THE DAILY CLIPS

June 17, 2009

News, commentary, and opinion
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Digging into the past

ECU students participate in N.C. archaeological excavation

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, June 16, 2009

East Carolina University students are unearthing artifacts that have been covered for more than 200 years in a brick cellar in North Carolina’s oldest town.

As part of a five-week summer field school, 11 undergraduate and two graduate students are assisting in the archaeological excavation of an 18th century merchant storehouse cellar in Bath, the town that celebrated its 300th anniversary in 2005.

Charles Ewen, professor of anthropology at ECU, is overseeing the project which lasts until June 24.

Ewen and the students are working in cooperation with the staff at Historic Bath, part of North Carolina’s Historic Sites, a division of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

A small group of European settlers came to the area in 1690 and founded the town of Bath in 1705. By 1708, the town consisted of about 50 people and 12 houses.

“This is one of the only brick-lined cellars in town and is a significant architectural feature from that time period,” Ewen said. “The contents of that cellar will shed light on the commerce and daily life in North Carolina’s oldest town.”

Ewen said history books tend to paint Bath as being an extremely remote place.

“Does that mean that they didn’t have access to the same kind of things they had in Virginia and South Carolina?” Ewen asked.

“The dig is showing that they had access to pottery from England, spirits from other places and a lot of pipe stems not made locally. Instead of having to rely solely on themselves, they had a pretty good trade going.”

Ewen said the town originally had 73 lots with owners, but visitors at the time said there were only about a dozen families living in town.

The project also is helping archeologists map the parts of town that were actually inhabited and the parts that were simply owned by speculators who lived in other parts of the world.

The students, including graduate students Dawn Luker and Lauren McMillan, discovered the entrance to the cellar and more of the walls. They are excavating the fill from inside the cellar, which has revealed historic ceramic artifacts that date from 1710 to 1780.

“I can’t wait to see what’s on the bottom of that cellar floor,” Luker said.

The artifacts include tableware like plates, storage vessels, jars and pieces of glass bottles.

Luker will use information from the project to write her thesis, which focuses on the economic activity of Bath, the socioeconomic status of the citizens and what types of goods would have been available to them.

“The field school has gone fantastically,” she said. “The students are learning real skills that can help them attain jobs after graduation, as well as seeing and experiencing history as it is uncovered in front of them, and by them.”
Ewen also said the summer project has gone very well and students have been working hard with good weather conditions and softer ground than in previous years.

Undergraduate students participating in the field school include Ashley Burch, Jennifer Burnam, Deborah Glisson, Sue Gurley, Dorinda Holmes, Jennifer McLeod, Robert Mills, Michael Morris, Kate Snyder, Jennifer Taylor-Sabdo and Rachel Woolsey.

Contact Josh Humphries at jhumphries@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9565.

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[COX Newspapers logo]
James Oblinger, center, the former chancellor of N.C. State University, heads into the federal courthouse in Raleigh today to appear before a grand jury that is seeking details about former first lady Mary Easley's employment at the university.

Staff Photo by Shawn Rocco

Photo

Oblinger going before grand jury

BY MIKE BAKER, Associated Press Writer

RALEIGH, N.C. - The former chancellor of North Carolina State University entered a federal courthouse Wednesday to testify to a federal grand jury that is seeking details about a job given to former first lady Mary Easley.

James Oblinger entered the federal courthouse in Raleigh shortly before 8:30 a.m. Wednesday. His lawyer declined to comment, but said a day earlier Oblinger would "cooperate in every way with this investigation."

Oblinger was subpoenaed last month, with federal investigators requesting access to all documents related to Easley's hiring and benefits.

Oblinger resigned last week as the university released e-mails showing that he had played a role in Easley's hiring. He said he did not recall his contribution until reading the e-mails and said the hiring involved no impropriety and no coercion.

The university's board of trustees voted to fire Easley the day Oblinger resigned. Two others, the provost and the chairman of the board of trustees, have also resigned amid questions about their roles in Easley's job.

Easley was hired in 2005 to run a speakers series and got more duties and a larger salary - $170,000 per year - last year. E-mails indicate that her husband, former Gov. Mike Easley, played a role in her hiring, as did McQueen Campbell, the former chairman of the trustees board.

A series of stories in The News & Observer of Raleigh showed that Campbell had provided private flights for Easley during his time in office. Separate federal subpoenas have also sought the Easley family travel records.
AP Writer Gary Robertson in Raleigh contributed to this report.

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Behind calm, a storm of controversy

NCSU tried to soothe critics, but anger lingered

BY J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff Writer

From the moment Mary Easley's big raise was made public last summer, N.C. State University's chancellor and provost came under blistering attack, with many parents, students and others sending letters and e-mail messages questioning how they could have made such a deal.

One man wrote three times, exasperated at a lack of explanation about how the wife of the sitting governor got her job. One alumnus wrote only a few words: "What are you people thinking? Idiots."

The seeds of such anger were planted in 2005, when those top administrators created a job for Easley, who was then first lady. The picture that emerges from more than 1,300 pages of documents provided to a federal grand jury is of N.C. State leaders who acted at the behest of the highest-ranking person in state government: Gov. Mike Easley.

The former chancellor who helped arrange the deal, James Oblinger, is expected to appear today at the federal courthouse in Raleigh, where a grand jury is meeting. Federal prosecutors are interested in several aspects of Mike Easley's actions as governor, including the circumstances surrounding Mary Easley's job.

The dealing on that job was done among several high-ranking players: the governor, Oblinger, and a key friend of the Easleys, NCSU trustee McQueen Campbell. From memos, documents, e-mails and interviews, it is clear that Oblinger and provost Larry Nielsen paid little attention to the perception of their decisions but instead were focused on carrying out the wishes of their superiors -- and then defending the job.

It is not as clear why they were so willing to go along with the direction from the governor, a Democrat who left office in January. They have cited Mary Easley's unique set of qualifications to teach in the area of law and lead a speakers series.
In 2008, after giving Mary Easley an expanded job and raise, prompting the first written attacks on them, Oblinger and Nielsen do not appear to have second-guessed themselves, according to records that have been made public so far.

Instead, they came up with a form letter response, created some talking points and gathered data after the fact that would justify Mary Easley's $170,000-per-year salary. The state auditor's office got involved but never released a report. The UNC Board of Governors appeared skeptical behind the scenes but then approved the deal. The version of events that emerged from N.C. State officials -- that Nielsen did it all himself -- turned out to be untrue.

One of the letter writers tried to sum it up in a note to Oblinger late last month with the subject line "Wasted Money!"
"This is an insult to every person in North Carolina," he wrote.

Oblinger will cooperate

Today, nine days after he resigned as chancellor, Oblinger is expected at the federal courthouse on New Bern Avenue. Oblinger's lawyer says the former chancellor will cooperate.

Oblinger had denied knowing much about the 2005 events but said in a statement as he resigned that the new documents produced for the grand jury had refreshed his memory. He has not elaborated.

The documents point to the direct involvement of the governor in the creation of the job in 2005 for his wife, including at least five times that Mike Easley spoke with others, mostly Campbell, whom the governor had appointed to the NCSU board of trustees.

At the time, Campbell needed help from Easley and his administration. Permits were pending and necessary to close a $19 million land deal on the coast that Campbell was brokering; the Division of Motor Vehicles was getting ready to shut a state inspection station Campbell owned because of violations; and his appointment to the NCSU board was up.

The records show that Campbell cleared the way for the job by turning to Oblinger, who was in his fourth month on the job. Campbell wrote to Oblinger once the job for Mary Easley was in place and recounted that the governor was satisfied.

Within days, Campbell would end up happy, too. By June, he was reappointed to the NCSU board, and would eventually rise to become its chairman -- the youngest in N.C. State history.

The land deal, at a development called Cannonsgate in Carteret County, got its permits in early June, and the sale would close a month later. Campbell later claimed in a letter that his political contacts helped secure the permits faster than any other developer could.

Campbell's knowledge of the project gave him such an inside track that by December he had secured one of the best lots in the development for the governor, who paid a lower price than others nearby.

And Campbell's inspection station problems went away, waived by top Easley administration officials.

Frank Perry, the former head of the FBI in Raleigh who later worked in the state auditor's office, said the timeline of events demands that authorities investigate thoroughly. He said he wishes state agencies had helped uncover things.

"This state has got to grow up and begin investigating itself," he said. "It should not have taken [the newspaper] and the FBI serving subpoenas to bring this out."

Work behind scenes
The documents show that Oblinger helped set up the position for Mary Easley and gave it his blessing, then handed off the details to Nielsen, who at the time was the university's interim provost.

All of that action in 2005 was handled quietly, with the participants openly gauging who else knew about what was taking place.

When Jim Svara, the chairman of the political science department was first contacted by Easley’s budget adviser, Dan Gerlach, because they had a previous connection, the chairman seemed curious, writing: "Guess this falls under the miscellaneous part of your job description."

The correspondence shows Gerlach, who now heads a foundation that distributes money from the national tobacco settlement, handed information off to Campbell. Campbell was already working on the job for Mary Easley, the records indicate. Campbell also made NCSU’s lobbyist at the legislature aware of the efforts. It was budget season at the legislature.

Nielsen appears to have first talked with Mary Easley about possibilities on May 2 that year, the same day her résumé was faxed to his office. His notes indicate talk of a five-year deal at $75,000 to $80,000 per year and work that would touch on law, public policy, ethics, the lecture series or honors students. In the margin, a single word is written: "wise."

It appears that the UNC system president at the time, Molly Broad, did not know of the hire until university officials were getting ready to put out a news release about it. "Chancellor has talked with the President this morning," Nielsen wrote as he decided it was time to announce the hiring two months after it took place. Broad, who lives in Chapel Hill, could not be reached.

The big outcry

But the job didn't burst into the headlines until last July. Her five-year contract worth $170,000 per year would dominate news coverage for days; her original three-year contract had ended at about $90,000 a year. The governor's only public response was that his wife, a lawyer, could earn more in the private sector.

A parent of a new student wrote to say she was outraged. "Please tell me my $75 'orientation package' fee did not go to pay for this waste of money!!"

A 1966 graduate wrote: "I am appalled that NCSU would allow itself to be used in this way... I urge you to act at once to remedy this blight on the reputation of NCSU."

UNC system President Erskine Bowles urged Oblinger to answer negative e-mail. Bowles himself had reacted with concern after first hearing about it.

The first news story was e-mailed to him by an aide, and Bowles wrote back from his BlackBerry: "How can he do this without some higher authority passing judgment on it?" Bowles wrote, according to e-mail messages obtained by The News & Observer.

The answer: Oblinger couldn't. Soon, the UNC Board of Governors, which oversees the 16-campus state university system, would launch a review of the Easley raise and others like it at NCSU.

What was she worth?

Separately, the state auditor's office also requested documents about Mary Easley's hiring and salary.

As the parallel actions went on, NCSU officials started working to justify the $170,000 salary, records show.
Phone calls were made to university contacts across the country. Nielsen took lengthy notes on conversations about what others elsewhere were paying for Mary Easley's type of work. Officials sought a proposal on coordinating a big-name speaker, one of the key parts of Easley's job, to get a comparison. All of it was done weeks after her salary had been set.

By Aug. 18, Oblinger took some handwritten notes that appear to be the result of a phone call from Bowles. He scratched out some salary numbers and some telling words.

"Board will not back. ... Is increment worth another $80," Oblinger wrote in his notes.

The following week, Oblinger himself was dealing with Board of Governors members. "I am working the phones today, for sure," he wrote after he said he spent 70 minutes on the phone with one, lawyer Brent Barringer of Cary.

Oblinger and Nielsen appeared in person to the Board of Governors and made arguments for the job.

Bowles threw his support behind it, too, and it was passed with some modifications that included private fundraising for part of the position.

Bowles said at the time he carefully reviewed NCSU's arguments: "I am convinced that the proposed salary fits the job and is fully justified."

Again, angry e-mails flowed.

One woman addressed officials as "leeches on the backside of humanity" and closed with the request that "the whole lot of you crooks be taken down." Bowles forwarded it to Oblinger, writing that it was a "nice sample of my in box."

Oblinger wrote to Bowles that he was "sorry about this."

The auditor's office continued its work, drafting an investigative audit that was critical of the 2008 salary figure, according to several officials who worked on it. One is Perry, who headed the Raleigh FBI office from 2000 to 2004 and later joined the auditor's office.

But it wasn't released because the auditor who started the investigation, Republican Les Merritt, lost the election in November and decided to leave the subject to his successor, Democrat Beth Wood.

The audit report said the salary was not justified, audit officials said.

But Wood said in an interview that NCSU made arguments that showed why the university believed the salary was justified, resulting in a "he said/she said" report. No report has yet been released, but more than 50 pages of auditor documents have been provided to the grand jury, records show.

At NCSU, some alums withheld financial support all along over Mary Easley. Then, the issue resurfaced in May, when The N&O published a two-part series that shed new light on the job's creation, including ties between the Easleys and Campbell.

Yet again, the messages to Oblinger were strong -- especially as Mary Easley refused to resign in the weeks that followed.

"What a fine job you have done for our once proud university," one man wrote the chancellor. "You knew what was going on and I don't believe for a second you 'don't recall' any conversation... You're not being honest."

A couple from Pittsboro, self-described Wolfpack supporters, wrote that the situation seems unethical and urged Oblinger to clean things up.

"The truth eventually comes out," they wrote, "and it doesn't look good!"
North Carolina's Dustin Ackley watches one of his five hits against Southern Miss in Tuesday's elimination game at Rosenblatt Stadium.

Ted Kirk, AP photo by Ted Kirk

Southern Miss catcher Travis Graves can't hang on to the throw as UNC's Ben Bunting scores on a third-inning single by Dustin Ackley.

Eric Francis, AP photo by Eric Francis

North Carolina's Ben Bunting slides safely into second with a stolen base as Southern Miss shortstop B A Vollmuth takes a high throw from the Golden Eagles catcher.

Ted Kirk, AP photo by Ted Kirk
UNC star sets record in win

BY ERIC OLSON, The Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. - When it comes to naming the greatest hitters in College World Series history, the conversation now must include Dustin Ackley.

His numbers certainly back up the argument.

Ackley went 5-for-6 on Tuesday and became the CWS' career hits leader in North Carolina's 11-4 victory over Southern Mississippi.

"I think everybody saw today what everybody on our team and myself have seen the last three years with Dustin Ackley," Carolina coach Mike Fox said. "It was an unbelievable performance, and we've seen that before from him day in and day out. He's one sensational player, and I'm glad the nation got to see a little bit of that today. We needed it."

The Tar Heels (48-17), who will play Thursday against Arizona State, eliminated the Golden Eagles (40-26) and sent Southern Miss coach Corky Palmer into retirement.

Ackley has 27 hits in 14 CWS games. The No. 2 overall draft pick by the Seattle Mariners, in his bid to become the second player to have six hits in a CWS game, flew out to left in the ninth inning.

Ackley doubled and hit four singles to all parts of the field. It was the kind of performance put up in the 1990s by Cal State Fullerton's Mark Kotsay, who batted a combined .517 in two CWS appearances and is widely considered the best pure hitter to play in the tournament.

"The guy can just flat-out hit," Southern Miss second baseman James Ewing said of Ackley. "We always heard about him, but to watch him, the guy hits the ball where it's pitched. ... That was a show he put on for us."

The left-handed-batting first baseman, who has hits in 21 consecutive NCAA Tournament games since 2007, singled to left in the third inning to break the record of 24 career hits by Stanford's Sam Fuld (2001-03).

"It was just one of those days," Ackley said. "I've had days where I've hit a bunch of balls on the nose and they were getting hit for outs. Today, it seemed like a bunch of the balls were finding holes, and I was getting hits."

The rest of the Heels were pretty good, too. Ryan Graepel added four hits, Ben Bunting had three, and Kyle Seager homered as Carolina banged out a CWS record-tying 23 hits.

The last team to have 23 hits at the CWS was Southern California, which did it against Arizona State in the 1998 championship contest.

"My worst fears came true," Palmer said. "Carolina is a great club. They can pitch, hit, defense. I was hoping I'd be wrong, but I really worried about our matchup. Seven left-handed hitters in there, and we didn't have an answer."

UNC's Adam Warren (10-2) allowed three hits and struck out six in six innings. Warren ran into one rough patch. He threw 44 of his 128 pitches in the fourth inning, when B A Vollmuth hit a three-run homer into the left-field seats.

Colin Bates, Patrick Johnson and Nate Striz pitched the final three innings for UNC and
allowed one run.

Southern Miss, which walked in the winning run in a 7-6 loss to Texas on Sunday, again struggled with its pitching.

UNC scored at least one run in each of the first four innings. JR Ballinger (6-4) was down 6-0 when he left with two outs in the third, marking the shortest of his 16 starts this season.

"JR was a little wild, and when he did get it in there, they hit him so hard," Palmer said.

Palmer, 55, announced in April he would retire at the end of the season. He was 458-281 in 12 seasons at Southern Miss.

"Magical season," Palmer said. "You can't ask for any more than what we've done the last three weeks. I was glad to be a part of it, and I'm happy these guys let me work a little longer."

North Carolina 11, Southern Miss 4

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UNC star has five hits to set College World Series record for career hits
Rosenblatt Stadium; Omaha, Neb.

Today's game
Virginia (49-14-1) vs. Arkansas (40-23), 7 p.m.

Thursday's game
North Carolina (48-17) vs. Arizona State (50-13), 7 p.m.

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Nielsen's severance package 'invalid'

Interim chancellor pulls plug on Oblinger's deal to provide Nielsen with $310,000, three-year cushion.

BY ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

The severance deal former N.C. State Chancellor James Oblinger created for Provost Larry Nielsen a day before the provost resigned last month is "invalid," Oblinger's successor declared Tuesday.

Oblinger's deal would have paid Nielsen over the next three years $310,255 more than a salary commensurate with other faculty members in the College of Natural Resources, where Nielsen will now teach. The new deal: six months at $298,700, his annual pay as provost, and then his pay drops to $156,715, which is in line with the other faculty.

"Chancellor Oblinger did not have the authority to fundamentally alter the contents of the employee agreement ... without first getting approval of the Board of Trustees," interim chancellor Jim Woodward wrote in a letter to Nielsen. "This approval was not given nor was it sought."

Nielsen could not be reached Tuesday.

Jim Martin, chair of N.C. State's faculty, said Woodward recognized that Oblinger failed to follow procedures. "It did go above and beyond what was allowed," Martin said. "So I think it was a very wise move."

Nielsen was one of several university officials to resign as the details of the hiring of former
first lady Mary Easley surfaced. Nielsen, provost since 2005, insisted that he decided to hire Easley, who headed a speaker series and performed other tasks. The recent disclosure of university e-mails revealed that several people, including a top aide for Easley's husband, former Gov. Mike Easley, played a role in her hiring.

Oblinger and former trustee McQueen Campbell have also resigned, and Easley's contract has been terminated.

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- Read interim chancellor Jim Woodward's letter (PDF)
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Next up at NCSU

Faculty, staff and alumi of N.C. State University never figured to be looking for a new chancellor right about now, but with the resignation of James Oblinger in the wake of the controversy involving former Gov. Mike Easley and his wife, Mary Easley, the process of finding a leader begins.

The good news is that N.C. State is a well-regarded institution likely to attract strong candidates for its top post. It may in fact prove difficult to narrow the choice to a list of finalists from both applicants and others who may not apply but who would be a good fit. A search such as this brings in proven administrators interested in making a move, but it also can bring to light an interest from someone who may have been successful in another field and now would like to make a difference at N.C. State -- perhaps someone who studied there.

Then there is the matter of inside vs. outside. Oblinger was a faculty member and administrator at the university for over 20 years, which gave him some advantages when it came his turn to lead. But it may be time for N.C. State to have a chancellor from somewhere else, who brings a fresh perspective entirely. Still, if a chancellor search is open, and this one should be, there will be a chance for a public conversation about that very issue along the way.

The notion that the choosing of a new chancellor will be more difficult because of the exits of Oblinger, former provost Larry Nielsen and former trustees chairman McQueen Campbell is not to be taken seriously. Jobs such as the chancellorship of a major university with NCSU's reputation don't come along that often. The choice will be deliberative, difficult but ultimately successful.

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Perdue will talk about budget for education

The Associated Press

RALEIGH - North Carolina Gov. Beverly Perdue wants to get her two cents in about public education before House and Senate leaders bicker over billions of dollars.

Perdue scheduled the first of several rallies today to lay out what she would like the final state government budget to contain on education. The rallies likely will pressure fellow Democrats in the Legislature starting budget negotiations this week.

The first event will be at the old Capitol building in Raleigh. State Board of Education Chairman Bill Harrison and community college system President Scott Ralls will attend, along with Perdue and advocates for teachers and parents.

Perdue will be at Smith High School in Greensboro on Wednesday afternoon. Events also will be held in Charlotte, Asheville and Greenville over the next week.

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