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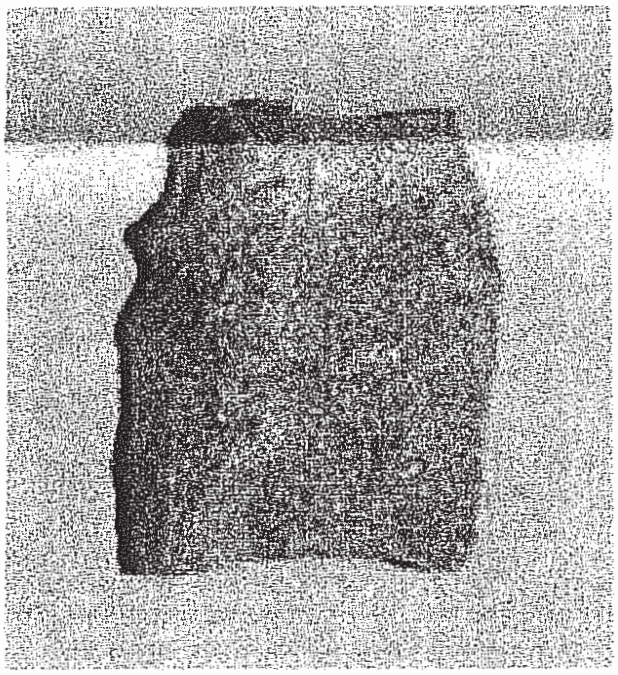
# Archaeologists discover 13,000-year-old artifact

Freedmen's Cemetery has yielded archaeologists Alexandria's oldest relic, a quartzite spear point from 13,000 years ago.

Archaeologists have been digging on the site of the old cemetery since May, marking the grave sites of former slaves and free men of color who were buried there during the Civil War. The cemetery was abandoned in 1869 and the land lay dormant for many years, owned by one individual until he transferred title to the Catholic Church. In the mid-20th century, it became the home of a gas station and an office building. Finally, when Woodrow Wilson bridge construction began, the site was returned to the City of Alexandria to be made into a memorial to those who are still buried there.

Since digging began, archaeologists have found more than a thousand artifacts from the Native Americans who lived in Alexandria through the ages. The site's use or lack thereof has protected these relics, according to City Archaeologist Pam Cressey.



Courtesy Photo/Alexandria Archaeology Department

A reworked Clovis point discovered at a dig site in Alexandria is believed to be 13,000 years old.

"When the graves were dug, those people would have unearthed many of the tools from the site. However, once the cemetery was abandoned and a slab was placed on the site as a foundation for the gas station and the office building, that asphalt would have effectively sealed the site, protecting everything under it," Cressey said. "The site was on a bluff, overlooking Hunting Creek, so it would have been a great place for the Native Americans to go to make tools. Most of what we have found are flakes from the construction of those tools and some tools that were brought to Alexandria from other parts of Virginia. We have identified more than a thousand items and the Virginia Department of Transportation archaeologists identified a thousand more before we began our work. Almost all of them have come from the western part of the site nearest to the Church Street ramp."

## Other artifacts found

The spear point found last week was a piece of a tool. "It appears to have been hafted (attached) to a piece of wood and used as a weapon for hunting," Cressey said. "Then, because it was no longer useful for that purpose and because people in those societies didn't discard anything that could be used, it was being cut down for some other purpose. It broke before that process could be completed and that's what we found."

Michael Johnson, an archaeologist for Fairfax County, has examined several stone artifacts found at Freedmen's Cemetery and believes the location was once a major Native American site. Johnson, a leading authority on lithic technology (stone tool manufacturing), concluded that the broken point was originally a Clovis spear point that had been reworked or re-sharpened so it could continue to be an effective tool. It appears that when the tip broke off during reworking, or lithic reduction, the user abandoned it. Clovis is often identified by its ground, concave base, bifacial blade, and fluted channel, which allowed the point to be hafted or attached to a spear. "My first impression at seeing the point was, 'How cool'," said Johnson. "It goes to show that if you do the right thing, as Alexandria has done over the last 30 years, eventually you'll find some truly great things. This is only one of many that have been found in Alexandria. However, for me the Clovis point and site were really special."

The spear point has been examined in the lab, photographed and catalogued. Cressey will show it to people who take walking tours of the cemetery site and its permanent home will be the Alexandria Archaeology museum.

The next tour of the cemetery site will be on Sept. 15. Check the Alexandria archaeology web site for the exact time.

*— Staff Reports*