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The timbers of an 1833 wharf were discovered last week during excavation at Bathurst Street and Lake Shore Boulevard.

Condo crew finds waterfront relic from the 19th century

Huge timbers of 1833 wharf uncovered

BY JEFF GRAY

A condominium construction crew, perhaps the defining symbol of Toronto's waterfront in the 21st century, has unexpectedly stumbled onto a massive reminder of what defined the town's shoreline in the 19th century.

Near Bathurst Street and Lake Shore Boulevard West and buried among the future foundations of the 32-storey Malibu - billed as the city's first California condos - workers last week uncovered part of the base of the Queen's Wharf, built in 1833 to enlarge an earlier structure meant to serve nearby Fort York.

Archeologist Ron Williamson, called in to investigate the find, says that by the 1850s the wharf was one of the biggest of several bustling commercial piers along the growing town's shoreline, providing a place for schooners and tall ships to unload their goods. At its zenith, it even supported rail tracks to make moving freight easier.

"When you see this, you've really got to let your mind go because you've got to imagine what the city was like in 1850, where the waterfront was Front Street," Dr. Williamson said.

In the 1920s, the city started to bury Queen's Wharf and others like it, dumping

landfill here to move the shoreline south. Few traces of the wharf remained, save the little lighthouse near Fleet Street, which was preserved and moved 50 metres west before Queen's Wharf disappeared.

Now, about 80 years later, workers have unearthed what Dr. Williamson believes are 28-centimetre, square white-pine timbers, which are still held together with wooden dowels and iron spikes. The digging had revealed, as of yesterday, a structure more than 30 metres long. Other similar wharves are routinely found beneath condo developments, but never one this large. Dr. Williamson said.

While Dr. Williamson has documented and photographed the dock and approved its demolition, the developer, Malibu Investments, has agreed to carve out a chunk of the structure and hand it over to Fort York.

The museum administrator at Fort York, David O'Hara, said the wood may be too old to survive without special preservation techniques. But he said working with this piece will buy archeologists and historians time to at least study the find further and, perhaps, develop an exhibit at the fort on the wharf and its place in Toronto's history.