench. One is a dark brown feature which has been cut by the utility trench (left photo below). This feature is most likely a burial, given its depth, shape, and characteristic “halo” of darker soil as noted in other burials in the churchyard. The feature is at least 1.4’ deep from original ground surface, based on its profile in the excavated utility trench, and at least 2.7’ below ground surface as it exists today. A second possible feature was identified recently, but further investigation is needed to determine if this is a burial, tree hole, or other kind of feature (right photo below). Some interesting artifacts to come out of this area are a plated copper-alloy ring fragment, possibly in the shape of a crown, and a fragment of ceramic tile associated with the earlier 1670s church.



LEFT: Likely burial feature in the south trench, defined by grayish soil in center with a darker “halo” either side.

RIGHT: Another large feature in the same trench, either a double (or more) burial with another small feature cutting into the SE corner, or a large tree hole.



Possible ring fragment made of a copper alloy (note the green patina) and plated with another material to appear gold.

Moving forward, excavations in the southern trench will further investigate the possible features (with the goal of identification, and not full excavation unless we have a firm understanding of their function). We are also in the process of excavating the 1959-1960s excavations/disturbances alongside the south churchyard wall before we continue with the older layers in the last 10' of trench. As with the west wall, there is no evidence of the 18th-century wall visible in the southern trench – just 1960s brickwork laid on top of concrete.

Finally, we have begun excavations of one of the west sidewalk trenches, extending 1'-3' south from the walkway. The layers on this side of the church are less distinct but seem to follow the same stratigraphic sequence as the southern trench so far, except for some additional late 20th-century lenses close to the church.