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Alan Armstrong and Christian Williamson

BELLEVUE — Archaeologists last week kicked off the first wave of discovery in a project expected to take about four years at the historic Bellevue Estate property on Gift Hill Road.

The land is owned by St. John Community Foundation and under a long-term lease to St. John Historical Society, which plans to construct a cultural and historic center at the site.

SJHS members envision the center as an elegant island-style building with a climate controlled archive and exhibit area as well a meeting space.

Before SJHS can get moving past the planning phase of the project, however, Northwestern University Ph.D. candidate Alan Armstrong will take a closer look at what's on, and in, the ground at this historically-rich site.

Armstrong, along with Syracuse University graduate student Christian Williamson, arrived on St. John July 14 to get started on a two-week archaeological dig of the Bellevue Property, the former site of a Dutch cotton plantation dating to around 1720.



"The land has been professionally surveyed already so what we did was map out the major ruins on the property first," said Armstrong. "They're looking at an area to build on and one of the things we're doing is trying to see what's in that portion of the land."

Armstrong first mapped out the main ruins on the land, then cleared a major part of the property before creating a grid and installing a total of about 60 flag markers spaced five meters apart, he explained.

"We'll go in and dig a little circle at each of the flags," he said. "It's called a shovel test. We'll look for ceramic and glass or any kind of man made objects."

The Bellevue Estate land was owned by relatives of the powerful Van Beverhoudt and Van Holten families and was the site of a Dutch cotton plantation likely dating to around 1720, explained Armstrong.

The cotton plantation was abandoned sometime around 1790, but evidence suggests the property was still in use after that date, Armstrong added.

"It looks like there was provision growing going on here after the cotton plantation was abandoned," said the archaeology Ph.D. student.

Armstrong is excited to explore a section of the land that he believes was the site of a slave village, now hidden under the soil, he added.

"We're really excited to find and identify the slave village on the plantation," said Armstrong. "We'll be looking for small houses, small yard spaces and maybe a community meeting area. We're excited to get to explore that part of the land."

There are three major building foundations found on the Bellevue Estate land as well as ruins of several outbuildings. SJHS members plan to build the cultural center on a flat portion of the property where no major ruins are found.

After this two-week dig is wrapped up, Armstrong will further research the history of Bellvue Estate and plans to apply for additional grant funding to continue archaeological work on the land, he explained.

At SJHS's 40th anniversary ceremony in March, the group announced it has received an anonymous \$100,000 gift which will allow for the cultural center project to progress.

"This incredibly generous anonymous contribution is the impetus that this organization needs to move us forward into phase two of our plans for the St. John Cultural and Historical Resource Center," SJHS President Lonnie Willis said at the March event.

"Phase one was 'imagining,' and phase two will be 'creating.' We are so thankful for this contribution, and I hope it will spur others to make similar commitments to our society and to our island."

SJHS is accepting additional contributions to the Cultural Center Capital Campaign. Anyone who would like to contribute should email SJHS President Lonnie Willis at lonnie00831@gmail.com or check out the group's website at www.stjohnhistoricalsociety.org.

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