

Battersea Excavation Sets Stage for Preservation



Kim O'Connell

6

The Petersburg villa known as Battersea is one of the nation's most significant remaining examples of Palladian architecture. The 240-year-old building has retained its distinctive five-part massing and now awaits restoration and a new use.

Sometimes, the first clue about how to preserve a building lies not within the structure itself, but beneath it. Such was the case on a clear day in October, when a team of amateur and professional archaeologists mounted a public excavation at Battersea, an eighteenth-century Palladian villa in Petersburg, Va.

The dig, undertaken as part of Virginia Archaeology Month, aimed to reveal information about the building's various inhabitants, who have spanned more than two centuries. Built by Revolutionary War patriot Col. John Banister in 1767-68, Battersea is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and remains one the nation's best remaining examples of Palladian design. Now owned by the city of Petersburg,

the building had been uninhabited for years and has languished in a state of disrepair.

"The house has such distinction," says Leslie J. Naranjo, executive director of Battersea, Inc., a nonprofit organization that is working with the city on a long-term stewardship plan for the house and its 37-acre grounds. "This was a good way to demonstrate publicly how archaeology can be used as a planning tool to determine the future use of a site."

During the excavation, which began on October 16 and culminated in a public event on October 20, archaeologists from the state's Department of Historic Resources (DHR) focused their efforts on both the front porch and an area behind the house, to discern differences between how primary and secondary

entrances were used and maintained. Digging in five-foot-square pits, the team uncovered several artifacts near the porch, including architectural debris such as mortar and window pieces, as well as ceramics and buttons. The pit behind the house revealed more objects that directly related to residential life, such as bottle glass, a door latch, a padlock, a comb, and other items. This information will be compared with data from an earlier excavation performed by the College of William and Mary, with a full report expected next year.

“There is a lot more archaeology that can and should be done at Battersea,” says Mike Barber, an archaeologist with DHR who led the excavation and finds it comparable to the higher-profile archaeological digs performed at the Jamestown settlement. “We’re talking about a fairly elitist white population living in the villa itself, but over the course of its history there were also African-Americans living on the property and Native Americans as well.”

After the core excavation was completed, more than 140 people gathered for an “open house” event at the site, which featured presentations by local and state officials and included a session in which schoolchildren sifted for artifacts alongside the professionals. “Though this week’s excavations uncover only a small part of Battersea’s history,” DHR Director Kathleen Kilpatrick said at the event, “they contribute to a growing body of evidence that, pieced together over the years, will allow Battersea, Inc., to share the full story of this place and the people who lived there.”

Architecturally, Battersea has retained its Palladian features through a succession of owners, particularly its distinctive five-part massing. Later alterations have generally complemented the original structure, such as the early nineteenth-century addition of Federal-style windows and other details. Notably, a beautiful Chinese latticework staircase in the main hall has survived. Although the site was first listed on the National Register in the 1960s, recent research supported by the Center for Palladian Studies in America, along with the city and local preservationists, allowed the site to be further designated in the Register in 2006 as having national significance in addition to local and state importance.



John J. Zeugner

7

State archaeologists, along with local preservationists and volunteers, dig beneath the villa’s front entrance to discern how this area might have been treated differently from dependencies at the back of the house.

Battersea, Inc., and the city are now seeking funding for further research, preservation, and interpretation of the property. “The potential for additional archaeology is very high there,” says Hugh Miller, FAIA, a former director of DHR who serves on the board of Battersea, Inc., and chairs its property committee. “The next logical step is to get funding for a systematic archaeological survey of all 37 acres, and start to develop some research questions and do some investigations. The comparison between objects of material culture and the documented history is going to be very interesting.”

For her part, Leslie Naranjo views Battersea not just as a historic house, but as a catalyst for education, recreation,

and economic development in the region. Just as the archaeology has begun to reveal the layers of history at Battersea, Naranjo believes that the site will one day support several different functions that will appeal to a cross-section of society. “We’re studying a living community, not a static site of the past,” she says. “Battersea represents many parts of the past and many peoples. A full archaeology survey will reveal to us the areas that we really need to protect and those where there might be more flexibility as to how the site is used. It’s ripe for some really creative thinking.”

– Kim A. O’Connell