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SIFTING THROUGH HISTORY

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PETERSBURG — Battersea is one of Petersburg's fascinating mysteries. While much is known about the city's other landmarks, Col. John Banister's 1768 estate continues to present many riddles to historians. This week, archaeologists started to survey the villa's entire 37 acres — for the first time in Battersea's history. And surprisingly, the experts already made some discoveries.

Col. Bannister, who built the original house, was Petersburg's first mayor and a prominent figure in Colonial Virginia. He was a respected businessman, barrister and Revolutionary War leader. His estate also saw action during that war.

Josh Duncan of Cultural Resources Inc. from Richmond leads the team of three specialists, who started assessing the compound on Wednesday. They get support from locals like Shante Cummings and Megan Kirby. Cummings received a scholarship from Battersea Inc. for this venture. Kirby was hired on salary for four weeks. "This is a good start for me, because I plan to sign up at the American University in Cairo soon," Kirby said.

Ben Greenbaum, local historian and member of the Battersea Board of Directors, said Battersea plans to get more members of the community involved in the exploration of the estate.

"This is not just a museum," he said. "This is a research project for the people of Petersburg."

Yesterday, project archaeologist Duncan gave Greenbaum an overview of the first findings.

"This is basically the first phase of our survey," Duncan said. "We are identifying possible archaeological sites on the estate."

Duncan and his crew don't limit their focus to the era of Col. Banister, but they do extensive searches for relics dating back to prehistoric times.

One of the first findings was a stone that was used by American Indians to make tools — some 8,000 years ago.

"This was certainly an area of high importance for the natives for many thousand years," he said. Another finding was evidence for more houses that must have stood along Appomattox Street in the late 19th century, a fact that wasn't known until now.

Greenbaum showed special interest in the Battersea of the Civil War era.

"We don't know very much about what happened here during that time, except that Confederate soldiers camped down the road," he said. Duncan doesn't have any answers yet. But he hopes to find relics around the locations of former slave cabins.

So far, his team was able to dig out other small relics like ceramics from the late 18th century, brick fragments, oyster shells and even the bones of a pig that fell prey to Battersea residents more than 100 years ago.

"We usually dig holes from three to four feet deep," Duncan said.

In the next four weeks, which is the first phase's duration, the archaeologists plan to open the ground on 900 different locations.

The findings will be displayed at Battersea sometime in October. The cost for the survey — roughly \$30,000 — is covered by a \$65,000 grant from the Cameron Foundation.

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MANDANA MARSH/STAFF PHOTOS Robert Peterson, left, and Megan Kirby dig and sift for artifacts yesterday at historic Battersea in Petersburg