



## Archaeology at Morven Park

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Surrounding Morven Park's historic mansion is a landscape full of clues about the people who previously occupied the property. Archaeology, which is the study of past human culture through material remains, is one of the key methodologies used to understand these clues at Morven Park.

Thanks to Indiana Jones and other fictional characters, the term archaeology often conjures images of archaeologists bravely entering dusty tombs full of traps and cursed artifacts. The goal of these daring figures is usually to secure priceless treasures that—in the wrong hands—could lead to the downfall of civilization, or “To acquire archaeological fame and fortune!” as stated in the movie *Curious George*. Real archaeology isn't quite as dangerous as it is depicted in the movies (although poison ivy and ticks are not pleasant), but the thrill of discovery and the expansion of knowledge is always exciting.

The current archaeology program at Morven Park began under the Director of Preservation in 2010. The goals of this program are to identify potential archaeological sites (places where there are physical remains of past human activities), protect known archaeological sites, and establish best practice guidelines for the excavation of archaeological sites.

Prior to the development of the archaeological program, metal detecting within Morven Park—most notably at a known Civil War encampment site—was unrestrained. Efforts were made to reduce metal detecting in the 1990s, but some staff members were permitted to continue the practice if they turned in all recovered artifacts. This resulted in several interesting artifacts being added to the collection but, without their original context, the chance to learn more about the history of the site from these artifacts was lost.

*Context*, in archaeological terms, refers to the relationship of artifacts to each other and to their surroundings, which translates to how the artifacts were placed in time and space. Context is based on the geological laws of association and superposition. These laws state that objects found within the same geological level are contemporary with each other, while those found below are older and those found above are more recent. These laws help archaeologists establish artifacts within a chronological framework. A wonderful example of the importance of context is provided by the Society for American Archaeology:

“In the 1920s, archaeologists found a stone spear point lodged between the ribs of a species of a North American bison that went extinct at the end of the last Ice Age. It settled an argument that had gone on for decades. The spear point established once and for all that people had inhabited North America since the late Pleistocene. It is the context or association between the bison skeleton and the artifact that proved this. When people remove an artifact without recording its precise location, we lose that context forever. At that point, the artifact has little or no scientific value. Context is what allows archaeologists to understand the relationships between artifacts and between archaeological sites. It is how we understand how people in the past lived their daily lives.”<sup>1</sup>

By prohibiting all on-site metal detecting since 2010, the Westmoreland Davis Memorial Foundation (WDMF) Board of Trustees and staff have ensured the protection of the archaeological sites and the information they contain for future generations. The staff is extremely grateful to the metal detecting

community for respecting these restrictions and for sharing some of the artifacts that were found on site in the 1970s and '80s.

In addition to the policies and procedures established for the management of archaeological sites at Morven Park, an additional layer of protection has been provided through a conservation easement held by the Virginia Outdoor Foundation. The easement protects over 600 acres of land at Morven Park, the bulk of which lies on the ridge adjacent to the historic buildings and within the viewshed of the Davis Mansion. The easement protects both known and unknown archaeological sites and requires the supervision of a qualified archaeologist for all excavations. Fortunately, Morven Park has a staff member who meets all federal and state archaeology qualifications.

You may be surprised to learn that the best way to protect an archaeological site is to refrain from excavating it. Because excavating results in the destruction of the site, excavations at Morven Park occur only if there is a threat to the site or if it is necessary to answer a research question, such as confirming the location of a long-lost building. No matter the reason for the excavation, the archaeological team has just one chance to get it right and record as much data as possible. Data such as original ground level, the location of each artifact, color and type of soil, and the relationships between artifacts and other natural or manmade features are critical to understanding the site. By recording an excavation in detail, archaeologists can review the data and draw conclusions about the history of the site and ensure that future researchers have access to the same data for further examination.

The WDMF Board of Trustees and staff are honored to care for all the history held at Morven Park, both above and below ground.

To learn more about archaeology, visit the Archaeological Institute of America <https://www.archaeological.org/> or the Society for American Archaeology <https://www.saa.org/>

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<sup>1</sup> Society for American Archaeology website: [www.saa.org/about-archaeology/what-is-archaeology](https://www.saa.org/about-archaeology/what-is-archaeology)