

Exhibit sheds light on early Albany slum

Life in Sheridan Hollow was grim for Irish immigrants in 1800s

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ALBANY -- Overcrowded, squalid and prone to flooding, Sheridan Hollow was the last resort for Irish immigrants facing a housing crunch after arriving in the mid-1800s to labor in back-breaking jobs nobody else wanted.

According to the 1850 census, 84 people in 19 family groups lived in three small two-story flats on Sheridan Avenue at the bottom of a ravine on the frayed margin of Arbor Hill. They slept crammed into hallways, kitchens, beneath stairs and splayed across any available floor space.

As "Sheridan Hollow: A Very Working-Class Neighborhood," a new display at the State Museum makes clear, life was grim in this early slum and marked by grinding toil.

Clay pipes, pieces of porcelain dolls, earthenware cups and bowls, marbles, a writing slate and other artifacts were unearthed during an archaeological dig in 2004 and 2005 prior to construction of a state parking garage.

Syringes of varying sizes were found. The larger type was used for enemas to clean out nasty parasites and the smaller variety injected narcotics, most likely morphine to dull pain.

"As the poorest people in the city, facing anti-Catholic sentiment, they were shoved into the worst area of the city and tried to make the best of it," said Charles Orser, curator of historical archaeology at the State Museum.

Within a generation or two, many of the Irish worked their way into better jobs, moved to more desirable neighborhoods and became prominent in politics.

Paradoxically, the portrait painted of Sheridan Hollow 150 years ago would not be unfamiliar to those living in the area today.

"We don't make connections with the present, but the irony is that the conditions still exist today," said exhibit coordinator Michelle Stefanik. "Historical archaeology can tell us about poor, hard-working people from Albany's past whose stories were never told."

The new display is part of the "Beneath the City" exhibit.

The sway-backed shanties of Sheridan Hollow -- bordered by Hawk and Swan streets -- were cobbled together on reclaimed bottom land after Fox Creek was channeled into a buried culvert around 1840.

Despite the sewer line, sanitary conditions were poor. Cisterns and outdoor privies were located next to each other, and frequent flooding contaminated the water supply, sickening residents with cholera, typhoid, dysentery and other diseases. Roundworm and whipworm were common.

Before indoor plumbing arrived in the 1920s, its lack provided steady employment to entrepreneurs such as Henry Kass, of 63 Bassett St., who advertised his services as "Night Soil Scavenger," cleaning out privies.

Unemployment ran as high as 20 percent in Sheridan Hollow, and children pitched in when they could. Two-thirds of kids attended school. One-third had jobs -- girls as domestics and seamstresses and boys as peddlers and apprentices.

Tired of being ridiculed as Sheridan Hollow slum-dwellers, they changed the name of the area to Fox's Hollow, but never quite shed the reputation as the lowest of the low in Albany.

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