Ever wondered as you walked along Beech Path what those ruinous stone walls beneath Bussey Hill are doing there? Or, as you circled the southwest slope of Peters Hill, why there are so few grave markers in the Walter Street Burying Ground? If so, then you share an interest not just in the living collection of the Arnold Arboretum—its sine qua non—but also in the cultural heritage that helps make it the rich and varied landscape it is today. Yes, in a city known for its deep history, even this great green gem of Olmsted’s Emerald Necklace is rife with a significant human past in addition to its arboreal present.

Or perhaps you just wondered what that gaggle of students was doing on a handful of sunny days over the past two fall semesters, as they walked around those walls and headstones with fancy-looking survey instruments. The students were graduate and undergraduate participants in The Lay of the Land: Surface and Subsurface Mapping in Archaeology, a course taught through Boston University’s Department of Archaeology. With Arnold Arboretum support and guidance, the course took advantage of one of the most picturesque archaeological landscapes Boston has to offer to provide instruction in methods of archaeological surveying.

Among several sites of prehistoric and historical archaeological significance in the Arboretum, the Walter Street Burying Ground is perhaps the most conspicuous. A cemetery established in the early eighteenth century in association with the Second Parish of Roxbury, it served local residents as well as Revolutionary War dead. The widening of Walter Street in the early twentieth century truncated its extent, and only a small selection of its original grave markers are identifiable today, with those of Anna Bridge (d. 1722) and Katharine Mayo (d. 1857) chronologically bookending the remaining markers. How many markers were there originally? We can’t be certain, but 49 were documented in 1854, and 35 were still visible in 1902. Only 14 markers are identifiable today in addition to a three-part crypt. Previous studies had located the surviving markers on the map only generally, so the goal for students was to provide the Arboretum an updated and accurate survey as well as a virtual archive of each marker in its current state of preservation. The survey revealed no significant new discoveries—the 14 newly surveyed markers correlate well with the 1902 map showing 35 markers—yet the image modeling of the remaining headstones now provide a 3D, virtual archive of monuments that have already suffered significant attrition.

The site between Bussey Hill and Beech Path is less well known. Those familiar with Arboretum history, though, will know that the standing Roxbury Puddingstone foundations of a barn and the grassy berm before it mark the core of the early nineteenth-

Students of Chris Roosevelt’s Boston University course in surface and subsurface archeological mapping employ surveying equipment as part of their investigation of the Walter Street Burying Ground.
century agricultural estate—complete with manor house, outbuildings, and lavish landscaping with artificial ponds, roads, and paths—of Mr. Benjamin Bussey. Following its bequest to Harvard University, Bussey’s “Woodland Hill” estate became the canvas on which George Emerson, along with his co-executors of the will of James Arnold, painted the ambitious idea of an arboretum for Harvard University.

The mansion of the eponymous hill and “Bussey Mansion Site,” as it is now called, stood into the 1930s, but no traces of its structure remain above ground today. Because its general configuration is known from contemporary maps yet remains invisible from the surface today, it is a perfect training site for archaeological prospection using geophysical methods to delineate subsurface remains. The results of our electrical resistance survey at the site pinpointed the location of the mansion’s high-resistance, doubled-square foundations of stone, marking the line of its first-floor house walls and wraparound porch edge, as well as traces of the road known to have led behind it towards the structure labeled as a barn on 1930s maps.

These past two autumns in the Arboretum have thus enabled excellent opportunities for student training in cutting-edge archaeological mapping methods just as they have, we hope, provided the Arboretum confirmation, if not new discovery, of its historical and archaeological treasures. Working with students in this wonderful corner of nature’s classroom was so enjoyable and effective that one can only hope that such training and research opportunities will continue, even if they focus primarily on the Arboretum’s lesser-known, “non-living” collections.

Our Archives serve as the repository for institutional records and personal papers associated with the history and operations of the Arnold Arboretum. Additionally, we curate a small collection of objects which includes a number of artifacts crafted by indigenous peoples. These materials were discovered in our landscape by Arboretum Collector-Botanist Ernest Jesse Palmer (1875-1962), Plant Propagator Alfred J. Fordham (1911-2000), and other staff members since the 1920s, often turning up as a result of natural disturbances like storms or our more routine activities of planting and removing trees and shrubs.

Over the years, the collection has been researched by scholars specializing in the material culture of New England’s indigenous peoples, and their analyses have identified the ages of the points and tools found here. The eight earliest artifacts—all projectile points—date to the Middle Archaic Period (8000-5000 years Before Present or BP), and reflect seasonal hunting activities on bird migration routes. The Late Archaic Period (5000-3000 BP) saw a warming of the environment and an increase in population by immigration of indigenous peoples from the south and west. Our 38 projectile points from this period reflect a growing and diverse populace here and suggest the land was used for hunting game such as deer and turkey. The limited quantity and distribution of lithic materials from the Woodland Periods (ca. 3000-400 BP) reflects the movement of indigenous peoples from the uplands of the Arboretum landscape to the coast, when this region was used primarily for inland hunting trips. During the Contact Period (400-200 BP) we have documentary evidence by European settlers that indigenous settlement was centered along the Neponset and Mystic Rivers. From this era we have found several gunflints, signifying a shift in how game was pursued here in Colonial times.

Although these artifacts are iconic and evocative, their removal outside of a wider archaeological context must be considered in assessing their true historical value. However, their discovery in the closed, undeveloped environs of the Arboretum gives them a greater significance than if they had been collected randomly in Boston. The collection is available for study in the library, and you can read the finding aid for this collection in the Archives section of our website. —Lisa Pearson, Head of the Library and Archives