

Memorandum

Department of Planning & Public Works



To: Planning and Public Works Committee
From: Aimee Nassif, Planning and Development Services Director
Date: February 11, 2010
RE: Joe Harl-Dampier Site Presentation

Summary

Joe Harl has been leading the excavation work at the Dampier Site since artifacts were first discovered there by Stan Dampier back in December 2008. In June, 2009 the Archeological Research Center of St. Louis, of which Joe is the founder and part owner, was funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to perform an archeological dig at the site. Since that time, artifacts such as pottery, jewelry, and even fish scales have been uncovered leading archeologists to believe that this site dates back to sometime around 1100-1200 AD.

As Joe's presentation will show, the volume of artifacts uncovered is astounding and leads archeologists to believe that this may be one of the largest archaeological finds in the Country. The amount of jewelry discovered is so large that it is also believed that this was a wealthy civilization that could possibly be larger than that of Cahokia.

The Dampier Archeological Site is located in the Chesterfield Valley, south of Olive Street Road and east of Eatherton Road. This property (and several other parcels encompassing over 30 acres) was purchased by the City of Chesterfield for the purpose of a stormwater reservoir, which was being constructed in partnership with the Monarch Levee District. It was actually due to the work that had begun on this reservoir, that the artifacts were discovered.

Joe's presentation will provide an update on what artifacts have been discovered at this site along with an analysis of what he believes these artifacts tell us about the people that lived there and how the community itself was designed with a market place and temples.

Joe is founder and part owner of the Archeological Research Center of St. Louis, Inc. and also serves as the Vice President of the Missouri Archaeological Society.

Cc: Michael G. Herring, City Administrator
Rob Heggie, City Attorney
Michael O. Geisel, Director of Planning and Public Works

Chesterfield's Dampier Site: Why Is It Important?

During the removal of soils to improve the levee system protecting the Missouri River bottoms in Chesterfield, the Dampier site was exposed about 5-6 feet below the surface. The Dampier site is unique as it represents a major ceremonial-market center occupied about 1,000 years ago. Although similar centers have been identified in east-central Missouri, most of these have been destroyed by development and the Dampier site is the only one to have been carefully investigated.

Exotic materials suggest extensive trading with goods coming from the Gulf of Mexico, the Appalachian Mountains, central Missouri, southern Illinois, the Great Lakes, and possibly even the Rocky Mountains. The site also appears to be a major ceremonial center with a large pole, at least 21-24 feet above the ground, marking the northern edge of the community. Other findings include buildings representing the market place, ceremonial activities, and places where the dead were prepared for burial, as well as the base of a platform mound, upon which was once the home of the community's leader. Another building was L-shaped representing a temple. Next to this temple was a large feasting pit that contained numerous pieces of animal bones including bison, decorated pottery, a gaming stone, pumice fragments, pieces of copper, and four parts from Long Nose God masks. These masks represented a human face with a bird beak nose. God's masks have been identified at very few sites and are always associated with important leaders.

The Dampier site represents a unique part of Chesterfield's cultural heritage. If promoted it could attract visitors from across the world and bring local citizens a source of community pride. It is a shame that area school children know more about the cultural heritage of Egypt or Mexico than what is directly beneath their feet. Information from places like the Dampier site could be used to teach local students about the incredible ancient cultures that existed right here.

Investigations at such sites can be used to improve our health and well being today through the study of ancient diseases, and the reintroduction of past medicines, foods, and ideas. For example, corn was not the most important crop to prehistoric people. Instead, they raised plants native to this region -- lambsquarter, knotweed, maygrass, and little barley. These plants, like corn, produce starchy seeds, but unlike corn, their seeds are beneficial to our digestive systems. The native starchy seed plants do not require the pampering and fertilizing required for corn, and can even be raised in vacant city lots. Further these plants could also be used in the production of ethanol.

Places such as the Dampier site are thus a very important part of Chesterfield's cultural heritage and should be further promoted. Otherwise, future generations will criticize us for our short sightedness in denying them the lessons that could have been learned from the past.

Joe Harl, M.A.

Founder, Archaeological Research Center, Inc.

Joe Harl graduated from Washington University in St. Louis with a Master of Arts degree in Anthropology, specializing in Archaeology. He has been performing archaeological investigations across Missouri and Illinois since 1978, with the University of Missouri-St. Louis from 1978 – 1994 and now with the Archaeological Research Center of St. Louis, Inc., of which he is a founder and part owner. Harl also gives presentations to school groups of all ages and a wide variety of adult groups. These presentations describe the remarkable cultural heritage that exists here in Missouri and how information learned through archaeological investigations can greatly improve our lives today.

Harl presently is serving as a Vice President for the Missouri Archaeological Society and Secretary for the Missouri Association of Professional Archaeologists. He is a member of the Mound City Archaeological Society, Midwestern Archaeological Conference, Southeastern Archaeological Conference, Society for American Archaeology, and Society for Historical Archaeology.