

Potomac Scene Magazine

Weekly supplement to the Potomac News

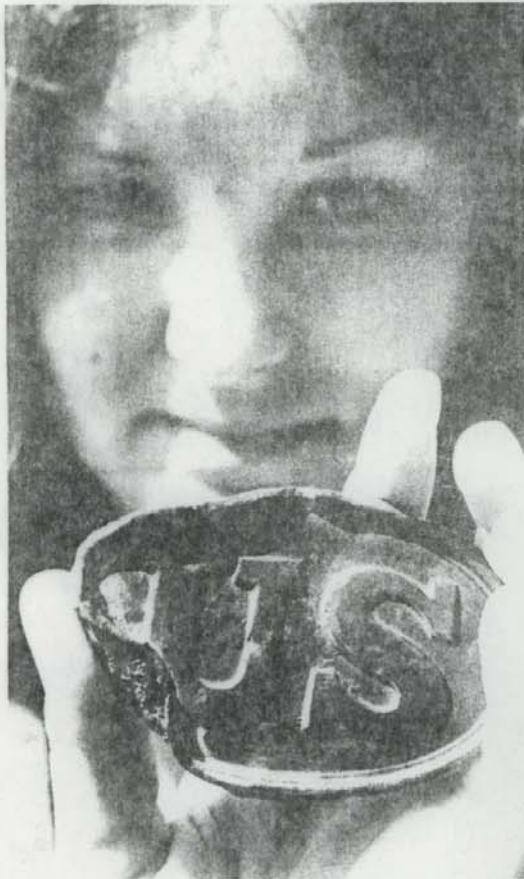
VIRGINIANA FILE
*Historic Sites
(Bel Air)*

Prince William Public Library
Manassas, Va.

(Weems-Betts Museum Coll.)

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Touching hands with history



Casey Page holds up belt buckle discovered at dig



Rare coin, dated 1729, found Wednesday morning



Students dig through dirt at Bel Air for art

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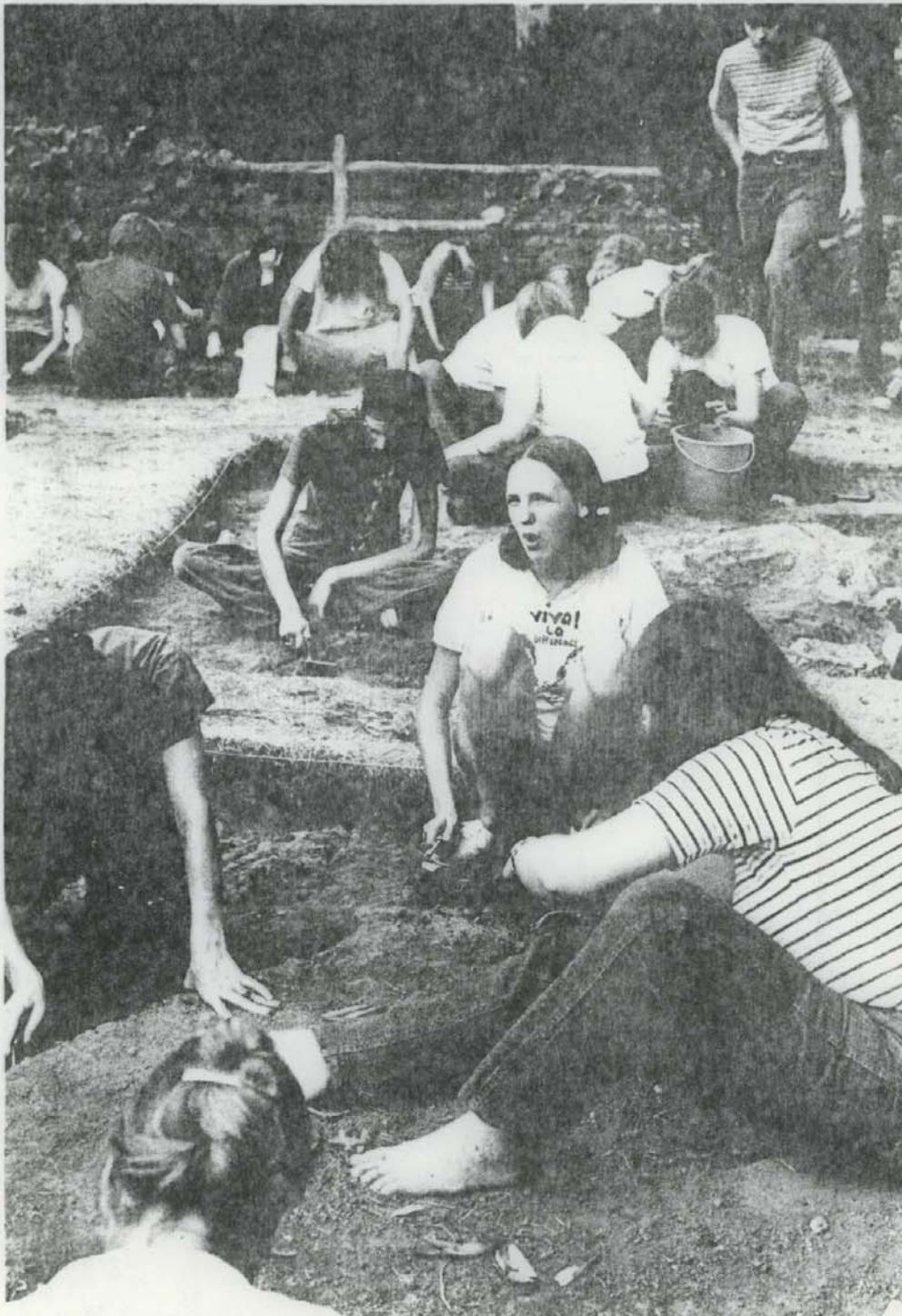
- Potomac Calendar • Theater
- Movies • People and places

WHAT WAS IT like to live in early Woodbridge? Three Potomac News correspondents have their own memories. Page 11.

Easy TV listings inside!

hands with history

Prince William students search through the past. See story Page 2.



Staff Photos by Paul Lewis and Ann H

Students dig through dirt at Bel Air for artifacts from past

Questions get harder deeper into past they go

By ANNE HAZARD

Stationed within three-foot thick brick walls that encompass Bel Air Plantation's cool dusky kitchen, William and Mrs. Anne Flory and two archaeology teachers waited for the rain to stop.

Outside, gathered on the patio and lawn, a congregation of Prince William high school students also waited.

Some of the students talked, laughed or complained of aching muscles. Others eyed, with reservation, a 50-foot-square dirt site from which curious clusters of rock protruded.

As the rain diminished, students armed themselves with buckets, whisk brooms and trowels and set off for the site to "touch hands with the past."

"Touching Hands with the Past," a county sponsored summer archaeology pilot institute, offers full course credit to students willing to labor tediously in the hot sun.

More importantly, the course affords its 54 participants a unique opportunity — the opportunity to repiece a portion of an historic puzzle that, although buried, lies partially intact under the earth's surface.

Eighteen hours a week of field work or digging is a course requisite. Dirt is carefully scraped away with a trowel. Trowels are periodically abandoned for whisk brooms, depending on the nature of a find.

A SEVENTEENTH century clay pipe stem, revolutionary war items, a clay roof tile that dates to the 18th century, a Civil War bullet and belt buckle, and 18th century slipware and glass have been uncovered at the Bel Air site since the dig began on June 24.

The most spectacular find so far, however, is a 1729 British copper coin unearthed Wednesday. Finding coins during an archaeological dig is extremely rare, according to Miller, simply because people didn't throw them away.

Paradoxically, both the number of unanswered questions and the workload

increase, as work progresses.

"Every day I scratch my head a little harder," observes Stonewall Jackson history teacher Bob Miller, one of the course directors.

Miller studied with Ivor Noel Hume, archaeology director of colonial Williamsburg. Hume, recognized as one of America's foremost archaeologists, is credited with developing the concept of "stratigraphy."

Each level uncovered by the archaeologist constitutes a strata. Although individually a particular strata (one near the top, for example, may be inconsequential), each strata is an invaluable tool for comparison, according to Hume.

"Treasure seekers," Miller noted, or those "who dig only for the goodies," have been discouraged, thanks to Hume.

Plate chips even smaller than a fingernail, Miller claims, have not been missed by his students at the Bel Air site.

Three strata have been uncovered at Bel Air to date. In each strata there is sufficient evidence to indicate that a different building occupied the site during each of the three periods.

WHEN THE Florys purchased Bel Air in 1948, the main house stood, but in hideous disrepair. Mrs. Flory swept mud-hardened floors with a heavy industrial broom every day for a year before wood floor panels appeared.

Stones piled in the manner of a collapsed chimney in the backyard aroused the Florys' curiosity, especially after a neighboring resident since 1909 advised them that a log cabin that once existed on this site may have housed slaves in the 19th century.

Hundreds of spike-shaped nails dating to the 1800s uncovered there have led Miller to believe that the most recent building in existence on the site was a log cabin.

Parson Mason Locke Weems, the first biographer of George Washington, moved to Bel Air in 1808, and subsequently purchased the

property from his mother-in-law.

While Weems sought relief from his mother-in-law in the remotest room of the house (a study on the second floor), what was going on out near the alleged slave quarters?

Blacksmithing, possibly. Pieces of iron slag and a veritable "horse graveyard" discovered adjacent to the archaeological site indicate that horses were quartered in the vicinity, possibly near a blacksmith shop.

Time limitations have forced Miller and crew to "close on corner holes that aren't developing into much" and concentrate on the walls and foundations of two earlier buildings partially uncovered in second and third layer strata.

A stone foundation in the second strata, Miller believes, can be dated no earlier than 1800, although artifacts dating as early as 1670 have been uncovered there.

Because this building stood at a 45 degree angle to the house, similar to the angle at which Mount Vernon's kitchen building stands in relation to its main house, the Florys believe the building was possibly a colonial kitchen.

Window glass, bottle glass, ceramic items and plate chips lend weight to the kitchen theory, according to Miller.

BENEATH THIS building students accidentally uncovered the brick walls of still an earlier building that stood parallel to the main house. Details are sketchy, but Miller has dated this building at about 1750.

Tuesdays and Thursdays when they aren't digging, the students clean, identify and label artifacts. Field trips of other historic Virginia landmarks, lectures and films round out the course.

When the course ends, students will be required to submit a daily journal of observations in which artifacts are logged and a floor plan of a plantation is sketched.

Included with the floor plan, maps showing out-buildings and fields are

required, as well as sketches of the house, samplings of furnishings, kitchen utensils, fireplace articles, door knobs and other items.

Miller and Gar-Field history teacher Bob Lookabill, the other course director, were somewhat frustrated initially when two original sites turned out to be trash pits of glass and debris.

Although he concedes that the physical labor required is practically unbearable in the summer heat, Miller is anxious to proceed from "late colonial" to "colonial" strata.

Flory will be sorry to see the end of the big sift on July 30. He believes that Bel Air may have been the site of a series of forts erected by Governor Berkeley in the 17th century.

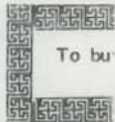
Berkeley had the forts built to pacify citizens who felt they were not sufficiently protected from the neighboring Susquehanas.

The failure of these forts, according to Flory, ultimately led to Bacon's Rebellion, a rebellion in which Prince William participated actively to gain a representative form of government.

Evidence of late 17th century occupation at Bel Air, Flory feels, would substantially support his thesis. Bel Air's terraced terrain, he believes, possibly originated as the foundation of a stockade.



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Cliff Owen sifts through screen

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