Archaeology Week focuses attention on state 'finds'

Families gather along the riverbank where the Indians fish the cold, clear waters. They hunt and gather food for the group. They have adapted well to life in these prehistoric times. The year is 3500 B.C. The place — Watson Brake, Louisiana.

BY LISA TRAMONTANA
Newsfeatures staff writer

As our movements carry us from day to day, few of us are aware of our rich archaeological past and the mysteries that lie literally beneath our feet.

Names like Poverty Point and Watson Brake easily elicit hepatitis among Louisiana residents. But local archaeologists are hoping to change that with more than 70 statewide events planned for the 12th annual Louisiana Archaeology Week, today through Saturday, Oct. 2.

The week is sponsored by the state Division of Archaeology in the Office of Cultural Development, Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. Tours, exhibits and presentations will focus on key sites around the state, said Nathaniel Heller, Archaeology Week coordinator. He discussed some of the most important "finds," many of which will be highlighted during this week's activities (see calendar).

INDIAN MOUNDS

One of Louisiana's biggest claims to archaeological fame is that it features some of the oldest and best-preserved Indian mounds in the world. Many are older than Stonehenge in England or the pyramids of Egypt, said Thomas Eubanks, state archaeologist and director of the Division of Archaeology.

No one can say with certainty what purpose the mounds served. But experts say the round-topped versions were probably used for ceremonies, while the homes of important leaders were probably used for personal basis.

The existence of the mounds shows that prehistoric people lived in Louisiana probably because of its abundant natural resources.

POVERTY POINT

Poverty Point, near Epps, Louisiana, is perhaps the best known archaeological site in the state. It contains Indian mounds that have been carbon-dated at 5000 B.C.

The center of the site suggests a C-shape formed by six concentric ridges divided by corridors at a flat central plaza. The rings of ridges measure three-fourths of a mile, the highest mound measuring 70 feet tall.

"Archaeologists got interested in Poverty Point in the early 1950s," said Heller. "This was one of the premier sites in the country. The carbon dating started a debate that went on for decades.

Studies of artifacts found at Poverty Point help paint a picture of what life was like. Major meat sources included fish and reptiles, venison and rabbits as well as several varieties of birds. Tools like spears and traps indicate the importance of hunting. Earth ovens and hand-crafted clay balls suggest that Poverty Point dwellers cooked at least hunted their food. The presence of religious symbols, charms and unique engravings suggest a sophisticated social system.

In 1967, Heller, said, a mound called Monte Sano in Baton Rouge was excavated and eventually dated at 5000 B.C. called Poverty Point.

"Then came Watson Brake," Heller said. "Of all the early mound sites, this is the jewel."

WATSON BRAKE

This site near West Monroe in northwest Louisiana stunned archaeologists. Many still find it hard to believe that native cultures in 1500 B.C. could be skilled enough to have built anything similar to Poverty Point.

But when studies of Watson Brake came back with carbon dates of 3500 B.C., it helped confirm Poverty Point's place in the record books and threw Watson Brake into the national spotlight.

In American Archaeology, National Park Service archaeologist Nathaniel Heller wrote in 2000 that the site was "the holy grail of the Archaic culture" and that it "may have never been studied so thoroughly as Poverty Point." But Watson Brake's size was just as large as Poverty Point. It was larger and more well-developed.

"We keep pushing back the boundaries of when these early mounds were built," said Heller. "That's why Watson Brake is so important."

Some of the artifacts found at Watson Brake include projectile points (commonly known as arrowheads) and mysterious ceramic blocks that may have been used for building prehistoric stone buildings. "These are the key pieces for making beads."

Heller says studies of the area suggest that people did not live at Watson Brake year-round, but rather on a seasonal basis.

"One guess is that they came together annually to hunt, fish and gather food," he said. "And they probably used this as an opportunity to arrange marriages, trade goods and conduct religious ceremonies."

While there is little evidence of agriculture, Heller said, archaeologists have found plenty of clam and mussel shells. "They may have been rusted people," he said, "but they ate oysters."

Half of Watson Brake is now owned by the state, which is working to purchase the other half from a private landowner.

MARKSVILLE

Located in Avoyelles Parish, the Marksville Indian mounds are much more recent, dated at about A.D. 50 and featuring rounded, flat, even conical tops.

Studies show that some of them were used as burial places.

But archaeological interest is not limited to prehistoric Indian mounds or the nearby part of the state. Archaeologists are drawn to much more recent finds as well. As Heller pointed out, "Archaeologists are interested in all time periods."
Archaeological Week Schedule of Activities

The 12th annual Louisiana Archaeological Week will feature over 70 events across the state, including lectures, exhibits and tours of archaeological sites. All events are open to the general public and geared toward all members of the community with some events presented specifically for children. For further information, contact Nathanial Hiler at the Louisiana Division of Archaeology, (225) 542-8170, or by e-mail—HYPERLINK mailto:nh@lahistoric.state.la.us.

The information for the calendar and descriptions of regions was provided by the Louisiana Division of Archaeology and is also available on their website and brochure form at libraries throughout Louisiana.

Schedule of Activities Northwest Region

In late prehistoric times, northeastern Louisiana was the home of the Caddo Indians. The Caddo lived in villages consisting of multiple clusters of houses spread out along the Red and Sabine rivers and their tributaries. Some communities had ceremonial structures that eventually were covered by cypress mounds. Caddo grew maize and other crops as well as hunted, fished and gathered wild plants. Early archaeological research focused on the Caddo mounds and burials; more recent work has provided information on Caddoan communities and households.

Louisiana Division of Archaeology

Alexandria

Tuesday, Sept. 19

9 a.m.—Noon: Art display, flip-noting demonstration, demonstration of archaeological techniques. Kent Plantation House, 361 Bayou Rapides Road. Information: Carolyn Breidweil, (318) 487-5998

Thursday, Sept. 21

7 p.m.: Slide talk on "Recent Excavations at Watson Brake Site," by Joe Saunders. Fort Polk Environmental Learning Center, 2200 Beckett St. Information: Shanna Faulk, (318) 746-7717.

Sunday, Oct. 1

7 p.m.: Slide talk on "Historical Archaeology in Northwest Louisiana," by George Avery and Pete Gregory. Bossier Parish Historical Center, 2206 Beckett St. Information: Shanna Faulk, (318) 746-7717.

Bossier City

Monday, Sept. 25

7 p.m.: Slide talk on "Recent Investigations at Watson Brake and Poverty Point," by Joe Saunders and Robert Condy, Bossier Parish Historical Center, 2206 Beckett St. Information: Shanna Faulk, (318) 746-7717.

Drinking water found at site.