



NANCY KING · CAPE BRETON POST

Participants in the fortress's first public archaeology program carefully dig at what is believed to have been the site of a well or privy (an outhouse). Visitors from as far away as Michigan and British

Public dig

Fortress Louisbourg offers week-long program for aspiring archaeologists

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Caryn Reynolds is using a trowel to carefully remove material from an excavation site at the Fortress of Louisbourg.

But she's not an archaeologist with the national historic site. She's a 17-year-old high school student from Michigan interested in possibly pursuing a career in the field.

Reynolds is one of nine people taking part in the fortress' first week-long public archaeology program. Participants get to see what is involved in a dig first-hand, supervised by fortress archaeologists. Their tools are a trowel, dust bin and brush.

"It's perfect, exactly what I wanted to do, which is hands-on digging," says Reynolds, who is participating in the program along with her father, Don. She admits she knew nothing about the fortress before finding out about the new program on the Internet.

"There's a lot of digging,

which is tonnes of fun. I've learned a lot about the process, cataloging, the different layers of ground."

Rebecca Duggan, site archaeologist with the fortress, notes the supervised dig is taking place at the De la Valliere property, in what was a yard area that was completely surrounded by buildings. The property was occupied by French, British and New Englanders between 1720 and 1758.

The fortress is a potential treasure trove of artifacts for the aspiring archaeologists. The large French settlement was founded in 1713, fortified in the 1730s, besieged twice by New Englanders and the British and ultimately demolished and abandoned by the British in the 1760s.

Parts of the colonial settlement have been excavated, with extensive excavations and research guiding the partial reconstruction of the fortified town and defensive walls.

Participants in the public archaeology program learn field techniques, attend presentations addressing current research at the fortress,

and put what they've learned to use by hand digging at the site.

Many of them also did other research on the Internet or by reading books prior to their arrival.

"We're trying to give a holistic perspective of what field archaeology is like," Duggan says.

Bruce Fry, archaeologist who oversaw the reconstruction phase, is also working with Duggan on the program.

They see the entire process, from the initial step of removing sods, to replacing them once the work is completed.

"You certainly get to understand how you know when to stop and how to set it up," Duggan says.

This work is expected to tell a bit about how yards were used, for example, whether children played there.

"It's one step to get a better understanding of the infrastructure of the community and broaden our perspective of how the community functioned," Duggan says.

They've uncovered a

number of artifacts, mostly an assortment of mid-18th century domestic materials.

On this day, the budding archaeologists are working at what may have been a well or a privy, both of which could provide important artifacts, Duggan says, as people used to dispose of virtually everything in them.

By the end of their second day, the participants were already much more confident in their understanding of the process, Duggan says, in areas such as artifact typing and the records that must be kept.

As Duggan speaks, one of the participants approaches her with a metal object she's uncovered. Duggan quickly tells her it's a part of a hinge, and judging by its size, it's from a window and not a door. She points to one of the nearby reconstructed buildings to show how they would look.

As they dig, tourists visiting the fortress are able to stop by, standing outside the roped-off area, and watch as the excavation progresses.

The diggers have found some personal items, such as cuff links or coins. There are

few military-related discoveries, usually just the occasional musket ball.

They have to put care into the work but not go so slow that they don't accomplish enough. All soil is screened for any smaller artifacts that might have been missed in the digging process, even when digging by hand.

All artifacts are bagged and sent to the lab on site. Other participants are working there, getting to understand the labeling and cleaning processes there.

Once they've finished, they return the site to its original condition.

"We just kind of disappear, in an ideal situation," Duggan says.

Dr. Jolene Jarvis is also visiting as a part of the program, along with her husband, Martin Kilmer, who is a retired professor of archaeology at the University of Ottawa. She says the experience is giving her a better understanding of her husband's work, and it's also stimulating for him because it's dealing with a different time period than he dealt with.

"I've never been on a dig

before," she says. "I'm really enjoying this. It's amazing how excited you get when you find an itty-bitsy piece of something."

Mark Sajatovich, marketing manager with the Fortress of Louisbourg, notes the hands-on archaeological experience is a growing sector of the tourism industry.

"The last couple of years, there have been so many people who wanted to get more than just the general look at what archaeology is like here and actually do it," he says.

"There's a certain feeling you get when you uncover something that people haven't touched in at least 300 years. You're now a part of the story of this item."

The program is run by the fortress volunteer association, but the service is provided by Parks Canada archaeologists, he adds.

The fortress hopes to be able to expand the program next year, possibly moving into such areas as French cuisine or period costumes.

"It opens a lot of doors for us," Sajatovich says. nking@cbpost.com