

UPDATE ON FT. OSAGE

by Mary Conrad

For many years, a small museum, which was formerly a school building, has sat south of the reconstructed portions of Ft. Osage. The Jackson County Parks Department has wanted to replace this facility for some time. Since the county originally planned to begin building a new facility a couple years ago, John Peterson, the curator of collections for Jackson County Parks, and Jim Feagins, a contractor, conducted sample testing of the area slated for construction. Along with volunteers, they dug a few test squares and auger holes (size of post holes).

During the 2002 testing, the investigators found evidence of occupations by peoples of a late Kansas City Hopewell culture, an even later group of prehistoric people, the Army, and townspeople of Sibley, as well as usage by modern picnickers. However, these artifacts were not plentiful. A brass U.S. Army rifle vest button of the 1814 to 1815 style is the only item which definitely could be connected to the fort.

Within months, construction of the education center not only did not begin, but the project was postponed. In late 2004, construction was planned for the spring of 2005. Peterson and some of the regular Ft. Osage workers began digging in December and dug frequently during the winter and spring months. This time Peterson decided to machine scrape areas before digging since he and Feagins had found earlier that the integrity of the top few inches was compromised.

With this new tactic, Peterson began finding significant complexes of artifact, most of which dated either to the late Kansas City Hopewell prehistoric era or to the nineteenth century town of Sibley. When the spring construction was delayed, Peterson and Feagins decided to conduct more extensive excavations with the use of volunteers. This tactic resulted in even more excavations than originally planned as digging has continued throughout the summer due to further delays in the start of construction.

The full-page article in this issue of To the Point was written by Feagins and Peterson the third week of June to provide as a handout to the Ft. Osage visitors who stopped at the excavations. The diggers have continued to uncover both prehistoric and historic features, complexes, and isolated finds. The historic brick structure turned out to be a cistern. In mid-August, one of the volunteers found a rifle regiment button of the model issued from October 1817 to April 1819, and at least one more rifle regiment button has been found since then.

The fruitful excavations of this past winter, spring and summer could be seen as testimonials to the value of machine scraping first if there has been significant soil disturbances.

Examining the Past: Current Archaeological Research at the Fort Osage National Historic Landmark, Sibley, Missouri

Part of the Fort Osage area's past can still be discovered in the soils near where the fort rested. The visitor will note the area marked off with caution tape between the old fort site and the Interpretive Center. This is the scene of an ongoing archaeological investigation. Here you will find archaeologists carefully examining the soil to learn the story recorded there of the ancient Indians who once lived on this Missouri River bluff top. Also at that location is found the later remains of a building from an early resident of the then fledging town of "Old" Sibley, Missouri. The site (given number 23JA266 by archaeologists) contains an important ancient record. While an occasional soldier's button from the fort era is found, the primary components at this particular site are a Euroamerican home location (approximately 1840 to 1890) in historic Sibley and the remains of a late Kansas City Hopewell culture (a prehistoric group of people that lived here approximately 1,500 years ago—A.D. 500). Note that this Native American occupation is far, far older than the fort. Ft. Osage was occupied by the US government from 1808-1813 and from 1815-1822.



The Kansas City Hopewell culture (A.D. 0 to A.D. 600) is identified by certain styles of grit tempered, decorated and plain pottery, and certain types of chipped-stone tools, such as bladelets, scrapers, and projectile points. These people subsisted by: hunting, fishing, gathering wild plants, and tilling small gardens. Their villages were usually located along natural terraces within secondary stream valleys. The site currently being excavated is a little unusual since it is located on a bluff top. At present the size and shape of their houses are not known.

At the northern end of the present excavation a historic brick feature was discovered. It appears to be associated with an early house, built not long after the town of Sibley was platted in 1836. A portion of this area was subjected to three remote sensing techniques: ground penetrating radar, a magnetometer, and a soil resistivity study. Just south of this structure, the stains from many posts were discovered which appear to represent the repair and rebuilding of small fences—possibly for the containment of small farm animals, i.e. chickens, pigs, etc. Also that area contained several large pits which had been filled in with broken, locally fired bricks, glass fragments from containers and windows, broken pottery of stoneware and earthenware, charcoal, clinkers, many cut nails and other artifacts.

This archaeological research is funded by Jackson County, Missouri, to mitigate the adverse effect on the site from the proposed construction of a new Fort Osage Education Center. Among other things, this environmentally friendly center will be able to display prehistoric and historic artifacts that actually come from within the building's footprint in addition to materials from elsewhere in the park.

By Jim D. Feagins, Archaeological Consultant, Belton, Mo. and
John K. Peterson, Curator, Jackson County Parks and Recreation, Blue Springs, Mo.

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For more information on the archaeology of the Kansas City area or to join area archaeological organizations contact: Missouri Archaeological Society (P.O. box 958, Columbia, MO 65205; ph. 573-882-3544), Kansas Anthropological Association (c/o Kansas State Historical Society 6425 SW 6th Ave., Topeka, KS 66615-1099; ph. 785-272-8681, ext. 255), and Kansas City Archaeological Society (ph. 913-287-4405).

