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Unearthing Kingston's past

Archaeologists uncover centuries of Indigenous life, colonial settlement and forgotten burial grounds

by Maura Rosner

DIG BEFORE CONCRETE and steel, before stone and drywall, the ground beneath Kingston was already a palimpsest of human life. Layer by layer, historians, archaeologists, and community advocates unearth evidence of Indigenous villages and often uncomfortable narratives is emerging about how early settlement, racial injustice, and historical preservation have intersected in this riverfront city. Some of those ancient Indigenous settlements, to forgotten 18th-century burial sites, the stories buried just below have current street levels reveal a complex, contested history still being directly over its own heritage.

The human story of the region stretches back roughly 16,000 years to a post-glacial epoch. Archaeological excavations along the Esopus Point Park, including prehistoric stone tools and projectile points, indicate that small nomadic bands frequented the shoreline long before European contact. In the heart of modern Kingston, at the historic Matthewis Persen House on John Street, archaeologists from the Dutch Hollow Archaeological Society discovered unexpectedly compelling evidence of an early Indigenous footprint in the form of post molds, distinct disordered soil impressions left by the removal of wooden posts. Those molds revealed the outline of an ancient Native American habitation.

Archaeologists, including the Esopus people, were part of the broader Lenape nation. Following centuries of displacement and conflict with European settlers, descendants of those communities are today part of three federally recognized Lenape tribes in the United States: the Delaware Nation in Anadarko, Oklahoma; the Delaware Tribe of Indians in Bartlesville, Oklahoma; and the Stockbridge-Munsee Community in Bowler, Wisconsin, as well as three recognized First Nations in Canada. Artifacts from the Esopus Point Park, including prehistoric stone tools and projectile points, indicate that small nomadic bands

Kingston's past

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Delaware First Nation (part of the Six Nations of the Grand River).

Layered architectural footprint

Built in 1680 for Gysbert Van Imbroech, the Matthewis Persen House stands as one of Ulster County's oldest surviving structures. The home was occupied by the Persen family for a bench still was occupied by the home opens during the Second Esopus War when it served as "intelligence regarding the location of the Native American forces and the movements proved pivotal in the Dutch victory. Over subsequent generations, an English family led by George Ihck, a recorded enslaver, acquired the property, expanding the original single-room structure and adding a barn extension.

Ulster County historian Edward L. Moreno III said, "By the time Ulster County purchased the property in 1964 and formally adopted it in 1990, its original age had been largely forgotten. County workers added a modern brick extension, covering the original stone walls, and covered the roof to look like wood shingles, much as the 4-H club. Advocates secured state and county funding to stabilize the building as a welcome center, and when crews removed some exposed, layered building materials side by side, including 20th-century clay pipeline, 18th-century pipeline, and early mortar boost the building's true age. Subsequent excavations inside the building revealed that Kingston's 17th-century street level sits approximately two feet lower than today's pavement."

Systematic displacement of sacred grounds

The physical building direct by urban development ground was surrounded to sacred sites. According to Moreno, "... mid-19th-century communities lacked modern preservation ethics, and many historic burial sites, gravestones, often leading to churches that were unimaginable today. When churches and developers were expanded in the 1800s, building foundations, roads, and commercial moving headstone was relatively common. Across from Pine Street, where a modern medical center now stands, a former white burial ground was paved over, and remains were moved and placed against the rear boundary fence behind the Old Dutch Church."

This dynamic was be more severe for African American residents. By the mid-19th century, the main cemetery movement swept the nation, the city of Kingston designated the newly established Mount Zion Cemetery as the primary burial ground for Black residents.

Seeking to sell off prime municipal real estate along Pine Street, city officials issued a public notice in 1852 declaring unequivocally that Black families relocate their deceased loved ones from the Pine Street African burial Ground. The city warned that if families did not do so, remains would be disinterred by municipal workers would do it for them, though city officials ultimate-



An inscription at the Persen House.

ly ended up relocating only a fraction of the promised relocations. Through the mid-20th century, portions of the graves were formally mapped, and remains previously uncovered on adjacent private properties were respectfully reburied within protected boundaries.

Today, the Pine Street African Burial Ground is recognized as both a New York State and National Historic Landmark. While time and development erased the site's original headstones, archaeologists using ground-penetrating radar and historical records have identified its approximate boundaries. Hamsher has since installed a commemorative monument to honor those interred on the sacred ground. Plans are underway to establish an educational museum on site to ensure that Kingston's complicated and multilayered story is finally brought to light.

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Unearthing the material culture

Dr. Joseph E. Diamond, professor of anthropology at SUNY New Paltz and author of The Archaeology of Early Kingston, has led many excavations revealing the complex archaeological landscape of the region. Joseph Diamond highlighted early contributors and mentors who shaped the field.

Examining artifact collections from Kingston Point and the broader Esopus Creek drainage, including the C.R. collection, Diamond documented hundreds of pre-and pre-contact Native American activity. Pre-contact Native Americans were not staying strictly within modern municipal lines, Diamond said, noting that his research included fire or ash key sites just outside the city's corporate boundaries in Fort Ivern, Hurley, and the town of Ulster.

Diamond detailed a chronological progression of stone tools from Kingston Point, starting with the earliest projectile points recovered from 8,000 to 5,000 B.C. Neville and Kirk Corner Notched points, which were distinct from earlier points used on spears, javelins, or darts. Joseph Diamond noted that these were the kind of projectile points that Native Americans often of were used.

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consulting with a Vosburg phase Native American site in Rhinebeck, Somerville points, Orient Fishtails, and Jacks Reef Pentagonal points spanning from 1,000 B.C. to A.D. 800. From A.D. 1300 up to European contact, Diamond identified artifacts which were distinct from earlier points used on spears, javelins, or darts. Joseph Diamond noted that these were the kind of projectile points that Native Americans often of were used.

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Inside the Senate House itself, excavations conducted under the floorboards of the waiting room revealed a cache of more than 1,000 brown, rounded ceramics of 18th-century and Dutch Delftware.

Nearby, archaeological excavators found a lot of clam shell fragments and a large quantity of hand-mechanically broken, suggesting that somewhere was making wampum around the time of the Revolutionary War.

At the lowest excavation level, dark soil stains in the native subsoil revealed post patterns of an eighth-century Indigenous dwelling. Radiocarbon dating of charcoal by approximately A.D. 750 to 800, the discovery inspired Diamond's research article, A House Within a House. "It's literally a Native American house that predated the Senate House built right on the exact same spot," Diamond said.

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Homegrown

Back Home Cannabis opens new Kingston dispensary location

by Maura Rosner

WHEN ADULT-USE cannabis became legal in New York State, the gold rush was immediate. Corporate multistate operators, well-capitalized investors, and a flood of marketing agencies all descended on the state's rural estate, lobby municipal boards, and began staking claims in the burgeoning market. Yet, tucked away in Ulster County, the team behind Back Home Cannabis has built a radically different approach. Founded by a group of local nonprofit empire, they entered the industry for more durable: decades of dirt-under-the-fingernails farming experience, a deep commitment to the region's agricultural heritage, and a conviction that sometimes the most durable ideas are the simplest.

Back Home Cannabis is officially unveiling its new dispensary location at 1 Kingston Plaza, followed by agricultural veterans Kris Kinsey and William Lubben, along with longtime Ulster County residents and business owners Joseph Pacifico and Andrade and Derek Hempstead from inventory. The opening marks a major milestone for craft cannabis in the Hudson Valley.

To understand the foundations of Back Home Cannabis and its new Kingston location, one must look to the decades of local farming that preceded it. Kris Kinsey, a fifth-generation agricultural asset, is the founder of Evolution Farms, one of the largest hemp farms in New York. For more than 30 years, she has supplied fresh produce to competitive New York City Greenmarkets, balancing complex logistics, unpredictable weather, and the slim margins of small-scale agriculture. Among farming circles, she is known for her ability to push boundaries, experiment with new crops, and help peers, maintaining a long history of roughly 100 acres of cultivation.

Kinsey also brought a particular depth of expertise to the table, anchored in commercial vegetable production, soil science and farm infrastructure. When the two grew

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Views of the Back Home Cannabis farm, facilities and storefront.

> Consumers visiting the Kingston store have the unique opportunity to purchase products grown and handled by the very people running the business...

build, with the team choosing the microbusiness model specifically to preserve quality control and stay close to the cultivation process.

While cultivating in the region's rugged agricultural skill, securing the public approval for a new agricultural dispensary location presented a different kind of challenge. Over the past few years, the Back Home Cannabis team scouted properties across Ulster County. Finding a viable site for a legal cannabis dispensary is a complex undertaking, with strict regulations governing everything from zoning to proximity to schools, complex local zoning codes and the ever-present risk of community opposition. Many rural regions have outright banned cannabis businesses, while others have imposed such restrictive regulations, proximity provisions to schools, or prohibitively expensive licensing fees that it is impossible for anyone but the largest corporate operators to enter the market. Even in areas that have legalized adult-use cannabis, the process can be slow, unpredictable, and filled with roadblocks.

Back Home Cannabis stands out as a rare success story in this regard. After several years of searching, the team found a location in the town of Kingston that met its strict criteria and secured approval from the town's planning board and zoning board of appeals. The process was not without challenges, and the team had to navigate a lawsuit filed by a neighboring property owner. But the project ultimately moved forward, and the dispensary is now set to open its doors.

The location itself is a key part of the company's strategy. Situated in a former bank building, the dispensary has been designed to be welcoming and accessible, with a layout that encourages customers to browse and learn about the products on offer. The team has also made a point of hiring locally, with a staff that includes many people who have lived in the area for years and have deep ties to the community.

For Kinsey, the opening is the culmination of a long-held dream. "I've been farming my whole life, and I've always wanted to have a place where people could come and see what we're growing and how we're growing it," she said. "I want them to be able to ask questions and to understand the process."

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Good Ol' Boy with a Gun

The Family Man: Blood and Betrayal in the House of Murdaugh by James Lasdun

FIVE YEARS AGO I found a copy of People magazine in a New York library. The cover article was about a South Carolina family named Johns Murdaugh who had been involved in a series of murders and other crimes. "Who lives in a place like that?" I thought.

But when I saw that James Lasdun had written a book about the Murdaughs, I knew I'd read his version. Lasdun is the author of the novels Delivery and The Horse Whisperer and the memoir Seven Lies. He's also a poet and short story writer. He's been a professor at Hunter College and Columbia University, and he's a longtime resident of Hudson. He's also a friend of mine.

Lasdun refrains from mentioning the current occupant of the White House, but as I read his book, this fact kept coming to mind. The Murdaugh was a rich, entrepreneurial pillar of the community who could get away with just about anything. Some paid $500,000 from your back pocket to settle a lawsuit. Others got away with and over? Hmmmm. Have you put a bullet in Melania and Barron?

Lasdun's subjects in the Palmetto State through Parker Ellcott & Associates, a crime and criminal defense firm.

Murdaugh specialized in personal injury law, and was tremendously successful, earning millions in fees for himself and his partners. He was also a savvy lobbyist.

Has the affluent, drug-addicted, unscrupulous Murdaugh family of the quintessential American type, the kind of people who would feel right at home with a camera around his neck used to be? The Southern version of this family would be more genteel and its criminality abashed – when he ventured into assignment. The story of Murdaugh became a "nondiction

blackout assault rifle. (The bags are destructive to fields and crops.) If you're my age, it's impossible to read about Murdaugh without thinking of Billy Joel's "Allentown," which was a class citizen (1982-1971) about a rural family from the Ozarks who strikes it rich—literally by striking oil—and moves to Beverly Hills, where they're ridiculed by condescending Hollywood fellows, famously referring to "hillbillies." Or, as Joel sings, "Who lives in a house like this?"

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