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## THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION OF BEL AIR PLANTATION

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An illustrated lecture presented at a meeting of Historic  
Dumfries Virginia, Inc., at the Dumfries Town Hall  
September 5, 1974

As a history teacher, I have several times in the past attempted to find sources on local history in order to teach a course on Prince William County. I have searched through all our county libraries and questioned countless librarians only to hear the continual response, "I'm sorry, we have nothing except that one little book written by the Writer's Group in the 1940's." (Prince William: The Story of Its People and Its Places). This has been a frustrating experience and it seemed that something should be done to correct this deficiency.

This summer, as we began work at Bel Air, I heard about your group for the first time, and I was very happy to hear that some residents did care about the heritage of our area and were compiling information pertaining to it.

Consequently, it is gratifying to be able to contribute in a small way myself to our heritage and to be able to present it to you this evening.

The background of the archaeological excavation is brief and uncomplicated. We envisioned a similar program last summer (1973) but, due to a late start, couldn't secure a site to dig. This may sound incredible to you, with the abundance of potential sites in this area, but the necessary permission to dig was not obtained from any of the people we approached. As a result, we implemented a program at Gunston Hall Plantation in Fairfax County undertaking a study of 18th century life in Colonial America.

Mrs. Lydia Matthews of Historic Dumfries Virginia heard of our unsuccessful search this winter, and she contacted me with the idea of excavating at Bel Air Plantation. Through Mrs. Matthews I met Dr. and Mrs. Flory, and we eventually worked out a program culminating in the dig this past summer.

Initially, we went over the Plantation examining the grounds and discussing what was known about the history of Bel Air. Mr. Edward Chappell of the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission assisted us, and together we walked over

the property and probed potential sites. Eventually, three promising areas were chosen.

As you approach the Plantation from the road, the first landmark you see is the main house. To the right or northeast of the house is a wooded area containing the remains of a small stone wall. We thought that this could perhaps be the kitchen or some other outbuilding, since the probing done earlier had revealed a brick scattering running from the house in the direction of the wall, and we felt that the scattering might be the remains of a walk. It was decided to pursue this and the wooded section eventually became Square IIIA.

The second area chosen is beside the main house, adjacent to the existing privy. Evidence of construction was found, and we felt that an older privy, or perhaps an old dumping area, would be uncovered. This became Square IIA.

Finally, in the yard behind the main house an area was picked to be excavated on the basis of an account of an old resident who remembered a log cabin on the site. It was always referred to as the "slave cabin," and since domestic sites are generally fruitful, we decided that this would be our main square, marked on the drawing as Square IA.

When you begin an archaeological excavation, your first act after choosing the site is to lay it out. This is done by marking off an area, usually a fifty-foot square, and then subdividing this large area into smaller squares. In our case, we laid out an area fifty feet by forty feet and subdivided it into eleven ten-foot squares.

Using this system, the archaeologist is able to work in a square of his own with two or more people and not disturb anyone else. It makes record keeping very simple, for each artifact found is placed in a bag marked with the large square number, the small square number and the soil level it was found in. Furthermore, leaving balks between the squares permits the archaeologist to see the soil levels as he digs down, allows room for wheelbarrows and equipment to move unhindered, and acts as a safeguard for the site. By this last statement, I mean that if at any time in the future, new techniques of archaeology are developed, the site dug today will not be completely destroyed. The areas under the balks will have been preserved and could offer some information to the future excavators.

From this point on, I think it will be more meaningful to you if I show you slides of the excavation and explain what is happening in each.

Slide 1 - Bel Air Plantation, main house

This, of course, is Bel Air Plantation, as seen from the road leading up to the house.

Slide 2 - rear of house with pile of stones in foreground

In the back yard, one hundred and thirty-seven feet from the house, stood this pile of rocks. They were reported to be the remains of the chimney of the slave cabin. Assuming that the cabin would have been parallel to the main house, we laid out our grid in this fashion.

Slide 3 - grid of Square IA

You can see how the large square has been broken into smaller ones, and these areas (pointing out sections on slide) reserved as balks. These trees presented quite a problem for us, (pointing to trees in slide) as the roots spread throughout the square and hindered our work all summer long. The magnolia tree over here almost died because so many roots were exposed for as long as two months.

Slide 4 - second view of grid

The grid is marked by the strings you see being laid here, and they remained all summer as a guide line. The squares were numbered one through eleven, starting in this corner (pointing to square 1) and running this way.

Slide 5 - students removing topsoil on first day

Our first day. The students are removing topsoil from the site and this is the only time shovels will be used all summer. The turf is somewhat difficult to work with and it is necessary to employ the larger tools for it. For the remainder of the summer trowels and dust brooms will be used exclusively.

Slide 6 - Site IIIA in wooded area

Meanwhile, a second group of students began excavating Square IIIA in the wooded area northeast of the house. The trees made this plot extremely difficult to work, but this line of rocks (points them out in slide) spurred the kids on.

Slide 7 - second view of Square IIIA

The students had learned enough from their lectures on historical archaeology to know that a kitchen site would be very exciting and that plenty of artifacts would be found. Unfortunately, this was not a kitchen site. What it turned out to be in fact was a stone wall.

For two full days, this group dug like demons, careful demons to be sure, and found nothing but rocks, insects and poison ivy. Not one single nail, glass fragment or ceramic shard was uncovered. Being a perceptive man by nature, it dawned on me that all was not well with Square IIIA.

So, at the end of the second day, we threw away the book, picked up a shovel and proceeded to dig in one of the squares.

I hasten to say that this is not what one is supposed to do, but we had a very limited number of days to work with, and the other areas were proving more fruitful. We also had to consider our morale situation and to try and avoid the frustrating experience that a dry hole could create. The purpose of our excavation was two-fold, remember; one was to uncover whatever we could from Bel Air and the second was to build up an interest in our students for history in general and archaeology in particular. Continuing to dig in a dry hole would have failed both objectives. So we dug with our shovels.

We found nothing. The absence of a builder's trench confirmed that the stones were not the remains of a foundation, and this greatly relieved my troubled conscience. I had been certain when I sunk the shovel into the earth the first time that it would very neatly shatter a two-hundred year old wine bottle which would have ultimately been the only complete artifact found all summer.

This square was then closed off.

#### Slide 8 - Square IIA

The privy area shown here was also a dry hole. The construction remains turned out to be nothing more than the rubble from a late 19th century repair job on the existing privy, and the only interesting artifacts recovered were several medicine bottles, including this one.

#### Slide 9 - Listerine bottle

This is an 1882 Listerine bottle, with the cork still in place. All the bottles found were cork-top variety and all dated from the 1880's and 1890's, confirming the repair date of the outbuilding.

#### Slide 10 - Square IA students working on first level

Moving back to Square IA, we can now focus on our most productive and important excavation and explain a little bit more about the process of digging.

The key to historical archaeology is to remove the soil one layer at a time, being careful to record each artifact found in each level.

The trowels you see in the slide allow the students carefully to scrape away the soil and uncover artifacts of any size - some even as small as a pin. The bags are used to hold the artifacts once they are uncovered, and each bag is marked with the large square number, small square number and soil level. They are changed every day, and every time a new level is begun.

The importance in keeping the artifacts separated according to level is to enable the archaeologist to date that level. The most recent artifact of the stratum is the one that dates it. This fact always seems to confuse people, who assume that the oldest artifact would be the one to give a level a date, but if you think on it for a moment, it becomes clear. Let me give you an example. Suppose I drop a group of coins from my pocket right now on the ground. The coins are a 1956 penny, a 1974 nickle, and a 1938 dime. The archaeologist of the future uncovers these and knows

immediately that they couldn't have been deposited before 1974. The reason for this is simple. I can drop any coin dated back as far as you wish today, but I can't drop a 1975 coin until 1975. This is known as the terminus post quem--the date after which the level was deposited.

Slide 11 - student beginning level 2

It is easy to see in this slide how the soil levels change. The boy is removing brown dirt from his square, the remains of the topsoil, and below this a red clay is easily discerned. This will be his second level.

Slide 12 - student holding up Civil War buckle

The first artifact shown is this Union buckle from the Civil War. This particular buckle was first issued in 1839 and was used mostly by cavalry. You can see the brass edge, the raised letters "US" and on the back are two studs and a hook, indicating that it was used as a belt buckle.

Slide 13 - student holding a miniball

Each of the two Union miniballs found had a small star imprinted on the inside. The National Park Service identified these as having been manufactured in an arsenal in Massachusetts and told us that they had been discharged.

These finds confirmed the documentary evidence we had from Bel Air, which recorded a Union occupation of the Plantation during the winter of 1863-64. It would seem reasonable to suppose that the troops were quartered in a log cabin and that these artifacts are remnants of that occupation.

Slide 14 - overview of site showing students working in squares

As the summer wore on, more and more artifacts were uncovered, usually glass fragments, ceramics and metal objects. You must remember that these are the most commonly found artifacts, because they won't deteriorate in the earth like wood, cloth, paper, leather and other organic materials.

Slide 15 - several ceramic fragments in place

Here are some examples of the fragments found early in the excavation. They are 19th century pieces, and they were within three inches of the surface. We were extremely fortunate to begin recovering artifacts so soon after removing the sod. The students caught an enthusiasm from the very first day and were continually reinforced by the finds. Every time something was uncovered, whether it be a piece of barbed wire or an 18th century pipe stem, they would light up and give a shot of confidence to everyone else at the site.

Slide 16 - display of artifacts

This is a sampling of the artifacts uncovered during the first week of the excavation. The object here is a Ball mason jar lid, dated 1890, and

these fragments are 18th century slipware, a wine bottle fragment and several nails.

The nails eventually numbered over a thousand, and every one was of a type manufactured between 1820-1840. This fact, coupled with a newspaper advertisement from the Alexandria Gazette in 1826 describing the property as having been recently much improved with several outbuildings, a barn, kitchen, smoke houses, ice house, drying sheds etc., all "newly built," leads us to conclude that the construction date of the log cabin was around 1820-1825.

Discovery of scored bone fragments, wood, ashes and melted glass and metal indicates that the cabin was destroyed by fire around the turn of the century. No artifacts later than the 1910-1915 era were recovered, and we know from the eyewitness that it stood around 1908 and was gone by 1920. Consequently, it seems reasonable to conclude that the fire occurred during the second decade of the twentieth century. The cabin, then, stood for about a century.

At this point in our work, nothing had been discovered that didn't fit our expectations. We knew that we were digging on a log cabin site, and this was confirmed by the foundation and the mortar found. It was known that Civil War troops quartered here, and we had found evidence of that occupation. We knew that the building was here in 1908 and gone in 1920, and the artifacts confirmed this. In short, everything was going according to plan with no surprises or mysteries.

#### Slide 17 - students cleaning artifacts in lab

An archaeologist's work is not limited to digging in the field. In fact, most of the work is done after the artifacts are uncovered. The tedious work of cleaning, marking and identifying the artifacts is time-consuming but crucial to the interpretation of the site.

#### Slide 18 - students marking artifacts

Our students were in the lab approximately once a week, and they cleaned, marked and stored every single artifact uncovered. These students are marking the artifacts with special radial pens, designed to write with an extremely fine point.

#### Slide 19 - artifact with marking on it--close-up

Here you can see how fine the marking is. The student is holding a small plate fragment, no larger than a thumbnail, yet, it is marked with ER 101 IA7. This lettering means that it was found in the excavation behind the house, in the first level and in square seven.

#### Slide 20 - students digging

By the middle of the second week, we had made great progress. You can see that we are now a good foot and a half down, and for the first time, artifacts we did not anticipate at all were beginning to pour out of the site.

Slide 21 - pearlware fragments, blue

One of the first early fragments we found was this piece of pearlware, painted with a Chinese motif, very popular in the late 18th century. This pattern was produced in England between 1785 and 1810, which would not have made it so unusual if this had been the only 18th century piece found. However, it turned out to be the first of hundreds of ceramic shards dating from the early through the late colonial period.

Slide 22 - pipe stem fragments

Soon, tobacco pipe fragments began to appear, mostly stems, but on occasion, a part of the bowl. These are very common on colonial sites, and if enough are found, they are dateable. We found forty-two stem pieces and three bowls, and the date derived from these was 1750-1770. The stems generated a lot of enthusiasm among the classes because they were easily identifiable, definitely colonial, and frequently found.

Slide 23 - brown-dot slipware

Another example of ceramic finds are these pieces of brown-dot slipware, manufactured in England from around 1740 through the American Revolution. This pattern is very often found, and several antiques of the type are on display at Wetherburn's Tavern in Colonial Williamsburg. The edge of the pouring cup is the largest single fragment found all summer.

The fact that so many tiny fragments were found and no large pieces at all were uncovered suggests that a trash pit must be located somewhere in the area. Usually, when a plate or bowl was broken in the 18th and 19th centuries, the person cleaning up would gather all the large pieces together and toss them into the trash pit, a hole dug in the ground that normally measured three feet by five feet. When the pit was full or began to smell to foully, it was covered up and another one dug to replace it. If the pit was any distance from the cabin, it seems reasonable to conclude that some large fragments would have been tossed under the structure rather than carry every broken plate across the yard. Hopefully, further excavation of the area will reveal the location of this pit, and the archaeologist's treasure chest can be excavated.

Slide 24 - excavation from upstairs window of Bel Air

This view gives you a clear idea of the relationship of the excavation site to the main house. The picture was taken from the second floor bedroom window looking out at the back yard.

Slide 25 - students examing artifact at site

This group has evidently found something of interest, judging from the expressions on their faces.

Slide 26 - scratch-blue ceramic

The artifact held here is a fragment of a delicate cup made of "scratch-blue" pottery. The potter would glaze his ware white, but it took on bluish tint, and then literally scratch a line in the clay, apply cobalt blue to it and then fire his piece. The result was very pleasing, as you can see, and his product was one of the better quality items produced in the mid 18th century.

We found quite a few pieces of a cup and a pitcher, so the Ewells may have owned a set of scratch-blue pieces.

Slide 27 - Rhenish stoneware fragment on rock

We continued to uncover mid-eighteenth century ceramics with some regularity. About the third week, we had uncovered the cabin's foundations and turned up this piece. It is a fragment of Rhenish stoneware, produced in the first and second quarters of the 18th century, and it was found directly beneath one of the foundation stones. This fact told us that the stoneware had been discarded before the construction of the dwelling.

Slide 28 - child's thimble

One of the more interesting domestic finds was this child's thimble, shown here on my two-year old daughter's hand to illustrate its size. The thimble is brass, cross-hatched on the top and patterned on the sides, a typical colonial example.

Slide 29 - delftware fragments

These beautiful examples of delftware date from the same period as the stoneware and thimble. It was probably a bowl of some sort, judging from the hand painted pattern on the inside and outside of the pieces found.

Slide 30 - wine bottle fragments

Of course, every colonial site will yield its share of wine bottle fragments, and we got our share. Numerous pieces were found, among which were the bottoms shown here. From these we can date the bottles at around 1770 and further establish this as a colonial site.

Remember, we had begun the summer looking forward to digging a Civil War period slave cabin, and now we were in the middle of a rich colonial site. The cabin was constructed no earlier than 1820; we know that from the nails we recovered. No earlier foundations were found beneath the cabin; nor were any post holes, builder's trenches or colonial construction materials located. The only conclusion we could reach was that a colonial structure, perhaps built at the same time as the main house, 1740, stood somewhere in the near vicinity and we were collecting some of the scattered rubble from this building.

The presence of the wine bottles, ceramics and glass would lead us to conclude that it was some type of domicile, or perhaps a kitchen. It may have been an earlier slave quarter, or the home of a workman or indentured servant, or perhaps a spring house or dairy where containers of food and



drink would have been stored to keep cool.

We did not have time to expand our excavation to search for this building, perhaps that will be done in the future, so for now the identity of the artifacts source remains conjecture.

Slide 31 - saltglaze; creamware

Whatever the building was, it seems to have stood over a period of many years. This slide illustrates the many types of patterns of creamware and saltglaze we found. The patterns cover the time span of 1740-1810. We have a barley pattern, dot, diaper and reel pattern, queen's ware, shell edge and basket patterns.

Slide 32 - buttons

Of all the artifacts we found, the most fascinating by far were the buttons. All together, nine were found, and each one told us something different about the site.

Slide 33 - Civil War button

The first button uncovered was this fine example of a Union soldier's coat button. It was the most common button worn by the Northern Army, and is associated with the infantry. This particular button was first issued in 1849 and served throughout the war. It is stamped with the words, "Waterbury, Mass.," on the back, telling us the origin and dates it was used, and is made of brass with a raised eagle stamped on the face.

Slide 34 - pewter buttons

Next, these beautiful pewter buttons turned up; one a coat button measuring 21 mm in diameter, fairly large for a jacket, and the smaller cuff button measuring 8 mm. They have a spun back with a raised eye and were worn during the Revolutionary War by British infantrymen. There is no record of British soldiers on the grounds of Bel Air in the Revolutionary period, so this find was exciting in the sense that something new was being discovered from the excavation.

Slide 35 - artillery button

That the British were at Bel Air was confirmed even further by the discovery of this button. It is an excellent example of the brass jacket buttons worn by the Royal Regiment of Artillery, originally from Forts Niagara and George on the Canadian frontier and who saw service with almost all units active during the Revolutionary War. It is known that they served in ships that sailed up and down the East Coast and that they were with British units that were in the area.

The button, itself, is 21 mm and has a raised shield filled with three primitive field pieces. On the top of the shield are three clusters of cannon balls with many smaller cannon balls as a background. It has been positively identified by the staff of Fort Niagara and the experts at Fort Ticonderoga, New York.

Slide 36 - pointed star button

The only button that has eluded positive identification is this one, a small pewter button, badly deteriorated, that is spun on the reverse with a small wire eye and stamped on the face with an eleven pointed star on a rough surface.

The National Park Service, the staffs at Ticonderoga and Niagara as well as several individuals familiar with buttons of the era, all conclude that it is a Revolutionary War period button, possibly French, but no one can positively trace it. The search is continuing on this one, but it gives us another bit of evidence on a military presence at Bel Air during the Revolution. (Note: This was later determined to be a common 18th century pewter button.)

Slide 37 - hunt button

Finally, it was this small brass button that really captured everyone's imagination. Very small, it is probably a cuff button, judging by its shape. The word TALLIO is imprinted above a running fox design and is immediately identifiable as a hunt button. The question was, from where?

Initial research turned up very little on this subject. There was a hunt club in Dumfries in the 18th century, but there is no evidence that any of the Ewells belonged to it, and even if they did, there is no evidence that the club had a uniform of any kind. It is known that the word, "tallio," rather than "tallyho," was used on English hunt buttons prior to 1821. A similar button with the running fox device and the words, "Sinnington Hunt," printed underneath, has been found. It is possible that our cuff button was designed to match those coat buttons, but at this point it is only conjecture.

This artifact was so different, and so illusive to trace, that every one at the site showed a strong interest in its identification. How did an English hunt button find its way to Bel Air's back yard? This has remained one of our most intriguing questions.

Slide 38 - flint

With the discovery of the military buttons dating from the Revolutionary War came the problem of confirming a British presence at Bel Air during the war years. Documentary evidence failed to show us one incident when a British unit was known to have passed this way, but it was discovered that British prisoners of war were quartered in the vicinity of Dumfries. We had no evidence that they stayed at Bel Air, but further archaeological finds seemed to build a strong case.

This gun flint, designed for a pistol, is in perfect condition and made in a British style with British material. Other finds included a knife blade, lodestones, 18th century pencils and this jew's-harp.

Slide 39 - jew's-harp

A small jew's-harp, a common 18th century musical instrument, was a great favorite among British soldiers of this time. Literally hundreds have been uncovered at other military sites including Fort Ticonderoga.

This is not to say that it is definitely a British soldier's harp, but it is one more piece of evidence that seems to build a pattern.

Slide 40 - half-penny

Finally, we come to the summer's most exciting discovery, a British copper half-penny dated 1729. Found beneath the chimney foundations and, therefore, lost before the cabin's construction, it was in excellent condition considering it had been in the ground exposed to the dampness and elements for two hundred years. The date is easily distinguished, as you can see, with the figure of Britannia still clear, and many of the letters still standing in bold relief.

It is extremely rare to find any coins on colonial sites, and copper coins of this era were rarer than most. Usually, a coin of this type would wear quickly, with the date worn off, the letters obliterated, the edges clipped, and the figure blurred. None of this has occurred on our coin.

Several possible explanations for the coin's presence in this condition exist. If the coin was dropped by the original builders of Bel Air, it may have been lost around 1740 and not been in circulation long enough to wear badly. If this is the case, then somewhere in the vicinity of the cabin there may be evidence of the 1740 construction, or perhaps even the structure that has been suggested by the evidence already uncovered.

Another explanation could be that the coin was someone's lucky penny. Being carried around for years and kept out of circulation, it would have retained its features well. Perhaps one of the British soldiers lost it when they were at Bel Air, for it was lost in a level that was being deposited until the turn of the 19th century. This possibility is one more piece of evidence that could lead to a positive conclusion regarding the stationing of British troops at Bel Air, either as prisoners of war, or as part of troop movements we are unaware of due to inadequate documentation.

Slide 41 - students at end of summer on site

As the summer came to a close, much progress had been made, many artifacts had been uncovered, and some significant facts had been added to Prince William County's history. The students pictured here are working with as much enthusiasm and determination as they had on the first day, only now they are competent to a large degree. They had learned how to dig, why archaeologists dug in the first place, and how to identify the artifacts they discovered. Most important of all from an educational viewpoint, they had learned how to take raw facts and develop hypotheses from them, building theories as further evidence confirms or denies their original assumptions.

The commitment they had made to the excavation did not disappear at the conclusion of summer school. Of the fifty-four students who participated in our program, over twenty continued as volunteer workers throughout the autumn, finishing up our square.

Slide 42 - television crew at site

Recognition for a job well done is always good for one's morale, and the work of the students was recognized by the media in a variety of ways. Several fine newspaper articles, well illustrated with pictures, reported on our excavation. And on the last day of school, WTOP-9 Television sent a crew to Bel Air to film a segment for their weekend newscast.

Slide 43 - T.V. man interviewing students

Despite the mud and rain, our only day of bad weather all summer long, every student remained at his post throughout the filming. Several students were interviewed, and the telecast was used twice on Sunday, July 28, during both evening newscasts.

Slide 44 - filling in site

Cleanup is always a sad aspect of any archaeological excavation that has been successful. The squares were filled in with the original sod, and the outline of the cabin was marked off by metal posts with the chimney foundation replaced as it was uncovered. The Florys are planting boxwood at the corners of the cabin site as a permanent marking.

Slide 45 - display of artifacts

At the conclusion of the excavation, we gathered together all of the artifacts we had uncovered and displayed them at our farewell picnic at Gunston Hall, in Lorton, Virginia. The thousands of fragments seen here all contributed to our interpretation of the site in some way.

The results of this project were manifold. On an educational level, it provided fifty-four students a unique opportunity to study history outside the classroom through the methods of archaeology. They were able to work with history and actually touch it in the field, and see their efforts result in the creation of new or, at least, amended pages of our heritage. It was exciting and challenging to them, a radically different approach from the usual reading of textbooks, memorization of facts, and writing of papers. They gathered the facts themselves, and began with questions that required a search for answers. Hopefully, the experience resulted in a new appreciation of their past and the skill to use this experience to analyze problems in the future.

The community also gained from this project, both in exposure through the media and in learning previously unknown aspects of its past. The publicity reaped by the excavation brought several proposals from local residents concerning future excavations on previously untouched sites. With the Bicentennial fast approaching, this prospect for involving students in a program combining the history of the Revolutionary Period, the heritage of our own community, and the opportunity to add to them both, is exciting for everyone.

Finally, the history of Bel Air Plantation was broadened immensely.

Although it is true that many more questions were introduced than were answered, this is really what the study of history is all about. We did not learn when the original structure was built, or by whom, but we did find evidence that the main house was not the only structure constructed in 1740. Although nothing really new was added to our understanding of the Civil War period, the facts we had were confirmed with physical evidence. Discovery of British military artifacts dating from the Revolutionary War era open a new chapter, one with plenty of work to be done, it is true, but at least it is now known that the questions exist.

The archaeological aspect of the program was an immense success. The primary goal of locating the cabin was achieved, with the construction date firmly set, and the dimensions and setting of the house revealed. The artifacts uncovered added to the rich heritage already being gathered by Dr. and Mrs. Flory, and they include the fascinating buttons, pipe stems, ceramics and the half-penny.

To summarize, the summer was a very satisfying experience for the students, the Florys and myself. It was exciting, intellectually challenging, oft times fun, and always rewarding in every way.

The artifacts are here for you to examine, and if you have any questions I will be happy to try and answer them, for you have been patient long enough.

Thank you.

Note: Copies of the slides referred to in this lecture will be available in the Archives of Historic Dumfries Virginia, Inc.

A recording of the television program is at Bel Air Plantation, as are the artifacts discovered in this excavation.