

# Resurrecting a church

## 18th-century foundation and artifacts uncovered in Elk Run

By Scott Shenk - Staff Writer

The two-lane Elk Run Road in southern Fauquier did not exist in the 1700s. But a dirt trail cut through the southern Fauquier area, then known as the village of Elk Run.

Settlers headed to the frontier used the trail, as did Revolutionary War soldiers. Even Thomas Jefferson passed through Elk Run.

Some visitors bought supplies at the general store. Some went to the blacksmith shop. Many, such as Mr. Jefferson, stopped by "Hardin's Ordinary" (a tavern and inn).

Surrounded by large plantations, "Elk Run was a happening place," says Brenda Branscome, a retired history teacher. "This was the (Interstate) 95 of its day."

Among the bustle of the mid-1700s village stood a brick church, perhaps two stories tall. The Elk Run Anglican Church not only served as the primary place of worship for locals and travelers alike, it also had a secular role, collecting taxes and hosting community meetings.

But the American victory in the Revolutionary War marked the end of the church. Because of their connection with British rule, people stopped using Anglican churches.

Then, locals started dismantling the Elk Run Church piece by piece, using the bricks and lumber to build their homes.

The church vanished.

But six years ago, a group of people started digging in a field that had been covered by a thicket and a patch of trees.

In December 1999, they found a portion of the church's stone foundation.

The work continues. Volunteers show up most Saturdays, except during the winter.

Last Saturday morning, about a dozen volunteers arrived around 9 and began loosening dirt with trowels in the sectioned "units," surrounded by the cross-shaped foundation. They put the dirt in buckets and then sifted it through a screen in search of artifacts.

"The interesting thing is the big picture it tells you here," Ms. Branscome says as she dusts off the "exposed" southeast corner of the foundation. Earth around the corner has been cleared, about two feet deep, to the bottom of the foundation.



Staff Photo/Chris Moorhead

**"The interesting thing is the big picture it tells you here," retired history teacher Brenda Branscome says of the archaeological dig.**



Like many others involved with the archaeological dig, Ms. Branscome searches for old pottery, coins and such, hoping to find some clue to the lives the people in the area more than 200 years ago.

"This is important because it was a big part of the community. And it's our history," says Dr. John Eddins, a local archaeologist volunteering with the dig. He supervises the work, ensuring that it gets done correctly.

Dr. Eddins has worked at sites where 10,000-year-old artifacts were found. He finds the Elk Run Church dig just as interesting.

The volunteers, he says, "are taking charge of their history."

About 10 years before Fauquier got its name (in 1759), the church was built along a route traveled by traders headed for the area now called Dumfries, according to "Fauquier County, Virginia 1759-1959," a book chronicling the county's history. Before the settlers, Indians used the route as a hunting path.

Elk Run "was on the edge of the frontier," says Ed Dandar, overseeing the project as the church preservation committee's chairman.

He and officials with St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Catlett want the project to become a historical park site and an educational tool, Mr. Dandar says.

The preservation committee has produced historic markers and pamphlets detailing the history of the church and area. And once the site work is complete, it could serve as a stop for tourists and school groups. Churches or historic groups could hold meetings at the site, Mr. Dandar says.

The Northern Virginia resident says the committee plans to produce a book and a video documentary on the church and the archaeological dig.

If not for the volunteers, the project probably would have gone nowhere, says Mr. Dandar, always searching for additional expert volunteers and donors.

After the group discovered leg bones in a grave behind the church foundation - using sonar, workers from Petrone & Associates found a dozen other potential graves - professors from George Washington University and Yorktown College expressed interest in helping with the project. They visited the site last week, Mr. Dandar says.

The project got its start in 1999, when the late Ned Browning donated the property to St. Stephen's; several other area churches turned down the offer, Mr. Dandar says.

Mr. Dandar, a retired military intelligence officer with experience in work such as the Elk Run dig, helped St. Stephen's members plan the project after Mr. Browning donated the property.

The Virginia Department of Historic Resources has registered the site. Two historic markers standing near the foundation detail the church's history.

Volunteers have found numerous artifacts, including parts of a Spanish coin and pieces of earthenware, a Kirk Indian arrowhead and plenty of nails.

Melanie Fuechsel found the Spanish coin about six weeks ago, the 12-year-old Warrenton Middle seventh-grader says Saturday as she loosens dirt with a trowel.

Her mother, Virginia Fuechsel, digs nearby in another unit.

"I try to get her out here every Saturday. It was her birthday present," Mrs. Fuechsel says. "She's learned a lot and had fun."

Jackie Lee has done much of the research along with Mr. Dandar. She shows up most Saturdays, too. She also is the director of the Old Jail Museum in Warrenton.

"The church was just laying here since the 1750s," says the former Las Vegas showgirl who has a bachelor's degree in anthropology.

She imagines Sundays some 260 years ago, people watering their horses at the nearby spring as they head to church to hear a sermon by the Rev. James Keith, the original pastor and grandfather of former Chief Justice John Marshall. She pictures a beautiful brick structure with three entrances. During services, rich folks sat up front, the poor in back. If blacks were allowed, they may have gone up to a balcony - if the church had two levels.

Ms. Lee can't wait until the volunteers complete the site work, so people can stop and enjoy the history.

"It could be a very nice place."