

DIG, WASH, IDENTIFY, RESTORE



Ashley Newton is an anthropology student at McGill University in Quebec. The dirt she is shoveling here will be water screened for "no secums."

"People always ask, 'how do you know where to dig?'" Matt Reeves smiles at this question, because it is the first step in the exacting process of unraveling this mystery that is archaeology. Actually the first step is raising the money to do the dig, but we'll talk more about that later.

At this particular site, they started, like most of the others, with a metal detector. Then they dug a few test pits "and we located where the concentrations of artifacts were. Then we started opening up units." A unit is five feet square, and they are laid out with a laser transit that is accurate to a thousandth of a foot. They carefully remove the grass and clean top soil, "that's developed with just sod compaction, roots rotting, organic material being contributed. That top soil has developed over the past 150 years."

Once they've peeled off the sod, they go through the next layer. "That's when we start with the trowel, and what we're looking for when we trowel are transitions where we go from a nice brown loamy soil down to where we start to find artifacts and brick fragments and stone fragments." This becomes what's known as the 'A' layer "that 1840 surface that was abandoned when these structures were taken down."

Then they change out bags, forms, everything and start the 'B' layer. "That's the surface where you find the majority of the artifacts that were left in place when the structure

was abandoned, any trash deposits that were thrown out in the yard." From there it goes down however many layers are necessary until they run into undisturbed soil again.

Of course, all of the extracted earth is screened, and when they come to interesting features, they haul the soil to the lab, soak it in water which causes anything that could float to rise to the top. Then they run the slurry through a window screen to find "no-seeums" as small as egg shell fragments, pins and beads. "We always err on the side of sampling and recording everything to the last nth degree," notes Matt.

Here at the lab, which is now open to the public, team members carefully wash artifacts and preserve them. In the case of bits of ironwork, such as the pintle, rust is removed through electrolysis. Along one wall of the lab



Eastern Mennonite student Alise Comtois shows off a ceramic find before bagging and documenting it.

are rows and rows of shallow drawers containing examples of every artifact found. This makes the job of identifying a china pattern, for example, relatively easily.

Probably the most painstaking process is the paperwork, from stratigraphy sheets filled out in the field to a graphic record that includes digital photographs; from identifying and cataloging each artifact to the final written report and interpretation. "If we never wrote a report on this site, we may as well take a bull dozer to it," says Reeves. "The most difficult thing to do is go back to a site that was excavated 10, 20 years ago and write it up."

"You know when you dig a site, it's essentially controlled destruction," continues Matt somberly. "So we excavate very carefully so we can record everything that we find. So essentially what we do is we record the process of taking apart the site. And the only way to learn about the site is to dig it." And when they're done, they'll

put all the dirt back and reestablish the grass.

Archaeology is also a process of learning from what is not found. On this particular dig, for example, they have found no Civil War artifacts; no bullets, no buttons, nothing. That tells them, these buildings were gone by then. In fact they were gone by the 1840s. "When we pull a nail out of the ground, we know it's associated with a Madison activity," says Matt confidently. Speaking of nails, prior to 1810, all nails were hand-wrought. "If we find a single machine cut nail at the bottom of this pit, we know that that deposit dates to after 1810 to 1812. But if we find no machine cut nails in this deposit whatsoever, we can say this deposit dates to before 1810."

Other sites at Montpelier have revealed not only Civil War artifacts, but evidence of 19th century earth moving, which inadvertently placed older artifacts on top of newer ones, creating a confusing upside down time parfait.

Asked what is the most amazing artifact found in his 10 years at Montpelier, Matt Reeves thinks for a moment and tells the story of the Marie Antoinette plate, on display today in the Grills Gallery. It was found in Dolley's midden. According to the Johnny Scott family legend, which was undocumented, "it was bought by (James) Monroe in Paris from the residue of Marie Antoinette's estate. And finding the exact match here at Montpelier, that had been in the ground since the 1820s, gave complete credence to the family's story."



Eileen Nakahata and her mom, Pam Smith, check out drawers of artifact samples that are used to help identify recently found items.



Top photo, the Archaeological Cat checks up on intern Lindie Woosley and expedition member Kate Whitmore. Note the animal bones in the pit. Above, Dr. Matt Reeves has been working at Montpelier for 10 years now. He says there are "generations of archaeological work to do here."

PHOTOS BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

The Curious Cat OR "What Inspires Me to Wake Up in the Morning"

The Archeological Cat is making his usual rounds this morning. He moves in sideways, drapes his tail across our legs, rubs his whiskers against a pile of shovels, arches his back. He flops over on his side near a partially excavated animal jawbone, and stretches luxuriantly.

Montpelier's Director of Archaeology Doctor Matt Reeves identifies this feline as a "Montpelier Gray." Apparently there were many cats with this charcoal coloration at Montpelier during the DuPont era.

Anyway, this particularly curious cat shows up at the current dig just about every morning to hang out. He likes it here. Maybe, in one of his nine lives, he's the spirit of a slave who toiled in this very spot 200 years ago. Or perhaps he's the reincarnation of a long-gone archaeologist. One thing's for certain, when Matt Reeves dies, he could come back as this same Archaeological Cat because digging at Montpelier will still be going on.

As Reeves terms it, "We've got generations of archaeological work to do here."

Matt Reeves has been on the job at Montpelier for 10 years now, yet he's as excited about his job as he was his first day; even more so. He is so amped about this site and Montpelier in general, that he rattles on for minutes at a time in a never-ending run on sentence. "I love talking about this stuff," he says, coming up for air. "That's what inspires me to wake up in the morning; to come here and be so happy to work here." The curious cat rubs against his legs. He is happy to work here too.

To the uninitiated, it's hard not to catch this spirit, because this is fascinating stuff. It's like finding a buried treasure by following a bread crumb trail through history. And Montpelier in particular is uniquely blessed because these sites have never been disturbed. "I can't believe my luck to be working here," gushes Matt. "Even after 10 years, it's just amazing. We keep on discovering all these sites that are in pristine condition."

Disregard the mansion, and take a look at what they have here besides the Paleo Indian sites, the Civil War encampments, the Gilmore Cabin and the early 20th century DuPont history. Montpelier still has an incredible array of major archaeological finds taking in a 116-year slice of our history from 1732 to 1848. There's Mount Pleasant, Dolley's Midden, the North Kitchen, the Georgian landscape, the Formal Back Lawn, the South Yard, the Field Slave Quarters, the Slave Cemetery; the list goes on and on with more sites cropping up all the time.

"I think this is one of the most incredible set of sites in Virginia; in the U.S. that I know of," raves Matt. "To look at slave lives and then combine that with being on the property of Mr. Madison, the gentleman who was the architect of the Constitution. He devised what we as Americans know as rights of citizenship. In his public life he was doing this, but in his private life he was a slave owner. He couldn't even resolve this in his own mind."

But let us gently set the issue of Madison's moral dilemma over slavery aside and consider the story that the artifacts in the earth are telling. Currently, Montpelier archaeologists with the help of college interns, volunteers, and field expedition members, are working in an area that is both literally and figuratively between the field slave quarter and the house slave quarter. Located about halfway

between the mansion and the visitor's center, you might say this area is the midpoint or the fulcrum that made Montpelier tick back in the day when Dolley and James were hosting huge parties and welcoming hoards of visitors. It is an area near the identified stables and a possible workshop. And coming out of the ground, with painstaking care and down-to-the-eggshell documentation are what Matt Reeves calls, "the unique artifacts...the more exciting finds for me that give us a glimpse into every day life."

To get an idea of every day life in the early 1800s we have to remind ourselves of the obvious: there is no telephone; there is no telegraph. All long distance communication is done by handwritten letter, transported over horrendous roads on horseback. In those days, when guests came, they often came unannounced, even uninvited and then they stayed a long, long time.

"For the Madisons, what probably drove them into debt was what was going on in the mansion," says Reeves. "They had visitors constantly coming in. It was the visitors, the guests, the hospitality of the south. They didn't consider them freeloaders. It was what you did."

Little wonder that they weren't eaten out of house and home. Again, risking the obvious, you didn't just ride into Orange and pick up some fried chicken at the grocery store either; you had to grow it and raise it yourself. Hence, livestock had to be slaughtered and processed here. A kitchen garden had to be tilled and

tended. All this food had to be cooked on a hearth and preserved and served. And they had to clean up. And all of this happened right here.

"The Madisons weren't entertaining in a vacuum. They didn't have washing machines in the cellar and have the cars parked down below," smirks Matt. "They had horses. They had to do all the laundry of all these folks who were here. They had to cook, and there's this massive support infrastructure that was outside." Just stabling, mucking, and feeding all those horses took mountains of forage and a small army to shovel the manure.

"The Marquis de Lafayette showed up with an entourage of 40 people," marvels Reeves. "Well, you're feeding 40 people, and you're keeping them in the house and their entourage included servants and everything else, the coachman. You didn't drive up in your car; you drove up in a carriage. You didn't drive the carriage; you had a coachman drive the carriage, and you had your personal valet and you might have your cook, and... this," he points to the dig in progress, "supported that."

This working part of the Madison household sat just outside a perimeter fence. This fence not only kept livestock out, but "it's also a social barrier," notes Reeves. Inside this enclosure were the domestic slaves, an area that has already been excavated. "Those houses were literally a stone's throw away from the terrace and the rear lawn where Dolly had all her barbecues and fetes. And those structures are frame structures. They have glazed windows; they have raised wooden floors, they've got masonry chimneys. They are refined structures." He pauses to make a point. "They are almost meant to be seen... The Madisons are putting the best face on slavery from what's directly visible from the house."

But just on the other side of this fence is this middle earth, not quite as crude as what they expect to find when they move the dig to the field slave area, but not as fancy as the household slave area either. Standing in the



An archaeological dig is an exact process measured by thousandths of a foot. It is also hard, hot, dirty work.

middle of this dig, Matt Reeves turns to all points of the compass. "We've got work yards all through here, potentially a paddock. You've got the stable that's up there. You've got good evidence for a craft complex over there. This is the beginning of the working part of the estate. And then as you move in that direction past the visitor's center, that's when you get into the main farm complex."

Eventually he would like to see all or part of this become a crucial interpretive part of a visitor's tour through Montpelier. Right now, "Visitors can't see in a tangible way and experience, in a tangible way, the stable and where that was and begin to ask questions about what was involved having 100 guests here at Montpelier."

One of the first things they found were stones poking up through the ground. "When we find these kinds of stones out here, we get really excited." It was the hearth. "And that hearth is at grade, which means the floor is also at grade. It's a clay floor...Also there's no evidence of a masonry chimney, which means it's a stick and mud chimney...Typically those are associated with a log structure. It's much cruder than the frame structure that we have evidence for with the house slaves."

The daubing for these cabins and stick and mud chimneys came from "borrow pits" where they dug out the clay and filled the resulting hole with trash. To archaeologists, trash is treasure. You learn a lot from

it. We know James and Dolley were partial to champagne and oysters from the empty bottles and shucked shells in her midden. We know what china pattern was on Dolley's table from the shards of broken plates found in her garbage heap.

The same is true for this work yard complex, and it's interesting to note that some of the same china patterns are showing up here as well, which prompts Matt to quote the oft-said line, "What's mine is massa's, and what's massa's is mine." They're also finding animal bones, specifically the jaw bones of goats or sheep. An expedition member comes up to Matt with an L-shaped piece of iron. He immediately identifies it as "a medium sized pintle...This is like a little shutter hinge like maybe to a window." An intern produces a ceramic shard. "That's part of the Fitzhugh pattern," says Matt without hesitation. "That's gorgeous. You found it; you get to hold it." The intern smiles proudly and then bags and documents the find.

uments the find.

Matt talks of a tobacco pipe they found. "These little glimpses into 19th century life in many ways are only possible through archaeology, because there's no record of folks hand-modeling clay tobacco pipes."

But what is truly unique about Montpelier is the fact that it has not been tilled. These artifacts have lain in the ground untouched by man since they were originally deposited there sometime between the late 18th to the mid-19th century. And the people to thank for that are the subsequent owners of Montpelier, in particular, the DuPonts. "They're buying thousands of acres of land and not tilling it, not doing commercial timbering and then giving it to the Trust and that's what kept it preserved," marvels Reeves. "It's amazing...I know of no other site that has this whole range of slave quarters, from different segments of the enslaved community that are in areas that have never been touched, that are in unplowed context." He points to the brick hearth. "That would be long gone. Two seasons of plowing there would be no evidence for that hearth."

Every morning, Matt Reeves shows up for work between 4:30 and 5:00 a.m. He uses this quiet time to do analyses. His alarm clock is the realization that there is so much yet to be found and, like the Archaeological Cat, he is curious. "It's what inspires me to wake up in the morning."

So you want to be an archaeologist

The first thing you need to do is lose the Indiana Jones hat and attitude and prepare yourself for early mornings on the job at 7:30 and long sweltering days on your hands and knees rooting around in the dirt.

In addition to regular field schools for college credit through James Madison University and the State University of New York, Montpelier hosts archaeological expeditions for the general public. This is where you, the average Joe, can participate in active digs such as this, under the one-on-one supervision of the archaeological staff and their interns. The last two of these weeklong field expeditions will be held October 3-9 and 17-23. Just go to montpelier.org/archaeology programs to learn more.

"All of this is learned with field experience," says Matt pointing to the dig. "There's no way to learn this in a book." As a result, classroom time during a field expedition is minimal; you're getting your hands dirty right from the get-go.

Needless to say, all this digging, all this conservation and paperwork does not come for free. Of the eight archaeologists working at Montpelier, only two are paid by the operating budget. That's why Matt Reeves spends

most of his time trying to raise money. "If we just relied on operating funds, we wouldn't have an archaeology department, one that could do this kind of excavation. So that's where we have to go out and find grants, ask for donations." One way to give is to sign up for an expedition because the \$650 fee helps pay for the staff that is down in the trenches training you.

Does Matt miss being on his hands and knees with a trowel in his hand? He sighs and responds, "The problem is, if I was, I would be the only archaeologist here."



During field expeditions, each participant is mentored by an archaeologist. Here Stefan Woehke helps 9-year-old Nick von Klaudy. Nick, the youngest of all expedition members, has been interested in archaeology since he was six.



The hearth was located at grade, which means the floor of this structure was clay not wood, explains Field Director Adam Marshall.