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Possible Archaeological Sites within the City Limits of Jefferson, Texas

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Possible Archaeological Sites within the
City Limits of Jefferson, Texas

Thomas E. Speir

INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the author accompanied a longtime resident of Jefferson on a tour of the city to examine historic and prehistoric sites within the city limits that might be of archaeological interest. He became aware of many of these sites over 20 years ago while growing up in the area. The condition of the sites has, of course, changed radically since that time. Enough information about the sites was revealed to indicate where it might be worthwhile in the future to do more extensive archaeological and historical research.

We began our tour at 12:00 noon on July 24, 1992. My host drove, allowing the author to take notes on the sites. The first stops on the tour were in North Jefferson, while later in the day some possible sites in South and East Jefferson were looked at. Each site was numbered chronologically as they were shown to the author; the sites were also plotted on a map of Marion County and Jefferson. The same numerical system will be used in this report.

HISTORIC BACKGROUND

Jefferson is the Marion County seat located on the Texas/Louisiana border in Northeast Texas. The terrain is mostly hilly and approximately 80 percent forested with significant pine and hardwood production (Texas Almanac 1968-1969).

One of the principal Jefferson industries today is tourism focusing on the town's historic past. Located west/northwest of Caddo Lake, Jefferson realized regular steamboat trade with New Orleans via the Red River and Big Cypress Bayou by 1845 (Sheneman 1986).

Destruction of "The Great Raft" on the Red River lowered water levels, stopping the riverboat trade after the Civil War-era. Loss of rail service to nearby Marshall further caused the city to dwindle in size to that of a small town with a rich heritage.

SITE FINDINGS

Sites 1 and 2

These sites are located in North Jefferson on facing lots across a north-south city street. My host learned about Sites 1 and 2 in the early 1970s when, having recently married, he moved into a house in the neighborhood. He remembered a Blacksmith shop on one of the

lots about 35 meters south of the street intersection. Artifacts recovered in his yard at the time seemed to confirm this: broken handmade iron tools and scrap iron fragments from a forge. The site now has a small garage or shed built over its southern half.

Site 2 was reportedly the location of a Stagecoach stop that was adjacent to the Blacksmith shop. While building a common fence with a neighbor, my host recovered a badly rusted revolver from beneath a backyard corner fence post. Approximately 35 meters due west of the Blacksmith shop was the remains of a well in the backyard. Coins dating from 1900-1920 were recovered by the well, which no longer exists.

The rusted revolver was eventually donated to the Jefferson Historical Museum by my host and his neighbor. It has not been confirmed if the weapon is still on display or if its make and model have been determined.

Site 3

This site is now a vacant lot on the southeast corner of an intersection in North Jefferson. In the 1950s a very old building with a sign reading "City Laundry" was present on the lot.

Nearby sits an old home that my informant recalled had an old well and cannon at one time behind it. This cannon now sits before the Jefferson Historic Museum. The significance of the home is unknown.

Site 4

This site is located north of the Louisiana and Arkansas Railroad on the north side of the city. We proceeded some 30 meters in an easterly direction down the tracks. There, some 40 meters before the track curves south, is barely visible in the woods from the tracks the remains of a large brick water cistern. The cistern is nearly 2.5 meters in diameter. The front and back walls have collapsed, but part of the arched roof still remains. Traces of a recent campfire were noted at the bottom of the cistern. My host said that as a child it was called the "Hobo Cave", and he suspects that it was built in connection with the railroad itself. His father helped build the railroad trestle over Big Cypress Bayou about 1909.

Site 5

This is another vacant lot where an old building once stood. Numerous old bottles have been recovered from the site; all were labelled "DeWare & Sons Bottling Works". My informant suspects the site is the location of the Bottling Plant that once existed in Jefferson.

Site 6

This is an old historic trash dump in South Jefferson. It is in a wooded area bordered by a Baptist Church on the left side of the road. Traveling into the woods at the end of the street brings one to a ravine that empties into Big Cypress Bayou. The ravine has long been used as a trash dump and was once a source for old bottles by collectors. It is now heavily overgrown and we did not attempt to penetrate the area in the summer heat.

Site 7

This area is in the southernmost part of Jefferson, located within a bend of Big Cypress Bayou. This apparently used to be referred to as "Sand Town". There is a path leading down towards the river, probably for the convenience of local residents who still fish in the area. The site may have been significant during the city's riverboat era, although its use beyond warehousing is unknown.

Site 8

This site is located near sites 6 and 7, generally in the backyard of a nearby house. It is suspected to be the site of a Detention Camp for Union soldiers used during the Civil War, and possibly during the Reconstruction era. There is also supposed to be an unmarked graveyard associated with the Detention Camp.

Evidence of a stockade is suspected by my informant following a conversation with the current property owners, who believe the remains of the stockade are probably near their backyard garden. When disking up the area for the garden, numerous Minnie balls and other Civil War-era artifacts were uncovered. They also contend that an office and barracks area were across the street. If this second-hand report is accurate, it is possible that the location of the stockade and the barracks are reversed as ammunition would not likely be found within a prison stockade.

This site warrants further examination to establish whether it is a Civil War detention camp.

Site 9

This site is located on the east side of Jefferson. A "Scale House" is still standing; that is, a building that has a large drive-thru porch leading to large built-in scales for weighing wagons.

Across the street, and 20-30 meters south, are the remains of a one foot high concrete retaining wall running for about 100 meters by the road. At the southern end of this retaining wall is a large concrete piling. By proceeding on foot due east across a cleared

field, another large concrete piling is seen. These pilings may represent the foundations of a commercial building that once stood facing the street.

Behind the second, or back piling, was the location of a building known as "The Soap Factory". This is simply the name the structure was referred to by local residents, but may have nothing to do with the building's actual use. My host suggests that the building may have been a cotton gin.

Site 10

This is one of two prehistoric sites investigated in Jefferson. There is a very large oak tree adjacent to the remains of a large pine tree stump at the end of the street on the east side of the city. When playing in the area as a child, my informant and his friends recovered a very compact pile of projectile points buried beneath the roots of the pine tree. The current location of these artifacts is unknown.

Site 11

Across the tracks from Site 10 was an open field that was once a playground. At one time, several arrowheads were found on the surface of this field. One memorable day, the remains of a rifle with an octagonal-shaped barrel was recovered. This site has been the scene of industrial construction within the last decade, and likely this prehistoric site no longer exists.

Site 12

Driving northeast out of Jefferson is a stone house on the side of the road. Directly behind this home used to be a trail that led to Big Cypress Bayou. At this point the town's flood levee ends, and here within the bayou are several old pilings. These pilings, my host believes, are associated in some way with the old riverboat trade that served Jefferson. Old maps indicate this area was possibly a landing area with docks and warehouses. Local residents in the 1960s referred to the area as the "Buffalo Hole".

Site 13

In the center of the town's historic district is a large warehouse built during the mid-1800s. Although the structure is once again in use, it was deserted in the early 1960s. My informant and a group of friends discovered a trap door in the floor of the warehouse. Beneath the trap door was a hidden cellar containing an arched entryway into a tunnel. The tunnel itself was caved in, but extended in a line to Big Cypress Bayou. It should be noted

that a creek flows 20 meters beneath the structure, and any tunnel would have to run quite deep to go beneath the creek.

Found in the cellar at the time were small cardboard cylinders containing powder residue believed to be from cartridges. The cardboard cartridges crumbled with very little handling; also found were "Merry Widow" tins.

Site 14

This property forms an obtuse "L" shape that widens before intersecting with Big Cypress Bayou. It is located on the south side of the city.

Halfway towards the bayou is a ravine coming down from higher ground to the north. The higher ground through the woods, about one city block away, was the site of a saloon or a store at the turn of the 20th century. The ravine was used as a trash dump for this saloon, and the current property owner has several bottles that family members recovered from it.

Following the property to the bayou (which we did not do), leads to a trash dumping ground that may have been used by the riverboats. My informant noted that as recently as 10 years ago, rotting barrels containing "marbles" made of real marble could be dug out of the banks. Several of these old stone marbles of various sizes are in the property owner's possession. It is their contention that this area is the widest part of the bayou and, therefore, is the most likely site of the Turn-basin for the riverboats, and not downriver at the current highway bridge crossing as promoted by area tour-guides.

CONCLUSIONS

I suspect that many of these "sites" may now be lost forever. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile to conduct investigations at the remaining endangered sites before they too become lost. Some, such as those on the bayou banks, are probably not endangered by anything except the actions of the bayou itself. Others, however, may fall to construction over the next few decades.

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