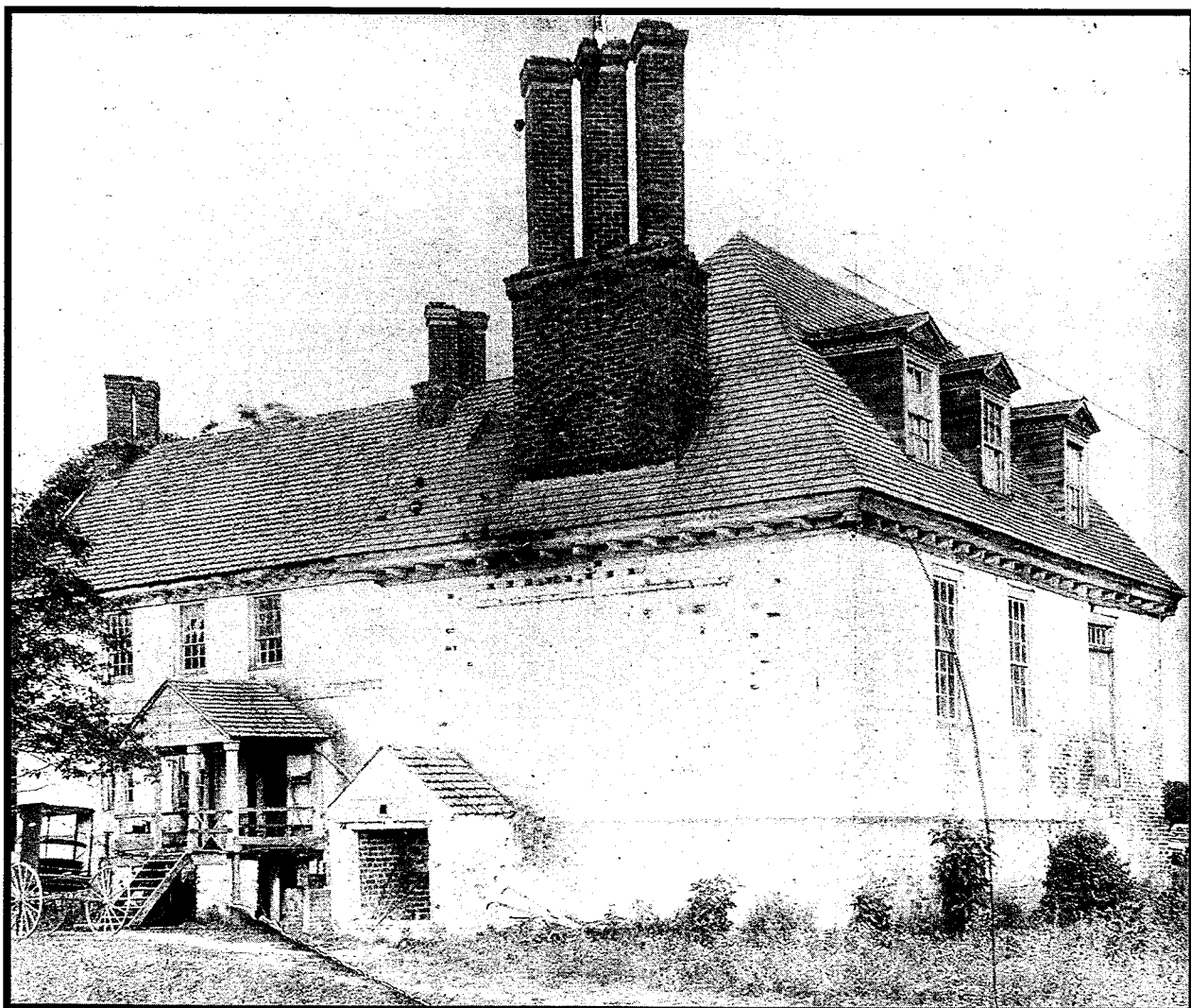


# QUARTERLY



# BULLETIN



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# SEARCHING FOR THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FAIRFIELD

Mark Maloy

The Burwells were one of the most affluent and wealthy families in seventeenth-century Virginia. During the past decade, the Fairfield Foundation has worked tirelessly excavating the property where the Burwells resided. Our knowledge of the Burwell family in the eighteenth century continues to grow as we excavate more artifacts and features. The elaborate manor house, recognized in six late nineteenth-century photographs, was built in 1694, but Lewis Burwell patented the land in 1648. This begs the question: what can we learn about the seventeenth-century Burwells through archaeology? Where did they reside? What kind of material culture should we expect to find? We know that the Burwells lived on the land that is now Fairfield by the mid-seventeenth century, but little else; the rest of the story waits for the archaeologist to find in the ground.

In the early 1960s, an archaeology team headed by Professor John Blair of Richard Bland College in Petersburg, Virginia investigated the site of Fairfield Plantation (Blair 2001; Virginia Department of Historic Resources Archaeological Site Inventory). They found a wine bottle seal on the surface of the plowed field. The team excavated a test unit directly beneath it, recording a "tiled cellar" filled with broken wine bottles and seals from many of Gloucester's seventeenth-century colonial leaders. The problem, however, was that the excavation records disappeared and the cellar's location was lost beneath the agricultural field. The only locational information that survived mentioned a cellar approximately 150 feet southeast of the 1694 manor house. Relocating this structure is essential to understanding the early development of Fairfield.

In order to discover more about early colonial Fairfield, I designed a research proposal to search for the seventeenth-century cellar and foundations of the original manor house, if they still existed. Locating this building would dramatically enhance Fairfield's interpretation. The only irrefutable facts at hand were that the Burwell family was living on the property

at that time. Few know the story of Fairfield in the mid-seventeenth century, but it is immensely important. By finding the remains of an earlier dwelling, we would be able to learn more about the occupants' standard of living, the development of the plantation from its beginnings to its zenith, and also see how the Burwells used this structure after the 1694 house was built.

Before conducting fieldwork, I reviewed what artifacts had been found at Fairfield dating to the seventeenth and early eighteenth century and where these were concentrated. This included several locally-made clay tobacco pipes, large bore diameter imported tobacco pipes, early wine bottle seals, and sherds of North Devon plain coarseware and North Midlands slipware found mainly through shovel testing on the site. The only seventeenth-century features located to date, besides the 1694 manor house, are an ash pit (Feature 13) discovered in 2001 and the Burwell family cemetery, about 300 feet to the south of the manor house. I examined the contents of Feature 13, found approximately 140 feet east of the manor house, which included locally-made clay tobacco pipe stem and bowl fragments and an iron butterfly hinge diagnostic to the seventeenth century (Figure 1). The nature and distribution of these artifacts guided the research design for this project.

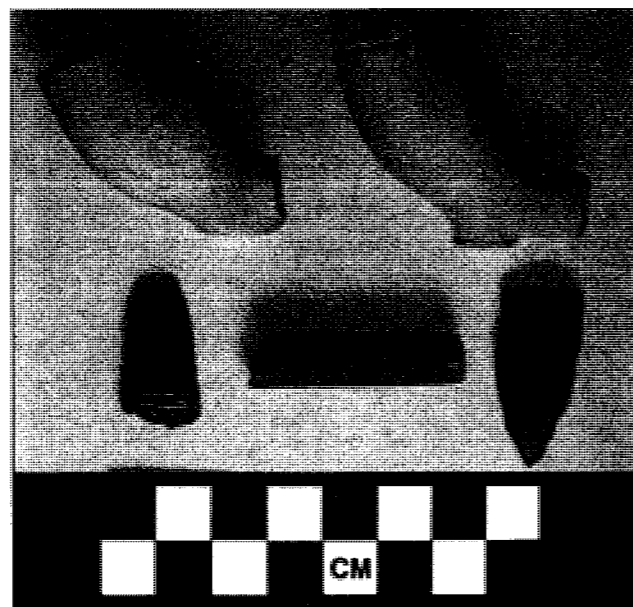


Figure 1: Locally manufactured red clay (bottom) and imported white clay tobacco pipe fragments recovered from the ash pit

## Fairfield Plantation - 44GL24

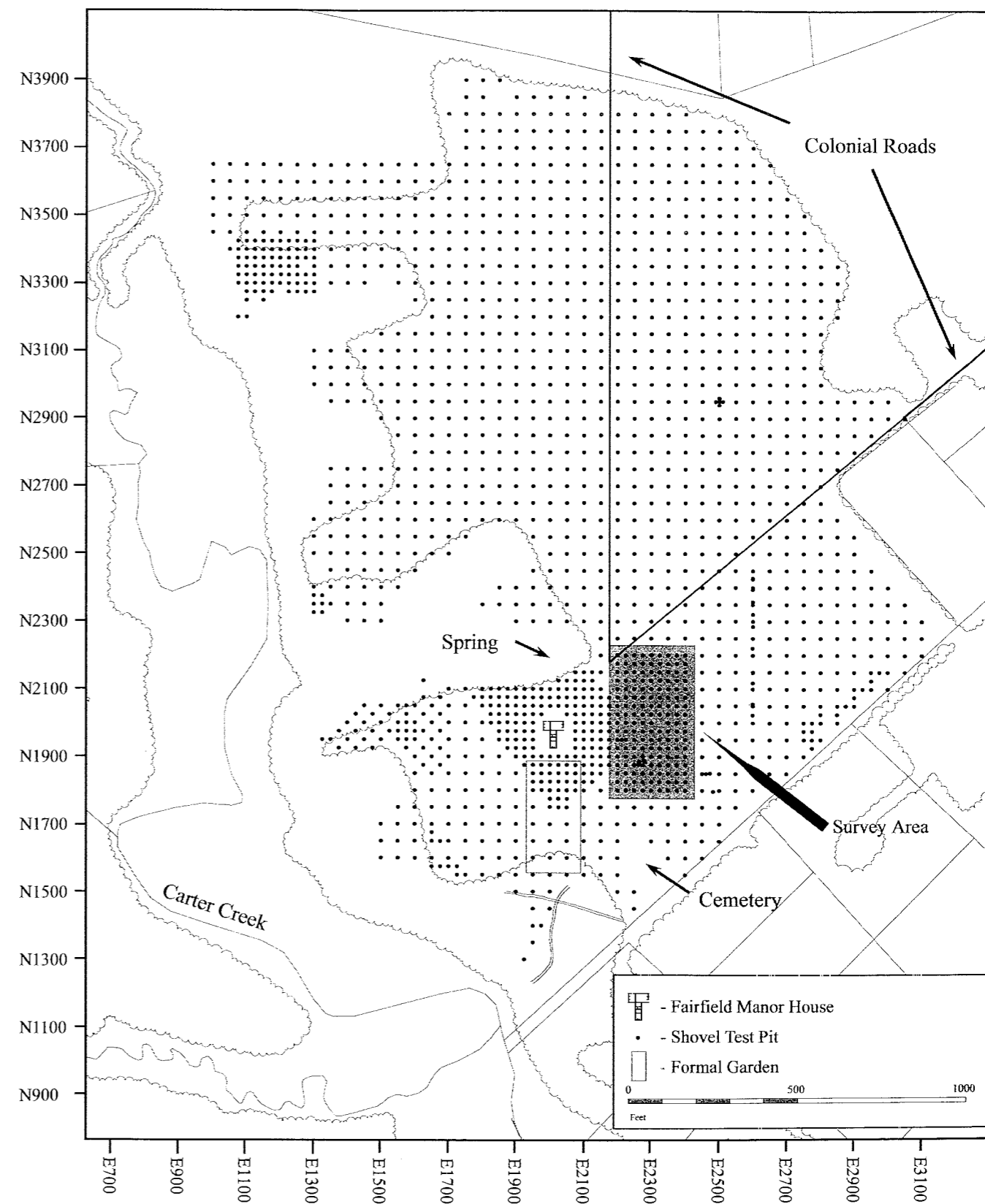


Figure 2: Project survey area

Based on Dr. Blair's notes and artifacts, the early cellar was presumed to be located in a 200 foot by 400 foot area to the east and south of the house, beginning about 150 feet from the foundations (Figure 2). A shovel test survey of this area at 50 foot intervals was undertaken in 2000/2001. This survey revealed a preponderance of architectural debris and eighteenth-century artifacts, as well as a small scatter of seventeenth-century artifacts. A large excavation block opened in 2001 revealed a clay extraction pit filled in the second quarter of the eighteenth century as well as the seventeenth-century ash pit mentioned above. Presuming the early cellar was not likely smaller than 4 feet square, I decided to excavate shovel tests at 25 foot intervals, and then, if no cellar was found, I would conduct a probing survey at four foot intervals. This entailed excavating an additional 97 shovel tests in addition to the 31 test pits already dug in the area in 2001.

After mapping the project area, I led a dedicated crew of volunteers in shovel testing. Each hole measured approximately one foot in diameter and was excavated to subsoil, which was usually around one foot below the surface. The soil taken out was screened through ¼-inch wire mesh with all artifacts recorded and a profile drawn before backfilling. This provided me with a good understanding of the landscape and the general dispersal of artifacts across the project area.

A wealth of data was collected through shovel testing, but a tiled cellar was not found. One concentration of shovel tests located in the northwest part of the project area yielded a substantial amount of brick and several interesting artifacts (Figure 3). The most interesting artifact recovered was undoubtedly a wine bottle seal marked NB 1715 recovered from STP N2075 E2325 (for a comparable example, see Smith, this volume). This is the seal of Nathaniel Burwell who lived at Fairfield in the early eighteenth century. Most of the artifacts recovered are diagnostic to the eighteenth century, such as imported clay tobacco pipe stems, dark green wine bottle glass, and wrought iron nails. Ceramics also were predominantly eighteenth century: pieces of Westerwald stoneware, creamware, white salt-glazed stoneware, coarseware, Chinese porcelain, and colonoware. Some earlier artifacts were recovered, including large bore diameter imported tobacco pipe stems and North

Midlands slipware, in addition to a small amount of Native American lithics and ceramics and a handful of nineteenth-century artifacts including whiteware.

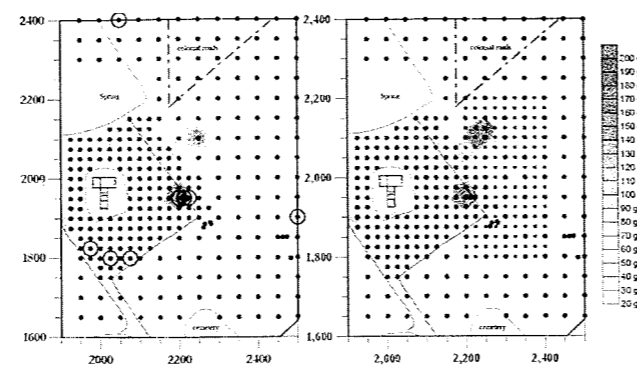


Figure 3: Artifact distributions

After reviewing the information gained through the shovel tests, I decided to focus the probe survey in certain areas, based mainly on time constraints. Most of the probing occurred around the heavy brick concentration. I struck solid brick in numerous places, with the most hits coming within a 15 foot by 25 foot area (Figure 4). Compared with the earlier shovel test survey, this work further refined the concentration to a small area near the intersection of the two colonial roads as they approach the manor house. Additional probing was completed farther to the south, but nothing was found.

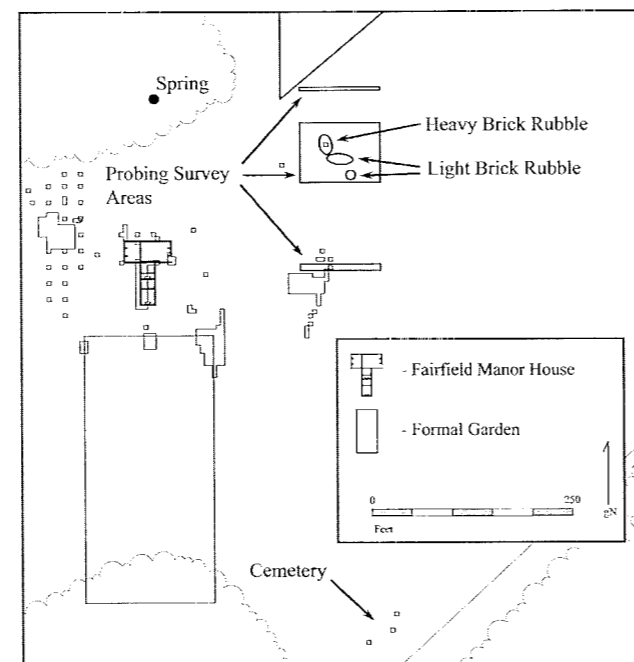


Figure 4: Probing within the survey area identified three distinct concentrations of brick rubble

Luckily we had enough time at the end of the project to place one five foot square test unit within the survey area. Placed close to the center of the dense brick concentration, I hoped to find evidence of the seventeenth-century cellar or a related foundation. We recovered an exorb-

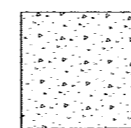
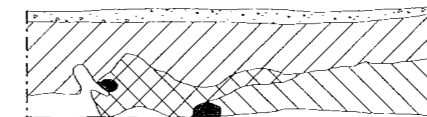
tant amount of brick immediately after the start of excavation. The unit was divided into two layers above natural subsoil: Layer A (small rubble) and Layer B (larger rubble) (Figure 5). The base of each layer was mapped and photographed and the north and east walls were profiled after Layer B was completed. Buckets upon buckets of brick came out of the test unit, including two complete bricks, 17 brick bats and approximately 100 kilograms of brick

fragments (approximately 50,000 grams from each layer). Layer A was clearly part of the plowzone, but shallow Layer B appeared less disturbed by plowing activities as the soil was too dense with bricks for the plow to effectively cut through. Artifacts recovered were predominantly diagnostic to the eighteenth century, matching those found in shovel testing. We also recovered numerous wrought iron nail fragments (10 complete examples), imported clay tobacco pipe stems, and more

## 44GL24 Fairfield

Test Unit 328  
North Profile

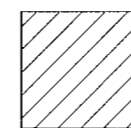
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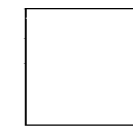
Topsoil.



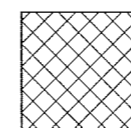
Heavy rubble.



Dark brown (10YR 3/3) loam.



Brownish yellow (10YR 6/8)  
silty loam.



Dark brown (10YR 3/3) loam with  
brick rubble.

0.0 ft 5 ft

0.0 m 1 2 m

GN ↑

Figure 5: North profile of Test Unit 328

eighteenth-century pottery, including colonoware, North Midlands slipware, and creamware.

Two of the more interesting artifacts found in Layer A consisted of a one-and-a-half inch by four inch flat piece of copper, and a small bent sheet of lead. Almost 20,000 grams of mortar was recovered, as were small fragments of plaster showing marks where it was pressed against wood lath. This strongly suggests that these materials are related to a nearby structure, perhaps to the northeast where the majority of the artifacts appeared to concentrate. While there was no foundation identified in the test unit, a strange feature was discovered at the bottom running diagonally from the northwest to the southeast corner (Figure 6). It resembled a plow scar, but its appearance and depth clearly suggested otherwise. Designated Feature 171, it was bisected and the south half excavated. I waterscreened the feature fill through 1/16-inch wire mesh, but no artifacts were recovered. The lack of material culture, and particularly brick fragments, within the feature implies that it predates the brick deposit, and may represent an early feature on the site.

44GL24 Fairfield

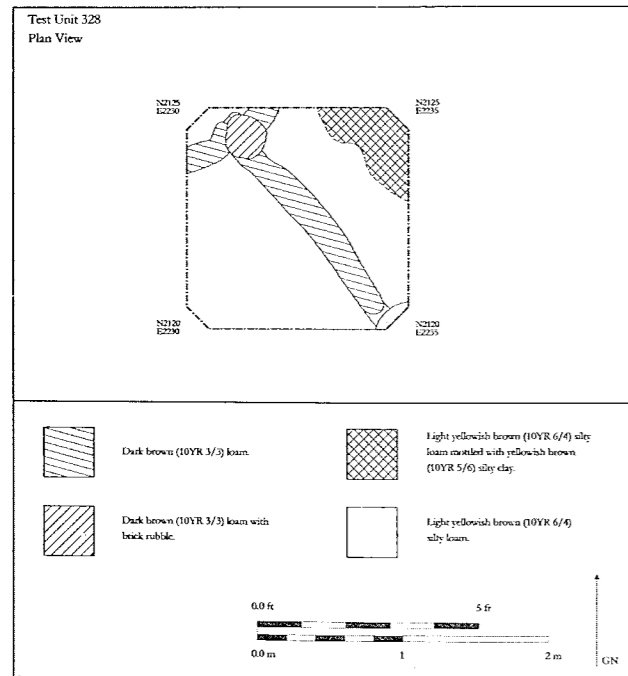


Figure 6: Plan view of Test Unit 328

With the excavations complete, the artifacts were taken to the lab to be washed, sorted, and cataloged. Based on subsequent analysis of the material culture, it appears that we found the remnants of an eighteenth-century structure. An alternate theory, though

is to interpret the artifacts recovered from the test unit as part of a brick-filled trash deposit. Thirdly, the area may have once served as a brick kiln, perhaps making bricks for ancillary structures near the 1694 manor house. However, the ground showed no signs of extreme heat or burning, and the large amount of mortar and relatively small amount of artifacts detracts from the trash pit interpretation. The used mortar and plaster, as well as the complete nails, is more suggestive of the structure interpretation, and quite possibly a collapsed chimney or plowed-over foundation. This could be connected with the tiled cellar found by Dr. Blair, but any direct connection has not been proven. The test unit coincides closely with the intersection of two roads leading to the 1694 manor house, so there is a high possibility that multiple structures could have been sited in this advantageous position, including dwellings, barns, and service buildings.

Ideally, more test units will be excavated to the northeast, expanding on this investigation in order to better understand the nature of this structure/deposit. Also, more shovel testing is necessary to the south and southwest of the project area in the direction of the Burwell cemetery, as this is the most likely remaining area for identifying the earlier cellar. There is still much that can be learned and more archaeology is essential to furthering the interpretation of the seventeenth-century Fairfield.

In conclusion, although I did not achieve the intended goals of the project, the discovery of new information will help with future interpretations of Fairfield Plantation. We discovered a possible brick structure in the northwest section of the survey area. While no foundations were identified, the large amount of brick rubble suggests a collapsed chimney or plowed-over foundations. As the brick concentration was identified near the convergence of the two historic roads that led to Fairfield, could the structure have served as a colonial carriage house for visitors arriving by wagon? Perhaps it was a work building related to other functions on the plantation? Or was the seventeenth-century cellar hiding just beyond the next test unit? Buildings constructed in the seventeenth century were often used in the eighteenth century for different purposes. When Lewis Burwell II replaced his earlier house in 1694, he may have converted his earlier home to other uses. Perhaps an eighteenth-century carriage house was once the Burwells' seventeenth-century home. This is all speculative, but in order to answer these questions, we must conduct more archaeology and open

up a larger area.

Based on the archaeology completed this spring and earlier shovel testing in 2000/2001, it is clear that the area where Fairfield's two colonial roads intersected was a point of concentrated activity. Negative shovel tests were absent during this project. However, in order to find the elusive tiled cellar, additional survey and test unit excavations must expand to the south of the manor house. The story of seventeenth-century Fairfield is vital to the interpretation of Fairfield Plantation. With so little known archaeologically, and even less extant in the historical record, excavations are critical for answering the many remaining questions about this early Virginia plantation.

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**Mark Maloy** is a recent graduate of the College of William and Mary and of the certificate program of the National Institute for American History and Democracy (NIAHD). The project described above was undertaken during an internship with the Fairfield Foundation. His address is 7839 Valleyfield drive, Springfield, Virginia 22153. His email is mbmaloy@wm.edu.