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Old Town Gets Older

Breaking news from the distant past; 13,000-year-old stone tool discovered in Alexandria.

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GAZETTE PACKET

Old Town just got a lot older — about 3,000 years older to be exact. The city's archeologists already knew that life in Alexandria dated back about 10,000 years after finding part of a spear in Jones Point Park several years ago. But an archeological dig on South Washington Street recently unearthed the oldest evidence of human life in the city — a stone tool once used to hunt deer, elk or mastodons. The artifact was unearthed in July and identified as a 13,000 years old by a Fairfax County prehistoric expert on Aug. 3.

"This is an extremely exciting discovery," said Francine Bromberg, a preservation archeologist in Alexandria. "This is the first time we have concrete evidence of people from this time period in the city."

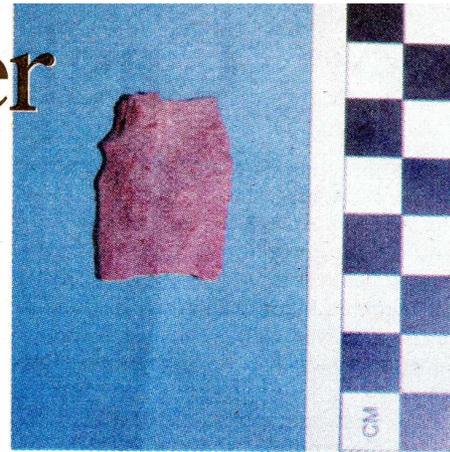
Bromberg said that the men who once used the spear point would have lived in an environment very different from our own. Their world was much colder than the one we live in, and the terrain would have probably been dominated by grasslands dotted by periodic stands of conifer trees. Archeologists refer to the quartzite tool as

a "Clovis point" because the first discovery of such a tool was made in the 1930s near Clovis, N.M. Clovis points have a distinctive shape and serves as a diagnostic marker for an era known as the Paleoindian period.

"My first impression at seeing the point was 'How cool,'" said Michael Johnson, the Fairfax County archeologist who verified the age of the tool, in a written statement. "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."

Johnson, a leading authority on prehistoric stone tools, said the tool's broken point was originally the tip of a spear that had been reworked or re-sharpened so it could continue to be an effective tool. He concluded that the user probably abandoned the tool when its tip fell off as it was being sharpened. Typically, Clovis points are identified by a concave base, bifacial blade and fluted channel that allowed them to be hafted to spears.

"These kinds of spear points spread across North and South America," said Eric Larsen, an archeologist working the site. "The most interesting part of this is how it fits into the story of the Freedman's Cemetery."



Clovis point

THE DISCOVERY OF a prehistoric tool on the site of Alexandria's Freedman's Cemetery has further complicated the difficult history of the old graveyard, where archeologists are excavating approximately 1,800 African Americans buried there shortly after the Civil War. Despite the fact that a 1930s-era tax map labeled the area "Old Negro Cemetery," a series of zoning decisions in the 1940s and 1950s resulted in a gas station being built on top of the graveyard. The city acquired the property earlier this year in an effort to create a memorial at the site.

"The gas station saved the Clovis point," remarked City Archeologist Pam Cressy. "It likely that we would have never found this if a townhouse or something else had been built on this site."

The protective layer of concrete that had been poured over the area 50 years ago has preserved the ancient spear point that is

now the center of attention at the city's Archeology Museum, which is located on the third floor of the Torpedo Factory. In addition to the Clovis point, archeologists have found other evidence of prehistoric occupation at the site — including a significant concentration of quartz and quartzite flakes, which are the slivers of rock that are chipped away when stone tools are being created. Alexandria's archeologists believe that the location overlooking Hunting Creek would have been ideal for Native Americans to work stone tools for hunting, fishing or other uses. The recently unearthed artifacts support the likelihood that it was a major prehistoric site, with a history stretching back tens of thousands of years.

At the dig, archeologists hover over geometrically precise depressions in the earth. Color-coded flags identify where the bodies were buried 150 years ago — hidden underfoot for the past 50 years by a never-ending stream of Washington Street motorists. As the underground story emerges from the dirt, archeologists are discovering more about the original cemetery and how it was laid out. Stephen Weatherly, an archeologist working the site on a hot Tuesday afternoon, said that the team has now learned that rows of bodies are separated by areas where no burials took place.

"This could tell us more about how the cemetery was accessed," he said. "They probably didn't want to bring carts over the existing graves."