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Diggin' down with Upward Bound: WKU becomes dig site for young archaeologists

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Veronica Garcia, center, along with Jennie Eakles, left, and Em Rodgers, Western Kentucky University's Raymond Cravens Library as part of the Kentucky Archaeological Survey staff and WKU Department of Folk Studies of first-generation, college-bound high school students from Allen, Butle opportunity to learn archaeological field methods, artifact washing and i on archaeological experience on the WKU campus. (Grace Ramey/photo

Grace Ramev

Two dozen high schoolers from surrounding counties got their hands dirty Friday as part of an archaeological experience at Western Kentucky University.

Kentucky Archaeological Survey staff and WKU's Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology teamed up to give members of the university's Upward Bound program a chance to search for remnants of the past.

Participants went to work on the slope between the WKU Music Hall and Cravens Library, trying to narrow down the history of the area: Was the site home to pre-university activity, college construction activity or regular college activity?



Students were divided into groups and given their own sites to explore, finding myriad objects including pottery pieces, coal, glass, a marble and an animal tooth. Young archaeologists took turns shoveling dirt into a sifter and then picked through the remains to find artifacts.

Ty'Keria Mason, a junior, was hoping to find something like jewelry. Avril Marshall, a senior and member of Mason's digging group, didn't have any specific artifacts in mind but was just "here for the adventure."

Jaylon Jefferson, a sophomore, enjoyed the archaeological dig because he's liked dinosaurs "since I was little."

Dr. A. Gwynn Henderson, education director for the Kentucky Archaeological Survey at WKU, hopes the experience gave students a true sampling of archaeological work – it's not all about digging for dinosaurs.

"Part of what this is about is giving them a sense of what archaeologists do – it's not just digging. It's research, asking questions, washing, analyzing and interpreting," Henderson said.

Henderson said the artifacts found Friday are priceless for piecing together the area's history.

"The nature of the objects in a place can inform us about the habits of the people," Henderson said.

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Dr. M Jay Stottman, assistant director of the Kentucky Archaeological Survey, has a pretty good idea of what the site used to be. After researching maps of the campus' development, he found that the area was home to a dwelling built near the turn of the 20th century.

“We think the house was built in 1906, at least that’s what newspaper articles have said,” Stottman said. “It was probably somebody’s house. And then the university, around 1930, bought this area, bought these properties, and they kept the house.”

Once the two-story stone building became part of WKU’s campus, it was used as a home economics practice house as well as a storage facility for the music program.

It garnered the nickname of “pest house” as it was frequently used as a quarantine location. It was torn down in 1971, leaving behind the artifacts the students found Friday.

The students were not told what the site once was while they were digging – rather, they were encouraged to form hypotheses based on their findings. For example, a group of students found a layer of coal, leading them to believe this could have been a coal pile for a residential dwelling.

Henderson said none of the students knew this activity would be part of their Upward Bound programming when they were first admitted, but every student participated with “no grumbling.”

Upward Bound is a federally funded education program that identifies and recruits low-income or potential first-generation college students. The program provides study skills assistance, ACT prep, college information and help with the financial aid application process.

Cameron Carr-Calvert, director of Upward Bound, attended the dig with the students.

“They get the opportunity of real-world field and lab experience, their WKU program has spent the last four weeks on campus so they’re also learning something about the history of the place that they’ve given up their summer to live at,” Carr-Calvert said.

Unfortunately, students were not able to take home their findings, as each artifact is cataloged for historical purposes. Henderson said the collection of items will remain on campus for any archaeologists wishing to further examine WKU’s colorful past.

