

# > Discoveries

## Digging for frontier history

Students uncover traces of 19th-century America. STEPHEN W. SPERO

“**J**ohn, we have glass.” That shout from student Kit Clemente meant that Binghamton University doctoral student John Roby could add another artifact to the approximately 3,500 items pulled from the Dennis Farm, a 153-acre plot of land about an hour south of campus, along a ridge in northeastern Susquehanna County, Pa.

The old farm, owned by the Dennis Farm Charitable Land Trust, is raising a new crop of archaeologists and nourishing fresh ideas about relationships between black and white Americans at the time of the nation's birth.

### EARLY N.Y. SETTLERS

The Dennis family started living on that hillside around 1800, shortly after Judith and Prince Perkins, a free, black veteran of the American Revolution, arrived in the area from Connecticut in 1793. Perkins' direct descendant, Denise Dennis, who heads the trust, says the stories of free African-American families like hers are integral to America's history. Her research has proven that her relatives were among the 10 percent of blacks living in America around 1800 who were not enslaved.

“Our family arrived in what is now Susquehanna County when it was still a ‘howling wilderness,’ and all these early settlers had to depend on each other,” she says about how her family blended into the life of the local community. “There were years I told people about the farm, and they just wouldn't believe it.”



Doctoral student John Roby (left) helps Paul Brown, a senior, examine an artifact that may shed light on the lives of free African Americans in the 1800s.

Now, Binghamton University is working to help preserve the family's story for history.

### UNCOVERING HISTORY

To gain new insights into the Dennis family, Roby, fellow doctoral student Stacy Tchorzynski and their 11 students spent a hot, dusty summer this year uncovering history.

Perkins arrived on that steep hillside when it was the American frontier, and not much physical evidence remains from his original home. Ribbons of stone walls snake over the farm, familiar landmarks in a region where the most predictable crop is rock. At a corner of the property lies the Perkins-Dennis Cemetery, where family mem-

bers, a Revolutionary War veteran and a Civil War veteran who lived nearby are buried. About a 10-minute walk down the hill is the home of Perkins' granddaughter, Angeline. Family members lived there until 1918, and the property was placed in the trust in 2001 by Hope Dennis, Denise's aunt.

The hillside includes traces that may reveal how the area evolved from a wilderness to a community that participated in emerging national markets. The few artifacts found at the top of the hill speak to a time when Americans either made all their household goods or did without. Researchers found several mouth harps, finds that dovetail with a statement in a 19th-century history of Susquehanna County that describes

Prince Perkins playing the fiddle at the community's July 4, 1800, celebration.

Toward the bottom of the hill, Roby and the students have found items such as glass and manufactured nails that testify to the family's rising fortunes and the arrival of the railroad. "We're trying to find clues of how the family lived at different points in time," Roby says.

### TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Roby has always been interested in the history of African Americans, so after the Dennis Trust contacted Binghamton University and the Anthropology Department put out a call for graduate students to run the field school, he grabbed the assignment. Nine undergraduate and two graduate students, ranging in age from late teens to mid-60s, signed up for the six-week course.

"We think the field school is a very important experience," says Nina Versaggi MA '76, PhD '87, director of Binghamton University's Public Archaeology Facility, explaining why the facility gladly supported the class.

The students agree. "I don't think anything prepares you for field school," says Mark Sorenson, a senior at the State University of New York at Potsdam. "It gives you an idea of the lifestyle they lived," adds Joshua Anderson, a Binghamton senior.

### MARKER OF TIME

Among the first things the group did was to pound a permanent marker into the ground uphill from the Dennis home. They mapped the location of everything they did against this marker for the benefit of future researchers.

Archaeologists know, say Roby and Tehorzynski, that future scientists will have better tools for understanding



## BRINGING HISTORY TO LIGHT

**WHEN DENISE DENNIS BEGAN** seeking grants and official recognition from historical registers for a farm that has been in her family since shortly after the Revolutionary War, experts said she would need an archaeological survey of the land. She approached Binghamton University, which agreed to help.

Under the arrangement, the Anthropology Department conducts a field school, taught by doctoral students John Roby and Stacy Tehorzynski. Undergraduates and graduate students contribute to the research while learning the skills needed in professional archaeology.

The University's Public Archaeology Facility supports the effort, lending equipment and helping to pay the instructor stipends, according to Director Nina Versaggi MA '76, PhD '87. She says the University plans a second field school at the Dennis Farm in the summer of 2009. After the artifacts are collected, cataloged and preserved, the department will issue a report that Dennis can use in applications for official recognition and financial support.

the past. Meticulous records will make later analysis possible.

For now, they dig into likely spots near doorways and pathways, seeking artifacts that will reward them with evidence of everyday life. Exploratory digging starts with round test pits; digging slows and expands once items are found. Centimeter by centimeter, earth is scooped into buckets.

The buckets are brought to the heart of the site, a metal-framed, quarter-inch screen that hangs from a tripod. Students sift the contents of the buckets through the screen, seeking anything that might illuminate the Dennis family's daily life.

The archaeologists have found ceramics, glass, metal, animal bones and teeth, smoking pipes, and a pin that symbolizes medicine. "We're very curious about that symbol," Roby says, explaining that research will be needed to date it and give it context.

Some of the artifacts, such as the

finger-nail-sized piece of glass Kit Clemente spotted, may not add a great deal of information. Others, such as the fragments of a white porcelain doll's head dug up a few feet from the house, offer a rare glimpse into the lives of children in rural America, information often missing from written histories.

Archaeologists rarely find childhood items. These two fragments, Roby believes, can help date others. One of the chips has molded hair, placing it before doll makers began attaching real hair to their creations. Once they date this find, the archaeologists will be able to date other items found nearby.

This research process, painstakingly repeated, is important to Dennis, who is among the third generation of college-educated women in her family. It will enhance the written records she has of her family's experience with the old farm. Over time, it may help bring new life to that hillside in Susquehanna County. **1**