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Archaeological digs just a piece of Montclair's historical puzzle

Archaeology, in the eyes of Chris Matthews, Ph.D., "gives us a chance to look again."

Matthews, a professor of anthropology at Montclair State University, has now led two digs at the Montclair Historical Society's premises on and around 108 Orange Road. The second was this past week, April 3 through 5. The first was in March of 2013.

What Matthews tries to instill in his students is a curiosity for using historical archaeology - which involves not only digging for artifacts, but also using archives, interviews and other primary sources - to shed more light on the past.

Matthews' students, who are part of a class called Archaeology in Montclair, dug shovel test pits, known as STPs, rather than large excavation holes. The dig solidified what was known about the properties in and around 108 Orange Road, said Matthews: that the Nathaniel Crane House was moved to the back of the lot when the Clark House, a large Queen Anne revival-style home which holds the Historical Society's administrative offices and a local history library, was built in 1894.

Construction debris accounted for many of the artifacts discovered and analyzed from the first dig, Matthews said. It also revealed a few treasures: a snuff box and bale seal from shipping agricultural products.

"For me, that made the people who lived here come to life," said Jane Eliasof, executive director of the Montclair Historical Society.

It's too early to tell what the second dig will reveal. But Matthews has also spread his research scope wider than just the STPs. He worked with a team of interns to study the "Jersey Dutch" linguistic group, which was heavily centered in Bergen and Passaic counties; the dialect might have been a partial Creole language based on different types of Dutch, along with English and possibly elements of Lenape.

He also directed his interns to study federal census data to track down African-American residents of the area during the 19th century. Though Montclair wasn't incorporated as a township until 1868, the land known as Bloomfield and West Bloomfield had records of slave ownership. Matthews will discuss the excavations and additional research in a talk at the Montclair Public Library on April 30.

Dante Dallavalle, a student in Matthews' "Archaeology in Montclair" class and an anthropology major, learned that of the roughly 2,500 slaves still in the North in 1830, approximately two-thirds lived in New Jersey, he said. The state, he added, was the "harshest and most prominent enactor of the Fugitive Slave Act."

Montclair, a wealthy enclave in its early days, became a draw for African-Americans who viewed there to be economic opportunity in the area.

"It was seen as more advantageous to be here, more of a beacon for equal lifestyle," Dallavalle said.

One of the Historical Society's properties, the Israel Crane House, was the premises for the Montclair-North Essex YWCA for African-American women from 1920 to 1965. That history has been the subject of a new documentary, "A Place to Become," which will screen at the Montclair Film Festival on Saturday, May 3.

Both the film and the Historical Society's ongoing research seek to reveal "some of the issues of integration and segregation that Montclair was coping with during that period," Eliasof said.

Dallavalle came to learn as well, he said, that archaeological studies involve "digging through documents more than digging through the ground." While the work can be difficult, it had high payoff at the end: the research makes it possible to "get down to the actuality behind the conditions marginalized people faced at the time," he noted.

The result? "You're molding a more dignified social consciousness amongst people. It's unifying to give people a past that they came from, that they didn't understand before.

"Looking at the past and seeing where things stem from," Dallavalle added, "makes it easier to come up with creative solutions."

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