

Features

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Archaeologists continue searching for clues to Cahokia

BY TERI MADDOX

News-Democrat

Researchers are always finding pieces of broken clay pottery at Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site in Collinsville. It's nothing to write home about.

But every once in a while, someone digs up an artifact that gets an archaeological crew really excited.

That's what happened to Susannah Fulling and Rita Cooper last week at an excavation site near Mound 34. They found a fragment of a shell cup with engraved lines that once formed a Native American symbol or pattern.

"It's cool to find things that are engraved because it adds a human element to it," said Fulling, 22, of St. Louis. "You know somebody was here, and they cared about (the object)."

Fulling and Cooper are volunteer researchers with the Cahokia Mounds Museum Society's public field school. They're working on one of two archaeological digs at the historic site this summer.

Other researchers include students from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, University of Missouri-St. Louis and Washington University in St. Louis.

Both of the excavation sites are near Monks Mound. Visitors are invited to watch crews scrape earthen walls, sift soil and otherwise look for clues to the past. Hours are 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday, weather permitting.

"That's one of the requirements of people who dig on our property," said Bill Iseminger, assistant site manager. "They have to be accessible to the public. They have to have some signs out or have somebody on site to explain things to people."

Cahokia Mounds is the former location of a Native American city that flourished from 950 to 1350 with a peak population of 15,000 to 20,000 residents. Today, it's considered one of the most archaeologically significant sites in North America.

Researchers don't just search for artifacts. They also look for soil patterns that show placement of homes, workshops or trash pits.

Such patterns are being examined by SIUE students on one of the current excavations, called the East Stockade Project. They're trying to determine the path of a defensive log stockade that was built around the city's Central Ceremonial Precinct and was rebuilt three times.

The project's field director, Mary Vermilion, and her crew like to show visitors earthen evidence of the stockade's trench and, in some cases, pole holes.

"The public gets very educated, and they just eat it up," she said. "They love seeing what the students are doing and how important the work is here. The students are really pumped up about this, and their enthusiasm rubs off on the public. It's contagious."

The other excavation, the Mound 34 Project, is a follow-up to digs conducted in the 1950s by the University of Michigan and the late Greg Perino, an amateur archaeologist who grew up in Belleville.

Perino found signs of a Native American neighborhood outside the stockade and two copper workshops, where craftsmen apparently produced ceremonial items such as plaques, beads or ear spools.

"(The research) wasn't very well documented," Iseminger said. "It wasn't very well photographed or mapped."

Researchers began digging in the area again 10 years ago to verify and elaborate on Perino's findings. They also hope to answer questions about the city's involvement in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, an ancient cultural and religious movement.

Archaeological crews have enjoyed mild temperatures this spring, but they know hot, muggy weather is on the way.

"You get used to it," said Lori Belknap, 42, of Mascoutah, field supervisor for the Mound 34 Project. "We have shade tents. We provide water. We make sure everyone is dressed properly."

Part of Belknap's job is training volunteer researchers with the public field school, a program open to anyone 18 or older with an interest in archaeology.

Cooper, 67, of O'Fallon, has been volunteering on projects at Cahokia Mounds and elsewhere for nearly 20 years.

"A lot of people spend a lot of money going to fat farms," she said. "You can accomplish the same thing here and learn from experts in the field who are willing to share their knowledge."

This summer, two Boy Scouts are helping researchers on projects to earn archaeology merit badges.

Last week, Jake Baumgartner, 11, of St. Peters, Mo., looked for artifacts by sifting soil with a framed screen on wooden horses.

"We're screening the dirt that we scraped off the walls," he said. "The dirt goes through the squares, and anything that doesn't fall through is usually like a bone or a piece of pottery."

For more information on Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, call the interpretive center at 346-5161.

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