

At Olney's Falling Green, students and community members dig up the past

By Terri Hogan April 25, 2012 - Washington Post

Long before children were scoring goals and sliding into home plate at the Olney Boys and Girls Club Community Park, the property was known as Falling Green, home to some of Montgomery County's earliest settlers.

Now, as the property undergoes renovation, anthropology students from Montgomery College and community members have embraced the opportunity to get a glimpse of Olney's past.

Quaker farmer Basil Brooke built the circa 1770 home from hand-formed bricks. Members of the Brooke family maintained the property for nearly two centuries. The home stands at the heart of the club's 118-acre youth athletic park on Olney-Laytonsville Road. It is owned by OBGC, and has been vacant since the park opened in 2002.

The club is embarking on a \$1.8 million plan to restore the home, which includes a \$200,000 endowment to maintain the building. Renovation plans call for stabilizing and restoring the structure and building an addition to house updated utility systems.

To date, \$1 million has been raised, including \$300,000 through state funding and donations including \$500,000 from Roberts Oxygen Co. OBGC's goal is to break ground this summer, pending adequate funding.

Once restored, Falling Green will be used for OBGC's administrative offices, and will include a conference room for use by coaches and volunteers and a caretaker's residence.

Elisabeth Deal, executive director of OBGC, said having offices on-site will improve security, save money on office rental and enable staff to use time more productively, rather than driving to the park several times a day to meet with vendors and volunteers.

An open house held April 14 offered a rare glimpse of the home's interior, leaving visitors intrigued about the area's history.

Derek Jackson of Ashton is a historic preservation consultant. After driving by Falling Green daily for years, he toured the home at an open house earlier this month.

"You could just feel the lives of the people who lived there," he said. "There are many stories waiting to be told; it is like opening up a book."

Jackson was one of more than 200 people who took the opportunity to see the historic home's interior.

Beth Carter of Olney said she toured the home because she has a history and education background. She was also glad to see green space being preserved because much of that has disappeared in and around Olney.

"It was interesting to hear about its past, kind of like unraveling the history," she said. "It made me start thinking about how different life must have been, and how much the people who lived there must have appreciated the property they lived on."

During the open house, Montgomery College students could be seen digging in the yard.

Working with the Maryland Historical Trust's guidance, the club is collaborating with the college to ensure artifacts are properly recorded. It also is consulting with preservation experts at the Sandy Spring Museum to curate and display artifacts at the museum.

"The Montgomery College anthropology professors and students enjoy our collaboration with the Olney Boys and Girls Sports Association," said Eugenia Robinson, professor of anthropology at Montgomery College in Rockville. "We have worked together for over 10 years on research and exploration of the Falling Green historical property."

She said the collaboration opens students' exposure to historical archaeology and being part of a "real" dig; students enrolled in a Human Evolution and Archaeology course are required to work on an archaeological site. The items students find are consistent with a farming family, including fragments of pans, tableware, pottery and machinery.

Robinson said her students did some preliminary excavating in 2010. Now, with construction pending, they are more thoroughly exploring other areas of the property.

The archaeological work will continue through the spring, and is concentrated in areas where utilities will be installed, such as a planned geothermal energy system.

"Our goal is not to excavate the entire property, just the areas of impact," she said.

Heather Schramm, 21, of Middletown is a sophomore anthropology major who participated in one of the archaeological digs at Falling Green. Her experience revealed more than milk glass and bottle fragments found in the home's basement. "It was a little creepy," she said. "There was definitely an energy there, and people said they saw orbs. I really think I see a ghost in one of the pictures that I took, although other people have said they don't see it. It's all very eerie, but I love it."

Schramm said that based on the materials they found, the basement room they excavated was likely used for storage.

"It's all just so fascinating," she said. "Learning the history behind the house helps us to come to conclusions about how people lived, and ties all the pieces together."

Kathy Lyons, the club's volunteer preservationist, said the organization is fortunate to have the services of the Montgomery College archaeological department and the modern archives at the Sandy Spring Museum.

"We would not be successful in meeting the stringent historic guidelines without this professional level of support and assistance," she said. "We have developed wonderful partnerships with two outstanding organizations right here in our community."

For more details about the project or to make a donation, visit www.fallinggreen.com.