

Alexandria Times

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Virginia Archaeology Month in Alexandria

The next time you are traveling westbound on Eisenhower Avenue, past Joseph Hensley Park, look around. There is no visible evidence of Bush Hill plantation, but a brick house stood here for about 200 years until it burned down in 1977.

Like many plantations built in the 18th century, this house was accompanied by outbuildings or separate structures constructed for specific purposes like sheltering livestock, housing ice, cooking and as living quarters for enslaved people. Many plantations, including those in close proximity to towns like Alexandria, had formal gardens and designed landscapes. The one at Bush Hill was planned by George Washington’s gardener who had previously worked at nearby Mount Vernon plantation.

The Archaeological Protection Code is an important tool for preserving Alexandria’s history. It allows development to continue, while ensuring that buried resources are not lost during construction.

Under the code, developers are required to hire archaeologists to conduct investigations of potentially significant sites and produce reports on their findings. The code is applied across the entire city. The archaeological site of Bush Hill is one example of the code in action.

Archaeologists working under the Archaeological Protection Code conducted excavations at Bush Hill in 2000 in advance of construction. They uncovered evidence of foundations, brick walkways, garden terraces and even a midden, or trash pile, associated with the earliest occupation of the house. Artifacts from the house and kitchen were used and discarded in an area near the house.

They included broken tea and tableware, glass bottles, a pocketknife, straight pins, a button, a shoe fragment and a knife blade fragment. The code provided the opportunity to learn about this unique site, the free and enslaved people who lived and even resisted liv-

ing there and about the households through the refuse they left behind.

Though archaeologists conducted their excavations at Bush Hill 25 years ago, Alexandria Archaeology curates the collection from the site in perpetuity. An archaeological collection includes artifacts and also all the records associated with excavations like photographs and maps.

The city’s Archaeology division is responsible for preserving 3 million artifacts stored in the Alexandria Archives and Records Center. In the storage room are 23 boxes of artifacts from the Bush Hill site, including the historic trash from the midden. City archaeologists hold these artifacts in public trust and make them accessible for researchers, educational lessons and exhibits.

Throughout Alexandria, you will see the Alexandria Heritage Trail, composed of historic interpretation signs supported by developers and installed at the end of construction, after the archaeology

and history work is completed. Cities are in a constant state of change and evolution, but in Alexandria, anchoring these new areas in history is part of the development process – through the Archaeological Protection Code.

For the past 35 years, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources has recognized October as Archaeology Month with events and programs throughout the state. The City of Alexandria has a long history of archaeological stewardship thanks to more than 50 years of community-based efforts and the 1989 establishment of the city’s Archaeological Protection Code.

Today, residents and visitors can learn about past and present work on the city’s 265 registered sites at the free Alexandria Archaeology Museum on the third floor of the Torpedo Factory Art Center. Happy Archaeology Month!

*Out of the Attic is
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