

Time's Secrets, Unearthed

By John Kelly, Monday, November 6, 2006. Washington Post

You probably think that archaeology is all about artifacts, all about obsidian spear points, crystal skulls and gold idols.

If you think that, you are wrong. Archaeology is all about dirt.

I know this because I spent a day last week as an archaeologist, a day that I only now have gotten out from under my fingernails and probably will never wash out entirely from the knees of my jeans.

To an archaeologist, dirt is the cosmic timekeeper. It's the hands on the clock, the squares on a calendar. It's the medium that tells you this piece of pottery is older than that one.

Dirt is so important that archaeologists don't do anything so vulgar as actually dig it. They sort of gently coax it aside: "Please, Mr. Dirt Clod, would you kindly move?"

I know this because Heather Bouslog, assistant archaeologist for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, invited me to help excavate a Civil War-era site not far from the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal.

We live in an archaeologically rich area. Prehistoric peoples roamed the landscape. Settlers came, wars were fought, towns grew and fell and grew again. And at every turn, humans left traces of their lives in the all-embracing dirt.

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On Wednesday, Heather, her boss Jim Sorensen, 10 other archaeology buffs and I hiked to a location in the woods near Montgomery County's Muddy Branch. We pulled back the black plastic sheeting that protected the areas under excavation. String attached to spikes enclosed 5-by-5-foot squares.

The site has been fairly productive. Close to 30 Union regiments camped there over the course of the war. They looked for Confederate soldiers. One hundred forty years later, we were looking for what was left of them.

Artifacts found in the same layer of dirt come from the same time, so it's important to know exactly what kind of dirt you're working with.

"One of the things you develop is an aesthetic sense of dirt," said Mike Robinson, 60, a volunteer who worked beside me.



John Kelly, with Jim Sorensen and Mike Robinson at the Montgomery site, shows off his discovery: what could be a Civil War-era knife handle. (By Vivian Eicke)

If you can roll dirt into a sticky ball, it has clay in it. If it makes a raspy sound as you squeeze it between the fingers, it has sand. If it's soft like talcum powder, it has silt. Then we compared our dirt to a set of color swatches. It was "strong brown" on the Munsell scale.

I was told to remove the dirt in a neat and orderly process, all in one level, as if by microtome. My trowel was comically small, like something a child would use. The preferred method is to hold the blade parallel to the ground, slicing off thin layers.

When I had assembled a mound of earth, I would push it into a dustpan, then dump it into a bucket that Mike's wife, Peggy, would retrieve. She'd tip the contents onto a screen, shake it back and forth and see what was left.

It's so slow, I whined to Mike. Our holes were barely six inches deep, and that's after a year of digging. Don't you ever get the urge to just grab a shovel or a jackhammer and go to town?

"You have to resist those urges," said Mike, dryly.

At times I looked wistfully over at Pete Poggi and Jerry Kimmich, who gently swept metal detectors over the leaf-strewn ground. When they picked up a signal in their headphones, they'd drop to a knee and start digging, noting the location and depth of any artifact they unearthed.

That this sort of instant gratification was even allowed was because of a concern Jim and Heather had: relic hunters. It's against the law to remove artifacts from public land, but the archaeologists had detected signs of scavengers. It's why they were eager to document what they could, quickly, and why I can't tell you our exact location.

"People'll cut your throat for a relic," Jerry, 54, told me.

Said Jim, 62: "Archaeology is all about the science of measuring things in. If you take something out of the site, it's like taking something out of a crime scene."

Back at my hole, I shaved away at the soil. Roots would get in the way, and every few minutes I stopped to clip them. As I moved a thin layer of dirt, I saw a ruddy streak. Another root, said Don Housley, a retired Wheaton High School teacher who worked beside me. But there was a metal-on-metal sound as my trowel blade clinked against it.

I scraped some more until I revealed what looked like a tool, about four inches long and a half-inch wide. A knife handle, maybe.

Mike and Don stopped their digging. Jim came over. I lifted the knife handle from the earth and wondered who had last touched it.