



# Digging into history

► Mount Atlas site of a weeks-long archaeological project.

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Sweating beneath Saturday's mid-morning sun, about a dozen volunteers sifted through piles of dark red dirt, sweating at the biting ants they had disturbed and occasionally calling out, "I found something!"

Since the beginning of June, the volunteers have come from around Northern Virginia every Saturday to join an archaeological expedition at Mount Atlas, a Gainesville home dating back to about 1795.

Led by Heather Crowl, an archaeologist with the Maryland-based firm of Danes & Moore, varying numbers of archaeology and history buffs of all ages arrive each week in the hopes of uncovering some of the estate's history before the home is moved or demolished some time next year.

After measuring off four precise 5-foot squares, they began to dig, several inches at a time, into the hard-packed earth. The dirt was then deposited into large sieves, where eager hands carefully plucked out

shards of broken glass and pottery, along with a few nails, nails and other bits of centuries-old trash.

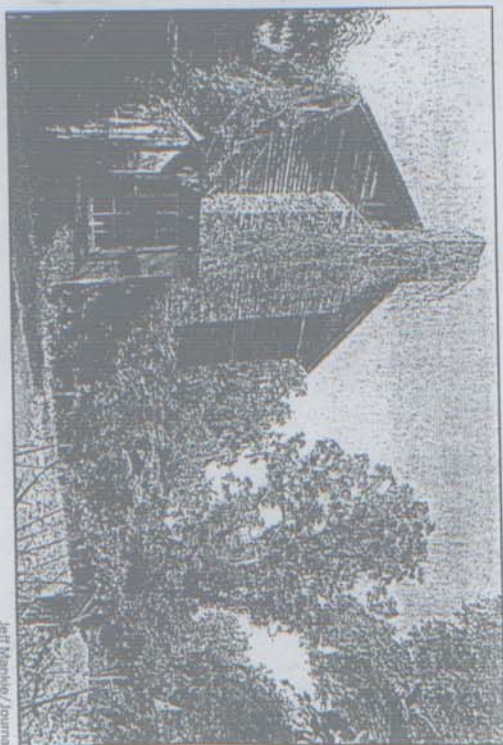
"Most of the really outstanding artifacts we've found are from the middle of the 19th century — 1850 to 1870," Crowl said. "We were pretty much just trying to find out what was here. We weren't sure when we started."

The estate, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, was originally part of a 41,600-acre land grant, which Robert King Carter received from the king of England in 1724. In 1795, the plantation house was built on a portion of the land north of Haymarket.

Today the abandoned and dilapidated house stands on about 10 acres.

A conservator for the estate of Barton Padgett, the home's most recent owner, has offered the house to Prince William County if officials agree to move it off-site so that the land may be developed. The Board of County Supervisors has until April 2001 to decide whether the home can be renovated and moved. If not, it will most likely be demolished.

About 20 feet from the back door, Stephanie Fritchler, Susan Brown and 8-year-old Courtney Cunningham sifted through dirt removed from the probable location of the kitchen, which was demolished around 1910. As the dirt filtered



Jeff Mackel/Journal

Volunteers have come from around Northern Virginia to join an archaeological expedition at Mount Atlas in Gainesville.

through the screen, Courtney withdrew a small rounded object from amid the stones and decaying leaves left behind.

After carefully cleaning the artifact several hours later, Mark Joyner, an archaeologist with the nonprofit Association for the Study of Archaeological Properties, declared Courtney's find to be the most

significant discovery of the day — a brass button from the coat of a Union Army soldier.

Joyner had been busy digging nearby with Pat Edwards, a resident of the Mount Atlas neighborhood, and Bev Veness, who

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## Volunteers join expedition

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works with historic relics at the Bull Run Regional Library.

The three had uncovered what they believed to be a fire pit, where trash was burned by the home's inhabitants. Over the last few Saturdays, they have found, along with pieces of charcoal and melted glass, a Mercury dime, a tiny medicine bottle, hand-carved oyster shell buttons and an old ice skate blade, probably a little more than a century old, Joyner said.

Meanwhile, beneath a mulberry tree just inside the forest's edge, Courtney's 6-year-old brother, Sean Jr.,

struggled beneath an adult shovel as he dug into a pit alongside his father, Board of County Supervisors Chairman Sean Cunningham, R-at-large.

The two dug for several hours while Bill and Kathy Freese of Fairfax sifted through the dirt pile unsuccessfully.

"Not a thing yet but we have high hopes," Kathy Freese said, smiling. "We figure some of these rocks have been here forever."

After several largely unproductive hours, Sean Jr. wandered off to begin his own excavation, finally uncovering an artifact of his very own — a fluorescent yellow

low golf ball inscribed "Nicklaus Golden Bear 3."

Sean was allowed to keep his find, which, he was told, must have turned yellow with age, as many very old objects do.

All of the artifacts, except for the golf ball, will eventually be washed, cataloged and labeled by the volunteers in an attempt to learn more about the 200-year history of Mount Atlas.

The excavation will continue each Saturday through July 22. For more information, or to join the dig, contact Debrae Karres at the Prince William Planning Office, by calling (703) 792-6830.

HISTORIC SITE FILE: *Mount Atlas*  
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