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Digging up the past

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Digging up the past

Furman students, faculty tackle excavation project

As part of his exploration of the history of Simpsonville, S.C., for a book he is writing to celebrate the town's centennial, Steve Richardson has spent hours poring over old maps and land deeds.

During one of his research sessions, Richardson, a Furman reference librarian, was able to pinpoint the site of the former home of Peter Simpson, a blacksmith for whom the Greenville suburb is named.

Simpson, Richardson learned, set up shop just a few hundred yards from the present-day tower clock, a landmark in the town. From 1838 until his death in 1847, Simpson's shop, situated near a wagon trail connecting Augusta, Ga., and Columbia, S.C., to the North Carolina mountains, was a popular resting place and watering hole for weary wagon travelers and herd-driving farmers. Richardson also learned that the land surrounding "Simpson's Place," which later became known as Simpsonville, was probably inhabited by Native Americans.

"The wagon trail near Simpson's Place predated white settlers and was used by Native Americans," says Richardson, a 1977 Furman graduate whose ancestors were among the first to settle in the Upstate during the late 1700s. The publication of his 300-page book, *Village Past, A History of Simpsonville*, will coincide with the town's centennial celebration next year.

Richardson discovered that some of Simpson's old property had been developed but that much of it was still undisturbed, including a stone dam built by settlers in the mid-19th century. Last October, however, Richardson heard some disturbing news: a large portion of the area, including the dam, was to be razed to make room for a sewer line.

"I was afraid we were going to lose a bit of our history," says Richardson.

What followed was a mix of activism, engaged learning and a lot of hard work.

Richardson contacted Steve O'Neill, a Furman history professor and authority on the history of the Upstate. Together they helped coordinate an excavation plan for the area. By November five students descended on the site with shovels, trowels and sifting screens in hand. Soon Brian Siegel, a cultural anthropologist at Furman and member of the South Carolina Institute of Anthropology and Archaeology, was commissioned to oversee the excavation.

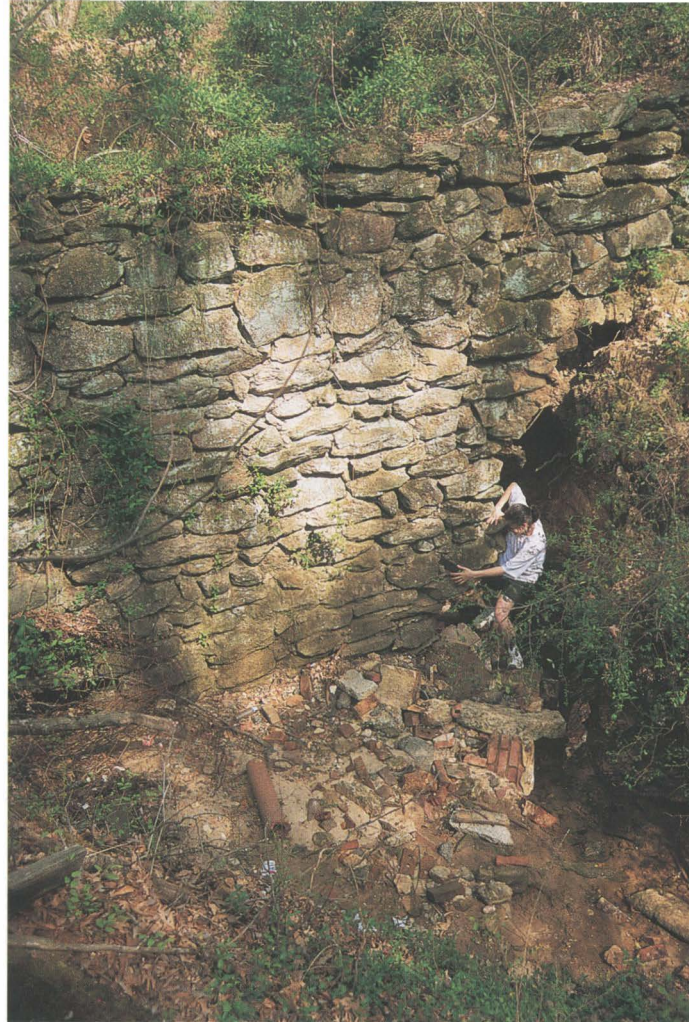
A Furman contingent visited the site regularly and bagged hundreds of finds, some of which will be examined later this year by Stanley South, a historical archaeologist at the institute. Cathy Lane, a senior history major who is helping to direct the dig, says volunteers have unearthed old pottery, 19th-century ceramics and even some quartz projectile points that could have been used more than 9,000 years ago.

"I have not done this before, so this is opening a whole new world to me," says Lane, who created a Web page (<http://hometown.aol.com/simpdig2000/index.html>) with information on the dig. "This is not work, it's fun."

Although the group has unearthed some interesting finds, Richardson says the experience of the excavation is what's important.

"What you have here are professors from different disciplines and students, all on their hands and knees, working together, digging and exploring," he says. "This has been a real positive experience, especially for the students. It's what engaged learning and Furman are all about."

Media coverage of the dig has also sparked a local effort to preserve the dam. Town council members are circulating a "Save the Dam"



Cathy Lane, a senior from Greenville who helped direct the Simpsonville dig, explores a 19th-century stone dam that was probably constructed a few decades after Peter Simpson's death. Martin Jakubczak, a junior from Easton, Pa., and Tiffany Dixon, a senior from Easley, S.C., help to excavate the former site of Simpson's blacksmith shop.

petition. Construction on the sewer line has not yet begun and the fate of the dam is undecided, says Richardson.

"The dam is Simpsonville's oldest man-made structure," says Richardson. "I hope they can save it. That would be another positive to come from the dig."

— John Roberts