

Uncovering the Past

Bill Buck talks to Professor Heather Wholey about how an archaeological dig at the 1730 Huey site helps us understand our local history and acts as a living classroom for WCU students.

BY RESIDENT BILL BUCK

Documenting history has been compared to putting together a giant jigsaw puzzle, often when you don't have all the pieces. This is made more difficult when many of the clues are literally buried underground. Enter the anthropologists and archeologists, the scientists who help us discover and understand the past through the study of human activity based on analysis of artifacts, architecture, sites, and cultural landscapes. The Brandywine Valley is fertile ground for this type of study with its rich colonial history and even longer period of indigenous people who called this area home for centuries before colonial times.

Heather Wholey, Professor of Anthropology and Chairperson of the Department of Anthropology at West Chester University leads a class in studying an archeological dig site just off New Street in nearby Westtown Township. The property, which would have been part of William Penn's original charter, was acquired by Mordecai Maddock who then sold it to William and Gemet Huey, immigrants to the Pennsylvania colony most likely from Ireland and Wales, respectively, in 1730.



They constructed what appears to be a series of agricultural-related buildings on the site. Remnants of what is believed to have been a springhouse are located over an active spring that flows into Plum Run and then into the Brandywine. A springhouse used the cool spring waters to keep foods cool and fresh. Other structures on the site and what they were used for are still to be discovered. Paul Mullin and Ray Sarnacki, former members of the Westtown Historical Commission, have assisted in documenting the history of the site for the township's historical archives.

Dr. Wholey described the archeological process, which starts by studying historical accounts, maps, and other documents. At the Huey site, initial fieldwork involved a metal detector survey to determine the presence of metal objects, like nails.

This was followed up with ground-penetrating radar to better establish the location of any structures potentially located underground. At the Huey site, ceramic artifacts have been found consistent with the date of 1730. Metal objects have also been identified that may have been farm implements but require further study. The oldest artifact found at the Huey site is a spearhead from the indigenous people in the area, dating from about 4,000-5000 years ago. The team is currently working on excavation of the site to expose areas of an outbuilding foundation. Remnants of the roof, as well as burnt wood and glass from windows have also been found. "It's like looking for a needle in a haystack," Dr. Wholey says. "And to make it easier, you try to reduce the size of the haystack by pinpointing the search area."





Dr. Wholey says there are several other active archeological sites throughout the area that she and her team study on a regular basis. "The oldest documented site in this area dates back to around 10,000 years ago," she explains. In addition to uncovering the past, these sites are used as archeological field schools to help train the students in excavation techniques.

At the site, the students carefully remove soil and then sift it to look for



potential artifacts. Abigail Hand, a WCU archeology student, described her first exposure to the field when reading a book on the subject when she was a youngster. "The field of archeology is very fulfilling," she says. "It's very hands-on and active; you really don't know what you are going to come across on a day-to-day basis." She encourages other young people to explore archeology as a field of study, as many of the skills of



discovery and investigation can often be useful in other disciplines outside of professional archeology.

For the time being, the Huey site will continue to be studied and used as a field laboratory. Ultimately, it could become an educational site open to the public to provide a greater understanding of our colonial past. Understanding our past helps us as we live in the present and plan for the future.



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