

Archeological survey digs up bits of Langley history

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John Layden, Benjamin Syms and George Wythe are not early aviation pioneers; however, they certainly were important to Langley's early history. Layden was the father of the first child of English parentage born in Virginia. Syms is credited with starting the first "Free School" in America. Wythe was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

These and other early settlers to this peninsula left their mark in the history books. Now, a team from the College of William and Mary are searching to see if they or Native Americans left any signs of their existence – buried beneath the soil of Langley.

Will Moore, project archeologist at the William and Mary Center for Archeological Research, started his work day at Langley Monday morning over near the Langley Officers' Club. The site was where the Sherwood Plantation home once stood. Mr. Moore hopes to find traces of where one of the outbuildings stood – or remains of an ancient debris pit.

Jack Aube, senior field technician, and Chris West, field technician with the center, carefully marked a square yard area with twine and metal spikes.

Mr. Moore and the technicians used a transit telescope and a stadia rod to record the elevation of the site to be surveyed.

They'd already had some success in finding artifacts not far from the club, at a site near Lawson Hall. At that dig, a button from a great coat dating from the late 18th or

early 19th century was discovered. Made of brass, the button is larger than an inch in circumference, and still has the fastener attached.

At the same site, goat or deer bones, Native American ceramics, a clay pipe stem and bits of glazed pottery were found.

What would this new site at the club reveal?

Following a routine they have perfected, first the layer of sod was removed, and then carefully, Mr. West dug down just a bit with the square back shovel into the soil, and tossed the dirt to Mr. Aube, who shook the dirt and debris with the portable shaking screen.

Bits of nails and other fairly modern building materials were found. And then a shard of glazed pottery, and then another.

At 1 p.m. what was declared to possibly be “the best find of the survey so far,” according to Mr. Aube, was found. Three inches long, less than an inch wide, what looked like bone appeared to have a perfectly centered quarter inch hole drilled into one end.

At first glance, it appeared to be a Native American created artifact. It resembles what could have been part of a necklace or other adornment. Much closer inspection in the field, along with a scrape from the knife, and the euphoria drifts away. “Looks like it’s only the end of a plastic spoon,” said Mr. Moore.

But proof of Native Americans does exist in the hole. A small shard of unglazed pottery is unearthed. Bearing four ridges on one side, smooth on the other, Mr. Aube explains what this find represents. The Indians in this area did not glaze their pottery. Besides the color of the clay used, one of the few other ways to decorate their wares was

to create a cord design, by tying wet reed around the pot while still wet. When dry, the cord pattern appears.

So why are these people digging holes all around the base?

“It’s part of a larger effort to manage and help identify locations to facilitate planning for future land use,” said Mr. Moore.

Langley is not the only base conducting surveys like this one, according to Dr. Paul Green, the Air Combat Command Cultural Resources Manager. “This base has significant cultural resources such as historic buildings and archaeological sites that were partially surveyed in the early 1990s,” Dr. Green said. “Completing inventories like this one here and at other ACC bases helps us manage future construction projects and training exercises.”

Ranges such as at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., and at Avon Park, Fla., are still actively being surveyed.

This year’s examination started in February and will run through May. Awareness of the College of William and Mary’s archeological work ties in with upcoming activities. Monday through Sunday is Historic Preservation Week, and Langley is conducting activities to help base people be aware of resources on the installation.

The 2004 theme is “New Frontiers in Preservation” and the 1st Civil Engineer Squadron has held poster and essay contests for children 14 and younger. The winners will be recognized at a ceremony in the Bateman Library May 13 at 7 p.m.