Students dig for history at Belle Grove

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The University of Mary Washington’s Dr. Doug Sanford is a man with a passion for the past. For several years he led teams of students that helped uncover artifacts on the grounds of Westmoreland’s Stratford Hall, birthplace of Robert E. Lee.

Now Sanford, who has more than 20 years experience as an archaeology professional, is leading a group of students digging for relics at Belle Grove Plantation in King George.

Belle Grove, an 18th century plantation on the Rappahannock River, has been painstakingly and beautifully restored by Brett and Michelle Darnell and turned into a luxury bed and breakfast and venue for special events. President James Madison was born on the plantation on March 16, 1751.

“This area had never been surveyed until we started work last spring,” said Sanford, the director of archaeological programs for UMW’s Center for Historical Preservation.

Working from an 1856 map of the Rappahannock River location, Sanford and crews of UMW students are carefully examining the Belle Grove grounds for historical treasures. “We have found a whole range of artifacts last spring and are finding more this year,” he said.

John Strangfeld, a UMW freshman from Herndon, finds pleasure in the on-site work.

“I really enjoy seeing what kind of things are here,” he said. “I really
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didn't think it would be this much fun.”

Sanford’s crew is mapping the Belle Grove grounds with yellow flags to mark spots with archaeological potential. They then use shovels to dig one-foot-deep holes to reach undisturbed earth.

Screens are then used to carefully sift through the dirt. The budding archaeologists then tag and bag any artifacts uncovered.

Their finds so far include buttons, oyster shells, ceramics, bricks, nails, clay pottery, coal, bottles, window glass, porcelain and some Native American artifacts.

“The ceramics are helpful, because they are easier to date,” Sanford said.

The historic treasures will then undergo further analysis.

“All of the artifacts will go to our labs to be processed, but we have an agreement with Belle Grove that they will be returned here,” Sanford said.

Michelle Darnell said she hopes to display the more interesting artifacts in Belle Grove’s summer kitchen when it is restored.

Sanford’s student archaeologists are studying historical preservation and take their tasks very seriously.

“I enjoy finding history,” said Randy Kehrer, a freshman from Fredericksburg.

“I like getting out and getting the historical experience,” said Mary Fesak, a junior from Centerville.

Although the grass-covered grounds appear unassuming today, Belle Grove has seen plenty of history over almost three centuries, including the birth of the nation’s fourth president, troop movements in both the American Revolution and the Civil War, and the presence of a substantial slave community in the 18th and early-to-mid-19th centuries.

UMW students spent a sunny afternoon digging for artifacts at Belle Grove with Dr. Doug Sanford(right).

Authority:
Rising rates likely in future

have,” Grzeika said.

The board is expected to agree on a proposal for rates and fees by the end of April and to authorize those for advertisement for a public hearing sometime in June.

$4.26 per 1,000 gallons for a two-month cycle. Customers who use up to 5,000-gallons during each two-month billing cycle, the minimum charge for water is $21.30. Added to that, the flat

Estate:
Schools try to appeal

Kiefer: ‘Let’s try it’

The school district is seeking to update the buildings in the area. The school board is now working on a plan through the school districts. The plan includes a $1.5 million bond for a new school in the area.

Academic superintendents have been reviewing the plan for several years.

“We’re pleased to see that we’re moving forward with that plan,” he said.

Suicide: