Louisiana

Archaeological

Survey and

Antiquities

Commission

December 12, 2023 Meeting

The Louisiana Archaeological Survey and Antiquities Commission met on Tuesday, December 12, 2023, at 1:30 p.m. in the 4th floor conference room, 1051 N. 5th street, Baton   
Rouge, LA.

# Members Attending:

Dr. Chip McGimsey

Dr. Mark Rees

Dr. Heather McKillop

Mr. Thurston Hahn

Ms. Kimberly Walden

# Members Absent:

Dr. Chandler Vidrine

Ms. Julie Doucet

Mr. Ray Berthelot

Dr. Ryan Gray

# Others Attending Electronically:

Ms. Sadie Whitehurst

Dr. Diana Greenlee

Ms. Jeanne Wood

Mr. Sam Huey

Ms. Helen Bouzon

# Welcome & Introductions

The Chair, Dr. Heather McKillop, called the meeting to order at 1:40 PM. Dr. McGimsey took the notes for meeting.

Everyone attending the meeting introduced themselves.

Dr. McKillop provided a brief overview of the current status of the vacant Curator’s position in the Museum of Natural Science at LSU formerly held by Dr. Rebecca Saunders. Currently neither the Museum leadership, the Department, or the University have indicated they intend to fill the position. They are looking for a collections manager to oversee the Anthropological collections. Dr. McKillop also noted that the University has determined they will no longer support MA level graduate student, only PhD students, based upon a cost/benefit analysis. One option for each department is to enroll every student in the PhD program even if they begin at the MA level. The University believes that funding only doctoral students will result in more grant funds coming in and an increase in the University’s National Research Council rankings.

Dr. McKillop also noted that in October 2024, LSU will host the South Central Conference on Central America.

**Approval of Minutes**

The minutes for the March 14, 2023 meeting were approved unanimously.

# Old Business

Dr. McGimsey gave a brief update on the Division of Archaeology. He introduced Sadie Whitehurst as the new Section 106 reviewer for the Division. He also mentioned the discovery of a shipwreck in eastern Louisiana waters where the discoverers are considering an effort to salvage the wreck. Such an effort would have to be undertaken through a contract with the State as to recovery methods and disposition of any recovered materials, and this contract will have to be approved by the Commission. Any salvage effort would also need an Antiquities permit as the wreck lies in state waters. At the moment, it is unclear whether this effort will proceed and at what pace.

Dr. McGimsey also provided an overview of the division’s Archaeology Month 2023. As summarized by Maegan Smith, Outreach and Education Coordinator, there were 30 events around the state, including eight Louisiana Archaeology trivia nights and five International Archaeology Events. The various events reached an audience of over 3, 300 people this year. The Archaeology Month poster highlighted 13 of over 160 shipwrecks documented across the state.

# New Business

Marksville Permit Request

Ms. Mikayla Fletcher of Tulane University is proposing to conduct some of her doctoral research at the state property at the north side of the Marksville site (16AV1). Her research project is entitled “Ritual Landscapes of the Lower Mississippi Valley – the Marksville Archaeological Project”. She provided a brief overview of the Marksville site, its connection to the Hopewell phenomenon, and the history of archaeological investigations at the site.

The permit request is to conduct initial explorations of the rings on the State land at the north end of the site. Her research is examining the overall site design and size and examines how the community experienced the site. One hypothesis is that the rings are part of Hopewellian structure of the site and are all largely contemporary. An alternative hypothesis is that they are not contemporary and that the Hopewellian occupation incorporated earlier features into their cultural landscape. By examining the set of rings at the north end of the site, she hopes to look at their style, age, and construction.

She has an agreement with TerraXplorations, Inc. to conduct magnetometry survey over the property. Identified anomalies will be cored or augered to obtain samples on their structure and for dating. Any artifacts and samples will ultimately be curated with the Division.

She is also consulting with the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe about permission to conduct magnetometry survey of Tribal lands on the south side of the site where aerial images indicate other embankments and rings could be present.

Her research will lead to an expanded and updated site map with additional radiocarbon dates and possibly artifact samples. She anticipates giving presentations at SEAC and LAS on her research.

Dr. Rees asked about coring versus augering. Ms. Fletcher replied that she is hoping to use a 4” solid core and place cores on a transect across any identified ring feature with additional cores as necessary to obtain radiocarbon samples. Dr. Rees asked how many rings she hoped to sample; she replied that she hoped to examine 2-3 rings. Further conversation indicated that she will likely be using a 2” diameter solid core.

Mr. Walden asked who she had been in contact with at the Tunica -Biloxi Tribe. Ms. Fletcher indicated she was speaking with Earl Barbry, Jr., the tribal THPO, and the tribal land manager.

Dr. McKillop asked about the ownership status of the site and Dr. McGimsey provided a brief overview of land transfers over the last few years. Today the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe owns most of the site except for the portion on state land at the north end.

Dr. McKillop and Ms. Fletcher had a discussion about what the appropriate ways to consult with the Tunica-Biloxi might be. Dr. McKillop advocated for asking the Tribe what they wanted to know about the site before designing a research project, rather than asking them to join a project generally designed without their involvement. Ms. Fletcher indicated that this had been her goal and discussions with the Tribe were ongoing.

Dr. McKillop asked who her advisor was; it is Dr. Chris Rodning at Tulane University. Ms. Fletcher indicated she had applied, or would be applying, for funding from the National Science Foundation, the Lewis and Clark Fund, and Tulane University grants. The possibility of including paid tribal monitors/crew was raised and is something that Ms. Fletcher is considering although not all grants can be used to support tribal staff. She is also talking with Tribe about utilizing tribal volunteers.

Dr. Rees asked where the cores will be analyzed; Ms. Fletcher replied she has been given lab space at Tulane for this purpose. Dr. McGimsey recommended having a soil scientist also examine the cores to assist with sediment descriptions.

Dr. McKillop confirmed that the permit will be issued to Dr. Rodning; Dr. McGimsey agreed and noted that both Dr. Rodning and Ms. Fletcher will sign the permit. Dr. McKillop encouraged both Dr. Rodning and Dr. McGimsey, along with a Tribal monitor, to be present during the coring operation.

***Motion:*** *Dr. Heather McKillop moved that the Commission meeting approve the permit request from Dr. Rodning and Ms. Fletcher. It was seconded by Mr. Thurston Hahn. The motion passed unanimously.*

Ms. Walden indicated she would like to try and be present when the coring is being done as well.

Poverty Point Station Archaeology Program Annual Update

Dr. Greenlee gave her annual report for FY 2022/2023. She focused on three field projects undertaken at the site over that period.

The Pit/mound project focused on an irregular mound of earth sitting adjacent to a depression just northeast of Mound E. Long thought to be a treefall, Park staff wanted to push the mound back into the hole to make it easier to mow this area. Dr. Greenlee wanted to confirm the feature was a treefall first.

A core through the depression revealed it is up to 5 m deep, and at 4.6 m a piece of a pine board was recovered that dated to 1480-1650 AD. This information indicated the feature is more complex than just a treefall. So Dr. Greenlee opened a 2x4 m excavation to bisect the mound and the pit.

The profile through the mound indicated the fill overlies the original ground surface but the original A horizon is absent. It appears that the fill overlies a plow zone in this area, indicating that the mound is certainly historic in age.

It was initially anticipated that the depression was a well or cistern, thus the sides would be wood or brick lined. The east wall profile through the depression does evidence a nearly vertical edge as would be expected, however, the south wall is very sloping. Excavations continued to approximately 2 m below surface but did not reach the base of the pit. There are very few inclusions with only one walking plow clevis and a few small ferrous fragments being recovered. There are currently two possible hypotheses: 1) that it was a hole excavated to hide valuables at some time in the past, or 2) it was excavated as a source for clay. In either case, it is unclear why the pit was excavated to a depth of 4-5 m.

Dr. Rees asked why the well hypothesis was no longer being considered. Dr. Greenlee indicated that she would anticipate the well to be lined with boards or some other material and they found no evidence for a lining. Dr. McKillop asked what the functional conclusion was, and Dr. Rees said he liked the idea of an aborted well best.

Dr. McKillop asked if the park was going to level the mound. Dr. Greenlee indicated that because the feature was still unexplained, and that it was part of the historic landscape of the park, that she was recommending it be left as is for now. She indicated that she did not plan any further investigations at this feature. Dr. Rees asked if the mound was the fill from the depression, and Dr. Greenlee indicated that there was more earth in the mound than the depression could accommodate, so at least some of the fill came from elsewhere. She noted that there was an oil well some 40-50 m south of the feature in the 1950s but there was no evidence that either the mound or depression represented activities associated with that well.

The second field project was the continued analysis of the GPR anomalies identified several years earlier in the plaza. These are small mounds that lie completely buried by subsequent filling of the plaza area by the Poverty Point occupants. Earlier research had suggested they could be mud volcanoes caused by gas releasing from the gas field deep beneath the site, liquefaction features (sand blows) resulting from earthquakes, or pimple mounds on the Pleistocene terrace surface. Aerial images identify possible pimple mounds and/or liquification features in field in the general Poverty Point area. A core was taken from a pimple mound near the site, and the sedimentological profile was very different from that seen in the GPR anomalies. Similarly, cores through the anomalies indicate they are very clayey and not primarily composed of sand as would be expected with earthquake liquefaction features. However, it is not clear they are gas field mud volcanoes either. The sediments in the anomalies include thin layers of a very waxy material, and there are currently several attempts being made to identify that material in hopes it will shed light on the formation process(s) of the buried mounds.

The final project was continued shovel testing in the area of Mound F. Initially begun and 2014, only a small number of tests were excavated then. For International Archaeology Day, the Park wanted to have dirt for students and visitors to screen, so Dr. Greenlee excavated a number of additional shovel tests in the vicinity of Mound F and saved all the dirt for the screening effort. In addition, in the spring of 2023 a TV producer wanted to do a segment of Hidden Louisiana at the site, and the host was filmed excavating a couple of shovel tests in this area. Remarkably, the test the host dug produced a point base and a fragment of a celt. In two of the tests excavated in 2023, there appears to be a buried midden stratum in the area north and west of Mound F.

Finally, Dr. Greenlee provided a short update on the lodestone plummet she noted during last year’s presentation. This iron plummet was found by Joe Rolph who runs the Starr Home Place in Oak Ridge, LA. He had found it some years ago in a cultivated field near his home. When the plummet is suspended, a line apparently incised onto the plummet always points to magnetic north. She was able to borrow the plummet and carefully clean the debris out of the apparent incised line. When clean, it became apparent that the ‘line’ was just a natural seam in the stone and had not been intentionally cut into the plummet. However, this does not mean the manufacturer did not take advantage of the natural seam and used it to point out north.

# Other Business

There was no other business before the Commission.

***Motion:*** *Dr. Mark Rees moved that the Commission meeting be adjourned. It was seconded by Mr. Thurston Hahn. The motion passed unanimously.*

The meeting adjourned at 3:34 PM.

