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Relic Uncovered In Cemetery Dig Points to Area's Earliest Humans

By Amy Orndorff
Washington Post Staff Writer

With its plethora of plaques, museums and homes of past presidents, Alexandria is a city that is proud of its history.

But nothing in any Alexandria museum can compare with a chipped rock the size of a matchbox that archaeologists identified last week as the oldest artifact ever found in the city.

Estimated to be 13,000 years old, the spearhead is the first piece of evidence that people inhabited Alexandria when it was just grasslands. Previously, the oldest artifact unearthed in Alexandria was a 9,000-year-old spearhead found at Jones Point.

"That is really what makes it very significant," said Alexandria preservation archaeologist Francine Bromberg. "We thought [people] were here, but we never had the tool

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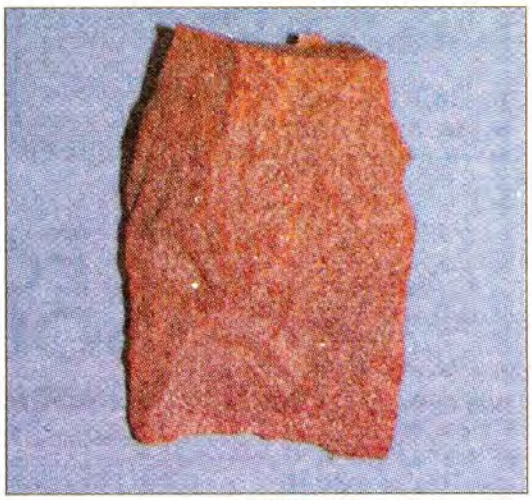

COURTESY OF OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

Archaeologists excavating in Alexandria discovered this 13,000-year-old spearhead, the oldest evidence of human presence in the city.

A Stony Piece of Prehistory Emerges in Alexandria Dig

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type to tell us that was the case."

The chipped rock, known as a Clovis point, was identified by the chips on both sides, a concave base and a fluted channel that would have been attached to a stick to create a spear. Native Americans would have used the Clovis point to hunt the abundant elk, bear, deer, moose and even mastodons that roamed the area.

The sharp tip of the point is missing. Fairfax County archaeologist Michael Johnson said the point probably broke while it was being sharpened and was then discarded. Most Clovis points are made from jasper or chert, two types of quartz, but this one was made from a third type, quartzite.

The point was unearthed in the westernmost section of Freedmen's Cemetery at South Washington and Church streets in Alexandria. The site has yielded a wide variety of points and other evidence of prehistoric activity.

"Basically, we have a site that was visited and occupied throughout the course of Native American prehistory, 13,000 to 400 years ago," Bromberg said.

The cemetery was used in the 1860s as a place to bury an estimated 1,800 formerly enslaved African Americans who streamed into Alexandria during and after the Civil War. Over the years, the cemetery was abandoned, and a gas station and office building were built on top of it.

The first archaeological research on the site was done in the mid-1990s when there was concern that the Woodrow Wilson Bridge project could adversely affect the cemetery. More work was done between 1998 and 2000, when 78 graves were found along with prehistoric material.

The city bought the land this year and ripped down the gas station and office building. A six-member archaeological crew has worked steadily on the site since May, often helped by volunteers and interns. Assistant city archaeologist Steven Shephard and Bromberg oversee the excavation. Through the heat, Bromberg considers what life was like for people who lived 13,000 years ago in what would become Alexandria.

"At this time, you have to imagine the environment was very different from what it is today," Bromberg said. "It's a totally much colder environment than you would find today."

Archaeologists hope to continue excavating the site through October so that a memorial park can be positioned without disturbing any more graves that might be found there.

The Clovis point will be displayed at the Alexandria Archaeology Museum, on the third floor of the Torpedo Factory Art Center in Old Town Alexandria.

Bromberg advises people who think they have found an artifact to report it to the Alexandria Archaeology Museum but not to disturb it. She said that where an artifact is found can be as important as the item itself.

"Archaeologists are not just interested in the artifacts themselves, but the story behind them. The story comes to us through the context where that artifact is found," Bromberg said. "When you pull an artifact out of the ground, it is like tearing pages out of a book. You lose part of the story."