



FACULTY CENTER

# A Sense of Heritage

*An archaeology professor makes the past come alive*

The classroom door opens fiercely and the professor briskly walks in. With fedora on head and whip in hand, Doug Armstrong commands attention and proceeds to dispel the Indiana Jones myth about archaeology to his students. "That is a commercialized view of what archaeology is," says Armstrong, chair of the anthropology department. "There is some degree of reality in that discovery and adventure are involved. But that's not what archaeology's goal is."

When Armstrong arrived at the University in 1986, he was a lone archaeologist charged with the chal-

the study of people during a period for which there is an oral history or historical documentation. Having done his dissertation in Jamaica and other field research in Africa, Central America, and the United States, Armstrong focused his study on the African Diaspora. "In the last 20 years, the diversity of the African American experience has come through a re-evaluation of history; a discovery of lost texts from the arts to music, to the places people loved," he says.

In spring 1994, Armstrong received a phone call about the East End Project, an archaeological excavation and exploration of a small community in St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands. At that time he was involved in other digs—working at Wesleyan Methodist Church in downtown Syracuse, where there is evidence of slave passages; and in Barbados, studying transitions of European-style plantations to Caribbean-style ones. Armstrong, however, managed to fit in a visit to the St. John site. He couldn't pass up the unique opportunity. "There were posts from the structure, foundations in place, and materials from the 18th century sitting on the surface," he says. "It was incredible and fantastic; I really wanted to do this."

Last summer's excursion to the East End Project marked the 10th field study conducted by SU. Such research, Armstrong says, can fill in gaps where written documentation might not exist. "What we have is their ideology expressed in action," he says, "material evidence of the presence of people."

About 40 years ago an elementary school teacher named Guy Benjamin asked his students to gather oral histories about their families. He, too, started collecting an oral history about his family and others from the St. John community that Armstrong will study. "Guy Benjamin is in his 80s now and there are three other individuals the same age who are the keepers of this knowledge," Armstrong says. "Because the next generation seems to be separated from this history, Benjamin was fearful of losing the information; we are going to prevent that from happening."

The site, which dates back to 1750, is located at the very east end of the island.

PHOTOS BY DOUG ARMSTRONG



This group of students is working on a global positioning survey as part of an archaeological dig at St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands. The students were led by Professor Doug Armstrong, chair of SU's anthropology department, who has been involved since 1994 with the excavation and exploration of a small community in St. John.

lenge of building an entire area of study. "As the department developed, students became the number-one focus," he says. "I wanted to create engaging and challenging classes that gave students opportunities to participate in archaeology." Over the ensuing decade, he has watched wide-eyed first-year students mature into thesis-writing seniors, and much of their development can be attributed to the hands-on education provided by the curriculum.

At Syracuse University, the specialization is called historical archaeology—

The soil was not conducive to large-scale or cultural production, so the Danish plantations established there were unsuccessful. As a result, groups of people of African descent acquired the land collectively and formed a community. "The rural East End free community provides an opportunity to examine the internal dynamics of community formation, sustenance, resistance, and persistence," Armstrong says.

In preparation for the study, Armstrong led a field school at St. John in the summer of 1995. A systematic scientific survey was conducted using high-tech global positioning systems to identify the more than 50 sites that made up the community. Teams of students walked area map sites and recorded vegetation patterns. One by one they put holes in the ground to gather material for chronological information.

A five-week dig this past May, the first of five summer field sessions, concentrated specifically on house sites. Twenty-four undergraduate and graduate students from various academic and ethnic backgrounds were divided into two groups. Each group spent two-and-a-half weeks in St. John at different times. "With all of the developments being erected, the East End community is in danger of becoming lost," says Doug Pippin, an SU doctoral candidate and adjunct professor of archaeology at Hobart College. "We are able to uncover the history of a free black community that was established early."

In St. John, Armstrong also emphasized the importance of enlisting local residents in efforts to save the endangered community from becoming a piece of forgotten history. He scheduled digs on Saturdays so community members could participate. "When the community gets involved, there is a profound sense of heritage," Armstrong says. "It's their tradition, which they will carry forward. They are responsible for protecting these valuable sites."

—NATALIE A. VALENTINE



## JAMAICA BOUND

Syracuse University professors Alfred Young and Doug Armstrong can assure students they'll learn about rich Jamaican history—one, by studying it firsthand; and, two, by digging it up.

Young, a professor of history and African American Studies, established a five-week summer seminar in Jamaica through the Division of International Programs Abroad (DIPA). Beginning in 1997, students will learn the economic, political, and cultural history of Jamaica not just through readings and lectures, but by living it. When they examine the government, elected officials will deliver lectures; when they attend a play, the producer will answer questions after the performance; when they study music, they will visit reggae legend Bob Marley's house and touch bullet holes in the wall from an assassination attempt. "I want them to experience Jamaica intellectually and emotionally," Young says.

Young arrived at Syracuse in 1995 as a visiting professor from Georgia Southern University, where he established a similar program. DIPA tapped into his resources and expertise to add the Caribbean program to its curriculum. "I opened doors for students by aggressively opening doors in Jamaica for myself," Young says.

During the dozens of times he has visited the island nation, he has met both influential and everyday people, all of whom he considers important to Jamaica's history. Young's particular interest in Jamaica lies in its ability to retain remnants of African culture and society. Because Africans brought to the Caribbean outnumbered their European counterparts, societal traditions were preserved in their new land, he says.

Armstrong found some of these cultural remnants through archaeological digs conducted from 1987 to 1993 in the National Heritage Trust-owned property at the Seville Plantation. With the government's support, Armstrong examined the first excavations, which concentrated on an early time period. Two sites were uncovered—one from the 1690s and the other from the 1770s. In addition, a study on the "great house"—the place used for sleeping and storage—was conducted and materials from that project are exhibited at the Seville National Park Interpretive Center.

Dorrick Gray, deputy director of archaeology at the Jamaica National Heritage Trust and a doctoral candidate at SU, notes that Armstrong's work has had a profound impact on the nation's heritage. "Doug Armstrong's research influenced policies because his discoveries encouraged the government to officially protect all sites," he says. "They were not confident that archaeology could uncover detailed information, but even though structures cannot be seen above the ground, we can still get the facts."

For Armstrong, this serves as an effective way to preserve a unique culture. "The more people are sold on it as being a part of their heritage," he says, "the better chance there is to preserve resources."

—Elaine Cipriano  
and Natalie A. Valentine



Discoveries from recent digs include a cooking pot (far left), a medicine bottle (top), and an African-Jamaican burial site (left) from the Seville Plantation.