

Former Sam Riggs' homestead site yields a glimpse at life in 18th century -

by Terri Hogan

Senior Staff Writer

The Greater Olney News, September 6, 2017

Volunteer archeologists unveiled a glimpse of local history while conducting a dig on the ancestral home of Brookeville's prominent Riggs family.

The dig was led by Olney resident Robert Hines, a history and archeology teacher at Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville.



Figure 1: Olney resident Robert Hines, a history and archeology teacher at Richard Montgomery High School, is dressed as Sam Riggs, whose family owned Pheasant Hill, a homestead in Brookeville. India Riggs (also pictured) is the fifth great-granddaughter of Sam Riggs.

Hines is beginning his 49th year of teaching, but plans to retire at the end of the school year.

Many of Hines' students participated in the dig, which began three summers ago.

Also volunteering was Riggs family descendant India Riggs, who is the fifth great-granddaughter of Samuel Riggs. She is formerly of Sunshine, but now lives in Florida.

India Riggs had volunteered on Hines' digs in Brookeville in preparation of the bicentennial celebration commemorating the town's role during the War of 1812.

Riggs said that once that project was complete, she convinced Hines to accompany her to a site formerly owned by her ancestors, nestled deep in the woods of a nearby housing development.

"He was captivated," she said.

Hines said he has led archeological digs at more than 50 sites throughout the county over the past 30 years, but artifacts discovered on this site are the most significant he has found.

He said the property was originally a 1,000-acre land grant in 1725 from Charles Calvert, 5th Lord Baltimore, to Thomas Bordley, who named it Bordley's Choice.

He died and never settled on the grant, but his son sold it to John Riggs of Annapolis Junction. John Riggs owned a large farm called Riggs Hills, which was divided at his death in 1762 among his five sons.

Pleasant Hill stayed in the Samuel Riggs family for five generations before it was sold in 1913. A land developer purchased the property and had the house burned around 1970 because of vandalism to the structure. The remains were hauled away.

The area eventually became the Brookeville Farms community. Green space regulations and the fact that the family cemetery existed on the site allowed for the core of the farm's foundations to be preserved.

Hines and his volunteers initially identified the house's west wing, which was about 60 feet by 30 feet, with four chimneys.

After further excavation, going down about six or seven inches to get to undisturbed soil, they discovered the east wing of the house.



Figure 2: Robert Hines and his students unearthed the west and east wings of the house.

“The family had 12 children, so they expanded eastward,” Hines said.

They unearthed a large metal object, which was determined to be an 18th century fireback, an object put into a hearth to protect the back wall of a fireplace and to project heat into the room. The Brookeville Farms Homeowner’s Association paid to have the artifact preserved.



Figure 3: The fireback - as found.



Figure 4: The restored fireback.

“A genuine 18th century artifact is a pretty rare find in Montgomery County,” Hines said.

He said there are other 18th century houses in the area, including Greenwood and Clifton, but he believes this is the fourth oldest house. Archeological digs have not taken place at the other homes because they are current residences.

They also discovered outbuildings, including slave quarters. A carved stone was uncovered, something that commonly placed around doorways. Hines said that slaves carried that tradition with them from Africa.

“This has turned out to be the most exciting dig I have done,” he said. “There were lots of finds, one right after the other.”



Figure 5: The artifacts found at the former Pleasant Hill homestead.

As a volunteer archeologist, India Riggs would have found the discoveries interesting. But because the site was the home of her ancestors, she said it was “thrilling and overwhelming.”

“I’d find a piece of ceramic and wonder who had touched it,” she said. “We uncovered a room with a brick floor. As I swept it, it touched me that my ancestors had probably swept that same floor.”

She especially appreciates discovering ceramics because there are so many different types. One of her favorite finds at the site was a tiny curled-up finger of a monkey.

“It may have been a piece of a toy; it was very unusual,” she said. She was also excited about discovering a tiny red and white bead, so small that it fell through the sifter, and decorative brass hinges that were likely on a trunk.

Hines credits India Riggs and the Brookeville Farms HOA.

“They have been instrumental in supporting this whole project,” he said. Hines, Riggs and the student volunteers held an open house last month for Brookeville Farms residents. Hines, dressed as Sam Riggs, sat at a table in the remains of the east room of the former home, with many of the recently discovered artifacts on display.

The artifacts have been taken to the lab at Richard Montgomery High School, where the students, under Hines’ supervision, will clean and preserve them. They will then be entered into a database, with a full report and historical analysis.

“Those kids worked so hard,” India Riggs said. “They shoveled about two and a half feet of rubble and will continue to put in more time during the school year.”

The artifacts are the property of the Brookeville Farms HOA and its members will determine what to do with them. Hines and India Riggs are hopeful the artifacts will be loaned to a local museum, organization or similar site and put on display.