In 2005 Harvard began a new kind of archaeological collaboration in Harvard Yard as part of the commemoration of the 350th anniversary of the Harvard Indian College. A diverse group of student excavators, Harvard faculty and staff, leaders of local Native American communities, and local preservation professionals came together over thousands of artifact fragments, which provoked exchanges and explorations about a long-buried past. Students from the Archaeology of Harvard Yard courses unearthed evidence of 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 Harvard students of the past, three themes emerged: literacy and the Indian College; rules and religion; and negotiations of social status. Who knew small buried fragments could reveal so much?
“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).

Literacy and 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 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

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 at Harvard Yard, student archaeologists discovered that breaking rules has a long history.

Curated by the students of Anthropology 1130 and 1131 and Peabody Museum summer interns; advised by William L. Fash, William and Muriel Seabury Howells Director, Peabody Museum; Dr. Patricia Capone, Associate Curator; Dr. Diana Loren, Associate Curator; Dr. Christina J. Hodge, Senior Curatorial Assistant.