

Digging up the past

Young 'archaeologists' help to uncover lighthouse pathway

By DEBRA RECH
For The Press

Students in Anne Griffith's Cape May City Elementary class really "dig" history. Thanks to the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts, they had the chance to participate in an archaeological survey this week at the Cape May Lighthouse.

The dig was part of MAC's continuing restoration of the lighthouse, one of the oldest continually operating lighthouses in the United States.

Built in 1859, the lighthouse is listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

As part of MAC's ongoing Educational Outreach Program, Griffith's fifth- and sixth- grade gifted students were invited to get some hands-on knowledge of archaeology.

Conducted by Richard Grubb and Associates of Cranbury, the survey was done to find the old brick pathways that once surrounded the lighthouse.

Mike Cosmo, manager of the lighthouse for MAC, said the goal is to restore the lighthouse as close to the original as possible.

"When the lighthouse was opened to the public in 1988, the beginning of the old brick pathway was uncovered from wear and tear," Cosmo explained. "Years of sand blowing and non-use must have covered the pathway up, and we want to uncover the entire thing."

The paths were used by lighthouse keepers to go from their living quarters to the lighthouse. Paths also led keepers to other important buildings — like the outhouses.

"We want to find the original foundations and eventually rebuild the privies not for use by the public, but for historical significance," Cosmo said.

Photographs from the 1930s showed the archaeologists where to dig. Griffith and her students (from last year's class) were at the dig on Tuesday helping them sift dirt and chart findings.

"The kids really enjoyed it; they didn't want to leave," Griffith said. "They used brushes and helped uncover part of the brick pathway. They also helped chart and graph their findings level by level."

Every piece of metal and glass found was recorded, bagged and sealed to be sent away for analysis.

"The kids knew everything they found had to be kept as clues to put together a way of life of people who no longer exist," Griffith said. "Pieces of metal may not seem like anything, but they're significant pieces of a puzzle archaeologists must now put together."

Griffith said her students study archaeology in sixth grade, and the dig was a



Staff photos by Danny Drake

Archaeologist Laura Cushman, right, leads students Heather Bates, 11, left, and Jessica Griffith, 10, in uncovering the old pathway at the Cape May Point State Park.

great hands-on teaching tool.

"It was wonderful to see the kids participate in a real project of archaeology," Griffith said. "They were fascinated by the whole process of uncovering things and dating them. I just wish we could be there when the outhouses are uncovered. They were often used as garbage dumps by people back then and can yield some amazing discoveries."

According to Charles Pennington, chief investigator at the dig, the outhouses were proving to be elusive as of Thursday.

"We haven't found them yet and may not find them at all," Pennington said. "Sometimes when these things get demolished, they really get demolished. But we're still hopeful."

Funds for the lighthouse restoration come from state grants. The largest phase of the program, overhauling the lantern and roof, have been completed.

The next project is completing the interior restoration, including the vestibule,



Teacher Anne Griffith, center, takes a look at the finds of Bates, left, and Griffith.

hallway and oil storage closets, the brick masonry and ironwork throughout the tower, completion of the Watch Room and installation of a fire detection and security system.

The archaeological survey was part of the exterior renovation, which also includes restoring the stonework of the lighthouse foundation and the brick paths.

To contribute to the restoration, write to MAC at 1048 Washington St., Cape May 08204 or call 884-5404.

Kids dig lighthouse adventure



By JENNIFER KOPP

Acting Editor

CAPE MAY POINT — What is it about digging in the dirt that is so exciting? At a very young age, children are drawn to burrowing down into the earth whether it be in the backyard or at the beach — hours are spent shoveling, excavating, mining, if you will — the sweet thrill of victory being simply leaving a “humongous” hole in the ground.

And sometimes, if one is very lucky, *treasures* will be unearthed. The word *treasure* in this sense is subjective. Could one stumble upon diamonds, rubies, and pearls or perhaps even discover Captain Kidd’s bounty reputed to be buried somewhere in Cape May County? Most likely not, yet there exists always an iota of a hope that *it could happen*.

Usually, it is merely a shiny pebble, ocean-worn glass or a fancy shell that is joyously retrieved and ceremoniously brought home to brighten a shelf for a while. When students from Cape May Elementary school met with archeologists and representatives from the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts (MAC) at the Cape May Point Lighthouse, Tuesday, August 19, it was a “privy” and old brick walkways that were the treasures of the dig.

The Cape May Point Lighthouse, as we know it today, is the third built on the

Top photo shows Ashley Griffith and Bradley Smith as they sort through excavated dirt at the Cape May Point Lighthouse. The wooden and metal sifter shown in the bottom photo was proved by the archeological team.

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site. The original was built in 1823, and stood 68 feet tall. As is the case with much of Cape May Point, the encroaching waters of the Atlantic devoured the land and the structure fell into the sea. It is said that occasionally, even today, bricks from the original structure wash ashore during storms.

A second lighthouse was built in 1847, but due to poor design, was demolished not long after. In 1857, a third structure was erected by the Army Corps of Engineers. First lit on October 31, 1859, it remains today a beacon to seafarers and landlubbers alike.

After the United States Lighthouse Service was discontinued in 1939, the United States Coast Guard was responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of lighthouses up and down the east coast. As electronic navigational aids began to reduce the need for lighthouses, they fell victim to federal budget cuts and as a result the Coast Guard began leasing lighthouses to special interest groups willing to maintain and restore the structures.

In 1986, the Coast Guard leased the Cape May Point Lighthouse to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Parks and Forestry who, in turn, subleased the property to MAC after the organization expressed interest in restoring the lighthouse to its original condition.

Part of the estimated ten-year restoration project, which has included the overhaul of the beacon's lens and roof, and repainting of the tower, also includes the property itself. A grant from the State Department of Transportation's Inter-modal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, or ISTEA program, has enabled MAC to complete all exterior renovations including the unearthing of the original outhouse and restoration of the brick walkways.

Ann Griffith, enrichment program coordinator, at Cape May Elementary, has always had a fascination for archeology. Annually Griffith takes her gifted program students on archeological digs, earlier this year traveling to Dover, Delaware where pre-historic dwellings had been unearthed by the Delaware Department of Transportation, also called DELdot.

Though summer traditionally is a

"time-off" for most teachers, especially those with children; Ann has two daughters, Ashley age 8 and Jessica age 11; when Griffith read about the upcoming August dig at the Cape May Point Lighthouse, she wanted to involve her class.

Says Ann, "I get so involved with my students during the school year, I do need the time off in the summer to distance myself and spend extra time with my own daughters. But when this came up, I couldn't resist. Here is history right in our own backyard. What a great opportunity for the kids. And it's nice to get back together in the summertime, I miss them all."

Griffith contacted MAC about the project. It was decided to incorporate the dig into its Educational Outreach project, an all-encompassing ongoing program designed specifically to integrate with teachers like Ann and the community itself. Says Kathy Donatelli, MAC communications director, "The Educational Outreach Program is designed to work with area teachers through music and events such as the dig at the lighthouse."

On a beautifully bright Tuesday morning, Griffith along with 8 students met with Chip Pennington, an archeological investigator with Richard Grubb and Associates to look over a 1930s map outlining the brick walkways and outhouse before beginning the dig. Excitement mounted as the map turned out to be exact — almost incredulously, there they were — the brick walkways just inches below the grass covered dirt.

As the dirt was removed from the brick, it was carefully sieved through large wooden and wire "sifters" by the students. Nothing was overlooked and treasures came in all sizes and shapes. Pieces of lead, coal and even wood captured each child's attention as well as that of the archeological team. The treasures were placed in marked plastic bags to be later tested and dated.

Though the students were on the dig only Tuesday, the archeologists remained on the site through the week's end. By Thursday, August 21, the foundation of the privy had been located but mystery seemed to be mounting as half of the brick walkways, the ones that, theoretically, led to the keeper's home could not be found.

Questions arose as a result of the increasingly perplexing puzzle —



Part of the brick pathways exposed at the Cape May Point Lighthouse during the excavation.

had they been excavated at an earlier date? Where they even farther below the surface? By Friday, the missing walkways hadn't been found nor had the mystery been solved. Only the lighthouse itself knows the answer and she isn't talking.

But Griffith and her students are. Enthusiastically. Ann says, "The neat thing to me is the actual process of archeology, the essence of the digs. Each archeological team thinks differently, uses different methods and procedures. Every time we go, students get a sense of diversification in each field. Archeology is one science you cannot simulate in the classroom, you really have to experience it first hand."

"When you find something that perhaps hasn't been touched 100,

or even 12,000 years, it's an incredible experience. We found a 12,000 year-old spear point in Delaware many 'digs' ago. The thought that the last person who touched this was probably its maker, who is gone now, who left this last token of his existence is truly an awe-inspiring concept."

The students, too, share the enthusiasm. Says Joanne Emerson, a sixth grade student, "I love sifting through dirt because we found a lot of stuff at the lighthouse. Sometimes we don't find anything, but this time we did. And a lot of people visit the lighthouse, so I think it is an important place here in Cape May."

And, there is the age-old love of just plain digging in the dirt. Fellow sixth grader Sarah Larkin says, "I like the digging the best of all." Of course.