

## Archeologists unearth wartime artifacts in North Potomac

Excavation at Blockhouse Point Conservation Park could shed light on county's Civil War history

by Patrick Dunne | Staff Writer

It may not be chests of gold or pirate booty, but according to some county archeologists and historians, X marks the spot for buried treasure in North Potomac.

County archeologists and volunteers are investigating the history of a Civil War blockhouse in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, located along River Road just north of Tobytown.

"[The blockhouse] is in the shape of a Greek cross ... the one bar is in the middle of the other," said Heather Bouslog, an archaeologist with Montgomery County Department of Parks.

"What we're looking for, in the archaeological process, is finding things that aren't in the records," she said. "We're interested in the whole picture, not just the belt buckles."

Blockhouses were earthen watch stations dug into Potomac riverside bluffs to keep an eye out for Confederate troops crossing the river and to protect the Union army supply line. There are three in the county.

The ink wells, shards of a whiskey bottle and bits of forks and spoons found at the site in the past two years can tell experts how long the blockhouse was used during the Civil War and what life was like in the Union army.

The county has been excavating the site for several years, Bouslog said, in an effort to protect the site from illegal looting by people looking for Civil War artifacts.

As with any battlefield or encampment, people will use metal detectors to find buttons, bullets and anything else to add to personal Civil War collections, Bouslog said. Excavation is a way for county archeologists to preserve the site and the history under the ground.

It could take several more years to finish the work and piece together the history of the blockhouse. Bouslog said she and Jim Sorensen, another county archaeologist, rely on volunteers to help unearth artifacts and keep costs down. Up to 20 volunteers – adults and high school students – have put in at least 2,000 hours at the site using simple tools.

Shovels are avoided because intense digging could move around or break artifacts buried in the loose soil.

Don Housely, a volunteer at the site and retired history teacher with Montgomery County Public Schools, said there were three blockhouses built along the Potomac River to protect the C&O Canal and army supply line.

They know from historic records that the 19th Massachusetts Infantry built the Blockhouse Point blockhouse in early 1862, and were one of 28 regiments that made camp around Muddy Branch Creek from the fall of 1861 to the spring of 1862.

Pennyfield Lock, Blockhouse Point and Seneca Creek State Park have similar blockhouses, but the one in North Potomac is on county land and the only one the county can explore.

"What's unusual is that there's also a small, company-size camp associated with the blockhouse," Housely said. "We think the troops would be sent to Blockhouse Point and stay there, rather than go and come right back."

The Rockville resident and former head of the Wheaton High School history department said there is evidence that the site was only used for a few months, but looters may have taken evidence explaining the full story.

"Even though we've found artifacts, we haven't found what you expect to find even for a two-and-a-half month occupation," he said.

There is a scattering of items like a knapsack hook, glass, bullets from Army-issued guns and others from personal revolvers. But they are not in a concentrated place, which leads experts to believe the site was looted in the past.

It is illegal to hunt for Civil War items at the site in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, and the county has long-range plans to build a visitor center on land adjacent the park.

"There's talk of wanting one there, but that's as far as it's gotten," Bouslog said.

Instead of building a center just for the blockhouse, it would serve as an information center for Civil War life in Montgomery County. Thousands of troops camped in the county and marched through on their way to battles. The Callithea Farm site next to Blockhouse Park could highlight the interactions between the 14,000 county residents and the troops.

"There were a lot of southern sympathizers in the area, and the Union were hostile to a lot of them," she said. "There's a lot more to the story."