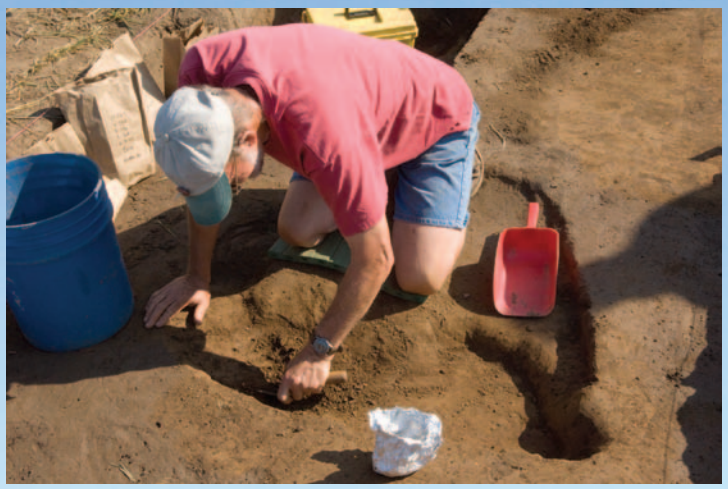
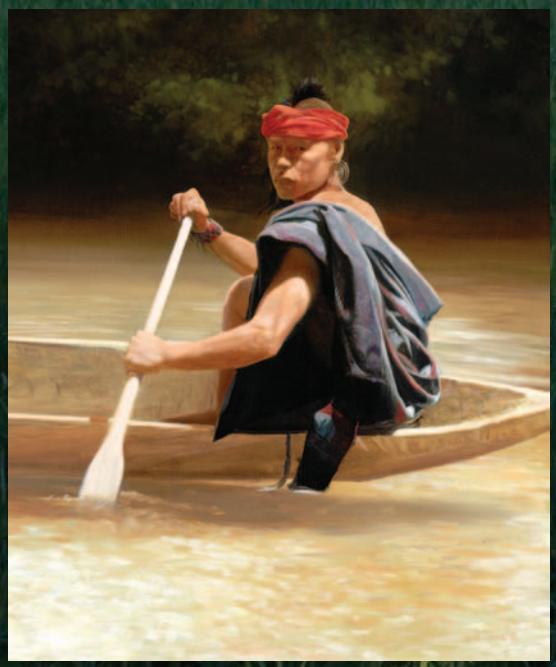


Volunteer Roy Brown scraping soil from one of the excavation pits at the June 2007 dig.

Why Do They Keep Digging Up The Past?

Written by **Mary Meehan** Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

Sifting for artifact in a quarter inch mesh screen.



Susquehanna Indian painting by Lee Teter. The Susquehannock and Shawnee tribes were among the residents who lived here along the Potomac River.

AS A BOY GROWING UP IN RAWLINGS, MD, GARY GRANT HUNTED FOR ARROWHEADS ON THE JOHN BARTON FARM. Finding his first arrowhead made him ask, "Okay, who made this? How did they make it?" While accounting became Grant's profession as an adult, archeology is his delight. Besides reading and taking courses in it, he has participated in digs in Colorado, West Virginia, and "all over the State of Maryland."

Thirty acres of the old Barton Farm are now the Barton Site, an archeological dig on Route 220, south of Cumberland. Grant and other volunteers now work there under the supervision of Dr. Robert Wall, an archeologist who teaches at Towson University, Towson, Md. They're digging into the story of American Indians who lived along the Potomac River from 12,000 or more years ago through the arrival of English settlers in the 1700s A.D. Members of the Susquehannock and Shawnee tribes were among later residents of the area.

The Western Maryland chapter of the Archeological Society of Maryland provides major support for work at the Barton Site. Ed Hanna, a retired police officer who heads the chapter, notes that there are ancient sites everywhere in Western Maryland. Most are in or near valleys and rivers, which Hanna calls "the interstates" of ancient times. The Barton site, on a Potomac River flood plain, was the location of many successive settlements, and silt deposits from flooding sealed off one era from another. This stratification aids archeological understanding, so Barton is a prime site. Now owned by the Archaeological Conservancy, a New Mexico-based group, the site has been excavated since the late 1980s by volunteers working with Dr. Wall.

Roy Brown *(kneeling)* prepares archeological features for photographs by Dr. Robert Wall *(left, standing)*.

Freelance collection of arrowheads is no longer allowed on the property. Instead, the volunteers work together to find artifacts and old building sites and to explain how the old residents lived. As Gary Grant says, their life is "a fascinating puzzle that needs to be put together."

Dr. Wall, who already has a huge amount of data from prior work at the site, uses that and surveying equipment to map out areas to be excavated in the summer months. Each excavation pit is large enough for one or two people—sometimes more—to work in; and five or more pits may be worked simultaneously when there are enough volunteers. One day last June, Ed Hanna's pit was about 16 inches deep, and he was already back to the 1600s. Others were working on a "deep unit" that was expected to go down about eight feet and possibly as far back as 15,000 years.

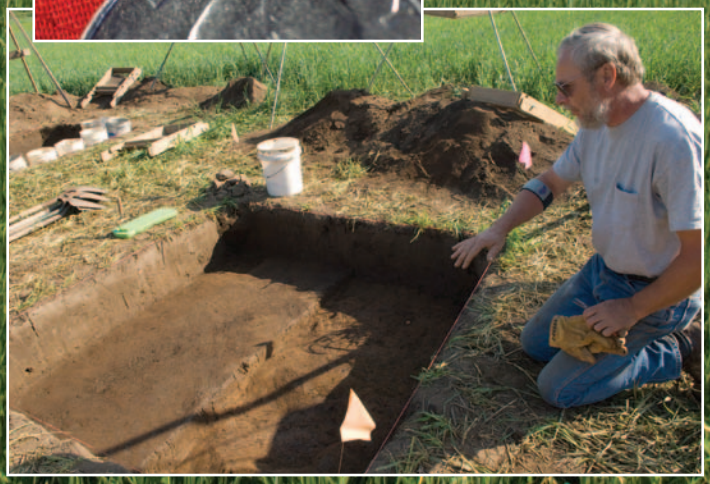
As some volunteers scrape soil from the pits, others run it through large sifters that are suspended from tripods. Standing at the sifters, they push the dirt through and watch carefully for bone beads, stone scrapers and awls, pieces of pottery, and "points." The latter are small, triangular stones that the Indians cut and sharpened for use as knives, spear points, or arrowheads.

Volunteer Bob Bantz, working one of the large sifters, watches for beads, scrapers, pottery and points.

Antler pendant and a bone beads found at the site in June 2007.

Glass trade bead from early contact with Europeans.

David Frederick points our traces of an 1800s settler's plow and 1600s Native American post structure.



Andrew Barnhart, a high school student from Hagerstown, Md., was one of the sifters in June. He said he found the work "a lot harder than what I expected," but he enjoyed finding "a couple of beads, a couple of points." He is considering a career in archeology.

So are several Towson University students who were working at the site as part of an archeology course for which they'll receive academic credit. Leah Singleton said she was "just baking" in the summer sun and that her muscles ached by the end of each day. "I'm like, wow, I haven't talked to that muscle in a long time," she laughed. She had found only bones and points in her first days of sifting, but was glad that others had found more interesting items—a stone awl, for example. Sharon Rossman, another Towson student, wants to be a forensic anthropologist. She was happy to find a bone bead and a few points. While she liked the summer heat, she acknowledged some boredom in "just sifting."

But when volunteers had time to look up or walk around, they had striking views: West Virginia's Knobly Mountain on the southeast, farm country to the south, and Maryland's majestic Dans Mountain to the west. The people who lived there thousands of years ago must have enjoyed their magnificent valley.

David Frederick had graduated to working in a pit, carefully scraping the surface and watching for evidence of primitive buildings. Frederick, who grew up in Cumberland and now lives in nearby Keyser, W.Va., was using up his vacation to help with the dig. A maintenance supervisor at a saw mill, he said many people think he's crazy to work in a hot field as a volunteer during his vacation. But he added, "I'm getting paid. Not in money, but in knowledge."

He thinks often about the ancient people who lived at the Barton Site "and how hard a life they had here.

And I just imagine trying to do things with stone tools—and not being able to go down to the hardware store and buy what you need." It's believed that the bow and arrow were invented around 1000 A.D. Without them, Frederick said, hunters had only knives and spears to kill deer, elk, and bear. That made hunting both difficult and dangerous. Or, as Ed Hanna remarked, one can imagine a hunter's "trying to get dinner before dinner gets him." Some food, though, was much easier to gather: Laboratory analysis of soil from the pits has identified corn as well as seeds from blueberries and strawberries that the primitive people apparently ate.

Frederick read a newspaper notice about a Barton excavation a few years ago, then went "out to see what was going on and just got hooked on it." Several other members of his family have helped out at the dig. His wife Darlene was hooked by finding a piece of pottery on her first day. "You know, it just takes one piece," she said. She is a special-ed teacher in art, "so the pottery intrigues me."

While they used stone for tools and weapons, the Native Americans who lived at the Barton Site didn't build with stone. The volunteers, though, can infer much about their homes by watching carefully for post holes. When posts rotted in the soil, they left stains behind that are still visible today. This makes possible some well-educated guesses about house structures and village palisades. Gary Grant mentioned evidence of a house discovered last year at the Barton Site. The Indians worked around a fire in the center of the building, he said. They made beads and fishhooks from bone, as well as "some of the prettiest sharpened tools that you would ever want to see."

Roy Brown, a Cumberland resident who is retired from work in printing and graphic design, is a seasoned volunteer at the Barton dig. Others there hold him in awe because he understands ancient artifacts by copying them with painstaking accuracy, using only those tools available to the Indians before the Europeans arrived. He has even done replications for museums. Brown recalled making a bow some years ago: "I used all stone tools. I had to make a stone ax to cut the tree down, and then stone scrapers" and stone knives. He added that "once you cut a tree down with a stone ax, you have a much greater appreciation for what it takes to make a palisade around a village or to build a lodge."

Dr. Wall and his volunteers take great pains to record —in writing, maps, and photographs—everything they find. He and his Towson students also do laboratory analysis of the artifacts. Wall hopes to use some Barton material for an exhibit on the ancient people at the Allegany County Museum in Cumberland. "We do traveling exhibits, too," he says. "We take some materials from what we've found and put some graphics together with that."

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Ed Hanna would like to see more observers and volunteers at the Barton Site. He acknowledges, though, that archeology "isn't for everybody.... If your only interest is to find the neat stuff—the beads, or the copper, or the spear points, or something—you know, that interest will run out when the artifacts run out." On the other hand, if you see archeology "as a connection to people, you have a longer-running interest." He invites those who would like to learn more to: "Come visit us. Come to our meetings, and meet some of us... That camaraderie always helps a lot. You feel like you're not alone in a new territory."

The Western Maryland Chapter of the Archeological Society of Maryland meets in the LaVale Public Library, LaVale, Md., at 7:30 p.m. on the 4th Friday of each month from September-May (except December). The meetings, free and open to the public, often feature guest speakers—and sometimes a "show and tell" of artifacts. Digs at the Barton Site take place in the summer and occasionally in the early fall. For more information, contact Ed Hanna at wmdasm@yahoo.com or (301) 777-1380. Also, see marylandarcheology.org on the Internet.