

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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Digging up the recent past
By Joe Getty

At the historical society, we use techniques of historical archaeology to gain a better understanding of everyday life in Carroll County. Our ancestor's cultural artifacts that are deposited in the soil provide evidence that is not available in written documentation.

Archaeological investigations at Union Mills Homestead have identified distinct Pennsylvania German patterns in the use of household ceramics in Carroll County. An excavation at the Historical Society's Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House uncovered architectural foundations that were not known to exist on the site.

During the summer, we teach an archaeological field school for middle school students. The process of discovery and problem-solving provides a valuable learning experience about history. Analysis and interpretation of the artifacts gives students a broad perspective on the lives of earlier generations in Carroll County.

It is also important for us to be aware of archaeological investigations in other parts of the state and their relevance to Maryland's history. A notable discovery was made at St. Mary's City with the uncovering of three lead coffins buried over 300 years ago.

The Historical Society of Carroll County is sponsoring a bus tour on October 7 to historic St. Mary's City. This trip is timed to coincide with the scientific investigations of the lead coffins. The tour will also explore the world of 17th century Maryland and its settlers at this living history museum.

The popular concept of archaeology is excavation of the ancient past at sites such as Pompeii and Troy. Historical archaeology deals with more recent past, specifically literate societies that were capable of recording their own history.

In Maryland, historical archaeology deals with the development of culture since the 17th century. In particular it is concerned with the importing of European cultural traditions and the changes that occur in the "American" environment.

St. Mary's City is the best preserved founding site of a 17th century English colony in North America. It was established in 1634 as the capital of Lord Baltimore's new colony of Maryland.

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The bus tour will include living history interpretation at the Godiah Spray Tobacco Plantation, Governor's Field, the Maryland Dove (a replica of the squared-rigged ship that brought the first settlers), and the reconstruction of the 1676 Maryland State House. Lunch will be at the farthing's Ordinary and the visit will conclude at the visitor's center and gift shop.

The tour will also include a visit to the area where the investigations of the unusual lead coffins will be taking place. Archaeologists uncovered the coffins in November 1990 and believe that they contain the remains of members of Maryland's founding family, the Calverts.

The coffins were discovered at the site of the Great Brick Chapel, built about 1667. Archaeologists located a large gravel-filled feature through a survey using ground-penetrating radar. Lead coffins were rare in colonial times but their use is documented in written sources. A single coffin would weigh between 500 and 1000 pounds.

Over the past two years, a team of internationally-known scientists, including representatives from the Smithsonian Institution, NASA and the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, developed a plan to investigate the coffins. Work is to begin in October. A special tent with a video monitor will be set up to allow observation of the investigation work.

The initial work will consist of boring holes under controlled conditions to allow testing of the air, potentially yielding trapped 300 year old atmosphere. The holes will also allow examination of the coffin's contents through fiberoptics.

The coffins will then be opened for physical examination of the remains by forensic experts. Scientific testing will include anthropological analysis (age, sex, race, and height), pathological studies (to determine the manner and cause of death) and chemical and microbiological analysis (DNA, blood type, etc.). This analysis combined with the historical and archaeological research will provide the key to determining the identity of the three people buried in the lead coffins.

The archaeological investigations will provide a unique view of life in Maryland's earliest phase of history. If you would like information about the Historic St. Mary's City bus tour on October 7, contact the Historical Society, 848-6494.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: Jay Graybeal describes the soil in an excavation unit at the historical society's archaeological field school. Historical archaeology provides a unique view of county history.