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August 25th, 2014, 11:42 pm

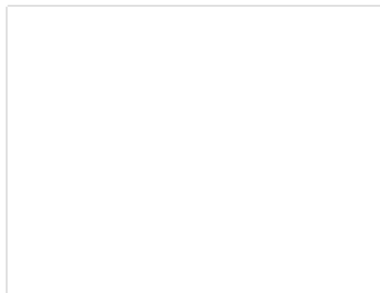
# UMW students at Stratford Hall go ‘the extra mile’

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The Town & County section of Tuesday’s print edition of The Free Lance-Star should have my story on the long labors of the University of Mary Washington’s archaeological field school at [Stratford Hall](#), the Lee family seat in Virginia’s Northern Neck. (I’ll post a link later.)

The story is only a glimpse of what UMW’s Dr. [Douglas Sanford](#), field director Andrew Wilkins and their students have accomplished at this remarkable historic site. It includes close-up photos of a few of the artifacts unearthed by the summer field school’s students and follow-on, “crew phase” researchers. Each of those items is worth a lengthier explanation, which I’ll endeavor to provide in coming days.





Only from a boom-lift can one sense the scale of the overseer's complex discovered at Stratford Hall. This one image reflects many seasons of work. CLINT SCHEMMER/THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Archaeology has long interested me, but what I saw on several visits to the place of their inquiry, Stratford's so-called "Oval Site," gave me a renewed sense of what incredibly hard work it takes to pry the past from the ground. Even under time pressure, as the field season wrapped up, Sanford's students worked with precision, teamwork and good humor.

But Judy Hynson, Stratford's director of research and library collections, describes those herculean labors much better than I did. She has watched the UMW excavations' progress for many years, and kindly shared her thoughts in an email:

*"The field school was Stratford's major annual research activity that provided information about Stratford's various inhabitants, such as slaves, who have not left written documentation of their lives here. ...*

*"It was a joy working with Doug Sanford, who was a great mentor to many of his students. I personally felt that the field school students always went 'the extra mile' ... working in all kinds of weather (mostly hot), with the ground at times as hard as rock, and sometimes finding their meticulous excavations invaded by critters (moles, ants, etc.).*

*"I would watch the students 'work through' their initial blisters until their hands toughened up from constantly scraping with a trowel. No one can imagine the physical discomforts of sitting on the ground for hours scraping the dirt until they've tried it!"*



UMW student Jessica Bittner draws a feature being measured by Dr. Douglas Sanford—one of the postholes at the overseer complex’s kitchen-quarter. This posthole was created when one of the “earthfast” building’s original posts was replaced. CLINT SCHEMMER/THE FREE LANCE-STAR

*“I greatly respect the expertise of the field school crew, many of whom have joined Doug as archaeology professionals. Andrew Wilkins, doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee, has successfully directed the field school for the past two years, and he could usually count on Doug to volunteer his excavation skills about once a week.*

*“Stratford’s visitors and school groups have enjoyed seeing the excavations, and the field school students constantly interpreted the site as part of the field school experience. It has been wonderful to partner with the University of Mary Washington in a long-term program where students have honed their archaeology skills while Stratford has gained information from their findings. It was a win-win situation.”*



A sign near an old hickory tree tells Stratford Hall visitors a bit about the archaeological research being done on the building complex where it’s thought that the plantation’s head overseer and some of the Lees’ enslaved African-Americans lived in the 18th century. CLINT SCHEMMER/THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Now that excavations have concluded at the Oval Site, it’s hard to image how this quiet, unassuming spot was the scene of such agricultural hubbub—and the dynamic between the plantation’s owners and the owned –240 years ago.

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