

Digging into 'one of Petersburg's jewels'

Archaeologists delve into dirt at Battersea, a Founding Father's home

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PETERSBURG - Little is known about Battersea, the home of Col. John Banister, Petersburg's first mayor and one of America's Founding Fathers. But that could change as a result of an archaeological effort.

Archaeologists have been at the site on Upper Appomattox Street for the past three weeks, digging up artifacts they hope will yield a better account of the site's history.

"Battersea is truly one of Petersburg's jewels. It showcases the city's architectural variety and styles," said Kevin Kirby, Petersburg's director of tourism.

The \$30,000 study of the home -- listed as a Virginia Landmark and on the National Register of Historic Places since 1968 -- has been financed with a grant from Petersburg's not-for-profit Cameron Foundation.

In this study -- considered the first in-depth assessment of the property--archaeologists and apprentices have excavated 1 to 2-foot-deep holes and found hundreds of artifacts including prehistoric flakes American Indians used to make tools and projectile points. Coins from the early 1800s, a bullet from the Civil War, a late 18th to mid-19th-century kaolin clay pipe, and a late 19th century piece of pottery.

Some of the artifacts are evidence of American Indians, while others suggest where other buildings may have been on the site and indicate some of the uses of the property, said archaeologist Josh Duncan, who is leading the study.

The site was used as an industrial mill where slaves worked. At one point the property's occupants also worked the land and did some cultivation and gardening at the home as well as along the Appomattox River, said Duncan, of the Richmond-based Cultural Resources Inc.

"We are finding out a lot about what happened here," he said, noting that some of the relics could date back 2,000 years.

Some of the findings will be revealed today during an open house, Duncan said. The final report will be available in a few months after the archaeologists finish the lab work.

Banister was a signer of the Articles of Confederation and a friend of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. He built the home about 1767 and 1768 along the Appomattox River. The home was occupied by British troops and was an important site in the 1781 Battle of Petersburg.

Today, Battersea is a 37.5-acre property on which sits one of the nation's most unique examples of 18th-century Italianate architecture, according to the National Register of Historic Places.

The exterior and interior of the home have changed over time, but the home keeps several of its original features such as an elaborate Chinese lattice staircase, said Kirby.

The city purchased it for \$200,000 in 1985 and has since maintained it with limited funding and used it on special occasions. Tours of the property and of the house are given by request through the city's visitor's center.

The city is considering opening the house more frequently, Kirby said.

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