

# Albion **A**dvertiser

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## Brockport State students digging into the past

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**CLARENDON** – History lies in the dirt between overgrown trees in the very corner of the town of Clarendon. These Brockport State University College students are uncovering it, piece by fragmented piece.

The old Polly Tavern, still a figment of collective memory, once stood at the corner of Route 98 and Townline Road. The grounds and foundation remains of the tavern and former home are being excavated by a class of would be archeologists led by Dr. Lou Ann Wurst.

The students have mapped the site and sifted through the dirt to find historical treasures, 150-year-old stone walls and gained a sense of wonder as they unravel the mysteries of everyday life.

“It’s impossible to cover what we do in the classroom,” Wurst said. “We do everything in the field.”

The Polly Tavern was a stage coach stop along what would become Fourth Section Road until 1850. The tavern was named for the family that lived and worked there, and who is now buried in the old cemetery across the street from the excavation site. It was the family home through the 1930s, after which it was abandoned and left to decay. At some point in the 1970s the home’s chimney was dynamited to prevent it from falling on high school students using the remains of the old tavern as a club house.

“We’re hoping to find archeological features from the use of the property from all the times it was in use,” Wurst said. “We’ve found so much stuff. It’s amazing.”

The students have uncovered about half a million artifacts, Wurst said, including a bucket of that day’s finds, ranging from 100-year-old liquor bottles with strange liquids



Christina Henry watches as Kara Belecz lines up 100-year-old bottles discovered at the old Polly Tavern site. (Albion photo by Karen Sampson)

still inside, to rusted nails, everyday crockery and good china. Also, students uncovered clay marbles and three coins from the 1860s.

“We’ve gotten some really big pieces of metal,” she added. “There’s a plowshare and part of a baby grand. Not many dolls or toys. A silver spoon and a silver plate.”

The students are uncovering the artifacts through the slow process of digging and sifting, marking each site and find in a notebook for later study.

“We work in units of one-by-one meters,” said assistant Ami Blackmore. “Everything that comes up gets screened. Some of the cooler things you find in the screens. This ensures that we miss very little.”

Blackmore said the class is composed of both graduate and undergraduate students. Two students are teachers themselves and one student is a retiree from Florida.

More skill than digging is used by class members, Blackmore said. Students take measurements, record observations and make logical guesses about locations to dig.

“There’s math as well as dirt,” she said. “For every question we answer, there’s 10 more.”

All the artifacts are collected and washed in the lab at Brockport State. Blackmore said the property owner has first choice of any items found and the rest will be used for further study and instruction in the classroom.

“As science progresses, you can learn more and more from these things,” Blackmore said.

The students will be at the dig site until the end of the week. They welcome visitors and are eager to learn more about the site’s oral history.