Karen Early sifts clay through a screened box on a grassy hillside in rural Orange County. “Already this morning we found a large piece of brick and a smaller nail,” says Early (’06), an archaeology major.

She was among 20 students working this summer at the first field-slave quarters site discovered at Montpelier, President James Madison’s estate. Students and archaeologists removed and painstakingly examined contents of shovel-test pits on the location of the small, former slave village. “It gives me a different perspective on history,” says history major Juli- anne Herczeg (’07).

Early and Jonathan Silvester (’05), an archaeology major, had done similar work at other sites including Fredericksburg and the Shenandoah National Park. “You get your methods, and you can adapt to wherever you want to work,” says Early, who hopes that will be underwater archaeology. Silvester’s goal is cultural resource management for architectural firms whose clients want to examine sites before developing them.

A similarly begun probe led to the current dig site’s discovery in 2003 when Montpelier staff began surveying to locate a new road for visitors. “It’s a true learning envi- ronment,” says JMU anthropology profes- sor Clarence Geier.

Slaves probably lived there in log cabins from the late 1700s through the 1820s. “At first we thought the site would have been damaged by agriculture,” says, Matt Reeves, Montpelier’s director of archaeology, but apparently it lay fallow since then.

So far, the dig has produced more than 120 machine- and hand-tooled nails, ceramic fragments, animal bones and teeth, a key to the mansion — and questions. A shovel brings up layers of loam, charred wood remnants and reddish clay. Geier and Reeves have bet a case of Guinness on Geier’s theory that the earth had been moved to round off a hill for constructing the quarters. Clues to that and other mysteries must await the return of field students next summer, says National Trust Fund archaelogist Lynne Lewis.

The Madisons, who owned between 100 and 120 slaves in the 1790s, built nicer quarters for house slaves behind their mansion. Reeves, however, suspects the more isolated field slaves may have enjoyed greater freedom after work hours. Records indicate the fourth president treated slaves relatively well, though Reeves points out that good conditions under slavery were, well, relative. Dolley Madison’s son, Payne Todd, sold slaves off to pay debts until the family sold Montpelier in 1844.

This was the 18th summer that JMU students took part in archaeology at Montpelier. Digs in the 1990s included the sites of Mount Pleasant (home to Madison fore- bears), the house slave quarters and a blacksmith shop. Archeological work there has increased significantly in the current mil- lennium, owing partly to the restoration under way.

About half of Montpelier’s 15-member archaeology staff are JMU alumni. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime job, and we’ve gotten in from start to finish,” says staff crew chief Stephanie Donnan (’01). Her crew has found pipe stems in Montpelier’s backyard and excavated beneath removal sites of additions built after the Madisons’ ownership. Staff archeologist Megan Veness (’02) pieced together green bottles from shards, one bearing President Madison’s father’s seal.

Findings are cleaned, recorded and stored in the grounds’ archaeology lab. Exam- ining a reconstructed bowl, lab director Melissa Rich (’03) recalls the excitement when colleagues digging beneath two sections of a kitchen site found that pieces they unearthed fit together.

“Getting them out of the ground is just where things begin,” Geier says.

— Chris Edwards