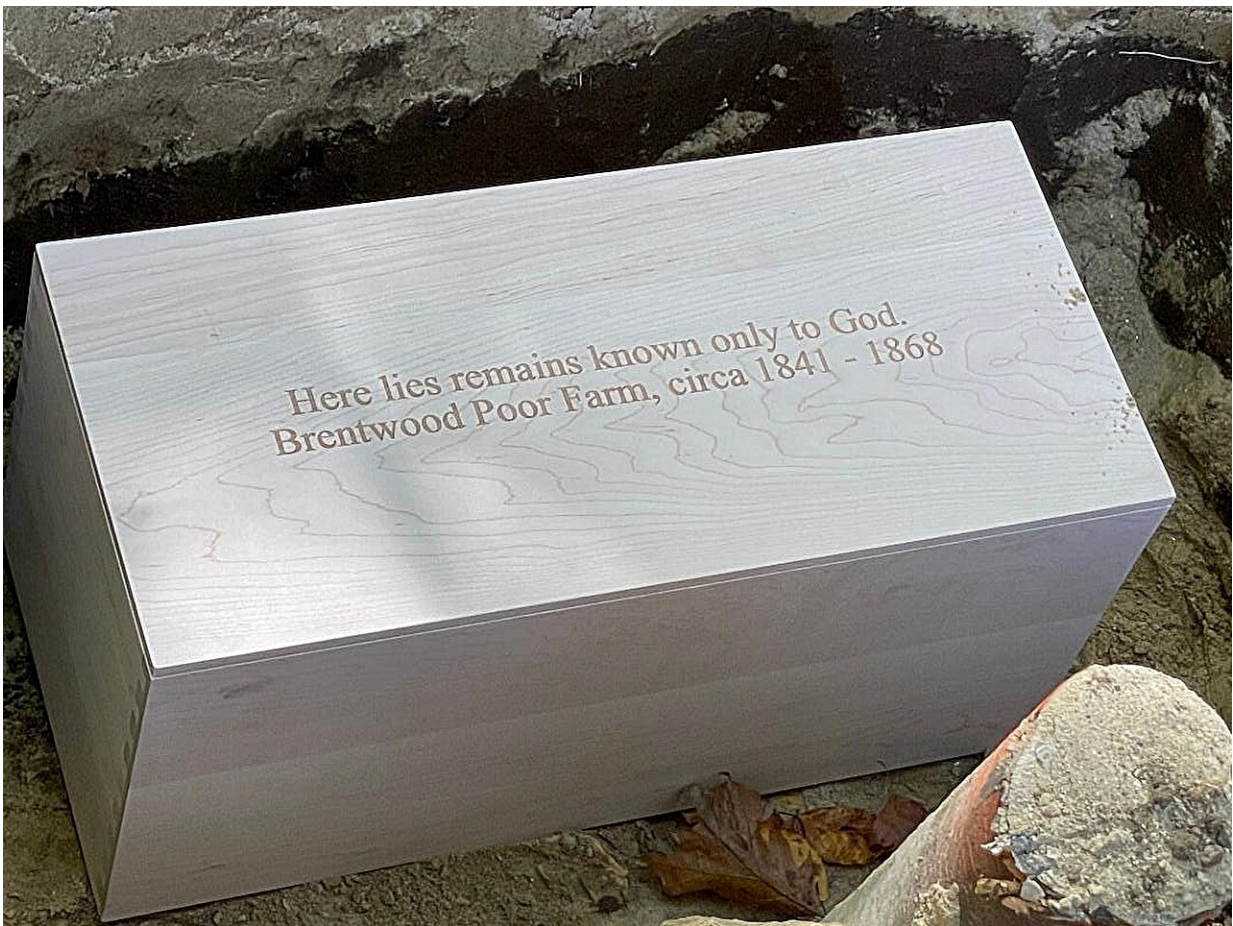


Research team helps community document skeletal remains found on historic 'poor farm'

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The remains from the poor house were buried in a simple wooden box crafted by a local cabinet shop that was inscribed with "Here lies remains only known to God, Brentwood Poor Farm, circa 1841–1868." Credit: Robbin Ray / UNH

On a bright autumn afternoon, a plain wooden box crafted by a local cabinet shop containing skeletal remains was returned to its final resting place during a simple reburial ceremony in Brentwood. Researchers and students from the University of New Hampshire's Forensic Anthropology Identification and Recovery (F.A.I.R.) Lab worked for two years with town officials and the New Hampshire state archaeologist to investigate and document the remains, which were uncovered more than 20 years ago during construction and were identified as being from a farm for paupers during the mid-1800's, commonly known as a poor farm.

"We analyzed the [skeletal remains](#) to determine their age and condition and help solve the mystery of why they were buried in the [remote area](#) in an unmarked grave," said Alex Garcia-Putnam, co-director of UNH's F.A.I.R. Lab. "After several years of documenting the skeletal remains, we were honored to not only provide valuable information about their lives but to also have the rare opportunity to be present at the reburial—to put these individuals at peace and offer all interested parties some sense of closure."

The remains of the farm workers were mistakenly uncovered during excavation on private property in 1999. The New Hampshire state archaeologist was called to the site and determined that the remains were historic due to their age and condition and they were transferred to the New Hampshire medical examiner's office for storage, where they remained for 23 years. In 2022, the remains were transferred to UNH where researchers went to work on skeletal analysis.

UNH's F.A.I.R. Lab works with law enforcement and the state's medical examiner's office to help identify remains. In this case, the work was more historical in nature and the team evaluated the bones to date them and determine the health of the individuals, as well as sift through town records and maps to learn more about the historical significance of the

area where the remains were found.

According to their research, which is chronicled in [a paper](#) in the journal *American Antiquity*, the remains showed signs of hardship, such as poverty and hard labor and left signs of several health issues like osteoarthritis, dental disease and other signs of physiological stress. The remains were originally found in a grave without any markers—another indication of poverty—on land that was thought to formerly be the Brentwood Poor Farm from 1841 to 1868.

Poor farms were institutions set up as a type of welfare in rural counties in the United States during the 19th and early 20th century to provide support for the poor and other groups of dependent residents. The farms were set up to offer room and board in exchange for labor, but the treatment of residents was often exploitive and violent. It is said that poor farms were started to keep marginalized individuals—including a mix of poverty, race, ethnicity and mental or physical illness—out of the view of the middle and upper classes.

The town of Brentwood worked closely with the current landowners to set up a reinterment in the precise location of the original grave. The paupers at the farm were most likely buried in hasty unmarked graves and their final resting place was forgotten over time as the poor [farm](#) model for social welfare was dissolved in the 1930s and 1940s and the land passed into private ownership.

"All individuals deserve a respectful final burial and we hope that this event shows that Brentwood cares about its residents," said Joyce Keegal, superintendent of cemeteries in Brentwood. "We are so thankful for the work done by UNH to not only help shed light on the lives of these individuals but to also help us advocate for them."

"This has been an amazing community collaboration by the town of

Brentwood, the state, the homeowners and UNH to not only provide answers and connect the threads but also bring closure and meaningful resolutions for all involved," said Amy Michael, co-director of UNH's F.A.I.R. lab. "We work on all kinds of investigations—criminal to cold cases—and it is so fulfilling to move someone from a shelf in a medical examiner's office humanizing them by giving them a dignified burial. Today was a good day."

The burial site is on private property in an undisclosed area. Plans are in place by Brentwood town officials and historical society for a future exhibit about the Brentwood Poor Farm.

More information: Alex Garcia-Putnam et al, Embodied Poverty: Bioarchaeology of the Brentwood Poor Farm, Brentwood, New Hampshire (1841–1868), *American Antiquity* (2024). [DOI: 10.1017/aaq.2024.35](https://doi.org/10.1017/aaq.2024.35)

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