

Archaeologists uncover treasures throughout the county – January 28, 2024

In April 1993 Joe Getty, then Director of the Historical Society of Carroll County, wrote in the Carroll County Times, “Although historical archaeology work in Carroll County has been limited, the few sites that have been investigated have helped us gain a better understanding of everyday life in our communities.”

In the 31 years since, it is nice to report that additional work has been done by a variety of groups, some professional, some amateur, and some a mix of both. Parts of the county have been covered, but many more are begging for investigation.

Stephen Israel contributed a helpful list of newspaper articles on Carroll’s archaeological finds and investigations going back as far as 1926 which can be found at the Historical Society of Carroll County. The early articles often referred to findings of Native American artifacts – projectile points (arrowheads), knives, tomahawks, soapstone bowls and other evidence of the people who had campsites here, some dating back to 3,000 years before the present.

Jack Ruby began “surface collecting” Native American artifacts in the 1920s in the area around Eldersburg – along Pine Knob Road, Mineral Hill Road, and on the flood plains and the low terraces associated with Morgan Run which empties into the North Branch of the Patapsco River. Most of that area has since been developed and Jack’s sites covered. He amassed a huge collection and shared his enthusiasm for collecting and knowledge of Native American ways with elementary school children. The Gate House Museum of History in Sykesville owns a portion of his collection.

News about other local archaeological investigations began appearing in the mid-1980s starting with finds at the Union Mills Homestead and the Thomas House on Bishop Street in Westminster. Professional archaeologist Dr. Geoffrey Gyriscio and a team of amateurs investigated the area around the miller’s house on the grounds of the Homestead. Some of what they found was disturbing. The redware pottery used by the miller and his family, and by many Pennsylvania German families in our area, was actually quite dangerous because of lead in the glaze which could contaminate food. Although the danger was widely known, some chose to ignore it. Other excavations in areas with a large Pennsylvania German population showed the same preference for redware. At least 10 local potters produced it.

The archaeological work at the miller’s house also revealed something far less ominous. It “dispelled the hypothesized Germanic tidiness of the building’s occupants, revealing yard scatter typical of 19th century Anglo-American sites.”

Dr. Gyriscio also worked with Joe Getty on the Thomas House, widely thought to be the oldest in the County. It has subsequently been converted to an attractive tearoom near the Farm Museum. The two men dug beneath a porch, finding bits of glass, redware pottery and animal bones, but nothing that appeared to date to the mid-1700s when the house likely was built.

In 1993 Carroll County school students dug trenches and shovel pits around the first county jail on North Court Street in Westminster in an effort to discover more about that building's history. Using the tools and techniques of historical archaeology, they uncovered evidence of the original slate roof, early glass, and how the jailer's family lived on the floors above the prisoners' cells. During the same year, work behind the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House, owned by the Historical Society of Carroll County, revealed the existence of a bake oven.

Building on students' interest in archaeological projects around the County, the Historical Society offered two summer classes for school children that year – Historical Archaeology Field School and Exploring Carroll County Military History and Artifacts.

Meanwhile, middle school students in New Windsor enjoyed opportunities to excavate around that community's well-known Sulphur Springhouse under the direction of their teacher Lisa Lardieri Macurak. The work began in 2007 with Lisa ensuring her students followed a scientific approach. She felt the project would be a "great way for her students to get a sense of the importance of history." In 2012 she was still involved in archaeological work and had 18 students (6th-8th graders) uncovering objects as diverse as bones, animal teeth, glass bottles, and musket balls.

New Windsor's historic Dielman Inn was the subject of an archaeological investigation in 2021. Esther Read, an adjunct professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, used some of her students plus amateurs from Westminster and New Windsor to dig at the former hotel located in the center of town. Everything unearthed was taken back to UMBC's archaeology lab for cleaning and identification.

Professional archaeologist Stephen Israel's years of work at Pine Valley Park near Manchester revealed an American Indian camp site perhaps still occupied by the time English settlers began pushing into the Piedmont area of Maryland. He uncovered a wide range of artifacts.

Very recently, a team of professional archaeologists working for Elizabeth Anderson Comer investigated the tannery site at the Union Mills Homestead hoping to find where the tanning vats were located in an area with no visible clues. The tannery closed about 120 years ago. In a stroke of luck, the investigators unearthed a corner of one vat which still contained a partially tanned piece of cowhide covered with hair.

Less professional excavations have also added to our understanding of local history. The discoveries occurred in opposite corners of the county.

For years the residents of Taneytown depended upon water from a public well located in the square – the intersection of East and West Baltimore streets with York and Frederick streets. The well was likely dug in the early 1800s and operated first as a "drawn well," the kind where buckets were lowered. Eventually a pump was installed. In time the well was covered and passing motorists were unaware it ever existed. Fast forward to the 21st century. While repaving Baltimore Street, the well was exposed. It made no sense to leave it that way but, for a short time, Taneytown residents had a peek into their past.

Quite by accident, construction workers on the grounds of Springfield State Hospital near Sykesville uncovered a burial site containing roughly 13 bodies of varying ages wrapped in cloths. The remains were important enough to be sent to the Smithsonian Institution for thorough analysis. The results indicated these men, women, and children had led lives of hard manual labor and poor diets. Those would have been the living conditions of many of Carroll's early settlers.

While there have been other archaeological investigations in the County, it is impossible to cover all of them. Please visit the library of the Historical Society for more detailed information. Rest assured, there are many more fascinating stories needing investigation.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.

Image 1 – Courtesy Samuel M. Riley Caption: Archaeologist Joe Clemens of Elizabeth Anderson Comer/Archaeology probes the area surrounding a tanning vat at the Union Mills Homestead as part of an investigation of the historic site's tannery complex on October 25, 2021.

Image 2 – Courtesy Samuel M. Riley Caption: Archaeologist Robert Wanner, Ph.D., records data from a test unit during an investigation in October 2021 directed to the 19th century tannery at the Union Mills Homestead.

Image 3 – Courtesy photo Caption: Archaeological survey at New Windsor's historic Dielman Inn