

# LIlife

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## Digging for yesterday

A SETAUKET  
COMMUNITY  
UNEARTH'S  
ITS PAST —  
AND THE  
STORY OF ONE  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
FAMILY G8



PHOTO

NEWSDAY PHOTO/REBECCA COONEY

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Archaeologist and Hofstra University professor Chris Matthews, right, Brad Phillippi and Brienne Giordano work at an archaeological site in Setauket in June.

# Clues to historic COMMUNITY

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Archaeological dig finds that Native, African Americans lived together

The home where Jacob and Hannah Hart lived with their kids from the 1880s until 1930.

BY JOHN HANC  
Special to Newsday

**C**hris Matthews stopped in mid-stride, and then rolled his foot along the frozen ground, as if pumping an imaginary gas pedal.

"Feel that?" he said. "We're on a slight incline."

As a cold wind rattled the bare branches surrounding the deserted graveyard, he gestured to a line of half-sunken boulders. "See those?" he said. "Those stones are in a vertical line. It looks like they were placed there."

Matthews then stepped back and opened his arms wide, as if he could almost embrace a long-vanished presence.

"I think this might be where the church was," he declares.

Matthews, an archaeologist who teaches at Hofstra University in Hempstead, is trained to detect the pieces of the past that often appear hidden in plain

## Learn more

For more information on the archaeological dig in the Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill historic district of Setauket, visit: [people.hofstra.edu/Christopher\\_Matthews/ALTC.html](http://people.hofstra.edu/Christopher_Matthews/ALTC.html)

sight around us on Long Island.

This place, the Old Bethel Cemetery, surrounded by modern housing developments and tucked into a wooded corner off Christian Avenue in Setauket, is even more subtle than most. Headstones from the early 1800s stand — and, in some cases, lie — in broken pieces, further clues in the story that Matthews, along with a group of local preservationists and residents, is trying to tell about this neighborhood.

Called officially the Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill Historic District, this half-mile-



## Artifacts tell story

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Gravestones at Old Bethel Cemetery in Setauket, where Civil War veterans were also buried.



Fragments of a dish, spoon and possibly an arrowhead, which might have been an heirloom, indicative of Indian heritage.



Several buttons of different types — which is consistent with census records showing that Hannah Hart was a laundress.



Left, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was built in 1909. Above, a Civil War soldier's handwritten discharge document, dated 1865.

long area, bounded by Main Street and Mud Road, was designated as such in 2005 by the Town of Brookhaven.

"It's one of the few communities where African-Americans and Native Americans have lived together for generations and continue to live," said

Matthews. "When I describe the project to people from Long Island, they don't even know such a community exists."

Matthews, a native of Washington, D.C., has taught at Hofstra since 2000. He heard about Bethel from a colleague at the Society of Preservation for Long Island Antiquities, whose office is in Cold Spring Harbor. Studying such communities is right up Matthews' alley.

"My work looks at questions of race and class," said Matthews, whose previous digs included projects in mixed-

race communities in New Orleans and Annapolis, Md.

### 'Long time coming'

The focal point of his efforts in the project he and colleagues call "A Long Time Coming: Archaeology and History of the Native and African-American Community of Setauket" is just off Main Street, about two miles east of the old cemetery. In what is now a tangle of brush in a vacant lot stood the house of Jacob and Hannah Hart, who lived here with their eight



Marbles and fragments of a smoking pipe are clues to how families may have spent some of their downtime.



A broken bottle that was determined to have contained a derivative of sperm oil, a byproduct from the whaling industry.

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For more photos of the archaeological dig, go to [newsday.com/lilife](http://newsday.com/lilife)

See DIG on G10

PHOTO BY HEATHER WALSH  
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# Unearthing a historic community

DIG from G8

children from the 1880s until about 1930. It was a logical place to begin the project, in part because a photo exists of the house from the early 1900s, as well as documentation on the Hart family.

The first phase of the dig occurred last June. Matthews and a group of eight student interns spent five weeks excavating the site. The team was helped by longtime Bethel residents who actually remember the house — such as Clifton “Hub” Edwards.

“I’ve lived here so long I actually remember when Mud Road was mud . . . just a dirt road,” Edwards, 82, said with a chuckle.

The Harts came of age in an earlier period, when the Civil War and slavery were still in living memory. The team uncovered the family’s drinking well, the foundations of part of the house as well as three artifacts that reveal some details about their lives — and by extension the lives of residents in Bethel and other African-American communities on Long Island two centuries ago:

- A broken glass bottle that was determined to have contained a derivative of sperm oil — one of the many byproducts from the whaling industry — suggesting that Jacob Hart may have been involved in one of the maritime industries that once flourished on Long Island;

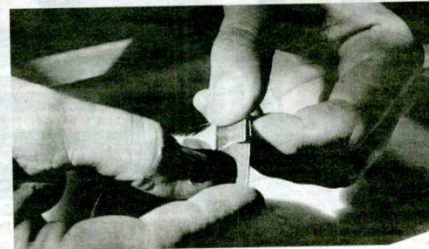
- Several buttons of different types — which is consistent with census records showing that Hannah was a laundress who cleaned and mended the clothes of other families;

- A sharp projectile — possibly an arrowhead, which might have been a family heirloom, indicative of Indian heritage.

Supplemented by a few newspaper stories, including Jacob’s 1931 obituary from a local newspaper, a picture emerges of the Harts as a family in which both parents worked. Hannah operated what today would be equivalent to a home-based business, while Jacob took on whatever work he could get: as a mason, factory worker, farm laborer.

## Sense of duty

Judith Burgess, an anthropologist from Westbury who is also



a consultant on the project, was at the dig last summer.

“We started out with bushes and a lot of poison ivy,” she recalled. “But then you saw it emerge . . . the well, the foundation, the artifacts. Who would know underneath all this brush was a whole family’s life?”

One that is only beginning to truly be comprehended.

“If you really want to understand a community such as this, you need to understand what made it possible for them to persevere,” Burgess added.

A key to that survival is the

nearby African Methodist Episcopal Church, of which the Harts were members. The white-frame church was built in 1909 and was a center of life for the Bethel community. The church remains active, as is the American Legion Post across the street, where veterans such as Edwards, who served in the Army during the Korean War, continue a long tradition of military service. In fact, through his own research, Edwards has identified at least five men from the Bethel community who fought in black units during the Civil War.

From left, Chris Matthews, the Rev. Gregory Leonard and community member Carleton Edward tour the archaeological dig Bethel-Spring Hill. Left, Matthews holds an artifact.

This sense of duty, exemplified by the two adjacent institutions, is part of what impresses the Rev. Gregory Leonard, a native of Boston, who has been minister of Bethel AME church since 1994.

“Here we serve God: the American Legion Post across the street serves country,” he said. “But we all serve.”

## Historic footprint

With funding from Hofstra’s National Center for Suburban Studies and other sources, the dig at the Hart house will resume in June. What it’s all leading to, Matthews is not quite sure, although he envisions more excavations and an eventual book or a museum exhibition that will interpret the Bethel community to a broad audience.

First, however, there are other important questions to answer. Records show that there was an earlier church near the commu-

nity, dating back to the early 1800s, likely founded by recently freed slaves. But where was it located?

Matthews believes the footprint might be in the Old Bethel graveyard. This part of town, just outside the historic district, on the border of Setauket and Stony Brook, was once deeply wooded, a place where African-American Indians and perhaps African-American Indians as well could congregate in safety, and speak and worship freely. Such clandestine, backwoods meeting spots are known to have been a feature of slave communities all over antebellum America. To think this happened a few miles from what are now Stony Brook University and Smith Haven Mall — and that what grew out of those secret rendezvous was a church and later a community that endures to this day — is remarkable.

And instructive.

“You have to remember that Long Island existed before we had suburbs,” Burgess said. “It has a rich past and a diverse past. Scrape away that suburbia, and you’ll see what’s there.”