

A DAY OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN TENNESSEE

July 29, 2011 Aaron Deter-Wolf Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Education, Prehistory America, Americas, Anthropology, archaeologist, Archaeology, Artefacts, bank line, Cumberland River, Day of Archaeology, History of North America, History of the Americas, Israel, looting, Middle Tennessee State University, Monroe County, Nashville, Natural Disaster, Paleo-Indians, Prehistoric, Tennessee, Tennessee Archaeology

The first task each day is to check email and phone messages to see what inquiries have come in. Part of my role with the state's Division of Archaeology is to help inform the public about Tennessee's prehistoric past, and on an average day I'll receive questions and requests from a variety of sources. These typically include property owners with archaeological resources on their land, collectors interested in identifying their finds, and students, academics, and Cultural Resource Management firms conducting research. The type and number of requests seems to cycle, and recently there has been a marked increase in calls from members of the public curious about prehistoric artifacts they have found or inherited.

The artifacts people contact me about usually consist of lithic tools and ceramic sherds, although some older collections are apt to contain whole ceramic vessels and shell artifacts. I also receive numerous calls about geodes, fossils, and a wide variety of natural stones which have been misidentified as "dinosaur bones." Unfortunately for the many amateur paleontologists who send me photos of their finds, it's geologically unlikely that they'll discover a Tyrannosaurus skeleton. While fossilized marine life can be found in the bedrock of much of the state, we do not have remains of any terrestrial dinosaurs in Tennessee. Of course even if we did, as an *archaeologist* I would know very little about them...



Sometimes they're not actually artifacts.

Despite the recent heat wave, many people seem to have been outside finding things this summer which they want an archaeologist to identify. In a strange recent trend, a large number of the requests I received over the last month have been from people convinced collections of river cobbles and natural bedrock formations are in fact prehistoric artifacts. In several instances, collectors have been convinced that their finds were proof of mysterious ancient races, the Lost Tribes of Israel, or relics left by refugees from Atlantis.

Once the requests from the public have been answered, I try to make headway on several ongoing projects. A graduate student who worked with me on excavations last fall has been in the office doing analysis of the materials we recovered. The Coats-Hines site is one of Tennessee's oldest archaeological sites, and consists of a location where some of the earliest Americans (better known as Paleoindians) butchered a mastodon at the end of the Pleistocene. The site is presently buried nearly 3 m below surface in a residential backyard, and test excavations last October allowed us to nominate it to the National Register of Historic Places, which is America's list of cultural resources worthy of preservation. Coats-Hines was listed on the National Register earlier this month, but analysis of the >1,500 pieces of faunal material and is ongoing. In addition to artifact analysis, I am working on several reports of past investigations and research articles.

It's nice to round out the week with some time in the field, and a visit to inspect sites along the Cumberland River near Nashville. Parts of the Cumberland in Middle Tennessee have not been impacted by extensive modern development, and consequently are home to numerous prehistoric archaeological sites. While these sites are not threatened by development, they are being steadily destroyed by both erosion and the attention of looters.



Site inspections along the riverbank.

In May of 2010, Middle Tennessee experienced catastrophic flooding that in some sections of the Cumberland washed away up to 7 m of riverbank. The floodwaters destroyed a massive portion of the archaeological record, and also exposed new site deposits along the bank line. Since that flood, newly-exposed site areas have been regularly visited by looters who illicitly excavate in search of human burials containing unique or finely-crafted artifacts. Over the last year I've been working with archaeologists and students from Middle Tennessee State University to monitor and document ongoing site destruction, and salvage data as possible.

On a positive note, there does not appear to be new looter activity at any of the sites I have recently visited. After talking with several landowners and park personnel, it's time to head back to the lab and call it a week. The inspections do result in a small collection of displaced lithic and ceramic artifacts, which will be accessioned and added to the official site file record.