Anthropology Professor Mark Leone shares details regarding his ongoing dig at Wye House in Talbot County

For the past 30 years, University of Maryland Anthropology Professor Mark Leone has directed Archaeology in Annapolis, a research project excavating a wide range of historical sites throughout the capital city. Leone is currently excavating Wye House Plantation in Talbot County, and has made some revealing discoveries.

Wye House has a very remarkable history. Built in the late 18th century by the Lloyd family, it was home to hundreds of slaves including Frederick Douglass. Leone and his research team were approached by the current residents of Wye House as well as the descendants of free blacks who reside in nearby Unionville. Leone says he listened to both groups share what they already knew about the site and what they wanted to know. They primarily sought to learn what was left of the slaves’ heritage from Africa, as well as their spirituality or religion. Leone and his team excavated the orangery, where slaves lived and grew food. Buried under the floor of the orangery, they found a bundle: a clay bag/pouch containing items like lead shot (small balls of lead), pins, nails, and a small stone axe. Bundles are ubiquitous across Western and Central Africa, so finding one on the Eastern Shore provides physical evidence of a connection between the slaves and their African roots.

Leone said the bundle found in the orangery has the same meaning as one found in Africa, but this one was adopted for American use. “Bundles were designed to manage or control a spirit of the dead for human purposes,” Leone said. Although the slaves on the Wye House Plantation were Christian, the bundles served as an everyday expression of how people dealt with protection and well-being, indicating that they used African spiritual objects in their day-to-day life.

In the orangery, Leone also excavated fossilized pollen and analyzed it, which revealed that the slaves cultivated many greens and experimented with many different types of plants.

Leone’s findings have excited many people; his work at Wye House and his excavation of the bundle has been featured in numerous media outlets. Because the discovery is a clear connection between 2nd and 3rd generation slaves and their spiritual African heritage, it is a very important and fascinating discovery, especially for the African-American community.

Leone runs a field school during the summer in Annapolis and at the Wye House site for undergraduate students interested in archaeology. The six-week course is a great way for those who are interested in archaeology to get field experience and work in all aspects of an excavation.