



TOP The archaeology zone at Otis House.
BOTTOM Small artifacts dating to the late eighteenth century uncovered during archaeology.

tower in what would have been the row houses' backyards would have destroyed any remaining archaeological evidence, as a matter of good preservation practice we commissioned a study before beginning work on the wall. The results were surprising, opening up speculation about the nineteenth-century usage of these urban spaces.

We uncovered a host of brick structures in the narrow, 300-square-foot area. Analysis is still underway, but an early theory suggests that they are part of Boston's mid- to late-nineteenth-century water and sewer systems. We also found smaller artifacts of the late eighteenth century such as china shards and clay pipes, possibly indicating use of the space during the Otises' occupancy.

But just below these finds lay another interesting discovery: dirt. In fact, this dirt shows no evidence of disturbance since at least 1630, making it one of the only examples in Boston of what archaeologists call sterile soil. In an urban area that has experienced land reclamation, generations of settlement and development, and twentieth-century urban renewal efforts, it is remarkable to find such undisturbed soil less than three feet below the surface.

What was life like in this area of the peninsula after 1630 and in the European occupancy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Further analysis of these newly uncovered features may yield some answers.

—*Colleen Chapin*
Preservation Manager

Archaeology at Otis House

Last year, in preparation for repairs to the stone retaining wall at Otis House, we initiated an archaeological assessment of the anticipated excavation area. Archaeological resources and features can contain significant information about the evolution of an area's cultural landscape and the history of people and populations for whom no written record may exist. Artifacts can inform us about how the land might have been used and how that use might have evolved over time, providing valuable information about historic properties and their context.

Boston has a long history of land reclamation to fill out the awkwardly shaped Shawmut Peninsula, but the 1796 Harrison Gray Otis House in the city's West End sits on a part of the peninsula that existed when the Puritans arrived in 1630. Historical

accounts note grazing pastures and a windmill among the land's uses prior to its acquisition by Otis in the late eighteenth century.

Today's Otis House actually comprises three buildings. Between 1822 and 1833 four brick row houses were built along Lynde Street, just north of the 1796 Federal-style mansion. In 1925 the City of Boston made plans to widen Cambridge Street, which would have brought the road directly through the front rooms of Otis House. The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now Historic New England) acted quickly to acquire the four Lynde Street buildings, demolishing two of them and moving Otis House almost forty-three feet back, connecting it to the remaining two row houses and saving the house.

Although it was believed that the 1976 construction of a five-story stair



A Rare Mural on the Move

Ben Zion Black's 1910 mural for Chai Adam Synagogue in Burlington, Vermont, may be the only one of its kind in America. Hidden behind a wall for years, it is again seeing the light of day thanks to the decades-long perseverance and planning of a dedicated group of local preservationists.

Behind an apartment wall erected in 1986 is a portal to the nineteenth-century Jewish immigrant community in Burlington and the Lithuanian villages they left behind. For almost thirty years the wall covered a brightly colored mural that once adorned the Chai Adam ("Life of Man") Synagogue, now an apartment building. The mural is not only an important part of the city's history, it is also a link to an artistic genre that was all but lost in Europe during the Holocaust.

The synagogue was constructed by Jewish peddlers who came to Burlington from the area of Kaunas, Lithuania, in the 1880s. In 1889 they built the wood-framed and sided Chai Adam Synagogue in a traditional Eastern European rural style. By the early twentieth century Burlington's "Little Jerusalem" numbered upward of eight hundred residents and recalled the organization of a classic Eastern European village. There were multiple stores selling kosher food, three synagogues, and a Hebrew Free School all within a six-block area.

ABOVE Ben Zion Black was paid \$200 and took six months to complete the work of decorating the Chai Adam Synagogue in 1910, pictured here shortly after completion.



Cleaning in 2014 revealed that the Ten Commandments were originally a rich red (below), not brown as they had appeared when the mural was last seen in 1986 (left).



In 1910 the Chai Adam congregation commissioned a newly arrived immigrant, Ben Zion Black, to decorate its synagogue. His work included an 11-by-21-foot mural in the apse. Black's mural incorporates traditional imagery, such as the Ten Commandments resting on a throne protected by the guardian Lions of Judah, with the glimmering Crown of Torah and the divine light shining down. His style reflected traditions of rural Eastern European synagogues as well as modern theatrical painting.

When Chai Adam Synagogue closed in 1939, the building was sold and used for commercial purposes. When it was sold again in 1986 for conversion into apartments, members of the nearby Ohavi Zedek Synagogue, along with a local architect and staff from the Shelburne Museum, arranged for thorough photographic documentation of the mural. They persuaded the building owner not to destroy it, but to instead construct a protective

wall in front of it in the hope that someday the mural could be preserved. During a 2007 trip to Lithuania that included a visit to the village outside Kaunas from where his ancestors had emigrated more than a century earlier, Aaron J. Goldberg, a sixth-generation descendant of Burlington's original Jewish settlers and an archivist at Ohavi Zedek, learned more about the lost artistic genre of painted wooden synagogues across rural Eastern Europe. Recognizing the Burlington mural's significance not just to the local community but also to art historians internationally, Goldberg again solicited the help of the 1986 architectural and curatorial team and others to reopen the apartment wall. In 2010 a small group gathered as the wall was removed and the mural was viewed in the full light of day for the first time in decades.

News of the mural's reemergence circulated across the Internet and was greeted with surprise and excitement throughout the international Jewish

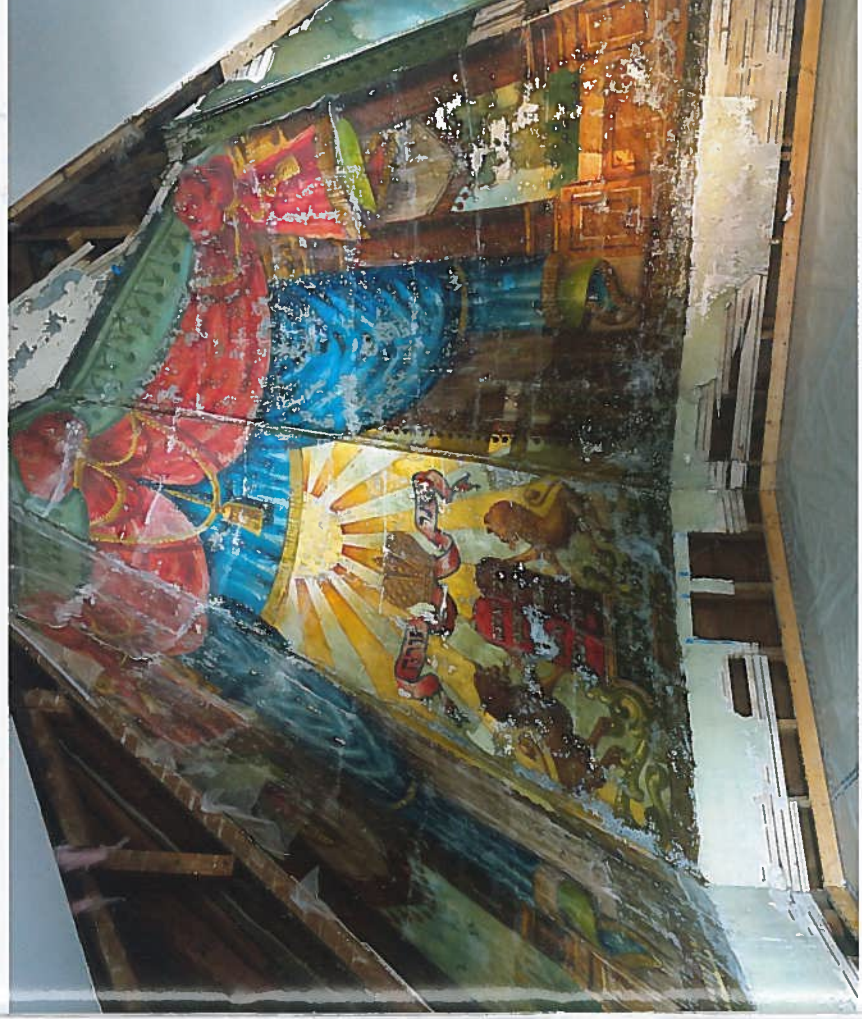
and stabilized flaking paint and began cleaning the mural, confirming that coal dust and cigarette smoke had darkened the painted surface. Coats of varnish had yellowed over time. The colors visible in the 1986 photographs were not, in fact, the original bright paint colors of 1910. Dark green drapes had been electric blue, a reference to the Tent of the Tabernacles described in the Book of Numbers. The newly revealed colors underscore the vibrancy of the original mural, an exuberant expression of art and liturgy.

By the summer of 2014, with the help of foundation grants and private support, and the approval of the building owner, plans were finalized for relocating the mural to the public lobby at Ohavi Zedek Synagogue, just three-tenths of a mile away. Engineers constructed a temporary, enclosed structure around the mural, with a removable top. At the same time, additional protection was applied to the front of the mural. A first step involved

adhering silk fabric using an acrylic resin to secure the paint in place during the mural move. A final and more substantive fronting constructed using Tyvek and specially made foam cushions was braced against the front of the mural to secure the plaster in place during the move.

This spring, the slate and wooden roof was removed, exposing the entire mural within the temporary enclosed structure. Steel was passed through the top of the temporary structure, in pieces, to create a frame that is twenty-one feet wide, nine feet deep, and almost eleven feet high. After the mural was carefully cut away from the integrated roof structure and the built-in sidewalls, a crane lifted it out of its former home and it was carried to Ohavi Zedek, where it will be on public display in the lobby by this summer.

Work over the rest of the year will involve plaster infill and careful touch-up painting to return the mural to its original 1910 condition. In addition,



LEFT Painting in a trompe l'oeil style, Black added clouds and birds, perhaps representing a heavenly paradise. He carried the outdoor theme onto the ceiling (which no longer survives), which he painted sky blue with clouds, cherubs, and musical instruments. ABOVE A temporary structure fully insulated the mural from extreme winds and winter cold that could cause further cracking.

computer kiosks will offer oral histories recorded decades earlier with former Chai Adam congregants, stories of "Little Jerusalem," and cultural histories of the larger Burlington immigrant experience, together with materials recalling the cultural, artistic, and religious traditions of Eastern European painted wooden synagogues. Visit lostshulmural.org for project updates and information about visiting Ohavi Zedek to view the restored mural.

—Aaron Goldberg and Jeff Potash,
Co-directors of the *Lost Shul Mural Preservation and Conservation Project* and co-archivists at Ohavi Zedek Synagogue in Burlington, Vermont