

Hessian remains unearthed at Revolutionary War site

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It started as a routine public archeology dig this summer, with more than 100 people, including Rowan University students, working an area immediately adjacent to the Red Bank Battlefield in New Jersey, just south of Philadelphia.

Then they found a human femur — and everything stopped.

When professionals took over, an extraordinary discovery ensued: the remains of 13 people, believed to have been Hessian soldiers, who were hired by the British to fight in the American Revolutionary War nearly 2½ centuries ago. They were discovered in a 4½-foot deep trench system that surrounded the battlefield's Fort Mercer, university officials said.

They also uncovered a King George III gold guinea, a soldier's monthly pay — which researchers called extremely rare — as well as pewter and brass buttons, a uniform knee buckle with human blood, and musket balls at the mass burial site next to the 44-acre battlefield, operated as a National Park along the Delaware River in Gloucester County.

Officials from Rowan, the battlefield and Gloucester County unveiled their findings at a news conference near the dig site. Red flags were stuck in areas of the trench where skulls were found.

"If we can extract their stories, and if we can tell their stories, it lets us put a name to a face," said Jennifer Janofsky, a Rowan public historian who also serves as director of the battlefield. "And that, to me, is a very powerful moment in public history."

The soldiers are believed to have died during the Battle of Red Bank, when American soldiers who were outnumbered pulled off a surprising victory. It was important because protecting Fort Mercer meant delaying the British from getting supplies up the Delaware River to Philadelphia.



PHOTOS BY MATT ROURKE, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Wade Catts, principal archaeologist for South River Heritage Consulting of Delaware, speaks with members of the media and officials Tuesday at the Red Bank Battlefield Park in National Park, Gloucester County.



A King George III gold guinea discovered at the site.

About 2,000 Hessian soldiers were fighting for the British during that battle on Oct. 22, 1777, while American forces, including soldiers from Rhode Island and the New Jersey militia, numbered only 500, according to historians. Yet the Hessians lost about 377 soldiers, compared to only 14 American deaths.

"Based on everything we've found and the context of what we've found, these appear to be Hessians," said Wade Catts, president/principal archaeologist for South River Heritage Consulting of

Delaware, who led the site dig.

The human remains have been turned over to the State Police public forensic unit, which will extract data from the bones and teeth to figure out their origin, the university said. They also will conduct "skeletal assessment, isotopic, genetic and radiological analyses" to understand their health and life history and gather other information, the university said. A mold of a jaw made by the unit was among the items on display.



A soldier's knee buckle discovered at the site.

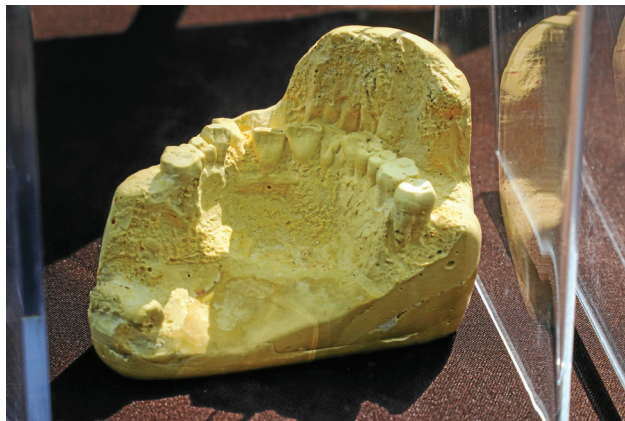
from the battlefield were thought to have been uncovered by the early 1900s. But in 2020, Gloucester County bought a quarter-acre wooded site, which included a part of the trench. The family that owned the site and knew of its potential historic context, Janofsky said, approached the county about the sale. Janofsky got a \$19,000 New Jersey Historical Commission grant to conduct the initial dig there, as well as a public education and outreach program, the university said. The work included four public digs this summer, the last one on June 26, when the femur was found by one of the volunteers, Wayne Wilson, 50, a union electrician from West Deptford.

"The whole thing has been nothing short of amazing," Wilson said.

West Deptford police were even called in to make sure it wasn't a crime scene, Cardona said. The county gave \$30,000 more to continue the work. Then a 5-by-5-foot dig section grew to 10-by-13 feet. Cardona said there's probably more to discover. The trench actually extends well beyond the quarter-acre under an adjacent neighborhood, he said. But the digging at this time has stopped.

Non-human items from the dig eventually will be showcased somewhere at the park, Cardona said. The trench will be filled in and the human remains will be reburied at a place to be determined. But the discovery will become part of the on-going educational program at the battlefield.

"It's one thing to discuss the battle in the abstract," Janofsky said. "It's another to witness firsthand the violence of that day"



A casting made of human remains discovered at the site. Researchers believe they have uncovered in a mass grave in New Jersey the remains of as many as 12 Hessian soldiers who fought during the Revolutionary War.

Historians are hopeful they may be able to find descendants of the soldiers.

One of the skulls uncovered is believed to have been from a soldier, approximately age 17 to 19, the age of many of Janofsky's Rowan students.

"Now, we have a better opportunity to tell a more complete story of these individuals," said Janofsky, who teaches classes in public history, material culture and

pre-Civil War America and who got her bachelor's from the University of Scranton, her master's from Villanova and her doctorate from Temple. "Who were they? Why were they here? What was their fate? It gives the public a more nuanced understanding of the history"

University spokesperson Joe Cardona said uncovering such a mass burial sites from the Revolutionary War is rare. All mass grave sites