

High-schoolers dig up the past at Needwood Mansion

Wednesday, May 9, 2007 by Contessa Crisostomo | Staff Writer

At the end of a tree-lined driveway on Needwood Road in Derwood, nearly 20 high school students gathered late last month for the chance to discover artifacts from 19th century slave quarters on the grounds of the historic Needwood Mansion.

As history has it, there was once a row of slave cabins behind the mansion, but in the late 1800s. George Washington Columbus Beall burned the cabins down soon after buying the property.

More than two centuries later, the high school students attempted to piece together the story of Needwood Mansion by searching for artifacts buried within its soil.

Students in archaeology clubs at Richard Montgomery and Col. Zadok Magruder high schools participated in the first ever joint Dig-a-Thon between the two schools on April 27 and 28.

“It’s something they look forward to all year,” said Heather Bouslog, assistant archaeologist with Montgomery County Park and Planning, which co-sponsored the event.

To the left of the mansion, four squares were dug out and students, armed with trowels, began to scrape away the soil layer by layer.

“Your story emerges a piece at a time,” said history teacher and Richard Montgomery club sponsor Bob Hines. “It’s kind of like reading a newspaper ... you kind of have to peel back a page at a time.”

Members of the Richard Montgomery Archaeology Club worked on one square, which revealed what looked like cinder blocks from what may have been a building. Among the soil, the teens also found glass, metal piping, nails, plastic, pieces of ceramic and the occasional earthworm or maggot.

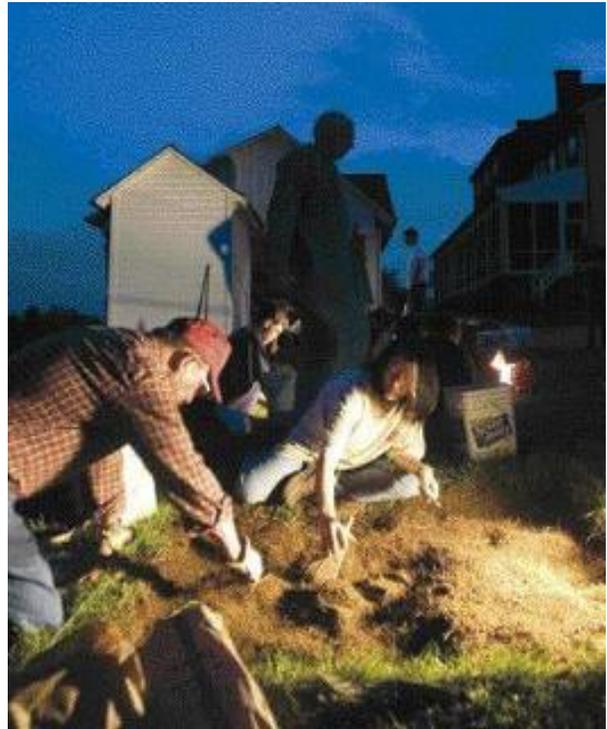
“What you’re really doing is finding someone else’s garbage and trying to get to the soil from that period,” Hines said. “It’s like detective work.”

They even found a small, sawed-off piece of hollowed-out bone, which Hines said may have been from a ham.

“I see grooves in it, so that’s evidence of modern [19th century] food processing,” Hines said.

But digging up artifacts is only the beginning.

“About one-sixth of the work is getting it out of the ground,” Hines said. “The other five-sixths is trying to figure out what it is, wash it, identify it, then write it up.”



Charles E. Shoemaker/The Gazette

Jim Owens of Olney and Richard Montgomery High School senior Christa Lee (center) work together during a recent archaeological dig at Needwood Mansion in Derwood.

Richard Montgomery held its first Dig-a-Thon six years ago, Hines said. The club started the event as a fundraiser every other year to fund equipment, such as shovels, for regular digs throughout the year. The Dig-a-Thon became so popular that they decided to make it an annual event.

The dig is a first for the members of the newly formed archaeology club at Magruder.

Co-presidents and -founders Elaine Hall, 16, and Theresa Bouslog, 16, started the club this year because of their interest in archaeology. Hall said attending the summer archaeology camp with Park and Planning sparked her interest in archaeology and to start the club.

Hall said the club meets on Thursdays at the mansion — where the archaeology department of Park and Planning is housed — to clean and classify artifacts others have found. Members occasionally go on digs of their own.

“Last weekend we went to Williamsburg and Jamestown,” Hall said.

For some, an interest in archaeology turned into a serious career path. Anna Goodman, a senior at Churchill High School, is an archaeology intern with Park and Planning and wants to major in anthropology with a focus in archaeology when she attends college next year.

For others, participating in the club is a fun hobby.

“I like playing in the dirt,” said Deela Dicello, a junior at Magruder.

Audrey Kao, a senior at Richard Montgomery, said she does not plan to pursue archaeology as a career, but would be interested in taking an archaeology course if it is offered in college.

The plan for the Dig-a-Thon was to dig through the night, but fatigue consumed the teens and by 2 a.m., they were fast asleep in the mansion. They awoke and continued digging until about 11 a.m.

Bouslog said the students plan to return later to continue their excavations, especially in the areas where many artifacts were discovered.

If You Go

The Archaeology Society of Maryland is hosting a dig 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday at Needwood Mansion, 6700 Needwood Road.

For more information, call 301-840-5848