Just four years after Harvard initiated a new kind of archaeological collaboration in Harvard Yard to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Indian College, the project uncovered a 17th-century foundation trench on the Indian College lot in front of Matthews Hall. A diverse group of student excavators, Harvard faculty and staff, leaders of local Native American communities, and preservation professionals came together over thousands of artifact fragments, provoking exchanges and explorations about this long-buried past. Even a discarded brick or a small piece of pipe stem provided evidence for colonial Harvard as a landscape shaped by social and religious tensions that affected everything from Native American and English settler relationships to the routines of student life. As current students searched for meaning in the material remains of past Harvard students, three themes emerged: negotiations of social status, rules and religion, and the Indian College. Who knew small buried fragments could reveal so much?

In 2009, students from the Archaeology of Harvard Yard course located a foundation trench believed to be the Harvard Indian College! Excavations in summer and fall 2011 will further explore that site.
“With the discovery of these artifacts, I could imagine myself traveling back through the centuries—19th, 18th, and 17th—to when Harvard Yard was still a pasture and to when the Indian College stood tall.”

—Lan Zhou, Harvard College 2008

Social Status: Divided We Eat

The 17th-century College officially favored wealthy students, such as those who paid double tuition and presented a silver dish upon matriculation. These students, known as “Fellow-Commoners,” received the right to dine at the Fellows’ table on tablecloths covered with their silver items. They enjoyed hot mulled cider, fresh fruit, and other luxuries unknown to the less affluent students, who ate from shared wooden trenchers (platters).

The Indian College

Few realize that Harvard’s charter created a multicultural educational institution that was dedicated to “the education of the English & Indian Youth of this Country in knowledge: and godlines.” The Harvard Indian College, however, was part of a network of grammar schools and praying towns created to Christianize Native Americans. It housed the first printing press in North America, which produced the first Bible on the continent—in the local Algonquian language.

Rule (Breaking) and Religion

Late 17th–early 18th-century tobacco pipe from colonial Harvard Yard.

Like any school, Harvard has rules. Harvard’s 17th- and 18th-century rules were religious in nature, stemming from local Puritan beliefs. The College Laws forbade drinking and smoking; they even forbade certain types of adornment, such as gold buttons, which violated Puritan notions of modesty. Yet, looking at fragments found underground in Harvard Yard, student archaeologists discovered that breaking rules has a long history.