**Slave Cabin Research Grants Produce Results**

Only a handful of domestic structures from the antebellum period survive. Most of them are elite structures, like plantation homes or Federal-style houses built by the ever-expanding European settlements in western Virginia and Kentucky. At Sweet Briar, an even more unusual remnant has survived: a slave cabin, most likely built under the direction of Elijah Fletcher (Indiana Fletcher Williams’ father) in the 1850s. The cabin was used as residence for almost 80 years, housing enslaved families, postbellum overseers and, finally, a College employee and his large family.

In the 1930s, Sweet Briar College added electricity and radiant heat to the cabin and used it as the home of the alumnae office. In the subsequent decades it was converted to a classroom, oratory, and, in the 1980s, a farm tool museum. In 2012, the Tusculum Institute was awarded a year-long grant by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities to research the past uses of the structure and involve the local community in planning for one last conversion: into a museum about African-American heritage at Sweet Briar.

The grant was used to bring a core of experts (museum curators, historians, archaeologists and public interpreters) to campus to survey the cabin’s history and advise the college on how best to present its complex, 170-year history to the public. Last year’s Summer and Fall newsletters reported on some of their conclusions. This past spring, John Whitfield (a professional African-American genealogist) and Lynn Rainville teamed up to locate and interview family and friends of longtime black employees. Their goal was to collect information about the two centuries of African-Americans who have worked at Sweet Briar in order to share these biographies with visitors to the cabin museum. Whitfield (conducting interviews below) compiled a list of more than 350 African-Americans who worked at Sweet Briar between 1870 and 1940. Rainville took this information and created a photo book about African-American history at Sweet Briar, which she mailed to black churches in Amherst to solicit additional information about people who once worked at the College.
Teaching with Historic Places: Civil Rights in Education

More than 60 educators, museum professionals and community members attended the fifth annual Teaching with Historic Places workshop on June 15 at Sweet Briar College. The focus of the conference was on Civil Rights in Education. Co-sponsored by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) and the Tusculum Institute, eight speakers discussed their own personal experiences and research into the efforts to integrate public schools in Virginia during the 1950s and 1960s.

Professor Theodore Delaney (associate professor of history, W&L) started off the morning with his life story, which began as a janitor at Washington & Lee. He then worked as a biology lab assistant for 20 years, earned his B.A. at age 41, and his PhD in history at age 50. His unorthodox academic trajectory began even earlier, when he (along with other African American students) took the Negro Fund Test which determined whether he was offered a place at one of the few colleges that accepted African-American students. He received a scholarship from Moorehouse but his family still lacked the funds to send him to college, hence his reliance on paid employment for so many years. In the photo on the right, Prof. Delaney talks with workshop participants. An exhibit on Nelson County’s effort to integrate their schools stands behind him.

During the rest of his talk, Delaney outlined the difficult legal and social barriers that African-American students had to overcome. Justin Reid (associate director, Moton Museum) picked up his story with information about the students who fought for integration in Farmville. He encouraged teachers to visit the newly completed, multi-million dollar exhibit at the Moton Museum. Next, the group watched the documentary “Mr Stokes’ Mission,” which intends to teach children about desegregation.

In the afternoon, Betty Kilby Fisher (photo on the left) told her heart-wrenching story of integrating her Northern Virginia high school and fighting against racially motivated attacks. She is the author of the 2002 autobiography, “Wit, Will and Walls.” Professor John Kneebone (associate professor of history, VCU) led a panel discussion about the day’s topic with local residents Mary Rose and Edith Napier (directors at the Nelson County Heritage Center). Lynn Rainville ended the day with a discussion of Sweet Briar’s efforts to integrate its student body in the 1960s.

The 2014 topic and date (usually the second weekend in June) will be announced in the winter. The all-day conference focuses on topics of national importance that can be taught using local architectural, archaeological and historical resources. Past topics include Native Americans in Virginia, antebellum plantations, life on the homefront during the Civil War and the War of 1812.

Request for Proposals Due October 1, 2013

Sweet Briar College is seeking qualified offers for the purchase, reconstruction and rehabilitation of Tusculum, an 18th-century, timber-frame house. This historic landmark dwelling was professionally deconstructed, with its architectural fabric carefully labeled and moved for storage on the Sweet Briar College campus in 2006. The College has undertaken extensive repairs to Tusculum’s framing and joinery. To submit a proposal to purchase this historic house (for reconstruction in an appropriate setting), contact Lynn Rainville. More information can be found at tusculum.sbc.edu/RFP_Tusculum.pdf.
Summer Research: Historic Cemeteries at other Colleges

The Sweet Briar lands contain many layers of history: multi-thousand-year Native American sites, 19th-century cabin foundations, old College trash dumps, and standing remains, such as the antebellum slave cabin and the former “big house” (today the College president’s home). Very few colleges offer such complex history, but summer intern Crystal Collins ’10 has located a handful of other colleges with slave graveyards.

Gravestones of African-Americans in the Old Chapel Hill Cemetery at the University of North Carolina. Photo by Stephen J. Fletcher. Source: lib.unc.edu/mss/exhibits/slavery/escheats.html

Memorial at the Sweet Briar Plantation Burial Ground: “Sacred resting place of unknown founders who labored to build what has become Sweet Briar College. We are in their debt.” Photo by Meridith De Avila Khan.

Two New Grants Support Research into the Cabin

At the end of the VFH grant, Rainville received confirmation that the Tusculum Institute had received two additional grants to fund the creation of an exhibit within the cabin. The first, from the National Trust for Historic Places, will be used to hire Dr. Lauranett Lee (curator, Virginia Historical Society) to design an exhibition in the cabin. The second grant, from the Deupree Foundation, matched the NTHP monies and will enable us to design an interpretive display in the cabin. We hope to have it open in the winter of 2014.

The slave cabin in 1913. Sweet Briar Magazine.

Keith Adams & Matt Reeves inspecting the base of the chimney.

About Tusculum Institute

Tusculum Institute is a historic preservation resource center on the campus of Sweet Briar College providing education and outreach to students, faculty and the wider community and region. Using the rich historic and intellectual resources of the College and working in partnership with the Department of Historic Resources, the Institute supports the preservation of the region’s historic assets and promotes the use of Virginia’s historic legacy as a learning resource. If you wish to support us, please contact our development office, P.O. Box 1057, Sweet Briar, VA 24595. Email: hmccrory@sbc.edu.