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REPORT OF INVESTIGATIONS

NO. 40

1979

REPORT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE
WATERFRONT APARTMENT COMPLEX, THREE RIVERS,
ST. JOSEPH COUNTY, MICHIGAN

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Report of Archaeological Survey of the Waterfront Apartment Complex,

Three Rivers (St. Joseph Co.), Michigan.

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In November we were contacted by Mr. Kevin Buckley of Three Rivers, Michigan History Division, Department of State. The survey was carried out by Western Michigan University on December 7, 1979.

1. Location.

The survey area is the location of the proposed Waterfront Apartments, on the west side of the St. Joseph River in the city of Three Rivers in St. Joseph County. The parcel is located by the surveyor, John F. Stack, Paw Paw, Michigan, in the NW fractional quarter of Sec. 19, T.6.S., R.11.W. The parcel extends along the river from Millard St. on the north to Hill St. on the south. The parcel can be clearly identified as a roughly triangular wooded area south of the gaging station on the USGS Three Rivers West 7.5' Quadrangle map.

2. Survey Method.

We had been advised by Mr. Buckley that a large part of the area to be surveyed had been disturbed by prior gravel quarrying, but that some portions of it had mature trees and were relatively undisturbed. We shovel probed at 15 meter intervals over the entire area south of Buck St., and over all elevated and presumably undisturbed areas on the remainder of the parcel. The aerial map which accompanies this report has streets marked for reference.

We started our survey at the south end of the parcel and found that the whole area from Hill St. to Buck St. is highly disturbed; borrow pits, mounds and dumps were noted. Recent trash in varying concentrations is found behind the houses adjoining the property. We shovel probed most of this area to get a "feel" for it. The soil is a very thin humus overlying sterile sand/gravel of varying texture. Pockets of grey silty clay occur occasionally. The most promising area for prehistoric material is a ridge paralleling the river (see aerial photo), but nothing was found here.

Next we surveyed the area between Buck and King Streets. The major borrow pit and a large pond are located here. Elevated areas (i.e. possibly undisturbed) are located immediately east of the houses on Spring St., and near the river along a ridge south of the pond. A small chert waste flake was found eroding out of this ridge, but no other cultural material was found.

From King St. north the area is also considerably disturbed by quarrying except again for the portion just east of the houses on Spring St. North of the disturbed area is a level area at an elevation of 810-811', which appeared to have the best potential for locating a prehistoric site. Results of shovel probes in this area were however negative. In order to further check these results, two 1 by 1 meter test pits were placed in this northerly part of the site; Test Pit #1 in this flat area and Test Pit #2 near the river (see aerial photo). Both pits were dug into sterile yellow subsoil to a depth of 15 cm. Historic material was found in the humus layer of both test pits, but definite prehistoric material was limited to a single chip in Test Pit #1. All test pit dirt was screened through 1/4 inch mesh.

3. Materials Recovered from Test Pits.

Test Pit #1 had a humus layer 8 cm thick from which was recovered:

3 sherds of an ironstone plate; decoration is a blue transfer print dating to the last half of the 19th century.

1 sherd of thin, flat pale blue glass.

1 bone fragment of a large mammal (possibly cow). Fragment is unburned and appears recent. It may be either the medial condyle of the humerus, or possibly comes from the base of the skull (mastoid process or occipital condyle).

1 eroded fragment of metal.

1 piece of slag.

1 chert chip.

1 fire-cracked rock (possible).

Test Pit #2 had a humus/disturbed layer about 13 cm thick. From it was recovered:

5 fragments of clear glass from 2 vessels.

1 piece of amber glass.

1 unidentified piece of metal (recent).

5 pieces of coal.

1 railroad spike.

4. Structural Remains.

A poured concrete foundation projecting about 18" above ground level is located in the northern part of the site. It measures 18.4 m. by 5 m. with the long axis oriented roughly east-west. Its dimensions suggest possibly a barn or a garage. We are unable to estimate the age of this structure, but it does not appear to be very old -- probably 20th century. An atlas of St. Joseph County (1872) in the Archives and Regional History Collection at Western Michigan University does not indicate this structure. It does however indicate that in 1872 there was another street to the east of Thomas St., called River St. Thomas St. itself formerly extended further south. Between Thomas and River Sts., house lots are delineated, but it is unclear how many lots actually were built upon. The foundation which our survey encountered probably post-dates the existence of River St. (see sketch). Since the street would appear to pass through the structure, the 1872 map indicates that the St. Joseph River has been straightened here, and that in 1872 it flowed through a curve to the east of its present channel. Part of the former course of the river can be discerned in the aerial photo.

The former existence of River Street introduces another element of disturbance into the northern part of the survey area. While some of the historic material found in this portion of the site may be associated with the foundation, some of it could pertain to River St. and prior residential use of the area.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations.

A check of the Michigan Archaeological site files before doing this project indicated no known archaeological sites in the survey area. However its location along the St. Joseph River near the confluence of two tributaries suggested the probability that prehistoric sites may have existed here. The discovery of two chert chips and 1 possible piece of fire cracked rock indeed suggest this. However the extremely high degree of historic disturbance over virtually the entire area would seem to effectively preclude recovery of prehistoric remains of any real significance.

While I am uncertain of the age of the historic foundation, it appears to post-date River St. and is not judged by us to represent a site of cultural significance. It should be noted that shovel probes over the north end of the site did not produce any kind of cultural evidence other than recent trash behind the Spring St. houses.

Our survey results indicate that construction of the Waterfront Apartments will have no effect on significant cultural resources.

Reference: 1872. Atlas of St. Joseph County, Michigan. C. O. Titus, Philadelphia.

Report submitted by: Elizabeth B. Garland
December 21, 1979