

# Grand Parkway Site Yields Surprises, TxDOT Conducts Data Recovery Excavations of Prehistoric Artifacts Found on Cypress Creek Knoll.

by Lindsay Peyton, Houston Chronicle, December 17, 2013



**On a pasture in northwestern Harris County** lies a pile of sand that may help shed light on the earliest inhabitants of Texas. The sample of dirt traveled in the back of several dump trucks from one of the most significant archeological sites discovered in the state – unearthed when construction crews were paving the way for the Grand Parkway.

Jason Barrett, environmental specialist for the Texas Department of Transportation serving in the archeological studies program, explained that archeologists and environmental specialists had to evaluate the land before the route for Texas 99 could be determined. What they found in a sandy knoll along Cypress Creek, however, came as a surprise. The area, now known as the Dimond Knoll site, has produced a wealth of important new information about prehistoric human life in Harris County. “It gives us a lot of data we can use to better understand a time period in history that is notoriously difficult to find out about,” Barrett said. “This site is really rare.”



In 1996, as part of the early planning stages for Grand Parkway, a team from Moore Archeological Consulting Inc. discovered a site along Cypress Creek that required further examination. In 2006, as TxDOT sent a crew from PBS&J, an international engineering company now named Atkins, to reassess the site and conduct eligibility testing for the National Register of Historic Places, Barrett explained. “During the testing, we discovered there was a wealth of archeological materials,” he said. At the time, artifacts indicated that the site could date to 2500 B.C. - and TxDOT recognized the need to preserve the area, Barrett added. There were pottery shards, stone weapons and pieces of bone. To avoid disturbing the site, the department planned to build a bridge over the sandy knoll.

The terms of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers permit negotiated by the Harris County Toll Road Authority, however, required TxDOT to undertake data recovery excavations. Barrett worked with Rich Weinstein of Coastal Environments Inc. to unearth the area. On the first day in the field, they discovered a deeply buried paleosol - a soil formed long ago and lost under other layers of sediment. The paleosol yielded artifacts

dating to the Late Paleo-Indian period. Barrett said the site was then recognized as being around 11,000 years old. “That kind of changed things a bit,” he said. The TxDOT archeologists changed their original plans and expanded the scope of their research. They decided to excavate the sandy deposits above the paleosol as well.

“This is a really rare find in the Houston area,” Barrett said. “We needed to get rid of sand and expose as much of the site as possible.” Usually, he said, 10 percent of a site is sampled during an excavation. TxDOT decided to unearth more than 30 percent. “We did an enormous amount,” Barrett said. “We were getting a lot of artifacts and really good data. “We wanted to find out as much as we can.” The sand was removed to the north of the site. Typically, it would have been used as fill in the construction process, Barrett said. Instead, TxDOT preserved the pile so the sand could be sifted through and checked for more artifacts.

Members of the Houston Archeological Society volunteered to come to the site and get to work. The group’s president Linda Gorski had heard about the project. “We contacted TxDOT to see if members of the Houston Archeological Society could help,” Gorski said. “But for safety reasons, we couldn’t work on the site.” Barrett said it would have been hazardous for the volunteers to work in an active construction zone. Luckily, a member of the society owns land in Cypress - just 10 to 15 minutes away. The sediments were moved off-site - and the sifting began. “About 55 dump truck loads later - and we have been literally screening since Feb. 2,” Gorski said.

Participants from the Brazosport and Fort Bend archeological societies also joined the effort, as well as anthropology and archeology students and professors from several local colleges including the University of Houston, St. Thomas University, Houston Community College and Lone Star College. The project has also been host to school groups from Rosehill Christian Academy and the Kinkaid School and a group from the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

“It’s different from learning in a classroom,” Barrett said. “Getting out and doing it is a whole different story.” Gorski said students have benefited from the process. “People are learning how to identify and collect artifacts,” she said. “These are artifacts that will tell the story of prehistory of Harris County. “This site is literally rewriting the prehistory of the area.”

During the week, Gorski hosts “lab nights” at her home. Members of the Houston Archeological Society gather in her kitchen to wash artifacts and identify what they have found. “The volume of complete artifacts is remarkable,” she said. “You just don’t see this.” After the sifting process has been completed, the analyzing and documenting of the artifacts will begin - and finally the pieces will be curated into a single collection, Barrett said.

“The next step is the analytical phase,” he explained. “We look at soils, at pollen - things that will tell us about climate, the ecology of the time, the diet of the people.” A preliminary overview of findings suggests that the site was visited regularly by mobile foraging groups - for thousands of years. “What seems to make sense at this time is that groups came back with such regularity to this area, that instead of carrying materials, they left them here or buried them,” Barrett said.

The recovered artifacts from the topsoil date from the Late Prehistoric, as well as Middle and Late Archaic periods, while artifacts recovered from the deep paleosol date to Early Archaic and Late Paleo-Indian periods. Several pit features containing human remains were discovered during the excavations - but these possible burial sites have been preserved according to a memorandum of agreement with tribal groups. Dimond Knoll is the largest excavation into an Early Archaic and Paleo-Indian occupation in Southeast Texas, Barrett said.

