

Mini vacation Visit an archaeological experiment



for a change

The Colonial Pennsylvania Plantation is nestled between the hills and valleys of Ridley Creek State Park with worm fences surrounding it. The fences were so named because they were made up of a series of crooks.

Posts were not used - just rails. They were all of equal length and were loosely piled over one another.

Photo by Joanne Spahr

By JOANNE SPAHR

How about taking your family to an archaeological expedition next weekend?

It's not as silly as it sounds. Although most people conjure up pictures of ancient Egyptian pyramids and tombs in the Mediterranean, these are not necessarily the only archaeological expeditions which exist. Actually, there is one fairly close by to families in Lancaster, Berks, York, Lebanon, and especially Chester, counties.

The place in mind is Colonial Pennsylvania Plantation which is nestled between the hills and valleys of Ridley Creek State Park near Edgemont, Pa. Now in Delaware County, back in the time of Joseph Pratt III during the mid-1700's, the period to which the plantation is being restored, it was in East Bradford Township, Chester County.

That was the time history was being made in Philadelphia, and Benjamin Hawley, a neighboring farmer, didn't even record the momentous events in his diary. He was too busy going about his business of working a Chester County farm. To find out exactly what it was that Hawley and other Chester County and southeastern farmers did as a daily routine, what their tools were like, and how long it took them, plus many more facts of daily life are the goals of Bishop's Mill Historical Institute, a non-profit corporation which has pledged in its goals and objectives to "establish an accurate 18th century working farm, alive in all respects and accurately reflecting the historically natural environment as well as the life style, technology, and world view of most people in this area two hundred years ago."

To do this, the group uses the plantation as a working laboratory and archaeological experiment. The staff and volunteers at the plantation dress in the style of the 1770's and, working with "reasonable facsimiles" of the original tools, actually restore the plantation and farm to the way it was at that time. While working with the tools and the facilities found back in

the mid 1700's and living in the manner of the Joseph Pratt III family, they keep records of their work and in this manner learn more about the period and what it actually was like to live back then. In technical terms, this is called imitative or experimental research.

For instance, they have restored the floors of the east section of the house using replicas of the old tools, and

by keeping a ledger of all the work done, now more closely understand the procedure of making the floor and the "work life" of the tools involved.

"We're experiencing what we term a "learning curve," says one staff member. To explain this further, he goes on to say that sometimes the researchers will predict too long a period of time for carrying out some

procedures, while for other experiments they don't plan on enough time. It is this actual participating and trying the experiment themselves which helps to clarify history and the researcher's understanding of the period.

According to Ernest Palmer Jr., vice president of the Board of Directors of BMHI, and historian for the group, there has been no in-

depth understanding of the typical, prosperous, though not wealthy, farm back in the 1750's in this region. So, the group is out to learn what was what by using the plantation as a laboratory.

But, the Colonial Pennsylvania Plantation is not off limits while all this is going on. Actually, the staff encourages visitors to come and share on a personal basis what they are learning.

"Here, visitors can touch things and ask questions. We are working for a personalized museum," says one volunteer.

And it is very personalized. Instead of the huge influx of visitors which flow through most roped-off museums, Colonial Pennsylvania Plantation has about 300 visitors a day and a garrulous, friendly staff who will stop and explain the techniques they are using and what they have learned from their research.

But, of course, each visitor can glean from the museum in the making whatever he wishes. For those who want to go in depth into certain areas, there are experts on folklore, archaeology, anthropology, historic agriculture and American studies. Corner any one of these experts and your world will be expanded rapidly.

But, if you are not in the mood for an archaeological or anthropological lesson, you can just stroll through the working plantation and enjoy the feeling of going back into history during the time when George Washington was nearby at Valley Forge.

Dr. Jay Anderson, who is in charge of the project, says that the majority of the visitors stay two hours or more, which is fairly long for a family with children. Then, he adds, there are also the

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The farm family, or staff and volunteers who work at the plantation, have a daily meal which they prepare from foods they have raised on the farm. Although they do buy some ingredients which the colonial

family of the 1770's would have also needed to purchase, the group is trying to be as self-sufficient as farm families at the time of the American Revolution.