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Volunteers dig up the past at Zeigler Log House in Clarksburg

by Samantha SchmiederSpecial to The Gazette

Aspiring archaeologists can experience a day at a real excavation site, uncovering historic artifacts and a lot of dirt, here in Montgomery County.



“You don’t have to be crazy to do this. We’ll teach you,” Vivian Eicke, an archaeological technician with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, said with a laugh.

The commission has excavated the site around the Zeigler Log House in Little Bennett Park near Clarksburg since early 2009. It has gotten help from local volunteers, a children’s summer camp and a partnership with Montgomery College.

Heather Bouslog, the director of the archaeology program for the commission, said anyone is welcome to come out for the day and learn about excavation.

Volunteers work in what looks like a scientific sandbox for adults. They dig, photograph, map, sift and catalog the dirt and rocks to find artifacts and help piece together the past.

“It’s not just about finding the goodies. It’s really about finding out who lived here,” Bouslog said.

She said many people dig and pull things out of the ground, but don’t look at where it’s found or what’s around it. “Context is the key to figuring out the whole story,” Bouslog said.

Bouslog and her colleagues are trying to figure out how the Zeigler family lived so many years ago and are especially hoping to find clues about the slaves who lived there with them.

What is known about the home is it was built in the early 19th century. The rear section of the house was erected as a log structure, most likely by David Zeigler.

According to the Friends of Little Bennett Park, Zeigler married his wife, Eleanor Hyatt, in 1835 and they raised 10 children in the house. The 1850 census listed Zeigler as an innkeeper.

In the mid-19th century, the Greek revival/Italianate front section of the house was added, according to the park’s advocacy group.

The property also has a frame bank barn and a concrete-block dairy barn.

The home, listed on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation in Montgomery County, has two parts: the visible exterior of the house, built in 1854, and the log house that lies within, built in 1823.

Scientists used dendrochronology to study the tree rings to find out how old the logs were and where they were taken from.

“Kind of like a wooden fingerprint,” Mike Robinson of Rockville, one of the regular volunteers, said.

Robinson said he enjoys working on the site because he likes science, the outdoors and history.

Pete Peltier, a volunteer from Gaithersburg, said he comes to the site to “play with people his own age,” but also is genuinely interested in history and “unusual stuff.”

“If the walls could talk, or this tree could talk, the things they could tell you would be fascinating,” Peltier said.

Over the years, crews have dug up spurs, glass bottles and the original foundation of the stone fireplace underneath the newer brick one. Within the walls of the house, they found children’s shoes and a medicine bottle apparently put there due to an old superstition, Eicke said.

All artifacts are sent to the Needwood Mansion in Deerwood or an archaeology lab at Montgomery College in Rockville to be studied, identified and cataloged.

Robinson compares their work to the crime scene investigations everyone loves to watch on TV, explaining that they all use the same techniques.

“It’s like looking at a crime scene that’s almost 200 years old,” Robinson said.