

Mason Niquette
Environmental Studies Archaeology Intern
Summer 2012

This past summer I spent seven weeks conducting archaeological research under the guidance of Dr. Sarah Sherwood. My research focused on rock features which are located all over the Domain. These rock features are basically piles of loose, native stone that have been obviously placed in formations by humans. According to some preliminary research of these features conducted by Dr. John Willis, there does not seem to be any archival record of these sites. So in essence, these communities are “invisible” historically. Because of this, the archaeological recording of these sites is the only “document” of human land use in this area of the Cumberland Plateau, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries.

For the internship, I conducted an archaeological survey in four compartments of the Domain with the help of fellow interns Patrick Vestal C’11, Sarah Long C’11, Carson Pfeifer C’12, Tom Conover C’14, and Jane Millar C’14. During the survey, we located several of the rock features. Each time we found a site, I marked its location with a GPS and filled out a form with common attributes so we could compare different mounds. I then entered all of this data into a Geographic Information System (GIS) with the help of Dr. Chris Van de Ven.

After finding and mapping the locations, we decided to conduct limited archaeological testing of two sites to determine what these features were and their cultural significance. We quickly learned that these were 19th century sites. Over the course of three weeks, we dug a total of five 1-meter-by-1-meter excavations. After this work was finished, I spent a week in the laboratory washing and cataloguing the artifacts for study and ultimately curation. I also made some rough maps of the sites

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and helped another intern make some maps for her internship as well during this time.

After my internship ended, I went home and conducted artifact analysis. Currently, I am using the information we gathered to write up a report for the University's records as well as a report to submit to the State of Tennessee. When classes resume, I plan on updating the GIS information and making more maps to help with Domain maintenance so these sites can be taken into consideration before projects are undertaken that could damage them.

One additional part of the fieldwork involved working with two groups of high school students from the Sewanee Environmental Institute (SEI). The students came by for a day to help us excavate and it was a blast. For me, it was interesting teaching high school kids about what I have learned about archaeology in school and from the internship. I had never done anything like this before so it was a completely new experience for me. For the students, I believe they left with a different outlook on archaeology and cultural resource preservation. I also think they had a ball digging in the dirt and finding artifacts.

As an Anthropology major who is focusing on archaeology, this was the ideal internship for me. I have done limited work on a few other sites prior to this but I have never worked on something of this scale. I learned a lot about archaeological surveys from this project. I had never done any form of survey work so this was a whole new experience. On the first day, Dr. Sherwood took me out in the field and showed me how to walk transects and what I was looking for in the woods. After that, I went out with

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different interns every day who knew as much as I did about archaeological survey (almost nothing). So through trial and error, I learned a lot about survey work.

I was also lucky enough to learn some archaeological field methods. As I stated earlier, I had worked on some sites but that was mostly digging shovel tests. This was the first time I worked in a unit. So I learned how to dig 10 centimeter levels and how to dig carefully so as not to hurt any artifacts. I learned how to identify artifacts while sifting and digging at a quick glance. It was an absolute blast. I have also come to value the importance of keeping good notes and being very careful and detailed while filling out forms.

Lab work and the application of GIS were two other specific skills I honed during this internship experience. I kept the lab clean, and washed and catalogued all of the artifacts. I had taken an intro to GIS class last semester but this summer, I wound up using it a lot. I found out how you could use it for archaeology and just how powerful a tool it is.

Finally, there were two very broad, but invaluable skills I learned from this project. The first is leadership. I discovered how to lead a crew and how to make decisions in the field and lab. This was the first time I had ever been thrust into leadership in a professional situation. I had a group of people counting on me to make decisions and to tell them what needed to be done on any given day. It was a great experience.

The second broad skill I learned was organization. I learned not to tolerate any mess in the field. In the first few days it seemed like equipment just kept disappearing. I got sick of it so I made a list of everything in the field and made sure all of it was

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accounted for at each day's conclusion. I made sure to keep track of all the bags of recovered artifacts and at the end of each day, I would double check them all and make sure nothing was lost. Organization is vital when trying to understand data from the field because it is so easy for things to be lost or destroyed. By keeping records organized, it makes it easier to work with the data after excavations are over and allows for archaeologists who did not participate in the work to understand what you have done if they were to ever go back and conduct research.

This internship was an absolutely wonderful experience. It reaffirmed my decision to make a career out of archaeology. I absolutely love it. It also gave me lots of time to learn more about Sewanee and the Domain: I got to learn about its history and spend hours and hours exploring places that I otherwise would not have seen. Dr. Sherwood was a wonderful mentor and overall, this was an incredible opportunity that I will always remember and for which I am very grateful.