

College students digging for piece of history at New Philadelphia site

By **DEBORAH GERTZ HUSAR**
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BARRY, Ill. -- Kennesaw State University senior Sedrie Hart stands at a screen picking out pieces of grass from clumps of soil.

"The hardest part is trying to screen sod. It's really difficult ... but once you get past the sod, the soil's been real good. It goes right through the screen," Hart said.

But the rewards of breaking sod and battling the elements at the New Philadelphia field school are more than worth it.

Hart and eight other college students from across the country spend five weeks at the site near Barry, then will move Saturday to the Illinois State Museum for five weeks analyzing their finds.

It's hand-on archaeology experience and, perhaps more importantly, a better understanding of the first community platted by an African-American.

The story of the integrated community founded in 1836 by Frank McWorter spoke to Hart.

"We know about slavery, the slave trade and all that, but we don't hear about the Frank McWorters who bought their freedom and began their own towns ... not to mention that there were white people in the 19th Century that weren't necessarily as racist as history portrays. They lived side by side here. That says a lot," Hart said.

"This isn't just African-American history. This is U.S. history. This is history that white people can connect with, black people can connect with."

The field school inspired John Schultz, a senior history major at University of Illinois Springfield, to focus on archaeology in graduate school.

"I wanted to learn how to do archaeology, and it's a very interesting story, a very important story. I learned a lot," Schultz said just before carefully wielding a shovel to lift sod to expand a dig site.

"What we think we've got here is a circular stain. We have to keep expanding units to try to catch the boundaries of it," said Terry Martin, a field school co-director and curator of anthropology at the Illinois State Museum Research and Collections Center.

This year's field school work focuses primarily on expanding the 2005 discovery of a portion of the foundation of the home of Louisa McWorter, a daughter-in-law of Frank McWorter.

"We're trying to fully expose it, but we may have to wait to next summer. We've lost time to rain this summer," said Chris Fennell, field school co-director and an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois.

"We'll cover it in landscape tarp, carefully put the soil back in to protect it, then I'm thinking we'll come early next summer with an advance team before the field students are here to uncover all that. Then we'll be doing vertical profiling of one half of the structure."

Layer by layer, more of New Philadelphia's story unfolds.

"Growing up in African-American communities predominantly and not knowing about the story at all is kind of puzzling. You'd think they would tell us that, but they only tell us the negative stuff," said Keishaia Griffith, an anthropology major at

the State University of New York in Buffalo from Brooklyn, N.Y.

"I'm from Alton, so this is not far from my home, but I'd not heard of this and really want to get involved," said Beatrice Adams, a junior history major at Fisk University, a small predominantly African-American institution in Nashville, Tenn., where some of the first primary research was done on New Philadelphia.

Adams hopes to become a professor of African-American history and share the story of New Philadelphia which "can speak loudly to anyone because of its connections to human freedom, struggle."

Griffith's first field school experience offers the "total package" of history and hands-on archaeology.

"It's impossible to get all these minds together that actually like each other and want to work together, and you have it in one field school," she said. "I'm pretty excited about this. Hopefully I can bring something to my school from it."

Digging and screening yield artifacts ranging from a Civil War uniform button to a pocketwatch and half of a doorknob.

"We find a lot of unknown metal parts, a bunch of bolts and nails. We find a whole lot of glass, mortar and brick, ceramic pieces," Hart said.

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