

Bessey Hall/ North River Survey: Archaeological Report



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Abstract

In the month of September, 2010, Campus Archaeology tested the area to the immediate north of the Red Cedar River, west of Farm Lane Road at Michigan State University's campus. The survey covered the green spaces behind Bessey Hall, Ramp #2 (Auditorium Road), and the Computer Center, ending just east of the bridge that crosses the Red Cedar River to Wells Hall.

This report discusses these investigations and results, and makes suggestions for further research.



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Introduction

On September 29th and 30th, 2010, Campus Archaeology performed Phase I archaeological investigations on the North side of the Red Cedar River on Michigan State University's Campus. The investigation covered green areas that ran directly parallel to the river, as well as areas closer to campus buildings, including Bessey Hall, the Computer Center, and Ramp #2 on Auditorium Road. The purpose of this survey was to test before possible demolition of Ramp #2 and/or future construction in the area, as well as to test for the possibility of any prehistoric remains in this sensitive area.

The project lasted two days, and was conducted by Campus Archaeology under the direct supervision of the Campus Archaeologist, Christopher Stawski, and CAP director, Dr. Lynne Goldstein.

Physical Setting and History

Michigan State University is located in the city of East Lansing, in central southwest Michigan. The investigations took place on the North side of MSU's campus, in what is traditionally referred to as the older, historic part of campus. Falling to the west of Farm Lane and south of Auditorium Road, the investigations took place on the north side of the Red Cedar River, and south of Bessey Hall, the Computer Center, and Ramp #2 (see Figure 1). The area behind these buildings consists of green space that is the floodplain for the Red Cedar River.

Historically, this area directly north of the Red Cedar River served as the "backyard," so to speak, for the periods when MSU was then named the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan (1855-1861), State Agricultural College (1861-1909), and Michigan Agricultural College (1909-1925). It was not until the period after 1925, when the institution was called variations of the title Michigan State College (1925-1964), that there was rapid expansion to the south of the Red Cedar River.



Figure 1. Map of the Investigation Areas

Maps from the MSU archives depict the area during several phases of campus development. One such map was drawn in 1959 from accounts in: Kuhn (1955), Beal (1915), early period campus maps, USGS maps and campus topography maps from T. Glenn Phillips (a landscape architect), and county topography maps from 1859. The map shows a continuous stretch of wood lot, described as thick woods, in the investigation area. A second map, entitled “Plan of the Grounds of the State Agricultural College, Lansing, Michigan,” from 1879, was created by A. Zeese and Company, and depicts the land cover of the investigation area as swamp. A third map from the late 19th century, in 1896, shows the area undeveloped as far as buildings, but depicts a more landscaped area, void of heavy wood lots and with a road running parallel to the river.

Maps from the 20th century show basic development of the area north of the Red Cedar River, but most of the development is limited to out-buildings and maintenance structures. A map of campus from the 1920’s depicts barns and small out-buildings to the north of the investigation area, but no development in the area closest to the river (Figure 2).

The first building to be constructed in close proximity to the river and within the investigation area, is the Band Shell, built in 1937, dedicated in 1938, and razed in 1960 (Stamford and De-whurst 2002:83). A historical marker, a large rock with a bronze plaque, now marks the spot where the Band Shell stood. It reads:

development, CAP argues that there is a strong possibility for undisturbed prehistoric remains in the investigation area.

Previous Investigations

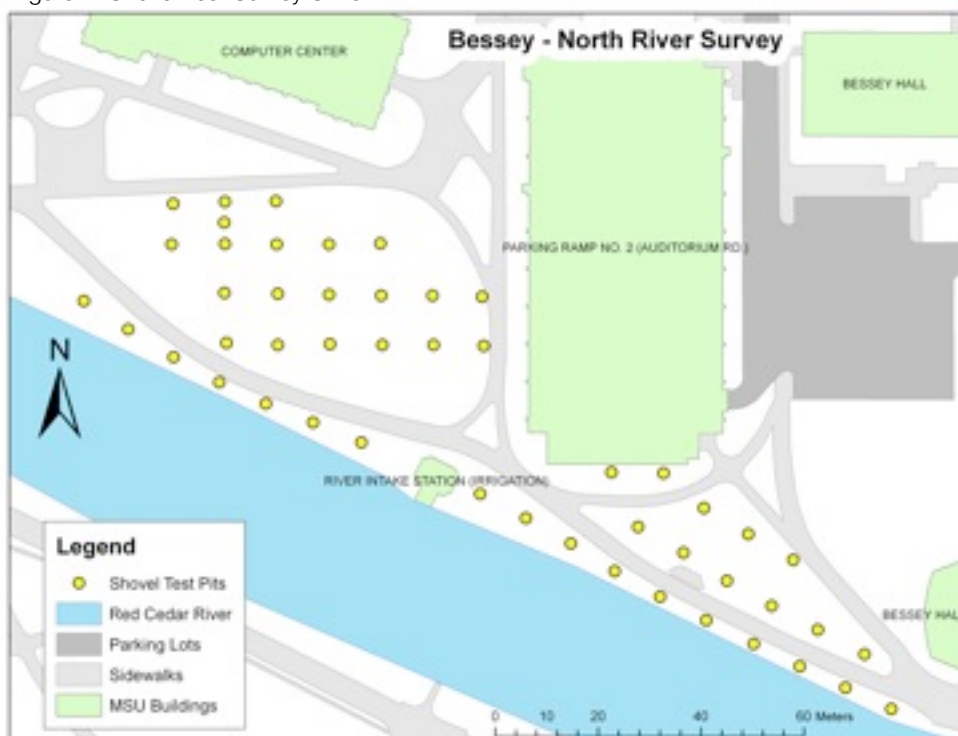
No prior archaeological investigations have been carried out in this vicinity.

Methods and Techniques of Investigation

The primary method for the Phase I archaeological investigations was shovel test survey. Shovel test surveys, or ST's, are a way for archaeologists to cover a large unplowed area quickly. It is impossible to see the ground, due to grass or dense vegetation, so ST's are minimally invasive (meaning that they do not disturb a lot of ground), yet provide enough data for us to determine whether further archaeological testing is warranted. The ST is a shovel-by-shovel width hole dug straight into the ground. The dirt is sifted, and artifacts are collected and their type and quantity is recorded on a map. We examine the map for areas where there are significant artifact clusters, and identify those areas as potential archaeological sites that need to be further examined.

For the specific area under investigation, two separate methods for shovel test surveys were performed. The first was a 10 meter transect that ran parallel to the Red Cedar River, and also included the green space to the south-east of Ramp #2 where the Band Shell used to stand. The second was a north-south 10 meter by 10 meter grid that was applied to the green space south of the Computer Center (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Shovel Test Survey Units



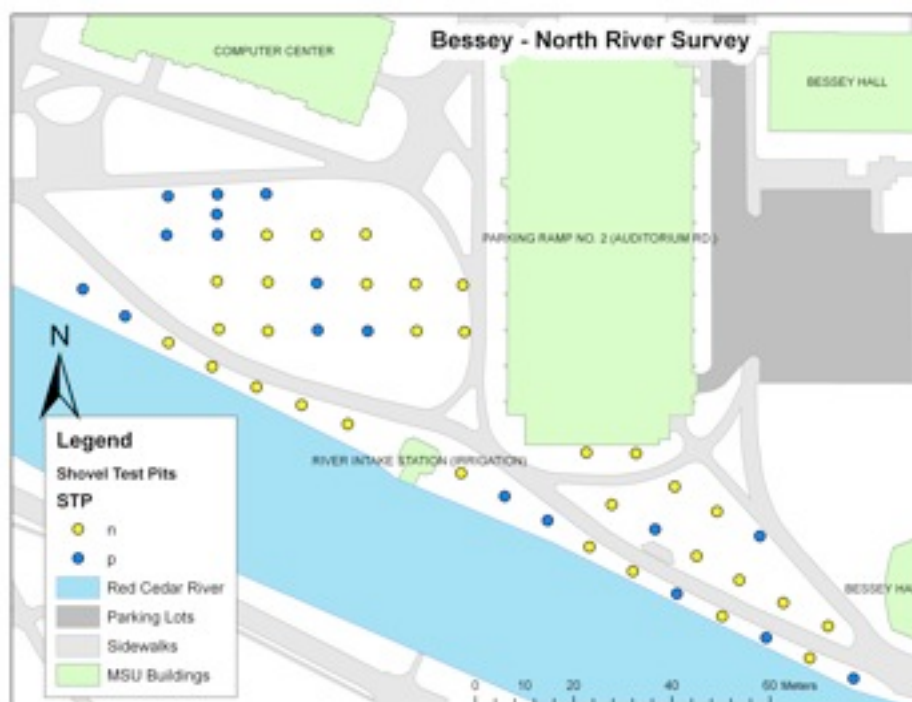
Results of Investigations

Initial Investigations

The shovel test survey found $n=18$ positive units containing historic artifacts, but no evidence of prehistoric artifacts. Several important patterns can be gleaned from these finds. The first is the cluster of artifacts found within the green space to the south of the computer center. This area displayed the most uniform and intact stratigraphy, with an A-horizon layer going down ~ 25 cm, followed by a cultural layer that contained few artifacts and a rubble of clinkers and some ash. This stratigraphy was dominant in the central part of the green space, and the north-west corner, as seen in Figure 5. The artifacts from this area are primarily construction material, consisting of nails, brick, roof slate, and window glass. Other notable artifacts from this area are bottle glass and coal. No diagnostic artifacts were found.

The second area of interest include the sweeps that run parallel to the river. There were $n=9$ shovel test units that included artifacts, mostly construction materials, Only one ST had ceramic materials. Yet, given the highly disturbed stratigraphy in this area, it is evident that we are dealing with a constructed riverbank, meant to stop the river from flooding the surrounding area. This was especially evident in the units closest to the river, as a mixture of construction fill was found, including large concrete pieces, at approximately 40 cm below the surface. Historical artifacts were found, although they are thought to be a result of the riverbank fill.

Figure 5. Positive Shovel Test Units





Further Testing

It is the advice of CAP that, given the sensitivity of this area and the fact that we did find evidence of fill, prior to any construction or earth-moving, that further shovel test survey be completed in this area, with a possibility of small-scale excavation also considered, based upon artifact or feature discovery. The area holds a high moderate sensitivity for historical artifacts. Although no prehistoric artifacts were found, this area is still considered to be highly sensitive for prehistoric materials. Based on this analysis, it is advised that any digging or construction in the area should have a CAP representative present.

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