

Va - Prince William / Bel Air

**DIGGING AT BEL-AIR**

**Down to Earth History Grabs 'Em**

By JOAN MOWER  
JM Staff Writer

When Bob Miller conceived of a summer school class centered around an archeological dig, his greatest fear was that student excavators wouldn't find anything and might become bored stiff after a week. Luckily, Miller's fears have proved ill-founded. First, the 55 students from Prince William County's five high schools have turned up a mind-boggling array of 18th and 19th Century artifacts on the site of historic BelAir plantation near Dale City.

And, to Miller's great relief, the plague of the 20th Century student-boredom hasn't struck any of the budding archeologists.

Typical of student reaction to the class was Celeste Kuhla's comment.

"Scooping up yet another piece of broken pottery, the 17-year-old Stonewall Jackson student asked 'How could anyone be bored when you keep finding all this stuff?'"

"Stuff" is not quite the way Miller would describe the thousands of relics buried under the ground. During the course of a month, the student have uncovered a 1729 copper penny, jacket buttons probably of French origin, a Civil War belt buckle and scores of Delph china pieces. The "stuff" also has significant historical value. For example, the button, presumed to have fallen off some Frenchman's jacket, indicates the French might have stayed at BelAir.

Mrs. William Flory who lives at BelAir, knows the French passed through Dumfries in the early 1780's en route to Yorktown, but they now have proof the troops rested at BelAir.

The "real mindblower" finds, according to Miller are two previously unknown building foundations. When Flory invited students to dig

up their front yard, they had stoves from a Civil War period slave cabin.

"We don't know what other buildings were on the property, because we never excavated," said Mrs. Flory. The Florys date the main house from 1740, but written records for the plantation stop at 1827.

Working three mornings a week for three hours, the students have flabbergasted the Florys by finding two new foundation structures. Painstakingly sifting their way through three layers of soil, the students came across the foundations.

Sitting under a Magnolia tree (appropriately), Miller said he guessed the third level foundation might be an outdoor kitchen serving the original 18th Century house. His assumption is based on the number of kitchen-related objects turned up by the blue jean clad excavators.

Like professional archeologists, the young history buffs have experienced their share of professional disappointm-

ents. The slave cabin foundations is only located on a quadrant of the students' excavation site. Thus, the artifact finds have been mostly limited to a partial area.

The students have not been spared the routine-precision work associated with archeology. Before they started excavating they carefully surveyed a plot and marked it off.

At the outset they removed the grass with trowels. Since the class began they have penetrated three soil levels-scoop by scoop. While the work is not strenuous, the students have learned to be meticulous, working on hands and knees, examining every piece of soil and cleaning up after a day's work.

A month ago, students constantly hounded Miller to identify artifacts. But experience has matured the budding archeologists to the point where they usually know what they find.

Hardly a minute goes by without a student making another "find." During a

short time period, a young man proudly held up a intricately piece of china, and another displayed a clay pipe piece.

Although the outdoor work is perhaps the most fun, messing around in the yard is not the sum total of archeology the students have learned.

The class spends several days indentifying and marking artifacts. Each piece is classified and coded, and the students graph their individual finds.

Inspired by Miller (who took to archeology when he went on a summer dig three years ago) the class incorporates excavation with field trips and book learning. called "Touching Hands with the Past," the class is designed to give students a feel for history.

And, according to interviews with the students, they have felt more than the ground in the last month.

"I learned how they built houses," said Denise Dawson, a Gar-Field student, adding she appreciates architectural

construction now that she has taken the class.

Susan Lucas, a 10th grader, signed up for the class "because I'm sick of being bored during the summer." Not only has Miss Lucas staved off boredom, she claims she has learned to think for herself in the course.

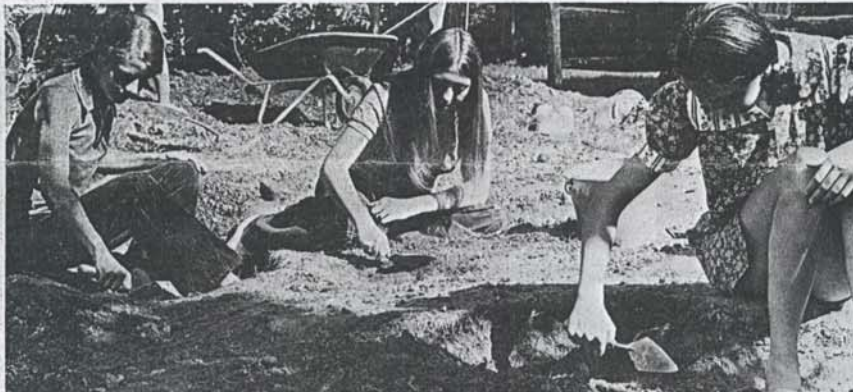
An amateur interest in Indian pottery led Debbie Curtis to sign up for the class. "I like looking for little goodies," and Miss Curtis who knows her newfound techniques will make her hobby more exciting.

Some students will undoubtedly fulfill Miller's idealistic hopes: "I want to help students broaden their horizons," said the teacher.

For other students, the class was an enjoyable way to complete course requirements and pass the summer.

"I sure prefer being outside to sitting in the classroom," said Osbourn student Carl Barbee.

For all the students, the class has been on-the-job, down-to-earth, history in the raw.



**They Dig School**

George Rosston - The Journal Messenger

Three members of Bob Miller's history class really dig their work at Bel-Air Plantation near Dale City. From left, Donna Poague, Pam Blevins and Anita McGuin.

From left, Barbara Poague, Donna Poague, Pam Blevins, Anita McGuin, and Bob Miller.