

The Break Room with City Archaeologist, Andrea White

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Transcript

Narrator:

You've tuned into another edition of The Break Room, a weekly conversation about how the City of Saint Augustine works from those who do the work every day, hosted by the City of Saint Augustine's Communications Director, Melissa Wissel. The Break Room offers a closer look at the different city departments and provides updates on current and upcoming projects and events. And now your host Melissa Wissel.

Melissa Wissel:

Welcome to The Break Room. Thanks for tuning in. We're back this week for a follow up interview with city archaeologist Doctor Andrea White. We didn't quite finish up what we were talking about last time, Andrea. Welcome back.

Andrea White:

Thanks for having me back.

Melissa Wissel:

So I do have a quick follow up I asked. I think you did see the. I'm really this is exciting for me. The Smithsonian magazine online covered the story of the British readout and actually linked to our Break Room interview, so that was really big for me.

Andrea White:

Yeah. Yay. Throwing your hands up. Whoops.

Melissa Wissel:

But so lot of good coverage, any kind of quick follow up on how we great exposure we got on that story that was kind of a big one.

Andrea White:

Oh yeah, it's always amazing to me how long it certain, I guess. What do you want to call it Right. Media coverage how long it goes and keeps, you know, reappearing. And we keep getting interview requests because we've been doing, you know, we've been kind of on a media blitz for over a month. But we had a really great AP article come out recently and that, of course, just really exploded it. Once again, we've got requests for images in Europe and other places.

Melissa Wissel:

Ohh wow, that's that's really exciting.

Andrea White:

So pretty exciting. It is always interesting. To see how the headlines are spun. I think there was one that was. Was like archaeologists discovered that there was a British period and we're like, oh, we don't really discover that the British were here for twenty years. And that was kind of well known. But it's still pretty exciting.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. Exciting evidence of it? Well, that's really cool. So so moving on from the British redoubt readout. You've got ongoing projects constantly. A restaurant wants to open, somebody wants to put in a backyard seating or something in the historic district we've talked about. Tell us about the interaction of how you're able to use your volunteers and then Flagler College had a project.

Andrea White:

Mm-hmm. Then we partnered with Flagler College this past summer, so we cannot do what we do without all of our wonderful volunteers. We have anywhere from 30 to 35 volunteers that commit quite a bit of time. In fact, we recently tallied up how many hours were donated in 2024, and we were always astounded. But. It's close to 4,000 hours, so that's really the equivalent of two full time staff folks, so.

Melissa Wissel:

4,000. OK, so is that two hours at a time, five hours at a time, long projects like those.

Andrea White:

Normally it's a few hours at a time. Yeah, so that is cumulative both in the field and in the lab. We normally invite folks to come in. We have an application process. And we normally only take a few at a time because it doesn't matter how many people want to volunteer. There's only so many of us that can oversee people. Yeah, you can have 100 people. But if you only have one staff person, you can't manage a hundred people at one point.

Melissa Wissel:

So what does a volunteering day look like give me like. You know, you and I also talk about how you, you laugh or it's in your field, how everyone's all about the digging. And so is there digging, is there getting dirty or is it tagging in the lab or a little bit of both?

Andrea White:

Well, we normally start folks in lab and give them an introduction to what archaeology is all about, why we do what we do. We're not just very strange and meticulous and want to torture you by subdividing all of these things and keeping all these different soils and artifacts in different places. For instance, that there's a method to the madness, and so that's really a great way for people to have an introduction. It's a more controlled environment to introduce people and we try to bring people in at the same time. So it's kind of almost like, oh, this is your class, your group of people. So that new people are coming in and there's other new people so they can kind of connect with folks.

And it helps everybody sort of integrate as a team together. So we normally bring people in about once a year and we train them in the lab, they start off with washing and processing

and sorting artifacts. And then if they're still interested, then we can maybe move them on to the field. So when we started our partnership with Flagler Field School this past summer, we were able to both train the field school students on some archaeological methods as well as our volunteers. At the same time. So we partnered with Laurie B. She's a professor at Flagler in anthropology, and so she had a bigger project out at Fort Mose, but she really kind of needed a quick introduction for summer for students. And we had this project out at Francis Field, which most listeners are probably familiar with, where you go to festivals and we really need to do some testing out there because it is in an archaeological zone. We knew that there were probably some deposits out there, but we had never really tested it. And it's a very big field, so we thought. Well, this is a great opportunity to get a little free student labor as in exchange for teaching them basic field methods and shovel testing and stuff like that. And then we partnered our new volunteers coming in as well as our older volunteers if they wanted or seasoned volunteers, they should say if they wanted. Come in and work with us and get that training. We all work together. So it was fun. It was a really great learning opportunity for everybody.

Melissa Wissel:

So how do you pick? So I'm picturing Francis Field. Excuse me with You know all of our various festivals and runs and things that start and end their parades. How do you pick a spot? How do you pick where in a space like that? That that can either do you look at it and go eenie, meenie, miney Moe. Do you look at some old maps of something that says, I think there was something over here. We kind of talked about that with the reader. Yeah. In a place like Francis Field. That's a big space like you just said.

Andrea White:

Yeah it's a huge space, So what archaeologists do. And make sure you're standing at the corner by the parking garage. This is a binoculars. Go where should?

Melissa Wissel:

Where should I go? Should we do?

Andrea White:

No. Normally archaeologists start by gathering background information. So has there been archaeology in the past done there? We look at historical maps. We look at historical aerial imagery. What has been there that we know of. So we get a better sense of what we might be looking for and then we do very systematic testing. Often you will do it at a very set interval like I'm going to lay out tapes, measuring tapes, and I'm going to dig at a hole in the ground at every twenty five meters. Yes, we use the metric system. So we dug. We started off digging holes at basically every twenty five meter intervals and of course systematically across the whole. Property and that's sort of the basis of what normally archaeology does. And then once you get more information, if you need to narrow that gap in there, you know and start what we call delineating, then you can put in more shovel tests if you find stuff.

Melissa Wissel:

And it's a very measured depth. I mean, there, there it's a square Hole it's a.

Andrea White:

It is a square hole, yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Square down X amount of inches very flat. This isn't digging a trench for your for your composting, this isn't a fence trench. This isn't like, oh, let me just throw in a flower garden. This looks good. Yeah. And then turn up the dirt.

Andrea White:

No, we dig based on the soil stratum, which is a layer of soil that is, you know, usually very consistent in terms of one color and those represent different events so out of Francis Field, some folks may be aware that it was a baseball field. Several different baseball fields. Over time there was a minor league team called the Saints that was out there. And so we found evidence of the different baseball fields, which was really cool. And it's very distinctive. When you think of a baseball field, right, you think of the outfield, but the infield is normally a very distinct clay kind of like, you know, sort of orangey clay that is not native in normal in Saint Augustine. We do not find that. So it is definitely brought in. Fill for the baseball field and. It was very distinct. Was great to teach folks like hey, when this soil layer

is gone, you're done with that deposit like that is the end of the baseball field, you know, period. And then we're going to go down deeper into history.

Melissa Wissel:

This was the baseball field era. And then yeah, yeah.

Andrea White:

Yeah, That is exactly What we do as archaeologists is we take each layer. Think of it. Make a cake. Each layer of you know layer cake is represents a distinct period in time and the artifacts in there help us decide what time period we're looking at and what types of activities might have happened there. So within the baseball field, we were finding like celluloid buttons that probably came off of uniform. So that was pretty cool and sometimes. We were finding multiple layers of baseball fields because the baseball field, through aerial imagery, changed over time on there was more than one out there.

Melissa Wissel:

Very cool. Yeah. So what real quick if you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wissel. I have Dr. Andrea White with us. She is our city archaeologist. We're talking about field work that our department does with not only volunteers, but an opportunity with Flagler students. So you mentioned the buttons. What else? Anything else notable to report? Under. In Francis Field.

Andrea White:

Yeah. So what was surprising even to us is there were a few deposits associated with, there was a huge hotel called the San Marco Hotel that dates the late nineteenth century that sat where the visitor center is today. For those that are familiar. And there was some deep trash pits. Full of bottles, hotel Ware just very deep. We did not get to the bottom. I think we were down four feet.

Melissa Wissel:

Really. Wow.

Andrea White:

Yeah. And we physically could not get to the bottom of the students. And we used some tall students to have longer arms and legs to help get down there.

Melissa Wissel:

Wow.

Andrea White:

So yeah, that was a big surprise for us. It wasn't everywhere. It was only in some discrete areas, but it was enough to tell us there are things that are out here that we need to be aware of and document that were very deep. So that's good. So any, you know, I think there's some minor trenching that might happen with some of the festivals to bury electrical lines, you know, but they're very shallow, like, couple inches. But so we know that they should not be impacted, at least based on the information. We've collected but. It's good to know that if there's any future projects out there, irrigation or something deeper that we'll need to come in and do more work.

Melissa Wissel:

And then so talking about what you've discovered that then goes back to the lab and that's where you do the recording. Tell us about the lab a little bit.

Andrea White:

So the lab is a very important step in archaeology. Everyone thinks that's the digging, but that's probably only about twenty five percent of what we do. The lab is where we bring everything in. We wash it, we sort it, we analyze it. So you take each item and you look, when was it manufactured? Where was it manufactured? How much of it do we have? We are now entering to a place where we have a new database, Catherine Sims. Our research and collections archaeologist has been working for many years to develop. A very complex database that stores all of the information about all the artifacts, so we have to enter everything in there. How much does it weigh? How many? How many counts of it do we have? What depending on what it is, if it's a button, we might ask a bunch of information about the manufacturing. If it's, you know, pipe stems are different, we might need a

borehole size. How you know all of this little detailed information about each artifact is very important. And so we catalog it all and then we have to curate it all. And in each artifact needs to be labeled and put in individual bag. All of this type of stuff. I know it's a little mind numbing, but it's very important so that we have an inventory of everything we have. We can do analysis with all of that information. We can compare it to other sites that we've excavated. We can make that information available to other researchers. And it's really what lives on beyond us doing the work. It will live in perpetuity. That's the idea behind those artifacts is that hundred years from now, somebody can come back and say that collection, because there's new technologies, new research questions to ask, and we need to be the custodians of that. And that's really one of the most important things that we end up doing as archaeologists is preserve that information because we've destroyed the site by digging it. It's a destructive science, but we've still retained the photographs of the notes. We took digging in all those layers. Yeah, all of the other information, as well as the artifacts.

Melissa Wissel:

Does the database get shared? I mean is it is it? Yeah, kind of like a thing that connects to another database that connects.

Andrea White:

No, We really would love that. We've been working with Lori Lee at our partner with at Flagler College to kind of be able to share create the database. So it's shareable information. People might call different things just like we have different regional terms for stuff. You call it a shopping cart, a buggy. You know, there's all these kind of things that people terms people have for certain things. So it makes sharing a little difficult when you start trying to mush and mesh different databases. So that's kind of hard, but at least we can export that information and you know it has capabilities. We hope that someday we might be able to share some of that stuff, even just images from things online.

Melissa Wissel:

Because you have access in industry to other databases.

Andrea White:

Not necessarily. Yes, sometimes it's, you know, software is proprietary, so it sometimes that makes it harder to share different information through. You know, you have to subscriptions. And stuff but. There are databases that we have access to that we can use. For, especially for identifying the artifacts.

Melissa Wissel:

Last question before we have to sign off, we're already about out of time.

Andrea White:

Oh my gosh, time flies.

Melissa Wissel:

I know we're just about up. How is the lab coming along, you busting at the seams? Any updates on the lab? I know we've talked a little bit about maybe it getting and you getting a new lab. We won't go there too much in depth, but we can hint maybe someday you'll get a new lab.

Andrea White:

Yeah, we had. We've been upgrading the space we have. That is another reason why we have to kind of limit our volunteers. There's just not enough space in the lab for as many people as we'd like in there. So it houses everything, our offices, our collections, our workspace, all of our field equipment. So it's kind of a, it's a tight space right now where archaeologists are always running out of space.

Melissa Wissel:

Because you keep finding stuff, stop finding stuff.

Andrea White:

Yeah, we keep finding things. Things that never happens. But at least we've made a lot of upgrades to the space we have, especially with equipment and storage and stuff like that.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, we are out of time. Very soon I hope we get to do another lab orientation. Open house. Whether it's during city government week or back again next year during archaeology month. But that's a wrap. All right. Thanks for coming in.

Andrea White:

Thanks for having me back.

Melissa Wissel:

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Narrator:

You've been listening to The Break Room, a weekly program addressing projects and programs offered by the City of Saint Augustine. Join us each week as the city's communications director, Melissa Wissel, has in-depth conversations with the people who make our town work to meet the needs of our community. See you at this time next week for another edition of The Break Room.