Historic Cooking Demonstration at the Sweet Briar Cabin

This year's Founder's Day began with an opportunity to watch, assist, and eat food cooked over an open hearth. The cooking demonstration was led by nationally known food historian, Dr. Leni Sorensen, adjacent to the historic antebellum cabin behind the President's House.

We were joined first thing in the morning by students attending the Buckingham CTE/ProStart Culinary Arts program (seen with their teacher and Dr. Sorensen in the photo at the right). These aspiring chefs chopped and diced and quickly learned that there are few safety features on boiling-hot cast iron pots! Other members of the audience helped mix the batter for the corn bread and laid spoon-shaped dollops onto a hot griddle.

Around noon Dr. Sorensen gave a brief lecture on historic cookbooks and the ingredients that were available to African American cooks in the 19th century. It took over two hours to prepare a relatively simple meal — corn pone, collard greens, sweet potato, and chicken — reminding all of us how fortunate we are to have electric ovens and microwaves!

After enjoying our hard-earned meal, College Chaplain Dori Baker and President Jimmy Jones led a procession to the on-campus slave cemetery. This new ritual is in parallel with the traditional visit to the Fletcher/Williams monument each year as part of the Founder's Day ceremonies.

Photos: Buckingham culinary students -- Dr. Sorensen -- historic chef -- 19thC Cookbook
Over the past two years, the Tusculum Institute has received multiple grants to support student and faculty research into the antebellum cabin’s history. The sponsored research has illuminated the diverse uses of the cabin between c. 1840 and the present. Presumably Elijah Fletcher supervised its construction as it is located directly behind his house. Documentary evidence reveals that originally there were dozens of cabins for the African Americans who lived and worked at Sweet Briar. One remains standing (right).

After emancipation, many of the formerly enslaved families moved to nearby Amherst and Coolwell. The cabin was repurposed as a home for the farm’s overseers. This included Logan Anderson who lived in the cabin for a number of years when he worked as the farm manager for Indiana Fletcher Williams. The College was founded after Indiana’s death in 1900 and afterwards the cabin continued as a residence, this time for college employees. The most famous resident was Sterling Jones, Sr. and his large family.

By the 1930s, the expanding college repurposed the building to serve as the Alumnae Office. This was the beginning of several decades of institutional use for the structure when it served as a classroom, coffee house, theatrical rehearsal space, and even, briefly, the college chapel. In the 1980s, then museum curator, Ann Whitley ’47, curated an exhibit of antique farm equipment and put it on display in the cabin.

This past summer, Lynn Rainville worked with professional genealogist John Whitfield and Virginia Historical Society curator Dr. Lauranett Lee to design a new exhibit, on the changing uses of the building and the history of African Americans at Sweet Briar. The newly installed exhibit is open to the public free of charge. For more information on visiting the exhibit please visit the Tusculum Institute website.

Below: A view of the newly installed exhibit about African Americans and the families who have lived in the cabin. Below: The original door to the cabin has been preserved within the building and is surrounded by exhibit panels.

The Tusculum Institute is very interested in the remembrances of Sweet Briar Alumnae and community members who may have visited the cabin over the past century. Please contact us if you are willing to be interviewed over the phone or in person about your cabin stories. We are also very interested in photographs of the building from any time period, including the 1980s when the metal roof was added and the 1990s when the landscape was enhanced.
Digital Resources at the Tusculum Institute

One of the goals of the Tusculum Institute is to promote digital sophistication among our students and use web-based projects to share our research with a wide audience. This past year we have unveiled several such sites. Below is an end-of-the-year review of two of these resources.

In January 2015, the Tusculum Institute will unveil a new logo and website design to make these projects easier to locate and use.

A brand-new initiative, co-sponsored by the Virginia Department of Historic Resource and the Tusculum Institute to locate and photograph World War I memorials in Virginia. These memorials include traditional plaques and granite markers as well as stained glass windows, statues, buildings, bridges, and trees planted in honor of the men and women who served and lost their lives in the war. The website also contains links to over four dozen counties and their monuments, soldiers' biographies, information about Virginian regiments that served in The Great War, and transcriptions of letters sent to and from the Front. www.tusculum.sbc.edu/WW1/index.html.

Last year an anonymous donor sponsored a year's work of student research into Daisy Williams' life in New York City. The only daughter of Indiana Fletcher Williams and the Reverend James Henry Williams, Daisy grew up at Sweet Briar during the summers but spent her winters up north in New York where her parents managed real estate holdings. The website illustrates excerpts from Daisy's diaries with historic photographs of New York City and contains a google map with all of the people, places, and events that she visited during her time in the city. Read more at: www.tusculum.sbc.edu/DaisyNYC/index.php.

Hold the Date: 2015 Teaching with Historic Places Workshop

The Department of Historic Resources and the Tusculum Institute are pleased to announce the theme of next year's annual workshop: Virginia's Agricultural Heritage. Tentatively titled "Farms and Barns," we will discuss the Commonwealth's rich agrarian history on June 13, 2015 on the Sweet Briar College campus.

About Tusculum Institute

Tusculum Institute is a local history resource center located 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 or have questions, please contact Dr. Lynn Rainville (lrainville@sbc.edu, 434.381.6432).