

# Urban Archeology in St. Augustine

## Volunteers Assist Research and Public Outreach

Bruce John Piatek



Screening for replica artifacts.

**T**he Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board, an agency of the Florida Department of State, recently completed field work on the Government House excavation. The Preservation Board is an agency that is charged with the study and preservation of the historical and archeological resources of colonial St. Augustine, FL, and its environs. The Preservation Board is assisted in its archeological research efforts by the St. Augustine Archaeological Association whose members are avocational archeologists. The Association's members provide volunteer assistance to professional archeological investigations and assist in archeological educational programs for tourists and residents. The Government House investigation is currently in the analysis phase, with active field work having ended in September of 1993.

The author, along with Stan Bond, Mary Martin, and the volunteers of the St. Augustine Archaeological Association, recently completed a successful excavation season working on the Governor's House site in St. Augustine. The dig was conducted by the Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board. The project was designed with three principal goals for research and three goals for public education and outreach.

The first research goal was to identify the earliest European use of the Government House lot and better

define the boundaries of the 16th century settlement. Behaviors which could be encountered are associated with the guard house and watch tower shown on the 1586 Boazio Map produced after Sir Francis Drake's raid, and Governor Canzo's home built on the site in 1598.

Second, we hoped to better document the evolutionary history of the buildings that served as the governor's home and office. The historic maps contain inconsistencies in the structural layout of the building over short periods of time. These inconsistencies appear to be the result of different map makers producing maps of the same building but with differing perspectives on what was important. Sorting out these inconsistencies would help us better understand the evolution of the site and future assessments of other colonial properties.

Third, we hoped to collect data on the daily life of the governors, their family, servants, and slaves. This was the first archeological research conducted on the site which served as home and office to Florida's colonial governors. It was hoped that data from the excavation

could provide new insights and a broader comparative database for St. Augustine.

The findings from the excavation are preliminary since laboratory work is not complete, but the effort was successful. We discovered that during the 18th century the governor's courtyard was first paved with small stones that came into the colony as ships ballast. Later the courtyard was resurfaced with two successive tabby floors. The foundation from an 18th century guard house was identified and information was gathered on its construction sequence and dimensions. Post molds indicating an early-18th-century or late-17th century wooden building were also identified. Below these features was a mid-17th-century well that graced the governor's courtyard. It had four coquina stone columns that rose from the corners of this square well apparently to support a roof. This elaborate structure was an enhancement of an earlier barrel lined well. The high point and final day of the excavation was the recovery of the complete, intact barrel from the bottom of the well and the board and post well repair



Students enter unit for detailed explanation.

structure. The wooden items are currently being conserved by the Maple Leaf Shipwreck Conservation Laboratory in Jacksonville. It is hoped that the well structure can be reconstructed and eventually placed on display at the Government House museum.

The public outreach effort required a high degree of planning and effort prior to beginning the excavation. Once the background history was known, research questions were developed, and the site was selected, the logistics of doing the excavation were time-consuming but familiar. The concept of public outreach was first planned to be a simple process of opening the site to the public and having a site interpreter present current findings and working hypotheses to visitors. Next a brochure was added to the concept so that visitors could take additional information from the site. The concept then grew to include an exhibit gallery, visible working laboratory space, and small museum shop. All this enhanced the visitor's experience and provided additional vehicles through which to teach people about archeology. Exhibit design and construction, and the activities of developing signs, visitor flow patterns, advertising, booking school tours, obtaining goods for resale, etc., were new activities for Stan Bond and the author who were responsible for getting these jobs done.

The first goal of our outreach effort was to invite the public into the site and allow them to watch the work and ask questions. The goal was to maximize the public benefit from the expenditure of public funds without sacrificing archeological quality. We threw open the gates and invited the public to watch as artifacts were discovered before their eyes. They could see history buried under their feet. This component of the project was highly successful. It did slow down the excavation and the same questions were asked thousands of times, but it was a great opportunity for people to see the real St. Augustine, and to make a link to the past.

A second goal was to develop the 3,000 square foot exhibit gallery. The author designed the exhibit hall to be a hands-on, do what the archeologists do, exhibit space. This effort was something new and it worked well. Visitors could reconstruct a ceramic dish, match artifacts with the people who used them, dress up like a colonist, use a surveyor's level, see building foundations under the existing building, step into a mock excavation unit which appears 6' below ground, see artifacts, look into the laboratory and even excavate and screen for replica artifacts. People were able to grasp the bigger picture of what archeology was and how it discovers the past. The exhibit invited people to learn by not only seeing artifacts but by touching and doing things.

The final goal for public education and outreach was the school tour program. School groups toured the excavation, archeology gallery, and the Government House museum. Staff archeologists or volunteers led the tours which served over 1,000 students. We also had tours from the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind which provided an interpretative challenge. Tours did not end with the coming of summer. Students from the local school board's Summer Marine Sciences program came to the site throughout the summer. They learned how important marine resources



View site with visitors. Interpreter is in period dress.

were to the colonist and even made tabby while in period dress. Students from the San Luis Archaeological & Historical Site summer program assisted with the excavation.

Volunteers were an integral part of this and other components of the project and provided over 4,500 hours of labor. Most of the project volunteers were retired professionals, a few high school students, and working people that helped on the weekends. Two dedicated volunteers helped construct the archeological exhibits and provided labor as well as expertise in engineering and technical drafting and design. Once the project began, one volunteer coordinated and scheduled volunteers to run the gallery space and assist in the museum store. Volunteers greeted and interpreted the exhibit space to over 105,000 visitors. The exhibit was staffed by volunteers from 10:00 a.m to 4:00 p.m., seven days a week. Volunteers also assisted at the excavation screens and in the washing and initial sorting of artifacts. Many of these volunteers are members of the St. Augustine Archaeological Association. The Association is a volunteer organization started by staff of the Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board to encourage interest in archeology and channel that interest in positive directions. Other volunteers were not Association members but wanted a chance to help in this exciting project and to meet other people with similar interests. About three fifths of the volunteer hours were spent in the operation of the gallery with the remainder related to field work. Since volunteers had total freedom to select the activity they wanted, they all moved into tasks that suited them and required little if any supervision once they were trained. All aspects of the project, which spanned nearly eight months, were a great success.

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Bruce John Piatek is the museum administrator for the Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board. For his work on this project, Mr. Piatek received Florida's Department of State Productivity Award and the Florida Association of Museums' 1993 Museum Services Award for Innovation, citing his creation of a unique urban archeology exhibit at the Government House site in St. Augustine.

Photos by the author.