**Excavations begin at Williamsburg’s First Baptist Church site**

By Madison Peck

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The students sat in the heat, pulling out small items and discussing the archaeological staff from Colonial Williamsburg, who told them stories about the history of the church.

The program that brought the students to the Custis Square site was the Public Archaeology Institute, in which high school students experience what it’s like to be a full-time archaeologist.

The program, run by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, is in its second year and has quickly become popular. This year there were 45 applications for the 30 spots.

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**Getting their hands dirty**

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THE VIRGINIA GAZETTE

Archaeology program at Colonial Williamsburg grants hands-on experience to high schoolers

By Madison Peek
Virginia Gazette • Jul 20, 2022 at 10:00 am

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Expand
WILLIAMSBURG — Ten high school students huddled around 1-by-1 meter squares dotting the earth, digging for artifacts of the old Eastern State Hospital building.

The students sat in the heat, pulling out small items and showing them to the archaeological staff from Colonial Williamsburg, who told them stories about the history of Eastern State and their work so far.
The program that brought the students to the Custis Square site was the Public Archaeology Institute, in which high schoolers experience what it’s like to be a full-time archaeologist for a week. The program, run by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, is in its second year but has quickly become popular. This year there were 50 applications for the 20 spots.

“They essentially jump in [like] they have always been doing this. They learn as they go,” said Crystal Castleberry, a Colonial Williamsburg archaeologist. “They dig an entire test unit with a partner and they sort of work through the process with their partner and with the team leaders that we have on site.”

The ongoing project students worked on was digging in Custis Square to learn more about the Eastern State Hospital. The building the group was analyzing was built in the 1890s after the original hospital structure burned down. The 1890s building was bulldozed in 1968 and turned into a cow pasture, so the group has found well-preserved foundations, artifacts and lots of rubble, Castleberry said.
By analyzing the remains of the hospital building, students and archaeologists can learn about the history of the hospital and how mental health care was treated over the years. Williamsburg was the site of the first mental health hospital in the country and has had “every iteration” of mental health care in the almost 250 years the hospital has been established.

Students learn about the history of the hospital, conduct digs and log the artifacts they find. They conclude the program by giving a tour of the grounds to friends, family and visitors.

The 20 students who were a part of the program came from states all over the country. Students had to write an essay about why they wanted to be in the program, sharing their specific passions for archaeology.

“There’s a lot of history here and it’s really cool,” said Eli Jah, a high school senior from Alexandria.

Jah discovered the program while shopping for potential colleges and jumped at the opportunity to put his passion for archaeology to work.

Perched above a shallow site square, high school students Thomas Ray and Natalie Herman used trowels to unearth layers of dirt and pull out artifacts, which they placed in a plastic bag and filled out a form. The form had to be very detailed, with information about exactly where the artifact was found, what it was, what soil it was in and any other pertinent details. Someone looking at the forms 50 years later should be able to tell exactly where the artifact was found, Herman, a North Carolina native, said.
Ray, of Hanover, and Herman, both juniors in high school, are planning to be archaeologists or work with history in the future. Despite the scabs on their hands from the digging, they were happy to get hands-on experience in the field.

“As I’ve gotten older, [in my] classes we haven’t done as much interactive things,” Herman said. “It is interesting to see like how the stuff they taught us in class, like the dirt layers, I could see it in real life.”

For Williamsburg native Will Kester, the hands-on experience brought to life the behind-the-scenes of the history he’s surrounded by.

Kester said he enjoyed “being able to dig and ask questions that you don’t really get to find out from a history teacher or online.”

“Everyone had so much knowledge that it was a great experience. I learned a lot from it,” Kester added.

Kester had been waiting to age into the program since he participated in the Kid’s Dig, a former Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archaeology program aimed at elementary school students interested in archaeology. The Kid’s Dig was the inspiration for the Public Archaeology Institute after 21,000 kids participated in the program over five years.

“We really tapped into how excited young people are about archaeology and what they can still find out that isn’t in a history book,” Castleberry said. “It sort of brings the whole history thing to life in a much more tactile way for them.”

Madison Peek, madison.peek@virginiamedia.com

A 1964 photograph shows excavators at two Custis wells and the excavated Custis mansion cellar hole. In the background is part of Eastern State Hospital’s former building. Courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

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