

THE VETERANS CURATION PROGRAM

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It's a sunny Friday morning in Augusta, Georgia, and at the Veterans Curation Program laboratory a team of military veterans is hard at work preserving the nation's prehistoric heritage. They're engaged in archaeological curation; stabilizing, documenting, and recording archaeological materials like potsherds and projectile points to save them for future generations.

Curation is the back end of archaeology – vital, but largely unseen. Excavation is always in the spotlight.

Dirt-and-trowel archaeology is our data source, our brand, and our metaphor. Digs provide iconic images and stories of struggle, adventure, and discovery. Archaeology will always be linked to the thrill of discovering a site or an artifact that was lost for hundreds or thousands of years. But what happens to the artifacts after they're bagged, tagged, analyzed, and written up? What happens decades later, when they're moldering in the back of an unpaid storage unit, lost and forgotten except for a footnote in a report nobody can find a copy of? That's where the Veterans Curation Program comes in.



Staff Sergeant Mark Crawford, Georgia National Guard, sorting lithic debitage.

The Veterans Curation Program (VCP) specializes in rehabilitating neglected and deteriorating archaeological collections. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers selects some of the worst examples of national collections – the ones that are orphaned, lost, or infested by vermin, the boxes that are molding and water-damaged, full of bags that disintegrated decades ago – and transports them to VCP laboratories for a complete restoration. At the VCP they begin a long process of stabilization and documentation. Any excavation records associated with the collection are cleaned, mended, organized, and digitized so that future researchers have as much of the archival record available as possible. The artifacts themselves are sorted, counted, weighed, and inventoried, and rehoused in archival-quality cardboard and plastic. Technicians here create a complete digital inventory of the collection. By the end of the rehabilitation project, we know exactly what's in an archaeological collection, we have digital copies of all the important records, and the collection is stabilized to preserve it for future generations.

This is difficult work, and often delicate work. And it's being done by veterans. The Veterans Curation Program hires and trains unemployed veterans of the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's a



Air Force veteran George Bauser selects a box of artifacts to rehabilitate.

tough job market out there, especially for the enlisted soldiers who left the service with no degree and a set of job skills that are difficult to translate to the demands of the corporate workplace. The VCP provides new skills like data entry, records management, public outreach, and support with job searches and resume writing. Since 2009 the three VCP laboratories (one each in Augusta, Georgia; Alexandria, Virginia; and St. Louis, MO) have employed 173 veterans, the vast majority of whom have subsequently transitioned into full-time civilian careers.

Today, the Augusta VCP is working on three Southeastern archaeological collections administered by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District. Jon Beaver, a former Army Sergeant, is photographing the White Springs 1979-1986 investigation with a digital photograph station designed by a forensic photographer. Jon has a knack for photographing pottery tiny sherds and stone tools. I ask him what part he likes best, and he says, "I like getting creative with the lighting. I try and bring out the surface texture so things don't look flat." Eventually these photos will end up on tDar, the Digital Archaeological Record, where the public will be able to view the results of his work.



Trey Williams, USMC, holding a mended sherd he processed today.

Tim Handley, a retired Infantry Staff Sergeant, is leading another group of veterans working on the Divide Cut II investigation. The 100 boxes of artifacts from Divide Cut II are mostly lithic debitage and stone tools. The technicians are processing each box bag by bag, emptying the contents, sorting the projectile points from the chipped stone and the groundstone from the ecofacts, building a complete inventory of the collection. It's slow work today—every bag is a rainbow kaleidoscope of chert flakes and broken stone tools. Two months ago, none of the veterans in this laboratory knew an abrader from an anvil stone, but after a crash course in lithic technology (and a visit from a local flint-knapper) they're happily sorting everything into their correct piles before counting, weighing, and tagging them.

At one point Tim turns to me with his hand outstretched.

“Broken tool?”

I take a look at the red chert in his hand. Most of the edges are clean breaks, but one is sharpened, ever so faintly.

“Good catch.”

He nods and turns back to the small mountain of flint on his desk. Half a dozen other veterans are doing the same thing, and the rhythmic clinking of stone on stone is audible beneath the hum of conversation.

So what do I do every day? I'm the archaeologist on staff at the lab, and my main job is to train the veterans on the nuances of archaeological processing—ceramics, lithics, faunal, rehousing, interpreting proveniences. I found my way to the VCP in a circuitous fashion, following the trade winds of globalization from the Midwest to Asia and then to Augusta, Georgia. When I finished my MA in 2012, jobs in archaeology were in short supply (older archaeologists tell me it's usually that way). Eventually I took a job teaching history at a high school in Seoul, one of Asia's neon entrepôts where technology, capitalism, and traditional culture collide in heady fashion. More than 30,000 U.S. soldiers remain stationed in South Korea, a result of the armistice that ended the war in 1953. I married one, and within months the Army had relocated us to Fort Gordon on the outskirts of Augusta.

Working at the VCP has been both a privilege and an education. An education in curation, in military affairs, and in the real benefits archaeology can have for the public. I've seen first-hand lives and families transformed by the opportunity to gain new job skills in a supportive environment tailored to the special needs of veterans. I've also had the opportunity to help restore a small portion of our national heritage that might otherwise have been lost to attrition and neglect. To any aspiring archaeologists out there, I say: as exciting as the field is, don't forget the other side of archaeology, the back end, that protects and preserves everything the discipline has worked so hard to uncover. And I'd also say: go for it.



VCP laboratories create digital records of diagnostic artifacts, like this rim sherd photographed today.