



What Lies Beneath ... Museum, ECSU partner for hi-tech archeological investigation

By Robert Kelly-goss, Albemarle Life Editor, Tuesday, June 26, 2012



Staff photo by Thomas J. TurneySumer intern from Norfolk State Kevin Brodie II uses a ground penetrating radar to survey an historic site on Rivershore Road, Thursday, June 21, 2012.



Staff photo by Thomas J. TurneyMalcolm LeCompte of ECSU (left) goes over results with sumer intern Kevin Brodie II where they are surveying an historic site off of Rivershore Road, Thursday, June 21, 2012.

On this particular day — last Thursday — it's hot and muggy, and hot. It's not the sort of day you want to be out under the sun, searching for historical treasures at Elizabeth City's oldest settlement site, Cobb's Point.

But for archeologists, historians and even a spatial physicist, there is likely no time like the present to search beneath the earth for evidence of the past.

Out on an open expanse of land along the Pasquotank River, Malcolm LeCompte, Ph.D., stands beneath a floppy hat next to several students, looking over a device that looks like a push cart.

The device has large wheels and at the base is a plastic box that looks like a small vehicle battery. On top, shaded from the sun by a canvas hood, is a computer screen with several controls next it. This is ground-penetrating radar.

LeCompte, who is a physics professor at Elizabeth City State University with the university's Center of Excellence in Remote Sensing Education and Research, was sent to this location on Rivershore Road by the center's director, Linda Hayden, Ph.D., to help Museum of the Albemarle staff search for evidence of a 17th century customs house, a courthouse, possibly a tavern and in general a picture of colonial life along the river, predating Elizabeth City.

"This piece of land is the earliest piece granted in a charter in 1663 by Lord Berkley, governor of Virginia," explained Don Pendergraft, the now former exhibit design chief for MOA. Berkley granted the land to Thomas Relfe because, according to MOA records, he brought 15 people to the colony that paid one shilling each for one acre of land. The land grant was his reward.

Pendergraft squats on the grass, pulling on yellow cords that are being staked to the ground. The chords make a grid across the open field and it is along those grid lines that LeCompte and his student

interns will travel, gathering data that can later tell a story about what was once on this spot of ground — and what rests beneath the topsoil.

This location at Cobb Point is currently the site of the Horsely House, the location where Arts of the Albemarle will hold its biannual Design Event fundraiser in late summer. It is also the site of a place that has gone by many names: Relfe's Point, Relfe's Ferry, Winfield, Cobb Point, Fort Cobb and even Winslow Farms.

"From this point to the east, to Charles Creek, there was 750 acres (of farmland)," says Pendergraft.

While Pendergraft explains the nature of the site, LaCompte is following the progress of his ground-penetrating radar. He says that it's showing them that there are some walls beneath the ground here and that after he and his student interns complete the survey, they will take the data back to the university where they will put the pictures together.

"The radar waves, depending on what's down there, travel down and come back and we get a picture of what's down there," says LaCompte.

The picture on the screen isn't clear, but to a trained eye it means something. And a group of pictures taken by traveling that grid can be grouped together to mean something more.

The results are something like a jigsaw puzzle, only in three dimensions. The data they pull from the site will eventually fit together to show that perhaps beneath the ground here is the foundation for the customs house, or even the courthouse.

Museum collections specialist and archeologist Clay Swindell says it's difficult to tell what structure sat where at Cobb Point. There are no records indicating where the structures sat, but they do know that the structures were there because the customs house physically existed on the site until the early 1970s, according to Pendergraft.

He says the building was torn down by landowners to make way for construction and that's why, according to Swindell, doing this project is important. They want to verify what is there before someone comes along and builds on top of it.

Being an archeologist, Swindell would like nothing more than to conduct a dig on the site, but that's not likely to happen, he says. That's why using the ground-penetrating radar is important. It is giving them the picture they need to at least record that this and that are beneath the ground and that this is a historically significant site.

"It's a non-intrusive way to study it," says Swindell.

He says there are a number of items they might find if they were to dig, however. If there was a tavern on the site, for example, they might find bottles, pipe stems, cups and that sort of thing. But at least this way they know they can outline the location of the structures.

In the 17th century the site also served as a wharf and a ferry landing from what is now Camden County. Back then, present-day Camden was part of Pasquotank County and if you needed to head to the courthouse, you would have to take the ferry across the river.

The first courthouse was situated in present day Newbeginland — that's the area where you'll find the blimp base. Swindell says folks back then complained that traveling across the river to that location was too far and so the courthouse was eventually moved to Cobb Point.

The location was also believed to be a part of the infamous Culpeper's Rebellion. Led by John Culpeper and George Durant, the rebellion protested the British's stranglehold on free trade in the region.

And eventually the site became famous because of Fort Cobb, an earthen fort erected to defend Elizabeth City from invading Union troops during the Civil War.

LeCompte will take the information back to ECSU and put it together, giving the researchers a clearer picture of what's beneath the ground there. Once the information is put together, Swindell and museum staff members will be able to interpret it and then create an exhibit that will be on display at the Design Event in September.