

Poplar Forest Hosts Archaeological Field School

Department of Archaeology and Landscapes Celebrates 33rd Summer Field School in Historical Archaeology

Forest, VA: On June 3, 2024, Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest welcomed 14 students to its annual Summer Field School in Historical Archaeology. Hosted in partnership with the University of Virginia, the field school teaches practical skills in excavation, site survey, recording and laboratory methods, as well as foundational theories and methods in archaeology. Over the past five weeks, Poplar Forest's professional archaeology staff has guided field school students through the fundamentals of archaeological research as they've explored the history of this National Historic Landmark.

This summer the archaeological excavation is focused on the 1857 Slave Dwelling Restoration Project, a community-centered effort to stabilize, research and restore the last standing quarter that once housed enslaved individuals who lived on the Poplar Forest plantation. The two-story brick building, known today as the 1857 Slave Dwelling, was home to enslaved people prior to Emancipation and free Black tenants through the early 20th century. The archaeologists are working on the first phase of the project in collaboration with the Poplar Forest African American Advisory Group, local and descendant community members and specialists in engineering and architectural restoration. Phase 1, which includes archaeological investigation of the building's foundation and along the path of a proposed drainage line extending east from the dwelling, is supported in part by a 2024 Commonwealth History Fund grant from the Virginia Museum of History & Culture (VMHC).



So far this summer, the field school has uncovered thousands of artifacts—including buttons, marbles, plate fragments and tools—and a variety of other archaeological remains outside the 1857 Slave Dwelling. These finds will help archaeologists research the building and the lives of its residents both before and after Emancipation.

“This summer’s excavations are shedding new light on the lives of the African American residents of this significant structure. We are looking forward to continued discoveries as part of this important new project as we work in partnership with Poplar Forest’s African American Advisory Group and other scholars, experts, and community members to preserve and share this key piece of Poplar Forest history,” said Dr. Eric Proebsting, Poplar Forest’s Director of Archaeology and Landscapes.

The 2024 field school students represent 13 different universities and organizations with both in-state and out-of-state attendees. In addition to working on the archaeology site, they have also participated in the ongoing interpretation of these important excavations to the public. On June 22, 2024, the students and archaeology staff welcomed more than 100 visitors to the 1857 Slave Dwelling site for a Public Archaeology Day. Students and staff demonstrated excavation, screening and artifact washing, and invited visitors to join in. Students also hosted an interactive table with excavated artifacts and activities for children, and answered questions about the building and its residents. Discoveries were also on display during Poplar Forest’s Independence Day Celebration, which included the opportunity for hundreds of visitors to see artifacts and the excavations and learn more about the building and its residents.

The six-week-long field school concludes on July 12. Archaeological field work on the project will continue throughout the summer.

About Poplar Forest

One of only two homes Thomas Jefferson designed for his personal use, the Poplar Forest retreat was the place where Jefferson “came to indulge in the life of the mind and renew his personal creativity.” Jefferson and his wife, Martha, inherited the Bedford County plantation known as Poplar Forest from her father in 1773. When his presidency ended in 1809, Jefferson visited the retreat three or four times a year, often staying for several months at a time during planting seasons.

Designated a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior, and nearly lost to development, Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest plantation in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains was rescued in 1984 by a group of local citizens who sought to preserve it for the cultural and educational benefit of the public. Poplar Forest was opened to the public for the first time in 1986, in its “before restoration” state. Today, the neoclassical architecture of the octagonal house has been returned to Thomas Jefferson’s design. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has recognized the meticulous research and restoration efforts with its highest award, and the plantation has been nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A visit to Poplar Forest offers a unique opportunity to observe a “live” archaeological dig during periods of active excavations. Visitors can also be among the first to experience the recently completed state-of-the-art restoration of the historic home’s interior and portions of the designed landscape, revealing Thomas Jefferson’s vision for his personal retreat.

Poplar Forest is open daily beginning January 13 from 10:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., and from March 1 through December 30 from 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m (closed on Easter, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day). Admission includes a guided house tour—by docent or app—and self-guided exploration of exhibits in the lower level of the house, the Wing of Offices, the ornamental grounds, the 1857 Slave Dwelling and the Quarter Site. Docent-guided tours of the octagonal house are offered at 10:30 a.m., 12:00 p.m., 1:00 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. Enslaved community talks are available on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays from April through October and are free with regular admission.

Admission is \$23 for adults; \$20 for seniors (ages 65+) and active military (must show ID); \$12 for college students (must show ID) and teens ages 12–18; \$6 for youth ages 6–11; and free for members and children under age 6. Admission for members of the military and their families is free (with ID) from Armed Forces Day through Labor Day as part of the Blue Star Museums programs. Tours for groups of 20 or more are available by appointment at a discounted rate.

For more information about Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, visit poplarforest.org or call 434.525.1806.